

## **Where the Gentians Bloom**

### **A \*Classic\* *Beauty and the Beast* Story**

**by Judith Nolan**

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*"Thou shalt command us all, April's cowslip, summer's clover  
To the gentian in the fall, Blue-eyed pet of blue-eyed lover..."*

***Ralph Waldo Emerson***

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### **Chapter One**

To Be Or Not To Be

"Come, I think I may have finally solved a mystery." Vincent smiled as he extended his hand, head slanted to one side as he watched her approach.

"What is it?" Catherine stepped away from the down-shaft of white light from her apartment basement to grasp his warm fingers. "What have you discovered?"

"All in good time." Vincent shook his head as he drew her close against him. "But I know you are going to be happy with the outcome."

"Why are you being so mysterious?" Catherine didn't demur as she drew back from the welcome embrace to look up at him. But Vincent didn't reply as he turned to lead her down an unfamiliar tunnel.

As they walked, Catherine looked about her with interest, which soon turned to chagrin. As before when they left the familiar trails, the tunnels all looked the same. It seemed that most of this world below the city was still like a foreign land to her. She could find her way easily above ground, but down here even

the smallest tunnel child could certainly lose her within a heart-beat. So, she clung to Vincent's hand, moving closer to his side and wrapping her hands around his arm. Not that he seemed inclined to release her.

"The journey will be worth it." He clasped her hands reassuringly with his own.

Minutes turned into hours as they walked side-by-side down a seemingly endless path along damp, concrete corridors and echoing brick-lined labyrinths. Beneath the soft chatter of the pipes, the subway provided a muffled backdrop as they moved through doorless entryways and around barred gates, working their way ever deeper into the darkness briefly enlivened after long, gloomy intervals by sputtering lanterns and flaming torches pushed into sconces carved into the rock walls.

Often, they illuminated crudely painted warning signs that spoke of rock falls, quicksand and hidden dangers — often Catherine looked back to the stark lettering with a worried frown — Vincent quietly expressing his confidence they offered them no harm.

"The warnings are for any strangers who might venture Below," he reassured her softly. "Not for those who know of these tunnels or our world. They are Father's first line of defence in a constant, ever-shifting battle with the Topsiders."

"Well, I think he has made his point," Catherine commented drily, not completely convinced by the simple explanation. She crowded closer to Vincent's side and they moved on, now seeming to rise steadily again toward the surface.

"This is it." Vincent finally halted before a concrete wall. Here the subway noise was louder and more constant.

"Where are we?" Catherine cast a curious glance around her, studying the concrete box-like nature of their destination where a narrow opening had been carved in the wall before them.

"The sub-basement of Mr Smythe's bookshop, 777." Vincent leaned against the side of the broken brick opening that had been chipped through the wall into a dimly lit sub-basement. He lifted aside an old piece of canvas that shielded the opening from view within the room.

"We are?" Catherine peered into the room beyond, becoming aware of voices somewhere above. Muffled and distant they came and went with the staccato chatter of the subway. "Why are we here?"

"Solving that mystery I told you about. It won't be long now. Stand there and watch. I'll be right here." Vincent moved back into the darkness, drawing his hood up over his hair and waited.

"You are being very mysterious," Catherine complained.

But she maintained her position in the tunnel, looking around the edge of the ragged sheet into the concrete room which seemed full of scattered art supplies and several canvas-draped paintings on and around a collection of easels. The overhead lighting was poor, one naked, hanging bulb casting gloomy shadows into every corner.

"I know I left it in down here somewhere..." a man's voice remarked, coming ever nearer. "I swear I didn't leave it up in the shop. I'm not that stupid..." Footfalls sounded on the steps of a staircase leading down into the basement room from the floor above.

A muffled reply came from the room at the top of the steps as a pair of long, jean-clad legs descended into the sub-basement. They resolved into a tall, rumped, young man, wearing a Mets cap and a paint-smear dust jacket.

His attention was fixed on searching the room. He didn't see Catherine until she pushed aside the sheet and stepped into the basement through the opening, her hands set on her hips in annoyed surprise.

She shook her head in disgust. "Kristopher... I might have known. So you are a fraud, after all."

"Busted." Kristopher Gentian straightened, his shoulders slumping.

He sighed dramatically. "Okay, you've got me good this time. I figured you'd find me eventually. I guess Vincent told you where I hang out. I've seen him around, watching me; trying to work it all out. I knew if I waited long enough he'd bring you here eventually."

"Perhaps." Catherine shrugged. "Or maybe I'm just a very good detective. I can figure out things on my own, you know. Now you're going to tell me everything. And I want the truth this time, Mr Gentian." She folded her arms and waited for the elusive artist to begin his long-overdue confession.

"Ah, Cathy, there is still so much you need to learn..." Kristopher shook his head sadly and then smiled as he spread his hands wide. "So much I could teach you, if only we had the time. But I have somewhere else I need to be right now..."

As he spoke he stepped back into the shadows cast by the wan overhead light and moved sideways behind a large canvas shroud. The sheet lifted briefly, outlining his lean body, and then it became still and shapeless once more.

"Hang on, where do you think you're going?" Catherine started forward, peering intently into the shadows. She put out a hand to detain him, but encountered nothing beyond dust and cobwebs. "I want to talk to you! Come back here, right now!"

"He's gone, Catherine. Again, I have no sense of him." Vincent stepped silently into the room and moved to stand close behind her. "And I truly thought I had him this time..."

He looked around the dimly-lit basement. "I've been stalking him for weeks now, watching his every move. He is a creature of most particular habits."

"Oh... I really *hate* it when he does that!" Catherine fumed. "He's annoying, that's what he is! He enjoys playing games with us."

"I suppose that's because he has all the time in the world. And the next." Vincent shrugged with a soft laugh. "But the game is not over..."

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## **Chapter Two**

### Where The Gentian Blooms Best

"What game?" Catherine demanded to know as she followed Vincent back through the ragged opening in the wall and into the tunnel beyond. "Why did you say that? There could be a very serious case of art fraud here."

Vincent shrugged as he drew her hand through the crook of his elbow. "I think Kristopher Gentian enjoys a good game of catching me if you can. He delights in vanishing right before our eyes."

"Well, I do wish I knew what to think," Catherine fumed. "Is he alive or actually dead like Smythe claimed?" She frowned. "And he implied there were more works of art that may yet be uncovered. I'm sure he knows the truth about Kristopher."

"Of course, he does," Vincent agreed. "After all, he identified the body. No one questioned his word. There are distinct advantages in having Kristopher living quietly as a dead artist rather than a live one."

"But that painting he did of us," Catherine worried the point. "You said it was dry when you touched it. You said that oils can take months to dry. Even years. Kristopher had barely more than a month."

"Yes, I did say that." Vincent smiled as they walked down the tunnel together. "But there are ways of drying an oil canvas faster by the use of additives or direct sunlight in a warm room. Kristopher would have access to both."

"All part of the illusion, I suppose you're going to say next," Catherine complained. "Well, I'm a lawyer. I deal in certainties. I *like* certainties. I organised that exhibition for him in good faith. I don't enjoy being made to look like a fool."

Vincent listened to her, his face impassive. "Our world Below has plenty of room for spirits and demons. Narcissa taught me that when I was very young. But you live in a world where such entities walk only in stories and fairytales."

"Which is exactly where they belong," Catherine told him. "But when you grabbed Kristopher that night, he appeared to us in that awful warehouse. Did he seem real to you? I've touched some things he's touched. Like your Tennyson first edition and he did hand me his single business card and took it back again."

Her lips curved derisively. "And when we went to that café, he ended up with a cappuccino moustache on his top lip. How would something like that happen to a ghost?"

She threw up her free hand. "Ohhh, he's so aggravating! He's got my mind going around in circles."

She stopped walking to stare up at Vincent. "Well, did he seem real?"

"He appeared to be as real as you or me..." Vincent encouraged her to continue walking. "Which is all part of his carefully constructed illusion."

"Then he *is* alive and not some ghost like he pretends to be." Catherine nodded with certainty. Then her brow creased. "But if he is alive then how did he vanish so completely back there in the basement?"

"That is the thorny question we have yet to answer," Vincent assured her with a smile.

He leaned closer. "But one point you have not considered is you did not look behind that sheet of dusty canvas..."

Catherine stared up at him as Vincent encouraged her to walk with him again. "What are you suggesting? A secret passage or doorway?"

Vincent shrugged. "I don't know. But I do know that this part of the city is riddled with forgotten tunnels and hidden doors. You need to know what to look for. It could be that simple. Kristopher has had a lot of time to explore while he was pretending to be dead."

Catherine shook her head. "Nothing where Kristopher Gentian is concerned is ever simple." She looked behind her. "I don't suppose we have time to go back and check it out."

"No, Catherine. The sun is setting Above and the night is closing in. You need to sleep. You have work tomorrow."

"Yes, you're right, of course." Catherine sighed with dissatisfaction as they finally reached the section of the tunnels she recognised. "But the next day is Saturday. I'm in the mood to go on another ghost hunt."

"If that's what you want to do." Vincent nodded as he led her home. "I'll wait for you at your basement entrance."

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"Where did you go just now? And who were you talking to?" Jonathan Smythe demanded to know when Kristopher suddenly appeared beside him. "And stop creeping around like that. You could be civilised and make some noise."

His unrepentant companion shrugged. "Where'd be the fun in that? I like surprising the pretty ones."

"Kristopher..." Mr Smythe raised a warning finger. "You're supposed to be dead, remember? You'd better start acting like it." He went on sorting through the books on his desk. "People will get suspicious."

"Who says I'm dead?" Kristopher waggled his fingers before the older man's face. "I feel alive."

"You know you have work to do up here. There are books to sort and price. You don't have time to go poking around down there. That basement should have been bricked up years ago."

Kristopher grimaced as he opened and closed several books. "It's all I've got since they cleared out my old warehouse. And you sold off all my paintings at that exhibition. I'll always need someplace to go where I can paint and think."

"You could think while you're working for me like we agreed. And you still haven't told me who you were talking to just now," Smythe complained.

"Cathy..." Kristopher replied dreamily with a smile. "I was talking to Cathy..."

"Oh, were you now? Well, she's trouble, that one," Mr Smythe warned. "You'd do better to stay far away. She's a lawyer and far too nosy for her own good. She's onto your little game and if you give her cause, she'll keep digging until she finds the truth."

Kristopher looked pained. "Oh, no, not my Cathy. She's so beautiful and so in love..."

He closed his eyes. "... *and over our heads floats the bluebird, singing of beautiful and impossible things, of things that are lovely and never happen, of things that are not, and that should be...*"

He opened one eye. "That's Oscar Wilde, you know."

"I know very well who wrote those lines," the bookshop owner complained, slamming down the last book on the top of the pile. "I *forbid* you to go anywhere near that woman again. Do you understand? There's too much at stake."

"Yeah, okay, okay." Kristopher shrugged. "But I still want her to sit for me. I've asked her, but she hasn't said yes, yet. All I have is a sketch I did of her down in the old man's café a few weeks ago. It's not enough. I need more."

"I give up!" Smythe threw up his hands. "It's your funeral..." He shook his head. "Or it was."

"It was a nice one too." Kristopher nodded. "I don't know if I ever thanked you for all you did for me back then."

"You can thank me by putting these books into their right places..." Smythe picked up a large pile and pushed them into the younger man's unwilling embrace. "They should keep you out of trouble for a while."

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### **Chapter Three**

#### All My Certainties

"Vincent?" Catherine queried as she stepped over the broken brick threshold from the sub-basement of her apartment building. "I'm so sorry I'm late. Are you there?"

"I'm here..." Vincent moved forward from the shadows. "I have been waiting for you for some time. You were detained?"

"Continuances," Catherine replied in a disgusted tone. "I'm sorry, but Joe declared that no one was going home last night until we'd completed everything to his satisfaction. He chewed all of us out while he ate an entire packet of those awful chocolate cheese nuggets he likes." She shuddered with disgust.

"You're tired. You've barely slept," her love observed softly, looking down into her drawn face. "We can go hunting for Kristopher another time. I'm sure he's not going anywhere soon. You should go back and rest. I can walk you out."

"No..." Catherine took his arm, sliding her hands around his bicep. "Thank you for your concern, Vincent. But I didn't get in until after midnight and all I could think about, while I was trying to sleep, was hunting that man-ghost down and giving him a very large piece of my mind. I can sleep when I've done that."

"Very well..." Vincent chuckled quietly as he accepted her demand to go on. "I pity Kristopher if we do manage to finally catch up with him."

"Or catch him out in his carefully constructed lie," Catherine affirmed as they began to walk together down the dank tunnel. "Then I will take great delight in prosecuting him for the art fraudster that he most certainly is."

Her breathing hitched. "Or, at least, I think that's what he is..." She shook her head in honest confusion. "I'm so sick of fighting with shadows."

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Kristopher looked all around with narrow-eyed care as he descended into the sub-basement of Jonathan Smythe's bookshop. Yesterday, Catherine had caught him unaware as he'd been going about his lawful business of being dead.

He was well aware that Vincent had been following and watching him for some weeks. Kristopher had done his very best to give him the slip any time he ventured into the tunnel system. He didn't want all his secrets to be exposed. But he knew the lion-face man was quite capable of backtracking like a bloodhound and working out where Kristopher had been hiding himself.

"But I figure I'm a lot smarter than the average tunnel dweller," the man-ghost said to the clustering shadows. "No one catches me out twice."

To be sure he remained undisturbed, he'd taken the time and considerable effort to push an old, somewhat dilapidated shelving unit across the canvas-shrouded entrance from the tunnels beyond. Its stout oak construction ensured no one would be able to enter from that way again without making some considerable noise and alerting him to their unwelcome intrusion.



"A pity..." Kristopher raised one shoulder with dissatisfaction. "If only Cathy would come to see me by herself. I would like that. She wants to sit for me, I just know it. I could make her famous..."

He'd been very pleased with his first portrait of Catherine and her very unusual lover. To maintain the illusion, he'd dried the canvas with oil paint additives and the direct sunlight streaming into his bedroom in Smythe's upstairs apartment.

"But I long to paint her, alone..." He sighed and shook his head as he walked toward the large piece of old dusty canvas he'd disappeared behind the day before.

He moved behind it once again. The sheet lifted briefly, outlining his lean body before it became still and shapeless once more.

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"Ah..." Vincent mused as he reached out to lift aside the old piece of canvas that shielded the opening in the bookshop's sub-basement. "It appears that our return visit has been anticipated and new measures taken to circumvent it."

The dusty fabric was now firmly anchored in place and refused to lift. Vincent pushed against it with the flat of his hand before he leaned against the side of the broken brick opening that had been chipped through the tunnel's wall.

"What's the matter?" Catherine frowned. They'd been walking for a very long time to reach their destination and her feet were sore and her temper had frayed.

Vincent shrugged. "Someone, and we can guess who, has pushed a large piece of furniture across the entrance to bar our path. To move it from this side would take some effort and may attract someone's close attention. I was certain we had him this time."

"So, Mr Gentian does have something to hide after all," Catherine replied with satisfaction. "What do we do now? I don't want to admit defeat and go home Not yet."

Vincent's shadowed eyes gleamed in the tunnel's gloom. "There is another way into the basement."

"Where is it?" Catherine leaned closer, looking all around. "Show me or tell me."

Vincent turned to lean his back against the brickwork. "From my observations, I happen to know that Mr Smythe slips out every Saturday around midday to

purchase a bite to eat from the neighbouring deli. He leaves the shop unlocked for that short time. No doubt, he trusts Kristopher to keep watch."

He smiled thinly. "I somehow doubt that young man pays any attention to things he doesn't wish to be bothered about."

"So, once Smythe has gone out, I could just walk right in through the front door of the shop..." Catherine's brow creased. "But if I did get down to the basement unseen, I can't move that big piece of furniture by myself."

Vincent straightened. "All you need to do is make sure the coast is clear and we are unobserved by man or ghost. I can move the piece from here if you're sure we're alone."

"Let's do it then," Catherine replied with certainty. "We don't have a lot of time. How do I get Above from here?"

"Follow me..." Vincent stood away from the wall to take her arm and guide her further down the dark and gloomy tunnel and they began to climb steadily toward the surface.

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"Kristopher's never around when I need him," Jonathan Smythe complained under his breath as he farewelled the last customer of the morning.

He'd been doing his best to ignore the dictates of his grumbling stomach for some time. An unusual rush of lunch hour customers had delayed his usual Saturday dash down the street to Kransky's Deli where he always purchased a classic Reuben sandwich to go, with all the delicious trimmings.

He usually left Kristopher on ghostly watch for any new customers. Especially the pretty ones who could often be charmed into making a purchase by the young man's boyish appeal. But his charge wasn't always reliable. Today he was nowhere to be seen or found.

"Good help is hard to find..." Smythe muttered as he left the shop by the front door.

He stood still for a moment, debating if he should lock up. But if Kristopher was out and about somewhere close, he would soon return. Smythe decided against locking the door and hurried away down the street. He would not be gone long.

"What's there to steal anyway?" he reassured himself. "A load of old books..." He was unaware he was being closely observed.

Catherine hovered in the shadows cast by the neighbouring shop's wide awning until Smythe reached his destination and ducked through the deli's front door. She eased out of the shadows and hurried to the door of the bookshop.

The doorknob turned quietly and easily beneath her hand. She opened it slightly and reached up to silence the doorbell before it could advertise her unwanted presence. She slipped into the shadowed shop.

As before, it smelled of musty books and dust. As Smythe had once told her, it was the most refined dust. He'd said that all of his books waited. They sit patiently on their respective shelves until the day their covers are opened, and their pages are turned by the proper person.

"Well, I'm here right now to open a few books and finally get to the bottom of your precious myth of Mr Kristopher Gentian," Catherine remarked to the shadows as she crossed the shop to find her way to the basement stairs.

She descended slowly, searching the shadows for anyone watching her. But everything was silent and hung only with shadows, cobwebs and more dust. Catherine frowned at the large canvas hanging before the back wall as she approached the large piece of furniture covering the tunnel entrance.

"Vincent..." she whispered, putting her hand around the end of the bookshelf to touch the canvas beyond.

Vincent immediately grasped her searching fingers. "I'm here. But please hurry. We don't have long. Are you alone?"

Catherine cast a doubtful glance toward the large sheet of ragged canvas Kristopher Gentian had disappeared behind the precious evening. "I'm as sure as I can be. There's no one here."

"Good. Then please stand back out of the way, Catherine."

She did as asked, walking backwards and waiting. Nothing moved for a moment and then, with a mighty heave, Vincent shoved the old shelving forward enough for him to squeeze his large frame through from behind and enter the basement.

"Now what?" Catherine looked all around. "Do you think Kristopher heard us? I hope not."

"If he did, he will soon return," Vincent replied with satisfaction. "Then he will know his little game is finally up. There is nowhere for him to hide."

"I wish I had your certainty," Catherine complained. "Once I was so sure he was a fraud. But Kristopher seems to be able to disappear right before our eyes."

Vincent shrugged as he walked forward. "There's only one way to find out for sure."

He reached out to grasp the edge of the large canvas sheet hanging from the ceiling and concealing any secrets behind its dusty fall. Catherine hurried up to stand at his elbow as her love twitched the paint-splattered canvas aside.

"What is this?" Catherine immediately demanded to know. "I don't understand. Where's the door? You said there would be some kind of door."

"It seems I was completely wrong..." Vincent frowned at the seemingly solid brick wall that confronted them, barring their progress further into Kristopher Gentian's carefully guarded and secret world.

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