

My Friend, Edie

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“Don’t walk in front of me... I may not follow.

Don’t walk behind me... I may not lead.

Walk beside me... just be my friend...”

~ Albert Camus



“Providence...?” Catherine queried blankly. “You’re speaking of going to Providence?” Her newly-filled wine glass hovered in astonishment midway between the dining table and her lips. She set it down slowly

without tasting the contents. Her mind struggled to grasp the facts of what she had just been told. "Oh, Edie, this is a joke, right? It's not funny."

Now she could see the astounding point of Edie's sudden invitation to dinner at 21, and her friend's blasé ordering of a whole bottle of Dom Perignon. This was a celebration. But also a goodbye.

It was all so sudden and appallingly real. Catherine's stomach hollowed with dismay, making her feel ill.

"I don't understand..." She swallowed tightly, even as she shook her head in disbelief. "You're actually thinking of moving all the way to Providence, Rhode Island? You surely picked a heck of a time and way of telling me. I thought we were friends. This is madness."

Edie pulled a face and shrugged one denying shoulder. "I wanted to tell you so bad. And I'm not *thinking* about it, it's already a done deal. I leave at the end of the week. As soon as I've trained up the new girl. Her name's Rita Escobar. She isn't me, but she's okay. I think you'll like her."

She sipped her champagne before continuing, "Joe swore me to absolute silence on pain of death. He said I wasn't to tell a soul until it was all okayed. I got the letter confirming everything this afternoon."

She grimaced briefly. "I guess Moreno got scared after you refused to go up there and made him look bad. And I knew you'd try and talk me

out of it. You make it sound like I've contracted some kind of communicable disease. I need this, Cathy. I'm finally doing something for me and it feels right."

Edie's lips formed into a pout, as she spread her arms wide and struck a pose. "Besides, how could anyone resist this?" Her over-sized earrings jangled as she shook her dark braids. "Pure New York sass, black and beautiful besides. They won't stand a chance. I'll have them eating out of my hand inside a week, see if I don't."

"I know you will..." Catherine watched her closely, seeing the hair-line cracks her friend was trying to hide behind a brave front. The indecision of choices made and now put beyond regret.

She knew now how Vincent had felt when she herself had told him she was leaving for Providence, far away from his loving arms. It was all so unfair. She felt like crying. [1]

She inhaled deeply instead, and said, "Very well, then. Here's a question. What about your list?" She zeroed in a little too quickly, before swallowing her champagne to steady her certainties, which had suddenly gone out of kilter. "Have you made one yet?"

"What list?" Edie's forehead contracted, then suddenly cleared. "Oh, *that list. Et tu*, Chandler? The pros far outweigh the cons in this case. Three years in Providence and I will've cleared all my debts. The whole salary package is eye-wateringly unbelievable. I can afford to

come back to New York and buy myself a nice apartment. Maybe finally find that good man who's proving so elusive."

The young black woman shook her head. "And I'm not going away forever, Cathy. I'll be coming back, don't you worry. You can't lose me that easily. Once a New Yorker, ya know?" She raised her right hand. "I solemnly promise I will be back. Try and keep me away. Who knows what trouble you might get into without me around to watch your back."

"I don't want to lose you at all." Catherine sniffed. "In the meantime, I will miss you, woman. You *do* know that? No one can replace you."

"What you'll miss is me doing all your work for you. I got skills you can only dream about. I've already wised Rita up not to do everything for you." Edie chuckled. "When you turned down that gold-plated, once-in-a-lifetime job of co-ordinating everything from counselling services to court appearances, the powers-that-be moved fast. They turned right around and offered it to an up and coming DA from New Jersey." Her grin widened. "In fact, an old acquaintance of mine. She grabbed it with both hands."

Edie tipped her head to one side, studying Catherine's deeply worried expression. "They needed a computer data operator with my background and experience. Is that so bad a thing? To know you're wanted?"

“Oh, Edie, I’m not doubting your skills. But you once said yourself that you’ve never set foot outside of the Five Boroughs of New York. Think of it, open air, sunshine...cows. They have cows on Rhode Island.”

“I’ll close my eyes to all the bad points,” Edie replied quickly. “I gotta do this, Cathy. Work like this doesn’t come along often for a girl like me. If you know what I mean.” Her dark eyes grew serious and pleading. “Be happy for me, just a little...”

“Oh, I am. And yes, I understand.” Catherine reached across the table to grasp her friend’s out-stretched hand. “If I can do anything for you, you know my number. Drop me a line any time.”

“Always, girlfriend.” Edie sniffed as she squeezed Catherine’s fingers. They sat together in companionable silence, each deep within their own thoughts. They said no more until their entrees were delivered.

“Since this is the last time we’ll talk face to face for a while...” Edie eyed her table companion speculatively as she picked over her food. “I want to know, how did that gorgeously pricey silk nightgown work out for you in the end, girlfriend?”

Catherine frowned, not daring to answer such a loaded question. She hunted for a change of subject, but nothing suggested itself. She ate her meal in silence, keeping her eyes down, striving for an air of casual disinterest.

“Okay, I see...” Edie sighed, as she ate a portion of her meal before continuing. “It’s been months since you bought that piece, and you haven’t once dropped by my confession booth. You *know* it’s always open for all the gossip. Even if it will be by long distance from now on. We can have long, midnight chats on the phone. You’re holding out on me.”

“I’m sorry?” Catherine frowned. “I’m afraid you’ve lost me.”

Edie didn’t buy the look or her words. She grinned wickedly. “You promised me a blow by blow account of all the juicy details. I’m waiting...” She arched her dark eyebrows. “You wouldn’t renege on an old friend, surely?”

“I promised you no such thing,” Catherine said quickly, watching her good friend warily. “I’d forgotten all about it, and that night,” she lied briskly.

That night, and the following day, had been memorable for many reasons. Vincent had entered her apartment for the very first time, and they had talked, really talked. Far into the evening...that was not a memory she was prepared to share, even if she could.

But Catherine had forgotten that she’d showed Edie that dratted nightgown. “Your memory is failing. That was merely an impulse purchase. I told you then I was simply in the mood for some retail therapy.” [2]



“Good one!” Edie hooted. “Now pull the other leg, it’s got bells on it! You can’t fool your Auntie Edie. I know you too well. You always look shifty when you’re lying.”

“I do not look shifty! And there’s nothing at all to tell. I’d rather you dropped the whole idea.”

“Ouch...that bad, huh?” Edie grimaced. “So I’m guessing he didn’t measure up then, in the end.” Her shoulders lifted fatalistically. “In my experience, they never, ever do. Pity that. I had high hopes for you, girlfriend. Voyeurism around in your rich-girl love life makes mine seem less lonely. You’ve got it going on, big-time. Rich, gorgeous and smart, who wouldn’t want you?”

“Who are you talking about? Who didn’t measure up?” Catherine tried for the innocently confused look. She pushed the food around her place. She’d suddenly lost her appetite.

If she thought of Vincent then, and what had finally happened to that particular nightgown, it would show in her expression as a treasured

memory, and Edie would pounce with undisguised glee. She saw far too much for Catherine's comfort.

"The guy you bought that sexy thing for," Edie replied patiently, before eating another mouthful of food. "You said you needed to be patient. That he was a complicated guy. You confessed you'd gone all out for one of those deep, mysterious types. The sort who wants to hold your hand and gaze soulfully into your eyes instead of getting down to the business of making you extra happy. Unfortunately, I know the type all too well. New York City is full of them. Maybe Providence will treat me better."

Edie sighed ruefully. "What else have I got to entertain me right now? They've gone and cancelled my favourite TV show...for the third time!" She frowned. "They've got cable up in Rhode Island, right?"

"Yes, I'm sure they have cable. And as I said, it's complicated..." Catherine concentrated on her food. "Besides I haven't seen him in a while. Or heard from him. Maybe he's left town."

That part was at least true. It had been more than a week since Vincent had visited her balcony. She was beginning to think there was something wrong. She intended to visit her sub-basement tonight, and tap out an invitation in the code her lover had taught her. She prayed he would hear it and join her.

"Of course you haven't heard..." Edie slanted her head, disbelief evident in the tapping of her coral-tipped fingers on the table cloth.

“You get them right where you want them, and they don’t even phone. I did wonder back then just who it was. It’s not Elliot Burch, I’m guessing...” Her dark eyes assessed Catherine’s face closely.

Catherine’s carefully preserved, neutral expression gave nothing away. Narrowing her eyes, Edie continued with her interrogation, answering her own question.

“Nope, not him...he’s way too pushy for his own good. He would’ve bought you the whole store, just to prove a point.” She pursed her lips, deepening her look of interrogation. “But there *is* someone...I can feel it. You’re holding out on me. You look like a woman in love. You have that glow about you.”

A shiver of concern stalked the length of Catherine’s spine. “Your lack of a satisfactory love life doesn’t give you permission to go digging around in my private life,” she replied too sharply, then immediately regretted her words. “I’m sorry, Edie, that wasn’t meant how it sounded...” Her shoulders slumped. “It’s just that...”

“Yeah, it’s okay, I get it...” Edie raised both hands, palms outermost. “You don’t want to talk about it. He let you down, the *rat!* Sorry if I trod on a few corns. I was only asking...” She dropped her eyes to her plate. “I was just trying to tie up some loose ends before I skip town.”

“The office won’t be the same without you.” Catherine grasped the change of subject with both hands, pushing her plate of half-eaten food aside. “You are irreplaceable, you do know that?”

“Make-up...” Edie fanned her fingertips before her blinking eyes. “If you make me cry, I won’t forgive you.” She smiled wistfully, wiping a careful finger beneath both eyes and sniffing. “How am I gonna survive without you, Up Town Girlfriend?”

“Come back before I have a chance to really miss you,” Catherine replied on a deep sigh. “But I am sure you will be fine without me. You are Edie Valentine, computer data programmer extraordinaire. They will love you in Providence. I know, because I love you.”

“You think so?” Edie brightened. “Yeah, lots of new bad guys to hunt down and make very sorry.” She tilted her head to one side. “But it won’t be the same without you.”

“Three years and you will be back.” Catherine raised her wine glass to clink it against Edie’s. “I’m holding you to that promise.”

“Three years...” Edie pursed her lips. “I wonder what your life will be like by then. I’m betting you’ll make me jealous with three beautiful kids and a gorgeous husband. You mark my words, he’s waiting out there somewhere for you, Chandler.”

“Perhaps...” The warmth of her love for Vincent swept through Catherine’s inner being then, and she smiled wistfully. “Who knows what the future holds? With love, all things are truly possible...”

“Of course.” Edie nodded wisely. “You just have to believe that love will always find a way. And you need to believe in Madame Sharonova’s predictions. They always come true. She told me only last week that one day I’ll meet someone tall, dark and handsome, who’s supposed to come from a secret place few people know about...”

Edie pulled a face of rueful bemusement. “She said a good friend will show me the way to meet him. I’m still working *that* one out. Maybe he’s waiting for me, somewhere up there in Providence...”

~ *FIN* ~



*“There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends.
I have no notion of loving people by halves, it is not my nature.”*

~ Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey

[1] *Beauty and the Beast, Nor Iron Bars a Cage*

[2] *An Ever-Fixed Mark*

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