

THE CANDLE ON THE MIRROR

by Linda Mooney

(from *THE GARDEN*)

It was nearly one in the morning. The streets were so quiet. I could hear the water lapping at the piers one block away. I'm no poet, but I was filled with dread ... and anticipation. And there was also some fear ... the same dread and anticipation and fear I get whenever I had to go to the morgue to identify a body. You know the person is dead, but you're never quite prepared for how chewed up or sliced apart the remains may be, until that moment the examiner lifts the sheet. It's that first glance that will tear at your stomach, until you've steeled yourself enough to look.

That's the way I felt now. My stomach was so tight, my mouth tasted like I'd gummed aluminum foil. But what was worse was the fact I had no back-up.

In other words, I had no Vincent.

He was more than twenty miles away, near the northern-most tip of Manhattan Island, desperately trying to plug the hole which had ripped through the wall of one of the chambers by a shift in the earth, and was now leaking salt water into the lower tunnels. It was taking the efforts of every tunnel member to mend the hole, strengthen the wall, and bail out the water before it tainted the fresh, underground springs.

Shortly after dark, Vincent had met me beneath my apartment to tell me of the disaster. He had no idea how it had occurred, but he had to tell me ...

"... not to go tonight. Please, Catherine."

Yet, here I am. He is as worried sick about me, as he is over the tunnel's present circumstances. If he had stayed with me to watch and protect me, that would have placed his beloved tunnels in jeopardy. But to remain at the site of the damage, knowing I was in one of the worst parts of town to meet a person whose voice I had heard only once on the phone ... I could feel his anguish like a ghost over my shoulder, which just increased my guilt at putting him through such turmoil.

But I had to be here. Now. Quite by accident, I had gotten a lead on the case Joe was working on. Never in my wildest imagination would I have ever dreamed that my money-laundering case tied in with his child labor violations. Thanks to Rita, though, I had obtained entrance into the secured bank files of Mr. Maretti; and as I was attempting to find out where and how he was shifting huge sums of illegal drug money, I came across a rather cryptic note about a Mr. Milos Procasaconos.

Joe was working on a three-inch thick file about a Milos Procasaconos, who was suspected of selling illegally immigrated children from poor third-world nations to cartel bosses in Venezuela and Colombia. These children were being sent to work the fields, cultivating and harvesting poppy, being younger and able to last longer than the adults and the infirm.

"Their parents are looking at nine, ten, maybe even twelve children, with no money, no hope for a future ..." I looked into my beloved's eyes as I tried to reason with him. "These people are willing to sell their flesh and blood in exchange for a measly hundred or two hundred dollars because they're starving."

"And the men who sell the drugs get cheap labor," he finished for me. "Exploiting innocents."

"Vincent, it's terrible! These children are literally sold into slavery with no chance to grow up, or to even lead a

normal childhood!"

"Catherine..."

"As God as my witness, Vincent, there can't be another Milos Porcasaconos! And if it is the same one, ***Joe and I are going to serve his head on a platter to the DEA!***"

"Then why can't Joe go with you? Why must you go alone?" His concern was so strong. I felt he would wrap his arms about me and not let go until daylight. Not that I would object in the least.

"I don't know who phoned me. Only that he would meet me at the Lady Liberty tavern off the docks after midnight, and he had information when the next shipment of human cargo would arrive. Joe's still in Miami following up his leads. I haven't been able to talk to him about my discovery."

"An escort then. The police."

Shaking my head, I tried to give him a brave smile. "I can't risk spooking my snitch. Children's lives are at stake."

"Catherine..."

I watched as my love paced to the end of the tunnel where it branched, then back. "I know how concerned you are," I began.

It was a crooked smile at best. "Yes ... you do. But promise me you'll take great care?"

How much like Father he sounded at that moment. "I have my gun," I assured him. "Moreno knows where I'm going, and Greg Hughes is going to have me wired. They'll be six blocks away ..."

"Even seconds away, too much can happen in that short span of time!"

"What would you have me do?" I cried, throwing my hands out in confusion. ***"Wait until you can go with me? What about the children? What if Procasaconos gets wind that I'm onto him and shuts down his operation, only to open it at another port? How long before we find out when he's funnelling his next boatload of victims?"***

I hated the fear and frustration which crept into my voice. I was yelling at the man I loved most in the world, whose entire existence centered on my well-being; but the thought of hundreds of children - some as young as four and five years old - struck that spark of indignant justice in me. So I remained firm - resolute - and scared spitless.

Drawing my leather jacket tighter against the chill of the foggy night air, I stayed in the shadows of a nearby abandoned building and waited for my informant. A tinny voice whispered in my ear.

"Still clear?"

"Still clear. You guys stay awake, you hear?" Speaking so softly, it was barely a breath, yet the tinge of uncertainty colored my request.

"Keep your head, Chandler. You'll do fine. Cavalry's not far."

There! A sound ... footsteps?

"Code yellow," I muttered and felt for the butt of the revolver in the pocket of my jacket. It was small comfort.

"Your visitor, Chandler?"

Again, the footsteps. They appeared to advance, pause, advance, pause as though their owner was uncertain about revealing himself.

Or it could be a drunk stumbling around in the dark.

"Get a grip, Chandler," I mutter to myself.

"Say what?" My electronic guardian asked.

The footsteps got noticeably louder. At any second, I would be able to see who was approaching, when a slight figure suddenly appeared in the glow of the corner streetlight.

"It's a kid!" I was so surprised, I had spoken aloud. Dumbfounded, I watched the boy take a step toward me, then stop as he looked me up and down, as if he expected me to pounce on him and eat him without warning. From what I could tell, he was dark-skinned, but not black. His clothes were filthy, just rags, he was shoeless, and he kept his hands behind his back. He had that haunted look on his face, ducking and bobbing his head like a trapped animal. He couldn't have been more than nine or ten.

"Hi. What's your name?" I asked in a vain attempt to converse, although doubting he knew any English.

To my surprise, the child spoke, sounding vaguely Hispanic. "You ... you Catrin Shandler?"

Oh God. "Yes, I'm Catherine Chandler." He had to have been one of the children brought over by Procasaconos, and that knowledge was my downfall. Anxious to help him in any way possible, a good meal and a bath, for starters, I reached out and offered my hand.

"Look, come with me," I whispered, ignoring the urgent questions coming from my ear-piece. "I'll take you where it's safe. No one will hurt you anymore."

I took a step forward, intent on saving him and wanting to soothe away the shadows from his gaunt cheeks. Never did I expect ...

He pulled his hands from behind him. He was holding a revolver, police issue, and my body went stone cold. Somehow I knew it was loaded. And I knew I had been set up.

"Put the gun down," I said firmly, hopefully in my authoritative tone of voice. Death sat on the end of the barrel, winking silver streaks in the lamplight.

A voice in my ear echoed. "Gun? The kid's got a gun? Holy..."

The boy began to slowly shake his head from side to side and his hands trembled. The gun must have felt foreign, like a cold dead animal that could still kill.

"No take back," he muttered. "No take back."

My God, what have they been telling you? So many arguments popped into my head, but I knew he wouldn't understand me. There was no way I could convince him I wasn't the bad guy; they had had weeks on a cargo ship to thoroughly brainwash this innocent child, and I had stumbled into the net like a neophyte.

"Please ... por favor..." My Spanish was nil. I could only hope a gentle tone of voice and a smile would help me through this ordeal. Keeping my hand held out to him, I tried to keep my eyes on the boy, not on the gun. "I won't hurt you. Let me help you. Plea ..."

The gun exploded in my face. Heat streaked past my cheek and rammed into my shoulder, knocking me backwards where I collided with the building behind me and for a moment I was unaware of falling to my knees. A voice screamed my name, and another cry reverberated inside of me, followed by guilt and anguish.

The pain ... oh, God, the pain was incredible!

The kid? Where's the kid? WHERE'S THE KID?

Amid the black fire in my shoulder, I somehow focused on the child, still holding the gun but now terribly frightened by the noise, the weapon, the circumstances ...

"I'm all right. It's all right. Just put the gun down." I tried to keep my voice calm.

"No take back," he kept repeating, bringing the barrel back up to face me. "No take back."

My hand found the small gun in my jacket pocket, yet I hesitated. Could I shoot a child? Could I stop him from shooting me again? Blood was beginning to soak through my clothes; I would pass out soon.

His arms stiffened - he was about to pull the trigger, when the sound of sirens filtered through my haze. The boy jerked his head around to stare at where the sound was coming from, and I saw the desperation on his face. He knew what he had done. He knew what the sound meant. And he knew he had to escape.

Turning back to me, he blanched when he spotted my gun pointed at his stomach. I never got to say another word. His arms aimed, strained ... he closed his eyes against the noise and the blast

I fired before I knew what I had done. The bullet caught him directly in the chest, lifting him off his feet, and he landed on the edge of the curb with a soft, wet crunch.

Seconds later, two unmarked police cars squealed to a stop yards away. Greg Hughes was the first to reach me.

"Jesus, Chandler! What a mess. Dooley! Call for an ambulance!"

A uniformed officer, leaning over the boy, straightened up. "This one's a no-go. Better call for the meat wagon, too."

"You all right, Chandler? Just hold on; we'll have you taken care of in a minute. Jesus, I knew something was fishy when you mentioned the gun."

I looked up at the detective's face hovering over me. "I shot a child." I still couldn't believe it. "I killed a child." It didn't sound like my voice. It didn't feel like my hand still cradling the revolver.

Hughes jerked off his jacket and wrapped it around me. "You're going into shock, Chandler. Just hold on."

"He never told me when the next boatload was coming in. I shot him before he could tell me."

"He was going to kill you! To hell with the information; we're going to nail that bastard if it takes until the turn of the century. Anybody who would train kids to do their dirty work for them ..."

Looking back at the body, now covered with a tarp from the police car, chills began to envelope me all over. *Delayed reaction. I'm going to faint.* I could feel Hughes laying me flat on the concrete and elevating my feet. The pain was never going to go away - the entire left side of my body had ceased to exist, leaving behind a hurting no words could ever begin to explain, unless you yourself had been shot.

But deep within me, in that part of my psyche or soul only one other person could touch, another heart beat with mine. Another voice reached my inner ears with words to calm and soothe, and ethereal hands tried to contain the torment of the wound.

Hughes was still talking to me, but I could no longer hear him. Tilting my head slightly, I could see, past the police cars and the lifeless body of the innocent child, the old warehouse across the street - and the dark figure hiding in the shadows.

My lips formed his name ... then I remember nothing else.

I underwent surgery to remove the bullet and the doctors kept me in the hospital a total of ten days before releasing me. During that time, Vincent came to my room every night. I don't recall many of his visits, because of my medication, but I do recollect finding a token of his love on the pillow beside me when I awoke; a rose, a book, a note ... something to tell me how much he cared and how much he missed me.

My shoulder no longer hurt abominably, just a steady pounding like a migraine gone astray. Yet that could not compare to the agony I felt in my heart.

I had murdered an innocent child. I had killed a boy who had been trained like a circus animal to pull a trigger on a gun in self-defense, when no defense had been necessary. Because of me, a child would no longer have the opportunity to grow up ... to find love ... to enjoy his children or his grandchildren.

Joe came to see me soon after I had been moved into a private room. There were bags under his eyes and he looked like he hadn't slept well in a couple of days, but despite all that he looked wonderful to me.

"Hey, Radcliffe," he greeted me as he came around the door. "Heard any good hospital jokes recently?"

"Hi, Joe. It's good to see you." I returned his hug the best I could. "So ... tell me what you know."

Scratching behind his ear, he sighed deeply. "Well, we missed the boat - literally. Grapevine says the new shipment docked and took off the same night as your attack. You know you were set up, don't you?"

Keeping my eyes down, I nodded. "Any word on the next shipment?" It was hard to refer to boatloads of children as just another cargo of merchandise, but that's what slavery had created of them.

"None."

"What about your tie-in? Anything pan out in Florida?"

"I struck out. Either they covered their tracks too well, or someone warned them before I got there. We're back to square one on this, Cathy."

Several moments of silence passed between us. Joe shuffled around the room to poke a nose in each floral arrangement. "Any idea when your parole comes up?" he quipped.

I forced a smile to break the uneasiness and answered. "Looks like I'll be out of action for a couple of weeks. Don't rent my desk space, okay?"

"You can bank on it," he grinned. A quick peck on the cheek and he was gone, leaving me with another long day to face my demons alone.

Fortunately, I was awake when Vincent came through my hospital window that evening, carrying a copy of Walden in the pocket of his cloak and a worried expression in his eyes. I never could hide anything from him. He knew my heart too well.

He held me tightly, comfortingly, trying to give me the strength to heal the hole in my body and the deeper hole in my soul. He felt good and solid ... a real presence to overcome the nightmares plaguing me with regularity. For a long time we simply loved each other through our bond, speaking without words those feelings we shared. Knowing it would not be long before a nurse or orderly would check on me, we pulled apart, and Vincent reached for a tissue from the box on the nightstand to dry my tears.

"They will send you home Friday," he whispered. "I want you to come Below to finish recuperating."

"No, Vincent." I shook my head. "I'd rather not. And you know why."

"You must stop trying to bear the responsibility for the boy's death," he began.

"I didn't murder just one ten-year-old boy. I sent another hundred to their deaths. His ... was more merciful."

"Catherine."

"Don't try to pacify me. I've never killed someone before, much less a child. I ... I need time to come to terms with what I've done. But, more than that, I need time to think."

"About what?"

"I don't know ..." Trailing my hands down the front of his grey woolen vest, I looked up into his eyes dark with self-condemnation. "Don't blame yourself, either, my love. Your being there would not have changed things."

"I could have frightened the child," he suggested.

"Or he could have shot you instead. This hindsight will not do us any good."

Vincent suddenly stiffened and looked toward the door. "The rounds have begun. I need to leave." Pressing a soft kiss to my lips, he went to the window and straddled it before casting one last glance my way.

"I want you Below," he reminded me.

"I'll try. But I can't promise."

He nodded, then disappeared when the RN bustled into the room with her tray of pills.

They sent me home on Friday. I went straight to my apartment and locked the door, drew the hottest bath I could tolerate, and cried until the bubbles evaporated in the cold water.

Saturday went by in a blur. Unable and unwilling to talk to Vincent should he appear that evening - and I felt he wanted to - I took one of the doctor's miracle pills and slept dreamlessly until eight the next morning.

The telephone rang around nine; it was Jenny calling to see how I was doing - I listened to her talk to my answering machine and after she had hung up, I took the receiver off the hook.

While I indulged in a bowl of Campbell's Chicken Noodle for lunch, a knock sounded on my door and an envelope was slipped underneath. It was a note from Father repeating Vincent's request for me to remain Below until I was healed. Although the two men were not true father and son in blood, I often felt the words of one could be placed in the mouth of the other without much argument.

So it was with surprise that I heard my doorbell ring around seven and I opened the door to see the patriarch of the tunnels standing on my welcome mat - in a suit, no less.

"Well, what an honor!" I teased with a smile. "Or is there another reason why you've come Above dressed for a wedding, and I was just on your way?"

He glanced into my living room, indicating with a nod of his head. "May I?" I let him enter.

"Is this a social visit?"

"No, Catherine. Purely a professional one."

"I'm impressed." I replied, a bit too acidic.

Father scowled. "Sarcasm does not become you, my dear." Taking a seat on one of the couches. He balanced his cane against the edge of the coffee table.

"Can I get you some tea?"

Ignoring my offer, he patted the cushion beside him. "Catherine, come sit." I did, and he continued. "Vincent has talked with me. He's very worried over your state of mind."

"I'm fine. He knows I'm fine ..."

"In body, perhaps, but not emotionally. He says you're in turmoil, that you believe yourself guilty of genocide."

For no other reason than the fact that I suddenly needed to be held, I reached over and hugged him. He wrapped his arms around me, hugging back, and I began to cry. How long had it been since my own father had held me while I cried on his shoulder? Whenever things had gone wrong, whenever I had been faced with insurmountable problems, Daddy had always been there with open arms and a red clown nose in his coat pocket.

Vincent's arms were there for me when I needed his love, his understanding and his patience to see me over life's rough spots ... but they were not the arms of a father. And the arms which enfolded me now were so much like Daddy's had been.

It was the first time Father had ever hugged me with gentleness. And he did so now, with none of the awkward

clumsiness he had shown before, and even placed a kiss on my sweaty forehead.

"Ahh, how many times have I watched Vincent draw into himself after one of his rages, and wanted to hold him and tell him things would get better?"

"You never did?" I hiccuped.

"I never could. His guilt was too intense. And he usually took himself away from the rest of us to brood alone, for hours sometimes for days at a time."

I half-laughed. "I'm not so different, am I?"

"No. You're simply the other half of one soul. My dear child, sometimes you need a mediator, and that's what I'm here for."

"I don't understand." The feel of his hand stroking my hair, much like Daddy used to, was relaxing.

"You and Vincent love each other too much. You let that love stand between you, thinking it will solve everything, when really you need to filter your problems through a third party. I'm standing on the sidelines, and I can see things you cannot."

"Like what?"

"Like ... the fact that what you are going through is really no different than what you and Vincent have suffered before."

"Excuse me?" I sat up to stare at him. He offered me his handkerchief and waited until I'd wiped my eyes and blown my nose.

"Think about it, Catherine. Think back to the nights Vincent killed, unintentionally, and then turned away from your offer of solace."

"I never turned him away," I started to protest. Father cut me short.

"You refuse to come Below to let us help. To let him help. And you've shut yourself away from everybody who cares about you." He gestured toward the phone. "For how long, Catherine? Your grief will not bring back the child. Use that sorrow to give you the strength to find those men responsible for placing the boy in such danger."

"I'm going to find those men," I assured him.

"Excellent. Then don't forget to also accept the love of those around you. They'll always be there when you need them, when you need a word of encouragement, or a helping hand. A very wise person once said, there are two ways of spreading light; to be the candle, or the mirror that reflects it. Your light is justice, Catherine. You be the flame, and we'll be your candle. Let us help."

I smiled, for the first time in many days, and laid my head back on his shoulder. "How did you get to be so wise?" I muttered.

I felt him chuckle. "Practice," he replied, with a touch of irony. "Lots of practice."

Suddenly, I wanted to go Below, to go to Vincent, and to air all of my frustrations, my fears, my worries ... I wanted him to listen and not interrupt until I had talked myself hoarse. Then, I wanted him to love me.

An hour after Father had left, I went to the sub-basement where I knew Vincent would be patiently waiting. His greeting was a hug, and without a word he led me to the little tunnel under the grandstand in the park

where we often sat during the nights the summer concerts were in session. Knowing we wouldn't have anyone bothering us, he sat and drew me down to his lap where he held me like a little girl. I broke the silence.

"Father spoke to you?"

"Considerably. It appears we are at opposite ends."

"He's right, you know. It's been nearly two weeks since the shooting and all I can think about is the waste. How I deprived an innocent child of life, and how I possibly kept a hundred more like him from freedom. And at no time did it ever occur to me that I was emulating you ... and you me."

Vincent looked at me thoughtfully, digesting what I had to say. "I believed that by staying away and letting you have your solitude, you would follow your own grief process. And heal your heart, along with your body."

"It wasn't working out that way," I replied. He caught my hand in his and raised it to his cheek. "When you have killed in the past, you killed in defense, protecting those you loved, or yourself. But the guilt you felt afterwards still overwhelmed you. And no matter how hard I tried, or Father tried, to comfort you, you turned away to suffer alone. Don't you see, Vincent? I've done the same thing! It's total role-reversal."

"Your reaction was the same, but have you come to terms with yourself? It was never easy for me, and I sense you still haven't been able to, either."

I honestly didn't know, and I said as much. "Let me have another couple of days ... no, a week. I don't think I'll truly be rid of this ghost until I see the man responsible for sending that child to his death behind bars."

"But what if he's never caught?"

"Oh, ho!" I grinned, feeling a bit of the old mischievousness settling in. "You know me better than that!"

Vincent laughed in return, instantly sobering. "Then you will remain Above until your demons are vanquished?"

"I must. I'm sorry."

"The tunnels will be unbearably cold without your presence to warm them. The nights too long. My heart ... empty."

We held each other, knowing it would probably be a long time before we could do so again, then we spent the next few hours discussing nothing in particular - Mouse's latest invention, William's attempts at meringue pies, anything to allow us to remain together a few moments longer before we had to part. Later, he escorted me back to the hole leading to my apartment building.

"When you have healed," he requested, "Come back to me." And he kissed me tenderly and quickly walked away, disappearing down the dark passageway.

Turning to step through the ragged hole, I knew things were different, that my experience had changed what was between us. A wall we hadn't known existed had been torn down ... and the bandage covering the resulting wound would come off, given a little time.

No scars, I realized. And no more secrets.

True to his word, Father sent some of the older children out to scout the waterfront for any sign or clues that would give me some insight as to the next shipment of human cargo. Also, at his request, I pulled the undercover police force from the area, where they had been keeping a twenty-four hour surveillance. It was not a wait and see situation ... which gave me the time I needed to come to terms with my guilt.

The mortuary had labeled the child Juan Doe for the autopsy, and the city had buried him without a headstone in an orphan cemetery. I made a point to order a monument for his grave, hoping it would give me a sense of reconciliation. It did. And I was grateful.

Back at the office, I kept Rita on her toes trying to follow any paper trail Procasaconos might have forgotten to cover up, and Joe pursued his end. The case we were building was turning out to be quite a handsome one. The drugs were sold in the city, the money paid for more workers, the workers went to South America to harvest and process more drugs, and the money split in two different directions overseas - some went to the families of the children sold into slavery, and the rest was placed in the age-worn but still viable foreign bank accounts. All we needed now to nail the lid on the coffin was to confiscate the next boat containing illegal immigrants as soon as possible. We were so close to catching Procasaconos.

That work took up my days. At night, though, I often sat and stared out over the city from my balcony, airing myself as one does the laundry, and letting the breeze remove all the impurities from inside of me. I almost felt cleansed ... almost.

I missed my tunnel home. I missed my second family. And most of all, I missed Vincent. But I had sworn to myself I wouldn't go back there until all my demons had been exorcised. For I was having nightmares, and in them I found myself staring down a silver blue barrel held by a child no older than I had been when Mother had died. In my sleep, I relived the crack of the gun and the slug eating through my shoulder like a blazing worm, then I felt my hand take a life of its own to grasp, raise and fire the revolver it held. And as the boy fell backwards with a red-black rose blooming on his chest. I'd scream and wake myself up ... to an empty room ... and an even emptier bed.

Surprisingly, tonight I found myself praying for an end to the waiting - for Juan to find peace, and for me to be able to forgive myself. I hadn't prayed in such a long time ...

I didn't hear the doorbell ringing, until my visitor began to pound on the door. Quickly striding through the living room, I paused first.

"Who is it?"

"Samantha."

Opening the door, I saw the tunnel girl excitedly hopping from one foot to the other.

"Come on, Catherine! Pipes say the boat you're waiting for is out in the harbor heading up!"

"Where to?"

"Looks like Pier Four. Can't swear for certain, but the warehouse there's been boarded up for the last six months."

"Hold on!" Thankfully, I was still in casual clothes and not in my nightgown. I made a quick call to Joe (*Call it a reliable source, Joe, now move it!*) grabbed my keys, and ran after her. We took the elevator to the garage, but instead of going directly to the sub-basement. I held her arm. "We'll take my car to the docks. The police should be there soon, but I need you to guide me."

She nodded in agreement and we got in the vehicle.

It was close to midnight before I doused the headlights and pulled into the back of the warehouse. Oddly, I felt no fear, no apprehension. I guess it was because I knew this time the set-up was on the other foot. Procasaconos was not expecting us, but I was prepared for him.

In the dark with the engine off, the sound of water splashing against the pier permeated the silence. A lonely lamp post a few feet away cast a murky yellow glare over the boards. And from a distance, the deep throbbing of a motor could only be from our boat.

Samantha looked around, then pointed to a row of buildings behind us and off to the side. "There's an entrance there, hidden behind a false wall in an office."

"You go," I ordered her.

"But..."

"Shhhh!" Slipping off my cardigan, I covered the interior light in the car when she opened the door.

"Vincent might be waiting there," she added.

I knew he already was, but I waved her away. **"I don't want you involved,"** I replied. **"Now go!"**

"Take care, Catherine," Samantha whispered, then closed the door as quietly as she could and ran off to the cover of darkness.

A minute later, three police cars eased in behind me. Joe slipped out of one and came up to rap on the window on my side.

"Care for company?"

I did my trick again with the light while Joe joined me in the front seat. Pointing to the incoming boat, I said, "No running lights. It has to be them."

"Let's hope so," he muttered. "I'm missing my beauty sleep."

"Oh? What's her name?"

"Very funny, Radcliffe. Nice to see you haven't lost your sense of humor."

I snickered, enjoying the easy banter, and feeling a warm, calming wave seep through me from my toes to my shoulders - sweet, comforting, soothing.

Vincent.

I smiled. In the darkness, Joe continued to gripe, worrying about the trap and hoping nothing would go wrong. The boat slowly headed in toward the pier. A spotlight from its bow found where to dock, and from our vantage point we could barely make out the figures playing out the lines. It wasn't a big boat, from what we could see, but it was long and old and passably seaworthy.

Joe and I stayed where we were as the Special Forces team got out of the squad cars and, without firing a shot, descended on the craft. After weeks of preparation and countless hours bathed in blood and sweat, the climax was almost disappointing.

"You only get shoot-em-ups on TV, Radcliffe," Joe teased. "Ready to ID?"

I nodded, and we climbed out of the car and walked out onto the pier together. The first two men brought to us were unknown faces; Joe gave orders to send them back to the precinct in the wagon. The next man I recognized as one of Procasacono's main suppliers.

The fourth person brought out was our catch of the day.

Slowly, I walked up to the man responsible for so much suffering and stared at him, seeking some sign of humanity, or compassion. Viewing the expensive shoes and the tailor-made cut of his clothes, a coldness overcame me, cold mixed with heat, and my cheeks grew warm. The urge to lash out at him, to beat him senseless for all the pain and hurt he had caused, made me take a step closer, but something made me hesitate.

Clenching my fists and trembling with hate, I looked instead into his eyes and saw a dispassionate emptiness - a void filled only by the god called money, and worshipped on the alter of greed. Unable to take any more, I turned my back on him and let the officers lead him away. It took several deep breaths of the salty air to purge

myself, when one officer tapped me on the arm.

"Miss Chandler?"

"Yes?"

"Off-hand, I'd say there's about ninety kids in the hold of the boat. Do you think we should find some other place to take them than the station?"

Ninety? I glanced around for Joe, but he was busy over by the wagon. "What do you suggest? Hospital or Social Services?" I inquired of the man. From the expression on his face, I guessed he probably had two of his own at home, and the plight of the captive children in the boat was more than he could stomach.

"Hospital," he answered immediately.

I started toward the boat to have a look down into the hold, not thinking about what I might see, when the officer stopped me. "Better not, Miss Chandler. Please. Your job is over. Now, let us do ours."

Joe had rejoined us and echoed the officer.

"Let's go home, Cathy. The bad dreams are over. We caught the bogeyman." Taking my elbow, he guided me back to my car and watched me get behind the wheel. ***"Sleep late tomorrow,"*** he ordered. ***"Stop by the office in the afternoon to finish your report, then don't return until Monday. I want my old Catherine Chandler back, got that?"***

Impulsively, I reached up to hug his neck and place a sincere kiss on his cheek. Then as I pulled away from the pier, I could see him in my rear-view mirror standing with his hands in the pockets of his jeans, watching my taillights fade in the distance.

After arriving home, I was still too keyed up to go to bed, so I fixed myself a cup of hot tea and stood out on the balcony, looking at the lights of the city. Even in the wee early hours of the morning, New York appeared no different now than it did any other time of the night.

For the longest time I remained outside, sipping my cooling tea and watching the fog roll in. I felt ... at peace. My demons were gone, locked up behind bars to face my brand of justice, the justice I believed in. And the hate which had been eating at me was put to rest.

Juan had been a victim. So had I.

Now it was time to leave my own personal Hades and return to the land of the living.

It only took a few minutes to make my way down to the sub-basement, and another fifteen minutes to get to the main hub.

Entering Vincent's chamber, I could see by the amber glow of the window over the bed that he was asleep. Apparently, after I had left the scene at the pier, he had felt my calm and quiet piece of mind, assumed I would remain Above, as I had for the weeks past, and retired for the night. Unable to contain my love and happiness, I shed my outer clothes and shoes and climbed over the quilts to slide under the covers next to him.

The shaking of the bed disturbed him, and he rolled over, still groggy, not awake.

"Catherine ..."

"Goodnight, my love. See you in the morning." I kissed his forehead, then snuggled into his embrace.

"Are you healed?" His voice trailed away but his arm tightened around me.

"Better than that," I murmured, already succumbing to his warmth, his love and my exhaustion, both physically and emotionally.

"I'm a candle."

