

Oh, Sweetest Song...

Judith Nolan



Vincent and Catherine

Father looked distracted with worry. "She can only bring you unhappiness..." He tried again to make his son see reason, leaning forward in his chair to reinforce his point. He was painfully aware his caution was very relevant and inescapable. But, for not the first time, his sage advice was being challenged.

Vincent's head lifted, then he stood from his chair in agitation. "Then I'll be unhappy," he growled, his large hand clenching at his side. "But I can't forget her." He walked away, a book clasped tightly in his clawed fist. "We're still connected..." He sighed, turning back, his frowning gaze returning to that helpless state of confusion that so worried his troubled parent.

Vincent drew a long breath and held it. *Of course this perilous connection between himself and Catherine could be never become more than friendship...* that was a fact as immutable as the stone that surrounded him, anchoring him to his place beneath her world. Even thinking about visiting her in the world Above jeopardized all he stood for, all he cared for and protected...*and yet...*

Her face, healed by the strong spirit that shone from within, floated before his vision every time he closed his eyes. He could not forget her if he lived for a hundred eternities. The lightest touch on their shared bond made it hum with vital awareness.

On an inward sigh, Vincent tried again to make his deeply worried parent understand his predicament. "I can feel what she's feeling, I know what she's thinking -- when she's frightened, when she's happy or sad..." The distracting sensation also followed him day and night like a waking dream, a soft, warm envelopment of his very senses...

Vincent moved his head slowly from side to side. *Catherine...* his heart whispered. He'd sensed her that very day, walking along the busy city street far above his head, pausing in mid-step to look down into a

steam vent...and she smiled. He knew she'd been thinking of him, and his great heart had leapt with the knowledge she still remembered him; thought of him. Perhaps it was only as a distracting and foolish wish... *and yet...* Surely that was reason enough to seek out her company, renew their friendship. *If only to know she was well...and happy.* Then he would be content...

Father caught his breath in sad realization his most salient point had still not gotten across. Perhaps the fault was his. But then he'd never seen his usually obedient son so fixed, so unwilling to bend to the dictates of reason and common sense. His fine mouth compressed with despair....he sighed roughly.

Only heaven knew where this dangerously unequal connection might lead them all...no doubt to the edge of doom, and perhaps beyond... It was certain to break his son's great heart into a million pieces when this rich man's daughter tired of him, once she discovered the necessary limitations of his hidden existence.

That bitter fate Jacob himself had once experienced. But he was a very different man now, and that painful time in his life had been walled off from all recall. He wished now he'd had the courage to share that experience with Vincent before all this; show him the careless ways of the women who inhabited the world Above. *But that was for another time, not now...* he could not add to his son's already heavy burden of guilt.

He sighed and tried again. "Vincent, your senses -- your empathic powers are quite...extraordinary. It's your gift. And these powers have been heightened by the concern...the love that you feel. But don't let your act of kindness destroy you..." *Or this secret world that so many depended upon for shelter and sanctuary...* He fell silent, contemplating an uncertain future.

Vincent tightened his grip on the book in his hand, turning it over to stare at the embossed cover. He sighed deeply. "Maybe I have no choice..." His gaze lifted once more to the middle distance. Once more he worried about the book...was enough for a woman from her world. Perhaps it was a foolish wish, after all...*and yet...*

Could the gift bring her the happiness he so desired? Reinforce the memory of all they had shared in those ten days, those stolen moments out of time. It had been their last tenuous connection, and there was still its final chapter to be read. He wondered if she remembered that one small fact after all that had happened between them...all that had come to pass after five months of relentless toil and sacrifice on her part. She had completely changed her life, for the better. Vincent admired that in her. He knew she was proud of her achievements...and yet she had no-one to share them with. Her powerful father hovered at a disapproving distance, not interfering, but not helping either. Vincent knew his own father was gravely wrong in his assessment of Catherine.

But for now, all he knew was, he had to try. But to do that he must brave the world Above; wait until nightfall and make his way to the roof

of her building. From there it was a short trip down the fire escape followed by an easy drop into her tiny balcony overlooking the vast expanse of Central Park. He had been there in nights past when she had been working at her new job in the D.A.'s office. Of course, tonight, he would not linger, waiting for evidence of her safe return. He would simply leave the book, allowing her the knowledge that he was still out there, thinking of her. That he cared and believed in her. It would be enough...*it had to be enough...*

He knew the hours of her new life were crippling and long. Another reason he'd kept his distance, not desiring to make the first contact. He didn't wish to distract her from her new purpose, *or remind her of the old life where she'd been so hurt and then discarded by a careless world that professed to value such beautiful things as her lovely face...*

But now, he no longer had any choice. The insidious pull towards her soft, warm presence was becoming too great to ignore. And more compelling than all the dictates of Father's reasoned argument. But the trepidation that surged through him as he left the chamber and began the long journey Above was inescapable...

Vincent dropped down silently into the shadows that clung to the end of her tiny balcony. He was about to move forward and leave his gift where she would find it when the lights in the bedroom of her apartment flicked on. He grimaced in sharp consternation. She had obviously arrived home far earlier than he'd expected and now was

preparing for bed. He cast a glance at the windows beside him, but the curtains at the French doors were undrawn. If he lingered she would soon be aware of his presence. But if he was quick and silent, it would only take a matter of moments to leave the book.

Sucking in a calming breath through clenched teeth he crouched, and moved on silent feet across the tiles and placed the book just outside her bedroom window. From his vantage point high above her, he had often watched Catherine come out onto the balcony to hurriedly swallow her early-morning coffee in the half-light of dawn before she scrambled to be ready for work. As always the dawning light had driven Vincent Below once more to await the night.

He turned now, a few steps and he would be gone again, back into the night from which he'd come. But just as he moved towards the brick dais, he brushed against a chair at the outside table, making it shift and clank on the tiles. He felt Catherine react, but with only half her attention. She paused and then dismissed what she had heard.

Vincent breathed a sigh of cautious relief. There was still time. Reaching quickly for the raised brickwork at the end of the balcony to make good his escape, he stepped up. But, distracted by the closeness of her unseen presence and all it implied, his searching boot stumbled against the edge, giving a muffled thump as he came down more heavily than he intended. Immediately he sensed her quick and calculated reaction to the intrusion.

Catherine looked up from her paperwork. At first she'd dismissed the sound out on her balcony as perhaps only a passing cat. But then, at the second erroneous noise, all of Isaac's intensive training kicked in. She didn't call out, as once she would have done, advertising her uncertainty and fear. Instead she slipped sideways off the bed, reaching for the hand gun she now kept in the nightstand. Rising slowly to her feet, she moved towards the bedroom's French doors, unlocking and opening one with studied caution. She'd endured another long and tiring day, and she craved sleep. But she had work to complete, and this intrusion was a waste of her precious time. *Whatever, or whomever, was out there was about to be very sorry indeed...*

Vincent heard her open the door and then she came slowly out, weapon held at the ready. Her expression was tight and mutinous. He admired her new-found fortitude, even as he warily noted the gun. The presence of the weapon and her sense of anger anchored Vincent in place. He turned his face away, trying to make himself as small as possible, willing her to return inside and close the door behind her. Draw the curtain and allow him to make good his escape. Father *was* right, he *should not* have come here...

He waited helplessly as he sensed Catherine pause, glancing down when the door struck softly against something. He felt her confusion as she stared down at the old book lying on the tiles – the book Vincent had left there for her, his well-worn copy of "Great Expectations." Then her uncertainty changed, becoming questioning, even as he sensed her already rapid heartbeat quickening.

As he hid in the shadows, Vincent swallowed tightly, his mind racing, coming up with conflicting answers and apologies. The gift that he had thought so appropriate, now seemed somewhat dilapidated against the obvious luxury of her existence. Surely he had nothing to offer now, here in this place. But it was already too late to take it back...she had seen it. His whole body trembled with the need to be gone from her... but against every instinct, every tensed sinew and muscle, he remained, watchful and despairing...and then his boot slipped a little on the rain-damp brickwork he was balancing on, and Catherine's head snapped up and around. The gun, now clasped hard against the book in her hand, tracked with her gaze; the round, snub muzzle briefly pointing at him like an accusing finger, before it sank to hang forgotten from her fingers, the book now held in her opposite hand.

She blinked, confused. He heard her soft huff of disbelief, and then Catherine gasped, "Vincent...!"

Before he could react, turn away and deny her, to dismiss this... *whatever this strange compulsion was that had drawn him here*...she rushed eagerly forward to throw her arms around him, embracing him tightly, as if she would never let him go again. And suddenly nothing else seemed to matter in this world--*in this place*--except her soft warmth and beguiling fragrance. And to finally be able to hold her close once more...

Vincent's arms rose slowly to enclose her slim body, and he inhaled a deep, sustaining breath. Closing his eyes, he relaxed his rigid stance,

finally surrendering to the inevitability of this new and perilous relationship.

And somewhere deep inside him, a distracting voice whispered...*For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings, That then I scorn to change my state with kings...*

THE END

Mouse and Jamie

Mouse ducked his shaggy head. He frowned direfully. That *girl* again, standing in his path, watching him. She'd been watching him for days now. Like she owned him. Mouse sighed. No one owned him. *Well, maybe Vincent.* But Vincent was his friend. He'd said so. But this girl... *this Jamie...* wasn't his friend. He'd said so. Told her and told her. But she just wouldn't go away.

Beneath his breath he grumbled a word he'd heard Winslow shout when he'd hit his thumb with the hammer yesterday. But it didn't seem to alleviate his aggrieved feelings. *Maybe he wasn't saying it right...*

"Go away!" Mouse tried again, waving one dismissive hand imperiously at her. With his free hand he clutched his latest find from Above close to his dirty vest. "You...not here. Mouse gone." He tried to sidestep around her, but she got in his way again, spreading her arms out and

blocking the tunnel. Mouse scowled as he considered moving her physically. But both Father and Vincent had said he wasn't to hit anyone. Or bite anyone, or scratch them...*so many rules...*they made his head ache...

Mouse sighed roughly. "Mouse busy." His precious new find was now cutting into his already abused flesh, making him flinch. *And it was getting harder to hold...*

"Father said I was to hang around and keep an eye on you. Make sure you're okay. See to it that you don't get lost." Jamie folded her arms across her chest. "And make sure you're not getting into any more trouble. Said he didn't want you blowing anything else up. William's still mad about that toaster oven thing of yours. Said you tried to kill him."

"Not my fault," Mouse countered moodily, carefully adjusting his load. "Better next time. You'll see. Bad wiring. Caught Mouse out. Won't happen again."

He scowled. That man they all called Father didn't own him either. Come and go...*stay or leave...*all the same to Mouse. He didn't need the tunnels. Or the people who lived there. *Only Vincent.* That familiar feeling of sharp pain settled in his chest, as it always did whenever he thought of leaving his good friend forever. He didn't like the bad feeling, so he did his best to ignore it. *But he would leave if he had to...*

He chewed on his bottom lip in frustration. *Why they always pick on Mouse for what went wrong?* Some things went right too. He'd tried to rewire that pop-up toaster for his new friend to use. But that had all gone wrong, and gotten Mouse yelled at by William, the tunnel cook. Winslow, the blacksmith, who'd sometimes let Mouse hang around the forge while he was working, has been there at the time. He'd tried to stop the explosion and he'd nursed a badly bruised thumb for days afterwards. Mouse did feel bad about that. *Just a little...*

Mouse had gathered up the shattered remnants of his toaster -- and his pride -- and had slunk off to the deepest chamber of all, his very own Mousehole. There he'd worked day and night on a gift for Vincent, a birthday gift. To make things better. Vincent had liked that surprise very much. A gold egg that opened to show two tiny figures. One Vincent and one Mouse, side by side. Mouse had been so proud of it and Vincent had been so happy it didn't explode in his face.

So...Mouse did real good that day. That counted for something, right? Mouse grumbled to himself. It showed he was getting better. Didn't need anyone to look out for him. Not even Vincent, and not that Devin either.

Now it had been six months since Vincent's brother, Devin, had gone away Up Top. He'd said he'd be back, and Mouse wasn't to get into any fresh mischief while he was gone. Mouse had shrugged his warning words aside. He didn't need Devin to watch over him any more than he needed this stupid girl standing so stubbornly in his way now.

“Mouse got things. Must do. Places to be.” He tried again to move her from his path by going around her. His precious find clanked and rattled as he scurried forward, and he nearly dropped it.

“Well, so do I,” Jamie grumbled, jumping quickly to stubbornly block his path once more, arms spread wide once more. “But Father said, so I —”

“Father said. Father said...” Mouse mimicked her exasperated tone exactly as he carefully reassembled his burden. “Father didn’t say so. Not to Mouse. So, fine! Mouse don’t need *you*.”

“That’s as may be.” Jamie shrugged. “But I am here now. So you might as well get used to it. So where are you going? What’ya doing? What’s that you got there? Look, you know places and stuff I don’t. So maybe we can teach each other, right?”

“*Questions!*” Mouse rounded on her. “Head hurt. You just girl.” He lofted an accusing chin. “Don’t know stuff.”

“Says *who*?” Jamie bristled at that, her eyes blazing. “I know enough not to go around blowing up people and things all the time.” She smirked at his flushed cheeks, her feminine logic unassailable. “So now who’s the idiot?”

Driven to distraction, Mouse’s scowl deepened. “What’s...*idiot*?” he was forced to ask, enunciating the new word carefully.

“You are, you big *ninny*,” Jamie flashed back. “Don’t you even know that much?”

“Mouse not that. Not other thing too.” Mouse screwed up his face. “Tell Father Mouse okay, good. So go away. Mouse gotta go. Got stuff to do.”

“You don’t have a clue what I just said, do you?” Jamie cocked her head at him, as she leaned a shoulder against the tunnel wall, still blocking his path. “And yet Vincent said you’re real smart. So how come you act so dumb? Or maybe you’re just crazy. Trying to blow people up says crazy in my book.”

“If Mouse knew, he not ask.” Mouse balled his fists. “Mouse need to know, what he needs to know.” He expelled the words in a flustered rush. It was the most he’d said to anyone, other than Vincent. But he liked the sound of them. He’d made his point. “Going now. ‘Bye.” He flapped a dismissive hand again.

“Pig-headed stubborn, too. Okay, look...” Jamie straightened, raising both hands in supplication, palms uppermost. “Father wants me to keep an eye on you, so how about we give it some time? See if we can make it work. I won’t get in your way and you don’t try to lose me because you’re pissed about it all. You never know, you might get to like having me around. You sure know things and places I’ve never been. And since I want to become a tunnel guard real soon--if Father will let me-- you’d be a useful person to know. So, you help me, and I’ll help you. It’ll make us allies, okay?”

Mouse sighed as he eased the load on his abused arms. *More new words he didn't know...Just like Vincent, she sure used a lot of them.* Maybe he could let this annoying girl hang around, just for a little while. Until he knew all her secrets, and then he could avoid her completely. She was annoying, but he figured he was stuck with her anyway. He did know things and places where she'd never been. *Maybe it could work...*

"Okay, good. Okay, fine..." He hoisted his burden and set off again. And this time Jamie didn't try to stop him. Instead she fell into step beside him, chattering away as if they were suddenly the best of friends.

"You sure can talk. A lot..." Mouse's scowl deepened with every step, his shoulders hunching in mute defence, his headache now very real and aching. "Not good."

"Well, you talk real funny..." Jamie countered brightly, ignoring his scowling glance. "And just what'ya got there...? What's it do?"

"Nothing...Not yours." Mouse huddled deeper over his prize, increasing his shuffling pace...

Both were completely unaware someone was watching them from the shadows of an adjoining tunnel. Vincent moved into the flickering light of the tunnel's lanterns as the two most unlikely companions were swallowed by the darkness ahead. He smiled his satisfaction. It had

been his idea to enlarge Mouse's small circle of tunnel acquaintances, and a deeply concerned Father had been more than willing to ask the outgoing and tomboyish Jamie to be their eyes and ears where the inveterate tinker was concerned. Father also vividly remembered that unfortunate episode with the toaster.

Now that Devin had gone Above, and Vincent had more pressing duties Below, they all needed someone to keep an eye on Mouse and his doings. Someone closer to his own age who didn't appear to mind his scowling moods and abrupt manners...*or complete lack of them.*

Vincent listened with satisfaction to their arguing until it faded into the distance. And then he turned, retreating back down the tunnel to report back to Father over the complete success of their shared mission...

THE END

Elliot and Shannon

Elliot stood silently in the shadows of the Great Hall, watching the dancers turning around the centre of the chamber. The music was loud and the crowd well-oiled with William's fine brew and the wonderful grandeur of the occasion. There was a great deal of conversation and

much merriment. An enormous shadow had been lifted off this hidden community by Gabriel's welcome demise. Now the whole celebration of Winterfest, and the added excitement of Catherine's imminent marriage to Vincent, had left Elliot contemplating his own future.

His lips curved in wry amusement. The old Elliot would not be here. He couldn't spare the time. He'd be alone in his office working every available hour. Working with the single-minded focus that had characterized the old Elliot Burch. *Until that night, up in the park, when he'd tried to save the Mouse boy and been shot for his pains...*

But what a reward of trust and faith he'd received in return. It far outweighed the scars the killer's bullet had left on his body. Elliot shook his head. *How things had changed...*and for the better, he was forced to admit. Life was so much simpler now, decisions easy to make. Like coming down here into this hidden world for the weekend. He never took time off and yet here he was. He pictured his employees' horrified faces when he'd informed them they would have to do without him for three whole days. There had been consternation and many questions, but he had simply shrugged and told his people to get used to it. This was the new Elliot Burch and he did things differently now.

His grin expanded as he leaned his shoulders back against the wall behind him, his grey eyes drifting half-closed as he fell into an inward-looking contemplation.

What was there for him now? He had come so far...and yet...

He knew he didn't envy Catherine her happiness, or her final choice of husband. Not anymore. It seemed now as if it was always meant to be. Even from the very beginning, when they'd first met at his presentation of the artwork to the museum. Even then he'd already been too late to make her his. Once he would have moved heaven and earth to make himself into the man she wanted him to be. But with all new things comes experience, and he couldn't find it within himself to be jealous she had chosen someone else. Vincent was so right for her. What Elliot could do now was to be there...*for both of them. Always...*

"Or maybe it's just the cider talking..." He chuckled even as he rolled his shoulders tiredly and frowned down at his wristwatch. He was surprised at the lateness of the hour. Time beneath the city seemed to move more slowly, measured in good conversation, great food, and the regular imbibing of William's excellent brew. Elliot's lips curved into a reminiscent smile. It had been a long day and an even longer night. He knew far above this hidden realm the stars would soon be giving way to the dawn light. But he was loathe to leave this place, where he could be himself and the demands on him were few.

But he couldn't say he didn't miss the cut and thrust of the world Above. Especially now, when he had so much to do, so many loose ends to tie up. It would always be there...waiting for him to return. He eased his shoulders again. His body ached from the abuse it had suffered at the hands of Gabriel's hired killer, and the daily workouts he now subjected himself to, pushing to achieve his previous level of fitness and then to exceed it. But it was a good ache. The deep sense of accomplishment made all the pain seem worthwhile.

He smiled now as he watched Joe leave Father's side and walk slowly in his direction. Joe had also had a few too many of William's fine ales and it showed in the deliberately careful way he was walking. The D.A. of Manhattan sighed as he rested his shoulders back against the wall beside Elliot. He rolled his head sideways to look at his companion.

"Thought you'd want to know. Diana Bennett has managed to crack the code in the diary Catherine gave you. Pat was right when he said I wouldn't believe the scope of it. I can hardly believe it myself. There is going to be work for a thousand lawyers for years to come."

"That's great news." Elliot straightened away from the wall, turning to his companion. "How damaging is the information? Are we safe?"

"It should wipe out quite a few of your competitors," Joe replied flatly. "And more than a few people will wish they'd never gotten into bed with Gabriel. Now they're dancing a very different tune."

"Good. The lawyers for Justin Cole's estate contacted me a couple of days ago." Elliot watched Shannon circling the floor with Peter, shyly blushing at some compliment the good doctor had just paid to her. "They're winding everything up and wanted direct contact with his widow. They seemed to think I know where she's hiding."

"What did you tell them?" Joe asked, looking worried.

Elliot's lips thinned. "That I would deal with them for now. I've put my lawyers onto the case. I don't want Shannon to be involved until she has to be. She is still too fragile." He passed a hand around the back of his neck. "Despite everything, she is going to be a very wealthy woman. I wish I knew how she's going to react to the news when I tell her. She wants nothing more to do with her late, unlamented husband, or his money."

"Well, good luck with that." Joe grimaced. "I don't envy you the task of untangling that nest of vipers. I know you'll do what is best for both of you."

"But the shadow of Gabriel and all his scheming is finally over." Elliot watched as the dancing ended and suddenly Shannon being cajoled into singing by Mouse. "And for every ending, there is a new beginning," he concluded softly, as the sweet sound of Shannon's clear tones touched his heart with renewed warmth.

Joe had moved on to sample William's freshly-opened barrel of cider by the time Shannon found her way to Elliot's side. Mouse had been adamant that one song was not enough. Father had finally been forced to intervene, drawing the excited tinker away to join the throng of people crowding around the door to the Great Hall, all wanting to see Catherine and Vincent off on their honeymoon.

Elliot studied Shannon's down-bent head. He could see she was trembling and he laid a gentle hand on her arm. "He is dead, Shannon. Cole can't hurt you anymore."

“I know that,” she whispered. “But, sometimes I truly wish that I’d never met him. He took so much from me. Singing for Mouse just now reminded me of what I’ve lost.”

“There are many regrets in this life.” Elliot watched her with compassion. “But without Justin Cole, you and I may never have met. Strange as it may seem, his schemes brought us together and made us who we are today. I can thank him for that, at least.”

“I never thought of it that way.” Shannon raised her eyes to his and Elliot was struck once more by their intense colour. It was all he could do to stop himself reaching for her. It would be so easy to take her in his arms and kiss away her worried frown and air of sadness.

The sudden clamour as Catherine and her new husband finally left the chamber distracted their attention for several minutes. Elliot nodded as he watched them leave, many willing hands helping to shut the massive doors behind them, closing the remaining wedding guests within the vast warmth of the Great Hall once more.

“I haven’t forgotten about those tickets to the opera, you know,” Elliot said quietly, his eyes still on the doorway. “You will come with me one day soon. I am a very patient man.”

He felt Shannon flinch as her gaze tangled with his before darting away, looking at anything but him. She shifted fractionally away from him. But Elliot wasn’t giving in so easily this time.

“The first time I asked you, I said I would understand if you said no. I promised I wouldn’t ask again.” Elliot slid one hand around her upper arm, gently turning her to face him. He noticed that she didn’t deny him, even though she kept her attention riveted on his shoes. “Maybe I lied...just a little. I’m used to getting my own way.”

“You’re asking me to trust you.” Shannon looked up then, her breath drawing shakily inwards between her parted lips. “I *know* you’re a trustworthy man. Catherine trusts you, and Vincent.” Her mouth compressed. “Perhaps it is myself that I do not trust. Sometimes I--”

“I would never ask you to do anything you are not comfortable with,” Elliot hurried into speech. “I am prepared to wait, until you feel you’re ready.”

“My poor Stosh...” Shannon raised one hand, reaching to lay one against his bearded cheek, shaking her head slowly. “We truly are a sad match for each other, aren’t we?”

“I’ve been too preoccupied trying to get your attention to notice,” Elliot quipped wryly. Slowly, with infinite care, his arms reached to encircle her slim body and, after a slight hesitation, she drifted into his embrace, finally coming to rest with her cheek against his shoulder.

Elliot felt the easing of her stance, the slow relaxation of her body finally curving into his--the softly feathered sigh--and his heart took off like a runaway freight train, hammering against the cage of his ribs. It

took his breath away. He'd never before felt so unsure of himself, or of a woman he was developing strong feelings for. A knight in shining armour he was not, and yet the whole idea of taking things slowly and carefully appealed to him immensely. It was a new and humbling experience, and he found he too was trembling.

"So now...what?" As he spoke his hands travelled up her back, drifting of their own accord to her shoulders before he finally threaded his fingers into the silken tresses of her dark hair. She'd pinned it up for the evening, but he made short work of dislodging the pins.

"I like it better down..." he whispered against her cheek, when Shannon made a small movement of protest. "It suits you."

"Oh, Elliot..." Shannon lifted her eyes to stare at him, tears trembling on her lashes and it seemed the easiest thing in the world to lower his mouth to hers.

He was relieved when she didn't try to pull away. But she didn't respond either, merely standing and accepting his caress with only the rapid pace of her heart beating frantically against the wall of his chest showing she was not completely immune to his advances. But just as Elliot was about to ease away, she was not ready for even such small intimacies, he felt her lips move tentatively against his. He thought he even detected a tiny smile, and he responded by deepening the kiss, drawing her further into his embrace, his hands moving to the curve of her waist.

Shannon moaned against his lips, her arms rising to encircle his bent neck, and Elliot knew he had finally won this round. He wished they could stay here, hidden from the eyes of critical world Above and all its questions. All too soon he was forced to draw away. He rested his forehead against hers.

"I guess I have my answer..." he managed to quip, after several moments of breathless silence.

"Perhaps..." Shannon replied shakily, but she didn't try to move away.

"So now, I think—" Elliot began.

"*Elliot!*" a demanding voice came from behind them. "What're you doing over here with Shannon?"

A profound sense of *déjà vu* swept over Elliot. He closed his eyes for a long moment and counted to ten. But, just as before, it didn't help.

"Nothing, Mouse, she had something in her eye. I was just helping her out."

"That so?" Mouse's negative grumble of complaint showed he didn't believe his new friend. He pushed his head in between them looking from one to the other suspiciously.

"Yes, Mouse..." Shannon turned within the circle of Elliot's relaxed hold, leaning back against his shoulder once more.

“Okay, good. Okay, fine...” Mouse scowled his disbelief. “Dancing,” he stated baldly. He seized her hand. “Shannon said she dance with Mouse. Ready now.”

“Actually Mouse, I believe this dance is mine.” Elliot immediately hurried forward, drawing Shannon’s arm through his crooked elbow with a proprietary air that was unmistakable. Even to Mouse, who didn’t usually catch such subtle signals.

“Okay.” The boy scowled, shuffling backwards. “Next one for Mouse. Promise?” He stared hopefully at Shannon. “Gotta teach me.”

“Okay, Mouse. I promise.” Shannon smiled at his earnest expression before she allowed Elliot to draw her away into the thronging crowd, before he turned, with a heart-warming smile, to take her on his arms once more...

THE END