

SOUNDS

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Warning---this story contains explicit Adult Content

*But how could I forget thee, through what power.
Even for the least division of an hour?
Have I been so beguiled as to be blind
To my most grievous loss!
That thoughts return was the worst pang that sorrow
Ever bore, save one, one only,
When I stood forlorn, knowing my heart's best treasure
Was no more. That neither present time, nor year unborn,
Could to my sight, that heavenly face restore*

JANUARY

Whisking particles of damp earth from the palms of her hands, the elderly woman rose slowly to her feet. When the length of her spine protested even the slight effort, she carefully reached around her hip, placed the palm of her hand to the painful area, and grimaced. Although it had been very thoughtful of Luke to install a stone bench in this cavern, the seat of it was rather cold against her backside, especially when she forgot to bring a cushion. Rubbing at her chilled posterior, she decided that being a so-called Senior Citizen was not something she was enjoying all that much.

After peering down for a moment at an open-throated red rose and a newly budding one of purest white, which she'd just placed entwined on the jagged-edged rock directly in front of her, Catherine tilted her head back slightly. Studying the vaulted dome enclosing this particular cavern and disregarding the tears welling up in her eyes, she thought about the years she'd been coming here, the long, empty years. Sometimes, when she was feeling especially dispirited, it felt as though she had been making this daily pilgrimage for an eternity. At least it felt like that within the confines of her heart.

Shaking off an abiding sense of aloneness, she made a great effort to divert her thoughts to happier times. Those memories were always with her, too, of course, but they'd become more and more confused over the past few years, not always as clearly defined as when she'd been younger. Now those remembrances swept forth chaotically, in random order, through her mind, leaving her increasingly bewildered each time it happened. And it had been happening quite a bit lately, which was troubling, as well as very, very frustrating.

Yet, even at the worst of times, in her mind and heart she could still see Vincent standing there, in the entrance to their chamber, the morning of that last day. How strong he'd looked, how handsome. His amber hair, laced with lustrous strands of silver, wind-tossed and oh, so very long, flowed halfway down his back.

There had never been another man such as that extraordinary being; *her* man, the radiance of his eyes as they claimed hers the only light she'd ever truly needed. Yes, even at seventy years of age, Vincent had been utterly stunning to look upon.

Smiling sadly, Catherine wondered if he'd ever truly believed her, when time and again she'd pronounced him beautiful? Letting her eyes drift closed for a moment as his face became more clearly focused within her mind and heart, she thought it over. No, she decided, the one she loved had quite probably never accepted the truth of her assertions. But then, a man such as he wouldn't have. His unassuming nature and quiet ways would've prevented him from yielding to such a display of masculine vanity. Still, he'd been the most exquisite creature she'd ever known, or would ever know, with a virility that went far beyond that of an '*ordinary*' man.

Peering down at the two roses one last time, she shivered and gathered her shawl closer to her body. Feeling her nose '*twitch*' suddenly, and knowing from past experience that she was about to have one of her well-documented sneezing fits, Catherine reached into the pocket of her loose-fitting slacks and retrieved a handful of tissues just in time.

"Achoo! AH-choo! Ahhh...CHOO!"

After blowing her nose vigorously and listening to the cacophony of sound now reverberating through the cavern, she grimaced, hoping she wasn't getting yet another nasty cold. One this month had been more than enough, thank you very much. Being confined to her bed and waited on by friends and family as though she were the Queen of the Nile had *not* been her idea of fun.

Squinting just a bit in the dimness, for she'd forgotten her eyeglasses – again - her gaze roamed over the resting place of Missing Loved Ones, as Father had pronounced it on the day his dear friend, Mary, had been entombed here.

Missing Loved Ones. Deciding that she really detested that phrase, Catherine shuddered. Those interred here, in the newest excavation of this disquieting place, weren't missing, they were dead. They were gone, forever.

Forever. In years past she'd liked the sound of that word, especially when it had been Vincent whispering it to her in bed. Well, she didn't like it anymore. She hadn't liked it for fifteen years. Fifteen desolate years...

Stop, damn it. Dwelling on that time only makes your chest hurt.

Turning her thoughts away from the sense of despair attempting to gain control, Catherine studied the

walls that surrounded her on three sides. As she peered upward, the massive stones suddenly reminded her of citadels, ones that would stand guard, watchful, silent, and unchanged, unto the end of all things.

Shivering, she realized that it felt much damper than usual in here today, and that there was a peculiar heaviness in the sporadically shifting air she'd never experienced before. It was almost as though unseen fingers were gently stroking her skin, which was a strange sensation, yet not in the least bit frightening.

Rubbing at a sudden prickling of gooseflesh on her lower arms, Catherine eyed the shadowed area near the spiral staircase to her left, calling out warily, "Kristopher Gentian, is that you trying to test my certainties again?" When there was no response, as she had half expected, she announced with false bravado. "Well, if there *are* ghosts in here, I hope you're friendly ones. And if you're not friendly, go bother someone else, if you please."

Ghosts...bother...you...Catherine...

Listening to the eerie resonance of her words thrumming around her, and suddenly feeling more than a little absurd, Catherine grunted and shook her head slowly back and forth. Perfect, now she was talking to herself - she hoped. Sighing tiredly, she started toward the stairway leading to the passage out, but then paused mid-step. She hadn't said her own name, had she? Nevertheless, she had just heard it very clearly. Yet, how could she have? Echoes didn't ... *add* ... words.

"Kris," she muttered, starting up the steps, her tone a fusion of exasperation laced with fatigue, "If you're in here and you're trying to scare me, *again*, I swear, the next time we meet I'll ... I'll ... steal that damn baseball cap of yours."

Pausing halfway up the stairs and listening intently, Catherine waited, but all she could hear were the remote sounds of water dripping somewhere in the distance, accompanied by the rapid thudding of her heart. *'Well, of course no one answered you, you old fool,'* she silently admonished herself. Taking a deep breath and then releasing it slowly, she pushed back a length of white hair that had escaped the plastic clip holding it away from her face. *'And that's because no one else is in here but you.'* Deciding that she really didn't have time for such nonsense, she continued climbing.

Making her way slowly and carefully up the uneven slabs of stone, Catherine finally reached the archway leading out of the Catacombs. Leaning against the wall for a moment and fighting to catch her breath, she listened to the reverberations of sound welling up to greet her, sounds which had filled nearly two-thirds of her life.

First, she noted all of the messages humming back and forth on the pipes. Then she detected the distinctive tapping of Pascal's granddaughter, Becky, who was admonishing stragglers to *'Get a move on and come to supper.'* She wrinkled up her nose. A supper that she was obviously going to be late for, as usual.

Suddenly, other sounds and echoes from the past melded tenderly together, holding her a willing prisoner.

'What we have is worth everything!'

'We are something that has never been.'

'You're the woman that I love.'

'But Mama, I want to go to the Park with the other kids! If you ask daddy, he'll let me. Please? He never says no to you!'

Momentarily lost in her memories, Catherine stared into the past as the sound of the child's voice took on an almost frantic pitch. Jacob, her handsome and every-bit-as-stubborn-as-his-father son. He'd come home for Vincent's funeral, of course, and continued to make his monthly visits, as usual, when he could get away. Being Chief Physician at a shelter for the homeless in Washington, D.C. was a quite demanding job, she would imagine.

Smiling, she recalled how proud they'd all been when the boy had passed his medical exams with some of the highest scores ever recorded at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts. Dear Father had been overjoyed to the point of actually being rendered speechless, which had been quite funny at the time. She couldn't remember ever having seen him at such a loss for words.

And, naturally, she and Vincent had been extremely pleased as well. On returning to their chamber later that evening she'd readied herself for an argument, insistently telling him that although others had helped over the years, it was a testament to *his* teaching skills that had set Jacob on the path to such a promising future.

Recalling how surprised she'd been when he'd smiled widely and *agreed* with her, Catherine chuckled. It was one of the few times her Best Beloved had allowed his paternal pride to take precedence over his usual aversion to being singled out for personal praise.

Continuing to think about Jacob, she sighed worriedly, wishing that he had someone to help him Above; someone to bring an end to his self-imposed isolation. But he didn't want to get close to another woman after Cathy died. When he'd lost his lovely wife at the birth of their son, it had truly broken his heart. He's vowed then and there that he'd never remarry, and he never had. That had been such a terrible time for him - so much pain, so much sorrow.

Accepting the fact that their child could have inherited his grandfather's genetic uniqueness, and having decided to have him delivered Below, just in case, when Cathy began to hemorrhage it was too late to transfer her to the nearest hospital. From that point, everything had happened so quickly there'd been no time to prepare, no way to anticipate such a desperate emergency, and no time for alternatives.

Catherine shuddered. In her mind's eye she could still see the blood - dear God, so much blood. And

no matter how hard she fought to repress the sounds, at times she could still hear Lena's desperate cries of her daughter's name, and Jacob's sobs, as his beloved wife touched the side of his face, whispered something for his ears alone, closed her eyes, and was gone.

So, at age twenty-five Jacob had been left with a child to raise. And although he loved the boy, named Christopher, with every part of himself, he hadn't been able to keep the baby with him. It had taken long hours of discussion, but in the end she and Vincent had finally convinced him that it would be an impossible task, given the circumstances.

With all the bottles, diaper changes, illnesses, sleepless nights, and everything else most, if not all, newborns were predisposed to, how would he have been able to keep his grades at an acceptable level? Furthermore, to intern for up to thirty-six hours at a stretch, take proper care of his son, and still find the time to sleep would have been not only impractical, it would have been impossible, even for someone with his exceptional stamina. And to give up his hopes of becoming a doctor, after two long years of hard work, would've been a decision he'd almost surely regret later in life.

She'd then reminded him gently that when he'd still been quite young, he'd vowed to help the poor by administering to their medical needs when no one else could, or would. And Vincent had quietly added that the hope of following in his grandfather's footsteps one day had been Jacob's dream for a very long time.

With obvious reluctance, their son had finally agreed to continue with his studies, which meant that his child would be raised Below. In truth, as he'd admitted to her in later years, Jacob had known from the beginning that his decision would have been inevitable in any case. Baby Chris was beautiful, a chubby little angel with serene blue eyes - and he looked very much like his paternal grandfather. In fact, as the months passed, Vincent, she, and other tunnel residents, including Father, had found the deepening resemblance increasingly remarkable. Even as an infant, her grandson had been a true mirror image of the man she adored.

And as he grew in both years and stature, so did those similarities, Chris' infinite patience, his mannerisms, his copper-hued hair - which he refused to cut - were so akin to his grandfather's it was astounding. At fifteen, even the inflection in the boy's tone of voice had taken on strong traces of Vincent's. Catherine shivered - especially when he read aloud to her.

Yet Vincent, instead of simply enjoying the miracle of having a grandson, had held himself to blame for everything; the loss of Cathy, Jacob's grief, Christopher's appearance - *everything*. It had taken her and their son a very long time to convince him that no one held him at fault, that he'd had no control over those events, that sometimes Fate was simply Fate.

Recalling those heart-rending discussions, and the sound of him weeping quietly at her breast when they were alone in their chamber, Catherine wondered if that sweet gentle being had ever been fully convinced he wasn't to blame, or forgiven himself for something that truly wasn't his fault to begin with? Did Vincent keep his mistaken sense of responsibility concealed deeply within his heart, in a

secret part of himself he couldn't share, even with her? She'd have to ask him about that when they were together again, which would hopefully be soon.

Then, when Vincent was lost to them, it was as though a light had been turned off in their son's radiant blue-green eyes, one that would never go on again. Jacob had loved his father so. Yet at the services he'd shown very little emotion, nor had there been any tears. Some grief, some pain, went far beyond tears. This she knew only too well.

Shaking off those unhappy memories, Catherine turned her thoughts to Jacob when he'd been younger. How gentle his daddy had always been with him, even when the boy had pulled a series on seemingly endless pranks. Chuckling, she recalled the expression of obvious disgust on Vincent's face the morning he stuck his foot into his left slipper, only to discover his extremely hairy toes encased in cold sticky oatmeal.

She'd tried not to laugh, really she had, for that would only have served to encourage Jacob in his shenanigans. However, hiding her face in the pillow and snorting hadn't seemed to work all that well. She'd realized that, the moment Vincent had narrowed his lovely slanted eyes and growled in her direction.

Then, when she'd finally managed to regain her self-control, eased her legs over the side of the bed, and slid into her own slippers ... *SPLAT!* ... more icky oatmeal! As far as she was concerned, *that* hadn't been in the least bit funny. Yet her soul mate had seemed to find it quite amusing.

Trying very hard to keep his tone of voice from betraying him as she'd flung a pillow at their son, and missed, Vincent had quietly advised Jacob if these pranks didn't cease *right now*, he'd be spending many hours cleaning footwear. Which could very well mean he'd have to forego the opening celebration of ...

Reluctantly returning to the present, Catherine blinked rapidly for a moment, trying to recall the exact date. She had gifts that has to be either purchased or made, and soon, for it was only two weeks until the celebration of Winterfest. Although the special gathering wasn't all that much fun for her anymore on a personal level, she still attended every year.

Choosing to spend much of her time sitting near the exquisite tapestries in the Great Hall, which had been hung along one side of the vast chamber by unknown hands so many years before, she'd willingly become lost in thoughts of past holidays. And it was there, among those relics from long ago, that the unseen presence of someone very special felt the strongest.

Smiling sadly, remembering all of the times Vincent had waltzed her oh, so carefully across the floor, Catherine inhaled deeply and then released the breath as slowly as she could. The memory of being held close, in those strong, yet trembling arms, was so vivid at this moment that it caused her heart to ache.

On good days, when her thoughts were more or less organized, she could still see quite clearly the

ruffled white shirt Vincent had worn on the first Winterfest she'd been invited to, so very long ago. Sighing, she allowed her eyes to drift shut. His tightly-fitted trousers, the high boots that had encased long muscular legs, the candlelight that had seemed to set his hair aflame, and the look of shy vulnerability on his face as he'd guided her gracefully around and around the room, were very precious memories.

Drifting along in his embrace, feeling sheltered and at peace, it had felt as though she were floating, spiraling upward higher and faster, before being brought safely back to earth by the strength of his embrace and the warmth of his breath as it glided over her skin.

Suddenly, from within her consciousness, came the sound of an extraordinary voice, a voice that was unique unto itself - one that spoke only to her, now.

'Can you still hear it, my Catherine?'

Opening her eyes and blinking away the tears sparkling on her lower lashes, Catherine fought to breathe normally, missing him so badly that the ache never completely left her. Her intellect insisted, of course, that what she heard were merely her own thoughts being reflected back to her. Her heart, however, was of another opinion. And in this particular case, she chose to believe her heart.

'Yes, my love,' she thought, *'I can still hear the music. I always will. It's a part of my soul now, Vincent, just as you are a part of it.'*

'We are a part of each other, for always.'

'Yes, for ... always.' Lifting her right hand to gently embrace the small brown pouch around her neck, Catherine vowed, *'And someday, somewhere, I know we'll waltz again. I truly believe that we will.'*

'So we shall.'

Desperate to see him more clearly, Catherine's eyes drifted shut again as his beloved face shimmered to life once more. *'I always felt so safe, so secure, when you held me in your arms. I have to believe that you'll hold me again, touch me again, and leave me breathless with your kisses.'*

"That truth is what I cling to, Vincent; it's what keeps me..."

'You have to continue, my Dear, for Jacob, and for Christopher. You promised me that, long ago.'

'Sometimes it's very hard to keep such promises. I miss you so much.'

'As I miss you,' came the reply, the words a temporary balm to her shattered spirit.

'You promised never to leave me,' she reminded him, *'and you did.'*

'Fate made that choice - for me.'

'Yes.' Slowly opening her eyes, Catherine swept both hands around the empty corridor. *'But the*

knowing doesn't make ... this ... any easier to bear.'

'You have great strength, my Rose, as well as great courage. And even at the darkest hour, know that I love you ...'

"Vincent, stay? Please stay!"

'I am with you, always ... al ...'

Reaching out and bringing the palm of her right hand up hard against the tunnel wall in an attempt to steady her trembling body, Catherine fought for breath. As the whispery sound of his voice grew faint, and then faded away completely from within her mind, her shoulders slumped. *'Oh, my Love, I don't know how much longer I can endure this separation.'*

Moments later, after swiping at her eyes with the edge of her sweater, Catherine wearily started the trek toward the Hub, a late supper, and another night of restless slumber. Cursing Fate, and the accident fifteen years earlier that had turned what remained of her heart to stone, as she paced the well-worn path she whispered angrily. ***"To hell with 'Always'. To hell with promises. I want Vincent back. I want him here, with me. Dear God, how I need him."***

Pausing on her way home, Catherine peered through the entrance to the Library, or Father's chamber, as it had been called while he lived. When he was taken from them one cruel November morning, the other members of the community had urged Vincent to take the rooms for himself and his family. Yet, even knowing that the extra space would be most welcome, in the end he simply couldn't bring himself to change lodgings.

His expression of deep sorrow, when they were alone, the one she loved told her that there was just too many memories for him to feel at ease residing in those rooms, too many echoes of sounds only he could hear now, with Father gone.

And she'd understood his reasoning perfectly well. It would have been like invading the dear man's space, which was something she wouldn't have felt comfortable with either, if the truth were told.

So, the vast rooms were now used mostly as study areas, with the more exuberant younger residents using the main room, and the older children and adults using the antechamber for hard to come by - down here - quiet time.

In addition, thanks to an *'anonymous'* donor, there were two very intricate battery-operated computers installed in the smaller room, to assist the teenagers with their studies and other residents with various tasks as well. Plus, there were a great many new books in here. Modern books, with a diversity of subject matter that would have truly appalled Father. Imagining him scanning some of the titles and sputtering in protest as only he ever could, Catherine bit back a grin.

Some years earlier she'd added a codicil to her will, making sure that these rooms would always be filled with contemporary reading material, and whatever else future residents would find useful, or so

a welcome diversion at the end of a long workday. So, the books on the shelves now ranged from Pokey Puppy for the younger children, to *'How To'* volumes for whomever needed them, as well as reference material on the latest developments in technology for the older, college-bound students.

Eying a child named Teddy, who was seated in a chair behind Father's old desk with his feet dangling quite a few inches off of the floor, Catherine studied him for a moment. Noting the child's tongue peeking out of the left side his mouth, as he focused on the large book and scattered papers in front to him, she nodded her head in approval. Such concentration in one so young was rare indeed.

Curious as to what he was so engrossed in, she quietly moved forward a few steps. Not wishing to disturb him, or to be caught in an open and shut case of nosiness, she scanned the title of his book, and then crinkled up her nose. Someone seemed to have assigned the poor kid page after dreary page of arithmetic for homework. Backing away quietly and turning around, she started for her chamber.

Nodding by way of greeting as she passed several tunnel residents in the winding, torch-lit corridors, Catherine chuckled softly as various messages suddenly began clanging up and down the pipes, informing relatives and friends that they could *'Call off the posse; she's back.'* Someday, she thought, all of this *'veneration'* business was going to make her head too big for her hats.

FEBRUARY

Lowering herself to the stone bench, Catherine leaned forward and brushed traces of dust from in front of a beautifully carved granite plaque, which was inscribed simply, with a single name; *Vincent*.

Gently pressing the palm of her right hand to the contours of his name, she whispered, "It's Valentine's Day, my Dearest, and it's still snowing. Late at night, you always enjoyed walking with me in the snow, in the Park. Remember? More than once you told me that the flakes looked like sparkling diamonds as they drifted down and settled on my hair."

After exhaling deeply, she admitted, "When you were ... taken ... from me, I decided not to ... fuss ... with my hair anymore, so now it's nearly the same color as snowflakes. But yours never needed anything to heighten its natural beauty. In my memories it will always remain as it was when I last ... saw you, lustrous, long, and as usual, needing a good trim."

Gulping hard, the lonely woman choked back a sob. "Oh my Love, did you ever really believe me when I told you time and again how much I enjoyed running my fingers through your magnificent hair?"

Recalling how, in years past, she'd fuss with her appearance, especially before making the journey Below, Catherine straightened her shoulders and pulled a face. *'Vanity, thy name is woman.'* She'd always tried to convince herself that she spent hour after hour at her dressing table, or trying on various outfits, especially for Vincent, which wasn't true - at least not entirely.

When they had finally become one, in every sense of the word, she would sometimes sit on the edge of the bed in their chamber, watching happily as he prepared for the day. One morning in particular, as he re-entered the chamber after his shower, she'd eyed him as he slid out of his slippers and shoved his feet into work boots. Then, after leaning forward and haphazardly brushing his hair, he'd simply *flung* it back over his shoulders. Done.

Making note of the small amount of effort it had taken for him to look absolutely stunning, a brief surge of jealousy mingled with envy had risen from within. Those sensations had not only shocked her, they'd embarrassed her.

When she'd finally admitted aloud to having such *'poisonous thoughts,'* Vincent had stared at her, the expression on his dear face one of utter astonishment. When he finally found the words he wanted, his tone of voice had been filled with such tenderness she'd wanted to weep.

'Catherine, how can you feel envious of ... me, when you are the most delicately exquisite woman who has ever lived?'

And then he'd called her a person of great courage, one who gave his existence meaning by actually loving him, who had relinquished her world, and the comforts there, to join her destiny to his.

Recalling the sparks of passion clearly visible in his eyes as he'd whispered those endearments to her, so very long ago, she smiled. How could she not love such a man? Indeed, how could any woman not love him?

With trembling fingers, Catherine picked up the two roses she'd placed here the day before. After sliding them into a pocket of her sweater, she set fresh flowers down, precisely side by side, on the damp earth. Vincent wasn't really laid to rest here, but she'd needed a place to come to talk with him just the same. A place to be alone, to remember so many things; words, touches, kisses, times of sorrow, times of great joy, and times of passion - oh, such passion!

What's more, she'd needed a place to grieve privately, away from a loving, intensive, but somewhat intrusive, circle of friends and family. They had tried to console her many times, of course, especially in those first few years. Eventually, they'd realized that there was nothing that anyone could do to make up for what had been lost to her. That there was no way they could erase or ease the horror, the recollection, of that single moment in time. And there was absolutely nothing that would make her heart feel whole again.

In truth, how do you console someone who's lost the most important person in their life, who was not only their help-mate but also their best friend, as well as their partner in intimacy?'

The very first time they had joined not only their souls but their bodies as well, on the night of their third anniversary, Vincent had proved himself to be an adept and highly compassionate lover. It was as though he'd been born to share himself with her, and only with her. Thrusting within her repeatedly, harder and then harder still, he'd cried out throatily that he lived only for her, would have

died for her, and would *never* give her up. That now she truly belonged to him, *with* him. And not being a complete idiot, she'd readily agreed.

Yet even then, as aroused as he'd been and almost frantic to attain orgasm, he'd groaned deeply and pushed his hunger aside, determined to fulfill her needs before his own. Sensing her readiness, when Vincent had finally allowed his great strength of will to yield utterly to desire, he'd gasped her name over and over again, groaning of the satisfaction the sensation of being held tightly, within and without, brought to him.

As he'd tilted his pelvis down, trembling in his urgency, waiting to be reborn whole and free from fear within the shelter of her embrace, the extent of his pleasure seemed to sweep upward and outward like liquid heat from within the confines of their bond. Pleading with her to keep him close, as though fearing he'd truly shatter to bits if she didn't, the one she loved had inclined his head until their foreheads touched. When his long hair drifted forward over knotted shoulder muscles, the lush strands had become an amber-gold veil, one that momentarily isolated them from the rest of the world. Opening his mouth and capturing hers in a kiss, that she could still taste on the back of her tongue, at that same moment her womb had been bathed with the pulsing affirmation of his love.

The look in Vincent's eyes as he shuddered mightily, before pulling back slightly to gaze down at her, had been luminous, his shy smile almost angelic - an Angel with new wings, who had just learned that he could achieve heights he'd never even dared to dream of before. When circumstances finally delivered her from this tedious existence, whoever stood over her dying body would be able to see *that look* still reflected in her eyes.

As weeks passed, and he became more and more at ease with his own sexuality, she joyously discovered that there were depths to Vincent's passion she'd never realized existed within a man. Dear God, the size of him when fully aroused was incredible; it had taken her body a while to adjust to the feel of such absolute fullness.

The taste of him, the scent of him, the sounds he made no effort to subdue as they loved, still took her breath. The memory of the *feel* of his body trembling above her, below her, behind her, always caused her heart to begin thudding much too fast. The darkening blue of his eyes, and the urgent look there as he'd yanked her lower body off of the bed, demanding silently that the rhythm of their two forms now move as one, still caused a clutching sensation at the center of her womb.

Fighting against a sudden urge to scream at the top of her lungs and pound her fists against the walls, until the sounds of her despair became a permanent part of the stones, Catherine twisted her fingers tightly together, her taut knuckles whitening as she fought for control.

That last day, she and Vincent had decided to visit the Painted Tunnels, a place that he knew was very special to her. Only there could she view Elizabeth's lovingly illustrated history of this domain, which included a likeness of him as a child. On the way back to the Hub, he'd invited her to take a small detour with him, to the Whispering Gallery Bridge, which she'd readily agreed to. It was usually

peaceful there, with an impression of utter solitude, whichn was very rare Below.

With his long arms embracing her somewhat possessively from behind, mirroring the portrait that Kristopher Gentian had done of them many years before, they'd listened to the diverse sounds wafting around them. First there had been laughter, followed closely by the raucous honking of a taxi, then the murmured echoes of voices, and lastly, the haunting strains of a Grieg concerto. Oh, such wondrous music.

Without warning, there came the ominous sound of cracking wood, a terrible creaking noise she could still hear thudding in her ears at times, as the bridge began to cave-in on itself. Gathering her quickly into her arm, Vincent had taken three long strides and deposited her safely just beyond the perimeters of the scaffolding. But before he could leap out of harm's way and join her, the ropes holding the structure aloft had given way completely.

While she watched in horror and reached out desperately for him, screaming his name, he met her eyes for an instant, a heartbeat, his expression fearful, and then his body plunged downward, along with most of the wooden platform. Just before he'd vanished into the roiling mist before her horrified gaze, Vincent had shouted two words aloud, his tone one of urgent, almost demanding, entreaty.

"Catherine ... LIVE!"

And just as quickly, that wretchedly, half of her soul had been torn away.

She and many others had searched for months, day and night, in shifts, unwilling to give up hope, but they'd never found his body. All that was ever retrieved was the small suede pouch containing her rose she'd given him on their first anniversary, which had been found dangling from an outcropping of rock.

From time to time, teenage members of the community, who'd been very well trained for descents into hazardous areas, would renew the search. But there was no trace of him. It was almost as though he'd been absorbed somehow by that vast, unexplored part of this world, or had never even existed. Yet, he *had* existed.

Sometimes, when she was alone in their chamber at night, in bed, she'd close her eyes and still be able to smell the uniqueness of his scent, and hear his voice as they discussed the events of the day, or planned for the next, or made love. So many sounds that only she could hear, now - the throatily whispered words meant for her ears alone.

So, doing the very last thing he would ever ask of her, at least on this plane of existence, she'd lived. Or rather, she'd survived, for these past fifteen years couldn't, by any stretch of the imagination, be called *'living.'*

Gathering up her shawl, Catherine sank to her knees beside the granite tablet, as she always did on these daily visits. Tracing the chiseled name delicately with the tips of her fingers, as though it were a

living thing, she tried very hard to imagine that it was his warm flesh she touched. But all too quickly the coldness of the stone wrenched her back to reality.

"Oh, my Dearest Love, I pray that you didn't ... suffer." Gulping back the sobs rising in her throat, she lifted her right hand to capture the small brown pouch suspended from her neck. Holding it tightly, she stroked the soft fabric and the ivory rose enclosed within it with her thumb. "If your life had to ... close, I hope that end came quickly, and without pain. Why ... *why* ... did you urge me to go on living, when all I wanted to do was follow you, **be** with *you*?"

Fifteen years was a very long time to wait for him to call her, from where he'd gone without her at his side. And to tell the truth, Catherine was growing rather impatient with him. "Isn't it time yet, Vincent? I'm so tired, truly I am. Please, can't I come to you soon?"

Was it possible, she wondered, for a heart to shatter more than once? Yes, of course it was. After all, hers did, every single day.

Moving the fingers of her left hand slowly over the outline of his name, Catherine rested her forehead against the stones and began to weep bitterly, deep shuddering sobs that seared upward from the depths of her throat. Oh God, she missed him so. Knowing that her sadness would have upset him terribly, still she made no effort to restrain her tears. Until she was allowed to join him, he'd just damn well have to put up with them.

MARCH

After passing her hand over Vincent's grave one last time for the day, Catherine moved a little further along the rock strewn path to visit other resting places in this dimly lit part of the Catacombs.

The first grave that came into view was Father's, who had requested, at the end, that his remains be placed next to Mary's. That arrangement seemed appropriate somehow, giving the tunnel elder someone he trusted at his side throughout eternity. And dear Mary would have most certainly approved.

A few yards down from them lay Jamie, with Mouse close at hand, as usual. Next came Rebecca, then Olivia and Kanin. Towards the end of the uneven row of graves were Pascal and William. Friends in life, companions in death. Blinking rapidly, she studied another spot where there was a carved name, but only that. Peter Alcott was buried Above, next to his wife, his daughter, and the rest of his family.

So many people who were dear to her heart were here, together, as it should be. Yet here she stood, still breathing, still struggling. Still *waiting*.

At the next place on this disheartening journey, which she made at least twice a year, Catherine tilted her head to the left and peered down at a stone marked *Devin Wells*. Yet, like Vincent, Devin wasn't really '*here*' either. He'd died on a mountain-climbing expedition in Tibet, lost and alone in that world

of eternal ice and snow.

Shaking her head from side to side, her expression dispirited, she pictured his face as she'd last seen it. He'd been a handsome devil, that one, despite the deep scars on his cheek. with a sharp wit, and an even deeper tongue.

When he'd been home that last time, a few years prior to his death, she and Devin had found a common ground, finally. They both loved Vincent, so they'd set aside their differences and allowed their relationship to build from that reality, for his sake. Surprisingly, by the end of his visit they'd become fast friends, joking and laughing together, as friends will.

Vincent had seemed quite pleased that she and his brother had made their peace with each other. To be honest, she really hadn't cared for Devin all that much in the beginning. But eventually, his hunger to live life to the fullest, his charm, and his inane sense of humor simply wore her down.

Her expression somber, Catherine placed the palm of her right hand over his name and pressed down lightly. "I miss you, you scoundrel. Mountain climbing at age seventy wasn't the brightest idea you'd ever had, you know." Examining the remaining graves through eyes sparkling with unshed tears, she murmured, "I miss all of you very, very much. And I'll share a secret with you. This *living* business is quite a nuisance. I'm tired, so very tired. The next time you see him, please ask Vincent to come for me soon?"

Suddenly, from behind her, a voice called out softly. "I knew I'd find you here."

"V...Vincent?" For an instant a surge of renewed hope swept through Catherine's heart, but then harsh reality set in. Forcing a smile, she turned and peered over at her beloved grandson, Christopher, her second Unicorn. "Hello, dear."

"Hello." Returning her smile shyly, as was his way, the mirror image of his grandfather closed the distance separating them. Being extremely careful to keep his sharp nails away from her skin, he reached out and touched her hand, announcing quietly. "You're late for supper again, Nana Cat."

Acknowledging the gentle reproach with a nod of her head, Catherine smiled. Unable to pronounce her name correctly when he was young, Chris had given her that nickname, and it had stuck. Vincent hadn't approved, naturally, but she had. So that was that. To her grandson, and only to him, she was Nana Cat.

"What's on the menu for tonight?" she asked, although she really wasn't all that hungry.

"It's Thursday..." Chris gently reminded her, "...one of the nights you dine with Cassie and me, in our chamber." His expression glum, he continued, "And what's on the menu is liver." That said, he curled his bottom lip, hating that particular food every bit as much as she did.

"Liver," Catherine echoed with obvious distaste. "You came all the way down here so that you could *drag* me back home to eat *liver*?"

Barely restraining a grin at the peevish look being leveled in his direction, and trying very hard to keep his tone of voice from betraying him, he answered, "I've heard it said that *'misery loves company'*."

"Thanks a lot, child whom I once loved."

Chuckling under his breath as his ticklish ribcage was assaulted by his Nana's sharp elbow, Chris turned slightly and lifted his left hand in her direction, palm up. Without realizing it, and not meaning to, he broke his grandmother's heart all over again by asking softly, "Can I lead you through the dark?"

Unable to respond aloud, Catherine took his hand and didn't look up until they reached the corridor. When she found her voice again, she asked, "Is your wife sputtering mad because I'm late for supper again?"

Glancing at her, Chris arched an eyebrow, which told her everything she needed to know.

Sighing deeply, Catherine readied herself to face the inevitable *discussion* of *'At least making an effort to be on time for meals once in a while.'* Her grandson's new wife was a quite amiable young woman most of the time, very kind-hearted and loving. But she really wasn't all that long on patience. Especially when it was the same person who tested the limits of that patience three times a week, in the exact same way.

It was bad enough that she had to face Cassandra, but to have to eat liver in the bargain simply wasn't fair. "So, I'm in trouble again, am I?"

"Yes, I do believe you are."

"Will you protect me?" she asked, winking at him.

Smiling, her companion nodded his head, his devotion to her apparent in both his tone of voice and loving gaze. "Always."

"Always," she echoed softly. Clinging tightly to Chris' hand as tears filled her eyes, Catherine stared into the past. "Such a father's word."

APRIL

After tossing this way and that for some hours, and still unable to find a comfortable position, Catherine muttered a few choice words under her breath and sat up. As she swung her legs over the side of the bed, she bent slightly forward and began to cough uncontrollably, a deep racking sound that shook her entire body and seemed to be sapping her strength hour by hour.

This latest cold was a particularly nasty one. It had begun with a mild case of the sniffles ten days earlier, but had evolved rather quickly into a sore throat and high fever. And this time, the various medicines her son had prescribed weren't helping all that much, if at all. It seemed that a bad case of

the flu had her, as the saying went, literally *'by the throat.'*

Swallowing hard and ignoring the pain, Catherine reached toward the desk for a box of tissues. Wincing from the extreme discomfort even that slight movement caused to clutch at the left side of her chest, she gave up the attempt and swiped at her sore nose with the hem of her nightgown. Suddenly feeling unusually cold, she shivered violently and yanked the bedcovers up around her shoulders, finally admitting to herself that this time she was very sick.

"Catherine."

Staying absolutely still and holding her breath, she peered around the chamber for a moment, before homing in on the outline of a large shape which was almost entirely cloaked in darkness. Shadows, she decided, or an article of clothing she'd forgotten to put away, that's all it was. Convinced that it was only the fever causing her to hear someone who wasn't actually there, who couldn't be there, she swept her hair away from her face and started to ease back down to the bed.

"Hello, my Love."

"Vincent?" Wide-eyed, Catherine impatiently batted away the pile of quilts enveloping her and struggled to get to her feet. Ignoring the stabbing pain in her chest and the soreness of her throat, she called out hoarsely. "Is it really you? Finally you?"

"Yes, it's finally ... me."

"Is it time?"

The shadowed figure nodded his head slowly up and down.

"I'm glad," she sighed. Yet, still afraid to hope too much, not wanting to reach to touch him only to discover that this was merely a fever dream, which would have been beyond enduring, Catherine kept her distance.

Stepping out of the shadows, Vincent smiled and held out his left hand toward her, palm up. "So, you're ready, then?"

As the bluest eyes in the world gazed at her with so much love it caused gooseflesh to race along every part of her body, she suddenly felt young again. "Ready? Vincent, I've been *'ready'* for fifteen years, two months, and four days."

"And forty-nine seconds," he intoned softly, documenting their time of separation as he'd always done.

Which was proof enough for her.

"It's you, it is ... it really is!" Moving toward him so quickly as she could, Catherine flung herself against his chest. When Vincent gathered her into a fierce embrace and lifted her slightly, her bare

feet coming to rest on top of his boots, she began to weep. Oh, to be held by him again, to be *touched* by him again! Wrapping both arms tightly around his neck and burying her hands into his hair, she clung to him with every bit of strength she had.

"I'm so happy to see you!"

"And I, you," he replied, his tone gruff with emotion.

"I was hoping that you'd come today."

"The circumstances were deemed ... appropriate."

Overjoyed to be with him again, Catherine wasn't truly aware of the solemnity with which Vincent spoke. Pulling back slightly, she gazed up at the beautiful face that had captured her heart so many years before. "Happy Anniversary, my Best Beloved."

Radiant turquoise eyes met hers. "And to you as well, my Rose."

"The last fifteen years have seemed endless. Why did you make me wait so long?"

Aware of the barest trace of reproach in Catherine's tone, Vincent tilted his head to the left and smiled sadly. "Can you truly believe that such a decision was mine to make?"

"No," she sighed. "I suppose it wasn't."

Noting the small object resting between the curve of her breasts, he reached down and gently pressed the palm of his left hand against it. "I was hoping that someone would find this. Is your crystal in the pouch as well?"

"Yes, it is." Placing her hand on top of his, Catherine laced their fingers together. "I always wear it, except when I bathe. But now that you've come for me, I'd like to leave these tokens of our love here, for Jacob, or Chris." She peered up at him hopefully. "If that's agreeable to you?"

"Of course it is."

Slowly releasing his hand and reaching up to untie the long piece of cord at the nape of her neck. Catherine slid the small pouch off and wrapped the length of material around the middle of it. Turning, she took the few steps necessary and placed the treasured items to the center of the desk. After resting the palm of her right hand on the suede for a moment and stroking it lightly in fond farewell, she straightened her shoulders resolutely and returned to the waiting arms of her soulmate.

Studying the woman he utterly adored as she stepped closer, Vincent noted the natural grace of Catherine's movements. Her hair, unbound and flowing loosely about her shoulders, reminded him of a shimmering white cloud, the image one that captured his heart all over again, her slender body still the loveliest thing he'd ever had the pleasure of knowing on an intimate level.

"I have missed you, my Dear." Moving his hands to her waist, he gently stroked the outward curve of her hips. "My arms have been empty for a very, very long time."

"So have mine," Catherine replied, reaching up to run her fingers through his hair. "I have so much to tell you, to share with you."

"I know." Smiling at her, he announced quietly. "Yet, there were times, a few very special moments, when I was ... allowed ... to share some of the past years with you, in a way."

"You did?"

"Yes. A few months ago, I ... touched you."

Frowning, Catherine tried to remember. Then she gasped. "Last December, right before Winterfest! Vincent, I felt it! But I didn't know it was you, I didn't know it was real."

Gently urging her lower body closer to his, he vowed throatily. "It was as real as ... this."

Moving her hands to his waist, she threaded her forefingers through the loops of his denim jeans and met his eyes. "There were times when I felt you close. My heart believed it, but ..."

"I've always been with you, Catherine. Don't you remember? Many years ago I promised never to leave you." That said, he gathered her small frail body up in his arms. "And I keep my promises, when I can."

Resting her head on the center of his chest and listening to the steady thrumming of his heart, Catherine relaxed completely, observing, "It must be this awful flu that's making me so tired that I can barely keep my eyes open." Well aware of the fact that she was dying, and that the closure of her earthly existence was causing him extreme distress, why state the obvious?

Making no reply, Vincent turned on his heel. It was nearly time. Burying the tip of his nose into her hair, he carried his precious lady toward a blue-gray mist, which undulated and shimmered as he moved closer, as though beckoning him. Or welcoming her.

Her eyes widening as she peered into it, Catherine asked softly, "Where are we going?"

"To a wondrous realm where there is no pain, no suffering, and no passage of time as we know it." Stepping through the wavering portal, he continued, "We're going to a very special place where everyone is equal, and there are no ... differences."

At the same instant that the shimmering cloud started to engulf them, Catherine looked up at the man she loved. After studying his face for a moment, as though unable to trust her own eyes, she lifted trembling fingers to grip the curve of his chin.

"Vincent, what's happening? Suddenly, you're no older than you were the first time I saw you, all those years ago."

"And here, in this place, neither are you."

Becoming aware of the image reflected in his loving gaze, she gasped, "I'm young again!"

"Here, you shall always be young." Smiling, he promised, "And from this moment your ... sneezing fits ... are at an end."

"Good," the woman in his arms growled softly. "I was getting awfully tired of having to change my underwear ten times a day."

Caught off-guard by such a response, Vincent stumbled, very nearly sending them crashing to the ground. Regaining his footing and pausing just inside of the incandescent light, his sharp white teeth momentarily flashed into view as he laughed aloud.

"Ah, how I've missed your enchanting sense of..."

Before he could finish the thought, Catherine's hold on his neck tightened fiercely.

"Vincent?"

"Yes, my Love?"

"T ... There's something in the shadows," she noted quietly, fighting to keep her tone of voice from betraying a rising sense of apprehension. "And whatever it is, it seems to be moving directly toward ... us."

"Please, don't be afraid. It's our friends and family. They're coming to greet you." Regarding her through eyes that pledged eternal devotion, he remarked shyly, "Your mother is quite lovely, and your father is nearly as amusing as you are, especially when he decides to wear that ridiculous red ..."

"... Clown nose," Catherine interrupted, smiling. Lowering her voice to a purposely grin tone, she decreed, "Don't laugh ... don't ... laugh," Then her expression changed to one of happy anticipation. "How I've longed to see my Mother again, and to talk with her. I was so young when she died. And to know that you and Daddy are friends ..." Unable to find the words she wanted, she shook her head slowly from side to side.

"Ellie is also waiting for us, as is Father, Mary, Jamie, Mouse, Pascal..." Hesitating, he smiled, "...And Devin."

"That scoundrel's here?"

"HMMMMMMMM."

"I'm surprised he made it."

Vincent chuckled. "So is he." Uncertain of how she would accept this next bit of news, he tried to

prepare himself mentally for whatever comments might be forthcoming. "And Kristopher Gentian visits as well, from time to time."

At that, Catherine sneered inwardly, but said nothing. So, it would seem that she had both Devin *and* Kris to deal with from now on. Well, wasn't that just too, too special?

Vincent studied the shadows for a moment before speaking again. "All of our family members are here."

"All?" His Beloved echoed. Her expression one of astonishment, she inquired hopefully. "Have you met *your* parents?"

"Yes," he sighed, joy clearly defined in his tone of voice as well as in his radiant turquoise eyes. "They're extraordinary people, who love me just as I am. Holding her securely in the curve of his left arm, Vincent set his callused right palm ever so gently to the side of her face. Leaning toward her, he whispered, "As you have always loved me - just as I am."

"I..." Leaving the thought unfinished, Catherine put her hand to the center of her chest and flinched. That damnable pain had returned full force, and this time her left arm and the edge of her jaw were throbbing as well. With that, her eyes drifted shut. "Suddenly I feel so ... strange, like I'm falling..."

"Or being reborn," the one she loved huskily avowed, the words torn from the depths of his soul. Taking no notice of the scalding tears spilling from his eyes, Vincent embraced her tightly - waiting.

"I love you," the woman in his embrace sighed, her breathing becoming increasingly shallow.

"As I love you," he sobbed, "... forever, for *always*." Knowing full well what was about to happen to the courageous lady who was the best part of him, the part which had taught him to reach out and claim what was only his *to* claim, Vincent bent his head and touched his forehead to hers.

"Know this, my Catherine, trust in it, believe it, for my words are true. From this moment, nothing and no one shall ever part us again. This, I *promise* you."

"... no shadow ... of. ..." Using what little strength remained to her, his soulmate slowly opened her eyes. Lifting a trembling hand, she gently stroked the left side of his face, "... another ... parting ..."

Taking her last earthly breath into his mouth, Vincent kissed his beloved Catherine deeply, desperately, with all of the passion and the hope of an eternity yet to begin.

'You're safe, and now, sleep ... my Love.'

When the other mourners, who included his father, tunnel residents, and a few special Topside Helpers - Joe Maxwell, Jenny Aronson, and Nancy Tucker - had departed, Christopher and his wife stood before the newest grave in the Catacombs with their two hands clasped tightly together.

Turning slightly and burying her face into her husband's quilted vest, Cassie sobbed. "I miss her already!"

"So do I." A callused palm reached down to stroke her hair. "Yet, we mustn't allow our grief to overwhelm the joy of knowing that Nana Cat is surely where she most wanted to be - at my grandfather's side."

"I know. But it still hurts." She burrowed deeper into his quilted vest. "I'm so glad that you've kept journals documenting her life and Vincent's. I wish I could have known him better."

"I was so young when he died. I can scarcely remember him myself. But from what I've learned from various people over the years, I know that he was courageous, patient, and remarkably kind-hearted."

"He must have been an amazing person," she observed, "for Nana to fall in love with him." Cassie smiled up at the man she considered to be absolutely stunning. "As I fell in love with you."

"For which I give thanks every day," Chris replied, tightening his arms around her. "Having you here, sharing my life, and knowing that you love me, makes ... everything else ... bearable."

"You and your grandfather are very much alike, aren't you?"

"Over the years I've been told many times that the similarities are, or were, extraordinary."

For a moment the young woman at his side appeared lost in thought. "I've seen the sketch of Vincent as a child in the Painted Tunnels, as well as the marvelous oil painting hanging in Nana's chamber." She peered up at her husband. "Are those the only images of him that were ... allowed ... to be done?"

"As far as I know. For his own protection, as well as the safety of our world, I can understand why."

Nodding sadly, Cassie whispered. "Yes."

As one memory in particular drifted to the forefront of his thoughts, a small smile tucked itself into the corners of Chris' mouth.

"When I was still in my teens, I recall telling Nana Cat how sad I felt that I had no true memory of my grandfather. She suggested that any time I wanted to see him I could simply look into a mirror - and he'd be there."

Held safe and protected within the embrace of heavily-muscled arms, Cassie thought, *'If Vincent had looked that much like her Chris, he must have been very handsome.'* Then she blushed. *'And perhaps he'd been as sexy as well.'*

Recalling the wonderful conversations he'd had with his beloved grandmother down through the years, Chris tilted his head thoughtfully.

"When I was older, and better able to understand such things, Nana Cat recounted the story of how she and my grandfather first met, and the anguish they endured to finally have a life together."

"They went through hell, didn't they?"

"Yes, indeed they did. So, realizing that such a wondrous narrative should be preserved, in whatever form possible, I asked my grandmother if I could write down her words, as a legacy for the generations yet unborn. After thinking it over for some time, she finally gave her consent. Now their story is a part of this world, forever. Their courage lives on, not merely through the written word, but also within our ... hearts."

"From what you've told me, they really belonged together."

"They were true soulmates." Chris stated solemnly. "Taking a *'leap of faith,'* they shared a life and a love that was, and is, boundless. Through their belief in each other and the *'dream'* they clung to, even when utter chaos threatened to engulf them, we've all gained something very special - the strength to ... endure."

Noting the fatigue in her husband's tone of voice, Cassie turned slightly in his arms. Reaching up to touch the side of his face, she murmured, "I know that it's hard to leave, but we really should start for home soon. Your dad will want you close."

"Yes." Calling to mind how ill his father had looked these past days, and how much he'd seemed to age in so short a time, Chris exhaled a rough breath. "But would you mind going on ahead? I'd like to spend a few moments here..."

"... alone," she concluded, understanding that he needed a few minutes in private with someone who'd been very precious to him. "I'll be with your dad. Maybe I can get him to eat something now."

"Thank you, Cassandra."

Watching the woman he loved until she'd safely exited the catacombs, Christopher took slow even breaths, struggling to regain some semblance of inner tranquility. Returning his full attention to the mound of stones before him, he peered down at the vast array of flowers that had been strewn lovingly on the ground before a plaque etched with the name, *Catherine*. Suddely, he began to tremble all over, the quiet solitude of this place seeming to close in around him, until it felt almost as though he were being smothered.

Reaching down and using his forefinger to trace the outline of his grandmother's name, he whispered, "Did you ever know, I wonder, how much having you in my life truly meant to me? You taught me to accept who I am, and you gave me a sense of pride that has seen me through some of the darkest hours of my life. For that, there are ... no words."

Slowly rubbing the pad of his thumb over the small suede pouch encircling his neck, Catherine's grandson turned his gaze upward, to study the canopy of solid rock above his head. Seeing beyond

the stones within his heart, as well as far above the great metropolis of Manhattan, he blinked away tears. "Farewell, Nana Cat. May your journey be a wondrous one, leading you to your ... heart's desire."

Sliding to his knees, Christopher placed his left palm on the stone bearing Catherine's name and then laid his right on Vincent's. As he bent his head forward, his hair became a flowing amber curtain, one that concealed his face. Allowing grief to utterly crush him, he shook violently as wrenching sobs burst from his throat.

*'And now...the rest truly is...**silence.**'*

END