

# AN UNSEEN LOVE

by Glenys Walker

*(from CRYSTAL CAVERN TEN)*

Tapping lightly against the glass doors leading from the balcony into Catherine's apartment, Vincent stepped back to wait. The reflection from the city lights turning his long, flowing hair to gold against the cloak which hung from his shoulders. Beneath it was the white, frilled shirt he wore only on special occasions, and his legs were encased in the thigh-length leather boots he knew she loved to see him wear.

Through the open drapes, he saw dozens of candles giving off a blaze of light, and he was smiling when she opened the doors to be caught up into his arms, their lips meeting in a kiss as passionate as if they had been parted for weeks instead of only since early that morning. Letting her go at last, he raised her hand and held it to his lips before entering the apartment with her.

"You remembered again," he said in a voice husky with emotion.

"How could I forget this anniversary?" she replied softly. "My whole life changed the night you found me."

"And it brought me a love to outlast eternity," he said. "Sometimes I still can't believe that you and I are married, and that we have a child! Is he asleep?"

She nodded, and taking his hand went with him into the bedroom where their son lay peacefully in his cot with one small fist curled under his cheek.

"I tried to keep him awake for you," she whispered, "But it was impossible."

For a while they both stood watching the gentle rise and fall of the child's chest, smiling with pride at the picture he presented, then as they finally made a move to leave the bedroom, Catherine picked up a briefcase which was lying on their bed. Re-entering the living room she sat down on the couch and opened it, as Vincent came to sit by her. It was empty, and his questioning gaze met hers when she lifted her head to look at him.

"It was my father's," she explained. "I had to go through his desk after the funeral and found this in a locked drawer. I brought it home and put it in a closet I rarely use, then forgot all about it until today when I was looking for something else. I wondered if Father might want it?"

His fingers stroked the worn leather. "It has been well used," he observed gently, sensing how the sight of it had recalled the deep sorrow sense of loss she had felt at her father's death.

"It was the first thing I ever gave him of any value," she said sadly. "It was the Christmas after my mother died, and I'd saved the money from my monthly allowance. He said he would keep it always ... and he did." With a sigh she closed it, but as she did so something slid along the length of it inside the lid. Frowning, she reopened it, and when she felt along the lining her fingers encountered a small, hard object inside. On closer inspection she could see a fine zipper set into the fabric, so close to the edge as to be almost invisible to the eye of the casual observer. Intrigued, she unzipped it, felt inside, and pulled out a key as well as a folded document of some kind. Opening it, she scanned it briefly then looked at him with an expression of bewilderment.

"It's the deed to a house," she said slowly. "A house not far from here, in one of the few quiet spots left in Manhattan, and it's dated five years after my mother's death." She shook her head, puzzled. "I don't understand! Why would he buy a house and not tell me about it? There was certainly no reference to this in his will!"

"You would still have been very young, Catherine," he reminded her quietly. "There must have been many things he could not share with you."

There was a moment's silence then she said. "Yes ... I suppose so! But I think I ought to take a look at this mysterious house. I'll check on it after work tomorrow."

Much later, after falling asleep in his arms, she was back in her childhood, sharing once again in the love which always seemed to surround her parents whenever she remembered that time. And when she woke at dawn, as Vincent left her bed to return to the tunnels, she found herself wondering, as she had so many times, why the fates had decreed that her mother should die so young?

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The next evening she had no difficulty finding the house. It was in a quiet, tree-lined street, one of a row of three-storey, red-brick, terraced dwellings straight out of the previous century. There was little to distinguish it from the others. It had the same flight of stone steps leading up to a solid-wood front door, and several small-paned windows overlooking the street. If there was any difference at all, it was in the fact that with the added darkness of an approaching storm, lights had gone on in others, whereas this one remained in darkness. Obviously, it was empty.

Thunder rolled somewhere overhead and lightning flashed, while a sudden gust of wind shook the trees and sent flurries of rain pattering against the windscreen of her car, as she peered at the house through the gathering gloom. For some reason she was remembering Vincent's last words to her that morning.

"Be careful, Catherine," he said gravely. "I have a strange feeling about this."

Relying totally on his awareness of imminent danger where she was concerned, she had asked him if that was what he sensed, and after a moment's hesitation he had shaken his head.

"No, not danger or fear, but unease ... disquiet of some kind. As if you continue with this, it could cause you pain."

She had opened up a new world for him, a world of waking to the soft breathing of someone beside him, of sharing his deepest thoughts and the love in his heart, and more than anything in the world he wanted to protect her from any kind of hurt.

She knew this, and had queried softly. "And that makes you afraid?"

He had held her gaze with his own. "That fear is always with me," he said. "Should anything happen to take you away from me ... from us ... !"

At that, she had gone to where he was sitting and knelt beside him, looking earnestly up into his face and clasping both his hands tightly against her, as she assured him that such a thing could never be. She had even offered to give up on the idea if it disturbed him, but he had known that this half knowledge would always trouble her, and that it would be better to solve this mystery once and for all.

Now, as she sat looking at the house, she found herself wondering if her father had ever actually lived there. It was over two years since his death, and nothing had come to light about this place, either at the time or since. Perhaps it has been one of the many investments he had dabbled in over the years! But if that was so,

then why no mention of it in either his papers or his will ? Should she go in, she asked herself? After all, as his only child she had inherited everything, and unless there was evidence to the contrary, she assumed this property was hers ... she had the deed to prove it.

Suddenly realizing that the rain had stopped, she got out of the car and crossed the street, key in hand. Climbing the steps to the front door she put it into the lock. It turned easily and she twisted the handle cautiously. The door opened without a sound and for a moment she hesitated, then stepped inside and closed it after her. Feeling for the light switch she pressed it but nothing happened. Damn it, she thought, the electricity was turned off, and the last thing she felt like doing was going down into the basement to turn it on.

Desperately wishing that Vincent was with her, she took a torch from her pocket and switched it on, the frail beam of light illuminating polished floorboards and a staircase directly in front of her. Directing it further, she saw several doors leading off the hallway, and hardly daring to breathe, she opened the one to her left and took a few steps inside a spacious sitting room with an open fireplace. Most of the furniture was covered, but two small, antique tables showed little sign of dust, and the expensively framed prints on the wall, as well as other works of art tastefully displayed around the room, seemed to indicate that the owner, or owners, did not intend staying away for very long.

A slight sound from the direction of the hallway brought her spinning around, and the torch light showed a dark figure almost filling the doorway.

"Vincent," she breathed softly. "I am so glad to see you." He must have been somewhere in the house waiting for her, she reflected, and as always she wondered how he had gained access to it?

"The grille over the basement window is not very secure," he volunteered, as if in answer to her unspoken question. Moving slowly into the room he looked around, his keen eyes missing nothing, and he added.

"Someone lives here?"

"I know," she said, "but how can that be? If this is my father's house than I should have been told if someone had brought or leased it."

"Until yesterday, Catherine, you had no idea this place even existed. Perhaps we should not even be here."

She looked up at him. "You feel it too, don't you?"

"That we are intruders? Yes, I feel it."

Her mouth set stubbornly. "Well, I'm still going to check it out because there has to be an answer to all this. But first I think we had better switch on the lights."

There was a sense of strained urgency about her that vaguely troubled him, as she moved resolutely out of the room and across the hallway, towards a door she judged would lead them to the basement.

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"It's good to see you again, Devin. I hope you will be able to stay with us a little longer this time. Perhaps there is a specific reason for this visit so soon after the last one?" Father was addressing the tall, dark-haired young man standing across the desk from him in his chamber in the tunnels.

"Should a Father ever ask his son such a question?" Devin countered, and there was still a slight note of bitterness in his voice, despite the fact that not long ago, and after many years of absence during which his ties with the tunnels had never quite been severed, he and Father had made a determined effort to sort out

their differences.

Not waiting for an answer to that, he added. "And does there have to be a specific reason?"

Father gave a half smile. "With respect, Devin, even as a child you rarely came to see me without some purpose in mind. And I recall, you seldom sought my company otherwise. And the last time you were down here, you brought a friend to us for shelter after freeing him as a freak in some circus. By the way, how is Charles? Did you bring him with you?"

"Not this time, but he's okay," Devin replied. "I left him for a while with some friends we made in the mountains."

"So you actually took that journey," Father said, recalling Devin's promise to take Charles there one day.

"Sure we did!"

"And you obviously intend returning there!"

"Yes, as soon as...." He stopped and Father looked directly at him, his eyes bright with suspicion.

"As soon as what, Devin?" Taking a deep breath his son held his gaze and said firmly.

"As soon as Helen has the baby." Father stiffened in shock.

"Helen? And a baby? Whose baby?"

"Helen is my wife, and the child is mine," Devin replied briefly, his dark eyes still fixed on this man who for fourteen years had raised him in the tunnels, without ever telling him, that he was his natural father. But at that time, it was the constant conflict between them, which had finally driven him from this world into the one Above.

After twenty years he had returned, only to finally discover the truth about his birth, a truth that Father had withheld from him, because of his feeling of guilt over the death of Devin's mother, Grace, in giving birth to him. He had blamed himself for not being able to save her, and later had disciplined the boy more than the others, fearful as he was of showing favouritism which might disrupt the harmony of their world.

Now Father shook his head in disbelief, remaining silent for a few moments until he asked slowly.

"And where is she now... your wife?"

"She's here!" Devin turned away and moved towards the chamber exit, and as he did so a pretty, very pregnant girl with hair almost as dark as his, appeared at the top of the steps where she had obviously been waiting for his cue. She smiled at him as he took her hand to lead her down the steps and across to Father, who rose slowly from his seat at sight of her.

"Please.... it down," he said, indicating a chair at the far side of the desk. Obediently she sat, looking up at Devin as she did so and at the same time, reaching up to press the hand he rested protectively on her shoulder.

Watching them closely, Father noted the gesture and wondered at the tenderness he saw in his son's eyes when he gazed down at this girl. So, he thought, the boy has finally let someone into his heart to help heal the wounds of the past! The only other one who had come anywhere near doing so, he reflected, had been Vincent when as young boys growing up together they had truly been like brothers.

"I had to come." The girl's voice returned him to the present with a start. She was looking at him with an expression of apology in her soft, brown eyes.

"I have heard so much about you and Vincent, and this place which was Devin's home for so long."

Slowly he sat down again, his gaze seeking his son's in frowning query. Devin nodded and said frankly.

"She is my wife. I told her everything." Seeing the frown, Helen said impulsively.

"I will never reveal the secret. And please don't blame him for bringing me here. I made him do it. I wanted to make the journey before the baby was born."

Father's brow cleared and he gave a slight nod of acceptance. "I understand, my dear," he said. "How much longer before it is due?"

"Six weeks."

"And you wish to stay here?"

**"No!"** Devin broke in sharply. "We have a two-roomed apartment in Queens. It's not much, but I've got a job and it won't be long before we're out of there and on our way."

"What kind of work this time, Devin?" Father asked, looking pointedly at him and trying hard not to sound skeptical. He recalled their last meeting, when his son had boasted about the many occupations he had bluffed his way through: soldier, chef, attorney, monk, professor, knife thrower, and even a doctor. The latter being the one which had appalled Father the most, especially as Devin had told him, he had once performed an emergency caesarean operation.

"I'm working on a construction site," Devin said with a note of defiance in his voice. "It's close to where we're staying, so I'll be on hand when Helen needs me."

He had successfully managed to conceal his anger at the question thrown at him, but Father knew it was there, as it always had been. Was there never to be any peace between them, he wondered with an inner sigh? Some relationships seemed born to cause pain, and perhaps this was one of them! One thing was certain, up to now neither of them had found much happiness in it.

It was clearly obvious to both that the anger and resentment of the past twenty years spent apart was going to die hard, and that despite the apologies and surface reconciliation at their first meeting after the long absence, they were both still finding it difficult to forgive the grief of the lost time. However, he thought hopefully, perhaps the fact that Devin had acceded to Helen's request to see the Tunnels, were in some measure a sign of his need for the only family he had ever known! He sincerely hoped so.

Fully aware of the tension between them, Helen leaned forward and said softly.

"I would like to look around the Tunnels, Father! Is it all right if I call you that?" And when he gave a faint smile and nodded she went on. "Maybe Devin could show me the chamber he shared with Vincent."

"Of course," he responded quickly, and as she got clumsily to her feet, his sharp eyes noted the tiny beads of perspiration on her upper lip.

"Are you all right?" he asked anxiously, getting up from his chair and coming round the desk to lay his hand on her wrist.

"I'm fine," she reassured him, smiling her thanks for his concern. "I get a twinge now and then, but the doctor says everything is as it should be."

"Very well," he moved away to allow Devin to take her arm and help her up the steps, but his troubled gaze followed them until they disappeared into the tunnel.

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Their footsteps muffled by the thick pile carpeting, Vincent and Catherine made their way along the upper

landing where she opened the first door and glanced inside. It was a teenager's room, but decorated in a style which looked outdated now. Closing that one, she moved on to the next and saw that this was the master bedroom... a woman's room, or at least decorated by a woman. It was at once feminine, as well as elegant, in cream and pale blue with touches of gold. The king-size bed piled with satin pillows to match the drapes.

But it was the photograph standing with a crystal, gold-edged clock on one of the bedside cabinets, which immediately caught her attention and seemed to turn her to stone. It was a picture of her Father, Charles Chandler, but one taken when he was much younger, and he was smiling intimately at whoever was holding the camera.

She stared blankly at it for a few moments, then finally tearing her gaze away, she looked at Vincent, who was in turn watching her and feeling everything she was feeling. Her eyes had a haunted look.

"I don't understand," she said in a low voice, and he could sense the bewilderment, as well as the hurt in her. Compassion shadowed his own eyes.

"There must be a simple explanation for all this," he said huskily.

She gave a final, searching look around the room and began moving towards the door.

"I have to get out of here," she breathed, her mind in turmoil and her imagination running riot.

As she almost ran down the stairs, her one thought was to get into the open air and right away from this house with all its secrets. But as she reached the hallway, she saw a door standing ajar, one she had not noticed before. Uncertain at first, she just stood there but then began moving slowly across the floor almost as if someone, or something was pulling her towards it.

Pushing it wider and taking a step inside, she saw that it was a book-lined study with a large desk and leather furniture. There was an air of tranquility about it which immediately struck her, but once again she was confronted by the photographs standing on the desk. There were two of them this time ... one of herself taken when she was sixteen, and the other a much more recent one, of her father standing with his arms around a woman who seemed vaguely familiar.

She looked about his age, with stylishly cut almost white shoulder length hair, a straight nose, generous mouth, and smiling grey eyes, all set in a face devoid of makeup. She was not beautiful, as her mother had been beautiful, but there was a calm and serenity about that face which one would not easily forget. The way they were looking at one another left no doubt in her mind as to their relationship, and her throat constricted with sudden pain as she stood there staring at them.

It was not the fact that there had been other women besides her mother in Charles Chandler's life ... she had been adult enough for a long time now to accept this, and had known as well as liked the ones he had wined and dined over the years. But there was obviously something special about this one, and he had kept her secret .... that was what hurt.

She felt Vincent's hands on her shoulders and leaned back against him almost in a gesture of defeat. His arms came around her, and she felt him kiss her hair in gentle understanding.

"After Dad died ...," she said quietly, "... Marilyn, his secretary, told me that when I left the firm to work in the D.A.'s office he seemed to lose all interest in it, but maybe there were other reasons too. I do know that he hoped I would take over from him eventually. Perhaps if I had stayed, he would have retired and got away from all the pressure he was often under. Then he might have lived longer."

"Don't do this, Catherine," he murmured against her ear. "Like any father, he wanted only what was best for you."

"And that's all I thought about." There was a note of self condemnation in her voice. "Only what was best for me?"

"That isn't true! He knew you had to follow your destiny, and he must have been proud of your independent spirit. He trusted you to do what was right."

"But not enough to tell me about this woman ..." She gestured toward the photograph, "... Whoever she is." Once again her eyes wandered about the room and for the first time, she saw that most of the books lining the shelves were on corporate law.

Had her father spent time working here, she wondered? She tried to picture him sitting at the desk, carefully placing the two photographs where he would see them, every time he raised his head from his work, and she was seeing the one of her mother, which had stayed on his desk at the office until the day he died. Had the woman in this one, brought him his evening drink and told him he had worked long enough? Just as her mother used to? At this point, Vincent's voice broke into her troubled thoughts.

"They look happy," he observed quietly, and she found herself at that moment envying his simplicity of heart. Suddenly, the control she had fought to keep wavered and she turned in his arms to face him.

**"But why,"** she almost cried. **"Why didn't he tell me?"** She wanted to weep, and deny that there had been a part of her father's life he had not wanted her to know about. It was all so unlike him, something she had never thought about while he was alive, this possibility that he had fallen in love with someone, and although she knew it shouldn't have, it had come as something of a shock to her.

There were also certain things you could not tell him, Catherine," Vincent reminded her softly. She made a gesture of impatience.

"I know," she said defensively, "but I had good reason."

"Perhaps he had a good reason," he suggested. Her eyes searched his and he could see how close she was to tears. Pressing her head against his broad chest he tightened his grip, comforting her with his strength and holding her close until she was calmer.

At last, pulling back from him, she looked up again and gave a watery smile as she reached up to touch his lips with her finger.

"I'm all right now," she said shakily. "I guess we had better go. I'll meet you at the basement end of the tunnels as soon as I can."

She felt drained, and all she wanted to do now was to be with him in their chamber, safe and protected against the warmth of his body. To hear him whisper her name, as his blue eyes glowed fiercely with love, and to be brought to wonderful life with the heat flowing through her veins like fire in response to the touch of his gentle, searching hands. The hands over which her tears had once mingled with his, when he said bitterly that they were not meant to give love. Then to slide peacefully into sleep until the next morning.

Going back with him into the hallway, she switched off the lights, and for a while before she left the house they stood in the dark and just held one another. The seconds and minutes went by, the silence filled only with the sound of their breathing. When she finally spoke the words were muffled against him.

"I'll try and see Marilyn tomorrow. She might know something about this."

"Do you really want to know, Catherine?" he asked gravely, inwardly fearing that further revelations might cause her even more pain.

She nodded. "Yes, I have to!"

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"You should never have brought her down here at this stage of her pregnancy!" Father was angry as he stood facing his son in the hospital chamber. ***"I do not want to have responsibility for this, Devin."***

Helen was lying on the bed between them, her face white and teeth clenched against the pain, while Devin clasped her hand tightly and gazed fearfully down at her. But at Father's words, his head came up defiantly.

***"I brought her because it was what she wanted. How were we to know this would happen? Do you think I would deliberately risk anything going wrong in this place? She needs the best hospital, the best doctors ..."*** he stopped abruptly when he saw Father's raised eyebrows and caught the quizzical look in his eyes.

"Is this the man who lately told me that he had once performed emergency surgery on a pregnant woman?" Father asked quietly.

For a moment there was a strained silence and Devin had the grace to look ashamed.

"I know now why you were so wild about that," he admitted painfully. "If anyone as unqualified as I was came anywhere near Helen... I'd kill him."

"Just so!" Father agreed, somewhat mollified by the indirect apology. "However, all that aside, the fact remains that there is no way we can move her to a hospital now. It is too late for that. I will try and get Peter Alcott down here, but the trouble is that he could be at any one of a dozen clinics or hospitals around the city, and it might be some time before we can locate him."

Helen had been listening to this interchange and suddenly in a voice barely audible.

"I need you, Father."

At this, Devin gripped her hand even tighter and fixed his gaze on the other man who could almost see the battle raging inside his son. Finally he spoke, as if the words were being torn from him.

"I'm sorry, Father. I didn't mean what I said about this place. Remember when you had hopes that I was taking an interest in medicine, and you used to let me watch sometimes when you were operating? I've seen you perform near miracles in this chamber, and I want you to deliver this baby ... your grandchild. You are the best there is."

Father was clearly moved by his plea, but lingering doubts about Devin's true feelings still niggled in the back of his mind.

"What you really mean," he said, cynically for him, "is that I am all there is."

"I mean exactly what I say," Devin replied quietly.

Impressed by his obvious sincerity, even now Father hesitated, but this time on his own account.

"After what happened to your Mother ..." he began painfully.

"That was over thirty years ago," his son broke in impatiently, all at once wearied to death of the resentment he knew he had deliberately kept alive for so long, and now seeing his anger for what it really was, a spur to urge him on in his ambition to prove to this man that he had never needed him. But he did need him ... they were a part of one another and nothing would ever change that fact.

"Things were different then," he said. "You had no medical equipment ... it wasn't your fault. I know that now but I didn't then. I was just a boy, and I had to blame somebody besides myself for her death."

"Devin..." there were tears in Father's eyes as he stretched out his hand toward him, but just as he did so Helen clutched at her swollen abdomen and gave a gasping cry, so he had to give her his attention. Minutes later the pain had receded again, leaving her exhausted, and she was much relieved when Mary came hurrying in to help make her more comfortable.



As soon as they re-entered the tunnels, Vincent and Catherine heard Pascal tapping out the news on the pipes and quickly made their way to the hospital chamber. There, Devin and Vincent greeted one another with a warm, brotherly embrace, and Catherine renewed her acquaintance with this man she had once briefly worked with in the D.A.'s office, and who had on a later occasion solicited her help on behalf of his friend Charles.

But it was not until several anxious hours later, when Devin's son was born, six weeks premature, small, but remarkably healthy, that Vincent and Catherine were able to meet and welcome Helen, before finally retiring to their own chamber.

He was relieved to see how the thought of a new baby in the tunnels had taken Catherine's mind off all that had happened earlier that night. And when he came to where she lay on the bed waiting for him, he was filled with an aching tenderness, but at the same time a deep concern as to what sort of revelations the coming day would bring. He hoped with all his heart that it would bring her no more pain.

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Having been successful in getting Marilyn to meet with her for lunch, Catherine sat across from her in a secluded booth in a midtown cafe. After chatting generally for a while over a pre-lunch drink she reached into her purse, pulled out the key and the deed to the house, and without saying a word placed them on the table between them.

"What's this?" Marilyn asked curiously.

"I was hoping you would be able to tell me that," Catherine replied quietly. "You worked with Dad for almost twenty-five years, Marilyn. He told you most things, so maybe he told you about this."

Mystified, Marilyn unfolded the deed, and as she read it comprehension dawned. She glanced up at Catherine and there was compassion in that look, as well as a certain amount of sadness. Putting the document back on the table, she picked up the key and held it between her hands, as if trying to warm the cold metal of it, or maybe in some way seeking help from the feel of it. Finally she drew a long breath.

"Where did you find these?" she asked.

"They were in his old briefcase, inside the lining. It looked as if he had hidden them."

"He probably did that when he first bought the house for Petra. He wouldn't risk anyone finding them."

"Petra?" Marilyn nodded.

"Petra Conway." Catherine looked stunned.

"You mean Lionel Conway's widow?" At this moment, she could not recall ever having met the woman in question, but there had been that strange feeling of familiarity on seeing her in the photograph.

"I don't believe this," she said at length. "That deed is dated five years after my mother died. Do you seriously expect me to believe that Dad would buy a house, for some woman and not even tell me about it? Why would he try to hide it?"

Marilyn replaced the key on the table. "Charles always intended telling you about her, but somehow the years slipped by... you know how it is."

"No, I don't know how it is. I want you to tell me!" There was a quiet urgency in her voice.

"Well..." Marilyn paused as if not sure how to begin, then went on steadily, "....Both Charles and your

mother knew Lionel and Petra in the old days. He was just getting on his feet in the business, and Lionel's account was very important to him. It wasn't only that, though, they actually liked each other and became great friends, visiting frequently at their separate homes. You must have often seen them when you were a child."

Catherine cast her mind back but only blurred images emerged from the mists of memory. Probably, she thought, because being so young at the time, she was often in bed before the guests arrived.

"They were a great support to Charles when your mother died," she heard Marilyn add.

"When Dad sent me away," she broke in, remembering the bewilderment and confusion of a child who suddenly felt she had lost not one but both parents, and her eyes were full of the pain of that devastating loss.

"They had managed to get you enrolled into a very good school and he decided to go ahead with that."

***"But I needed to be with him."*** She sounded like a hurt child.

Marilyn sighed. "I know, Cathy. He probably wasn't thinking straight at the time, and when he finally pulled himself together, it was done. But to be fair, he knew it was what your mother wanted. They had talked about it when she knew she was going to die. I suppose in one way it made things more bearable for him, the fact that he could grieve without distressing you."

Distracted by the feelings which had come flooding back, Catherine picked up the key and began tracing patterns on the tablecloth, then she looked up at Marilyn.

"Was that when it happened?" she asked in a low voice.

Marilyn shook her head. "No, not then, but the three of them continued to see one another over the years. It was something that happened gradually, I think. Charles had always known that the relationship between Petra and Lionel was fairly ambiguous, more a uniting of dynasties rather than a love match, so perhaps they didn't feel too guilty about falling in love."

"But he could have told me," Catherine said with a tremor in her voice.

"Could he?" There was a quizzical look in Marilyn's eyes. "Cathy, he knew how much you were still hurting over your mother's death, and how bitterly you resented any woman you thought might be trying to take her place."

Catherine remained silent, unable to deny the simple truth of that statement.

*'Damn, damn, damn,'* she thought, furious with herself for being so wrapped up in her own life that she had failed to see the tumult in his.

Reaching across the table, Marilyn touched her hand. "It was something neither could help, Cathy. He was lonely and needed her love, and she gave it to him willingly. I always felt that her life really began at that point, because unlike Charles, she had never known real love before."

"So that is when he bought the house!" Marilyn nodded and leaned back again.

"Yes, when Petra decided to leave Lionel. Oh, it was all very civilized! He accepted what had happened as almost inevitable. She moved in there and Charles began spending a lot of his time with her. The perception of morality then was a lot different to what it is now and Lionel was a proud man, he wanted no scandal which might affect his social standing. Also at that time, he was negotiating an important merger with a company, the head of which was a lay preacher. So the only stipulation he made was that their relationship should be kept as secret as possible, at least until the deal went through. After that, the divorce proceedings could go ahead."

"Did Dad move in with her?" Catherine asked flatly.

"Not exactly. He respected Lionel's wishes in that. But he did spend his weekends there, and as many other nights as he could. It certainly wasn't Petra's fault that you weren't told, Cathy. She had no children of her own, and wanted you to grow up in a comfortable, loving atmosphere, but I guess Charles preferred to wait until the divorce went through, before saying anything to you."

In her mind's eye Catherine saw again the bedroom at the top of the stairs in that house. Had it been prepared for her, she wondered? She was suddenly realizing just how little she had known about her father's life, even before she had gone to college. Until then, there had been vacations spent with him at the beach, or by the lake in the mountains, but after that their lives had separated. She an eager, ambitious student sharing time between her studies and her friends, and he a busy corporate lawyer for whom she happily acted as hostess for dinner parties whenever she came home, continuing to do so, even after she moved into her own apartment overlooking Central Park. She shook her head.

"I still can't believe that nobody ever told me about this," she said, bewildered.

"Probably because it didn't go on for very long," Marilyn said. "They were only together for about a year, and the divorce was almost finalized, when Lionel had a stroke and Petra moved back to nurse him. Charles was devastated, but understood that being the woman she was, she could do no less.

"It seemed that Lionel was totally unaware that she had ever left him, and he was only really at peace when she was near, so she didn't often escape from their place on Long Island." She looked thoughtful. "I believe what happened to Lionel made Charles think about his own mortality, and that's when he decided to make the house over to Petra. So that she would always have somewhere she could escape to, and if anything happened to him there would be no questions asked."

"And there would be no mention of it in his will!" Catherine said slowly, then a tiny frown marred the smoothness of her forehead. "But why would he keep the original deed?" Marilyn shrugged.

"There's no mystery about that," she said. "When we needed it for his lawyer to complete the transfer to Petra, he couldn't find it. Obviously he just forgot where he put it in the first place."

"So the relationship ended there!"

"Not entirely. Sometimes, when the separation got too much for them, they met at the house and spent time together and those meetings seemed to get them through the years. Then Lionel died and suddenly she was free. A few weeks after the funeral she and Charles quietly took up where they had left off, and I don't think I have ever seen him so happy."

"But he still didn't tell me!"

"I guess for a while they were so wrapped up in each other they didn't realize that the rest of the world existed. Finally they began to make plans for a simple wedding, but Petra insisted that first he must tell you everything. So he made arrangements to meet with you at your apartment, but it was too late ... that was the week he died."

Catherine took a sharp, inward breath. Yes, she remembered him phoning her at the office, and wondering why he sounded so keyed up.

"Petra was at the funeral, Cathy!"

Catherine looked at her, frowning with concentration as she tried to form a picture in her mind of the cemetery on that day, and the figures standing by the graveside. Then suddenly she saw her ... a slim, veiled woman standing unobtrusively behind the others, and remembered wondering who she was. After that she had lost sight of her, until after the service when she glimpsed her getting into a chauffeur-driven limousine

with darkened windows.

"She still often goes to the house," Marilyn broke into her reverie. "I suppose to relive her time with him." Catherine nodded slowly, and in her eyes were deep sadness and regret.

"Yes," she said. "I know."

Marilyn's expression was one of query, but somehow she felt it would not be wise to ask her how she could possibly know, and at that moment the waiter arrived at the table with their meal. Catherine picked up the folded paper and the key and slipped them back into her purse, then she glanced up and saw the other woman watching her anxiously.

"Are you okay?" Marilyn leaned forward in concern. Catherine smiled.

"I am now," she said.

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Having made her way across Central Park to the tunnel entrance, Catherine stopped before going in and turned to look up at the sky with its millions of stars. The evening was warm, so she took off her suit jacket, then closed her eyes and just stood there letting the night breeze gently lift her soft hair from her face.

In imagination, she was seeing again with crystal clarity the inside of that house, and a series of images of her father with the woman in the photograph. At first they were gazing at one another over a candle-lit table, then suddenly she was leaning on his shoulder as he wrote something at the desk, until he looked up to kiss her. She watched them sitting together before the fire in the room overlooking the street, he in a comfortable, winged armchair, with her at his feet resting her head against his knee while he lovingly stroked her hair.

He had been right in not telling her about Petra Conway all those years ago, she reflected. She would never have accepted her then, and by the time she was mature enough to really understand, there had been little to tell.

"I'm so sorry you had to keep your happiness a secret, Daddy," she whispered softly. "I just wish I could have shared it with you." The sense of loss was still with her, and yet somehow she felt at peace.

Behind her, Vincent silently emerged from the tunnel entrance and came to stand before her. As usual, the only thing that had alerted her to his presence was a tingling feeling of anticipation.

"Did you find the answers you were looking for, Catherine?" he asked softly. All her love for him welled up inside her as she moved into the curve of his arm.

"Yes," she said. "Her name is Petra Conway, and she brought Dad happiness again, after my mother died. They loved each other."

"Does that hurt you?"

"No... not now." She looked up at him and in the faint starlight he saw that her eyes were glistening with unshed tears. "But he knew it would have, in the beginning, the wound was still so raw, so new."

She gave a deep sigh. "Why does time have to take away so many of the beautiful things, Vincent?" she asked quietly. "They fell in love so long ago, and had only got back together again just before he died. It's so unfair."

"Things happen because they were meant to, Catherine," he said huskily. "If these two people had been

able to stay together when you were a child, you would have taken a different path and we might never have met."

"Don't say that. I can't bear to think about it."

"It would have made your life less complicated," he stated simply. She shook her head vehemently and reached up impulsively to kiss where the pulse beat in his throat.

"But I could never have felt like this about anyone else," she murmured. "I just wish...."

"Tell me," he invited softly, controlling with a great effort the surge of feeling her loving gesture had aroused in him.

She shook her head. For a while she did not want reminding that she had missed out on so much of her father's life.

"Later," she said, then changing the subject abruptly, she asked about Helen and the baby.

"They are both well, and Devin is very much the proud father." He turned her to face him, gently tilting her chin so that he could see her face in the dim light, and noting the pale violet shadows of strain beneath her eyes. With one finger he began to stroke her cheek and neck, before pulling aside the open collar of the blouse she was wearing and bending his head to kiss her bare shoulder.

"You look tired," he murmured against her soft skin.

Giving a shiver of anticipation, she said unsteadily. "No, I'm not tired... not now!"

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The following morning, as soon as she reached her desk at the D.A.'s office, Catherine picked up the phone and dialed a number.

"Hello!" It was a woman's voice. "Petra Conway speaking!"

"Mrs. Conway...." She hesitated, for some reason feeling nervous. Then drawing in a deep breath, she carried on firmly, ".... I'm Charles Chandler's daughter." She heard the sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line and there was a pause before finally the voice said hesitantly.

"Catherine....?"

Just for an instant she seemed to see her father's face and he was smiling that special, warm smile he always gave whenever he saw her, and she knew she was doing the right thing. Instinctively she smiled back as she said.

"I should like to come over to see you. Would tomorrow be suitable?"

The END