

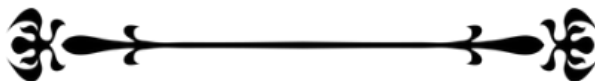
Baby Mine

Judith Nolan



"Don't be afraid of your fears. They're not there to scare you. They're there to let you know that something is worth it..."

C. Joybell C.



Charles Chandler stood looking down into the bassinet. He didn't blink for long minutes of wondering silence. He was almost convinced if he closed his eyes – even for a split-second – his new-born daughter might just disappear. She was that precious to him. And they had come so far together already...Theirs was an unbreakable bond forged through nine months of worry and anxiety. Months spent hoping against hope that this time things could be – *would be* – different...

"Thank you, my beautiful Cathleen..." Charles whispered, finally glancing across the room to the hospital bed where his wife lay sleeping, pale and exhausted from the protracted trauma of giving birth. It surely was a miracle that their only child had been born at all...small and delicate, but otherwise healthy.

Beyond their private hospital room, New York City slumbered in the depths of the warm July night. Few sounds penetrated the thick walls of their solitude. They'd come to this very room before...and had it left again, empty-handed.

His braced shoulders slumping, Charles thought back with regret to the last two pregnancies his beloved wife had fought so hard to bring to full-term...and lost. Their doctors had insisted they must not try again. It was not medically safe. But Cathleen wouldn't hear of it, certain they would succeed this time.

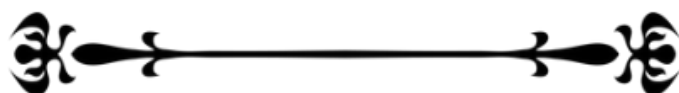
"Third time lucky," she'd whispered, maternal yearning evident in every sweet line of her face and body, as she tried to assuage the fear she'd seen in her husband's worried eyes and the doubting down-turn of his mouth. "It will be all right the next time. I just know it. And she will be so beautiful..."

"Well, if your heart is really set on trying one last time..." Charles had finally acquiesced with great reluctance. He couldn't find it in himself to disagree, no matter what it cost him. "I just hope and pray, for your sake, you are right. I couldn't bear to lose you or another child. I don't know what I would do without you..."

But even in the face of his wife's determined certainty, the deep, penetrating fear had never left him. Not even now, when it was finally all over and their baby had been safely born. All the money in the world could not guarantee the outcome they had both so desperately wanted. And Charles had been severely warned this time. His wife must not try to have any more children...*if he wanted her to live...*

"Catherine..." he breathed his daughter's name and sighed. She was his and Cathleen's precious gift. She would be loved as all children deserved to be loved, fully and completely. He made her that silent promise as he leaned in very carefully to kiss her baby-soft forehead beneath the fine strands of ash-blond hair so like her mother's. "I will care for you and protect you...always and forever..." he whispered. "I will love you beyond everything, my darling girl..."

His daughter stirred at his touch, turning her head and opening her eyes. They were still the deep, fathomless blue of the newly born, but she seemed to be trying to speak to him, to indicate some form of understanding beyond words or knowledge. Charles gasped, feeling his heart contract and then somersault as they stared at each other. His breath became jammed somewhere high in his throat, and tears of gratitude rolled unheeded down his cheeks, his chin trembling with the depth of his emotional response. The wordless communion seemed to last forever, and once again, the new father found he could not look away...



Vincent sat quietly, observing Father and Sebastien playing chess. Father had been so confident when he'd made this afternoon's challenge. He had barely waited for his opponent to arrive for the newly-organised Helpers' Feast before he'd cornered him

gleefully, making bold assertions that this time there was no escape and even less quarter. His confidence stemmed from the knowledge that he'd read all the books and researched all the latest strategies. He'd practised endlessly for weeks in advance, determined to finally secure this one moment of longed-for triumph.

But, like an old, cracked record endlessly caught in the same tired track, Sebastien was winning again, making Father's teeth grind with frustration. As the day turned slowly into night, a fraught silence reigned in the chamber — there was little sound beyond the far away bustle of a passing subway train, the soft tapping on the pipes, and Father's increasing rapid breathing above the occasional click of the chess pieces being moved. Far below them the feasting and merriment went on, as it would until dawn, but no sound of the festivities penetrated the thick rock walls of the chamber.

Vincent grimaced as he watched every move and counter-move with keen interest, the depth and complexity of the game providing endless fascination for an extremely gifted and intelligent three-year-old boy, with an already amazing grasp of the strategies Sebastien had employed to defeat his opponent in the last five games. How his long fingers itched to take charge of the pieces. He could see exactly where Father was going wrong, buoyed and blinded by all his research. But Vincent managed to keep his hands firmly clasped in his lap, trying not to show his agitation at his parent's latest unwise move, even though he barely managed to stifle a disapproving gasp.

"And I really thought I finally had you in this one..." Father leaned in, peering dejectedly at the board over the rim of his spectacles. "Spassky versus Keres, I believe...at the Gothenburg Interzonal back in 1955. Very nice move...and I was so sure I knew that game."

"So you already know how the story ends then, old man." Sebastien smirked.

"Yes, I have a fair idea..." Father reared back defensively, slanting a glance at Vincent's intent face. "So, what do you think, son? Am I doomed again?"

"It doesn't look good..." Vincent leaned forward eagerly with his palms pressed together, his small chin resting on the tips of his upraised fingers. He pursed his lips in concentration. "But your king...it's still here." He reached to lightly touch the piece.

"I'll admit that is a rare talent." Father laughed bleakly. "Yes, a Sebastien speciality. If he's losing, he delights in making your pieces vanish, only to make them reappear in the most unlikely of places. Remember that, Vincent. The man is a sore loser, as well as a gloating winner."

“Stop talking about me as if I’m not here,” Sebastien complained. “And stop trying to delay the inevitable. Six games to nothing. I believe that’s called a rout. So it’s time to give it up. I’m not getting any younger, and the night is already old.”

“Very well, then.” Father sighed as he reached to lay down his king, signalling his acceptance of yet another defeat. “I do wonder what masochistic instinct it was that prompted me to ask you if you played the game in the first place, magician.”

“I’ll admit to taking a few lessons up in the park, every Saturday morning.” Sebastien stood from his chair and stretched. “And back then you needed someone you thought you could beat. But now I can hear my bed calling. I shall bid you goodnight, Doc, and retire happy and triumphant. *Adieu, mon ami*. See ya, Vincent.” He winked at the smiling boy.

“So I cannot interest you in another game?” Father raised his eyebrows at him in desperation. “Allow me to salvage some of my much battered pride?”

“Tempting but no, thank you.” Sebastien shook his head. “Remember that strategy too, Vincent.” He leaned down to ruffle the boy’s long blond hair. “Always leave your opponent wanting more. It makes them vulnerable and desperate, openings you can exploit.”

“Oh, go to bed, you old fool!” Father grumbled, dismissing the magician with an impatient wave of his hand. “But be sure we shall revisit this tomorrow. And this time I will be ready for you...”

“Always a glutton for punishment, your old man.” Sebastien grinned at Vincent, before he took the short flight of steps of the chamber’s upper level two at a time and disappeared through the door of Father’s chamber, his delighted laughter echoing back.

“I believe I can still beat you...” Father turned to Vincent with a hopeful gleam in his eyes. “Care for a game before bed? I know it’s late, but I’ll make your excuses to Mary, if she comes looking for you.”

“A baby was born tonight, Father.” Vincent assented by sliding into Sebastien’s vacated chair and quickly resetting the board. “A little girl.”

“Down here...?” Father frowned in confusion. “But we have no one amongst us who is due to give birth. And I would have been summoned to attend. Mary knows where I am.”

“No. Not down here.” Vincent’s shaggy mane danced as he shook his head vigorously. “Up there.” He looked up, pointing to the chamber’s craggy and shadowed ceiling, stained dark with candle-smoke.

"I don't understand. There could have been a thousand babies born in the city tonight." Father made his opening gambit. "What makes you say that?"

"Because this one is really special." Vincent leaned forward, his tumbled hair brushing his chin as he studied the board. "Very special. I can feel it. I know."

His father lifted his gaze to stare at him over the rim of his spectacles, the game momentarily forgotten. "Every day you grow bigger and even more amazing. What is it that you feel, and how is it possible?"

"Here..." Vincent put two fingers to his left temple. "And in here." He pressed the flat of his hand against his warmly-covered chest, over his heart. "I don't know. I just felt her. It's all warm in here now. Like a bright light. Like a candle or maybe a star. Devin told me how the stars shine at night in the sky. All warm and pretty. That's how I see her. And I will see the stars one day soon, he said. Maybe even the moon, too."

"Devin and his fancies..." Father shook his head in disgust. "I'll have to speak to the boy again about that. He shouldn't fill your head with dreams of things that can never be. Or perhaps it's because you've been reading far too much poetry when you should be sleeping." Father sighed as he frowned at the board. "But I will admit you seem to know things before others do. It's your gift." *And maybe one day, your burden.* Father grimaced and shook off the thought. "But that is for another time. You are far too young to understand all the things you will need to know one day."

"Maybe, Father. Maybe not." Vincent's bright blue eyes gleamed with an inner knowledge his parent couldn't fathom. "And her father loves her very much."

"Not as much as I love you." Father reached to clasp his hand where it lay beside the board. "You know that. We have been through some tough times, you and me." He studied his son's unique face, touching on each unusual feature in slow deliberation. "But we are still here. We have survived, and for that I am grateful."

"Yes." Vincent nodded, returning his grasp. "But, perhaps...maybe, one day, we will meet." He brought his attention back to the game at hand. "I would like that."

"Who...?" Father frowned at the move his son had just made, looking for the hidden dangers. He had learned through bitter experience that even at three years old, Vincent's game was already becoming deadly. It was another of his unusual gifts to visualise the required moves several steps in advance and store them away. He never made the same mistake twice.

"The baby and me." Vincent watched his father reach to make a move, then hesitate and change his mind, withdrawing his hand. "I would like that very much."

“You know I wish the very best of everything for you, Vincent. But those who dwell up there...well, they might not understand. They do not know you and they are —”

“Dangerous. Yes, I know. You told me.” Vincent’s young shoulders slumped. “But... maybe...maybe this one will be different. I feel it.”

“Oh, Vincent...” Father lifted the boy’s hand and kissed the back gently. “Some things are better left alone. It’s a sweet and beautiful dream, but nothing that can ever be. There is no sense in wishing for such things to be other than what they are.”

“The voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses. Nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands...” Vincent quoted his favourite e.e. cummings poem softly, almost to himself.

And his eyes gleamed with a new, secret knowledge his father could not understand, much less deny. But it left Father uneasy and uncertain of what the future might hold for all that he held dear and for the unusual child he called his son and loved beyond everything...

