

# ASSUMPTIONS

by Trisha Kehoe

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Shortening his usual lengthy strides to match those of the petite woman walking at his left side, Vincent paced toward the tunnel exit in Central Park and kept his own counsel. If the truth be told, there was nothing left to be said. Catherine was leaving, and she wouldn't be returning for a very long time. Oh, there might be a sojourn home once or twice these next years, but for all intents and purposes she'd be far away and almost completely out of touch. A new city in a different country offered career advancements in her field of endeavor that she'd never obtain here.

Peering over at the focus of his inner reflections, Vincent surreptitiously studied the outline of her features. How lovely she was, how dear to his heart. Looking away, he tried to suppress a sensation of nearly overwhelming sadness. He was going to miss her dreadfully.

The matter of Catherine's future had been discussed at great length over the past few weeks, and at last her choice had been finalized. It had taken a great deal of encouragement, but he'd finally convinced her that some opportunities came along only once in a person's life, and to ignore such chances for whatever reasons were truly imprudent.

As he and Catherine took the final turn in the passageway leading out into the Park, just ahead of them a massive door loomed like a steel bastion against intruders. Stepping over to the left, Vincent pressed the palm of his left hand down hard on a piece of coiled metal, and almost grudgingly the weighty portal slowly creaked open. After forcing open a rusted outer gate, he turned and waited.

Peering up at the man she absolutely adored, Catherine took a step forward and tried to smile, but her lower lip insisted on quivering despite her best efforts.

"Well, I guess this is it."

Vincent merely nodded

Reaching out and hugging him very hard around the waist, she buried the tip of her nose into his quilted vest.

"I'll miss you very much."

Returning the hug gently and then taking a step back, he fought to keep his tone of voice from betraying him, and failed miserably.

"And I, you."

"You promised that you'd answer my letters," she reminded him, swiping at the tears pooling in her eyes.

"Of course I shall, every one of them." Reaching out, he touched at the drops of wetness. "Please, don't be sad, Catherine, or frightened."

Gesturing toward the Park, Vincent continued, "Think of all that awaits you just beyond these walls."

Studying the wisps of sunlight that were undulating along the stone much like slender golden fingers beckoning her onward, she nodded.

"A different world, a different ... life."

"A life you deserve; a life you've more than earned," he insisted quietly.

Squaring her shoulders for what lay ahead, she reached out and clutched at his left hand. "Have I - really?"

"Most certainly," he reassured her. "You've earned that life many times over."

"Well then ..." Exhaling a deep sigh, she loosened her grip on his fingers and started through the opening. "... I guess I'd better get busy living it."

"Farewell, Catherine. Be safe. See everything, do everything, for ... both of us."

"I will, Vincent, I promise. Goodbye."

Watching until all that remained was her shadow lengthening along the stone walls. He finally allowed himself to feel the pain he'd been fighting to contain for some time.

Blinking away his tears, he called out softly, "Have a ... happy life."

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Pacing slowly down the stairs leading into the Library, Vincent sank into a chair on the right side of an antique mahogany chess table. Picking up one of the white knights on the board, he studied it intently, as though he'd never seen it before.

Peering over at his son, Father questioned. "So, she's gone then?"

Rolling the chess piece from side to side between his left thumb and forefinger, the younger man nodded.

"It's for the best."

Glancing up, Vincent growled. "***Is it?***"

"Of course it is." Retrieving his cane and rising slowly to his feet, the Tunnel Elder moved to stand in front of the desk. "Such an extraordinary opportunity ...."

"Yes, I know," his son interrupted, which wasn't at all like him. "... Shouldn't be wasted."

Frowning at the tone being leveled at him, the Father reminded him, "You're the one who finally convinced her to accept the ..."

Before he could finish the thought, a feminine voice wafted down from the second level of the room.

"Don't forget that I helped, too."

Coming down the winding metal stairs with a pile of books in her arms, Catherine set them down on the desk and then collapsed into the chair opposite Vincent's. Smiling up at him and reaching out, she swept his unruly bangs away from his eyes.

"Hello you."

Returning her smile with one that displayed an astounding set of teeth, he replied, "Hello, my Dear."

"Have you seen Lena since the bon voyage party?"

"Yes. I stopped there on the way back from seeing her daughter off, as she'd asked me to."

Catherine grimaced. "How's she doing?"

"As well as can be expected. Having your only child leave home at barely sixteen must be ..."

Unable to find a suitable word, Vincent shook his head sadly back and forth.

"Well," his soulmate began. "I'm sure Cathy will write often, and there's always summer vacations and holidays. And if Lena decides to visit her, that can be easily arranged."

When Vincent made no reply, she continued. "It would have been a shame if she'd refused the scholarship. A full tuition for four years at such a good school isn't something to be sneezed at."

Noting that Father's eyebrows had lifted more than a few inches at Catherine's choice of euphemisms, Vincent chuckled softly. Eyeing his parent, he agreed. "No indeed, such a wondrous thing certainly cannot be ... sneezed at."

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### Home at last.

Entering the chamber he shared with Catherine, Vincent immediately struggled out of his work boots and socks, and then began to strip off the rest of his clothing. Layer by layer, first the quilted vest drifted down to a nearby clothes hamper, followed closely by a flannel shirt, and a patched thermal top. Then, a heavy brass belt was unhooked and cast aside. Lastly, a pair of faded denims were unbuttoned, unzipped, whisked off and tossed into the pile.

Eyeing the one she loved as he strode over to the large paneled wardrobe at the far side of the room stark naked, and not in the least ill-at-ease about that fact - not anymore - Catherine kept her thoughts to herself. The joy of just looking at him, of simply watching him move with an almost majestic grace, still took her breath away; it probably always would.

Opening the wardrobe, Vincent bent forward and poked around for a moment, muttering to himself. Finally retrieving a well-worn cotton nightshirt with leather cords at the neck, he lifted it over his head and slid his long arms into the sleeves. Tying the cords loosely, and then frowning as he suddenly remembered what night it was, he turned to face Catherine.

"Are Joe and Jenny coming Below to play cards tonight, as planned?"

"No, they can't make it. I meant to tell you earlier, but with all that's been going on I forgot. Jenny left a message for me with Mister Kwan."

"Is anything seriously wrong?"

"No, not seriously wrong. It's just that Joe Junior still has a dreadful sore throat."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Stretching widely to ease the kinks along his spine, Vincent continued. "He's such a personable child."

"He's a cutie, that one," Catherine agreed. Then, motioning towards his attire, she laughed. "Maybe it's just as well that our friends can't make it tonight."

Tilting his head to the left, his expression puzzled, Vincent waited for her to continue. When she didn't, he asked, "Why is that?"

"I'd hate for you to have to go through that layering business twice in one day.

Enjoying her impish sense of humor, he afforded her a wide grin. Moving to sit on the edge of the

bed, Vincent slowly shifted his large frame until he was laying flat. Propping two large pillows at his back, he exhaled a lengthy sigh and shut his eyes, observing, "All in all, it's been an extremely tiring day."

"As well as a trying one," Catherine added.

"Hmmmmm, quite."

"Cathy was one of your favorite students."

"Yes. She has such a quick mind, and at times her geological assertions had me doing homework," he noted, chuckling.

Catherine smiled. "I remember." Eyeing him, she announced with feigned annoyance. "Why the cheek of the girl to question you, of all people, on a classification of indigenous rock."

Narrowing his eyes, Vincent let the remark pass - at least for the moment.

Sliding out of her jeans, shirt and under-things, she shivered and rubbed at the gooseflesh racing the length of her forearms. Pacing quickly over to the wardrobe and opening one of the lower drawers, she slid out a long, pale blue flannel nightgown, slipped into it and tied the few ribbons at the throat. Then, eyeing the man reclining on the bed, she grinned just a bit mischievously.

Tiptoeing forward, Catherine flung herself across Vincent's stomach, announcing delightedly, "So, tonight you're all mine!"

"Uh!" Gasping to pull air back into his lungs, he reached out and delivered a playful cuff to her gently rounded backside, cautioning, "One of these days, or nights, you're going to pounce on me in that fashion and break ... something."

Peering up at him, Catherine giggled. "If I do, I hope it's not something you'll need." Sliding her right hand under his nightshirt she poked her forefinger into his little innie of a belly button and wriggled it back and forth.

Eyeing her from beneath his lashes and tensing his stomach muscles to keep from laughing aloud, for she knew full well how much her actions tickled, Vincent advised, "If you're examining me for superfluous lint, Dear Heart, I've already taken care of that particular problem."

"Oh." Burying her face into his lower body, Catherine fought to contain her laughter. Then, lifting her head just a bit, she eyed him and pouted. "But I was looking forward to rooting around in there."

"I know," Vincent grumbled. "Which is precisely why I made haste to do take care of the matter myself."

"What a buzz kill."

"Buzz ... " Allowing the rest to drift off to silence, Vincent raised an eyebrow in her direction. It would seem that he now had another new idiom to try out on Father.

Deciding to see what other mischief she could accomplish, and testing the limits of his patience by sliding her fingers up his left side, Catherine wriggled them back and forth along his ribs.

**"Woman,"** came a warning growl. **"If you continue torturing me in that manner, I shall retaliate in kind."**

Arching an eyebrow at her mate, Catherine echoed, "Woman?"

Noting the surprise in her tone of voice, Vincent fought to keep his expression carefully neutral. "I believe that's the appropriate designation for one of your gender."

Glaring at him, she declared a bit snappishly. **"Not in that tone of voice it isn't."** When there was no

response, she studied Vincent for a moment. Remembering that he'd been up since dawn, she decided that he really was tired. *Oh well.*

Easing over his left hip, Catherine plopped down next to him, thumped her pillow into a suitable lump and eased back against it. Patting the bed until her right hand made contact with a layer of quilts, she yanked them up to her chin, sighed, and went utterly limp.

Cracking one eye open, Vincent peered over at her. "Do I get a kiss good-night?"

"Of course." Curling over onto her hip, she yanked on a length of his hair until he bent his head and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Night."

"That was *not* a proper kiss."

Smiling to herself, Catherine managed a look of utter innocence. "It wasn't?"

"Indeed not." Burrowing under the quilts until he rested half on top of her, Vincent leaned on his elbows and lowered his head until they were nose to nose. "And if you think that you're going to get any rest until you make up for tickling me, and tempting me, you're very much mistaken."

So, the *game* was on, was it.

"Make up ... how?"

Nudging her thighs apart with his left knee, Vincent settled between them and shifted his weight slightly. Poking gently at her, and *not* with his finger, he announced, "Guess."

"But, I *assumed* you were too tired to ...."

Starting to untie the ribbons at the throat of Catherine's nightgown, he held her focus, his eyes glittering with intent in the muted chamber light. Cupping her left breast gently in the palm of his hand, Vincent leaned forward and bushed his mouth over hers, groaning softly.

"*NEVER* assume."

**END**