

SOMETHING TO BE THANKFUL FOR

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Vincent put down the last note that Father had sent. It had been in the supply delivery that Mouse had left. Vincent had picked it up earlier but hadn't read the note until he got back to the cave he'd been sheltering in since September.

September, he thought. *Father's note is dated November 13th. It's been two months!*

Now, Father was advising that he leave the tunnels completely and as soon as possible. The men who had followed him Below were finding even the hidden ways and were delving ever deeper. Father was worried that they would eventually find him.

"I know that it's been a difficult time, but I fear that you must leave the tunnels to remain safe," Father had written. "There are Helpers all over the city; maybe one would be willing to take you in. But if and when you leave, don't let anyone here Below or even any Helpers above, except for the one you shelter with, know where you are. That way, we cannot inadvertently let it slip to one of the intruders. All I ask is that you find a way to let me know that you are safe. I don't want to know where you are, only that you are safe. Pick a Helper to relay messages, and I will use that same Helper to let you know when it is safe to come home."

Vincent leaned back against the rock wall. He couldn't think of any Helper who could take him in. Peter had moved out of his house into a one-bedroom apartment and was out of town at the moment. He was in Santa Fe, visiting his daughter and her family, and didn't expect to be back until after Thanksgiving. Dr. Wong and Mr. Long would be easy to get to because they had thresholds, making them vulnerable. The intruders might find one of the thresholds. He couldn't think of any other Helper with the room or the resources to provide shelter for him.

But Father is right, he thought. *I do need to find a better place. Some place that no one would think to look for me.*

Then it hit him: Catherine! Even though he had sent her away after he recovered from his illness, she had remained an active Helper, and Peter had kept them informed of what she was doing.

Not long after the last time he'd seen her, she was promoted to deputy DA and ran the Brooklyn office. Soon after, she bought a house closer to her work, somewhere on Long Island. She moved into that house in January of this year.

But he didn't have an address or a phone number for her, and even if she was listed, going into a phone booth to look her up in the phone book was out of the question. He could call her at work, but again, he didn't have a number, and he'd have to use a public phone.

The Bond had returned, but he hadn't told anyone, so he was sure he'd be able to find her once he was closer to her.

But would she be willing to let him stay after how he'd treated her? He decided that it was worth the effort.

He had a beat-up map of the subway system. He took it out and studied it. He looked up at a calendar on the wall. If he left tonight, Thursday night, late, he thought he could make it to Catherine's by Saturday night. It was a long distance. He could use the tunnels, but he might meet the intruders along the way, so he'd have to use the subway.

He had several ways to use the subway. When he was younger, he liked to ride on top of the subway cars. It was more for the thrill than the need to get somewhere fast, but as he got older, he more often chose the safer method. Some of the cars had a small platform on the rear of the cars. It was large enough for him to sit on with his legs pulled up. The cars that didn't have those had ladders that led to the roof. Whether sitting on the small platform or hanging onto the ladder, it was easy for him to stay out of sight and get off and on when the train stopped.

With his decision made, he packed all the homemade trail bars and fruit from the last delivery into his backpack. He filled two old canteens with water from the river. On his way out he found some pipes and sent a short message: *'Advice taken,'* was all it said.

He took a circuitous route to the nearest subway tunnel, but by the time he reached the right station, it was already Friday morning, and the station and trains were busy. To avoid any chance of being seen, he found shelter in a maintenance tunnel until that night. As soon as the crowds thinned, he found his place on the back of a subway car. He had to change trains, which slowed him down, and it was Saturday morning when he finally reached his last stop.

It was almost dawn, so he had to find shelter for the day again. Luckily, there was another maintenance tunnel.

When the sun finally set, he found his way to the surface and started in the direction that felt right. He wasn't familiar with the area and was sticking to shadows and secluded areas as much as possible, so his route wasn't direct. Not long after he started, a cold rain started, but eventually, he reached a place where Catherine felt close.

Peter had said that she was close to the ocean, and he could smell that, and with each step, he knew he was on the right path. He passed several houses that were close together, but he remembered that Peter had told them that Catherine's house was by itself. Peter had said there were properties on each side. One with a fire-damaged abandoned house, and the other lot was vacant. Catherine had purchased all three properties, torn down the damaged house, and built a garage connected with the house by a breezeway. He was looking for that layout, and when he saw what he thought fit, he stopped. His hunch was verified by the name CHANDLER on the mailbox.

He wearily turned and started up the driveway, feeling like he was going home.



Catherine had spent the whole day cleaning the house. She'd moved to the old house on the beach on Long Island the previous January.

The summer of 1989, just after Vincent had recovered from his illness, had been chaotic.

First, almost as soon as he recovered, Vincent had sent her away. She'd argued with him, but he'd insisted, ultimately winning that argument. He'd gone so far as to close the threshold below her building and demand that none of the Helpers allow her to use theirs. And she had reluctantly respected his decision and had stayed away, even when she was invited to Winterfest, which she was because she was still a Helper.

She knew him well and even understood his reasoning: the Bond was gone, and he could no longer help her if she needed it. But she disagreed. She tried to convince him that he was more than her protector, her savior; he was the man she loved, but that wasn't enough for him. He felt he had to be useful, and he no longer felt like he was without the Bond.

Then, in July of that year, she was promoted to Deputy and put in charge of the Brooklyn satellite office. At least that was a distraction.

Then, she decided to find a home closer to work. It had taken several months, but she'd found an over 100-year-old house she loved. It needed a lot of work, taking over a year. She finally moved the previous January of 1991.

The house, a two-story Cape Cod with dormers in a finished attic, looked like it belonged on the cover of a romance novel. She did a full renovation. Everything was rewired and replumbed, closets were added to the bedrooms, and laundry and pantry were added to the large mud room on the back. The interior was modernized, but she hardly touched the outside, except for needed repairs, paint, and a new roof.

There was a Widows Walk on the roof that Catherine especially loved, but there was no easy way to get there. So, she'd gotten rid of one of the upstairs bedrooms, turned it into a sitting area, and had the contractor install a spiral staircase from there to the attic. They'd finished the attic to make it better for storage and installed another spiral stair to the Widows Walk. That was where Catherine went when she felt the need for solitude, to recharge.

Many of her friends, including Jenny, had questioned the move, especially since the house was in the middle of a large triple lot and rather isolated. She couldn't see her neighbors unless she was on the Widow's Walk.

Catherine had a hard time convincing them that after living in Manhattan all her life, especially since she started working for the DA, it was just the change she needed. But once Jenny visited and spent a weekend there, she understood.

Catherine cleaned weekly but hadn't thoroughly cleaned since moving in January. And since she didn't like having someone in her home while she wasn't there, she hadn't hired anyone to do it. She found that she enjoyed the feeling of accomplishment when she could look around her clean home and know she'd done it all.

So, she'd made a list and had been determined to get everything done, and finally, at a little after midnight, she'd put the last of her cleaning tools away and was getting ready to relax with a cup of tea, and some cookies. She yawned as she waited for the water to boil.

While she waited for the tea to steep, she set the teapot, a mug, and the cookies on the bar between the kitchen and the dining area.

It was a good night to be indoors. It had started raining about sunset, and now, it was turning to sleet; she could hear it on the windows.

Tap, tap, tap

The sound caught her attention. She was sure that wasn't sleet. She was used to the old house making noises, but this was different. It couldn't be a tree limb, there were no trees that close to the house.

Tap, tap, tap

It sounded like it was coming from the mud room. She went to investigate.

Several lights in the breezeway from the garage on the back of the house that faced the ocean were on; she hadn't turned them off earlier, and now she could see a bulky shadow through the frosted glass on the back door. Concerned about an intruder, she started to back up to go for the phone. But there was something familiar about that shadow.

Vincent? It can't be, she admonished herself, but somehow, she was sure. She opened the door a crack to verify her hunch, and when she saw him, soaked from the cold rain and looking very disheveled, she quickly closed it again, took off the chain, then opened it wide, beckoning him in as she stepped back.

"My God, Vincent! What are you doing here and on a night like this?"

He came in and closed the door before leaning back on it.

"I'm sorry to disturb you so late at night, Catherine, but I need a place to disappear to for a while, and you were the only person I could think of."

"No need to apologize," she said. "You are always welcome. Get out of those wet things and come in and warm up. I just made some tea."

He took off his cloak, handed it to her, and then bent to remove his boots. He was surprisingly dry under the cloak. She hung his cloak on a hook by the door, and he put his boots on the tray under it before following Catherine into the kitchen.

Catherine didn't know what to make of this turn of events.

He needs a place to disappear to? What on earth was going on? she wondered. I have been working a lot lately and have been a little isolated, so maybe I missed something.

She poured tea into the mug and set it on the counter in front of him as he sat at the bar.

He looked exhausted and more disheveled than she'd seen him since he was sick. She got herself a cup, poured more tea, and leaned against the counter across from him while she waited for him to speak. He drank the whole cup of tea and poured himself another before he spoke.

"Thank you, Catherine. When Father told me I needed to leave the tunnels for a while, you were the first person I thought of. I don't want to impose, but..."

"No imposition! I'm a Helper, remember. And that is what Helpers do; we help when it's needed. God knows you helped me often enough. But what is going on?"

"Have you spoken to Peter or any other Helpers lately?" he asked.

"No. Peter has been out of town for a while, and I've been working long hours at the office. When I get home, I've just been falling into bed, only to get up the next morning to do it all over again. I've let a lot of things get away from me. This is my first full weekend off in several months."

Vincent gathered his thoughts for a moment before explaining what was happening Below.

"The Tunnels have been invaded... again," he began.

"Invaded? Like the Tong or those awful people?"

"Both and neither," he said. "Father and I surmised that I must have been seen and followed. And whoever they are, they decided that I was fair game. They want to capture and display me in some kind of circus sideshow or something, or at least that is what they told Father. Somehow, they figured out how to get through the park threshold door and made their way Below. We knew they were there and tracked their progress for several days. We tried all the usual methods to deter and drive them out, but nothing worked. They managed to make their way all the way to the main chambers. Luckily, I was making a supply delivery to Narcissa at the time. A message was sent directing me to hide for the time being. I stayed with Narcissa for a day, then went deeper.

"Their leader talked to Father and told him that if they turned me over to them, they would leave everyone in peace. Father feigned ignorance, and everyone was directed to act as if they'd never heard of me or anyone like me. It didn't work, and the intruders started to search. They found Elizabeth's paintings. Mouse said he and Jamie were there when they did, and he said that Elizabeth acted like she was a dotty old woman and told them that the paintings were of a *creature of the darkness*. Then Jamie told them that Elizabeth was senile and just painted things that she imagined, and everyone let her because it made her happy.

"They didn't believe that story and kept looking. Mouse kept changing the ways. I'd retreated as deep as I could to the caves along the river that runs deep Below. Mouse and some others were bringing me supplies, but Father got worried that, eventually, I would be found. The intruders didn't show any signs of giving up. So, he sent a message suggesting I might find a hiding place that no one else knew about. He suggested coming Above. I took his advice and left the tunnels."

"How long ago was that?" she asked when he paused.

"I left the tunnels Thursday night. The rain tonight helped because there weren't many people out."

"How did you get here?"

"The trains. And I walked from the last stop. I arrived there early this morning, and because I could only travel at night, I had to take cover for the day. I wasn't sure exactly where you were."

She felt a tingle go through her body as she came to a realization.

"The Bond?" she questioned.

"It came back. I used it to locate you," he said, not looking at her.

"When?" she asked.

"Several months after I sent you away. It was just suddenly there one day."

She wanted to ask why he hadn't come to her then, but she refrained.

"So, no one Below knows where you are?" she asked.

"No one. Father thought it would be safer for all involved if no one knew where I was."

"But how are you supposed to know when it's safe to return?"

"Father told me to call a Helper and ask them to relay the message when I found a safe place. He would keep that same Helper informed on the situation Below and I'm to check in with them occasionally."

"You can call someone tomorrow and let them know. I assume that you won't be telling anyone where you are."

"I won't. I fear it might endanger you, so I'll tell them to tell Father I'm safe."

"You are welcome to stay here as long as you need to," she told him. "I have two guest rooms upstairs. You can have the one in the front of the house; it has a king-sized bed and a private bath. You should be comfortable. And I have a big box of clothes that I was getting ready to send Below. I'm sure you can find something in it to wear while you are here."

"Thank you, Catherine," he said with a wan smile.

"Now, are you hungry?"

"Famished!" he said adamantly. "I haven't had a hot meal since I left the main tunnels in September. I've been living on fruit and William's trail bars."

"September? Good grief, no wonder you look so thin." She went to the refrigerator and started pulling out leftovers from the meal she'd cooked the night before. There was a container of chili and some cornbread. It only took a few minutes to heat it and set it in front of Vincent.

"While you eat, I'll go upstairs and put sheets on the bed for you," she told him. "Help yourself to more if you want it."

When Catherine left the kitchen, he sighed and slouched into the chair. He was exhausted, but for the first time in months, he felt he could relax; he was safe. Not only had he not eaten very well for

the last few months, but he hadn't slept more than two or three hours at a time since his last night in his chamber.

The chili was warm and delicious, but he acknowledged that it could have been ice cold, and it would have still been delicious, because he was that hungry. He finished the cornbread and the chili. Then, all he wanted to do was sleep.

He went upstairs and found the room where Catherine was just setting a stack of clothes on a chair.

"There should be enough here to keep you going for a while. There are sweats and pajamas, too, and I put a bathrobe on the back of the bathroom door. I'll wash the clothes you are wearing tomorrow," she said before turning to leave.

"Thank you again, Catherine," he said.

She turned back and smiled at him. "Any time, Vincent. You are always welcome."

After she left, Vincent went into the bathroom and turned on the shower, then shed his clothes and stepped under the hot water. Not only had he not eaten or slept well, but the closest thing he'd had to a bath was quick dips in the ice-cold water of the river Below. The hot water felt like heaven. Shampoo and soap were in the shower; he lathered his hair several times and then went to work on his body.

He found some sweatpants in the bedroom, put them on, and fell into bed. He was still damp, but it didn't matter. He was asleep before he hit the pillow.

Catherine returned to the kitchen and happily put the empty pot and plates in the dishwasher. She felt joyful for the first time in two and a half years. Maybe he was just here because she was the best port to take shelter in for this particular storm, but at least he was here. They could talk.

She'd had things in the last couple of years that had made her happy: the job, the house, but there had never been any real joy in any of it. Now, at least for the moment, she was genuinely joyful.



When Catherine woke the next morning, it was almost 10:00. She was a little surprised not to find Vincent in the kitchen when she went down, but then, he had said he had been living rough and probably hadn't been sleeping well.

She put the coffee on and went to her door to get the newspaper. Over an hour later, when Vincent came down, she was sitting at the kitchen bar, nursing her second cup of coffee and doing the crossword puzzle.

He had found a pair of old jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt in the stack of clothes. He was shoeless but had socks. He still looked sleepy, but seemed more relaxed than the night before.

"I smelled coffee and woke thinking I was back in the tunnels," he said.

"Help yourself," she said. "But I thought you didn't drink coffee. I can make some tea."

"No, I think I need the caffeine this morning, as long as there is milk and sugar."

"Sugar is in the cabinet with the coffee cups above the coffee pot, and milk is in the refrigerator."

She watched as he poured the coffee and added the sugar and milk. He joined her at the bar and looked over at the crossword she was doing.

"Anna Julia Cooper," he said, then took a sip of his coffee.

"What?" she asked, confused.

"Thirty-two down, *A Voice from the South* author. It's Anna Julia Cooper."

She laughed and wrote it in.

"I wasn't familiar with that one," she admitted.

"You should read it," he suggested. "She could probably be considered one of the first feminists and civil rights advocates."

"I'll look for it next time I'm in Mr. Smythe's bookshop," she said. "I was just going to go upstairs and get dressed, then have breakfast." She pushed the paper over in front of him. "You can finish that if you want. I'll be back in a few."

She left, and Vincent took over the puzzle as he contentedly sipped his coffee.

Breakfast was simple: scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and juice, and it was ready a short time after she came back downstairs. She made plenty, and Vincent ate well. She made a mental note to add a few things to her grocery list for her regular shopping trip after work on Monday.

"If there is anything special you need or would like to eat, put it on the list by the phone," she told him. "I need to get groceries after work tomorrow."

"I don't need anything special," he assured her. "I was wondering if you have someone come to clean or do repairs? If you do, is there a place for me to go to hide?" he asked.

"I do my own cleaning. It's just me here, so it doesn't need much. Sometimes, deliveries are made, but they are left on the porch. But if you ever have to stay out of sight, you can go to the attic. There is a spiral stair in the back on the second floor. That will take you to the attic."

"Do you have any neighbors?" he asked.

There are neighbors on both sides, but they are snowbirds."

When the term seemed to confuse him, she explained.

"They are only here in the summer. The neighbors on the north have a place in South Carolina, and they spend the winters there. And the ones on the other side go to Florida for the winter. They both left on November 1st. So, if you want to go outside, you don't have to worry about the neighbors seeing you."

They spent a quiet Sunday. Catherine made grilled cheese and tomato soup for lunch and meatloaf with gravy, mashed potatoes, and green beans for dinner. Vincent ate heartily, and she knew she was definitely going to have to get a lot of groceries. She usually only cooked two or three times a week, relying on leftovers for the other nights. But with Vincent, there wasn't much left over.

They didn't talk much, and Catherine was a little disappointed.

Let him decompress a little before you push him into deep conversation about relationships, she told herself as she was getting ready for bed that night.



Vincent came downstairs just as she was preparing to leave for work on Monday.

"There is plenty in the kitchen for breakfast and lunch," she told him as she put on her coat.

"What time do you think you'll be home?" he asked.

"The office closes at 5:00. I grocery shop on Mondays, so I should be home around 6:30 quarter to seven," she said. She reached into her purse, pulled out a business card, and wrote a number on

the back. "If you need anything during the day, you can reach me at this number." She pointed at the number she'd written. "It's a private line that rings directly to my desk."

He took it, looked at it, then tucked it into his pocket.

"Have a good day," he said as she left. He checked that the door was locked and then went to the kitchen.

It turned out to be a long day for Vincent. He was warm, well-fed, and comfortable for the first time in a long time, but restless. He was going to have to find a way to fill his time. He had added a few things to Catherine's shopping list the day before, but he suddenly thought of something else.

He wondered if it would be worth calling her but decided to call.

"Chandler," she said when she picked up the phone. She sounded distracted.

"Catherine?"

"Vincent! What is it? Is everything okay?" she asked, suddenly more attentive.

"Everything is fine," he assured her. "I just remembered something I should have put on your list."

"What is it?"

"Can you get something like a composition book or a spiral notebook? Unless you have something here. I'd like to get back to my journal; see what I can remember of the last couple of months and try to record it and make some sense of it."

"All I have at the house are legal pads. I'll pick up something for you," she told him. "How is your day going?"

"It's quiet," he said. "The sea is rough today. I can hear the surf."

"That was one of the things that drew me to that house," she told him. "That and the Widow's Walk on the Roof."

"It's accessible?" he asked.

"Yes. Just take the stairs to the attic, and there is another stair to the roof. I keep a lawn chair up there in the summer, but put it in the attic when the weather got cold."

They talked for a little while longer before hanging up.

Catherine decided that she liked having him call her in the middle of her day.



"Is there anything you need to be done around here?" Vincent asked her at dinner one night later that week. "I need something to keep me busy; I'm not used to doing nothing."

"Not really," she said after a moment of thought. "The place was completely renovated on the inside; I moved in less than a year ago. If you see something that needs to be done, go ahead, but I can't think of anything."

"Do you have tools?" he asked. "Just in case."

"There is a toolbox on the floor in the back of the pantry, and if you need something else, just let me know."

After that Catherine often came home to find he'd been busy fixing little things through the day. He installed the bag of door stops he'd found next to the toolbox, fixed the dripping faucet in the laundry room, and myriad other small things that she didn't notice until they were fixed.

And she came home most nights to find that he'd cooked dinner. And he was a very good cook.

"You're going to spoil me," she told him at the end of the week.

"I like to stay busy," he told her.

The next Monday was the Monday before Thanksgiving. Catherine returned from the grocery store with a small turkey and everything needed to fix Thanksgiving dinner.

He was helping her put everything away and picked up the turkey with a questioning look.

"Freezer in the small refrigerator in the laundry room," she directed. "It's small and won't take long to thaw. I'll put it in the fridge tomorrow morning, or at least that is what all the directions tell me to do."

"You've never cooked a turkey before?" he asked.

"I've roasted a few chickens," she said, "but never a turkey. Before Daddy died, we always went out; since then, I've ignored Thanksgiving. I decided to give it a try this year. I have some of my mom's recipes. She made herb butter she used on her turkeys, and I also have her stuffing recipe. I'm not going to try anything too fancy. It will just be the turkey, with gravy and stuffing, orange-glazed carrots, roasted potatoes, and dinner rolls. I've made the gravy, carrots, and potatoes before, so the turkey and the stuffing will be the only new things."

"I can help. We all help William with holiday meals."

"It should be fun," she agreed.



Catherine was up early on Thanksgiving, drinking coffee and reading a cookbook, when Vincent came down.

"You're up early," he commented, filling the electric kettle with water.

"It takes fifteen minutes per pound to cook a stuffed turkey. The turkey should sit for a short time before carving and serving, so that means if I want to have dinner on the table at 2:00 this afternoon, I need to have the turkey in the oven by about 10:15 this morning... and I still have to make the stuffing and all the other sides.

"Relax, Catherine. It's only 8:00, and no one is holding a stopwatch to ensure you have it all done at exactly 2:00," he told her, as he spooned tea into the teapot. "It's just the two of us, and I will be helping."

"Sorry. I'm so used to deadlines at work that I think I have to have them in every aspect of my life, I guess," she said with a shrug.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked, as he joined her at the bar.

"Have breakfast first," she told him. "French toast and bacon are keeping warm in the oven. Once we've eaten, we can start the stuffing. You can chop the celery and the onion. I'll cube the bread and cook the sausage.

It turned out that despite her concerns, dinner was on the table promptly at 2:00.

"The turkey was perfect," Vincent said as they enjoyed their dessert after dinner. "No one would have known you had never cooked one before."

"I just did it the way my mom used to do it. I kept her cookbooks, and they all have handwritten notes in them. She loved to cook, and Dad always swore that she would probably have cooked for some fancy restaurant, if he hadn't married her. I guess I inherited some talent from her."

"William always said that if you can read, you can be an adequate cook, but it takes talent to make it special."

After they finished cleaning up and putting away the leftovers, Catherine turned to Vincent.

"I forgot to tell you. Things were crazy at work this week, but I learned yesterday that I have to take at least two weeks of vacation before the end of the year. If I don't, I'll lose it; the city won't buy it back. So, I told them that since the office shouldn't be that busy for the rest of the year, I'd just go ahead and take it starting Monday. It will give me time to get some Christmas shopping done and get the house decorated."

They moved into the living room with what was left of a bottle of wine, and Catherine turned on the TV.

"I noticed several boxes labeled 'Christmas Decorations' in the attic. when I went up to look at the Widows Walk last week. Do you want me to bring them down?" he asked her.

"Thank you. When I was little, my dad never wanted to decorate until the weekend before Christmas," she told him as they settled on the couch. "And then the decorations had to come down no later than the weekend after New Year's. But I always like to put mine up the weekend after Thanksgiving. It just never made much sense to go to all the work of decorating only to take it all down again in less than two weeks."

Vincent had never seen *It's a Wonderful Life* or *Miracle on 34th Street*, and Catherine had both the VHS tapes, so they watched those.

When they took a break later to make turkey sandwiches, Catherine asked about Vincent's last call to find out what was happening below.

"Peter came home earlier than expected. Then I called my usual contact, he told me. So, I called Peter and talked to him. He said there hasn't been any change. They've managed to keep some of the tunnels closed, so no one has found Narcissa or the deeper tunnels. He said Father hopes they are convinced that the tunnels they've found are the only ones, but they are showing no signs of leaving."

"How are they getting supplies Below?" Catherine asked.

"People who go Above every night pick up things from our Helpers. They all use the same route to go above: the park threshold. Father doesn't want anyone to know that there are any other ways. Our people are dropping the supplies in a side tunnel where Mouse makes sure they get down to his chamber so they can be safely delivered to William or whoever is supposed to get them. Peter assured me that no one is going without."

"That's good to know."



Vincent brought all the Christmas decorations down from the attic on Friday, and they spent most of Saturday putting up the tree and decorating the rest of the house.

"You don't have a real tree?" he questioned as they put the finishing touches on the garland that they'd wrapped the stair railing with.

"Allergies," she said. "When I was about six, Daddy decided we needed a real tree. We used to spend Christmas at the lake house, and he bought a live tree that he planned to plant in the yard after Christmas. Mom and I spent two weeks or so all stopped up, coughing and blowing our noses. It was a cedar tree, and it turned out that mom and I were both allergic to cedar trees. That was one year when the tree came down right after Christmas, and no one complained."

"Did he plant it? Is it still there?"

"It is. He planted it in the back of the house, beside the path down to the lake. It's beautiful, but I'm glad it's outside."



Catherine had a busy week planned for her first week off work. She spent Monday and Tuesday Christmas shopping and then had lunch with Jenny on Wednesday.

"You seem a lot more upbeat than you have been for a while," Jenny commented, halfway through their meal. "Are things looking up, or is it just *Holiday Spirit*?"

"I don't know," Catherine hedged. "Maybe some of both?"

"Whatever it is, I think you've smiled more in the last hour than I've seen you smile since you broke up with that guy a couple of years ago," Jenny said.

"What guy?" Catherine asked, trying to cover her surprise.

"Look, Missy, I've known you for sixteen years. I know you. I know that you were seeing someone for about two years; it was serious, then suddenly you weren't seeing him anymore."

"Sometimes good friends can be so inconvenient," Catherine said, making a face at Jenny.

"You don't have to tell me anything. I just wanted you to know I saw what was happening, and I understand."

"No, you deserve an explanation... You're right; I was seeing someone. We really had a connection, but it just didn't work," she explained with a shrug.

"Did he dump you, or did you dump him?" Jenny asked.

"It was his decision. I didn't like it and argued against it, but ultimately, he got his way," Cathy said.

"And now he's back?" Jenny asked with a quirked eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

"I had this dream one night a couple of weeks ago. It was weird, but I dreamed someone was looking for you. I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, but they kept stopping and looking around, and I heard your name whispered several times."

"You are uncanny," Cathy said with a small laugh. "Yes, he's back. He was looking for me, and he found me."

"Are you back together?"

"No... I don't know. We've talked, but always about inconsequential things. He needed my help with something, but now that that has been taken care of, any time I try to guide the conversation to *us*, he either changes the subject or decides it's late."

"What? He only came looking for you because he needed your help with something. Wow! The gall of that guy; he dumps you, but the first time he needs something, he's right back," Jenny was angry on behalf of her friend. "It's a good thing he's not here; I'd give him a piece of my mind!"

"No, it was nothing like that. It was important; he helped me a lot when we were together. I kind of owed him."

"Well, whatever... It just isn't right."



That conversation did make Catherine think. Not about Vincent showing up when he needed help; that was a given; they both knew that if either of them needed help from the other, they could count on that. But she wondered if she was putting too much into what was happening between them.

He'd been at her house for almost three weeks. They'd talked, but it had always been about his family, her work, or the house. He'd done a lot of nice things for her: the little things in the house, cooking dinner for her. But they hadn't even physically touched, not once. When they'd been together before, there were hugs, lots of them, and cuddles on the balcony. Now, even if they sat on the same sofa to watch TV, they were at opposite ends. There were three stools at her breakfast bar in the kitchen. If she sat on the far end, he always took the stool at the other end. It was as if he was staying as far from her as possible.

When she got home later that afternoon, Vincent was in the kitchen, and her toaster was in pieces on the counter in front of him.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Your toaster stopped working. I was going to toast some bread to make a sandwich for lunch, but it didn't work. The toast went down and stayed, then popped up when it should have, but it wasn't toasted. I took it apart, and it looks like the element is broken. Too bad Mouse isn't here; he'd have it fixed quickly."

"But we'd probably have to peel our toast off the ceiling," she commented as she passed. "There is a toaster oven in the pantry. We can make toast with that until I pick up another toaster."

"What do you want to do with this one?" he asked.

"Put it with the box of stuff that is going Below. It's in the mud room under the counter. Mouse can try to fix it or use the parts for something else."

She felt out of sorts, and after she changed clothes in her room, she didn't even want to go back downstairs, but she had a load of laundry to do.

Vincent had learned how to use her washer and dryer; he was just taking a load of his things out of the dryer when she went in. She dumped her laundry in the washer, added the detergent and fabric softener, turned it on and turned toward the door from the mud room into her home office.

"Is everything all right?" Vincent asked as she reached the door.

She turned and looked at him. She knew he would know if she lied, so she grabbed the first thing.

"I think I had too much wine at lunch. Some reds give me a headache." She entered her office through the door in the laundry room and closed the door, then crossed the room and closed the pocket doors between her office and the small living room.

She'd started journaling shortly after meeting Vincent; now, she pulled out the current one and started writing. Maybe it would help her sort out her feelings.

By the time she left her office a couple of hours later, she'd concluded that she had just misinterpreted all the nice things Vincent had done for her since he'd been there. He was the type of person who, if you did something for him, would want to repay it, and the only way he had to repay was by helping out around the house.

She went into the laundry to transfer her load into the dryer, then to the kitchen to start dinner. She found that Vincent was already heating the last Thanksgiving leftovers from the freezer.

She thanked him, and they ate in silence. After she helped clean up the kitchen, she told him she was going to bed early. It hadn't been dark for very long, but she collected her laundry from the dryer and went upstairs.

Vincent watched as she went up the stairs. He knew something was bothering her, but she hadn't lost the knack for covering up her feelings. Had her friend given her bad news, or was it something else? He was determined to get to the bottom of it the next day.

I'll give her a chance to sort it out for herself before I ask her anything, he decided.

Catherine dried off after her shower, hung up the towel, and put on the terry cloth robe from the back of the bathroom door.

She went to the chest of drawers in her bedroom for pajamas. Since the move, she'd only worn pajamas, usually cotton or flannel pants with short or long-sleeved tops. She'd put away all her pretty, feminine nightgowns. She hadn't gotten rid of them. They were still in one of the other drawers.

She'd always liked wearing those gowns. Many of them were silk and felt good on her bare skin; they made her feel pretty and feminine. And after Vincent had started visiting, she bought sets with a nightgown and robe. She could tell he enjoyed touching the soft fabrics, so she indulged him without telling him.

Since he'd been staying with her, she'd stuck with her terry cloth robe and pajamas. He'd only seen her dressed for bed a few times since he'd been there.

Now, she reached down and opened the drawer with the pretty gowns. The one on the top was one she'd bought a short time before he'd sent her away. It was just a plain pale peach-colored silk calf-length gown. The matching robe was quilted, and it hung in the closet.

She took the gown out of the drawer, then went to the closet for the robe. Vincent wouldn't see it; he likely wasn't even interested in seeing her in it, but that didn't mean she had to deprive herself of the pleasure of wearing it.

The silk felt just as good on her skin as she had remembered. She smoothed it down, took the terrycloth robe, and hung it back on the bathroom door.

She read in bed for a while but was having a hard time concentrating on what she was reading. She kept coming back to the problem at hand. And that problem was how she would handle having Vincent under the same roof for however long it took to resolve the problems Below.

Telling him he would have to leave would be out of the question. It passed through her mind for an instant, but she rejected it. She would have to keep up the *just friends* act until she returned to work. Then, she would arrange to be in the office as much as possible so she wouldn't have to come home and be confronted with the reality of Vincent.

She finally closed her book and turned out the light but couldn't sleep. She could not get her brain to shut up. It kept showing her all the "what ifs" and "could-have-beens," keeping her awake.

She sat up and turned on the light; it was just midnight. *The Widow's Walk*, she thought. *There's no wind; it's a quiet night. A few minutes up there, under the stars, will relax me. It always works.*

She got up, put on her slippers and robe, and left her bedroom. The house was quiet. Vincent was probably asleep. She climbed the stairs to the attic and then the one to the roof.

The cold, crisp air hit her when she emerged from the hatch at the top of the stairs. But it didn't feel that cold; there was no wind. She wrapped her robe closer around her neck and crossed the small space to the rail on the east side of the house. The sky was so clear that the stars looked almost close enough to reach up and pluck from the sky.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply in the cold air, willing herself to relax.

Vincent knew when Catherine left her room. She couldn't sleep. He looked up from his book and looked up at the ceiling. She was going up there at this time of night?

He went back to reading, but was finally distracted by the feeling of cold. His room was warm, but Catherine was cold. He waited, expecting her to come back inside, but she didn't. After another ten minutes, he decided to see what was happening.

He put his robe and slippers on and followed Catherine's earlier route to the roof.

She'd left the roof hatch open, and the cold surprised him when he emerged. He could see her standing at the railing and knew she wasn't dressed for these temperatures.

"Catherine?" he called.

She turned to face him, and he saw tears on her cheeks.

All he did was open his arms, and she didn't hesitate to move into his warmth.

Vincent held his breath for a moment; she was in his arms.

He closed his eyes, savoring the joy, his *and* hers.

Catherine did the same. This was exactly where she'd wanted to be since the night he'd arrived.

But why? she asked herself. *With the Bond, he had to have known that I was cold, even if I hadn't noticed it. He's probably just offering to share his warmth.*

They stood like that for several minutes until Vincent noticed that Catherine was shivering; he didn't need the Bond to tell him she was very cold.

He pushed her away a little, and she went reluctantly.

"We need to go back where it's warm," he told her, guiding her gently toward the roof hatch to the attic stairs.

She went, and Vincent followed, but because he stopped to close and secure the hatch, she was leaving the sitting area on the second floor when he arrived.

He went after her and caught her hand, pulling her back toward the small couch in the room. He sat then tugged her down to sit next to him.

She hesitantly joined him. She kicked off her slippers and tucked her cold feet up on the couch under her robe. She wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her forehead on her knees. Now that she was inside where it was warm, she realized just how cold she was.

"Catherine, what were you doing up there? It has to be below zero."

"I only meant to stay a minute or two. But it was so quiet and still; I just got caught up in the beauty and peace."

She couldn't help but think she'd probably misinterpreted Vincent's actions... again. He had probably just sensed her cold and wanted to help. She was startled when she felt him reach under her robe and wrap his warm hands around her cold feet, pulling them out to rest against his thigh as he gently rubbed some warmth into them.

"Your feet are like ice," he observed. "If you'd stayed much longer, you would have got frostbite." He tilted her head up so he could see her face. He touched her nose and cheeks. "Your face looks all right. How are your hands?"

She held up her hands so he could see.

"They're cold, but I had them tucked into my sleeves," she told him.

"What were you doing up there in these temperatures?" he asked.

"I just needed to clear my head. I couldn't sleep, and I thought that it might help."

"What is it?" he asked. "Did your friend have bad news? You've been quiet since you got home."

"No. It's nothing, really. I was just overthinking something."

They sat silently for a few minutes while Vincent rubbed warmth back into her feet.

"It has to be something," he finally said. "You were completely oblivious to what was happening to you."

Catherine just shook her head and looked away, determined not to tell him her state of mind.

"Catherine, talk to me. We were always able to talk about things before. Please, I want to help," he told her.

She leaned back on the arm of the couch, crossed her arms across her chest, and closed her eyes.

"Jenny just said something that made me think, that's all."

"Tell me," he said softly.

Catherine gathered her thoughts for a moment before she spoke.

"That night you showed up here, asking for help," she began, not looking at him. "I was surprised, but it gave me hope. I thought... hoped, that maybe we could talk and work it out between us. When you told me that the Bond had returned..." She shook her head. "But I was mistaken. All you truly wanted from me was shelter, a place to hide until the trouble Below is gone."

"I obviously read more into all of it than it is. But that's because I love you." She opened her eyes and looked at him. "I never stopped and was hoping it was the same for you."

It was Vincent's turn to close his eyes to block the pain he saw in hers. But he couldn't block the feelings flowing to him through the Bond.

He pulled her legs across his legs, then lifted her and set her on his lap, wrapping his arms around her.

"I'm so sorry, Catherine," he whispered. "I didn't send you away because I didn't love you; I sent you away because I thought I was doing the right thing *for* you. And without the Bond, I didn't comprehend how much I hurt you. I didn't feel I could give you what you deserved, so I sent you away. I'm sorry; I didn't mean to hurt you. Can you ever forgive me?"

Catherine couldn't speak. She leaned back in his arms and looked up at him, unsure what to say. Vincent spoke before she could.

"I love you, Catherine. That never changed."

He pulled her close before continuing.

"I needed a place to stay, but coming to you was just an excuse to see you again. Like you, I hoped it might give us a chance; give me another chance."

She leaned back to look up at him again, and the look on her face made him smile; then he leaned down and kissed her.

When he tried to pull away from her and break the kiss, her arms went around his neck, and she held him in place with surprising strength. But it was he who deepened the kiss.

When they both needed air and finally parted, there was a charged moment when they just looked into each other's eyes.

Catherine knew what she wanted, but instinctively knew that it wouldn't go any farther tonight, and she was willing to accept that as long as they didn't go backward again.

Finally, Vincent spoke.

"It's late. We need to rest. We can talk more tomorrow," he said.

"You promise?" she asked.

"I promise," he affirmed, relaxing and smiling at her. "... and I promise that I won't retreat."

It was as if he'd read her mind.

The next few days felt like the intervening two years hadn't happened; it was like it had been before his illness. They worked together, listened to music, and read to each other.

Catherine quizzed Vincent on what he thought the people Below would like for Christmas, and then she went out and did more shopping. Vincent helped her wrap the gifts, and she arranged to deliver them to Peter. Catherine talked to Peter several times. She let him tell her about what was going on Below, but never let on that Vincent was with her. But she did find out from him that it looked like Winterfest would be a no-go for that year.

"That's awful," she said, when Peter told her. "They all look forward to it so much; they plan all year."

"I know, but Jacob said that if the intruders leave, they may do it later. Maybe after Vincent is back."

She looked across the room to where Vincent was stretched out on the couch, reading a book.

"They couldn't possibly do it without him," she agreed. Vincent looked up at her, and she winked at him.

After she hung up after talking to Peter, she explained to Vincent about Winterfest.

"The children will be disappointed," he commented.

"But Father did say that if they can get rid of those men, they might be able to do it later," she pointed out. "Anyway, I told Peter that I would be sending the gifts to him, and he said that he was pretty sure that he could get them Below; he'll pass them off to the people who come Uptop to pick up supplies."

They spent the next week enjoying each other's company and taking turns cooking dinner. They had fun trying to outdo each other. Vincent started with a much-loved recipe from William, but Catherine made Boeuf Bourguignon the next night. She cooked it in the Crock Pot and the aroma was driving Vincent crazy all day. Vincent had been watching reruns of Julia Child on TV and had written down her recipe for Coq au Vin. He made it when it was his turn, and Catherine had declared it worthy of any of the best restaurants in the city.



Thursday evening's dinner had been much simpler. Catherine had made BLTs, and Vincent had heated a can of soup. After dinner, they watched a romantic movie on a VHS tape.

Every evening that week had ended with a good night kiss, but nothing heated. This evening, when Catherine leaned down to kiss him and say good night, he'd pulled her onto his lap and really kissed her. They were both breathless when he pulled back to look at her.

He looked as surprised as she felt. She almost laughed.

His arms loosened, and he allowed her to get up.

She wasn't sure what she was thinking, but her next words astonished even her.

"Will you join me upstairs?" she asked. "You know you are always welcome."

Before she turned to go upstairs, she saw the shock on his face.

Oh my god, she thought. I hope I haven't just sent everything back to square one.

Upstairs in her room, she showered and got ready for bed.

Vincent had been determined to move beyond the chaste kisses and hugs of the last few days. It was a step ahead, he had to admit to himself, but he seemed to be stuck on that step. When he'd pulled Catherine onto his lap and kissed her, her reaction had astonished him. She'd welcomed his kisses, and the Bond told him she liked it.

And when she left, she invited him... to her bed?

When he went upstairs about half an hour later, he got ready for bed and then sat at the small desk in his room to write in his journal. But he was unsure what to write. After a few words, he gave up, put on his robe and slippers, and headed to the kitchen to make tea. Catherine had some chamomile in the cupboard.

But he never made it to the stairs. Catherine's bedroom door was right across from the top of the stairs, and when he noticed that it was standing ajar, he walked over to it.

The head of Catherine's bed was against the outside wall, and the foot of the bed was closer to the door to the hall.

The Bond told him that Catherine was asleep. When he looked, she was on her right side, and he could see her face. He'd stood like this many nights on the balcony, not crossing that invisible line that kept him from entering her apartment. He'd watched her sleep, not wanting to wake her but still unable to leave immediately.

Now, he found himself going into the room, crossing it, and circling to the other side of the bed.

She did invite me, he told himself. I don't have to do anything but hold her and sleep.

He removed his robe and slippers and slipped into the bed behind her. He slid up close and put his arm around her waist. She didn't wake, but she snuggled back against him and sighed.

When Catherine woke the next morning, she was surprised to find she wasn't alone.

He took me up on my invitation, and I wasn't even awake to know it, she thought. But then, maybe that's a good thing... no pressure.

She was about to slide out of the bed when his arm tightened.

"Did I disturb you last night?" he asked.

"No, actually, I didn't notice when you came in." She turned over to face him and cuddled a little closer. She took the liberty of rubbing her cheek against his bare chest. "And it was nice waking up warm for a change. I didn't think about it when I chose this room as mine. It's on the northeast corner of the house and gets pretty chilly at night in the winter."

"Devin always did say that I radiate heat like a furnace," he said contritely.

"Father did tell me that your normal temperature is about 101 degrees. Doesn't that make you feel the cold more?"

"Somewhat, but that is one of the reasons I wear extra layers Below."

She could tell that he was beginning to get a little self-conscious about the situation he found himself in. She started to pull away.

"I need some caffeine," she commented, as she rolled over and sat up on the side of the bed.

She got up and went into the bathroom, and Vincent flopped over onto his back, a little exasperated with himself.

You could have at least kissed her, he admonished himself as he got up, retrieved his robe and slippers, and headed downstairs.

When Catherine joined him, the coffee was almost done, and Vincent was pouring hot water into the teapot.

"You all right?" she asked, as he poured her a cup of coffee and joined her at the bar.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?" he asked.

"Well, I was a bit *forward* with my offer last night," she began.

"But I did join you," he smiled at her. "Even if I was a little bit late."

"You could have woken me," she pointed out.

But she laughed when she looked at him and saw how he was looking at her. "I know... Sometimes, you are just too much of a gentleman."

"There is no such thing," he argued. "I didn't want to disturb you."

"There are times when I don't mind being *disturbed*," she retorted, making a face at him.

Their conversation for the rest of the day was much the same, and Catherine had to smile. Vincent was flirting and in a sexual way. It was hard to believe, and she liked it.

Catherine spent some time in her office before she went up to bed. She would be returning to work on Monday, and she wanted to ensure her calendar was current. When she came out of her office, Vincent was already gone.

Too much, I guess, she thought as she climbed the stairs.

Her routine was much the same every night; she was in bed with a book before long. She was pleasantly surprised a few minutes later when she saw Vincent standing at her bedroom door, this time without a robe and slippers.

"Am I still welcome?" he asked.

"Always," she said with a smile, patting the pillow beside her.

He joined her, but she noticed he stayed pretty close to the edge of the bed.

"I like that look," she said, then clamped her mouth shut. *Don't push it, Cathy*, she reminded herself.

"The top of the pajamas are a little tight through the shoulders," he told her. "And unlike your room, the guest room at the front of the house gets a little warm at night."

He seemed to relax a little, sliding down and turning on his side, facing her.

Catherine finished the page she was reading, put the book down, and turned out the light. There was no moon, and the room was very dark. She couldn't see a thing, but she was sure Vincent could see her.

She was lying on her side facing him when he held out an arm, inviting her closer. She could see that. She moved closer until she was in his arms, as she had been that morning before getting up. She pressed a kiss in the middle of his chest and then looked at him. Her eyes were adjusting, and she could see he was looking at her.

She couldn't make out his expression, but sensed when he came to a decision.

Vincent brushed the hair away from her face, then kissed each of her eyelids before allowing his mouth to hover over hers. Catherine reached up, drawing his head close as she lifted her mouth to his and initiated the kiss. He held perfectly still, almost as if he was afraid to move.

This feels like a dream, he thought. The slightest movement might prick the bubble and cause it to burst.

Vincent let her lead the kiss — her tongue slipped into his mouth to tangle with his. She lifted one knee and rubbed her leg against his thigh, inviting him closer.

He moved closer, and as the kisses continued, their bodies were pressed together, from mouth down to their feet.

She was tracking the progress of his left hand as he moved it down from her ribcage, over her hip, and to her thigh, where the hem of her nightgown had moved up. When he reached the hem, he started to retrace his route, but under her nightgown on her bare skin. When he reached her waist, he stopped. But she reached down and moved his hand over her breast.

That caused him to break the kiss and pull back to look at her.

"Don't stop," she whispered.

"Are you sure you want this?" he asked.

"I've never been surer of anything in my life," she assured him. "Make love to me, Vincent."

"May I remove this?" he asked, indicating the nightgown."

"Please," but she didn't give him time to remove it. She sat up and pulled it off over her head and tossed it away.

He pulled her back into his arms and kissed her again.

The next few minutes were spent in exploration. Catherine finally coaxed him out of his pajama bottoms, and they were skin to skin.

"God, you feel good," she murmured, rubbing her breasts against his furred chest.

Vincent couldn't believe that he was touching her so intimately. He'd dreamed of this, but hadn't dared hope it would ever happen.

Catherine rolled onto her back pulling Vincent with her.

She spread her legs wider and coaxed him to settle between her thighs. He moved his hands down, stroking her back until he had her bottom in his hands. He hardly knew what to do, so he followed his instinct and the Bond. Rocking his hips, he slid himself over her sex, spreading the wetness.

Catherine opened her eyes to see him staring down at her intently. She focused on nothing but him. She felt him line himself up with her and slowly push inside. The immediate climax that washed over her when he was fully inside took them both by surprise. There hadn't been the steady, slow build-up of pleasure... just suddenly, it was there!

But surprisingly, he didn't climax with her. Since it was his first time, she expected it to be quick, but obviously, she was mistaken.

He drew back as slowly as he had entered, but the push forward was quicker than the first time. They found a rhythm that was as familiar as it was new. She knew he was using the Bond to guide him.

Vincent reveled in her every sigh, touch, and kiss, every sensation that came to him through the Bond.

She could feel the control it took for him to love her slowly and not seek his pleasure.

"This is for you, too," she whispered.

It was as if she'd given him permission, and his pace quickened.

She was surprised when her body began to tighten and tremble again. It had never been like this before. He moved them both to a place where their surroundings no longer existed — the only thing that mattered was being part of each other.

As she arched, reaching a second climax, Vincent held her tightly as he plunged one more time and joined her. She'd never known such perfection. Nor had he.

The room was suddenly very quiet. Vincent avoided collapsing on her so as not to crush her. He rolled onto his side, his arm still under her. She rolled onto her side, put her head on his shoulder, and cuddled close. His arm closed around her, pulling her even closer.

"That was... I don't even know," she whispered. "It's never been like that before."

He rolled his head to the side and looked at her.

"How?" he asked, worried he'd done something wrong.

"It's never been that good before," she said hesitantly. "Maybe because I never loved anyone like I love you, but that was just... perfect."

She heard his sigh of relief.

"What?" she asked.

"I have no knowledge of that part of life. I've read everything from romance novels to medical books. I know anatomy, but..."

"You followed the Bond," she supplied.

"I did, and although I would have liked it to... last longer, it seemed to have worked."

Catherine surprised him with a laugh. "I'll take quality over quantity anytime." She stifled a yawn.

"Sleep, Catherine. We can talk in the morning."



Catherine knew she was smiling as she woke up. Vincent was curled around her back, and she was deliciously warm.

I could really get used to this, she told herself, not wanting to move because she didn't want to wake Vincent.

"I'm awake," he startled her by saying.

"Are you reading my mind now?" she asked, turning to face him.

"No, but I could feel your indecision and thought it might be that."

Vincent was smiling too and looked more serene than she'd ever seen him look.

"What time is it?" she asked. "I can't see the clock."

Vincent raised his head a little and looked over at the nightstand. "A little after 9:00," he supplied.

"Only two more days of being able to sleep past 6:00," she said wistfully. "I could almost get used to being a lady of leisure."

"That would last maybe a month," Vincent teased her. "Then you would be looking for something constructive to do."

"You're probably right," she conceded. "Daddy raised me with a decent work ethic. Are you ready for some breakfast?"

Vincent nuzzled her neck and then kissed her lightly.

"If you insist," he said, releasing her.

When Catherine came out of the bathroom, dressed in sweats, Vincent was gone, so she went downstairs and started breakfast. She had just finished breaking eggs into a bowl when she was startled by arms going around her waist. Vincent kissed her on the neck before stepping back and releasing her.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"Anytime," she said, looking back at him over her shoulder. "You are just in time."

"In time for what?" he asked.

"Breakfast, of course. If you get the bacon out of the oven, I'll finish these eggs, and we can eat."

Vincent took the baking sheet with the bacon out of the oven. He put the bacon on a plate while Catherine cooked the eggs, put them on plates, and added toast. She set the plates on the bar and sat beside Vincent.

"Have you looked outside?" he asked after a moment.

"No. Why?"

Vincent got up and went to the kitchen window across from them. The windows had plantation shutters; she'd kept them and all the drapes in the other rooms closed since Vincent had been there. He opened the shutters to reveal a white world outside and it was still snowing hard.

"It's snowing," he pointed out. "It looks like it's been snowing for quite a while; several inches are already on the ground."

"It's beautiful!" she agreed. "I didn't bother to look outside this morning."

When he sat back down beside her, she added. "Maybe we can go for a walk on the beach later."

Vincent looked at her like she'd lost her mind, and she laughed.

"We can bundle up like the little kid whose mom sends him out to play in the snow, and no one will see anything," she pointed out. "I know there's a heavy coat in that box in the laundry room. Add a knit hat or ski mask, a scarf, and mittens, and you will blend right in. Besides, hardly any of my neighbors spend the winters here; we won't meet anyone on the beach."

He still looked a little doubtful.

"If you think it will be all right," he finally conceded. "But what if we do meet someone you know?"

"I don't know many people who live on this section of the beach, but if we meet someone I know, I'll introduce you as my friend Vincent. And with your face mostly covered by the hat and scarf and

your hands in mittens, you can just say 'Hello' and maybe even shake hands. But if we are both wrapped up, I doubt my best friend would recognize me."

The snow had let up to flurries by lunchtime, but almost a foot of the white stuff was in the yard. Vincent had gone through the box of clothes in the laundry room and found an old Navy pea coat that fit him. There was also a black knit hat and a red and white striped scarf, with matching gloves. He left everything in the kitchen and went upstairs to get his boots. He had them on when he met Catherine coming out of her room looking like a short snowman in her all-white ski suit.

"Are those waterproof," she asked, pointing at his boots."

"They are leather, but my feet do get wet."

When they got to the kitchen, Catherine went into the pantry and came out with two plastic bags.

"Put these on your feet, then put on your boots. It will keep your feet dry," she said, handing him the bags.

He sat down, pulled off his boots, and did as she directed.

"That sounds like a *tunnel solution*," he told her. "How did you come up with it?"

"It was my mother," she told him as she watched him put on the coat, hat, scarf, and mittens. "We were up at the lake house one year when there was an early snowfall. I wanted to go out and play in it, but we hadn't expected it, and I didn't have anything to wear. Mom made me put on a pair of heavy socks and my shoes, and then she put plastic bread bags over my shoes. They went all the way to my knees, and she secured them with rubber bands, and I was able to go out and play in the snow. We lived in the city, so I didn't get to play in the snow often unless someone had time to take me to the park."

With Vincent all wrapped up, they left the house.



"Devin and I used to sneak out to play in the snow when I was little," he told her, as they used the wooden walkway that went over the berm and led to the stairs down to the beach. "I couldn't go with the other children during the day, so he took me at night."

"I'm surprised no one thought to bundle you up like you are now," she commented as they reached the beach.

"Someone probably did at some point, but Father would have never allowed it; that was why Devin and I had to sneak out."

He looked around. "I never realized that the snow would actually stick on the beach," he commented.

"It doesn't get as deep because of the wind, and it probably won't last long. I should have brought my camera."

They started to walk toward the north and were surprised when, about twenty minutes later, they saw a jogger running down the beach toward them. Catherine took Vincent's hand, but nothing happened as the jogger ran past them. He lifted a hand to wave, and Catherine waved back.

"See, I told you," she said when the man had passed.

They didn't see him when they were on their way back.

When they got back to the house, they were both cold. The snow had started again, and it seemed to be coming down harder than earlier. They shed their coats and boots in the laundry room and hung everything to dry. Then Catherine started making hot chocolate.

They were cuddled on the couch watching the TV news later as they drank their hot chocolate and ate cookies.

"What are we going to do once Father lets me know that it's safe for me to go back to the tunnels," Vincent surprised her by asking.

"I haven't thought that far ahead," she admitted. "Maybe I could stay with you during the week, and you could spend weekends with me?"

"But that would defeat the purpose of you living here to be closer to your office," he said.

"Well, it would be worth it. As long as we are together."

Vincent could tell from her feelings that she wasn't ready to confront that problem yet. So, he let it be.

"Well, the weatherman has promised that the snow will stop tonight," Catherine commented a little later. "I was hoping we'd get snowed in so I wouldn't have to go back to work on Monday," she said with a laugh. "Too bad the furnace is new and not likely to go out."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"It would be a good excuse to stay in bed with you to stay warm," she said.

That made Vincent laugh and hug her.

"Do we need an excuse?" he asked after he kissed her.



Monday morning came way too soon. Catherine was at the bottom of the stairs, putting on her coat. Vincent seemed as reluctant for her to leave as she was to go. He even buttoned her coat and wrapped a scarf around her neck.

"I'm going from a warm house to a warm car," she pointed out.

"But the car will take a little while to warm up," he told her. "And when you get to work, you will have to walk from your car to the office. Do you have a hat?"

She looked at him. "I really don't need one."

Obviously he disagreed, but he let it go.

After kissing her thoroughly, he finally let her go.

"Now I'm going to have to fix my makeup before I go into the office," she pointed out as she reached for the door handle.

"You can do that while you wait for the car to warm up."

He kissed her again before he let her out the door.

That morning, she had a meeting at the main DA's office downtown, so her drive was longer than usual. She parked in the basement parking lot and went up to the offices she used to work in as she unwound the scarf and unbuttoned her coat.

"Hi, Miss Chandler," the receptionist said as she entered the office. "Mr. Maxwell is waiting for you. Go on in."

Joe's office door stood open, and she went in. Joe looked up from the file he was reading.

"Long time no see, Radcliffe," he said, rising and coming around his desk for a hug. He took her coat and hung it on the rack. "How was your vacation? Did you go anywhere?"

"No, I stayed home and got ready for Christmas. I even finished all my Christmas shopping, which is some kind of a record. I'm usually one of those people running around on Christmas Eve for that one last gift."

She sat on the old leather couch that Joe had moved from his old office when he'd taken over as DA. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Nothing like getting to the point," he said with a grin.

"Well, I've been out of my office since Thanksgiving," she pointed out with her own grin.

"You know they can handle it."

"You did give me a good staff," she agreed.

"But that is kinda what I wanted to talk about. I've been talking to the mayor and police commissioner, and we all agree that you would be more of an asset in this office."

Catherine was a little stunned at that. "But..."

"No buts... hear me out. It's not a demotion. You've done a great job in Brooklyn, but I need you here running Investigations. You can get people to talk that no one else can. Our conviction record was way better before you left."

Catherine shook her head. "But I moved to Long Island to be closer to work," she said.

"I know, but think about it, okay? We need you here. Bianchi can handle the Brooklyn office. You've done a good job training him."

"I'll think about it," she promised.

All the way back to her office, she thought about it.

Could be the answer, she told herself. We were wondering what we would do once Vincent goes back home.

When she walked into her office a little while later, her phone, the private line, was ringing. She answered, hoping it was Vincent. But it wasn't, it was Joe.

"What do you need, Joe?" she asked as she sat at her desk.

"I just wanted to know if you saw the newspapers this morning."

"No, I just got to my office. What's up?"

"Just something going on in the park right across from where you used to live. I was going to mention it while you were here but completely forgot about it."

"What?"

"There have been reports of men who appear to be hunting in the park. One of the reports came from one of your old neighbors."

"Hunting? Hunting what?" she asked.

"That's a good question. All there are in the park are squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, and some birds. They could be hunting ducks or geese."

"And you are calling me about this, why?" she asked.

"Like I said, one of the reports came from one of your old neighbors, Mrs. Davenport. She didn't even call the police; she called here and asked for you. She didn't want to talk to anyone but you."

"Okay, give me her number, and I'll call her."

A few minutes later, she dialed the number Joe had given her.

"Davenport residence," answered a familiar voice.

"Hello, Frieda," Catherine said. "It's Catherine Chandler. I was told you called the office looking for me."

"Cathy! It's so nice to hear from you. You've been missed here."

"And I've missed you. How have you been?"

"I've been good. Arthritis bothers me some when the weather is cold like this. But I know you are busy and didn't call to catch up. Did you call about my report?"

"Actually, I did. I've been on vacation, and when I got back to work today the DA told me about what has been happening in the park. What did you see?"

"I was on my balcony earlier this fall when I saw some oddly dressed men carrying a lot of equipment going into the park at the entrance across the street. I decided I wanted a closer look, so I got my binoculars. They were all dressed as if they were going on safari. They were wearing a lot of camouflage."

"You said they were carrying equipment. What kind of equipment?"

"There were five of them. They were all young. A couple of them had those long cases in which some people carry rifles, and a couple had those long poles with rope loops at the ends, like the dog catcher uses. There was some other stuff I couldn't make out."

Catherine had been taking notes, and she wondered if there was some connection with the men who had invaded the tunnels.

"And I was so curious that I took pictures the last time I saw them."

That got Catherine's attention. She knew that Frieda had been a professional photographer before she retired.

"Please tell me you used a telephoto lens," she said hopefully.

"Of course I did," Freida said with a laugh. "What do you think I am, an amateur?"

"Would I be able to get copies of those pictures?"

"Certainly. Do you want me to send them to you?"

"No, I'll come and pick them up. Do you have more than one set?"

"Yes, I made several prints of each."

"Good, it would be wonderful if I could get two sets."

"I'll have them ready."

"I'll be there in a little while. Thank you, Freida."

Catherine grabbed a few things, wrote a note, and was back in her car, heading back into the city within minutes. She used her DA's Office sign and parked in front of her old building.

"Hi, Miss Chandler," the doorman said as she walked in.

"Hi, Roger. Nice to see you. How's your family?"

"Good, good, my son started Kindergarten last September."

"Goodness, they do grow up fast, don't they? I'm here to see Mrs. Davenport."

"She called down and let me know. Go on up."

While Catherine rode the elevator up, she removed her gloves and unbuttoned her coat.

Freida greeted her with a hug after she knocked.

"I guess you are probably in a hurry, so I won't keep you," Freida said as she handed over a manila envelope.

Catherine opened it and looked at the photos. They were all large 8x10 black and white prints and were very clear.

"These are great," she told Freida. "It just might help us figure out what is happening in the park.

"I would hate to think they were hunting the wildlife in the park. But I also read in the paper that there is speculation that they are planning to steal animals from the zoo."

"Hopefully, we can put a stop to it before they do any harm to anything."

"We will have to get together for lunch sometime soon," Catherine promised as she left a few minutes later.

Once she was back in her car. She transferred one set of pictures to the manila envelope she'd brought from the office, made sure her note was in it, pulled away from the curb, and headed to Willis' Newsstand, where she knew she could get a message sent Below. She pulled out a black marker and wrote one word across the front of the envelope:

Father

Willis looked at the large envelope in his hand and nodded at Catherine.

"Sure can," he said in answer to her question. "I can probably have this there within the hour."

True to his word, Willis handed the envelope off to Benny, who turned it over to Kipper and Samantha, who were supervising a group of children playing in the park, not far from the park threshold.

Samantha put the envelope into Father's hands when they took the children back Below for lunch.

Father opened the envelope and pulled out the pictures and the note.

Father,

The police department has received several reports recently about men acting suspiciously in the park with what appeared to be hunting gear. One of the people who filed a report took these pictures.

Peter told me what was going on Below, and I wondered if these were the same men harassing you.

Please get a message to someone who can call me and let me know as quickly as possible.

Catherine

He adjusted his glasses and turned the pictures over. It didn't take him long to recognize the men who had been royal pains since September.

He went to the pipes outside his study and tapped out a message. While he waited for Kipper, he wrote out his own note.

The note was delivered to Peter's office, but he didn't get it until he got back from lunch.



Catherine considered grabbing a sandwich from a deli. But when she saw the line, she skipped it and went straight back to her office, where she was trying to catch up on everything that had piled up while she was off.

When her private line rang around 2:00, she absently picked up the receiver and answered.

"Chandler," she said.

"Chandler, this is Alcott," he countered with a note of sarcasm.

Catherine laughed.

"Hi, Peter. What is it?"

"I just got this very cryptic note from Jacob. All it says is: 'Tell Catherine 'Yes,' as soon as you can.'"

"Good! Thank you, Peter."

"What's going on?"

"Those men who have been harassing the tunnel community. There have been reports of men acting suspiciously in the park, and one of my old neighbors got pictures of them. I sent the pictures to Father to find out if they were the same guys. Now that I know that they are, I just have

to figure out what to do with that information. I wish I knew where they were from or where they are living.”

“I just might be able to help you with that,” Peter said. “Jacob told me they’ve been camping in one of the upper chambers. One of the children overheard them talking about how they were running out of money and couldn’t afford the place they were renting. And Jacob said that they have Southern accents.”

Catherine thought for a moment.

“Do you think that if Father said he wanted to talk to them, they would meet him somewhere?” she asked.

“I’m sure they would. Since Jacob knows where they are, they must not be trying to hide. You got an idea?”

“I think I might. Thanks, Peter.”

Within minutes, Catherine was back in her car, heading back into the city. This time, she parked on a side street just off Central Park West and walked to the Park threshold.

She heard a sentry announcing her after she passed the first sentry post. Father was expecting her when she entered the study.

“Catherine, I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I know, but I think I may have an idea to get rid of your intruders that won’t involve the police and the possibility of them telling anyone about the tunnels.” She quickly gave him a brief description of what she planned.

“You’re sure of this?”

“I’m sure what I want to do, and I’m hopeful it will work. If you ask them to come to the study, do you think they will come?”

“Probably, but maybe it would be better if you went to them?” he suggested.

“No. We want the home-field advantage. If we call them here, they are on our… your turf, and I think that might just throw them off a little.”

Father went out to tap another message for someone to deliver a message. When he came back Catherine was sitting on a chair changing her shoes.

“What is that for?” he asked.

“These are my courtroom shoes,” she said with a grin. “I’m only five foot four inches tall. These are four-inch heels. Sometimes, the added height is just the advantage I need.”

Mouse showed up a few minutes later, and Father sent him off with a message to the intruders, who showed up 15 minutes later.

Catherine rose and went to stand at the end of the council table as the five warmly dressed men entered the study.

“Have a seat, Gentlemen,” she invited cordially.

“Who is this?” the man who appeared to be their leader asked of Father, who was sitting at his desk.

“I’m Catherine Chandler,” Catherine answered before Father could speak. “I’m New York County Deputy District Attorney, and I’m here to offer you a deal.” Catherine remained standing as the men took seats along the sides of the table.

"A deal?" one of them asked.

"Yes. The police have received quite a few reports of men in the park who appeared to be hunting." She picked up her briefcase, put it on the table, pulled out a random, rather thick file, and held it up. "A lot of reports." She dropped the file back in her case and picked up the pictures that Freida had given her. "And recently, these were taken by someone who lives across the street from the park." She tossed them onto the table so that they slid a little and fanned out. "She's a very good photographer, don't you think?"

One of the men picked up the pictures, looked at them, and then passed them down the table. She could see that they were all at a loss for words, even the one who appeared to be their leader.

"And as I said, I'm here to offer you a deal."

"Go on?" the leader said.

"To get right to the point, if you leave the city in the next 24 hours, the DA's office will drop the case."

"And if we don't?"

"The Central Park Conservancy strictly prohibits hunting within its boundaries. Hunting without a valid license is illegal in New York State. Penalties can include fines up to \$250 and up to fifteen days in jail. And then there are the penalties for unregistered firearms..."

"We haven't been hunting in the park," one of the men was quick to point out.

"Try to convince a judge of that," Catherine said. "Those are just some of the charges the DA is considering if you are caught. There is some thought that you might have been planning to steal animals from the zoo. In New York, penalties for harassing zoo animals include potential jail time and fines. The maximum penalty depends on the severity of the offense and can range from a \$1,000 fine and up to one year in jail for a misdemeanor, to a \$15,000 fine and up to two years in jail for a felony. I couldn't find a law about stealing a zoo animal, specifically, but it would probably come under theft. Zoo animals are worth a lot of money, and grand larceny is the most serious theft charge, punishable by up to 25 years in prison. New Yorkers love their park and their zoo animals. I don't see a judge going easy on you, even if it is a first offense."

Both Catherine and Father could tell that she had the five men between the proverbial rock and a hard place. But Catherine hadn't declared victory yet.

"And what's the deal?" their leader asked.

"Just as I said before, if you leave the city and the state within the next 24 hours, the NYPD and the DA's office will forget this ever happened. If you don't leave, we have the proof we need..." She nodded at the pictures. "... We know where to find you, and you will be arrested. The Tombs are in old buildings, and I hear that they are a little chilly this time of year, very much like these tunnels."

"I don't know, Billy. It's awful cold here. I don't know if I can take it much longer," one of the men said in a whiny voice.

"Shut up, Dusty. Can't you ever do anything but complain?"

"You said it would make us all rich," Dusty complained.

One of the other men thumped Dusty on the back of the head, and he shut up.

"Well, what are you going to do?" Catherine asked.

Billy looked angry, but it was also obvious that he was tired.

"I got family that needs looking after back home Texas," Billy said. "And I know the other boys do, too. So, I guess we're gonna leave."

"You have twenty-four hours," Catherine reminded them. "Do you have transportation?"

"We came on the bus."

"Do you have bus fare home?" she asked.

"We got round-trip tickets," Billy grumbled. "Just in case."

"That was smart, so I suggest you catch the earliest bus out of here, before the police start looking for you."

The men all stood, and four left, but Billy turned to her.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

"These people are my friends. The *man* you have been unsuccessfully searching for is my friend. I hate seeing him forced to stay away from the family he loves and who loves him, and I hate seeing anyone being bullied. The DA's office has enough cases to handle, and at this time of year, we are just like everyone else; we would rather spend time with our families than in a courtroom arguing a case, or down at the Tombs interviewing criminals."

"Fair enough," Billy said, then followed the others out.

Father gave the men plenty of time to get far away before he burst into laughter.

"That was quite a performance. I will have to go and watch you in court sometime."

Catherine dropped into a chair and toed off the shoes as she joined Father in laughter.

"I took drama in high school and college," she told him. It comes in handy sometimes."

"Do you think we should have them followed to ensure they leave?" Father asked.

"Probably. I sensed that they had given up. Billy is tired, and if the leader is ready to quit, most of the time, the rest will go along. Do you have a way to do it?"

"We are good at tracing people's movements. I'll send several men out to follow them; then, one will stay in the bus station until they see them actually get on a bus. Then we hope that they stay on it." He went out, tapped the message to get people on that task, then returned.

"Would you like a cup of tea, Catherine?" he asked.

"Do you have anything stronger?" she asked.

Father went to his desk and pulled out a bottle of brandy and two glasses. He poured brandy into each glass and handed one to Catherine. He held his up to toast.

"To a job well done," he said, then took a sip.

"We hope," she said before sipping hers.

Father went back and sat behind his desk.

"Will you stay for dinner?" Father asked.

"No, I really must get home. I've been running all day. First, I met with Joe at the downtown office; then I went back to my office in Brooklyn, then I came back to pick up those pictures, then I went back to my office, then I drove back into town to come here." She looked at her watch. "It's almost 5:00. No use returning to the office now."

"So, how is Vincent?" Father asked, as Catherine started to put on her low-heeled shoes.

Catherine looked at Father and smiled. "How did you know?"

"Just what you said to them, and then you said you had to get home. So, I figured you were hurrying to get home to tell him the good news. How long has he been with you?"

"Since a couple of days after he left the tunnels."

"Have you patched up your differences?"

Catherine couldn't help but smile. "I think you could say that."

Father didn't say anything but just gave her a pointed look.

"Everything is just fine," she rushed to assure him. "Vincent will probably be home sometime this week."



One more trip from Manhattan to Long Island, only this time it was in rush hour traffic, and it took over an hour and a half.

When she got home, it was dark. Vincent met her at the door and hugged her.

"What has been doing on all day?" he asked after kissing her thoroughly. "Your feelings have been all over the place, and it felt like you were moving all day."

"I was moving all day," she said, removing her coat and hanging it up. "I made three trips into the city, but it was worth it. I'm pretty sure your intruders will be gone in the next few hours, if they aren't already gone." She could smell food. "What did you cook? It smells delicious. I skipped lunch."

"Back to normal, I see," he commented, as they went to the kitchen, and he started putting food on a plate for her."

"Oh, but it was worth it." She took the plate and sat at the bar. He joined her with his plate.

"Now, please explain," he coaxed.

"We haven't been reading the papers, but there have been reports of men hunting in the park..."

She went on to describe her whole exhausting day.

"And you told Father I'd probably be home in the next few days?" he asked.

"Once, we are sure that those men have left the city. I thought I could drive you in before dawn one day and drop you off in the park near the threshold, or any other threshold, for that matter."

"What if I want to wait until the weekend when you can go with me?" he asked.

She gave him a dazzling smile. "That works for me."

She hadn't told him about Joe's offer; she had a few things to do before she did that, and it would mean one more trip into the city the next day.



Catherine had to get gas the next morning on her way to the office. She only stayed in the office long enough to tell her second-in-command that she had business in the city again, but she didn't think it would take long.

She drove to the area just northwest of the park. It was her dad's house, which she'd grown up in. Her parents bought it the year after Chandler and Coolidge started showing promise. It was a townhouse with three floors and four bedrooms. Three and a half baths and garage access from the alley behind the property.

She had cleared most of her dad's personal stuff out of it. All his clothes had gone below, along with all the linens and everything from the kitchen. But most of the rooms were still furnished. Her dad had updated everything only a few years before he died. But even though she hadn't considered living in it, she couldn't part with her childhood home.

Now, she was beginning to believe in kismet. There was even an open parking place at the curb right in front, and she parked, then went up the stairs and unlocked the door. As she walked through the house, she was glad she'd had someone come to clean once a month. Enough to keep the dust and cobwebs at bay.

This could work, she said to herself as she went down the stairs into the basement. *This is an older house; I think Daddy said it was built in the late 1800s, and hopefully, the tunnels extend this far north of the park.*

She found what she was looking for in the basement. It was a large rusty metal door with a padlock on the side of the basement that was the back of the house. She knew that the electric and water meters were outside just above it.

Her decision was made, and she headed back to Brooklyn. She first called Joe to tell him that she had decided to take him up on his offer. He sounded as if he was ready to throw a party to celebrate.

"Are you going to appoint Bianchi to run this office?" she asked.

"That's the plan, but don't tell him. I want to come out there and make the announcement. I'd like to have you back in this office by January 2nd. Does that work for you?"

"I'll make it work," she promised.

"That's gonna be quite the commute for you," he commented. "What is it? An hour and a half?"

"Give or take in traffic," she said. "But I won't be doing it for long."

"What?"

"I still have my dad's house, just north of the park. I'll probably move into it."

"But you just moved to where you are now."

"I know, and I won't give that place up. It will just become a weekend and vacation home and maybe a place to retire to 30 years from now."

She wondered what Vincent's reaction would be. They had both voiced concerns about what would happen after he went home, but they hadn't discussed it.

When she walked in the door at home later that day, Vincent met her at the door.

"What's going on? he asked. "I've felt your excitement all day."

"Let me change, and I'll explain."

She went up to change and was back in only a few minutes.

Vincent had heated some homemade stew and had just finished filling bowls.

"That smells delicious," Catherine commented as they both sat down. "It's frigid out there today."

Vincent let her eat a few bites before he spoke.

"Are you going to tell me?" he asked.

"We have both been wondering about what we are going to do after you go back home," she said after a moment of thought. "I think I may have a solution... thanks to Joe."

“Joe?”

“Yes, he wants me back in the main office to run Investigations.”

“And you are going to do it?” he asked.

“I am. I called him today and told him. He wants me back in that office the day after we go back from Christmas break.”

“But that is a long drive for you every day,” Vincent was quick to point out.

“That is where the *solution* comes in. I still have my dad’s house. It’s north of the park. It’s an old house and might have tunnel access. There is a heavy metal door in the basement in the mechanical room on the back. It’s padlocked and looks like it’s rusted closed. Dad put the padlock on it but never said if he’d ever opened it. And I never thought to ask about it.”

Vincent looked thoughtful. “There are tunnels that go that far north,” he said. “The one that runs under Belvedere Castle extends quite a bit farther past that. It’s been explored, but I haven’t been that way since before Devin left the first time.”

“Is any of that on Father’s maps?” she asked.

“His maps are old subway maps that have been added to and notated over the years, so they likely show something.”

“When were you planning to go home?” she asked.

“Saturday night?” he said. “We could stop at the house and investigate that door on our way.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” she agreed.



They left the house on Long Island just before midnight on Saturday night. Dressed like what Catherine described as Nanook of the North, Vincent rode in the front seat beside her. This time, she used the alley and parked in the garage behind the house. There was a small yard to cross to the back door, but no one was likely to see them because it was late.

They shed their outdoor layers and went to the basement. Vincent tried all the keys on Catherine's key ring, but none worked on the padlock.

“Are there any tools,” he asked.

“There is a cabinet under the stairs,” she told him. “Daddy kept a few things in there.”

Vincent was back a few minutes later with a hacksaw. It took several minutes, but he cut through the shackle and removed the padlock.

When he tried to open the door, it resisted.

“Do you think it’s locked from the other side?” she asked.

“I don’t think so. It moved a little.”

The hinges were on their side of the door, and Vincent returned to the cabinet and came back with a can of WD-40. He soaked all three hinges thoroughly.

“That might help; give it a few minutes.”

When Vincent pulled on the door again, it moved, but not easily or without protest.

“Ugh! That made my teeth hurt,” Catherine commented with a laugh, after Vincent had pushed the screeching door open far enough so that the light from the room they were in shone down the slope from the door.

"That runs west," Vincent pointed out before stepping over the threshold.

"Are we going to look tonight," Catherine asked as she followed.

"No time like the present," he said, taking her hand.

They hadn't walked far, all downhill, until the tunnel they were in intersected with a tunnel that ran north/south. They turned left and kept walking. The tunnel was straight, occasionally sloping down, but it didn't deviate to the left or right.

"This is promising," Vincent committed. "The tunnel that runs under Belvedere Castle is straight, and I remember that it ran straight when Devin and I explored past Belvedere Castle. That was the reason we turned around. We could tell it was going up, closer to the surface, and there were no side chambers or intersections. We didn't make it as far as your father's house."

They finally reached an intersection where a tunnel running east/west crossed the tunnel they were in. Vincent smiled.

"I know where we are," he announced.

"Where?"

"We are under the northern end of the park." He pointed to the tunnel that ran east. "That is an alternate route to the lower tunnels, where Narcissa lives. And that..." He pointed the other way. "... goes toward Riverside Park and the river."

"Then it does connect?" she asked.

Vincent pulled her into his arms and hugged her.

"It does. It will be at least a thirty or forty-five-minute walk from the home chambers to your basement, but it's a straight route."

"So, which way do we go tonight," she asked.

"We are halfway there. We might as well continue," he said.

The End