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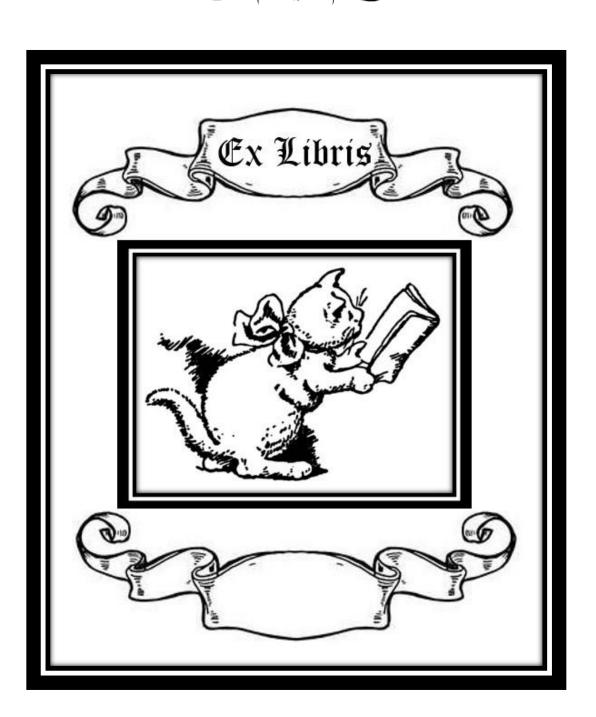


Together Forever Volume VI: When You Whispered My Name

> Treasure Chambers.com September 25, 2022



This Fanzine is dedicated to all who dare to create and have the courage to share it with the world.



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eauty and the east 35th Anniversary 2022



Together Forever Volume VI When You Whispered My Name

TreasureChambers.com September 25, 2022

Featuring stories, art, and poetry, inspired by the characters created by **Ron Koslow** and so beautifully brought to life by **Linda Hamilton** and **Ron Perlman** from 1987-1990





Acknowledgements

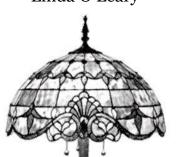


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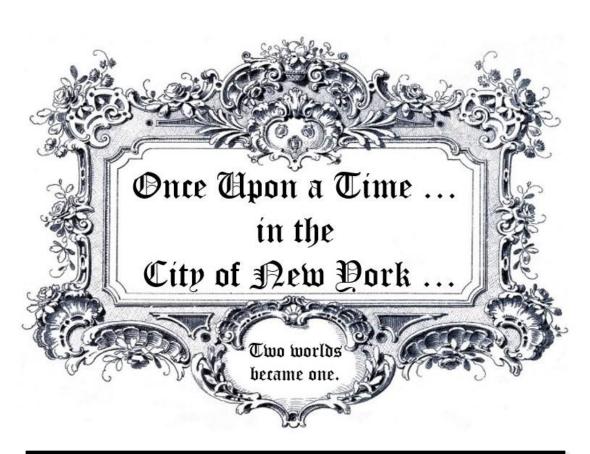
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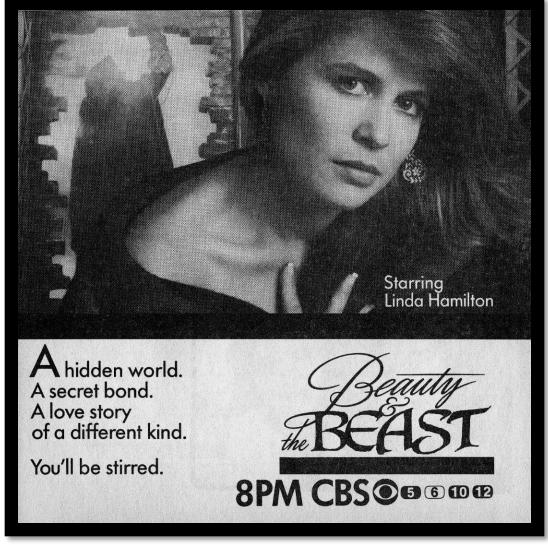
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Letter From Your Editors



Believe it or not, it's true, another year has really passed. We hope it's been a little gentler and kinder than the two that passed before. For some of you, we know it hasn't, and for that we are truly sorry.

Whatever this year has held for you, there's one thing we all know: Even after 35 years we can still find comfort and solace, friendship, and fun within these Tunnel walls.

Here we are free to dream of things that might have been, things that should have been or even things that might still come to pass...

We would like to thank all who have contributed their time and talents to this year's zine, and we would like to extend a warm welcome to the writers and artists who are featured in our zine for the first time; Linda Stauffer, Paulette Frazier, and Nelly-The Tunnel Writer.

We certainly hope you all have as much fun reading our zine as we had creating it.

Happy 35th Anniversary!

-Barbara Anderson

<u> A Note Of Thanks</u>

I recently watched <u>Beauty and the Beast</u> after a long hiatus. What a comfort it was to me that throughout, no matter the outcome, thoughts of wonderful fan fiction came to mind, bringing memories of beautiful possibilities of new beginnings and sweet endings.

I just wanted to thank you all and tell you how much your creations mean to me and to so many. I consider it a great privilege and honor to be the editor for some of you!

Happy 35th Anniversary!

-Linda O'Leary



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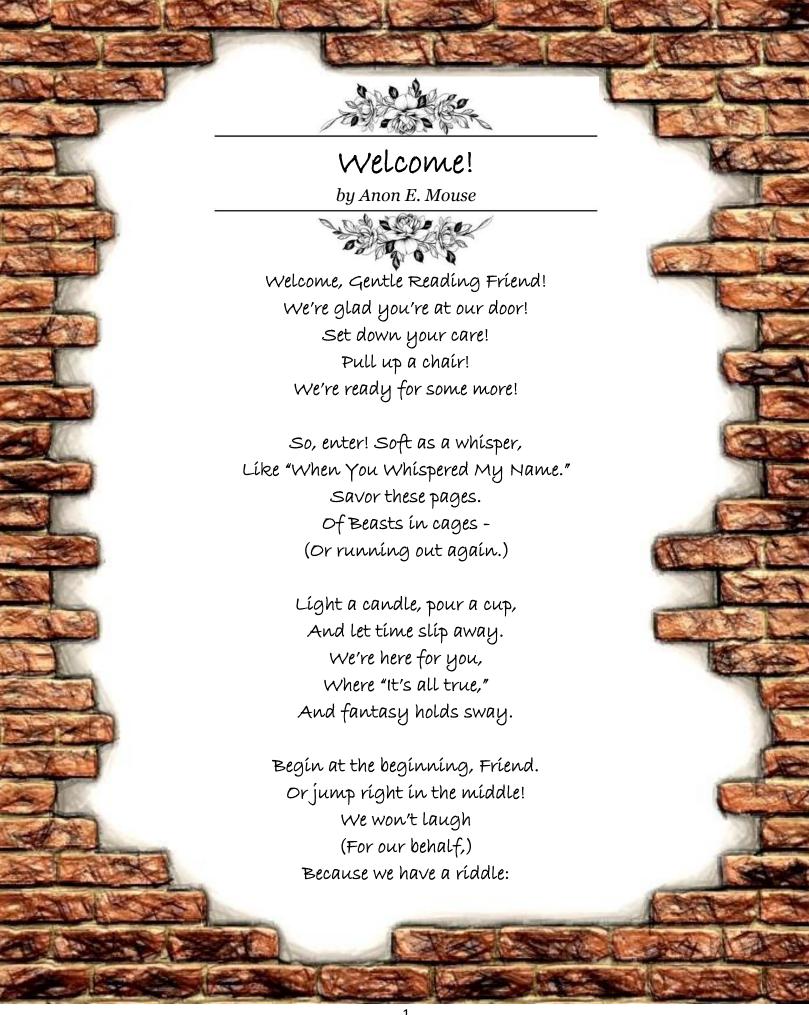


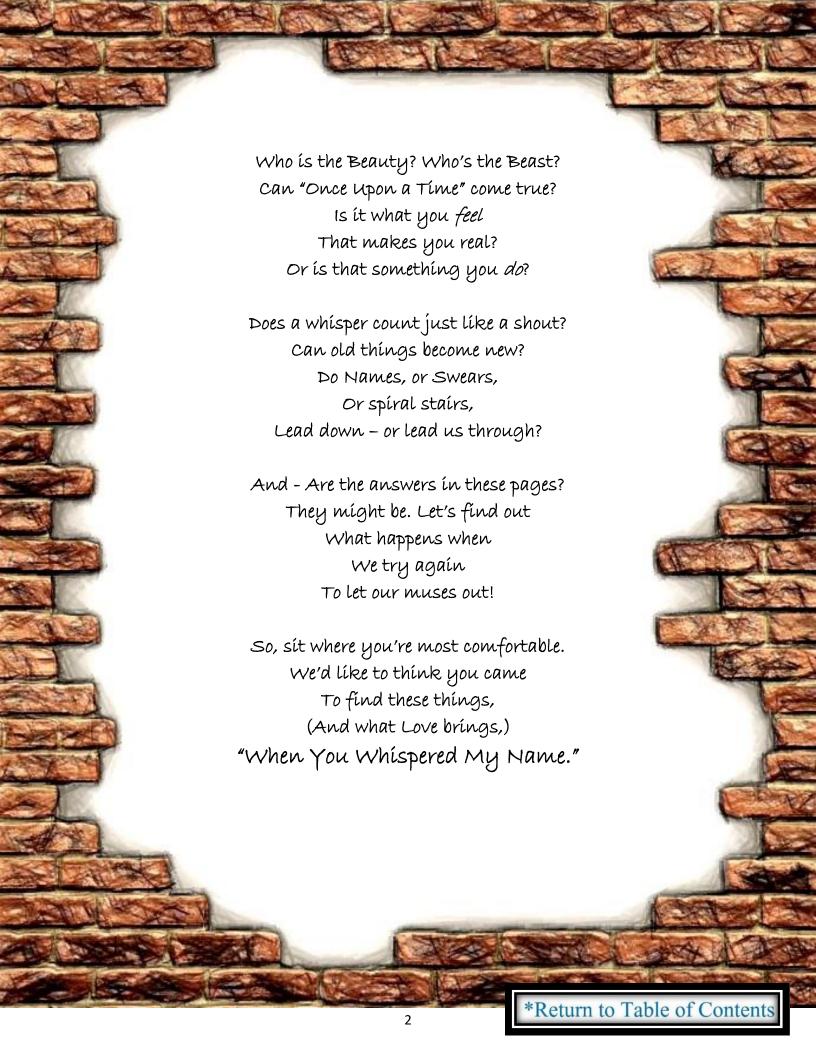
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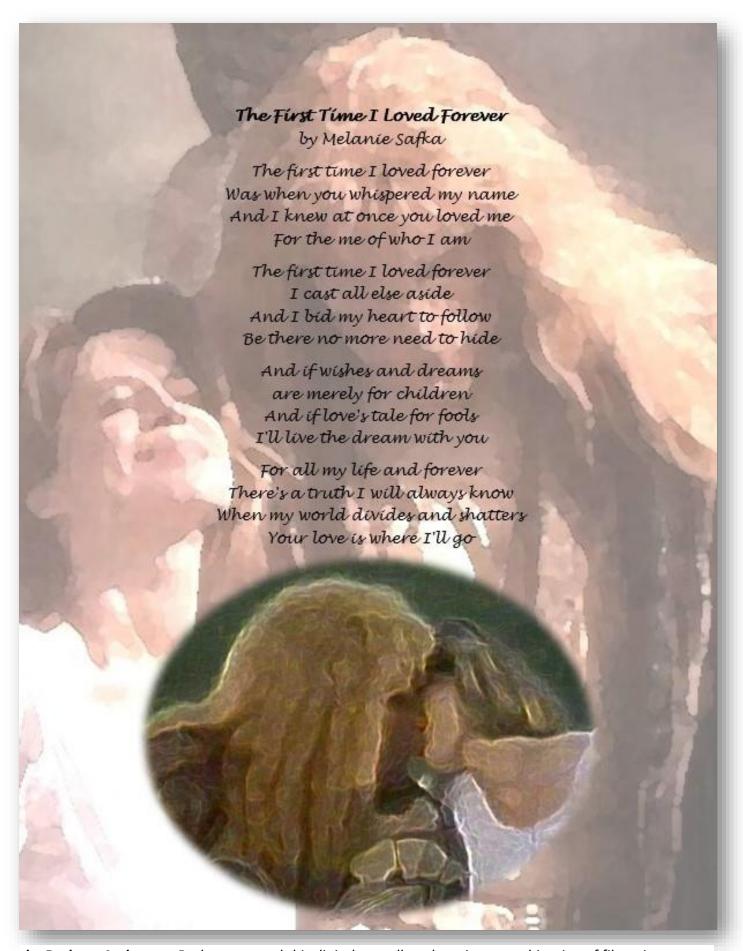


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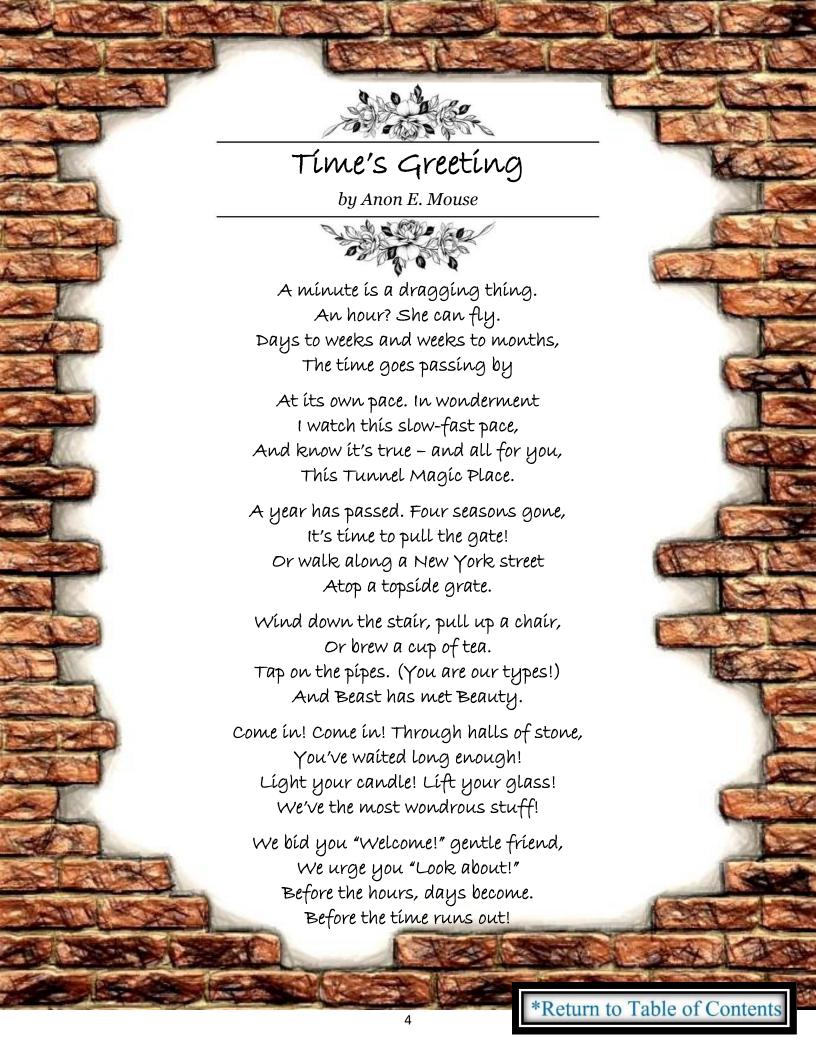








by Barbara Anderson; Barbara created this digital art collage by using a combination of filters in a discontinued computer program called Microsoft Digital Image Suite and Microsoft Word.





Walk With Me?

by Judith Nolan



"No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path..."

Gautama Buddha



Deep in distracted thought, Vincent sat in the Chamber of the Falls, staring at the rushing waterfall. Nestled in his open palm he held Catherine's rose. He dropped his disconsolate gaze to it, studying every curve and nuance.

Is this all there is to be now...? Must I always live with this unfillable void inside me? Can I live with it? I wish I knew...

He sighed deeply, resisting the urge to cast the precious gift into the rushing



waters below him. It was all he had left of Catherine. If this was all he was going to have of her, then he would make it enough.

Moisture that didn't come from the rising mist from the falls, glistened on his cheeks. He felt utterly lost and alone. Careless of his plight, the rushing waters covered the rising sounds of his inconsolable grief.

Suddenly Vincent stiffened, as a warm and loving sensation rushed through him, heightening, and sharpening every sense. He lifted his head, frowning in concentration as he listened to something far beyond the cavern, some inner voice that told him that all would be well...

Could it be? Is it possible? Dare I believe...?



Far away in Westport, Catherine slid eagerly behind the steering wheel of Nancy's car. She started the engine and drove swiftly away.

Her good friend stood on the doorstep watching her. She looked happy to see Catherine leaving.

"Good luck, Cathy. Say 'Hi' to Vincent for me. I would like to meet him one day..." she whispered, as she turned and went back into the house.



Far beneath the city, Vincent jumped to his feet, quickly returning Catherine's rose to the pouch hanging around his neck. He began to run as if his very life depended on it. Climbing ever higher through the tunnels, he raced toward the park entrance.

Catherine drove into and then through the city, breaking more than a few speed limits as she neared her destination. But the rising sense of urgency that had begun in a dream pushed her onwards. She knew she had to get back to Vincent before dawn, before the sunlight forced him Below and she would miss seeing him.

Turning into the park entrance she took the corners quickly, finally stopping the car on the road shoulder, near the drainage tunnel entrance. She jumped out, turning to lock it before she began running across the park toward the culvert.

In the same moment, Vincent came racing out of the tunnel entrance at a full speed but bounced to a stop when he saw her running toward him. His cloak floated around him as he braced himself for her arrival.

Catherine sprinted down the slope, laughing joyously as she crested the final swell of the ground and flung herself carelessly forward, landing in his open arms. She gasped with joy as he crushed her to him. They stood holding each other close for a long moment of shared joy.

Finally, Catherine pulled back to look up at him in wonderment. "Oh, forgive me... forgive me for doubting! What we have is all that matters. It's worth everything!"

Vincent stared down at her almost as if he could not believe his eyes. "Everything!" he agreed fervently on a gusting rush of grateful breath.

They stood together gazing deeply into each other's eyes. *Is* there anything more to be said?

Catherine stood high onto her toes, reaching her hand to his great head, drawing his mouth down to hers. Vincent couldn't resist her urging. He had no will, beyond their shared consciousness. Their lingering, mutual kiss sealed their agreement.

What we have together is truly everything, and nothing else matters...

Finally, Catherine drew back from him, her eyes full of wonder. She smiled softly, before



burying her face in his shoulder and throwing her arms around him. He pulled her back into his embrace, and they stood silent, lost in the beauty of the moment they thought had been lost forever.

Finally, Catherine slid her hand down his arm, lacing her fingers through his. Her eyes gleamed with anticipation. "I know it's late, but it's such a lovely night. Vincent, if I asked you, will you walk with me? I have something I want to show you. Something I've always wanted to show you."

Vincent stared down at her beautiful face. The warm taste of her lingered on his lips, like illicit magic. His gaze flickered over her smiling mouth, and he found he craved more.

The sensation made him hesitate a fraction too long in answering. "The sun will be up soon..." he demurred softly. "You must be tired. I should be taking you home before we are discovered."

"I'm not tired." Catherine shrugged and shook her head. "Besides, tomorrow is Sunday, so I can sleep in. We have the last of the darkness."

She turned to look at the cityscape gleaming beyond the park. "I want to share the city with you again, as we did on Halloween. But, this time, I want to do it my way." She looked back to him, tugging at his hand. "Please, Vincent..."

Her way? What is her way? What is she planning for us?

How could he resist? "Very well..." His fingers closed tighter around hers.

"Thank you, Vincent." Catherine slid her arm through the crook of his, before clasping his biceps with both hands. "Don't look so worried."

"Worried?" Vincent arched his brows at her. "I am simply being cautious. The park can be a dangerous place at night."

"But I'm with you," Catherine reasoned, as she hugged his arm against her, watching him closely. "Trust me."

"You, I trust," Vincent replied simply.

Together, they walked away from the shelter of the culvert, and they moved across the grass and up the slope to the edge of the roadway. Catherine pulled him to a stop as they were about to pass Nancy's car, parked under a streetlight.

"This is what I wanted to show you," Catherine said, fishing in her coat pocket for the keys.

Vincent stood stock still, staring at the vehicle. "It's a car," he said, rather unnecessarily.

"Yes, it's a car. It's Nancy's car. I borrowed it tonight to get back to you as fast as I could. I know I broke more than a few speed limits along the way." Catherine tried not to smile at his bemusement. "But, for tonight, it can be our carriage."

"Ah, I see." He looked up at her. "You're planning on driving home in it. Good idea. I will bid you goodnight then, Catherine."

He hesitated, obviously disappointed that their reunion was so short. But he would not be Vincent if he didn't always think to put her needs before his own.

"I was planning on it taking both of us on a tour around the city." Catherine watched his expression. "It will be okay, Vincent."

"I... are you sure about this?" Vincent's expression settled into one of deep uncertainty. He covered his confusion with an expansive wave of his hand. "Forgive me. Of course, you're sure." He shook his head, but his expression remained bemused.

Catherine smiled as she inserted the key and unlocked the passenger door. She held the door wide open. "Get in," she said softly. "It will be all right, Vincent."

"A horseless carriage..." Vincent hesitated a moment longer, before getting into the car and settling himself gingerly into the seat, gathering the folds of his great cloak around him.

He looked all around the interior as Catherine circled the hood to unlock her door before opening it to get in behind the steering wheel. Vincent was looking up when the overhead light came on and it momentarily blinded him and made the outside world disappear behind his own reflection in the side window. He didn't comment but a slight growl of unease whispered deep in his throat.

"Sorry, I forgot about the light," Catherine apologised as she closed the door and the interior light went off, leaving them in the welcome darkness once more.

She put a hand on Vincent's arm, feeling the tension in his body. "Vincent, trust me. We've walked miles together, both Above and Below. We've run and we've climbed. I've leaned on you and at times you've carried me. We trust each other implicitly. I want you to trust me now, and *this*."

"You, I trust," Vincent replied honestly. "But this contraption..." He looked all around. "It appears to have a mind of its own."

Catherine patted the steering wheel. "It's just a machine. But it's going to protect you, protect us. And if for some reason it doesn't, I swear, *I* will. I would never allow any harm to come to you."

Vincent glanced at her. "Very well, Catherine." He made an attempt to ease the tension from his shoulders.

He reached back to grasp the hood of his cloak, drawing it up and over his hair, concealing his unique face in the depths of the folds. He settled deeper into the seat, pushing his long legs forward as much as he could, beneath the dashboard.

"Where shall we go?" he asked softly, staring through the windscreen at the park spread all around them.

"Anywhere and everywhere," Catherine replied happily. "I want to show you everything... but first, seatbelt."

"I'm sorry...?" Vincent looked mystified.

"You have to put your seatbelt on..." Catherine reached across him to secure the safety device into its slot before she did the same with hers.

Vincent tested the woven strapping. "Are you afraid I'll run away?" he asked with a lift of one eyebrow.

"Something like that." Catherine laughed.

She turned the key, and the engine came to life. She disengaged the hand brake and applied her foot to the gas pedal. The car began to move forward, slowly. Vincent resisted the urge to clutch the edges of his seat as the car gathered speed. He sat still, feeling the power of the engine vibrating through him.

"Don't worry, Vincent." Catherine gave him an encouraging look. "You're safe with me. I haven't had an accident yet."

From out of nowhere, a car came through the park, passing them in a rush of noise and a swirl of dried leaves. The sweeping headlights glared and dazzled.

"It's not you I'm worried about." Vincent turned in his seat to stare at the fading taillights of the other car.

"But you've ridden on top of subway cars before." Catherine glanced in the rearview mirror. "When you rescued me from Belmont and his men, you said that was the only way you could have gotten to me so fast."

"Yes, but the subway cars have rails to run on," Vincent admitted honestly, turning back in his seat. "They have a prescribed path they must follow."

"That's a valid point," Catherine admitted. "I've never thought of it that way."

She took a corner with ease. "My dad first taught me to drive when I was seven. I was barely old enough to see over the steering wheel, but I had never been so happy, and felt so important."

"Your father is proud of you." Vincent relaxed enough to take his eyes off the road in front. "He only wants the best for you."

"As Jacob does for you," she affirmed, as she turned out of the park entrance and onto $5^{\rm th}$ Avenue.

They drove down the thoroughfare without speaking. Vincent leaned forward, fascinated by the cityscape as it moved past the car window. It was a vantage point he'd never had before, and the life on the streets intrigued him. He'd never dared to venture so close as to be able to almost touch some of the pedestrians.

Despite the late hour, the city was full of life. The walking public pressed past the car as if impatient to have it move out of their way. None of them looked into the car, their focus was entirely elsewhere.

Somewhere high above, a clock chimed the hour of five o'clock. Catherine ignored it as she drove on, taking turn after turn, causing Vincent to lose his usually keen sense of direction in a myriad of sights and sounds.

The blinking neon lights burst across Vincent's eyes, their harsh fluorescence illuminating the deep night as nothing else could have. They made shadows on the streets, and the shadows moved, just as Vincent was. Scattered taxis prowled in and out of the lanes, perpetual denizens of the New York night. The constant, impatient blares of their horns punctuated the darkness. Everything appeared to be in perpetual motion, nothing stood still for long.

People streamed down the sidewalks on either side, talking or laughing and at times shouting to be heard by their companions over the traffic noise. They crossed the road in front and behind, not caring for the gestures or shouts of dissent from some drivers.

None of them seemed to care about the fact it was almost morning or had any thought about the day to come. They were living in the moment and enjoying themselves hugely.

The city was vitally alive, pulsing with energy. Alive and breathing, even as it was in its own version of rest. Vincent sensed it all around him as Catherine drove beside him silently, allowing him to take it all in.

As their car turned yet another corner, heading back the way they'd come, Vincent turned to look at her. "I thought I had seen something of your world."

He shook his head. "That night we shared on Halloween, walking these very streets, showed me things I had never seen before. Now, this..." He spread both hands in puzzlement...

Catherine briefly took her attention off the road ahead to smile at him. "Until tonight, I'd never considered that there are places and sights you haven't seen. It's such a pity there is only one night a year when we can walk together, unafraid."

She looked back to the roadway. "But now we have another way, a new way to be together."

Some time passed and finally Catherine could no longer suppress a yawn. She used the back of her hand to cover her mouth, but Vincent saw the movement.

"You're tired. It has been wonderful, but we should stop now."

"Yes, but I haven't shown you everything I wanted you to see. We can go down to Greenwich Village and go back up along Broadway. I know you love the musicals."

"Another time," Vincent replied softly. "You're getting too tired to drive. You should be in bed. You can drop me off in the park."

Catherine slanted him a look, but she didn't comment. She simply nodded as she took yet another corner and headed back towards her apartment building.

Before Vincent could protest, she stopped at the code box for the underground carpark and pushed the required buttons. The roller door rose with a clatter, and she drove down into the bowels of the earth. She parked the car in a space next to her own car and got out.

Vincent followed suit, standing uncertainly beside the car as she reached to lock it. "Come on," she said, taking his hand. "We'd better be quick with this part."

"Where are we going?" Vincent allowed her to pull him along.

"A place that should be very familiar to you," she replied, as she reached a steel door at the side of the garage. "There shouldn't be anyone around at this time of night."

They went through the door and along an echoing corridor, towards another door at the far end. Catherine stopped Vincent with a hand on his arm.

"Wait here. I'd better go first, just to see that we're alone." She pushed him back against the wall, before opening the door and stepping through.

Vincent looked all around him, his usually sharp sense of direction well and truly confused. But he now had an idea of where Catherine was taking him.

She reappeared almost immediately. "The coast is clear. There's no one around, not even the night watchman. Come on." She grabbed his arm, leading him through the door she held open.

It closed behind them with a muffled clang that echoed. Catherine led him across the next corridor to another door. She turned to smile at Vincent. "This leads down to the basement level."

Vincent nodded. "Where you go down to my world."

"Yes." Catherine opened the door and took him through.

They descended a set of steps, going below the garage level into a world of concrete and steel uprights. Catherine opened another door, and they entered the large concrete basement, with its tumbled collection of boxes and piles of castoffs from the world above them.

She stopped at a seemingly random group of large cardboard boxes, stacked against the far wall. They moved as one when she pushed them aside, revealing

their secret, a large hole in the concrete wall that revealed nothing but echoing darkness. A trace of damp warmth rose through the hole.

Catherine reached above her head to turn on a switch, and a single, overhead light bulb created a long shaft of blue-white light that speared down into the darkness, illuminating the uprights of a single metal ladder pinned into the concrete at the opening.

"This is where you go down." She straightened and stood back.

"You should go home." Vincent extended his hand toward her. "I know my way from here. Get some rest and I will see you tomorrow... ah, tonight."

"Suddenly I'm not tired, Vincent. I'm glad you trusted me enough to come driving with me tonight."

Vincent nodded. "I am glad I did."

Catherine smiled. "And you didn't protest... much."

"Oh, there were times when I wanted to shout, 'look out'!" Vincent replied honestly. "The people up there seemed to walk about as if lost in their own worlds."

"Most of the time they are. Many of them live in the darkness and sleep in the daylight. I'm glad you decided to trust me. It can't have been easy."

Vincent pointed to the building above their heads. "Those people walking the streets above us, they were living their dream, Catherine. They're not living mine, nor living ours. We all dream our own dream."

"Yes..." Catherine nodded slowly. "I can't guarantee you that there won't be times when I will feel... unhappy, Vincent. Maybe there will be other times when I feel I must put distance between us. But it doesn't mean I love you less. In fact, I think I can only love you more. I wish..."

"I know..." Vincent exhaled slowly, drawing her closer by taking her hand. "I can understand that, for I too at times, have felt the need to hide my thoughts and feelings for fear of hurting you." He squeezed her small hand gently. "But now is not one of those times for either of us."

He could sense it through their bond. From being distant and remote, Catherine was now completely happy and at peace. It eased his mind after the strain of the last few days when he thought he'd lost her forever.

Catherine watched him. "I think you know it isn't. I think you know a lot more than you're saying." She raised her free hand to cup his bearded cheek and Vincent turned his head to press a soft kiss into her palm.

"Perhaps... I would say that we are both happy now," he whispered, closing his free hand around the bag that held the porcelain rose his love had given him.

"I would be even happier if I could go Below with you. I'm too wide awake now to sleep, and today is Sunday, I have nowhere else to be."

She watched his expression closely. "You could read to me..."



"That might put us both to sleep." Vincent smiled as he shook his head ruefully.

"I'm willing to risk it if you are." Catherine turned her hand within his grasp to slide her fingers through his. "Or we could go back up to the garage and I could take you driving again. We still haven't seen everything and there is still time before sunrise."

"Ah, no..." Vincent shook his head. "I think I have had enough of that horseless carriage for now. I don't like the uncertainty of it all." He leaned forward to look down the shaft of light into the darkness below. "If you are sure you are not too tired...."

"How could I ever be tired when I am with you, Vincent?" Catherine replied, stepping forward to descend the ladder before he had a chance to change his mind and deny her entry into his world.



"What hath night to do with sleep?"

John Milton



Beneath Bethesda Bridge by Judith Nolan Judith patiently and painstakingly created this image by layering and maneuvering seven separate photographs to make them appear as one. She uses a photo editing program called **GIMP** that is available online for free.



by Allison Duggins



Vincent wrote to Devin after his failed trip to Connecticut with Catherine. He regretted sending the letter as soon as he asked Geoffrey to mail it for him. But, at least writing it made him feel a little better. He realized Devin would not actually be able to do anything about it

Devin was surprised to hear from Vincent so soon after his letter of a month ago. Usually, his notes were filled with news of Father, the Tunnels, and the general goings-on within the community. This one was definitely different.



Dear Devin,

I don't know why I started this letter. I suppose I just needed to talk to you.

Catherine asked something of me... a simple thing really, but as always, a thing not so simple for me. She asked me to go away with her for a weekend, to a mountain cabin her family owns. She wanted to show me a lake nearby, a special place she would visit as a child. My heart leapt at the chance, even as it struggled against the difficulties involved. However, as usual, Father and the others were against it. They presented all kinds of reasons for my not going and as usual, I gave into their fears. Why do I do that? Why do I not 'follow my heart' as I tell Catherine and many others to do

when they come to me for advice?

I know you can't help me with this. It is something I must resolve myself, yet sometimes, I wish you were here to be, as Father says, on my side of the river.

Never mind your foolish brother, just wishful thinking.

Vincent



After reading the letter, Devin decided to pay the Tunnels a visit and end this ridiculous restriction once and for all. He was furious with Father and the others for continuing to do this to Vincent. Vincent is after all a grown man and should be able to make his own decisions regarding his life. He was also angry with Vincent for not standing his ground and allowing Father's and the others' fears to keep him once again from living his life. Charles agreed that Devin should go and talk to Vincent. Unfortunately, Devin was unable to leave right away, as he would have liked. He had responsibilities to attend to before he could set out.

Vincent's subsequent letters were about more of the usual things: Father, Catherine, the children, and his responsibilities. Soon the idea of going to the Tunnels seemed unnecessary... until the recent letter Devin received from Father.

Father had written to Devin shortly after the events involving the Outsiders, detailing what had happened and Vincent's mood. He asked if Devin would be able to come visit and possibly help Vincent deal with his feelings regarding the incident. Devin read the letter Vincent had written about his failed trip again and decided he could help Vincent with the recent incident, and he planned to settle this other matter once and for all.

Devin arrived in the Tunnels a few days later, and after greeting Father in the Library Chamber, asked when the next community meeting was to be held. He had something he wanted to discuss.

"Tomorrow, as a matter of fact," Father stated.

"Good. May I have time to address everyone?"

"May I inquire as to the topic?"

"I'd rather wait until the meeting, Father," Devin answered nervously.

"Please, Devin. I should know if this meeting needs to involve the entire

community."

"Well, since you insist. I'm here to get some things out in the open regarding Vincent. I heard about what happened a few months ago regarding the weekend he had hoped to go away with Catherine."

"I should have known Catherine would do something like this, getting you involved." Father raised his voice.

"Catherine had nothing to do with this," Devin shot back.

"Are you telling me she had 'nothing' to do with contacting you about their illplanned adventure, how we 'talked' Vincent out of going with her?"

"Yes, I am telling you, Catherine didn't contact me."

"Then who?" Father demanded.

"Vincent did."

"Vincent! I don't believe it."

"Believe it, Father. Vincent asked for my help a few months ago but I was unable to get away at the time yet after this latest incident, I felt I needed to be here and 'kill two birds with one stone' and I am here to make sure he receives my help."

"This topic regarding his trip Above should be discussed in private, between Vincent and myself. He shouldn't have involved you."

"Yes, he should have. Someone needs to stand up for Vincent since he won't stand up for himself. The entire community was against Vincent going with Catherine back then. They're as much to blame as you are, and I intend to air their 'dirty' laundry in front of them all and settle this."

"Devin, please... be reasonable."

"Reasonable!" Devin exploded. "Is it 'reasonable' to deny Vincent 'one' weekend of freedom, away from the Tunnels and the limitations of his life? Perhaps you should just confine Vincent to his chamber, Father, or try to; that way he won't get hurt down here either, especially doing some of the jobs that you see fit to burden him with."

"What do you mean by that remark?"

"How many tunnels have caved in on him? How many floods has he barely escaped? How many lives has Vincent saved, including yours, at the risk of losing his own?"

Father struggled to answer him. "Devin, please..."

"No, Father. I'm bringing this up at the community meeting tomorrow. I respect you too much to just blindside you with this. That's why I'm asking you to allow me to address the community."

Father sighed in resignation. He knew arguing with Devin would be pointless. He knew Devin would bring this subject up whether he consented to it or not. "Very well, Devin. You will be allowed time to address the community. I don't know how much good it will do, but if you feel you have to, then..."

"Thank you, Father."

Devin gave Father a nod and exited the chamber to look for Vincent. After eyeing the empty doorway for a moment, the tunnel leader pinched out the single candle still burning on his desk. Leaning back, Father put one trembling hand over his eyes and shook his head. He then slumped into his chair, dreading what Devin would say at the meeting.





Devin found Vincent in his chamber. "Hey, Bro. You miss me?"

"Devin! I didn't expect to see you here." Vincent rose from his desk and embraced his big brother.

"I would have been here months ago after that letter you wrote, but responsibilities kept me with Charles." Devin responded after Vincent released him.

"I hope Charles is well. I regretted writing that letter. I just needed to..."

"I understand. You wanted to 'rebel against the system'." Devin walked over to the bed and sat on the edge of it.

"You always did have a way of cutting to the heart of the matter."

"Well, I spoke briefly with Father."

Vincent looked at Devin with alarm.

"Don't worry, I just requested time to speak at the community meeting tomorrow. I told him that I was here to put the issue of your freedom to bed once and for all and I was not going to take no for an answer. I think Father realized that I was going to bring it up regardless of whether he consented to it or not. And I also wanted to see how you were after the incident with the Outsiders."

"Father wrote you about that?" Vincent seemed surprised that Father would do that.

"Yeah, he thought you might need someone to talk to since you won't talk to him about it. And since I was coming anyway..."

"Devin, I didn't mean for you to come here and fight my battles for me."

"Hey, what's a big brother for other than to fight battles for their little brothers. I plan on bringing this situation about your freedom up in front of everyone, so everything is out in the open."

"Do you think it will change anything?" Vincent asked softly.

"If nothing else, it will make everyone feel guilty for the way they have curtailed your freedom all this time. I'm calling 'everyone' out on this."

"Thank you, Devin."

"Anytime, Vincent."

The brothers settled into comfortable chairs and talked long into the night about the Outsiders and the failed trip to Connecticut.



The next morning everyone gathered in Father's chamber for the community meeting. Voices buzzed with news of Devin being in the tunnels and wanting to talk to them. There were whispered comments about how nervous Father looked as they came into the chamber. They could also see the stern expression on Devin's face as he and Vincent entered.

"Can I have everyone's attention, please." Father addressed the assembled crowd. The chatter immediately died down.

"Devin has asked to address this community about an issue he feels should be discussed. If no one has an objection, I am turning the floor over to Devin."

Before Devin took his place at the center of the room, Father whispered pleadingly one last time for him to leave this matter alone and let the three of them discuss it in private.

"I'm sorry, Father, but this issue about Vincent's freedom has to be addressed before everyone since *'everyone'* had something to say about it."

"Very well, you may proceed, Devin." Father sighed reluctantly and took his seat. The other Council members took their places around Father's desk.

With one quick glance at Vincent, Devin stood in the center of the chamber. He slowly turned around, looking at all the people who were staring at him, wondering what he was going to say."

"Thank you, Father and Council members for allowing me to address you today. I have something to say about the events of a few months ago when Vincent wanted to go Above for a weekend with Catherine," Devin started.

People began murmuring among themselves. Devin could see Pascal, Jamie, Mouse, and a few others duck their heads and look nervously around.

"Vincent wanted to go away with Catherine, and some of you," he looked pointedly at Father and the others involved, "were able to persuade him not to go. I was informed about this situation and, since I wasn't able to come here when the incident happened, I decided to come here now and put this issue to bed once and for all."

"You're here to fight Vincent's battles for him, Devin?" A voice from the crowd taunted.

"I'm here to ask... doesn't he have the same right to experience all that we experience or are you determined to keep him a prisoner down here?" Looking at Father, "You act as if Vincent is a badly behaved child who is constantly in need of guidance. You berate him if he stays too late Above with Catherine and rail at him if he comes to her aid."

A hush fell over the assembled crowd. No one said anything to contradict him. Mary started to say something but quietly decided against it.

"Father, you told Vincent that you have the same dream for him that Catherine has... that you've wanted nothing more than to show him the sun and the mountains, all the amazing things he had only read about," Devin began.

"Yes, that's true," Father commented.

"Are you jealous that someone else put in the effort needed to fulfill your dream?" Devin asked.

"No, of course not!" Father exclaimed.

"I wonder..." Changing the subject, Devin asked, "Father, who protected the Tunnels when we were children?"

"The sentries, of course."

"They dealt with any intruders that entered the Tunnels. I remember Daniel almost bashed one guy's skull in when he tried to set fire to one of the wooden barricades."

"Daniel wasn't the only one who had to eventually use extreme



measures against intruders in those days. There were others too," Father said.

"Like who?" Devin prompted.

"William, Nathan, Old Sam." Slowly, Father's face was transformed with understanding regarding where Devin was going with this line of questioning.

"If that was the case when we were growing up, why the 'hell' are you obligating Vincent to be the only one to deal with intruders now?" Devin demanded.

"We rely on him to protect us," William said.

"Ah, William, I'll get back to you. Again, Father, I ask you, why is it only him instead of the sentries or others from the community?"

"Because..." Father was reluctant to continue.

"Go on, Father. Let's finally get this out in the open."

"I don't know what you mean?"

"Yes, you do. Okay, I'll say it. It is because of who or what Vincent is, what Vincent has the 'animal skills' to do when it is necessary. You believe because he defends Catherine with, more times than not, lethal results, he might have an easier time doing something like that here." Devin turned to look around the

room. Many of the others wouldn't return Devin's glance.

Father had no words to counter his statement. Devin turned his attention to William.

"William, I heard you were quite vocal about how the Outsiders should be dealt with when they invaded the Tunnels."

"Well... I..." William stammered.

"I heard you told Father 'We must strike back, hard. We have the means, we have each other... and we have Vincent'."

"Yes, we have Vincent to protect us." William squared his shoulders.

"I heard that Father asked you if you would send Vincent out to do murder and you said, 'I would do what was necessary'."

"That's right," William stated. "I would do what was necessary."

"Then why didn't you? You've done it before."

"What? I don't understand. How do you...?" William questioned.

"I'm asking you, William, why 'YOU' didn't do what was necessary?"

"I... I couldn't do that again. I couldn't bring myself to kill anyone again."

"Ezra told me what he said when you helped him..."

"He... he told you?" William asked nervously.

"Yeah. He told me you and he were the ones who 'disposed' of the Outsiders afterwards."

Soft gasps could be heard from the crowd.

Many in the community realized with dawning comprehension that with all the times Vincent had had to use deadly force to defend the Tunnels, i.e. The Tong, The Outsiders, other intruders over the years, he was the only one who actually cleaned up the aftermath so none of the children would happen upon it.

"Devin, please," Father started. "I don't think the community needs to listen to this. Especially the children."

"Oh, but I think they do, Father. Yet you're right, the children really don't need to be here."

Mary and Sarah nodded to each other and gathered the children. Some of the

To Settle This Once and For All by Allison Duggins

older children started to protest about leaving, but one stern look from Mary silenced them at once. Sarah gathered the little ones and, with Mary, escorted all the children out of the chamber before Devin continued.

"Ezra told me... you said, 'I can't do this.' He told you, 'You can. You will. C'mon, William. You wanted Vincent to go and do this. The least you can do is help him out a little.' "

Devin didn't go into detail but most of the adults surmised that Devin was talking about policing the area after the incident with the Outsiders.

"I didn't..."

"Oh, so you're like most generals, order out the enlisted men to do something you don't have the stomach to do yourself."

"No, that's... that isn't what I meant."

"Then what the hell did you mean? And what did you expect? Vincent knows. He knows what he does... and he usually cleans it all up and puts it away by himself. Vincent lives with this inside him, day after day. He lives with the knowledge and the guilt. That's a pretty heavy load, wouldn't you say?

"That's not fair, Devin!" Cullen exclaimed.

Devin whirled. "What's your excuse, Cullen?"

Cullen turned his head away, unable to answer.

Turning to Pascal. "Or you? You told Vincent the trip to Connecticut was a risk for all of you, that what he does affects everyone else..."

"That's true, it does." Pascal stated.

"How?" Devin asked.

Instead of answering Devin, Pascal also turned away.

Turning again. "How about the rest of you? Randolph, Simon, and Matthew died at the hands of the Outsiders."

Many of the others around Devin turned away with a guilty look and the other men lowered their heads and wouldn't look at him.

Looking around the room again, Devin asked. "Why does it 'always' have to be Vincent to handle any intruders and then have to pay the ultimate sacrifice to defend these Tunnels when all else fails."

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The room was dead silence.

"What would you have done if Vincent wasn't here, if he was Above with Catherine, or on one of his many trips to the lower caverns? Are any of you willing to become the Tunnels' executioner if it becomes necessary to go that far? You shouldn't have to rely solely on Vincent."

Devin continued, "Vincent asked for 'one' weekend to spend with Catherine, away from the Tunnels, away from his responsibilities here and all of you gave him grief for even thinking of doing something for himself. You've always told him he could never have a life like anyone else has. I thought you meant because he lived Below, that the chances of him finding someone were limited, but that is not true! He has a right to everything anyone else has. Is it because it doesn't fit into the mould you've all created for him? You have never believed he was a man, never accepted that he could have a life any other man could have. You even made him believe he had no right to be loved by a woman, any woman. You denied his humanity and forced him to deny it too. Why, because you don't think he's quite... human? If there's something here Below that's less than human, I suggest you look inside yourselves for it, that's where you'll find your monster, people... in your own hearts... not in Vincent!"

Devin looked at the community around him once again. "That's all I really came to say. Try to think how you would feel if these restrictions were on any of you. Would you just arbitrarily accept them, or would you try to rebel and risk the consequences that 'could,'----that's the operative word here----'could' happen. Maybe something will happen, hopefully not. And just maybe Vincent will have the time of his life, enjoying the same freedoms we all enjoy. You must give him the chance to explore that for himself. Vincent knows the risks, to himself, and to you. He is willing to risk everything to fulfill one wish for his beloved. You must give him the opportunity to try."

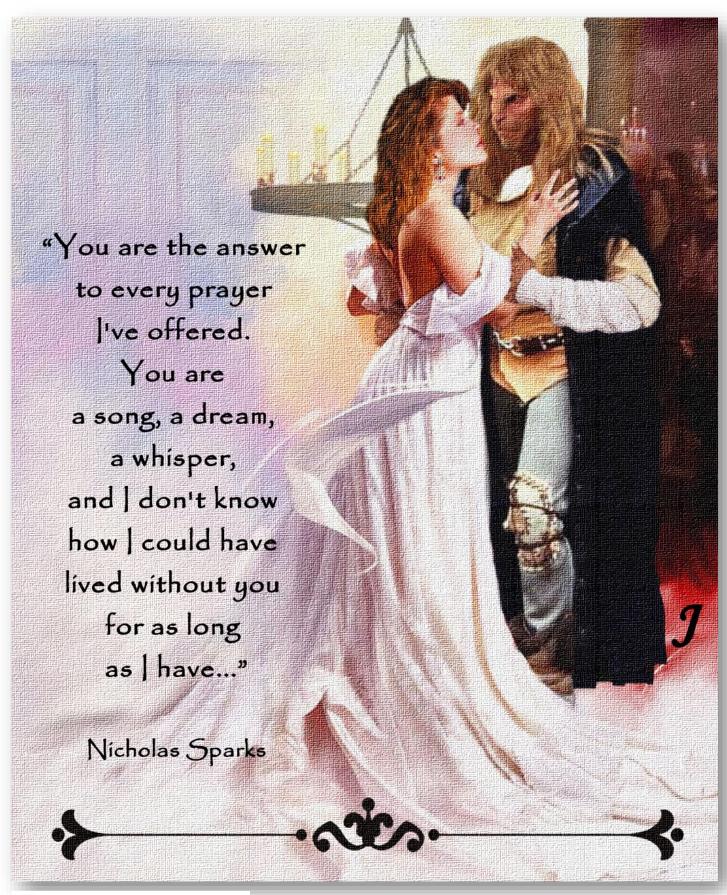
Devin bowed his head to Father and the other Council members and left the chamber. Silence followed him. No one was willing to say anything after that. Vincent followed him out of the chamber and accompanied him back to his chamber.

"Do you think it helped?" Vincent asked as they entered.

"I don't know. But I do know, everyone was feeling mighty guilty as we walked out."

"Thank you, Devin. For always having my back and encouraging me to try impossible things." Vincent then embraced his brother, who returned the hug just as tightly.





You are the Answer by Judith Nolan

Sharing the Magic

Hi Judith. Could you tell us what program or programs you use to create your digital art?

Judith: For my digital art works, I have always used GIMP 2014. I also have access to Photoshop, but I have found it can be difficult to operate. I keep to GIMP 2014 and not more updated versions because I know how to drive it and what tools to use within it to achieve the desired effect. It is a matter of imagining what you wish to achieve and then finding the right pictures to make it happen.

Do you have any advice for people who would like to try their hand at it?

Judith: My advice for anyone wishing to try GIMP is there are many online tutorials which I have used in the past. It is a matter of trial and error. You can make and remake what you are wanting to achieve and unmake what you have done by simply going backwards. Once you have achieved the desired effect then it can be removed from the GIMP template.

Once removed it cannot be returned or worked on unless you save the work with the correct code of XCF. It is a manual save. If you save your work as either a JPEG or a PNG file, then it cannot be returned to GIMP and worked on. It is truly a matter of trial and error. Best of luck!



Wish Upon a Well

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



Note: The main theme of this story was inspired by the premise for a possible second-season episode of the Beauty and the Beast series, which had never been developed into a script and filmed. The idea was suggested by Virginia Aldridge.



For my grandmother.



"That's it; you're last again, slowpoke!" Samantha chirped, grinning at Geoffrey, her hands on her hips in a victorious manner.

"That's not fair...," her friend moaned, catching his breath. "You've got longer legs."

The girl challenged him with raised eyebrows - they were almost of the same height. As their eyes met, both children burst into laughter. The rest of their friends joined them, and the happy sound filled the warm early autumn air in Central Park that Sunday afternoon.

"Give up, Geoffrey," suggested Zach. "You can never win against her, even I can't, and I can outrun anyone."

"But I bet she can't hide as well as we do," countered Kipper, the youngest, with an assured grin.

"Try me!" The girl was not fazed by his challenge. "Zach, you count, the rest of us will hide."

The oldest member of the group chuckled. Kids...

"Okay, as always, I'll count to 50, then I'll start searching. If I don't find someone in half an hour, we'll meet here again."

The children nodded in agreement. Zach turned his face towards the nearest tree, closed his eyes and started counting.

Everyone ran in a different direction. Geoffrey started running without knowing where he wanted to hide. He was counting along in his mind. When he made it to thirty, he slowed down, looking around him to find a good place to hide.

As he was walking under a majestic elm tree, he stopped in his tracks. Right in front of him, only a few feet away, as if by magic, appeared an old, stony well with an ornamental wrought-iron roof.

The Wishing Well... he thought with widened eyes. He'd heard about it once but had never seen it until now. It was almost as if it was only a story that the people in the Tunnels passed on from generation to generation. The sight itself was enchanting, but the reason that made the tunnel child stop was the figure he spotted at the well.

A grey-haired man in his early sixties was leaning against a walking stick and looking at a photo in his hand. He was dressed in an old-fashioned brown suit, probably from the early 60s, and he was holding a brown hat with the brim turned down in front. Geoffrey had seen such an outfit only once... when Father went Up-top on his ill-fated short trip.

However, the man's face was what caught the boy's attention the most. Its square shape with a wide forehead and jaw could have suggested strength and leadership qualities. Yet, the melancholic, longing look of his dark eyes gave it a much softer expression. Hidden partially behind the nearest tree, Geoffrey strained his ears as much as possible. He heard the quiet words coming out of the man's mouth as if he was talking to some invisible companion. Those quiet words hit him somewhere deep inside his still childlike soul. He couldn't understand a word of it, for the language was foreign to the boy's ears, but the painful tone of the man's voice and the solitary tear running down his cheek spoke a language understandable by anyone in the world.

Geoffrey was contemplating silent retreat when the man took out a coin from his trouser pocket, and after a brief moment of observing it, he threw it into the well. Then he wiped away the tear from his face, and with a deep sigh, he slowly walked to sit down on the nearest bench.

The tunnel boy was deep in thought as his sensitive brown eyes followed the mysterious stranger. What strange fate could have marked this man so painfully? Was there anyone in his life to help him with whatever it was that saddened him? Or was he all alone, walking through life as a lonesome strider?

Hide-and-seek forgotten, Geoffrey slowly turned, and unable to return from his brooding, his feet set out for the walk back towards the Tunnels.



"Geoffrey?" A curious, gravelly voice broke the silence in the chamber.

The boy was startled at such a sudden interruption of his thoughts. He noticed that the literature lesson had already ended, and all the other children were gone, leaving him alone with his tutor, who was watching him intently while holding a volume of Frances H. Burnett's *The Secret Garden* in his hands.

The pupil shook his head apologetically. "I'm sorry, Vincent. I was thinking about something."

"I can see that you have something on your mind. Would you like to share what's troubling you?"

Geoffrey sighed, and a worried expression appeared on his gentle face. "It's this man I've seen in the park," he started. "He seems very sad and lonely. I wish I could help him."

Vincent listened to the whole story of the mysterious park visitor with genuine interest. His little friend's compassion for the stranger made him smile. Geoffrey had always been a sensitive child.

"So, you have seen the man twice more?" Vincent asked.

"Yes, always on a Sunday at about the same time, in the afternoon," confirmed the boy. "He comes to the well, stands there for a while, then sits down on a bench nearby and holds the photograph in his hands. Do you think there is a way we could help him somehow?"

"That might be very difficult," replied Vincent truthfully. "We don't know the man's name, where he lives, or anything about the photograph you saw in his hands, nor who is in it."

After a brief moment of silence, Geoffrey spoke with conviction. "If anyone can do it, it's you. You can do anything."

Moved by such faith in his abilities, Vincent smiled and seeing his little friend's unusual determination, it was clear he at least had to try. After all, the past year had proved to him that nothing was impossible...

"Perhaps there is a way," he stated with a smile.

Geoffrey's face lit up with gratitude... and hope.



The night was pleasantly mild. It seemed the late summer was trying to reclaim its reign from autumn. The dark sky over the city was sprinkled with twinkling stars, visible quite clearly from places Vincent was leading Catherine through.

"I don't think we have ever walked this way," she remarked with a curious smile, glancing at him as they strolled hand in hand through Central Park.

"There are many pathways in the park leading to various places," Vincent replied enigmatically and tightened his hold on her hand a little. "I've spent countless nights throughout my life here, and yet I continue to discover ways and places I have not set foot upon before."

Catherine's contented, blissful expression revealed how fond she was of their walks, exploring the park together. Recently these night walks had become more frequent, weather permitting, and she thoroughly enjoyed them.

Joe would have a fit seeing me out here so late, she thought, with an amused smile.

She was fully engrossed in the delight of breathing in the pleasantly mild air, listening to the sound of their footsteps rustling gently in the grass, and the calming sound of the tree leaves moving in the light breeze. It came almost as a shock to her when Vincent suddenly halted.

"This is my latest discovery," he said and pointed to the well a few meters ahead.

Even in the darkness of the night, Catherine saw the beautiful and intricately shaped cast-iron roof of the unusual object, one rarely seen in a public park.

"Oh, it's beautiful! I never knew there was a well in Central Park," she admitted curiously, wide-eyed. "It looks like it was made sometime in the late 19th century."

"Not long after the park was officially opened, yes," added Vincent, proving his great knowledge of his second home.

"Why would someone build a well in a public park?" Catherine wondered.

The lion-man chuckled, glancing into the dark depth of the well. "People in the Tunnels talk of legends, almost magical stories about it, most regarding unfulfilled love. Some of the older Tunnel dwellers swear that those who express their deepest wish here, will always have that wish fulfilled."

"How come you never found it before?" the woman by his side asked, secretly in awe that there was something Vincent hadn't known about.

"There is no sign of it on any map. Apparently, only people who truly need it will find it at just the right time," he explained with a smile.

Catherine couldn't suppress a smile of her own. "Do you believe in it, in its power?"

"Believing in something with all your heart is half of the making of a dream come true," he replied, regarding her fondly.

The look in Catherine's eyes softened as she regarded his exotic yet attractive face in the moonlight... she had her own, secret dream... or maybe not so secret. Their eyes met for a moment. Then Vincent looked away, breaking the intensity heating up the air between them.

"It was Geoffrey who told me where to find it," he spoke after a moment and told her the boy's story about the old man, making clear the real purpose of bringing Catherine to the well.

"And you don't know the man's name or where he lives?" she inquired.

"No. Geoffrey says he couldn't make out what the man was saying, only that he looked very depressed and lonely," Vincent stated, his eyes fixed on the deep

by Lynette Parker

darkness inside the well, which was covered by a heavy cast-iron grate.

A resolved expression appeared on Catherine's face when she spoke again. "It seems Geoffrey found the well for a reason. We must try to find out what it is."

Vincent smiled, having expected her words. He turned his head to look into those big emerald eyes, full of life and decisiveness.

"I might have an idea."



His feet carried him to the same place as they had every Sunday afternoon in the past five months. Ever since he had discovered the old well on his lonely walks through Central Park, he couldn't break the habit of visiting it once a week. He was never much into magic, but since being a believer, faith was not unfamiliar to him. And faith usually walks hand-in-hand with hope. So, after all, was it really so unusual that he might have believed in something as trivial in many people's eyes as the power of a wishing well?

His only companion was his walking stick, a piece of old chestnut-brown wood with a silver handle shaped like the head of an eagle. He had needed it ever since he had tripped on the stairs and broken his hip a few years ago. The recovery didn't go as he had hoped for.

Unhurried, the man made his way to the well, leaning against it with a sigh of relief. A habit can become a great comfort, be it even a minor one. He took an old, lightly-stained photograph from his jacket pocket.

So here we are, again...

His thumb caressed the woman's face in the photograph, his eyes closed, and his lips started moving in quiet prayer. Minutes passed as a light breeze played with the short strands of his grey hair, and only the sound of children's laughter broke the train of his thoughts after he had finished his prayer.

He opened his eyes to the scene in the photograph again. It brought a bittersweet smile to his lips. Long, bony fingers reached inside his jacket pocket again, this time they fished out a dime. He dropped the coin into the well and watched it fall through the grate, waiting for the familiar distant splashing sound. Once he heard it, a deep sigh put an end to his ritual. He turned and made his way over to the bench nearby. Once he rested on it, his dark eyes found the well again, and his mind began to drift away.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" a soft feminine voice gently interrupted his contemplation.

When he turned toward the direction of the voice, he saw the face of a beautiful young woman with big emerald eyes, regarding him with the warmest smile he had seen in a while.

"I... yes, it is," he agreed, surprised.

"I've heard that this well makes people's wishes come true," Catherine continued.

The old man chuckled and glanced at the object in question again. "Yes, so I've heard," he replied quietly.

Catherine noted the sadness in his voice.

"May I sit down?" she asked.

"Please," the man answered with an unsure, slightly raspy voice, though genuinely glad. Since his early retirement, it had been a while since he had spoken to someone other than a mailman or a shop assistant. He still didn't feel brave enough to start a conversation. His unexpected companion solved that problem for him.

"I've often walked in Central Park since I was a child, and my parents brought me here on Sundays. But I had never seen this well until recently," she remarked casually.

"I discovered it randomly a few months ago, on one of my walks," he shyly braved an answer.

"A friend showed it to me. He always manages to surprise me with things and places I've never seen before," Catherine added with a revealing smile.

The old man noticed the twinkle in her eyes as she spoke. The heartfelt and kind tone of this woman's voice and the warmth in her eyes suddenly made him feel more comfortable. Barely used to socialising in the last few years, all at once he craved it like a child craves sweets when looking at them in a candy store window.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I have a feeling this friend of yours is... special to you," he noted, a hint of melancholy appearing on his face.

Catherine reprimanded herself mentally for allowing her emotions to run away with her. She shook her head bashfully. "You are not wrong," she replied and smiled. "He is *everything* to me. By the way, my name is Catherine."

"John is mine," the man answered and gentlemanly shook her hand, nodding briefly.

Suddenly, she sensed that the door to solving the mystery was opening. "Do *you* have anyone who means everything to you, John?"

With the blink of an eye, the man's face grew sad as he lowered his eyes, pinning them to the ground. "I did once..." came the answer, "a long time ago."

Hearing the pain in his voice, Catherine felt deep sympathy for the man by her side.

"What happened?" she asked the simple, most logical question.

He raised his eyes to her and seeing the genuine interest in this stranger's beautiful eyes, a feeling of resignation came over him. Wordlessly, he reached for the photograph in his pocket and passed it to her.

"She was the most wonderful woman I have ever known," John started, leaning back with a sigh, and his eyes wandered into the distance ahead. "We lived in the same village, attended the same school, shared the same friends. She was smart, witty, elegant...

"Her family wasn't rich, but she always managed to make the most out of the least... creating magic. And how she loved to laugh! Her sense of humour was one of the things I loved most about her, especially when she played pranks on others," he laughed. "Nobody was safe with her, but she would never go as far as hurting someone."

He looked at the woman in the photograph again and grew earnest once more. "We were only children when WWII started, but we would spend as much time in each other's company as we could, along with the rest of our circle of friends. You don't ignore the fact that something horrifying is going on around you, but you try to find a silver lining in each cloud, even the darkest one...

"It was surely different for the Americans, at least during the first years, but when you were growing up in Europe and had war right at your doorstep, your life was no walk through a rosy garden, I can tell you that."

Catherine was listening intently, slowly being swept away by melancholy. However, John's last words brought a small smile to her face. "I had a feeling you were not a born American," she remarked warmly.

Her companion chuckled. "I know. Even after more than forty years, I still can't get rid of my Polish accent." He glanced at her with an amused smile, shaking his head.

"It's nothing to worry about," Catherine reassured him. "In the end, we are all children of this Earth, regardless of our accent, descent, or the way we look... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you," she apologised, eager to hear more.

"No harm done, young lady." John smiled, ready to continue. "Well, anyway... A year after the beginning of the war, our parents understood things were not looking good for us and like so many, they decided to pack up and take their loved ones away from Poland. They had to spend all of their savings. It was a very arduous journey, but we made it somehow. New beginnings are always difficult, especially in a strange country, and we didn't speak the language at first. However, with hard work, we managed to settle down and find a new home."

"I can imagine you missed Poland anyway," remarked Catherine with compassion.

"Of course, not a day had gone by when I didn't think about returning there someday. But life was busy, years passed, and now... I guess I got too settled here in the end."

A small smile told her that John had truly accepted life in his second home. There was still more to find out, though. "What happened with both of you then?"

"She was resolved to become a teacher. A few years after the end of the war, she started working at the local school for Polish children, teaching English, Math, and Biology. I helped my father, who was a carpenter by trade. He managed to open his own business after a few years of working for a kind man who employed him soon after we had arrived in New York."

John stretched his legs, and for a moment, he was basking in the sun, which veiled the late afternoon park in a golden glow.

Catherine allowed him to take a breather and fixed her eyes on the photograph that she was still holding. In it, there was a beautiful, gentle-faced young woman in a black period dress, in the arms of a young, dark-haired man, dressed in an elegant dark suit, white shirt and a black bowtie. They were gazing at each other, and although they were not smiling, the intensity of their connection and the underlying emotions were palpable.

"That photo was made at a ball organised by our school three years after the war had ended. We thought it would be fun if we borrowed period costumes from the local theatre group of which we were members." He smiled again. "My, my, she was some actress! I always thought she should have become a professional... Well, there was a photographer at that ball. I don't know how, but I finally found the courage to ask her to dance with me. I had danced with other girls before, but this..."

"This was about dancing with someone you had true feelings for," Catherine finished with empathy.

John looked at her with a sad smile and sighed. "Yes... although she didn't know..."

"Why?" Catherine couldn't comprehend.

"I guess I never thought I was... worthy... interesting... good enough to be more to her than just a good friend. I didn't think I could give her everything she deserved."

Catherine felt a sting somewhere under her left ribs. The words felt too familiar, as if about someone she knew and cared deeply for. "I think I can understand," she stated quietly, with a distant look.

"No offence, but how could you?" John raised his eyebrows with a small smile.

She chuckled and sighed. "Trust me, you're not the only one with confidence issues."

He narrowed his dark eyes, studying her profile with interest. There was something fascinating about this woman, and very comforting.

Catherine returned his inquisitive look, telling herself that despite being in his early sixties, the man next to her still possessed great charm. And judging by the photograph, he indeed had been a good-looking young man once.

"In any case, we finally made it to the dance floor together, but then Alina spotted... oh, I apologise," John changed the topic suddenly. "I didn't mention her name! Well, now you know. Anyway, she spotted the photographer nearby, taking pictures of the couples in the room. She said, 'Janusz, let's have a picture taken to mark this lovely day!' So we did."

He noticed Catherine's curious expression. "Janusz is my Polish name. I changed it sometime after I came to America. John is easier to spell," he explained, drawing an understanding smile from her. "That photograph is the only image I have left of her..."

"What happened?" she inquired with interest.

John absently played with the eagle head on his walking stick. "Two years later, she met someone."

Silence befell them immediately, as if nothing else needed to be said. The pain behind those few words expressed a whole range of emotions weighing on him.

"Were you sure she didn't feel the same way about you as you did about her?" Catherine asked eventually.

A sigh preceded his words. "She never said anything. We spent a lot of time together in the final school years, but things changed once we both started working. She met new people and one of them was her future husband. He was a good man, I'll give him that; polite, intelligent, kind, well-behaved. Not rich either, but Alina never looked at people for their money. They spent more and more time together and two years after they first met, I was already a guest at their wedding...

"After another year, they moved to Rhode Island, where he got a better job. Alina and I wrote to each other for a couple of more years, but somehow, we drifted apart with time. I guess Providence wanted it that way."

Catherine shuddered at his words. *Providence... Rhode Island...* She too got offered a better job in Rhode Island once, and like Alina, she too chose to follow her heart... by staying in New York. Would she have become a solitary, lonely wanderer like John, roaming the streets and parks almost two hundred miles away, if she had left back then?

"I'm sorry," she said with compassion after her quiet contemplation.

"I'm not," her companion countered. "I got to spend many years in her presence, shared her joys and sorrows, and forged a friendship that neither time nor space could erase from my mind. I do have regrets, but mostly, I am grateful."

A small smile settled on his face before his eyes travelled into the distance again. "People always say, 'I wish I could see you at least one more time'. Sometimes it sounds so trivial, so insignificant, trying to change something that can't be changed... and yet I can't help but wish the same, at least to know she's well and satisfied with her life. I know it will never happen, though. Too much time has been lost," he concluded with a sigh.

The azure blue of the sky above them started fading in the late afternoon hour.

"Nothing is ever lost," Catherine spoke gently into the cooling air, watching two thrushes exploring a patch of grass. "With love, all things are possible..."



On that quiet, peaceful afternoon, Vincent climbed the circular staircase to the upper level of his father's chamber. The patriarch's main library was his destination, and he knew that the volume he was looking for was not among the countless book piles scattered everywhere around the lower chamber level. It was in one of the several tall bookcases, with neatly organized editions on the shelves.

Vincent used to spend hours there as a boy, always excited by the prospect of immersing himself in a new, foreign place and a new adventure.

"I really need more proper shelves in here," Jacob's voice suddenly flew up to him from below.

"That's what you said last year," Vincent remarked. "And the year before, in fact, you say that at least once a year *every* year, whenever you get new books from the Helpers."

"Well, yes, but this time I truly mean it. This place needs some order. I will need to have a word with Cullen," came the reply, filled with conviction.

"I've heard that before, as well," Vincent stated quietly, smiling.

"Anyway... are you looking for anything specific?" the patriarch asked from behind his dark-rimmed glasses, changing the topic.

"Odyssey," his son answered, his sharp eyes skimming through the spines on the nearest shelf.

"A-ha, I see," Father replied, making his way up to join Vincent. "Your heart is crying for some Greek drama. Since you were twelve, you have read it only... ten times." He chuckled.

"As you always say, Father... 'Good books are like good friends that we love returning to'," the younger man remarked fondly.

Jacob reached for a volume on the shelf in front of him. "Of course." He passed the book to Vincent and raised his eyebrows. "Even if they deal with murders, immorality, animal transformations and cannibalism," he added with a grin, amusing them both.

"But it also deals with life's journey and the power of love," his son contradicted softly. "One that persevered for decades, only to fight separation and all odds to find fulfilment again."

"Oh yes, the devoted, passionate, evergreen, undying love. I know." Jacob's grin faded. "The one that often makes us suffer more than we can bear," he added with sadness, more to himself than to Vincent.

The lion-man regarded his father for a moment before he spoke. "And yet, we love anyway."

Jacob lifted his eyes to him, briefly silenced by those few words. The corners of his mouth turned upwards as he nodded. "Quite foolishly we do."

Vincent tilted his head, putting his hand on his father's shoulder. "We are all fools in love." ¹

The knowing smile and a kiss on Jacob's temple were Vincent's parting gifts before he descended the stairs and quietly left the chamber with the book in his hand.



The Assistant District Attorney's office was buzzing with activity on Monday morning. As Joe liked to emphasise in recent weeks, it was the high season of crime, meaning everyone had to give 110% to their work, without exception.

Catherine was browsing through one of the too many files crying for her attention, waiting on her desk. Forcing herself to focus, she was well aware of the fact that she was failing. Her mind kept returning stubbornly to the conversation she had had with her new acquaintance the day before. Suddenly, her brooding was interrupted by the thud of more files landing on her desk.

"Tough weekend, Radcliffe?" Joe raised his eyebrows.

"I'm sorry, Joe," she apologised, fully back in the present. "My brain just shut down for a minute."

"Yeah, a common phenomenon in this office lately," came the sarcastic reply, accompanied by a grin. "These need a response within a week. You better tell your brain to hold off on the vacation for a bit longer."

Catherine watched her boss turn on his heel and return to his private office. She shook her head with a loud sigh. She intended to fully focus on the file again when she spotted Rita approaching her.

"Here's the file on the guy from the Johner case you wanted. I'm still searching for the one from the Pernell case. He's a bit tougher to figure out," the computer division's up-and-coming rising star stated from behind her large, black-rimmed glasses.

"That was quick, thank you!" Catherine accepted the file with appreciation. "You're doing really great having been here only a few weeks now. You've come at the worst time... it's been pure madness here for the past month."

"Well, I have big shoes to fill," Rita replied with a humble smile. "Or so I've heard."

¹ Jane Austen: "Pride and Prejudice"

Both women chuckled. Then Catherine looked at the piles on her desk but immediately leaned back in her chair, resignedly, shaking her head. She realised there was no way of getting back into attorney mode unless she could do something about the issue occupying her mind. Suddenly she had an idea and looked at Rita, who watched her with amusement.

"Would you have time to look up something else for me?" Catherine asked hopefully.

"When does anyone have time here? But go for it. Anything for you," came the reassuring reply.

Catherine looked around to see if Joe was in sight, then taking a piece of paper, she wrote down something and passed it to Rita.

"I need you to see if you can find anything about this name."



The rain was persistent that day and Catherine Chandler was battling her way through it with her umbrella, trying not to get drenched. She managed successfully to avoid disaster until she was almost at her destination, an old brownstone on 59th Street, on the southern side of Central Park. Just then, a cab, going past with speed that raised the eyebrows and adrenaline of the nearest passers-by, gave her a shower that surpassed her morning one.

"Damn!" she cursed, frustrated, putting a few wet strands of hair behind her ear. "This better be worth it," she muttered and walked up the few stairs leading to the front door. She pushed one of the doorbell buttons and waited.

"Hello?" a strong woman's voice came from the speaker.

"Mrs Kaminski?"

"Yes, speaking," was the reply.

"Hello. My name is Catherine Chandler. I'm sorry to bother you, but I would like to speak to you if you have a minute. I believe we have a common acquaintance."

A brief moment of silence was interrupted by, "Come in, please," and the sound of the buzzer. The click of the door followed, and Catherine pushed it open.

She found herself in a long hallway decorated with a few landscapes and portrait paintings on the walls. Only a moment later, she spotted a figure appearing in front of her, standing at the door leading to another room.

It was a woman in her late 50s, dressed in a colourful flower-pattern dress with long sleeves, with a crown of short, permed and blue-rinsed hair. A delicate

golden chain with a small cross around her neck completed her elegant look. Her curious, small blue eyes noticed Catherine's state and immediately she moved toward her. Although time certainly left its marks, Catherine easily recognised the features of the young woman in John's photograph in the face right in front of her.

"Goodness, what brings you here in such dreadful weather? Come in, you need to get dry," said Mrs Kaminski, taking her guest's soaked coat and umbrella. Then she drew the young woman into the living room, seating her near the crackling fireplace.

"Thank you," Catherine said gratefully with a smile, warming her chilled hands by the fire. "I guess fall has finally arrived."

"Tell me about it," Mrs Kaminski said, putting a warm blanket over her young guest's shoulders. "I realised that while playing with my flowerpots yesterday. The night frosts always come earlier than I would wish them to."

She was about to sit down in the vintage armchair by the fire when she straightened herself up again. "I apologise! Would you like anything to drink? I guess you could do with something hot. Tea or coffee perhaps?" she offered friendly.

"Coffee would be lovely," Catherine replied gratefully. "Thank you."

"I won't be a minute," assured her hostess and briskly disappeared to the kitchen.

That gave Catherine a few minutes to look around and have a brief visual tour of Alina's life. It seemed as if time stood still in that room. The neat but not too fancy vintage furniture in natural, warm colours gave it a feel of the late 1950s. Various porcelain statuettes in a glass display, on the wall shelves, and on what looked like a very old, black grand piano, decorated the space, along with a set of crystal glasses and bowls in another glass-door display. There were more beautiful landscape paintings on the walls, but what Catherine found most interesting were the photos.

There weren't many of them, only three, all black and white, on the mantelpiece, but they all radiated comfort and happiness. In the first one, there was a family of five in front of a Christmas tree. Catherine recognised one woman as Mrs. Kaminski, probably in her early forties then. The man next to her seemed a bit older, seemingly her husband. The other three people in the photo were younger, two girls and a boy, all in their late teens. It was very likely that it was a photo of Alina with her husband and children. The second photo was a portrait of the same older man from the first picture. An approximately three-year-old curly-

haired girl with cherubic cheeks was looking out of a window in the last photograph.

"Oh, when we were still young and beautiful," Alina's smiling voice came from behind Catherine's back.

"You still are," her guest replied, turning to her with a genuine smile.

"Young people often tend to be too kind to the older ones. But thank you," she remarked gratefully.

With a chuckle, she walked over to her guest. She put a decorative tray with a vintage porcelain coffeepot, two cups with saucers, a sugar bowl and a creamer on a side table. After making and passing Catherine her coffee, she approached the mantelpiece, observing the framed photographs.

"My children, and my late husband," Alina said with a fond smile. "We had a good life, Eliasz and I. It was filled with love, respect and common values. We always had each other's back... until he passed away unexpectedly almost eight years ago." A touch of melancholy coloured her voice. "That's when I moved back to New York. Even after thirty years of living away, I felt I had a certain... attachment to this place."

She smiled and looked at the last photograph. "My eldest granddaughter," she added and couldn't suppress a giggle, affectionately observing the little girl in the picture. Suddenly she looked earnestly at Catherine.

"Excuse me, but you said we have a common acquaintance. Who did you mean?" Alina inquired curiously.

Her visitor searched for the right words for a moment.

"Yes, I...," Catherine hesitated only briefly before taking a sip of coffee and putting the cup down. "I would like to do a favour for someone I have only recently met, and I believe you could help me."

The older woman knitted her brows but encouraged the stranger to continue. "Go on."

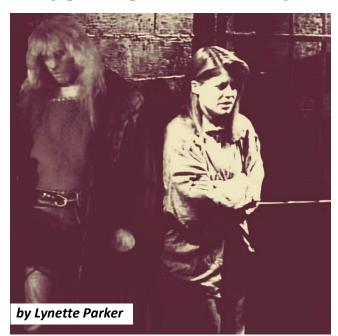
Catherine smiled, happy to have found a door open to fulfil her mission. Her warm-hearted look focused on the sky-blue eyes of her hostess.

"Let me tell you a story..."



It was already past 11 p.m. when she hastily made her way down to the basement of her apartment building. Quickly descending the ladder, she finally landed on the concrete ground and turned around to look into the semi-darkness behind the ever-present beam of white light.

"I'm sorry I'm late. Work has been a nightmare this week," she apologised while taking quick steps to meet the tall figure in the shadows.



"No need to apologise, Catherine. I know you're busy," Vincent countered with a gentle smile. The vision of her silky hair wetted by the rain, framing her face, and her coat leaving watermarks on the ground made 'butterflies in the stomach' sound like an understatement. It reminded him of another enchanting sight a few weeks ago.

"And just as I got out of the cab, it started pouring buckets, and I realised I forgot my umbrella in the office," she laughed, shaking her head. "It wasn't as elevating an

experience as that time at the concert, though."

She crossed the threshold and embraced her beloved ardently. It was the moment she was craving and waiting for all day... the most singular place... the feeling of comfort, peace and love... in his arms.

Vincent rubbed his cheek in the wet strands of her hair, smiling. "You could have sent a message. Rest is what you need most now," he remarked with care, though secretly pleased that she had come in person.

She raised her head to look into his eyes. "This is what I need most now."

Those words and her gaze disarmed him. "You have been successful," he stated without hesitation, pride in her abilities colouring his voice.

Catherine's beaming smile confirmed his theory. "I wish I could surprise you at least once without you *knowing* already." She laughed, enjoying how Vincent humbly lowered his eyes.

"You surprise me every day, Catherine, never doubt that," he replied, eventually.

She resisted the urge to do something spontaneous and returned from the clouds. "Yes, I have been successful, and by Sunday evening, we should have the question answered."

"What question?" he asked.

"The question 'Are all things possible with love?"

The excitement of the expectation in her voice was evident, though the sparkle in her eyes told him that Catherine had known the answer to that question for a long time.



The hands on his leather-strapped watch showed 5 p.m. when John approached the Wishing Well in Central Park on yet another Sunday. For a while, he was watching the still green leaves on the nearby trees sway gently in the autumn breeze. Then he took a deep breath and sighed, taking the familiar photo out of his pocket.

These trips were becoming more and more difficult for him emotionally. Why was he doing this to himself? What was he hoping for by performing this childish routine Sunday after Sunday? Why hadn't he tried to reconnect with Alina years ago already? All these questions were invading his mind, as was one answer - he was *afraid* to reconnect.

Knowing he would never have been more than a friend, he feared his heart would not have been able to bear it. Yet, as the years passed, so had his longing. His voluntary loneliness had become burdensome and depressing. Some people were content living alone, or at least they could live with the reality of returning to an empty home and living mainly for their work. John was not one of those people. While being successful at his job and an independent individual, he was only human. He *could* have been a friend now.

"You silly fool," he chided himself with a sigh and decisively put the photograph back into his pocket. "You're too late, thirty years too late."

"It is never too late to be what you might have been," ² an emotionally-charged voice startled him from behind.

When he turned around, the image of a middle-aged, elegant woman regarding him with her hands pressed to her chest took his breath away. Time can rob us of many things, but never of recognising a beloved face.

² George Eliot

"Alina...," he whispered, slowly raising his hand as if to reach for her, to assure himself she was real and not only a fantasy.

Finally, encouraged by his disbelieving smile and the tears rolling down his cheeks, she slowly closed the distance between them. Her eyes were glistening, and when her own hand cautiously reached for his, he noticed it was shaking.

"Janusz..."

Not far away from them, in the shade of the old elm tree, Catherine was watching the lost and found lovers with a contented smile, deeply moved inside.

"Will she stay with him now?" asked Geoffrey, watching the scene with her. "I think there is no doubt about that," Catherine answered, fondly ruffling his hair. "The truth is out, and nothing separates them anymore."

The boy felt pride in his young heart for having played a part in the successful reunion. "Everyone who loves someone should be with them, always," he contemplated.

Catherine's smile faded a little as she looked at him. "Sometimes it's not so easy, Geoffrey," she said softly, her eyes on him but her mind somewhere else. "Sometimes it takes... patience. But if we *really* wish for it and hold on tight to that wish... we *can* make it happen."

Her little friend's smile was contagious. "I know *you* can too," he remarked knowingly, and Catherine suddenly thought that he was growing up too fast.



Another pleasantly mild night descended upon Central Park, and it seemed that even more stars decided to show off their beauty to the world. It was almost midnight, but the two lovers standing at the Wishing Well were in no hurry to leave. They were leaning against it and watching the great spectacle in the dark sky above them.

"It feels so wonderful, Vincent," Catherine remarked in awe and couldn't wipe the smile off her glowing face.

"You have achieved something special, Catherine. You brought back to each other two souls who were bound together all their lives. That *is* something to feel wonderful about," he replied, regarding the moonlight reflecting on her happy face.

"Alina said she had always loved John, but because he never called his feelings by their true name, she didn't wish to ruin their friendship. She thought that's how he wanted it." She shook her head at the irony. "How familiar..."

A painful memory flashed in Vincent's eyes, reflecting her own - Providence, Rhode Island. It had almost parted them forever.

Catherine brought them back to the present. "Time can separate people for life, but sometimes, it can bring them together again. And it is thanks to *you*, that I was able to be a part of the happy ending for John and Alina," she added with a smile.

"Thanks to Geoffrey, his perceptiveness and generous heart," he corrected her modestly, though gladly sharing the triumph with her.

Catherine reached into the pocket of her denim jacket. She produced a dime and showed it to Vincent, prompting him to take it.

"For you, Vincent. Make a wish," she said with smiling eyes.

The gesture warmed his heart, but his hand gently closed her hand, which held the coin.

"Thank you, but I can't." His voice was filled with regret. "I'm afraid my wish would be too daring to come true..."

Catherine's heart ached when hearing those words, but then a bright smile replaced the melancholy on her face.

"Then I shall make a wish for *both* of us," she stated, her eyes locked with his for an intense moment.

She moved her hand above the grate covering the well, closed her eyes and dropped the dime in. When she opened her eyes to Vincent again, they shone with strong conviction in the moonlight. They were leaving no room for doubt. Whatever Catherine had wished for, he knew she believed in it with absolute certainty.

When her small body hid in his embrace, Vincent smiled and rested his cheek on the top of her head.

"For so many years, he couldn't forget her," Catherine pondered. "He never even married... just like Father and Margaret."

"Or Odysseus and Penelope," Vincent added, and his eyes wandered up towards the sky. "Two souls waiting for one another, parting on their common journey for a while, only to share it again in the end. No force can push true love into oblivion - not separation, not differences, not even time."

They were standing in their embrace for a while, listening to the colourful sounds of the night, each of them deep in thought. Vincent's sudden soft chuckle made Catherine raise her head. Her inquisitive look asked the question for her.

"I was only thinking," Vincent explained, amused by his own childlike urge. He then pierced her eyes with a direct gaze. "What did you wish for, Catherine?"

For a moment, she regarded him silently, finding pleasure in keeping up the suspense. Then her lips broke into a mysterious smile as her arms tightened their hold around his waist.

"You know the rules, Vincent. If I tell you, it won't come true..."



by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



"Remember tonight... for it is the beginning of always."
- Dante Alighieri

^{**}Illustrations provided by the author except where otherwise indicated.



Halloween Night

by Judith Nolan



Charles Chandler sighed when Catherine appeared from her bedroom. "Have I ever told you how beautiful you are? You remind me more and more of your mother."

"I miss her too, Dad." Catherine led him toward the balcony doors.

Charles smiled as they stepped up and passed through the sheer curtains. "I'm so glad you've found someone to love. I have my memories and I have you."

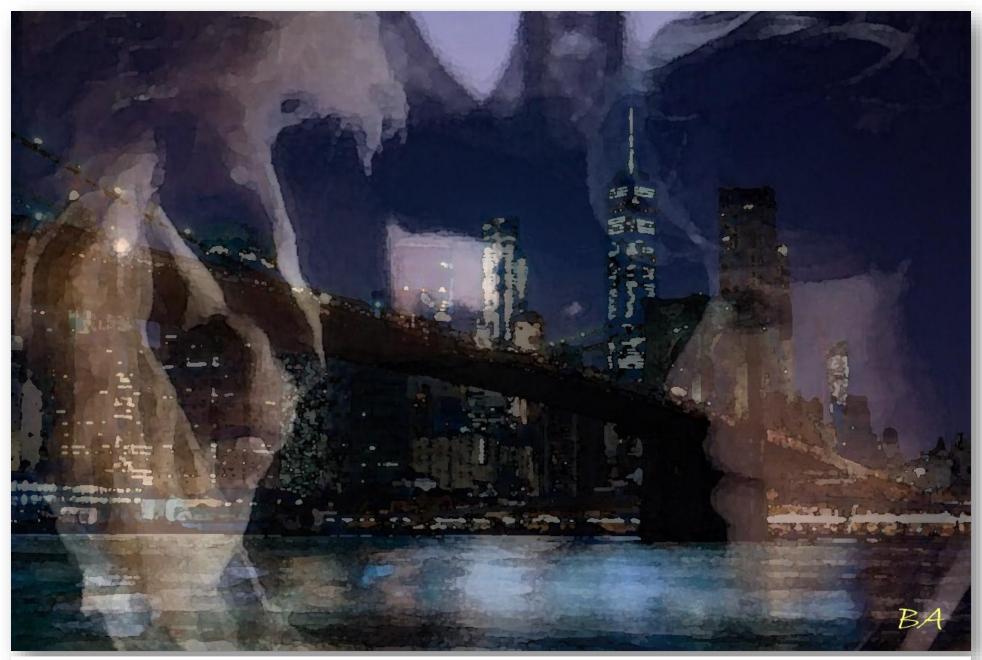
"You sure do." Catherine drew him into the night. "And I have Vincent."

A large, dark shape walked into the pool of light spilling from the apartment. "Good evening, Charles," Vincent said quietly.



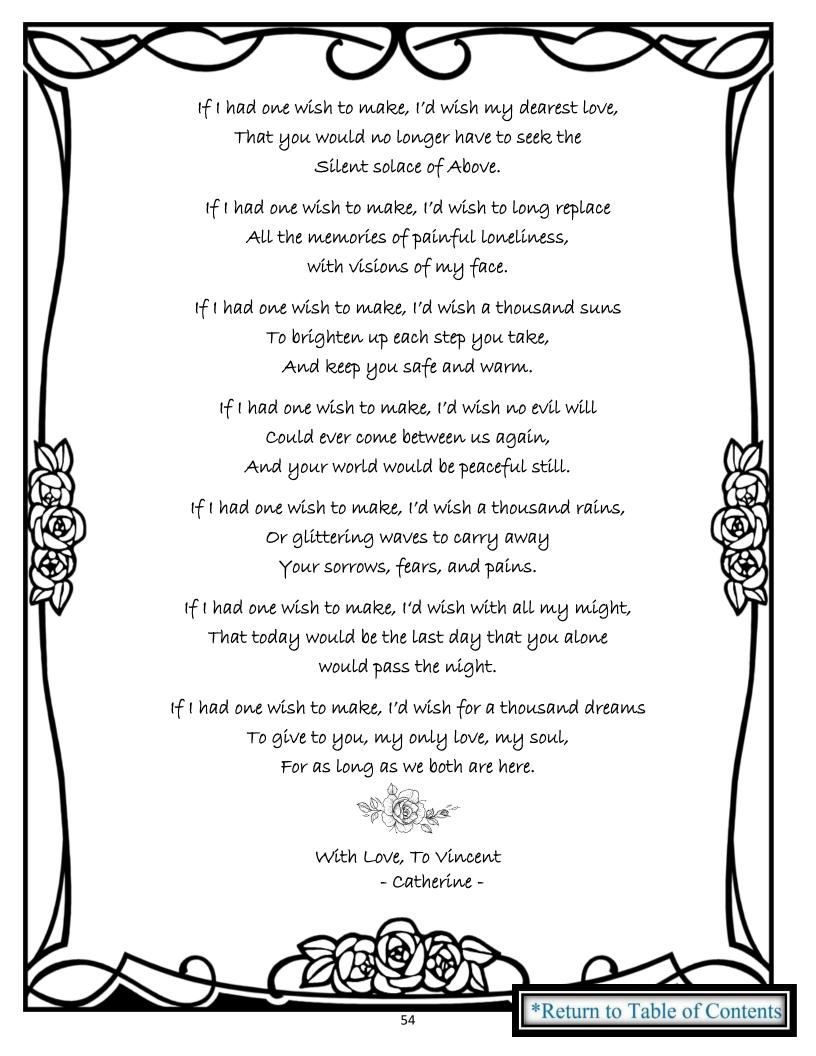


by Judith Nolan



by Barbara Anderson Barbara created this picture by using a watercolor filter in Microsoft Digital Image Suite and then layering them for a transparent effect.









by Lynette Parker



Sharing the Magic

Hi Lynette, I was hoping you could tell us what programs you use to create your art and how they come together. Is it different for each piece or do you use the same program for all of them?

Lynette: Before I begin, let me give a shout-out and thank you to CABB (Photo Gallery, and Batbland publicity photos), and The Treasure Chambers (Epi Cap Library). Without their screenshots and publicity photos I wouldn't be learning how to or creating digital art.

I don't consider myself an artist or a techie. I do good to draw stick figures.lol. Creating digital art can be enjoyable and frustrating. There's a lot of apps/programs available a few are truly amazing, some are good, others ok and the rest don't even get me started about them. I use the Google Play Store to get apps for my tablet and cellphone (a cellphone that's used only for digital art. Use wifi).

To get one started in the process of creating digital art you need apps that cover these basics. These are my favorites as they're easy to use, are reliable, have updates, and excellent results.

- **1.** Edge Tracer by Magic Hour---This app is for tracing/erasing around the edges of Vincent, Catherine and others in those screenshots/publicity photos turning them into pngs with a transparent background.
- **2.** Photo Editor by dev macgyver---This app I use to save those pngs, and art temporarily. Later I save them in folders on the SD card.

Some of the apps have their own folder on the device, or they save to camera, pictures, or download on your device which takes up space. That's why I always go save them on the SD card.

3. PhotoLayers-Superimpose Eraser by Handy Closet Inc--- This app is where I add a background, then V, C, andor other transparent pngs making what I refer to as a "wip" (work in progress). This app has features such as opacity, brightness, hue, tint, saturation, contrast, rotate, flip and crop. It saves the work as a png in a folder on the device named PhotoLayers.

I use various apps from the Google Play Store to create my digital art such as: Photo Paint, Prisma Art, Effect Photo Editor, Artist A - Art Photo Editor, Watercolor Effects & Filter by QniPaint Watercolor Sketch Camera, Paint Art Effect by Android Lab App, Sketch Master by Dumpling Sandwich software Photo Effect Pro by DHG Solutions, Photo Editor Pro Pic Editor, Impressionism Camera, Automatic Background Changer, Arto Photo Background Changer, Arto Watercolor, Arto Sketch, Arto Oil Paint Photoshop Express Photo Editor by Adobe, VistaCreate, Photo Overlap Blender by Z Mobile Apps Photo Blender, and Paint Art Photo Editor by PSS Tech.

I use a disc stylus pen or a mesh stylus pen when using these apps. The disc stylus pen is a must have when using the Edge Tracer app.

Through trials and errors, I'll use different features from two or more apps to create the final digital artwork. It's a lot of work but it creates art that passes my standards half the time.

Do you have any words of advice for people just beginning to play with digital art?

My words of advice for people just beginning to play with digital art is to set aside a regular designated time for it, have coffee, tea, water and snacks ready (save the wine as a reward for completing an art piece). To gently ease into digital art, choose a screenshot/publicity photo that only contains one person as it's easier to edge erase around. You'll gain confidence. Most importantly, have fun creating digital art.

{{{Lion Hugs}}},

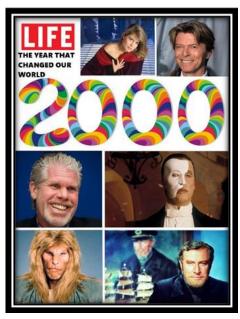
Lynette



"The True Meaning of Friendship..."

by Judith Nolan





"Be yourself; everyone else is already taken..."

Oscar Wilde



This piece is the follow-up fic for some I wrote a few years ago and more recently.

They can be found here.

<u>LibraryJudith (treasurechambers.com)</u>

A Walk in the Dark, a beauty and the beast fanfic | FanFiction

<u>Legends Never Die, a Ghost and Mrs. Muir + Phantom of the Opera Crossover</u>
<u>fanfic | FanFiction</u>

When Anything Is Possible, a Beauty and the Beast + Ghost and Mrs. Muir Crossover fanfic | FanFiction

How It Might Have Been, a beauty and the beast fanfic | FanFiction



³ Life Magazine Cover by Judith Nolan

"The True Meaning of Friendship..." by Judith Nolan

"To good friends and great times..." Vincent raised his glass full of William's best apple cider to the last of his table companions as somewhere in the distance a clock chimed the hour of two in the morning.

Nobody got up to leave and none made a comment on the lateness of the hour. The New Year had been celebrated in fine style by the Tunnel world, but now only the hardiest remained seated comfortably along either side of the long table in the dining hall as they continued their conversation. Father had left for the warmth of his bed an hour before, saying with a dry chuckle that he needed to catch up on his beauty sleep.

"And here's to the new century. I wonder what it will bring for all of us," David Jones lifted his glass in acknowledgement of Vincent's toast. "You know, I realised just the other day that I've lived in New York for longer than I've lived anywhere else in the world. It's amazing. I find it strange to think I can now call myself a New Yorker. I never thought I would settle anywhere permanently."

"Nor did I..." Captain Daniel Gregg leaned his forearms on the table before him, turning his glass between his palms. "I had always thought I would die heroically in a battle at sea and had been more than content with that fate. I wanted to leave my house in Maine to become a haven for generations of retired seamen."

He sighed, shaking his head ruefully. "Instead, I fell asleep alone and kicked the blasted gas heater on with my blasted foot. I died in my own bedroom and became a super spirit. Now Gull Cottage is my eternal home."

He shrugged. "And yet, that unfortunate accident brought me everything that had always been missing in my earthly life. A family of my own and a woman I love with all my heart. It's odd how fate works sometimes."

"Dying at sea would have been a better death than being burned alive by the angry mob that chased me from my underground home beneath the Paris Opera House. I had thought myself secure," Erik, the Phantom admitted honestly. "If they had caught me, I would not be here now in spirit. I too have lived in this great city for more years than I care to count. I made the best of it since I had nowhere else to go."

"Well, like Vincent, I was born here," Ron Perlman offered his own point of view, settling his large hand companionably on the shoulder of the lion-faced man beside him. Theirs was a friendship of long-standing built on a deep sense of trust and understanding. Almost as if they were one being.

Ron jerked his bearded chin up toward the rocky ceiling shrouded in limitless shadows. "I was born up there in Washington Heights in a cold water, railway flat

"The True Meaning of Friendship..." by Judith Nolan

that allowed for little privacy. But me and my folks, we made the best of it. It is funny what life can throw at us."

He too shook his head. "It seems so long ago, now..."

"I hear you..." David nodded slowly. "I was born in Brixton in London. I guess you can take the boy out of the city, but the city will always do it's best to reclaim your soul in the end, no matter how far away we try to run."

"Yeah, ain't that right," Ron agreed.

He frowned at his left hand where he held a fat cigar, the tip glowing red. "I know something I ain't gonna get used to... not smoking a cigar on a momentous occasion such as this. The docs have told me I have to give 'em up soon or they'll kill me."

He raised the stogie to his lips and puffed on it with a contented sigh. "Maybe I will, maybe I won't," he breathed through the fragrant wreath of smoke he'd created.

"Take it from someone who knows, living is better," Daniel replied. "I wish that I were alive again every time I look at Carolyn. She has become my beloved wife, and my entire world, yet we still cannot touch each other in this life."

"As do I wish it could be so," Erik agreed. "But I can admit the spirit world does have its advantages. I may go where and when I please."

"I can see the advantages of not being seen in your travels." Vincent turned to look at the ghostly man across the table from him. "I am still confined to the shadows every time I need to go Above. No matter the century, some things will never change, it seems. I will never find acceptance in the city above. I have come to terms with that."

He studied his friend's handsome face. There was no longer any need for Erik to be cloaked in a mask and wide-brimmed hat. He was still tall and willowy, but his face was now calm and serene, and as ordinary as any man's. His elegant, nineteenth-century clothes were dark, and he wore a crisp white linen shirt evident at his neck and wrists.

Vincent nodded. "And you have your Christine with you in the afterlife. That must count for something."

"Ah, yes. For that I am eternally grateful." The Phantom shook his head. "Yet, to smell the flowers again or feel the warmth of the sun on my face... the movement of fine silk against your skin cannot be beaten... nor the intoxicating taste of a good cider such as this..."

"The True Meaning of Friendship..." by Judith Nolan

He swirled the contents of his glass. "The simple things are those I do miss at times when I am alone." He raised the glass to his lips and took a long sip. "But in good company such a fine brew still goes down as well as it always did," he concluded on the ghost of a laugh.

"Then I guess the three of us who are still alive had better stay that way for some time to come." Ron shrugged, looking around the table at his friends, both living and ghostly. "I plan on living a lot longer than my old man did."

"Well, none of us are alone tonight," David pointed out. "Our wives are asleep in their chambers, and we still have time to hang out and tell outrageous lies to each other. That suits me just fine. There is nowhere else I would rather be than right here with all of you."

He raised his glass to his companions and took a long drain of the brew. He smacked his lips. "My compliments to the barrel master. I do believe this the finest William has ever made."

"He'll be pleased to hear it." Vincent smiled. "He's very proud of this and is saving the rest for this year's Winterfest."

"Ah yes, our annual gathering." David smiled. "That I intend to enjoy. I missed last year's when I had to go back to the UK."

"I too am looking forward to it," Daniel added. "I can't believe it has been over thirty years since that first night you and I met at Gull Cottage, Vincent."

"You spirited Catherine and me there to reclaim your book that had been stolen from your collection," Vincent acknowledged. "It was an interesting evening, even if it was a dream."

"And instead of reclaiming that book, I found a life-long friend." Daniel smiled. "And you returned the favour by giving me a first-edition, signed copy of my Tennyson in better condition than my own."

"It was the least I could do since your copy was a gift to me from Catherine that I could not part with." Vincent grinned. "And you'd already met the great man, Tennyson, in person at the Great Exhibition in eighteen-fifty-one. That counted for something. I envy you that privilege."

"Ain't true love grand?" Ron saluted with a flourish of his glass. "To our wives, who do try to keep us all in line and on the straight and narrow, bless 'em."

He reached for the large glass jug to pour himself a refill. "Most of the time."

"To our wives..." the other four men joined in the toast, all with looks of total agreement.

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"And here is to the true meaning of friendship," Vincent added quietly, looking at each of his friends in turn. "Whatever happens or whatever comes, we will always have each other's backs. Nothing and no one will ever come between us."

"To whatever happens, whatever comes..." each man agreed in turn, raising their glasses.

"All for one and one for all about says it..." Ron stubbed out his cigar in a nearby ashtray as he studied the lion-faced man beside him.

The stranger he'd first met up in the park more years ago than he cared to remember. It made him feel old to count back so far, so he dismissed the thought. There was time enough to make some new memories.

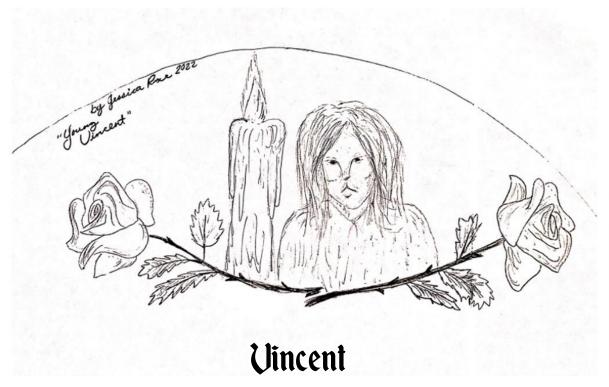
He grinned at Vincent knowingly. "Always, my friend. Always..."





"Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom..."
-Aristotle

^{**} Illustrations provided by the author.



by Judith Nolan



"There was a time when Vincent was very sick, wasn't he, Father?"

"You're right, Samantha. When Vincent first came to us, he was so very tiny and very sick."

"And he cried and cried, for three whole days."

"And he cried for three straight days. No one thought he would survive."

"But you knew better than anyone, didn't you, Father?"

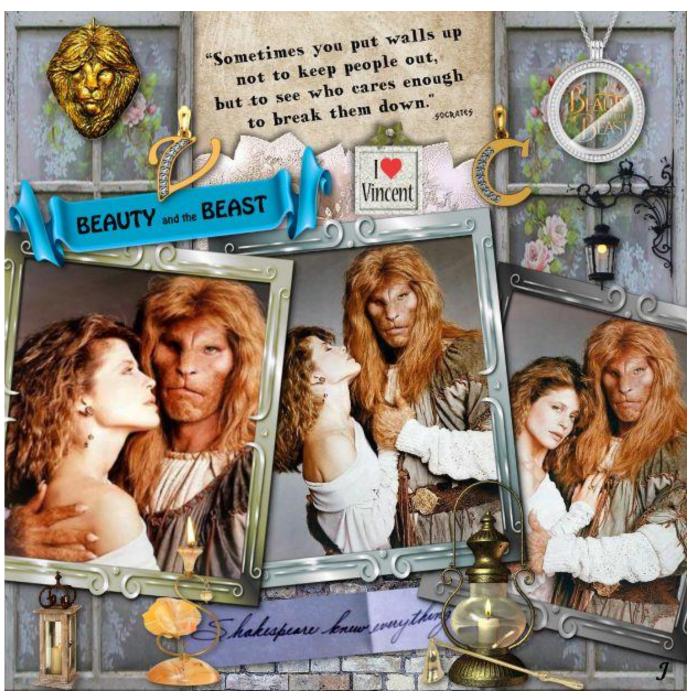
"Yes, even at his weakest, I could feel the strength in him. But that was in a time of terrible darkness for our world. A time we must never forget."

"Vincent learned, right, Father?"

"Yes, he learned how to live."







by Judith Nolan





The Crystal and the Rose

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova





Home by Kevin Barnes

Night befell the Tunnels under the streets of New York. No candlelight flickered in the cold breeze blowing through the chamber. With everyone sleeping, there was an almost sacred silence.

On a small table by the large bed, two lifeless (at least in human's eyes) objects were lying side by side. One was a clear, about a thumb-long, finely polished crystal, attached to a golden chain. The other was a beautiful ivory, intricately carved head of a rose, with a soft-leather pouch accompanying it. Both objects would easily fit into the palm of one's hand, and yet, lying side by side, they appeared much larger.

"I feel cold," said the Rose with a soft, somewhat tired voice. "I wish spring would finally arrive."

The Crystal and the Rose by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

"It has been a long winter," the Crystal remarked quietly. "But all winters end one day." He lit up gently from inside, sharing his special light with his companion. "Here, take some of my heat."

The Rose felt warmer instantly and forgot about her wish to be tucked snuggly in her leather pouch. "Thank you," she said gratefully. "Your nearness always brings me comfort."

"Just as yours brings comfort to me," came the Crystal's truthful reply.

"Sometimes, I wish we could stay like this forever. I wish we would never part at the break of every new day, having to wait until nightfall to be reunited again." His voice was touched by melancholy. "I don't feel myself when you're not near."

The little ivory heart inside the Rose was bursting with an emotion so common for living beings. "But we are together all the time," she said joyfully. "Can't you feel it? Every time He puts me in the pouch and hangs it around his neck, I feel your strength and light filling me within."

The Crystal lit up even more at her words. "You're right," he whispered, amazed at a sudden recollection. "Every time she hangs me around her neck, I hear your calm whisper echoing in my heart, and your warmth reaches the deepest part of me and lights it up," he added with bliss.

"Those who share something very strong, like us, can never be truly separated," the Rose proclaimed. "We are the lucky ones."

"Yes," the Crystal agreed. "She lost me twice, and yet, both times, I never felt closer to you. Strange... my hopes about being reunited with her and you might have been diminishing as time went, but I could never give up because the longer I was away from you, the stronger I felt you in me."

A brief, quiet tapping interrupted the silence of the night around them.

"I've often thought of what it feels like to give up," the Rose wondered.

"I've heard it means feeling hollow, devoid of all emotions, deprived of all joy and thrill of life," the Crystal pondered.

"Is that what they call death?" the Rose asked.

"Not necessarily," her companion contradicted gently and explained, "but it often feels like it. When you see no reason for trying, for finding any delight and satisfaction in life anymore, you might *feel* dead, at least for some time."

The Rose felt a shudder running through her ivory petals. "I'm glad I never felt that way. I have never given up either. And I never intend to. Roses may wither in

The Crystal and the Rose by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

time, but they stand tall almost until the very end, holding their heads up, always hoping to find the light," she remarked proudly.

The Crystal smiled inwardly, the glowing heat inside illuminating every angle of his smooth body.

"Over the land is April, Over my heart a rose; Over the high, brown mountain The sound of singing goes..." 4

A soft giggle resounded in the space. "There's no denying it... you are your master's gift. He has a poem for everything as well."

A deeper chuckle completed the light-hearted moment. "We are mere reflections of those who held us first before we found our way into someone else's hands," the Crystal pointed out. "Moreover, I may not have ears, but I *can* hear, and I do love to listen and pass on everything worth doing so."

"It's just a shame that no one apart from me can hear you," the Rose remarked with amusement, though with a hint of pride in her voice as well.

"That is something I am more than content with," the Crystal replied with satisfaction and a smile in his voice.

The sound of a light stir alerted them about the ever-passing time. "The dawn is near, "the Rose stated sadly, a slight shiver shaking her ivory body again. "They'll wake up soon."

"Yes, a new day is coming," the Crystal confirmed.

"Our time together is always so short," his tender companion complained.

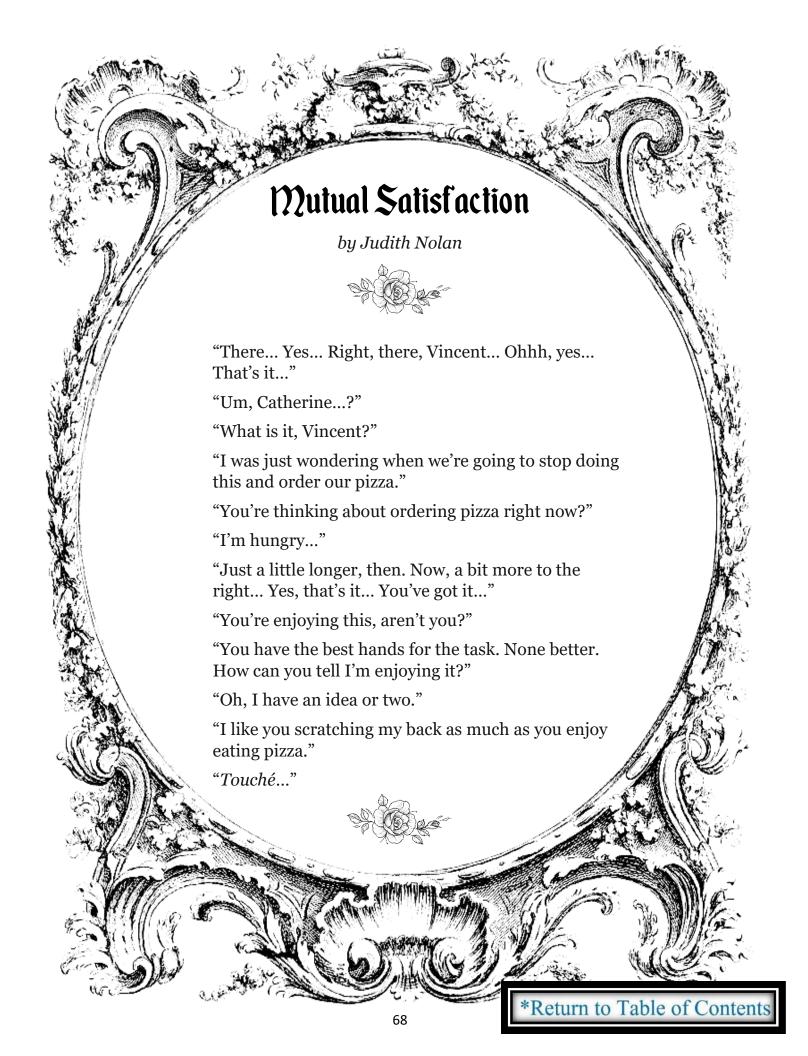
"That is true, but we'll always find our way to each other. There is a great comfort and assurance in that."

The Rose sighed but smiled inwardly; the cold shiver was gone once more. Blissfully, she took in the last moments of the unique light radiating from the crystalline object resting beside her before it faded completely.

Not long after, their voices grew silent, returning the chamber to the state of absolute stillness and peace, until two bodies on the nearby bed moved as one, waking up to a newborn day...

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⁴ Robert Louis Stevenson: Over the Land is April







by Judith Nolan





Tales of 'THE HOUSE' Episode 1

by Janet Rivenbark



"Where have you gone, Vincent?" asked Father when he noticed Vincent staring off into space for the third time in less than an hour.

Vincent started and looked at Father with a sheepish smile.

"I'm sorry, Father. I didn't mean to be inattentive. It's Catherine. Since the Bond returned, it's different. It's harder for me to interpret what is going on. She seems to have been in a bit of a... a quandary all day. Starting with what felt like purpose, but as the day progressed, I've felt it become more confusion and questioning."

"Do you think she's having trouble with something at work?" Father asked.

"Catherine is not at work. She has taken some time off to finish settling her father's estate. She got busy at work and put things off, then I was sick, and she put it off again. She needs to finish."

"That kind of thing is seldom simple," Father pointed out.

"That is true. I suppose I will hear about it when I visit her tonight." Vincent nodded at the maps he and Father had been studying. "I imagine I should apply myself a bit more here and now."



Catherine was in a quandary.

This is a totally confusing mess! She grumbled to herself, staring at a pile of file folders.

She'd come across a box of files when she cleared her father's apartment. After a quick look, she'd ascertained that they were personal, so she set them aside, intending to get back to them. Now, in August, almost six months later, she was finally getting to them.

She'd carried them up to her apartment from the storage unit in the basement, and on closer inspection, she found that the box contained files with deeds to

properties all over the city. As far as she could tell, her father owned them all free and clear, but she had no idea why her father would have purchased millions of dollars' worth of real estate.

She called Michael Talbot, the attorney who headed up the division of Chandler & Coolidge dealing with wills and estates. Mike's secretary told her he was busy, but he would see her if she could be there by 10:00.

Michael said he had helped Charles write his will but didn't know anything about properties. He suggested she talk to someone in the real estate division. George Savros was in charge and had done the paperwork for the purchases, but Charles had never confided his reasons.

Catherine decided that if anyone knew anything, it would probably be Jay Coolidge.

"I'm surprised he didn't tell you about what he was doing," Jay said after they'd exchanged greetings and Catherine explained the reason for her visit. Catherine hadn't seen Jay since the day she'd come to clear her dad's office.

"What *was* he doing?" she asked. "That's an awful lot of money to tie up in real estate."

"It started when you were still dating Tom Gunther," Jay began. "He and Tom were working on a joint venture, a development of some sort. They started buying commercial properties that were old and needed renovation. Tom needed capital and saw this as a good way to get it. He planned to renovate the properties and sell them at a profit. Charles wanted to work with him and figured that he'd let Tom renovate what he bought, then he'd sell and lend his profit to Tom or use it to invest in Tom's venture. He talked to me about it, and it sounded like a good move. Even if things fell through, properties in Manhattan seldom depreciate. He couldn't do much worse than break even.

"You and Tom broke up, and they decided they didn't want to continue their collaboration. I'm surprised Charles held on to everything."

"I looked at some of the files, and it looks as if it's all commercial property," she stated.

"That was the original plan," Jay told her. "If you sell it all, you will be substantially wealthier than you were to begin with," he added with a chuckle.

"Well, I know I don't want to be a landlord," she told him. "I'm busy at work and have enough headaches there, I don't need any more. I didn't see any paperwork listing a management company for rentals. Are they all vacant?"

"I think many of them are, but some are occupied. I think all the rent payments were going directly to Charles' accountant. Don't you use the same firm?"

"Yes, I do, and I'm surprised Fred didn't mention this to me."

"He probably assumed that you knew about it."

Catherine stood. "Thanks, Jay. It looks like my next stop is Fred Alberti's office." She left the offices of Chandler & Coolidge, but she didn't go directly to Alberti's office. She had a lunch date with Jenny, and she wasn't about to back out of that again. Jenny would kill her.



"Sounds like a good starting place for a mystery novel," Jenny commented when Catherine told her about the new developments. "Is that the last of what you have to do?"

"Pretty much. I've had everything put in my name, except for these properties. I'll have to put that into motion tomorrow. All the taxes have been paid, but there will likely be more once I sell."

"If you have any apartments in that collection that you think I might find attractive, let me know," Jenny told her. "My studio is getting more cramped by the moment."

"From the looks of it, it's all commercial, but I'll let you know if anything turns up."

After lunch, she went to Fred's office, and he was surprised that she hadn't known about the properties and the resulting income.

"I would have thought that you would have learned of it from the will, if not from Charles before he died," Fred said with a frown.

"Since I was the only heir, the will wasn't specific. Aside from a bequest to charity, it just said I would inherit everything else."

Fred had his secretary bring in a file and showed her how much was coming in every month from the property. All of that was going into an account used to pay for maintenance and taxes. It appeared that only about a third of the properties were rented or leased.

"What is your plan?" asked Fred.

"Well, I'll likely sell it all. But I'd like to take a look at some, at least the places that are occupied. I may offer the tenants the opportunity to buy before I put them on the market."

Fred nodded. "Just keep me in the loop. My office hasn't exactly been managing the properties, but your father authorized me to make sure work got done when something needed repair."



Catherine headed home and was soon sitting in the middle of the living room floor, with all the furniture pushed out of the way. She didn't know how long she'd been reading and sorting files when she heard a light tap on the balcony door.

She looked up and recognized the silhouette against the city lights.

"It's unlocked," she called out. "Come on in."

Vincent stepped through the door and came to an abrupt halt just inside.

"It looks as if it might be safer if I stay on the balcony," he observed.

"No, come on in. Just step carefully." She patted a vacant section of carpet next to her. "I saved you a spot."

Vincent removed his cloak and draped it over the back of one of her dining chairs, then removed his boots and set them outside the door.

"It's damp outside," he told her as he stepped over files and joined her.

He gingerly lowered himself to sit beside her and looked around.

"I thought you had taken time off. Did you bring work home?" he asked.

"No, this is the contents of a box I got from Dad's place. He was investing in real estate."

She went on and explained everything she'd learned that day.

"We have a Helper who is a real estate agent. She would probably be thrilled to help you with the sales."

"Good! I wasn't pleased with the company I used when I sold Dad's apartment. Give me her name and number, and I'll call her."

"I think Father may have some of her cards. I'll see that you get one," he promised. "So, what are you doing now?"

"I'm going through everything to find out which properties are occupied. I want to look at them and see if the people currently occupying them would be interested in buying before I just sell out from under them. I wouldn't want to put anyone out of business."

"I can probably help with that. What are we looking for?" he asked.

"The files aren't in any kind of order. I've had to read through almost every one of them to find what I want," Catherine told him. "Dad could be more than a little bit disorganized for a lawyer. Marilyn always said that was the bane of her existence. Dad wondered why he had to be organized as long as he had Marilyn to do it for him. But so far, in each file, there has been something that indicated if a place was occupied, by whom, and the business's name. Sometimes it's a copy of the lease or rental agreement, and sometimes it's just a note or a mention in the property description. That small pile," she pointed to the coffee table, "is where I'm putting those files."

After Vincent had gone through several files, he picked one up and spoke as soon as he saw the address.

"This one is occupied," he stated, putting the file on the table.

"How do you know? You didn't look," she accused. She'd never known Vincent to do anything halfway.

"The address, it is Long's Grocery," he told her.

"Do you think he'd be interested in buying the building?" she asked. She knew Long and his family lived in the apartment above the store. She picked up the file and thumbed through it.

"He's been saving. He knew the previous owner wanted to sell but had gotten an offer that Long couldn't beat. That was probably when your father bought it. It sold for a lot more than Long could afford. He heard that the new owner was going to renovate and repurpose it, so he's been looking at other places, but he doesn't want to move out of the neighborhood. His children go to school there, and there is the threshold."

"I'll call him," Catherine said. "I'm sure we can come to some agreement, even if I have to finance it for him personally."

They continued with the files until Catherine pulled the last one out of the box. She thumbed through it, and her curiosity, coming through the Bond, got Vincent's attention.

"What is it?" he asked.

"This property isn't commercial," she said. "The file says that it's in a zoned multi-use area, but it appears to be residential. It's a big house, over 11,000 square feet, with six bedrooms and nine bathrooms. It is a 25-foot-wide Neo-Georgian limestone and brick mansion built in 1906."

She pulled a floor plan with attached photos out of the file and handed it to Vincent after looking at it.

He studied it closely.

"Where is it?" he asked.

She told him the address, and he smiled.

"I thought it looked familiar. I've only been beyond the basement once, but I know this house."

"A Helper owned it?" she speculated.

"No, she didn't own it, but Mildred worked there for years. Your Father is only the third person to own it. Mildred's employers bought it from the original owners."

"Do you know the history of the house?" she asked.

"A little. Mildred loved talking about it. She was as proud of that place as if it were her own. Her employers, the Tillmans, bought the house from the original owners in the early 50s. They completely renovated it before they moved in. Mildred was hired as a maid at that time. She was only 19 and had spent some time Below. She and her mother were two of the originals. The house had a tunnel entrance that had been created during Prohibition. She lived in a small apartment in Brooklyn and commuted to work there. Later, in the 60s they hired her as housekeeper, and she moved into an apartment in the basement. That was when we opened the threshold.

"She worked there until a couple of years ago when the house sold. The Tillmans had several children. The family owned homes all over the world. Mildred said that in addition to the house in New York, there was an estate in England and houses in Italy and France.

"Mr. Tillman died about twenty years ago, and one by one the children left. One was living in England, and two others in the homes in France and Italy. One son runs the family business and travels often, but this was his home base. When Mrs. Tillman died, the children each inherited the houses they were living in. The son who inherited this house asked Mildred to stay on as housekeeper and caretaker until he could take the time to come to New York to clear the house. I

suppose that was when your father bought it. Mildred moved out when it was sold."

"I hope she found another job," Catherine mused. "She's only in her mid-50s, right?"

"Yes, she's not very old, but the Tillmans have taken good care of her. She inherited a small beach cottage in New Jersey from Mrs. Tillman and has a good retirement income. She moved to the cottage and works part-time in a souvenir shop. She loves it. We hear from her several times a year."

"I'm intrigued now," Catherine said. "I'd love to see the inside of this house. How about you?"

"I know we closed the threshold when Mildred let us know that the house had been sold, but I might be able to reopen it and meet you there. When would you like to go?"

She pulled a set of keys out of the file and held them up. "How about tomorrow morning, about 10:00?"



The following day, Catherine was at the house well before 10:00. She had a feeling about this house and wanted to see it without distractions.

She found an elevator and started at the top of the house. She was smiling broadly when she reached the basement just as Vincent arrived.

"You are smiling like you have a delicious secret," he said when he saw her.

"This place is fantastic!" she declared. "And it might just be the perfect place for me to bring a dream to fruition. *Maybe several dreams*, she added to herself.

"So, what is this dream?" he asked.

"I've been working a lot of domestic violence cases lately at the DA's office. Many of those women need more help than we can provide, and that gave me an idea.

"They generally have a hard time getting out of their marriages because they don't know where to start or where they stand legally, and they often don't have the money to pay a lawyer to guide them through it all. All lawyers do some pro bono work yearly, but not many work those kinds of cases exclusively and can't take on that much unpaid work. I've considered trying to start a small law firm that will handle such divorce and custody cases. We could take them on a sliding fee basis, and even for free if the woman can't afford it. We could network with the shelters and counseling centers and access various services."

"It sounds like a worthy endeavor," Vincent said. "But what does this house have to do with it?"

"Look at the floor plan," she said, holding a paper out to him. "The way this house is set up, the first floor could be used as offices and a waiting room."

And the upper floors?" he asked.

"I could live in the upper floors. The commute would be a trial, but I think I could handle it." She laughed as he seemed to catch on.

He looked back at the floor plan and shook his head.

"The place is still huge, what would you do with all of that space?"

"Enjoy it," she said with a laugh. "Using the two bedrooms on the first floor as offices would drop the house to four bedrooms, counting the basement suite, but if I ever sold it in the future, it could always go back to six bedrooms."

"All right," Vincent said. "Show me what you have in mind."

She walked him through the basement.

"I could furnish this as a guest room. You could even use it as a personal retreat," she suggested. "I know you have a place you go Below, but Father always worries when you go off by yourself."

"And so do you," Vincent added.

She nodded. "I do, but if you could come here, you wouldn't be that far away from everything, and I would promise not to bother you." She decided not to push it as they continued toward the back. "There's a laundry room and a recreation room here. It has a door that opens into the back garden. It's a tiny garden, but there is a tree, a patch of grass, and some flowers."

When they got to the stairs, Vincent showed her the door under them that led to the sub-basement and the threshold. Across from the stairs was an elevator, but they decided to take the stairs.

On the first floor, they started in the back.

"Both of these rooms are large enough for a desk and plenty of seating for clients," she pointed out. "There are two bathrooms; one could be for staff, and the other for clients, or I could combine one of the bathrooms with the closet and turn it into a small kitchenette for a coffee pot, a small fridge, and a microwave."

They walked back toward the front and entered a large room labeled "grand salon" on the floor plan. It had a hardwood floor and paneled walls.

"This would make a good waiting room. We could put a secretary/receptionist's desk next to the main staircase and a seating area in the front corner opposite the staircase. There is a closed entry that will be nice in winter as there won't be a lot of cold drafts to deal with." She pointed to the back left corner of the room. "That's the elevator," she told him. "It goes from the basement up to the 5th floor. If you or anyone from Below wanted to come for a visit during the day, you could take the elevator up and completely bypass this floor."

"There is room for a small library behind the main staircase. I could have shelves built. There's enough room there for a small worktable and a chair." She stopped and thought a moment. "Do you think Cullen would be available to make the changes and additions?"

"I'm sure he would. Let me know when you are sure what you want to do, and I'll talk to him."

They used the stairs to get to the second floor.

"What about the stairs?" he asked. "The staircase is open to what would be a public space on the first floor. Wouldn't you want a way to close it off?"

Catherine looked at the open stairwell. "I think we could enclose the stairwell on the second floor and put a door in the wall. We could even put a lock on the door and keep it locked during business hours. That would keep the upper floors secure. Having someone at the lobby desk would keep it and the elevator secure. Or we could put a coded or key entry on the elevator."

"I'm sure Cullen could handle the wall and door, too," Vincent said with a nod. What would you use this floor for?"

"Probably only for entertaining," she told him. "All the rooms on this floor feel very formal. There is a living room in the back and a parlor in the front, with a dining room in the center off a small kitchen. I might have to *wine and dine* people to raise money for the charities I've always supported. This would be a good space for that. The kitchen is small, but it would be enough for caterers to keep food warm and serve from."

They moved on to the 3rd floor.

"This floor feels homier to me," she commented. "It would be a great place to have a room with a TV and a stereo system. And the room in the middle is labeled a library." They walked into that room. "There are shelves. I've always wanted a library. I have my dad's office furniture and his books in storage. I could put them here."

Vincent wandered down the hall.

"Is this another kitchen?" he asked.

"It's called a wet bar," she told him. "It's a good place for drinks and snacks and would be nice for less formal entertaining. Let's go upstairs."

"I didn't realize 11,000 square feet was this big," he commented as they reached the 4th floor. "What is on this floor?"

She took his hand and pulled him toward the back of the house.

"This floor and the two above it are the heart of the house, I think." They went through a large kitchen into a dining area. "This is called a breakfast room, but it's more of a family dining room. I think a good-sized table would fit here, but this is what I really love."

She opened a big set of double doors and walked onto a sunny terrace. Vincent hung back in the shadows of the breakfast room.

"If I put up some kind of a cover out here, maybe a pergola, then you could come out here during the day. There's a privacy fence to shield the sides and back, but there are buildings on the next block that are taller than this one."

She came back inside and closed the doors behind her.

"What else is on this floor?" he asked.

"Another kitchen, the main kitchen, and there's a formal dining room in the front, but it could be used as another living room or family room." She headed for the stairs again. "The 5th floor has bedrooms. There are three of them. The master is in the back, and it has two large walk-in closets and a private bath. The other two bedrooms are in the front and share a bath. There is a closet here in the hall..." She pushed open a bi-fold door. "... that is deep enough to put a washer and dryer in. It would be more convenient than always hauling laundry to the basement."

She didn't give him much time to look around before tugging him toward the stairs again.

"This is the roof," she told him as they reached the top of the stairs and stepped into a large, screened room. "This is labeled as an entertainment room. Right now, it's just a screened room, but if I put in windows, it could be used year-round. There is a patio out this door, and since it's in the front of the house, I think you might even be able to come out here during the day."

She watched as Vincent went to the door and looked out. He stepped out and looked around. There were taller buildings that could be seen, but the roof was screened in on three sides by tall privacy fences and leafy trees in pots.

She sighed when he walked out to the center of the patio and turned his face to the sun. He closed his eyes and stood like that for several minutes.

He finally turned back to her with a smile on his face.

"Even if you don't decide to move in here," he told her, "this would make a big selling point."

As soon as she saw him standing in the sun, she made up her mind.

He walked back to the screened porch, where Catherine took his arm as they descended the stairs, then they took the elevator back to the basement.

"If you don't mind, I'll go back with you and get the name of that realtor from Father."



Catherine contacted all the renters in the other buildings, and several wanted to purchase. She warned those who didn't that she would be selling the buildings and that they would have to deal with the new owners once they sold. Then she met with the realtor and listed all the properties except the house, the building Long was in, and the ones that the renters wanted to buy. She decided that she definitely would be moving. She was just undecided when she should tell Joe about her plans.

But she had no trouble telling Jenny.

"How big did you say it is?" asked Jenny when they got out of the cab in front of the block of six-story buildings.

"11,000 square feet," Catherine said, leading the way up the steps to the double doors.

"Have you lost your mind?" asked Jenny. "You could put 16 of your apartments in this place and almost twice that number of mine."

Catherine opened the door and stepped back to let Jenny go first. The double doors from the entry into the *grand salon* were open, and Jenny gasped when she stepped in. The sound echoed through the bare room.

Catherine had told Jenny her plan, and after they toured the first floor, Jenny nodded approvingly.

"I think it will work," she told Catherine. This is big enough to work as an office but small enough that people wouldn't feel intimidated. How are you going to furnish it?"

"I swore that I'd do all my own decorating if I ever moved, but I think I will have to hire a designer. This is big, and I won't have the time to do it all myself, though I will be involved. I won't do what my dad did when he hired the designer to do my place before he gave it to me."

"What's wrong with your place? I love it," Jenny declared as they climbed the stairs to the second floor."

"I don't know," Catherine mused. "It was fine when I moved in... all pastel sophistication, but I think I've outgrown it. I want something more comfortable. I might go along with the more formal, sophisticated theme for the second floor, where I may be entertaining, but I want clients to be comfortable, so the first floor will be overstuffed and comfy, as will the upper floors that I will be using. There is an eat-in kitchen and a dining room on the fourth floor, but I still want it to be more of a family and friends' kind of room."

They were on the terrace off the breakfast room on the fourth floor when Catherine brought up the main reason she'd brought Jenny to the house.

"So, I need to make some alterations here and I think it will be a few months before it will be livable, but I was wondering if you'd be interested in buying my apartment?" She looked at Jenny and held her breath.

For a moment, Jenny looked like she was going to jump at it, but then she looked sad and shook her head.

"I could never afford it," she said sadly.

"I could rent it to you," Catherine suggested. "Or I could carry the mortgage, give you a low rate, or even sell below market value."

"I'd be taking advantage of our friendship," Jenny protested.

"I offered, you didn't ask. It's a great location for you, much closer to your office than your place in Brooklyn."

"There are plenty of pros," Jenny agreed, "but I just don't know."

Catherine named a selling price. She'd gone over the numbers and knew that if she carried the mortgage for Jenny and gave her a good rate, she'd probably be able to afford the monthly mortgage payment, even with the co-op fees. "It's negotiable... at least think about it. It will be several months before I'm ready to move out, so there is no rush."

Jenny hugged Catherine. "I will. And I'll talk to my dad. He's the best financial adviser I know, and I'll keep you posted."



The next person to tour the house was Cullen. He was happy to take on the work. He even had a crew in mind.

"I'm teaching some of the boys Below and this will be a great opportunity for them to learn some of the basics. I won't be disturbing any of the structure or electrical, so I won't need any permits for that. But I'll need a plumber to do the plumbing for the kitchenette on the first floor and the laundry on the fifth. We have a Helper who's a plumber, and I'll talk to him. How big do you want the kitchenette on the first floor to be?"

"Bigger than the wet bar," Catherine told him. "There should be some counter space and enough room for a microwave and a fridge. How about a roof over the veranda on the fourth floor? What would you suggest?"

"I think a pergola like you mentioned would be a good choice," he said. "You could hang baskets with plants and ivy in pots at each post. Ivy is an evergreen and will maintain the cover even in the winter once it's established. It grows pretty fast, from what I know of it. You would probably have good shade out here by next year this time."

"Then pergola it is. Do you have a source for materials?" she asked.

"Another Helper sells building supplies and tools," he told her.

"Then have him bill me for everything, including any additional tools you'll need," she told him. "And bill me for your labor. Don't try to *cut me a deal*," she warned. "Charge me by the hour or the job, but charge whatever the rate would be here Above. Your work is always better quality than anything I could get here, not to mention I won't have to wait a year for you to start."



When she talked to Long about buying the building his grocery was in, they both laughed.

"I didn't even know you were my landlord when I met you," he said.

"Well, technically, my dad was your landlord, but he died soon after that.

When she offered to sell him the building, he had the same reaction as Jenny.

"I know what your father paid when he bought the building," Long told her. "I haven't saved enough for a down payment to keep the loan payment down to what I can afford."

"What if I handle the financing? I'll carry the mortgage, or I can just not sell this building. I'd hate to sell it and then have the new buyer decide that they wanted to do something else with it. You'd not only be out of business but out of a home too."

She started laying out everything for him if she was to carry the mortgage. She had worked it out before she met with him. "Even without a down payment, if you continue to make a payment at the same amount you are now paying for rent, at this finance rate, you could have it paid off in 20 years. In the meantime, it will be your building. You can make any improvements or renovations you want."

"We do need a new cooler," Long admitted. "What I have saved would cover that and a few other things. Are you sure you don't want a down payment?"

"Positive," she assured him. "The building needs some work, so my selling price is substantially lower than what Dad paid for it. Since I'm not a bank, I can charge you a lower interest rate on the loan. If I sold the property outright, I'd just bank the money, and I wouldn't be getting much interest on a savings account. My interest rate to you is less than what the bank would charge but still enough to make it worthwhile. And if you have a good month and want to, you can make extra principal payments and pay it off sooner. I think I read somewhere that if you make as little as one extra mortgage payment a year, you can cut the length of your mortgage by as much as two or three years."

"Thank you, Catherine!" Long grinned and shook her hand.

"You are welcome! I'll have the contracts drawn up, and you can go over them. Once you sign them, we will be set."

Catherine had a good feeling when she headed back home.

When she returned to work the following Monday, she linked arms with Joe as they were leaving the Monday morning staff meeting.

"Got a minute, Joe?" she asked.

He looked down at her.

"Why do I have the feeling I'm not going to like what you need that minute for?"

They went into his office, and Catherine closed the door behind them before taking a seat on the beat up sofa. Joe removed his suit jacket and loosened his tie before sitting on the end opposite her.

"So, what's up, Radcliffe?" he prompted when she didn't speak right away.

"You know I took off last week to finish clearing up my dad's estate." At his nod, she continued. "I found a box full of files he had on property that he owned all over the city."

"And you found out that you are a lot richer than you thought you were, and you've decided to quit work and become a *lady of leisure*?" he said when she hesitated.

"Not likely," she said with a laugh. "I don't think I'm cut out to stay home all day eating bon bons and watching soaps."

"That's a relief," he said.



"Not yet, Joe," she went on to tell him about the house and her plan.

"Well, I'm sure you'd do well with that kind of work," he told her. "And we all know it's needed, but I'd hate to lose you. You're irreplaceable."

"I doubt that very much," she told him skeptically. "It's just that you can sweet talk me into doing twice as much work as anyone else,"

"You do get a lot done. People will talk to you when they refuse to talk to anyone else." He gave her his best puppy dog eyes. "You sure I can't talk you into staying?"

"Nope, 'fraid not, Joe. But you have me until the end of December. That should be enough time to find a replacement and let me train them."



The next few months were a blur. There were times when Catherine felt like she'd never get to the point where she was ready to move into the new place, and other times there weren't enough hours in a day to get everything done.

On her dad's advice, Jenny took Cathy up on her offer, and Jenny's move-in date was set for December 1. Since Cathy didn't need the furniture in the apartment, and Jenny insisted that most of her furniture wasn't fit for the dumpster, she asked Catherine to leave anything she wasn't going to use. Catherine took her curio cabinet, her mom's dressing table, all the tchotchkes, dishes, kitchen essentials, along with her personal things, everything else stayed.

When Catherine moved into the house, she furnished only the first-floor lobby and offices, the suite in the basement, and the top two floors. The second and third floors were still empty; the designer was still working on those.

Joe finally gave up trying to talk her into staying, and they hired her replacement in November.

"What do you think?" Joe asked her after she'd been working with her replacement for a couple of weeks.

"I think Fleming will be a good fit," she told him. "And you two ought to get along great. He went the same route you did: Army, GI bill for school, night school for his law degree while working as a cop."

"Everyone likes him," Joe agreed. "I just hope he doesn't feel weird being the only black lawyer on the staff."

"Look at it like he does, Joe... *the first black lawyer on the staff*. And it took us long enough by the way. I've still got six days of vacation left, and I've requested to take them from December 18th to the 26th. That should give me time to finish my Christmas shopping and recover from Christmas day. Then I'll have the rest of that week to tie up loose ends here."

"When do you plan to open your office?" he asked.

"March first," she said with a grin. "I have the offices furnished, but I'm still interviewing for the other lawyer and a secretary."

"I was wondering... are you planning to hire a man or a woman?" he asked.

"The secretary will likely be a woman, but if I hire a man for the other attorney position, he's going to have to be very empathetic and non-threatening," Catherine told him. "I think a woman would be my best choice."

Joe nodded and looked thoughtful. "Would you consider Erika Salven?"

"I thought she left town?"

"Only as far as Brooklyn, then she dropped out of sight for a while."

"You've been seeing her?" Catherine asked skeptically.

"No, but she's about at the end of her rope. She was hoping that staying quiet and doing nothing but volunteer pro bono work for a while would help restore her reputation. It hasn't worked, but she's at the point where she needs to find work that pays. She has about exhausted her savings."

Catherine was thoughtful, then looked up at Joe. "Tell her what I'm planning and give her my home number. I'll talk to her."

Later that evening, when she hung up the phone, she was surprised at what she'd just done. She'd made an appointment to have Erika come for an interview the day after Thanksgiving. She wasn't sure if she would hire Erika, but she was at least willing to give her a chance.



The interview was set for 2:00, and Catherine met Erika at the door to the house and led her to the office she planned to use once she opened the practice.

Catherine motioned for Erika to take a seat on the sofa, Catherine sat on the chair across from her.

"Joe says you're leaving the DAs office," Erika said when she was settled.

Erika looked as polished as ever, and Catherine was glad to see that.

"Yes, I've decided that the pressure cooker there is just no longer my cup of tea. How about you? What have you been doing?"

"Mostly volunteer work for one of the victims' advocate groups in the city," Erika told her. "Nothing paid. I did work for one firm for a while, but they were doing debt collection and I wasn't cut out for that. I couldn't threaten people who just didn't have the money to pay a bill."

"I can understand that," Catherine said.

Erika opened the folder she had on her lap and took out some papers. She handed them to Catherine.

"My resume, although I'm pretty sure you know most of it already from the deposition you took."

Catherine glanced at it and then told Erika what she had planned and what she would be doing. She did it rather stiffly, and even she herself noticed it. But she just couldn't



be too friendly to someone who had gone along with trying to ruin Joe's reputation and career.



"Look, Miss Chandler," Erika finally said. "I made a mistake... a lot of mistakes. I was blinded by the pretty picture they painted at Proctor & Brannigan. I honestly didn't see the dirty underbelly until they started using me to get at Joe. I didn't realize at first what they had planned. I liked Joe and wouldn't have willingly hurt him for anything. By the time I figured it all out, I was already in too deep to be able to get out of it with my skin intact."

"Self-preservation," Catherine said under her breath, but Erika heard her.

"Exactly, maybe not the best motivation, but it was mine at the time."

Catherine was beginning to understand a little better.

"I do understand, Erika," she told her. "Self-preservation was the reason I left Chandler & Coolidge. There were no nefarious goings on there, but I knew that if I stayed, I'd never be anything but the boss's daughter."

They talked for another half hour as Catherine explained her plan. Erika asked some excellent questions and Catherine made a decision. She's never been prone to making decisions without some thought, but she was pretty sure she was making the right one this time. She went to her desk, where she picked up a paper she had prepared. She had several copies but hadn't given one to any of the previous lawyers she'd interviewed.

"This is the package," she told Erika. "If it's acceptable, I'd like to hire you."

Erika's eyes almost bugged out of her head, and when she looked at the pay figure and benefits package, they got even wider.

"This is more than acceptable!" she exclaimed. "You think that the kind of law you plan to practice will be able to support this?" she asked... another good question.

"Not completely, but my Dad's practice set up a fund to support people who need legal help but can't afford it. I administer that fund. I won't be on the payroll, and since this," she gestured to the building," is the first floor of a house I'm living in, one that I inherited from my dad, there won't be a lot of overhead. The only

expenses will be your pay and benefits, that of the secretary, and office supplies. I'm putting in computers that will be networked, so a lot of what we do will be streamlined. My question is, 'When will you have to start drawing a paycheck?' I don't plan to start taking clients until the first of March, although I'll want you in the office and on the payroll at the beginning of February."

"I can make it until then," Erika assured her. "I'm still good for another six months or so."

When Erika left, Catherine had a good feeling. She wasn't sure why, but she felt that Erika had what was needed to do this kind of work.



Not long after hiring Erika, Catherine was at work when she got a telephone call from Peter.

"Cathy, there's an emergency Below," he told her without preamble.

"What is it?" she asked.

"A pipe froze and burst leaking into the area where the children's dormitory and the nursery are. They have what they need to do the repairs, but they need a place to relocate the children while they do the work."

"My place has more than enough room," she said after a moment of thought. "The second and third floors haven't been furnished yet and there's a kitchen and bathrooms. The kids can put sleeping bags on the floor, and the adults who come with them can use the guest rooms on the fifth floor."

"I was hoping you'd say that. Mary said that she and Sarah would be there and probably Brooke, Jamie, and Lena."

"They'll need food. I can order and have it delivered," she said.

"Mary said they would bring what they need, but they will probably need more. Please speak with Mary."

"How long do you think it will take to fix it?"

"Vincent said two or three days. They should be done by Monday afternoon."

When Catherine arrived home after work, she found her house swarming with children. They were in awe of the surroundings and were exploring, but she knew she could trust them not to touch without permission. The rule Below was *if it's not yours, don't touch it.*

"How would everyone like pizza for dinner tonight?" she asked once all the children had been rounded up.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" asked Mary. "They can eat a lot of pizza."

"Do you think fifteen would be enough... or how about twenty? I can keep it simple and get ten cheese and ten pepperoni. That might even leave enough for us with some leftovers."

That night the children feasted on pizza and after dinner, Catherine got on the phone to the grocery store that she knew would deliver, and with Mary's help, she placed an order that she was sure was adequate to feed an army for at least a couple of weeks. Mary only wanted to get the basics, but Catherine insisted on adding ice cream and cookies too. The grocer promised that it would be delivered at eight the next morning.

It was only a little after eight in the morning when Catherine stumbled into the kitchen on the fourth floor to get coffee. She found Jamie and Lena trying to fit things into an already overflowing refrigerator."

"We ran out of room," Jamie explained.

"There's another small refrigerator on the first floor, one in the wet bar on the third, and one in the basement," she told them as she reached for the coffee pot. It was on a timer, and she'd set it the night before.

The girls picked up their boxes full of food, leaving Catherine to enjoy the cup of coffee she'd just poured.

She was at the table in the kitchen sipping coffee and reading the paper that someone had brought up when Mary came in.

"Do you mind if I join you for coffee?" she asked.

"Please help yourself," Catherine said. "I thought you were a dedicated tea drinker," she added.

"That's Jacob," Mary said, pouring a cup and joining Catherine at the table. "I prefer coffee, but William's is way too strong by the time I have the opportunity to get a cup." She took a sip and closed her eyes.

"Maybe I should give William a Mr. Coffee like mine," Catherine suggested.

"That wouldn't work. William likes his coffee strong enough to stir itself. He would say that this is too weak."

That gave Catherine an idea, but she filed it away for later.

When Vincent came up late on Sunday evening to announce that the work was done and the children's dormitory and the nursery were dried out, all the

children were already asleep. They agreed that the move would happen the following day after breakfast.

"And take all the extra food," Catherine told Mary. "Just leave me some eggs, a loaf of bread, and some juice. I don't cook very much, and everything will go bad before I can eat it all."

"No ice cream?" asked Mary with a wink.

"Well, if there is any Rocky Road left..." Catherine conceded with a grin.



"That was lovely," Catherine said with a sigh as they walked back to the threshold under her new home after Winterfest. "I'm surprised they let you go. They usually insist that they need you to help clean up after anything."

"Some of the children are now old enough to help, and with Devin and Charles here, they have some extra hands. I'll gather a crew to take care of the heavier work tomorrow. We need to return the tables to the dining chamber in time for the Christmas celebrations. It's hard to believe it is Thursday and Christmas is Monday."

"Darn, I forgot, I meant to ask Father if it would be all right for me to stay over Below on Christmas Eve. I'll be down that evening, and it might run late. I know you like to get an early start."

Vincent looked stricken.

"I'm sorry, Catherine. That's impossible. With Devin and Charles here, both the guest chambers are occupied."

Catherine's smile disappeared, and Vincent could feel her disappointment, even as she rushed to reassure him.

"That's okay, Vincent," she said, patting his arm. "I understand. I'll just set my alarm and make sure I get here early."

They had reached her threshold, and she invited him in.

"I'm sorry, as you said," he said, "I like to get an early start, and it is late. Will you be down before Christmas Eve?"

"Probably not, but I will be down around noon on Christmas Eve. Can you get Mouse or one of the boys to meet me with the flatbed? I have a lot to bring down. I found some Christmas decorations when I cleared out my dad's place. I kept what I wanted to use, but I thought the children would enjoy using what I have left to decorate Below."

"I'm sure they will love it. I'll make sure someone is here at noon on Sunday," he assured her.

She stretched up on her toes, kissed his cheek, and said good night.

She was disappointed, but she tried to hide just how disappointed she was from the Bond. She wasn't looking forward to waking up Christmas morning without her dad, but at least she would be Below on Christmas Eve and then back again early on Christmas Day. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad.



Catherine had moved everything to the basement when Mouse showed up with the flatbed, Zach and Geoffrey.

The boys' eyes were huge when they saw the stacks of gifts in festive wrapping, pastry boxes of cookies and other goodies, and cardboard boxes of decorations. It took several trips through the threshold, and the cart was piled high when they started back toward the dining chamber.

Catherine went with them to the dining chamber, where she supervised the unloading.

"All the gifts need to be put somewhere until the tree is trimmed," she directed.

"The goodies go to William, and you can put the decorations with all the others."

The Tunnel tree was decorated on Christmas Eve, and it was left to the children to do it. Vincent helped by lifting the little ones so they could trim the upper branches.

"What about that?" Zach asked, pointing to the bag that Catherine had carried down.

"That's mine," she said with a grin. "I brought some special things for a few people."

Catherine's first stop was Father's study, and it worked out perfectly; everyone she wanted to see was there, Father, Mary, and Vincent.

After hugs, she distributed the contents of her bag.

There was a bottle of good brandy for Father, a small coffee maker with coffee, and a bottle of perfume for Mary. Catherine had stored the fact of Mary's love of coffee and had followed through on it.

A little bird had told her that, while he was sick, Vincent had broken his prized fountain pen during one of his rages. He'd tried other pens, but ballpoints and pencils didn't feel right.

Catherine considered going out and buying him a new pen but changed her mind. Her father had two Mont Blanc fountain pens, one he used at work and the other at home. She kept the one he had at home and was giving the one he used at work to Vincent.

"Thank you, Catherine," said Father when he saw his gift. "I may have to hide this one, so I don't have to share."

"Share all you want," she told him. "I don't know anything about brandy, but that was the one my dad drank, so I figured it had to be good. Let me know when you run out, and I'll get you another bottle."

"Catherine, this is lovely. Thank you!" Mary exclaimed over her gift.

"I remembered you said you liked coffee, and I recognized the scent you sometimes wear. My mom used to wear it."

"Catherine," said Vincent, recognizing the Mont Blanc pen. "This is too much... you shouldn't spend this much money."

"Don't worry, all it cost me was the price of a new nib. That was one of my father's pens. It was getting a little scratchy, so I found someone who could fix it."

"Your father's pen? Don't you want to keep it?"

"He had two, and I kept the other one. The only time I use a fountain pen is when I sign something. I usually take all my notes in pencil, and I go through dozens of those in a short time. I press too hard and break them. I have to sharpen them a lot."

"Thank you, Catherine," Vincent said, then he surprised everyone, including Catherine, by leaning over and kissing her cheek.



They spent the afternoon supervising the decorating of the tree, and there were enough decorations left over to do the rest of the dining chamber and part of the tunnel outside it.

By the time dinner was served, the children were almost too excited to eat, but when Father announced that there were all kinds of Christmas goodies for everyone who ate their dinner, the meals on the plates disappeared as if by magic.

When the cookies, cakes, and pastries came out of the kitchen, there was a lot of oohing and aahing that was quickly drowned out by crunching.

Catherine spent the evening with everyone in Father's study, where they listened to Devin's tales of his travels. He wisely left out the stories about his more skilled

jobs, but the ones about leading safaris in Africa or climbing mountains in Tibet were more than enough to fill the time.

"It's getting late," Catherine whispered to Vincent. "I should go home so that I can get back here in the morning. What time do the festivities start?"

They got up, left the study, and once in the tunnel outside, he answered.

"William serves brunch until about 11:00. It takes about an hour to clean up, and we usually start around noon," Vincent told her as they started to walk.

"Then, if I want some breakfast, I should be here before 11:00," she said.

When they arrived at her threshold, Catherine stretched up on her tiptoes and kissed Vincent.

"Good night," she said and turned to go up the stairs to the basement.

Catherine knew that Vincent waited until the door closed behind her before he left. But as soon as it closed, she started to feel lonely. She missed her dad so much. She worked to mask the feeling... she didn't want to impose it on Vincent.

"Merry Christmas, Daddy," she said aloud as she entered the elevator and pushed the button.



Vincent got back to the study just as the party was breaking up.

"Did Chandler go to bed?" Devin asked. "I'm surprised to see you back here."

"I took Catherine home," Vincent explained. "It's still kind of early for me. I thought I'd see if Father would be willing to give me a taste of that brandy Catherine gave him."

"Catherine went home? She's not staying the night?" Devin looked confused.

"You and Charles are in both the guest chambers. There is no place for her to stay," Vincent said reasonably, turning into Father's empty study.

"She doesn't stay with you?" Devin asked.

"Not since I was sick. She spent every night down here then, she slept on a cot in my chamber, but when she comes down now, she stays in the guest chamber."

"I thought you two were a thing," Devin said, clearly baffled.

"I'm not sure what you mean by *a thing*," Vincent resumed the seat he'd occupied earlier. Devin sat across from him.

"You know... a couple... lovers."

Vincent looked a little shocked, but he was talking to Devin after all. "We are a couple, but we are not... lovers." He almost whispered the last word.

"And why the hell not?"

"That is none of your business!" Vincent retorted.

"Oh my God, Vincent. You still believe all that nonsense that Father has been feeding you for... well... for your whole life? 'Be careful, Vincent. You're stronger than the other boys, Vincent. You might hurt someone, Vincent. STAY AWAY FROM THE GIRLS, VINCENT.' Does he still break out the warnings, even now?"

"It's all true," Vincent countered. "It's all good advice."

"But it shouldn't be the mission statement for your life!"



"Devin, please," Vincent started.

"Okay, I get it. And I know it's really none of my business, but I'm surprised you let her go home to spend the first Christmas without her father alone."

"She's not alone, at least not the whole time. She was here today and will be back in the morning."

"But that's not the same. I'm sure she and her dad had some kind of tradition. She needs to make some new traditions, and those traditions shouldn't include being alone."

Vincent was quiet for several moments. Then he looked at Devin.

"You're right. Someone should at least be in the house with her." He stood and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Devin asked.

"To pack an overnight bag. There's a room in the basement I can use. I'll let her know I'm there, and we can at least have breakfast together. We'll be back before noon."

When Vincent arrived in the basement, he dropped his bag in the bedroom and headed upstairs. The Bond told him she was still awake.

Catherine was startled when she heard the elevator. She got out of bed and grabbed the revolver she still kept in her nightstand.

Would a burglar use the elevator? she wondered.

She was relieved when the door opened, and Vincent stepped out.

"Oh," she put the gun on the table in the hall and put her hand over her heart. "It's you."

"I'm sorry," he said, walking to her and taking her into his arms. "I didn't mean to frighten you. I should have taken the stairs and called out."

"No, no... it's okay." She leaned back and looked up at him. "What are you doing here?"

"It dawned on me that you shouldn't be alone." He wasn't willing to admit that he'd had to be reminded. "This is the first Christmas since your father died, and I wasn't thinking when I brought you back. I'll stay, and we can talk. You can tell me what you and your father used to do, then we can have breakfast in the morning before we go Below. I left my bag in the room in the basement."

"You could have stayed in one of the rooms up here," she told him as they walked into the bedroom.

"The one in the basement is closer to the pipes, and I will be able to hear if anyone needs me," he told her. He looked at the big books spread across her bed. "What were you doing?"

"I was looking at photo albums," she said. "... kinda feeling sorry for myself."

He gestured toward the bed. "Show me. Tell me what you used to do."

They spent the next hour looking through all the pictures, and Catherine told him the stories that went with them.

"Before Mom died, we would wait until Christmas morning to open presents," she told him. "Mom would get up early and fix breakfast and put it in the oven to keep it warm, then I'd get up, we'd open gifts, and eat breakfast. But after she died, Daddy changed it up a little. He said we needed to make some new traditions."

Vincent was surprised that she used the exact words Devin had.

"What did he do?"

"We would go to a nice restaurant for dinner on Christmas Eve, then go home and open our gifts. On Christmas morning, he'd wake me up with a cup of hot cocoa. He'd have a cup of coffee, and sit on my bed and talk. Then we'd go to the kitchen and cook a big breakfast together. After we ate, we'd get dressed and spend the rest of the day watching Christmas movies on TV. We'd already had our big holiday meal the night before, so we'd order Chinese food for dinner on Christmas."

"Chinese food?" Vincent questioned.

"Yes. Christmas is a Christian holiday. Most of the Chinese restaurants are owned by Buddhists or Taoists so they stay open on Christmas, and they deliver."

A clock chimed somewhere in the house.

"It's midnight," Vincent said. "You should put all this away and get some sleep."

He helped her stack the albums on the dresser, then tucked her into bed as if she were a little girl. He dropped a kiss on her forehead.

"Good night, Catherine. Sleep well."



Vincent did not require a lot of sleep, so going to bed late and rising early was never a problem. He'd been of a mind to cook breakfast and serve it to Catherine in bed, but her story of how she and her father used to cook breakfast together on Christmas morning had resonated.

Although the morning found him in the kitchen, he wasn't cooking, only making tea and coffee. At 9am, he crossed Catherine's bedroom and set two cups on the night table.

He bent and whispered close to her ear.

"Good morning, Catherine," he said. "Merry Christmas."

He felt her waking as a smile spread across her face, even before her eyes opened.

"I love waking to the sound of your voice," she said, stretching and yawning. "Merry Christmas to you too."

"I thought that since you are no longer ten years old, that coffee might be more appreciated than hot cocoa," he said, picking up the cup and offering it to her.

"I did smell coffee. I thought I might be dreaming it." She pushed up to a sitting position and took the cup.

"That's good," she said after she took a sip.

"Not too strong?" he asked, picking up his cup of tea and moving to sit on the corner of the bed so he could lean on the footboard. "I've only made coffee in William's old stove top percolator."

"No, it's perfect. I like it strong." She looked around. "What time is it?"

"It's only nine," he told her. "We still have plenty of time to cook and eat breakfast before we have to be Below. They don't start until noon."

They talked a little as they sipped then Vincent told Catherine he'd meet her in the kitchen.

By the time she arrived, dressed in a red turtleneck, dark slacks, and her hair in a ponytail, Vincent had set out all the components of their breakfast.

"How many eggs do you want, and how do you like them?" he asked as she walked in.

"Two, scrambled, with a little bit of this." She pulled a container of shredded cheddar cheese out of the refrigerator and added it to the collection on the counter. "What do you want me to do."

"What did you do when you cooked with your dad?" he asked.

"I was in charge of putting the bacon on the cooking sheet, putting it in the oven, and making the toast. Daddy cooked the eggs, and we both set the table."

They both went to work. Vincent set the table while Catherine took care of the bacon. When the bacon was almost done, Catherine put bread in the toaster, and Vincent started the eggs.

It looked like a feast when they sat down.

"I've been in this house for about a month, and this is the first meal I've eaten at this table," Catherine said with a laugh as they dug in. "Mary and Sarah cooked when the children were here, but I ate with them downstairs. I will have to find my cookbook and start cooking again."

"You cook?" asked Vincent, clearly surprised at the revelation.

"Of course, I cook," she said with a deadly look. "How do you think I survived at college? After my freshman year, I complained to Daddy that the dorm was too noisy and I couldn't study so he bought a big house in Cambridge, not far from the campus. Nancy and Jenny moved in with me, and we took turns cooking. We taught each other things, and I got to use the skills that my dad's housekeeper taught me. She told me that everyone, girl or boy, should be able to cook at least a few basics. I got pretty good at some of those basics."

Vincent was laughing, and he apologized for doubting her. "It's just that you've told so many tales about burned toast and forgetting you've put eggs on the stove to boil that I assumed you didn't cook."

"You know what they say about assumptions," she said in a warning tone, then joined his laughter. "I actually enjoy cooking. I like to experiment, but when working at the DAs office, I seldom had the time... and for your information, the burned toast was because the toaster wasn't working properly. I got a new one and, as you can see, it is fine." She held up a piece of perfectly browned toast.

After breakfast, they cleaned up and headed Below.



"We must go to my chamber first," Vincent said as they approached the main chambers. "I have to leave this." He swung the leather duffle he carried. "And you can leave your jacket."

They rounded the corner and walked into half a dozen people, including Devin, Charles, Cullen, and three of the older boys, all clustered outside Vincent's chamber.

"What's going on, Devin?" asked Vincent, eyeing what looked like a door propped against the wall outside the entrance to his chamber.

"Vincent," said Devin, looking over his shoulder at Cullen, who was up on a ladder on the other side of the opening. "You're back early!"

"Not really," Vincent stated. "It's after eleven, and we start at noon."

"Okay then... you're back earlier than I expected. I was trying to surprise you with a Christmas present."

"This?" Vincent asked. "What is it?"

"It's a door," Catherine jumped in before Devin had a chance to speak. "One that rolls side to side, like a barn door."

"Yeah, I decided it was about time you were allowed some privacy." He grabbed Vincent's arm and pulled him toward the chamber. "Let's get out of the way and let Cullen and Zach hang that thing.

Cullen had moved the ladder out of the way, and he and Zach were moving the door toward the chamber.

Devin, Vincent, and Catherine moved around them and into the chamber, where they found Charles holding an L-shaped rod.

They watched as the door was moved into the room, turned upright then hung on a rail that had been mounted above the entrance to the chamber. Cullen tried it, and it rolled back and forth freely. When it was open, it was behind a cabinet, when it was closed, it covered the entrance.

Charles went over and slid the rod into a hole on the right side of the door, next to a wrought iron handle.

"And it locks," he announced triumphantly.

Vincent looked stunned as he turned to Devin.

"Whatever made you think of something like this?" he asked.

"When I got here last week, we tried to talk, and no fewer than seven people interrupted. Not only did they interrupt, but they just walked in. No one called out or asked permission, they just walked in. I thought it was about time you had some privacy. I supplied the materials to build it, and Cullen did most of the work."

"I have a feeling that I'm going to get a lot of requests for these in the future," Cullen predicted.

"It's a wonderful idea," Catherine added.

"Yes, thank you, Devin," Vincent said with the beginning of a smile.

Cullen and Zach were gathering their tools. "We'll see you in the dining chamber in a few minutes," Cullen said as they left.

"Yes, and thank you, Cullen," Vincent called after him.

He dropped the duffel and moved to hug Devin. "Thank you again, Devin. What did Father think when you told him about this?"

"Didn't tell him," Devin said with a grin. "As I always say, 'It's easier to get forgiveness than permission '... especially with the old man."

"He wouldn't disapprove of something like this, would he?" asked Catherine doubtfully.

"I don't know. It's never been expressly forbidden, that I know of," said Devin, "but he's always been very aware that all the chambers here Below are heated with wood fires, and there is a danger of carbon monoxide. He's adamant about good ventilation, but most of these chambers are drafty. When it got colder than usual down here, Vincent and I hung a rug over the doorway, but we had a wood-burning stove instead of the open brazier. We were able to use a duct to direct the smoke and fumes out through the opening up there." He pointed at an opening in the corner above the new door." He turned to Vincent. "Whatever happened to that stove?"

"We moved it to the nursery. They had more need of it than I did."

"Catherine was looking up. "Where does that go?" she asked.

"It opens into a rarely used tunnel that runs under the park. Any fumes vented there are quickly dissipated because there is always a stiff breeze," Devin replied.

Catherine looked at her watch. "It's almost noon," she told them. "We should probably get moving."



When they arrived, the dining chamber was already starting to fill up, but a place had been saved for Catherine on a bench against the wall. There was a table in front of her, and Mary and Brooke were on the other side of the table.

"I think the pile of gifts is bigger than usual this year," Brooke commented with a pointed look at Catherine.

Catherine just smiled and looked innocent. She'd brought down a lot of things the day before, but most of it had been food for today's lunch and the decorations. She had provided a lot of the gifts, at least for the children, but they had been delivered through other Helpers and a few at a time over the weeks since Thanksgiving. She didn't want any thanks, she just wanted to ensure every child had something.

Father stood in front of the tree and waved his arms to get everyone's attention.

"Everyone knows the procedure," he said with a smile, "but just in case anyone has forgotten... Vincent will select a gift and read the tag out loud then one of the children will take the gift to the person who is supposed to receive it. And we don't start opening until all the gifts have been distributed."

Father sat down, and Vincent selected the first gift.

You could tell which ones came from Above and which came from Below. The ones from Above had brightly colored new paper and ribbons, the ones from Below had creased, often used, and slightly faded paper and ribbons. Catherine knew that every bit of paper taken off gifts today would be saved and put away for use in the future.

It took the better part of an hour to hand everything out. The children brought the gifts with Vincent's name on them to Catherine, and she stacked them all on the other end of the table in front of her. He couldn't be seen when he joined her at the table and sat down.

"I tell them every year that I don't need a gift, but every year, I swear the pile gets bigger," he said wryly.

The oohs, aahs and shrieks of excitement had already started in the room, and Catherine grinned and nodded at the pile.

"You'd better get started," she told him. "We don't want to delay William's lunch."

Catherine was surprised at the sizable stack that was in front of her too.

She had an assortment of pencil cups, pen holders, tea cozies, book covers, and things she couldn't really identify. But she kept each of the tags and put them with the items to make sure to thank the giver.

Mary had crocheted a small bag to go inside her purse. It was big enough to hold lipstick, powder compact, and some tissues. She leaned across the table and thanked Mary. She almost teared up when she opened a framed photo from Lena of an almost one-year-old Little Catherine. She showed Vincent.

The last one she opened was a package wrapped in creased brown paper tied with a festive red ribbon. It was obviously a book.

Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas

The title made her smile. She didn't even have to ask who it was from.

"Does this include the poem you were constantly quoting?" she asked.

"It does, but it's not the original volume I had." He looked contrite, then leaned over and whispered. "I seem to remember flinging that one off your balcony."

Catherine's hand covered her mouth, and she stifled a laugh. "I bet someone on the street thought it was raining books."

"I just hope no one was hurt. Even a small book falling from that height would hit pretty hard."

Lunch was served after everyone was finished opening gifts.

"You're going to need a wagon to get all those back to your chamber," Catherine commented with a laugh after they had eaten.

"It's like this every year," he said with a shake of his head.

"They love you and want to do things for you," she told him. *I know that feeling*, she added silently.

"Father said the same thing. He and I both get the things that children often make to give to their fathers and grandfathers."

"My dad had quite a collection," Catherine told him. "I made him something for Christmas, Father's Day, and his birthday every year until I was eleven or twelve."

"Don't remind me, I have a birthday coming up in a few weeks, and there will be more I'll have to find places for. I can't just put any of it away out of sight, I don't want anyone to feel slighted."

A few minutes later, Mouse showed up with a wagon, and they loaded everything into it and headed back to Vincent's chamber.

"I don't think I have enough pens and pencils to fill all these holders," Vincent said as he set several on his writing table.

"You have a desk in the new classroom, don't you?" asked Catherine.

"It's a large worktable," he answered.

"Then take all but one or two of these to the classroom and put them on the table," she suggested. "I'll bring some pencils the next time I come down, and you can fill them. Children always need extra pencils in class."

"That is a good idea. As long as they are on the table, and I use the pencils too, everyone will get to see that I'm using what they made. Maybe I can do the same thing with the book ends." He pointed to three sets.

When they were done with Vincent's gifts, Catherine was surprised that Vincent went to close his new door. She was even more surprised when he used the rod that locked it.

"I'm ready to sit down and relax," he told her, walking to the bookshelf. "I've been busy since before Winterfest."

Catherine watched as he picked a book and went to his bed, where he piled pillows against the headboard. He sat down, pulled off his boots, slid up on the bed and leaned on the pillows.

The real surprise came when he patted the spot next to him.

"Charles gave me a copy of a book that he discovered. He thought I might like it. Why don't we read it together?" he suggested.

Catherine kicked off her shoes and joined him.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Freckles by Gene Stratton Porter. I've never heard of it," he said, looking at the spine.

"I read that when I was in elementary school. I loved it. I think it was written in the early 1900s. It's a very positive story of an orphaned child without a name who had missing a hand."

"It sounds as if it might be a good book for my students to read," Vincent commented, opening it.

"It would. A lot of them could really identify with Freckles."

Vincent began to read, and Catherine snuggled down next to him.

I could listen to him read the phone book and be mesmerized, she thought to herself.

Vincent hadn't even finished the first chapter when they heard the door rattle.

Vincent stopped reading, and they looked at each other. Catherine tried not to smile but failed.

A few seconds later, there was a rapping on the door.

"Father," Vincent whispered. "That's his cane."

"Vincent!" Father almost shouted. "May I come in?"

Vincent marked their place in the book with his finger and slid off the bed as Catherine followed. She put her shoes back on and moved to the chair.

When Vincent opened the door, Father was standing there looking like a thunder cloud.

"Was it really necessary to lock it?" he asked, his gaze taking in Catherine on the chair, the slightly mussed bed, the book in Vincent's hand, and his shoeless state.

"Not locking it would have defeated the purpose of the door, now wouldn't it, Father," Vincent stated. "The door is to ensure privacy and that I'm not disturbed. If I hadn't locked it, you would have walked right in as if it wasn't even there."

Father had the grace to look more than a little sheepish.

"I'll concede that point," he admitted.

"Do you think you'll be asking Cullen for a door?" Vincent asked as Father followed him across the chamber.

Catherine stood and offered Father the chair, and she and Vincent sat on the side of the bed.

"Not on the study," Father answered. "It's more or less a public space, but maybe on my private chamber... but that's not why I'm here. I wanted to talk to Catherine."

"What do you need, Father?" she asked, wondering if he'd just made up an errand to find out what they were doing behind the *locked door*.

"Willis was here for the party earlier, and he confided in me that his niece is in an abusive relationship. Her husband drinks, and he's a mean drunk. She wants out, but she has no place to go. Her parents have more or less written her off with the attitude that she's made her bed, now she has to lie in it. I was wondering when you are planning to open your office."

"I wasn't going to start seeing clients until March 1st, but if she feels that she's in danger, I'll talk to her. I can put her in touch with some of the shelters where she can stay." She went to Vincent's table and wrote a number on a scrap of paper. "I'm still setting up my office, but that is my home number. It rings on the phones upstairs and in my office, and there is an answering machine in case I don't answer. Tell her to call me."

She handed the paper to Father, who tucked it into a pocket.

When he didn't move, Vincent looked at him pointedly.

"We were reading," Vincent told him as Catherine sat back on the bed. "Would you care to join us?"

"What are you reading? Father asked.

Vincent held the book out to show him.

"I didn't know that was in our library. It would be a good book for the children to read."

"It's not from our library," Vincent told him. "It was a gift."

When Vincent wasn't any more forthcoming than that, Father rose and headed for the door. Vincent followed.

"Maybe when you are done with it, I can read it. It's been a while."

Father left, and Vincent closed and locked the door again. Catherine burst out laughing.

"I thought for sure he didn't have a legitimate reason for coming here," she said after she caught her breath.

"I'm afraid I was thinking the same thing," he agreed.

"I bet he was dying to know what *the children* were up to behind that locked door. I'm surprised he didn't try to tell you that the door needed to stay open when you were in here with me."



Catherine was very busy during the rest of December and most of January. Furniture was delivered, and she set up a meeting with Willis' niece and arranged for her to move to a shelter.

She took time out for Vincent's birthday party on January 12th. Devin and Charles left the following Monday.

Vincent was in her house several times, helping her move furniture and filling the bookshelves in the office and the third-floor library. Whenever there was a lull in the work, she would find him either on the roof or the terrace on the fourth floor, reinforcing the thought that moving was one of her life's better decisions.

Erika and Rita started work on February 1st, and Vincent decided it would limit his time at Catherine's.

"No, you can still come any time you want to," she pointed out. "You can stay in the basement or take the elevator up to any of the other floors. Erika and Rita have no reason to go to the basement or above the first floor. So, if you want to enjoy the quiet or sit in the sun, you'll be fine. Maybe, eventually, we can let them in on the secret." She was sure they could be trusted.

"You're sure?" he asked. "You don't mind me being around when you're not there?"

"Vincent, you are welcome here any time, day or night, when I'm here or when I'm not. Just stay off the first floor during business hours.

March 1st was a Thursday, but since they'd had so many calls for appointments, Catherine decided to open the office that day instead of waiting until the following Monday.

"It will give us a couple of days to see if the plan works," said Rita the day before. "If it doesn't, maybe we can tweak it a little over the weekend."



Catherine was getting off the elevator in the lobby that Thursday and heard the doorbell ringing. It couldn't be Erika or Rita as they both had keys. Besides, the office didn't open until 9am, and the first appointments weren't until 10am. It was only 7:45.

As she walked to the front door, she was surprised to see Joe with a huge bouquet of spring flowers.

"Happy first day in business," he said as she opened the door for him. He handed her the flowers.

"Thank you, Joe!" She reached out and gave him a one-armed hug. "They're beautiful." She headed back to the elevator. "Come on upstairs. I need to find a vase for these."

Joe left his coat on one of the hooks inside the door and followed her to the elevator, which was barely big enough for two. The big bouquet made it a tight fit.

"How are things at work?" she asked as they moved upward.

"Same stuff, different day," he told her with a grin. "We miss you."

"You mean you miss the unattached single woman willing to put in all those extra hours."

Joe feigned a hurt look as he followed her into the kitchen on the fourth floor. "I miss your sunny disposition," he grumped.

They joked as Catherine found a vase, filled it with water, and put the flowers in it. They were getting out of the elevator in the lobby when Rita let herself in the front door.

"And you stole one of our other valuable employees," he retorted, hugging Rita.

"Better working conditions," said Rita, gesturing at their surroundings. "Not to mention better pay and benefits. Can you blame me?"

"Guess not," Joe conceded with a grin.

There was a large round table in the middle of the lobby, and Catherine put the vase of flowers on it.

"Perfect!" she announced. "Now we can all enjoy them."

She led him back to her office, stopping in the kitchenette for coffee.

She handed a cup to Joe, who took a sip and smiled.

"Real coffee," he commented. "Not sludge. Now I know why you and Rita left."

"And it's ready when we get here," she pointed out. "I have this pot set on a timer. All I have to do is remember to set it up before I leave in the evening."

They spent some time in Catherine's office, catching up. One of Joe's sisters was pregnant, and his mom was ecstatic to finally be a grandmother.

Joe was getting ready to leave when they heard voices in the lobby. The next thing they knew, Erika stepped into the office.

Both she and Joe were surprised.

"You're here early," said Catherine glancing at the clock. "It's not even nine, and your first appointment isn't until ten."

"Ah, yeah, but I'm still getting used to that computer, and I want to make sure that I've got it up and running and have a chance to look over the information Rita got from the client." She turned and nodded to Joe. "Hi, Joe. How have you been?"

"Good," he said in a flat voice.

"I'd better get to my desk," Erika said and rushed out.

"I wondered if you hired her," he said as they walked toward the doors. "You never said."

"She's really motivated, Joe," Catherine said in a low tone.

"You think you can trust her?" he asked, surprising her.

"Of course, I can. She just made some bad decisions, Joe. I'm sure we've all been there and done that... seduced by the glamor of a cushy job, a big paycheck, and promises of more and greater things in the future. You have to admit you were tempted when she hinted that Proctor & Brannigan were interested in hiring you."

"I get it, I guess," Joe said. "But you weren't the one she used to achieve her goals."

"I know she's a beautiful woman, and you were captivated, but were you maybe using her just a little bit too? Especially when she said that her boss had been following your career."

Joe frowned. "Not the time or the place for this discussion," he declared as he rose and turned for the door. He reached out and pulled her into a hug. "But I'll admit you've given me something to think about."

She watched as he walked out into the blustery March day.

"I was surprised to see him here this morning," Erika said later when Catherine met her at the coffee pot.

"Me too," she said. "But Joe can be surprisingly thoughtful."

"Yeah, he can. Did he bring the flowers?" Erika leaned on the counter.

"Yes. They are the perfect thing to liven up the lobby," she answered as she poured some coffee.

"You and Joe 'an item'?" Erika asked.

Catherine looked at her for a moment before answering. "You really are fond of him, aren't you?"

"More than fond," was all she said.

"Well, if it makes you feel better. Joe and I are not 'an item.' I love him like a brother, and he's one of my best friends, but my heart is with someone else."

"It's not like I have any kind of a chance," Erika pointed out as she followed Catherine into her office.

"I wouldn't write him off completely. Joe trusted you and felt you betrayed that trust. He doesn't trust all that easily. Give him time to recover, you never know what might happen. I imagine you'll see him around here now and then, and one of us might have reason to go over to the DAs office once in a while." She shrugged and smiled as the intercom buzzed.

"Erika's client is here," Rita announced.

"She'll be right out," Catherine answered.

Erika left, looking like Catherine had given her as much to think about as she had Joe.





Perhaps, One Day...

by Barbara Anderson



It wasn't the first time they'd had this argument, and they both knew it wouldn't be the last.

"Because! Catherine... our dream..." he said, with a hitch in his voice, "... is something that can *never* be!"

The conviction in his voice was heartbreaking.

"Why?" she demanded. "Why do you always say that?"

"Because..." he insisted, his palms open in a gesture of pleading. "I don't know who I am!" he said, shaking his head in despair. "I don't know... what I am... We... don't know... what I am."

"That's not true!" she countered, with equal conviction. "I do know! I know who you are, Vincent... and what you are... I have always known!"

He tilted his head inquisitively to one side, waiting for her to elaborate.

She approached him, standing so close that her scent alone calmed the beating of his troubled heart.

Gently resting her open palm on his chest, she spoke softly. "You are the kindest... gentlest... most loving... human being... I have ever known... You are my Vincent... You... are the man I love... That is all that matters."

He closed his eyes, sighing heavily. Drawing her closer, he let her words flow into his soul. When she says it, he thought, I can almost believe it's true.



by Lynn Wright

As if reading his mind, Catherine lifted her hand and lay it against his stubbled cheek. "Perhaps, one day," she whispered, "you *will* believe it's true."





by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova





A Visit from St. Winslow

by Cindy Rae



There are many stories about different characters (on both sides of the veil) stepping in to intervene for Vincent and Catherine and help them toward The Happy Life. I thought it was time for this one.



"Don't grieve. Anything you lose comes round in another form."
— Rumi



December 25th had come, but it had not gone, not quite yet at least. The excitement of the morning had given way to afternoon... and then to evening. Vincent knew that unlike many other Tunnel folk, this was the part of Christmas Day that he preferred.

Nighttime was settling itself into the Tunnels, and just as it was in the world Above, it was doing so on quiet, well-worn feet. The hubbub of Christmas

morning had come and gone, bringing what few gifts and great excitement with it that it would.

The afternoon had been a busy one. Carols had been sung, food had been eaten, and Catherine, lovely as ever, had brought down a box of art supplies for the children: drawing paper, crayons, watercolor paint sets, and colored pencils, most of which had been used throughout the day. It was her Christmas gift to them all, and they were enchanted by it. Before dessert, multiple pictures had begun appearing around the dining area, strung on lines hung up by Pascal.

Father had read the last chapter of "A Christmas Carol," (again) and Henry and Lin had brought down a bag of fortune cookies for everyone to share. Elizabeth had begun a new painting, while Cullen had finished an old carving. There had been a Christmas concert given by the older children, and handmade cards delivered to the Helpers by the younger ones. It had been the Tunnel World on Christmas Day, as eclectic and varied a time as could be had.

And now... peace. The setting sun (and it set early in December) was like a referee's whistle, one that indicated the game was over, and it was now time to put the toys back in the box and settle in. Holiday gifts were stowed... or worn, as needs indicated. Supper (a thick stew and William's good bread) had been enjoyed, a huge vanilla cake had been sliced, and full bellies had made for tired folk. The art supplies had been put aside for another day (probably tomorrow, if Samantha had her way, and there was no reason to think that she wouldn't.)

The children had wandered off to their beds, as many of the adults did the same. Vincent had escorted Catherine to her threshold and bid her a soft good-night. She'd barely been able to conceal a yawn.

Vincent had smiled to himself inwardly, as he beheld her. *You're tired. Tired, and trying not to show it. Merry Christmas, Catherine. I love you*, he'd thought, watching her ascend her ladder... slowly.

Even Father had seemed weary and had waved Vincent off when he'd asked about a game of chess:

Jacob Wells had rubbed his tired eyes. "No, no, not tonight, Vincent. I think I'll just climb in with a good book and drift off. Perhaps tomorrow."

"As you wish, Father."

"And so... what will you do, now?" Father had inquired, reaching for a book on Virgil. With his other hand, he rubbed a sore spot at the back of his neck. The day had clearly worn him down.

"Go and visit with friends, I think," Vincent had replied.

And so, now he was.

But it was not living friends he'd referred to, and only Vincent knew that a trip to the Mirror Pool was in order for him. It was a thing he'd been doing almost every December 25th since Devin left, and it was a custom he found comforting in its repetition.

The room was empty. Only a small stub of a candle left near the pool's edge indicated that someone else had been by earlier.

Probably Pascal saying a prayer for his father, Vincent thought, or *Mary for her son*. He knew he wasn't the only one who came here on this particular day.

Our first Christmas without you, he thought.

He drew closer to the water and looked in. The earliest of the early stars were coming out; the sky was clear and winter cold. Vincent set his lantern down and lit a torch, letting the warm flames cheer the room a little, as it blazed in its ring against the wall.

That's better, he thought, knowing he wouldn't build a fire beneath the starlit opening. He had no letter to burn, no message to deliver. Not today.

But still, he wanted to speak to someone in particular, so speak he did:

"You would have loved the day," Vincent began, knowing who he was talking to.

"The children were excited, and Mouse was... well, he was Mouse. He's trying to devise a machine that does... something; Paints a picture, captures a rainbow, wraps a gift, perhaps."

Vincent shook his great head. "You'd have reminded him he has little enough to be able to give, and he'd have argued with you about it."

He smiled. "It was a good day."

Vincent knelt down near the edge of the Mirror Pool and continued speaking. "Catherine brought down art supplies. Samantha painted a picture of Jane Eyre then chased Kipper all the way to the hub. William baked bread, and of course,

the cake. Pascal had a piece then insisted he needed to get back to the pipe chamber. You know how it is."

He leaned over just a bit, watching his own reflection as he spoke to the shimmering water. "And I... I found something in my Chambers, something of yours, or it was going to be." Vincent reached a hand inside his cape pocket and inhaled deeply, letting the feeling of loss make itself known. His hand touched a small, rectangular box.

"It was in a box I had tucked away. I meant to give it to you at Winterfest... or Christmas..." Vincent grasped the undelivered gift and brought it forth. It was unwrapped and plain, the kind of box that was made from cutting down a piece of cardboard. He set it on the ground next to him.

"Merry Christmas, Winslow. I wish you were still here, my friend," Vincent said softly.

He owned the emptiness of grief and let it wash through him. He felt the pain of losing his friend, as the oddly still fresh yet well-worn sorrow passed over his heart. He touched his fingers to the water and the ripples obscured his image, and that of the sky above him.

"I miss you," he confessed to the rippling water.

When the ripples cleared a very familiar, though somewhat ghostly face was looking down at the water with him, from just over his right shoulder.

"Merry Christmas, Vincent." Winslow himself answered. His smile was broad.

Vincent spun his head around, surprised.

"Winslow?!" He was incredulous.

Cheerful as ever, Winslow continued to smile. "Of course!"

Winslow eyed the plain brown box." So... what did you get me?" he asked.



Vincent, for all his amazement, couldn't help but smile in return. He beheld his larger friend... a friend who was... opaque in spots.

"Well?" Winslow prompted, indicating the gift.

"Gloves," Vincent answered, astonished to be having this conversation. "I... repaired your old black ones, and added a pad across the palm."

No matter how this is happening, it is happening. Go with it, Vincent thought.

Winslow nodded his approval at Vincent's description of his present. "Save me from raising blisters. It's a thoughtful gift."

"I... it was... before..." Vincent's voice trailed off.

"I know what it was before," Winslow replied, straightening. "And don't ask me what I was going to get you. You know I was always last minute when it came to that sort of thing." Winslow said easily.

They both knew it was true. But only one of them seemed surprised that they were speaking to each other.

"Winslow, I can't believe you're..."

"You go ahead and use them. I got no need," Winslow wiggled his dark fingers at

Vincent, ones that were still wearing the clothes he'd been buried in.

Vincent stood. "Winslow, how can you... how can you be here?"
Vincent asked.

The black man shrugged his broad shoulders. "Beats me. Christmas magic maybe, even if it's just the tail end of it." He indicated a boulder Vincent often used as a seat. Both men settled themselves opposite each other.

"I always did believe," Winslow continued, as Vincent sat down. "Even if it was just a little."

I know what it is to believe 'just a little.' And what it is to believe much more, Vincent thought.

"I've felt your absence keenly, my



friend. You have no idea how often," he said.

"Oh, I kind of do," Winslow jibed. "Since you gotta pick up my work detail... details," he said, adding the plural. Winslow often did the work of two other men.

Vincent's smile settled into a wry grin. "Others took your shifts also. You always did work too hard, Winslow." *Perhaps that's why you never seemed to find time for anything else?*

The other man shrugged again. "My Daddy always said, 'Big men get the big jobs.' You remember."

Vincent did. "I think he put the first hammer in your hand."

"Back when we were putting in the culvert door. Good times. I see him sometimes," Winslow confided. "Of course, he's as busy here as he was anywhere."

Vincent wasn't sure if he was supposed to ask about where "here" was. He just knew he was beyond pleased to see his friend. And it gave him a chance to make an apology, one he was fairly sure the man sitting opposite him didn't require.

"I didn't... couldn't save you, Winslow." The regret in Vincent's voice ran deep. "I'm so sorry for that."

Winslow chuckled, actually chuckled. "Nah, but we saved Catherine, didn't we?"

Vincent nodded. "We did. We did that. And Pascal, and Jamie, they both came back. They are well," Vincent reassured.

Winslow waved a large, dismissive hand. "Oh, hell, I know that. I stayed close for a while, Vincent, watching over you all, at least as much as I could."

Vincent took that in. You saw? Perhaps sent us your blessing and made sure Jamie and Pascal returned safely... perhaps even helped me in some way, to save Catherine. Of course, you did. How like you, Winslow, to look after your friends, when you had lost... everything.

"Thank you." It was all Vincent could think to say.

Winslow seemed to solidify a bit, as he rubbed his hands on his patchwork slacks. "Pascal." He tipped his head, thoughtfully. "I should have gone down to the Pipe Chamber more... spent some time... been a better friend, maybe."

The spirit before Vincent looked a little wistful, if spirits could do that.

"I don't think he'd want you to have changed."

"And Jamie," Winslow interrupted. "The last thing I said to her... well, it wasn't kind. And there she was, saving you all with that damn crossbow of hers."

Again, just a touch of regret could be heard in Winslow's voice. "You think she forgave me?"

"I'm sure she did," Vincent hastened to reply. "Not that there was a need for forgiveness. She understood, Winslow. We all did."

A slight pause spun out between them.

"So... how *is* Catherine?" Winslow asked, leaning forward on the seat opposite Vincent.

Vincent's heart warmed at just the mention of her name. "Beautiful. Beautiful as ever," he replied, not bothering to hide his smile. "We have you to thank for that, and in no small part."

Winslow held up his hands in a gesture of negation. "I'm sure that however that pretty lady looks, it has nothing to do with me," he said, deflecting. "And you? How are *you*, Vincent?"

Vincent's head leaned to its customary tilt. "I am well. Busy, as we always are this time of year. Happy." Again, he beheld his friend, the one who had never found love for himself but knew its value, unmistakably. "I'm more in love than I was last year. I didn't think it possible," Vincent confided.

Is that why you came? To ask how we all are faring?

Winslow smiled back. "And Father? How's he doing?"

Vincent considered the question. "Busy also, more than last year. Looking forward to what the New Year will bring, I think, but less patient with the children. He's doing well, Win—"

Winslow stood and cut Vincent off for a second time. "No. No, he isn't." He began to pace within the confines of the room. "Not really," Winslow added. "And that's uh... that's part of why I'm here, Vincent."

It is?

Vincent followed the other man with his eyes. "Father? You're here about Father? *What's wrong?*"

Winslow nodded. "Sometimes I look in on him, inside those chambers of his. Sometimes I see things, things you don't."

Vincent considered the words. *You see things? About Father? Things I am not seeing?* "He's been... tired lately," Vincent allowed, remembering that Father had waved off his invitation to play chess this evening. It hadn't been the first time for that recently. Vincent had put it down to the stresses of the holidays.

Winslow took in the pronouncement. You see it, too. You just ain't sure what you're seeing.

"Tired... yeah. That's a word for it," Winslow replied.

Vincent felt internal alarm bells going off. "So... you came to tell me this? That Father's... his... fatigue is somehow... more?"

Yes. Yes, and where to begin with the rest of it? Winslow nodded.

"This is about him, yeah. But it's also about you and Catherine, Vincent."

A blonde eyebrow rose. "Catherine and I? I love her more than my life. And I... I sense from her the same. Sometimes it... it's so strong it overwhelms me, even as it humbles me."

Winslow had no doubt it was true. "Like I said, never felt it for myself. But... that doesn't mean I don't understand."

He sighed and returned to stand before his friend. "Father first. This is gonna be hard, Vincent. But I think you're the only one I can say it to. Father needs you... even if he doesn't know it, or won't admit it. And he maybe needs Catherine too. He's sick, Vincent, even he doesn't know it yet. That's why I had to tell you. He's not going to do anything. Then, it's gonna be too late."

The eyebrow went higher. "Father? He... he isn't well? But I just saw him. He's ... he doesn't *seem* ill. Weary, from all the activity, but fine as far as I can see. And Catherine..." He didn't know what more he could add to what he'd already said on that score.

Winslow moved closer to the Mirror Pool and knelt by its edge. He motioned Vincent closer.

"This is the hard part, Vincent. This is where you have to take something on faith just a little. You have to trust me like you used to."

Vincent moved near. Trusting Winslow was one of the easiest things Vincent knew how to do.

"Of course, I trust you. Everyone who ever knew you trusted you. There was never any doubt of that, my friend."

"Some mighta said I had a temper, spoke too rash, assumed the worst maybe a little too much. Like Jamie, maybe," Winslow said, allowing for his own faults. "I wasn't perfect, Vincent. But that don't mean I'm wrong now."

Winslow looked down into the water. His ghostly reflection looked back at him. Again, he sighed.

Vincent simply waited. *Is that why you're appearing to me rather than Jamie? Make me understand, Winslow.*

"Winslow... I bless that you're here, that we're speaking with each other. No matter how hard it is for me to hear it... I promise to believe. You must say what it is you've come to say."

Winslow nodded and then extended his gloved hand out in front of him, curving it toward the right. His reflection did the same. "Vincent, you know how you can look down a fork in the tunnel and see a little ways until it curves? You know that... part-way view?" he asked.

Vincent nodded.

"Well, the future is like that. I can sometimes... *see* it, a little, just a little ways down."

He waited to see if he was believed. Vincent's silence assured him he was.

"Now... the future is a funny thing," Winslow continued. "Kinda like how they showed old Scrooge in Dickens. Follow one path and it goes down that way. Follow another..." He let the word trail off, as he indicated following a path with the motion of his arm.

"So... like in Dickens... you're telling me that our actions can change our outcomes," Vincent said. "That there is no... one way, but possibly many."

Winslow smiled again, delighted at his friend's quick mind.

"Yeah, that's it. Actions change outcomes. You got it, Vincent. Nothing is *set*. Nothing is sure. The paths change. I need you to know that. It's just that... well, you *can* see the view, if you get me."

Vincent was growing increasingly alarmed. "And in this ... this view, Father... Father is... what? Desperately ill?"

Winslow cocked his head to one side in a gesture of consideration... and sympathy.

"If the present continues as it is now... if the path unwinds the way it's tending to... it's worse than "ill" ... much worse. I'm sorry, Vincent."

Vincent was shocked.

"You mean... you mean he's going to die? How?!" Vincent demanded. "Tell me, Winslow!"

The large man looked back at the pool "I can... I don't know if I have the *words* so much, but I can show you... show you so you can see what I see," Winslow replied, flexing his fingers.

"I can't touch you," Winslow said. "But I can touch this."

The black man extended his arm and put his hand in. No ripple of passage stirred the water. Yet, it began to shimmer and change, as the Christmas constellations became something else, a view to somewhere else. After a moment, Vincent realized he was looking at Father's very familiar chamber and he himself was entering the room, calling out for the man who had raised him all his life.

"Father? There's a mistake in the morning work schedule," Vincent said, coming down the short set of stairs. "You have Cullen both in the Eastern tunnels on the work crew, and on sentry duty to the south. And Jamie is both bringing groceries from Mr. Lee's, and fetching medicine from Peter for Sam Denton. I can..."

But the rest of the words died on Vincent's lips, as he realized that the cluttered room was dark and much too still. The last candle that had been used to light it had guttered down, probably sometime in the middle of the night. The brazier was unlit, and the room was cold. This was not the room's usual ambience, not at mid-morning.

"Father?" Vincent lit a table lantern and carefully approached the bed where Father lay sleeping. The sheet was pulled up to his chin and the quilt was comfortably folded back. His glasses were still on his nose. Except for the toopale color of his cheeks, and the fact that his chest was no longer rising and falling with his breath, he looked like a man in soft repose.

Vincent knew he wasn't.

"Father!" Vincent rushed to his only parent's side and felt a hand that had reached the same, too-cool temperature as the rest of the room. Father had

clearly passed away, some time in the middle of the night. The book he'd been reading was face down on the covers, and his evening cup of chamomile tea was stone cold, on his nightstand.

He was gone.

"Father!" Vincent pulled back the covers and pressed his ear to Father's chest, knowing he would hear nothing. After a moment, his cry of grief shook the chamber walls as he sat back on his haunches, stunned.

Beside Winslow, Vincent watched himself in the mirror pool, as others came into the room. Mary was first. She put a hand to her mouth and stifled a wail. Cullen was next, then Kipper and Mouse. Then Jamie. All of them knew. All of them realized. There were tears streaming down Jamie's face as she tapped out the message on the pipes. *All work stop. Pascal send the word to all. Father is...* she couldn't bring herself to tap out the word "dead." Cullen had to do it for her.

Vincent looked over at Winslow. "This cannot be. This must not be. I cannot bear it, Winslow," Vincent said, tears streaming down his own face. He wondered how this once-lovely day had gone so wrong.

Winslow removed his fingers from the water and the image vanished.

"It doesn't have to be this way. Nothing is fixed, remember?"

Vincent wiped his eyes. "What can I do? What must we all do?"

Winslow looked steadily at his friend. "You have to talk to Peter Alcott. Get him to come down. Tell him you've seen Father looking too tired lately. Lie, if you have to. Anything to get him to listen to Father's heart and take him up for tests. I had an uncle like this. He needs a pacemaker, Vincent. Don't ask me how I know. I just do."

"A... pacemaker?" Vincent echoed. That was more, far more, than the Tunnel World could provide.

Winslow nodded. "In a hospital, in an *Above* hospital," he emphasized, as Vincent took in what that would mean.

"There's no way to do it here. He has to go up Top. He has to agree to it," Winslow concluded.

Vincent rose and stepped away from the water, terrified that it had shown him the truth, and equally frightened that he wouldn't be able to get Father to agree to what Winslow was suggesting. He held out a beseeching hand.

"Father... he'll never agree to that," Vincent realized. "You know how he is, Winslow."

Winslow nodded. "I know. Stubborn. Even after he knows he'll try to treat it with pills and less stress. He'll lose ten pounds, and swear off salt. I *know*," Winslow agreed. "But I think you have to make him do it, Vincent. Somehow. Because this isn't just about him. Bad as it is, it's not just about him."

"It... Who? I don't understand, Winslow."

You mentioned Catherine. How is this about her?

"It's about you, you and Catherine. That's why I asked how you were doing."

"Catherine and I?" Vincent was clearly confused. "But how can this be about—"

"You have to get him to go, Vincent," Winslow interrupted. "Or something else bad happens. Before the next Christmas Day comes." The brown eyes were sad. "It gets worse, old friend."

"Worse than this? What could possibly be worse than this?!" Vincent demanded.

Winslow dropped his head a little. The balding, shiny pate looked even more so by torchlight. "Father's death... it causes things, things that mostly affect... you."

"Of course, it affects me. It affects all of us!" Vincent knew he was nearly shouting.

Winslow shook his head. "All of you, yeah, but also, *not* all of you. *You*, Vincent... just you mostly." He let the words sink in.

"More responsibility. More stress. Less *time*. More people come down, more needs to take care of. Michael has to come back to teach your classes when he can. You... you fill Father's shoes, all *you* can."

"How is it that such a thing would affect Catherine?" Vincent asked.

Winslow stood silent for a moment. "Who would it affect more?" he asked softly.

Then... "What's your life like, if Father dies before the next year is out?"

Vincent stopped to think about that, about the enormity of all it implied.

"Father is our leader. Our... our doctor..." The words trailed away, as the man who had a soul of a doctor himself realized who that job would most likely fall to. *And as more people come down*...

Vincent looked forward into a Father-less future and realized how likely that overwhelming scenario was. It wasn't that he couldn't do it. It was that he knew it would impact his relationship with his love. Their time was a precious, limited thing. If Father passed away suddenly, it would become that much more so.

"The council has many voices," Vincent said. "Others will help. Others will do what is--"

"Yours is the strongest voice and the truest," Winslow replied, exactly quoting Father.

Vincent hesitated. "Whatever path lies before me... I cannot help but think that Catherine and I are equal to it," Vincent said, aware that that still didn't solve the question of helping Father.

Winslow gave a slight shrug. "In a way, that's just it. You *will* be equal to it. *Both* of you will be... for a while."

He took a few steps back, as Vincent absorbed his words.

"But as time goes on..." Winslow could only look at his companion with great sympathy. "My friend, every axe handle that ever broke was once new... every pair of gloves." He indicated the gift box with a jerk of his head. "It's *time* that wears those things down. Time and use... too much use, sometimes."

Vincent nodded that he understood.

"Everyone *tries* to help when Father passes," Winslow continued. "Then they realize they don't know what they don't know. The schedules, the hundred decisions in a day, the doctor stuff... Peter tries to be here more, but sometimes, he just can't. Pascal can't stay long away from the pipe chamber. William holds down the kitchen...Mary helps like she always does, but she's not exactly young either, you know?" Winslow elaborated.

Vincent did. So, you're saying... most of Father's responsibilities... they fall to me. They simply do.

Winslow continued: "More people coming down. Hard times up Top, like there is sometimes. Age... use... stress... neglect... they all take a toll. On everybody. On you. And... on Catherine. Maybe... no matter what happens with Father."

The blue eyes flickered. "So, this is what you came to tell me? That time will not be kind to us?" Vincent asked, his worry and at least a little anger rising.

Winslow huffed a little. "I came to tell you that time ain't kind to nobody, Vincent. And that's if you don't find out you just ran out of it." His meaning was clear. Winslow's own passing was in his prime, violent and sudden. One moment he was there, the next he wasn't.

"Catherine is... she means the world to me. I would do everything in my power to make sure she—"

Winslow shook his head at the forthcoming pronouncement. "No. You have to *see*. You have to *see* this, Vincent. You have to see to understand." Winslow put his hand back into the water.

Vincent looked down at the pool again, and watched it shimmer to a wide, brimming kind of life. He was looking at the Tunnels, his Tunnels, for something told him they now belonged very much to him, or at least that he was responsible for them.

"Perishables coming in," William was telling him. "Lee says the canned stuff is running out."

"Cook all you can. Can some of it be made into preserves to be set back, against future need?" Vincent asked.

"Some, but not all, "

William replied. "Not much I can do with twenty pounds of ripe bananas but bake bread and make pudding."

Vincent nodded. "You know what to do, William."

"Vincent!" Cullen shouted. "It's that Eastern tunnel, again. The leak is back. Bigger than it was."

Vincent turned. "Pull the work detail from the Southern chambers. That must be stopped, before it flows down into dry-good storage."

"Southern chambers are for the newcomers. It will set us back." Cullen wasn't saying anything they both didn't already know.

There were two families who needed this place, needed it to survive. Somehow, Vincent knew as he watched himself sort through the problem.

"Tell them to put their children in the nursery. If we're out of cots, make pallets on the floor. The adults can sleep beside them. It's not much, but it's safe for now."

Jamie was tugging at his elbow. "Vincent, there are hobos prowling around the Third Street entrance again. I need you to come. Pascal says we have to secure that area, or they'll breach the perimeter..."

Vincent watched the day play out. He worked late into the night then went to bed without seeing Catherine. Then, another day happened, much like the first... then another... and another.

"Father is... irreplaceable," Vincent said, knowing that the moments between himself and Catherine were becoming fewer and farther between... too much so.

"Others... others could help... step in... bear the load," Vincent said.

"Yeah, maybe. But somebody needs to know everything that's going on. Somebody needs to be the heart of this place," Winslow replied. "Someone with a strong voice, and a true one. Someone not afraid to make decisions and live with them. If Father passes, someone will need to *be* Father. Or as much like him as they can. That's just how it is."

Vincent considered the view before him. He was shoring up a false wall in an area that had received increased scrutiny. Fail to make the area secure and the result could be... catastrophic, for his people and for him, especially for him.

"You're saying... if I do not step into his place, when the time does come..."

"It could all fall down, Vincent. I won't tell you I haven't seen that possibility."

"No." It was a whispered word.

"Most of them would have to scatter, go up Above, maybe."

Winslow was talking about the Tunnel World ceasing to exist, as they both knew it.

"There's more," Winslow said.

More? God. This... this nightmare... this is not enough?

The scene faded, but was immediately replaced by one of Catherine in her office. And from the look of things, her day was going no better than Vincent's had. Her desk was overflowing. A case file was open in front of her, and the phone was cradled between her ear and shoulder, as she made notes with a pen.

"Tuesday? No, no it can't be Tuesday. The judge will have to adjust the docket. No, I don't need a continuance! He's a sixty-year-old assault victim, and he's still in the hospital! Yes. Yes, testimony is..."

She looked up as Joe Maxwell walked by, a stack of file folders in his hand. He left three of them with her, as they frowned at each other.

"Catherine is busy. It is often so," Vincent told Winslow.

"Yeah, she is. But not like this," Winslow replied. His dark face grew somber. "For what I'm about to show you... I'm sorry Vincent."

The scene changed again and became very dark. Vincent was aware that day had become night, and that he was now looking at an alleyway, a vaguely familiar one. But instead of seeing Catherine, it was Joe Maxwell who stepped into view.

He met a man and conversation was exchanged. The man passed Joe a book.

A moment later, the man's car exploded, killing him and injuring Joe Maxwell.

"Catherine? What has Catherine to do with this?" Vincent asked, for a moment terrified that she'd been in or near... or in... the car.

Winslow shrugged his broad shoulders. "These are shadows, views down the path. *Nothing* is fixed, Vincent. But... it gets worse. Her boss gives her that book. And... then she's... taken by an evil man. In some versions of this... down some of the paths... she... she dies. Nobody gets there in time, not this time. You... I'm so sorry... you never see her alive again."

The image gave way to one of Catherine's balcony. It was utterly dark. Vincent got the feeling it had been that way for a long time.

"No!" It was both a statement of denial and a bark of command. "No! I forbid such a future for us... such a bleak, such an empty thing!"

Winslow took his hand away from the water. "Forewarned is forearmed," he replied.

"And Father... Father's illness, his passing leads to this?!" Vincent asked, incredulous.

Winslow lifted his broad shoulders again. "Leads' might be too strong a word. But... because Father passes... you're too busy, too... engulfed... too far away to reach her in time when it starts to happen... or something." He shook his head, the picture of a man who was unsure.

"I'm not sure. I can't tell. I would, if I could."

I know you would. I know, Winslow.

"Winslow..." Vincent said, unsure of how to continue.

"I can't see all the outcomes, my friend. I can't *see* everything," Winslow replied. "Just *some* things, possible things. Tell her to tell her boss that his friend can't get in the car. Tell her your life is about to get swallowed up by more than you can handle. Tell her to help you convince Father to go Above, that he can convalesce at her place if he needs to. Something. I only know that if things don't change, this is going to be a *bad* year, a *dark* year, for everyone. And somehow it all starts with Father dying."

He didn't want to tell Vincent that in one possible future, he saw Vincent killing Father – or someone who looked like Father – with his bare hands... claws. Some things were too horrible to be considered.

Winslow touched his hand to the pool again, and the image of Vincent walking into Father's darkened chambers returned.

"If I... if we stop this... the rest doesn't come to pass?" Vincent asked.

Winslow's dark eyes were uncertain. "I don't know for sure. But I know you *have* to save him. *We* have to save him, Vincent. He needs years, lots more years. Time for things to get more settled. Time for... for *you* to get more settled... you and Catherine."

Because if you do, the future is... it might be... too beautiful to describe for you. More amazing than even you can imagine, Winslow thought. Children, maybe. Maybe one that even looks like you, someday... or not.

"There's good futures, too, Vincent. Good, if you can reach for it." He wanted to give his friend that much hope at least. "You just... you just need the time."

So that's what this is about. Time. Time for me and Catherine. Time for us to--Winslow sighed loudly, interrupting Vincent's train of thought.

"Being you. Thinking it over. Gonna figure out a plan, a long game, because sometimes it works."

Vincent raised a quizzical eyebrow again. "And sometimes it doesn't?"

"Sometimes it doesn't," Winslow confirmed.

[&]quot;You're doing it, again."

[&]quot;Doing what?" Vincent asked.

"You can't be two places at once. You can't be two *people* at once, Vincent. The one who lives his life both Below *and* Above. For Father... he never wanted to be anyplace but here. So it didn't matter to him. But you're different."

"You think I should... confine myself? To Below?" *Because we both know I cannot live up Above*.

Winslow shook his head. "No. You can't. It would kill you faster than Erlik was trying to," he said, referring to the monster who had ended his life.

He sighed again. "I don't argue with you that Catherine means the world to you. Trouble is, at the end of the day, it's *two* worlds you're both trying to manage living in. You can both only do that for so long. You can *both* only do that… until time runs out on you… until you can't do it no more."

"Until the axe handle breaks. Until the gloves wear thin," Vincent replied.

Winslow nodded. "It ain't like I was all that great at this 'falling in love' thing, Vincent. I can only tell you what I saw. What I think I know, and only so much of that."

Vincent sighed, knowing that that much at least was true. Winslow could only relay what he'd seen, and then draw conclusions from that.

"You are not wrong to say that Catherine and I struggle, sometimes," Vincent allowed.

"Time... it's not always a kind thing, my friend," Winslow replied. No one knew that better than the man who had run out of it, too soon.

Vincent considered the words. Many of the stressors that plagued his and Catherine's relationship had to do with that very thing: Time. Time and the wearing effect it often had. Time that was, for them, a very measured and limited thing. He and Catherine were from two different worlds... worlds that only intersected so often, and sometimes at great cost to one or both of them.

"What happens if even only part of it comes true?" Winslow asked. "What happens if Father is saved, but you just can't... *see* each other so much, because you're taking care of this place, more and more?" he clarified.

What indeed? Vincent wondered.

He knew that Father's days were very full, just as his own were, and Catherine's. He also knew that "time" was a precious commodity, for both himself and his love. What indeed would happen to them if he had even less – considerably less –

than he did, now? Would his visits to Catherine's balcony become increasingly rare? Would they be limited to only times she could come down to see him, and hope there was no pressing issue that commanded his attention when she did? The thought bothered him, and it bothered him more than a little.

"If we convince Father to get help... we... avoid this... for at least a while?"

Yes. And then... something amazing happens for you... maybe.

"There's a big difference between if it happens now, or twenty, thirty years from now. Yes, Vincent. I can tell you that. Not that you'd need me to."

Vincent considered his words. There was a difference. Of course, there was.

"Do you promise, Winslow?" Vincent asked.

Winslow's normally gruff voice held a touch of sympathy. "I can only promise you that I'm here to help you, Vincent. That if I couldn't, I wouldn't have come. You're on a path. It's just... it's just maybe not the right one. You and Catherine are still just starting out. You need the *time*, Vincent. Time for each other. Time to build... well, whatever it is you're trying to build."

"And saving Father... seeing that Catherine does not accept that book... it grants us that time?"

"I only know that there's a big difference in your lives if Father... well, if he comes over to my side of things in a decade or two rather than... a lot sooner. And the book is important. She *can't* touch it. She can't. I'm just sayin'."

He was just saying. And in Vincent's heart, he knew every word was true. Winslow would never tell him a lie, either in life or in death. There was no question of that.

"So, we can prevent the terrible thing that happens to Catherine?" Vincent had to be sure.

Winslow smiled. "We can. You know what you need to tell her, to avoid trouble. Keep her close, my friend. It's not like you don't love her enough to."

That is for certain, Vincent thought.

Vincent rose. "I will tell Peter that he needs to see Father. And I will tell Father that he needs to do as Peter instructs."

"It won't be easy. He'll put up a fight, Vincent. You know he will," Winslow cautioned.

Determination coursed through Vincent's veins.

"Then I will drag him to the operating room myself, flailing and cursing me, if that's what it takes," Vincent declared, blue steel in his eyes. "I will see it done."

Vincent knew that as soon as he left here, he was about to go see Peter Alcott.

Winslow chuckled at the notion of Vincent dragging Father, kicking and screaming to an Above hospital, possibly in full view of everyone there.

"I get a feeling it won't quite come to that. But you feel free to make that threat." The wide grin refused to dim. Yes. That's it. That's it, my friend. Make the future a better one. Better for Father. Better for you. Better for everyone.

Vincent inclined his head. "And I thank you, my old friend, for your wise counsel, truly. Yet I will not tell you it leaves me free of concerns... for many reasons."

Catherine and I... even now, we need more time. More time together. But... how?

"Fair enough that it does," Winslow answered, rising. He looked down into the pool, but this time, didn't disturb its pristine surface.

"You said that there were good futures, also. That you saw that possibility."

Ah-ah-ah, no you don't. There are some things I think you need to find out all on your own, Winslow thought.

"There's a bright star in the sky," Winslow observed. "Bright enough to make a wish on. Why don't you try it, Vincent?"

Curious but not inclined to wish, Vincent glanced down into the pool, seeing the glittering star Winslow indicated.

"We did this when we were boys together." Vincent said.

Do ghosts still wish on stars? It was an idle thought.

"So we did," Winslow replied.

"Did any of yours ever come true?" Vincent asked, sincerely interested.

Winslow's smile was one of longtime friendship and fraternal love. Love for Vincent, and for the Tunnel Community they both shared.

"Almost every single one," he answered, the reply deep with meaning. Winslow had loved his life and his extended family. He'd lived well, even though he'd been taken too soon.

Vincent bowed his head, humbled.

"Go on. Make a wish. Don't be afraid," Winslow said. You have no idea how much power there is in a wish. How much power in a good thought and the good that we do? We think about it, we wish it first.

"Don't be afraid," Winslow repeated.

Vincent closed his eyes and made his wish. When he looked back up, Winslow was gone.



Vincent flew to Catherine's balcony, beyond relieved to see the bright lamps burning, within.

I suppose it will be that way for a while now, now that I've seen how empty it looks when it's dark, he mused, hoisting himself over the wall. His booted footfalls were soft, soft enough to go unnoticed by the sole occupant within. He looked through the windowpane.

She was there, of course. There and busy. Shoes off and dressed for comfort, in soft-looking tan slacks and a white pullover sweater, one with a wide neckline that draped down on one shoulder. She was sitting on her small sofa, her briefcase open beside her, a file folder in one hand, and a pen in the other. She was half-reclined, balancing a yellow legal pad on her knees, and scribbling notes on it as she read the case file. The soft, white sheer curtain gave her a warm, gauzy look. She frowned and flipped one of the stapled pages before her front to back. She was concentrating and working hard at something.

Vincent wondered if she had any idea how lovely she looked.

You are amazing, he thought. In my heart, you are mine and I am yours. All I am, all I have. We will have our time. I love you.

The words whispered across his consciousness, as he watched her strike through something, then write something else beneath it. He rapped gently at her window.

Her smile was immediate, a welcoming thing, as she dropped what she was doing and rushed to greet him. He wondered if she knew how good that made him feel, that smile, that quick-step across her living room carpet, that feeling in their Bond that said; *My love is here... my love is here, and I am happy*.

"Vincent?" Her smile of welcome was a questioning one. They'd just seen each other the day before.

"You're busy," he observed, keeping his blue eyes fixed on her face. The lamp gave a soft glow to her winter-fair complexion.

She shook her head in denial. "Just trying to get ahead before Monday comes. You?"

He drew her onto the balcony and gestured for her to sit. "There were... things that needed doing."

"More than usual, I take it," she prompted him. The look on her face told him all it needed to.

"It has been... quite the day. I gather Peter told you?" Vincent asked.

Catherine nodded. "He says he's sneaking Father into the clinic to have some tests run. Father hasn't been feeling well?"

Vincent decided to tell her more than anyone else knew.

"I believe it's his heart. He'll require surgery, Catherine."

Her eyes grew wide. "Father? In an Above hospital? I can't say I can picture that clearly. Will he be all right, do you think? What does Peter say?"

Vincent shrugged off the specificity of the question. "Father will be all right as long as he has the surgery. If he does that... he'll still have many fine years ahead of him... important ones." *For him. For us*.

Catherine's head gave a tilt. "They surely will be. Do you know when all this will happen?" she asked.

Now it was Vincent's turn to shake his head. "Soon, I hope," he smoothed. "As soon as possible. Catherine... would you consider something?" he asked.

The head tilt remained. "Of course. What did you have in mind?"

"It is... tomorrow you have no work..."

"True. But Father is tangled up with Peter. Won't they need you?" she asked.

They will, and in a way, they will not. Peter will know what to do and then what to do after that. Perhaps it is time I learned that they will always need me in some ways. But what do I need? He studied her beautiful face.

"I've done what needs doing. I believe they will manage," he replied.

"Oh. Well... I have some things I need to look over, but..." she indicated the waiting case files strewn across her sofa.

Vincent regarded her softly. We're both used to doing this... putting much ahead of each other. Dream with me, Catherine. I think we need to... very much.

"Do what you need to. We'll leave when you're ready." he replied, rising. Much to her surprise, rather than departing, albeit regretfully, he pushed open her balcony door and stepped inside. She followed him, curious.

"Vincent, what are you—"

"You'll need a heavy jacket, and a shirt with long sleeves, and hiking boots." He collected her brown leather jacket from the back of a chair.

"We're going hiking? At this hour?"

"Not tonight, tomorrow. Tonight, after you are done here, I will sit with you in my chambers and show you the maps. I will ask which caverns you'd like to visit. There's a river so deep and cold it runs like ice, and another with a calcium deposit that looks like a white waterfall, all trapped against the stone. There are crystals caught in it and it shimmers in the light. We can sleep until past sunrise. William will pack us breakfast."

Catherine's brain felt like it was moving in slow motion. *Breakfast*. *Oh*. *You don't mean we're going hiking across the park*. *You mean we're going Below*. *You mean you're inviting me to... stay the night?* It was a thing he'd never asked of her before.

A heavy leather shoulder bag was hanging just inside her bedroom door.

"This will do," he said, grabbing it. "Would you like to take your work down with you? Or... finish it here? You'll only need to pack for tomorrow... and... tonight... of course."

Of course. I'll need to pack for tonight. I wonder what I'll bring down for that? Catherine mused, delighted at seeing him this way.

"I think I'll leave the work here," she said, a shy smile overcoming her winsome features. She thought she knew what might be causing this, and to be fair, she was almost half-right.

"Vincent... Father is going to be okay. Peter is going to see to it that he gets the best care. You know that, don't you?"

Vincent nodded, as he peeked inside her room for her boots. They were near her dresser. *Should I just go in and get them? Or let her...*

He wasn't sure what to do when it came to effectively kidnapping his love.

"I'm sure he will. If we leave soon, I'll have time to show you the map to the mineral springs. It's small, and the water smells like magnesium. But it's warm enough to steam year round."

"There's a hot springs down there?" Catherine asked.

"Just east of the hub. Pascal says a thermal vent beneath the surface keeps it—"

"And people... bathe in there? They soak?" Catherine interrupted, not caring a whit for how the water got warm, only that Vincent was describing soaking in a pool of warm water with her.

Vincent nodded. "There's something in it that eases every muscle ache. Mary swears by it, for the arthritis in her knees."

Yes. Because the arthritis in Mary's knees is the thing I'm focused on, right now, Catherine thought.

"I... I guess I'll need a bathing s-suit." Catherine said, hoping he didn't notice her stammer.

"You can if you wish," Vincent replied, meaning only that she could soak in the mineral springs if it pleased her to do so.

Catherine's cheeks pinked. "Do you mean we should do this without clothes on?" she asked, clearly confused now.

To his credit, Vincent blushed as well. "I... no. No, not... not yet, Catherine."

Now Catherine's pink cheeks deepened to an embarrassed red.

"I... I'm sorry. I'm just... I'm not sure what's happening," she replied lamely.

Neither am I. Yet, I am. We need to move forward, Catherine. Need to spend more time together. Need that time to bring us closer. We need to make sure you're as comfortable in my world as you are in yours. And then... perhaps... we will see if you cannot do the same for me, in some ways.

He glanced around the room as he thought it. She had a stereo he'd sometimes listened to and a television he'd never bothered with. He knew the straight lines of the walls resembled a cage, a trap, and that the association bothered him, at least a little. He also knew that she had a huge, tiled shower in her bathroom, big enough for two, and a bed that would easily accommodate both of them. He didn't know how much of that he'd explore, or how much he'd be comfortable with. But he knew if he didn't start asking those questions now, he might never do so. It would be too easy to continue on as they had been. Too easy... until they ran out of time doing it.

He offered her his hand.

"I have been... made to realize that we each exist... somewhat on the edge of each other's worlds. I would like it if you felt more a part of mine. And if you wished... to help me feel more a part of yours, at least as much as you can."

We can let time be good to us, rather than beat us. We can, Catherine.

Catherine slid her hand easily into his, and squeezed his fingers. The bond simmered between them, then shifted, then settled. She could feel him searching for something, and needing her to do so too.

We're beginning something. I'm not sure what, and right now, neither are you. But we're beginning something, she realized. If this isn't about Father, I wonder who I have to thank for it?

"I'll finish getting my things," she said, needing to know no more for tonight. She gingerly shouldered past him.

"I'll wait until you're ready," he said, stepping back out onto her balcony.

He listened to her rummage through drawers, as he took in the beautiful December night. A nearly full moon was tearing its bottom across the tallest of the buildings opposite her apartment. The air was brisk and clean. It smelled good, like a new year was coming. It smelled like it might snow.

"Merry Christmas, Winslow," Vincent whispered. "I miss you, my friend. Perhaps by this time next year... Oh, I don't know. Father will be well, be better. Catherine and I will be closer. Talking about..."

((marriage))

His mind thought the word, the wish-upon-a-star word, but his voice couldn't bring itself to say it.

"Talking about important things," he sidestepped. "A future together. Something," Vincent said, leaving himself an opening for whatever was possible.

A year from now... or two... I hope I'll see you again. Be able to tell you that you were right, and that Catherine and I are closer. That wishes come true. I love her. I can't help but love her, and the feeling only grows.

He glanced down at the spot where he'd left a copy of <u>Great Expectations</u> years ago. In so many ways, that night had led to this one, and everything that had come between.

Inside the apartment, he could hear Catherine opening and closing her closet doors.

I have warnings to give her. Things only I can explain... barely. Winslow... old friend... I hope you're there on my wedding day, standing near the place of Best Man. I hope I sense you there. I hope I do... in a year or two. I love you, my friend. And if I never said it enough... thank you! Thank you for everything!

Behind him, he heard Catherine emerging from her bedroom. The bag was zipped up, and she'd changed into a pair of butter soft jeans and a cashmere sweater. She shrugged into her jacket.

"Ready to go. Shall I meet you down at the threshold?" she asked, tugging a book of Byron off the shelf and tucking it into a side pocket of the bag.

Byron. 'She walks in beauty, like the night...' Vincent's mind began.

"I'll be right there. Wait for me?" he asked, as she shouldered the bag.

"Of course, I will," she replied, already turning for the door. Vincent watched her ease her way out, the soft click of the lock reaching his sensitive ears.

Vincent turned back to the night. Before he left the balcony, he mentally addressed Winslow, one last time:

When Catherine was taken by Paracelsus...You were there when we needed you. Now again for Father... and me... and Catherine. For all of us. You're always there for all of us, Winslow.

Vincent shook his head in wonder, even as he knew it was time to leave. He swung his legs over the balcony wall.

Best Man stands to the right of the groom... in a year or two. Don't be late, old friend, Vincent thought, already looking forward to seeing his Beloved.



And a year (or two) later, Winslow wasn't.



No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. \sim Cindy



⁻Illustrations provided by the author except where otherwise indicated.





Everything I Own

by Paulette Frazier



Rated R



Chapter One

Catherine sat on her sofa and put her head in her hands. She felt the hot tears falling from her eyes. Vincent had yet again banished her from below. He continued to tell her that she had to live her life above. She begged him, pleaded with him not to send her away. He turned his back on her, leaving her at the gate of the tunnel in the park. He slowly closed the secret door. He told her not to come below again. She was not welcome.

She wiped her tears and went into the bathroom to start her shower. She stood in the shower and let the water fall on her face. The warm water mixed with her hot tears.

Vincent told the sentries to not



allow Catherine to come below. The sentries did not understand, but they obeyed him. Catherine had attempted to come below this morning, and she was turned away by Old Sam. He was sorry as he walked her to her threshold. Vincent told Mouse that they were going to seal her threshold the next day. Jamie went to Vincent.

"Vincent, why did you banish Catherine? What did she do so wrong?"

"Jamie, this is none of your concern. It is between Catherine and me. I would thank you to please mind your business."

Jamie was shocked. Vincent had never talked to her in such a manner. She walked away from him and went to Father.

"Father, do you know that Vincent has banished Catherine?"

"Why yes, he and I have come to the conclusion that Catherine was not a good influence on Vincent."

"Why Father, how could you say that? Catherine was nothing but good for the entire community, especially Vincent. She loves him."

"It is dangerous for Vincent to love her. She belongs above."

Father turned his back on Jamie. Jamie left and went to Mary.

"Mary, did you hear that Father and Vincent have banished Catherine?' "What are you talking about?"

"Vincent and Father have banished Catherine. Old Sam just told me that he was instructed to escort Catherine out. Vincent asked Mouse to help him seal Catherine's threshold."

"Oh my! No wonder Jacob is so happy. He will have Vincent back to himself. I will talk to Vincent."



Chapter Two

Catherine went through work with no real interest. She never smiled anymore, and Joe wondered what the matter was. He had tried to approach her about it this morning and was given a curt answer to mind his own business. He was upset. He put in a call to Dr. Alcott, Catherine's godfather. Peter came right away. When he walked into Catherine's office and saw her, his heart melted. Sadness emanated from her entire body. She looked up without her usual zest when she greeted him. He walked over to her and asked.

"Cathy, how are you?"

"I am fine, Dad. Just fine."

Peter knew she was not fine because she called him 'Dad'. He knew she only called him that when she was sick or in some sort of trouble.

"That is it, young lady, get your coat you are coming with me."

"I am busy."

"Now Catherine Rose."

She knew he was serious. She slowly got up and got her coat and purse. He took her by the arm, and they left.

Peter took her to his house and sat her down on his sofa. He sat beside her.

"Do you want to tell me what is going on? Or do I have to guess. I want to examine you also when we are finished talking."

She looked into her godfather's eyes and burst into tears. He gently embraced her, giving her time to get all her tears out.

"Tell me."

"Oh Peter. Vincent broke up with me. He and Father have banished me from Below. He has sealed my threshold and told the sentries to not allow me to come down. Every time I try, they escort me out. I do not know what I did. We did not even argue. Why are they treating me like this? I love him and I do not think I can live without him."

"Oh Cathy, I am sorry. Let's go to my office so I can examine you. I will call Jenny to come over and stay with you tonight. You are staying here in your old room."

As Vincent sat at his desk, he probed the Bond and felt Catherine's sadness. It was immense. He lowered his head. He thought he could have a clean cut from her. He and Father discussed it. He did not tell Father about the dream, the dream he had been having of Catherine's death. He was not going to be the cause of her dying. He would live in misery before he let that happen. In the dream Catherine was pregnant with his child. He lost the Bond, and she was kidnapped. He found her on a roof cold and dead.

They were getting closer and closer to making love and he had to prevent it. Father was happy because he did not want Vincent and Catherine to continue with their relationship. He was tired of being the bad guy.

Peter walked into Father's study.

"Hello, Jacob."

"Hello, Peter. How are you?"

"Jacob, would you tell me something and speak only the truth?"

"Yes."

"What is going on with Vincent and Cathy? Why is she banished? Do you and Vincent have any idea what you have done to her? She is in bad shape."

"She will get over it. She is just used to using people and having her way."

"What the hell are you talking about? Cathy is not that type of person. Why she has done nothing but good for you and your community... much less loving Vincent the way she does."

"She is rich. She can buy herself another man and another place to spend her money on."

Peter was sad. He never saw Jacob like this.

"I am sorry, Jacob. We have been friends for a long time, but I cannot in all honesty allow you to talk about my goddaughter in such a manner." He walked out. He went to see Vincent. He was really angry with Jacob.

When he got to Vincent's chamber he knocked. Vincent asked him to come in.

"Hello, Vincent. I need to talk to you."

"I know, Peter."

"I need to understand what is going on with you and Catherine. She told me you broke up with her and banished her. Please tell me why and do not tell me is because she is rich and selfish."

"Peter, Catherine is not selfish and please do not speak of her in such a manner."

"That is what your father told me. I hope you did not banish her to please your father."

"No Peter, I have my own reasons. I do not wish to discuss them with anyone."

"Well, that is not acceptable, Vincent. You have crushed my goddaughter, at least be man enough to explain to me why. I think I deserve an answer."

"I am sorry, Peter, I cannot."

"Well, I have no other choice but to end my relationship with this community. I cannot allow anyone to hurt my goddaughter. She has had enough pain in her life."



Chapter Three

In the days that followed, Catherine was sinking deeper into depression. She quit her job and sat in her room at Peter's. She had not been in her apartment for three weeks. Peter had cut off all dialogue with the Tunnels.

It was time for the Tunnel children to be vaccinated. Jacob sent a message to Peter to set a date for him to bring down the serums and help him vaccinate the children. Peter sent a message to Jacob, that due to circumstances, he was not bringing anything nor coming to the Tunnels.

Peter went upstairs to check on Catherine. She was asleep. It seemed to be the only thing she did these days. He bent down to kiss her and realized that she was not breathing. He immediately began CPR. He called Susan who ran into the room and saw what was happening and called 911. The paramedics got Catherine's heart back and rushed her to the hospital.

Vincent was teaching class when he felt it. He felt Catherine go. He rushed out of the chamber. He pushed the basement door in and ran into Susan.

"Catherine! Where is she?"

Susan looked at him. She was angry at him and almost did not talk to him. She saw the tears in his eyes and decided to tell him.

"Catherine is on her way to the hospital, her heart stopped. Dad is with her."

Vincent fell to his knees.

"What have I done?" He roared. Susan just stood and looked at him. He looked at Susan with tears in his eyes.

"I need to go to her. I need to tell her I am sorry. I need her in my life."

Susan touched the huge man.

"Come with me Vincent, we will wait for Daddy together."

Vincent got up and walked with Susan to the living room. They sat and waited.

Several hours later, Peter arrived. Vincent jumped up. Peter looked at him. He was angry.

"Why are you here? You are not welcome in my home, Vincent, after what you did to Cathy."

"Daddy, wait, give him a chance. How is she? Is she okay?"

"She is in a coma. She is dying and the doctors cannot find a reason. I know the reason though." he said looking at Vincent, "Do we not Vincent? We all know she is dying from a broken heart."

He sat down and put his face in his hands. Susan sat beside her father and rubbed his back.

Vincent stood and looked at him with his head down.

"I was wrong, I was wrong. I thought I could live without her. I cannot. I love her. I am sorry, Peter, we cannot let her die. You must take me to her. I need to see her. I will tell you why I did what I did."

Peter looked up.

"So now you want to talk, now that my goddaughter is near death, you want to talk. Do you think I will help you or your father, after the way you treated her?"

"Daddy, no. Please do not say anything that you will regret. This is about Catherine now. We must come together to help her."

Susan looked at Vincent.

"Daddy, you must take Vincent to Cathy, maybe if she hears him, maybe it will help." Peter looked at his daughter as she pleaded with him.

"How did I manage to get two wonderful daughters? Okay, I will get you into the hospital, only to help Cathy. Just realize, I am still angry."



Chapter Four

Peter, Susan and Vincent entered Catherine's room. She was still unconscious. Vincent walked over to her and kissed her lips. He whispered into her ear.

"My Catherine, I am so sorry. Please come back to me. I will never let you out of my sight again. Please dearest, I love you."

He burst into tears. He knelt on the floor and placed his head on her stomach. He closed his eyes and sent Catherine a message through the Bond...

My Catherine, I am sorry, please do not leave me. I will never send you away again. I cannot live without you. Come back to me my love.

Peter stood and watched him. He was still angry. If Vincent and Jacob had not treated her so badly, she would not be in this shape. He leaned against the wall with his arms folded. Susan on the other hand, felt so sorry for Vincent. She rubbed his back as he silently cried into Catherine's stomach.

Vincent finally stood up and bent over Catherine and kissed her lips. Suddenly as if in a fairy tale, Catherine opened her eyes.

"Vincent."

"My Catherine, I am sorry. Please... I love you."

He sent the message through the Bond. Catherine slowly opened her eyes again. She looked at Vincent and smiled.

"Vincent, you are here, I missed you. I love you."

"Oh, my Catherine, I am sorry, I will never send you away again. Please stay here with me."

Catherine fell back to sleep.



Chapter Five

Catherine remained in the hospital for two weeks. The doctors found no reason for her illness and finally after a battery of tests, they allowed her to go home. Peter and Susan took her back to Peter's. Vincent was waiting for her in the study. When they walked into the room, he swept Catherine up into his arms.

Peter looked at him. He was still a little angry.

Vincent knew he had to explain why he did what he did. He looked at Peter and said, "I am truly sorry, Peter. I am ready to talk now."

Everyone sat down to listen to him.

"I had been having this dream for months... the same dream. I was afraid. You see, in the dream, Catherine was pregnant with our child. She was kidnapped by a man she was investigating. He kept her for months, finally killing her after the baby was born. I felt if I sent her away, she would be safe. I just wanted to keep her safe."

"Well, did you tell your father the dream?"

"No, I just told him that I was sending Catherine away. He was happy. He said that she needed to be gone because she would only cause me sadness. I had no idea that he hated Catherine so. I had an argument with him last night. I told him that I was coming back to Catherine. If he continues to treat her like he has, I will leave the Tunnels and leave him. I am so sorry, Catherine, I should have talked to you. I never meant for this to happen."

"Oh Vincent, don't you know, I love you? I would give up everything for you. I only want to be with you. I could not live without you. If you had told me about the dream, I would have quit my job and came to live with you. I would have given up everything to be with you."

Peter watched but he was still angry.

"So, you think it is going to be that easy? Vincent, I have always admired you for your bravery and kindness. You lost yourself and, in the process, almost cost Catherine her life."

"Peter, there are no words that I can say to fix this. I just have to prove to you how much I love Catherine. I will spend the rest of my days making it up to you, Peter."

"Vincent, you have nothing to make up to me. You must prove it to my goddaughter. As for your father, I will have to work on that one. He said some cruel things about Catherine."

"I had no idea what he said to you about Catherine. Mouse told me later. He was listening to the conversation you had with Father. Jamie and Mouse told the rest of the community and they have been giving Father and me the silence. I shall call a

meeting tonight and talk to the community and offer my apologies. I will also talk to Father."

Peter nodded.

"Peter, may I take Catherine below with me. I promise I will take care of her."

Peter looked at Catherine, who was nodding yes.

Peter walked over to Vincent. He looked him straight in the eyes.

"Vincent, you are strong and powerful, but if you ever hurt my little girl again, I will shoot you. Understood?"

Vincent smiled. "Understood."

He and Catherine left.



Chapter Six

The meeting was taking place in the Dining Hall. All the Tunnel people were at the meeting. Father was still upset but he kept his wits about him. He looked at the people. Hardly no one was speaking to him. It was all that girl's fault. He and Vincent had a bad argument last night. Vincent told him that he planned on marrying Catherine. He tried to explain to Vincent that it would not work out. Those debutante girls loved you and left you. He had experience. He was sad because Vincent told him that if he interfered, he would leave the Tunnels.

Vincent called this meeting, and he would be the person running it. Father sat in his seat and pouted. Vincent and Catherine walked in together. The chatter that was taking place came to a halt. No one expected to see them together. They walked to the front of the room and Vincent asked Father to give the opening prayer.

Father stood up and bowed his head.

To the Great Maker:

Watch over this community and give all the guidance they need. Watch over our minds and tongues. May all the hurt feelings in this community dissolve tonight.

Amen.

Vincent stood up and began.

"I called this meeting in order to clear up some things. We have been going through turmoil this last month. I stand here tonight because I am the cause of the turmoil. I am extending my apologies to my Catherine, and my family. Last month I banished Catherine. With the help of Father, I sent her away and I demanded that none of you contact her or welcome her here. I am here to say I was wrong, very wrong. I was

afraid of losing her, so I decided to give her up instead. I was wrong. Catherine is my life, and I will never abandon her again. I am so sorry to you my family, for the trouble and hurt feelings. I know that many of you love Catherine. No one loves her more than I. If you will again welcome, her back into our family. I am sorry. There is one more announcement I would like to make and that one is directed at Catherine. He turned to Catherine and stood her up. He faced her and knelt on one knee. "I am poor, I have nothing of substance to offer you, my Catherine. The only thing I have is my heart. I am giving you my heart. I am asking you to join with me, become my wife, have my children. I promise I will put no one before you and I will love you always."

The tears were falling freely from his eyes.

Catherine looked him in the eyes and nodded.

"Vincent, I will go to the end of the Earth with you. I love you and yes I will be your wife."

The room broke out in cheers and applause. Vincent stood up and took Catherine into his arms and kissed her. Father stood up and walked out of the room.



Chapter Seven

Catherine was fidgeting as the dressmaker was fitting her with her new gown. Susan and Jenny had already finished their fitting. Mary was waiting for her turn. Mary and Jamie were representing Vincent's family. Catherine had explained to the dressmaker that Mary's dress should be special as she was the mother of the groom. Mary was deeply honored. Marilyn was stepping in as mother of the bride. She had already had her fitting. Marilyn, Jenny and Nancy met Vincent last week. All were impressed. Jenny asked him if he had a brother. Vincent promised her he would introduce her to his big brother who was standing in as best man.

The wedding was to take place in two weeks in the Great Hall below. Peter had made a special gift of rings for the couple. Charles had given him the wedding bands to hold for Catherine until she married. He had them fitted and they were ready.

William and Catherine had made the menu and all food was purchased. William was in charge of the cake. Jamie and Jenny took care of ordering the flowers. The children were going to decorate the hall. Vincent and Catherine accepted whatever they had planned. Secretly, Jenny, Jamie and Mary were helping the children. Jenny ordered dozens of small bottles of bubbles. The children suggested that they blow bubbles instead of throwing rice. Little Kate was going to be the flower girl and Luke was the ring bearer. His mother had been practicing with him for the month.

Peter sat downstairs and listened to the chatter of the women upstairs. He was happy. He smiled as he sipped his brandy. Jacob had come above last night, and they had a talk.

Father tapped on the basement door of Peter's home. Peter opened the door and allowed him entrance.

Father looked at Peter. Peter took him to the study. He offered him a brandy.

"Peter, I need to talk to you. First, I want to say I am sorry. I was wrong. I said some horrible things about Catherine. I was basing my thoughts on my experience with Margaret. Catherine is nothing like Margaret. She is a wonderful child, and she does so much for my community."

Peter was not planning on making this easy for Jacob.

"Are you apologizing because you need me? I will no longer help you Jacob. My daughter almost died because of you and your son."

"I know. I heard from Vincent how sick she was. Did you know I was a victim of the Silence?"

"Jacob, you were no victim. The only victim was Cathy. She spent three weeks in the hospital because of your callousness."

Jacob bent his head.

"I know. I am so sorry. Will you forgive me?"

"Did you talk to Catherine? She is the one you should be apologizing to. She is the one you hurt. She cried for days, quit her job and remanded herself to her room for days. Cathy did not deserve anything you said and did to her. To seal up her threshold? For real Jacob? And then to top that off you contacted me for help like I was going to help you after what you said and did."

Jacob was really feeling bad.

"I am sorry. I hope that I have not destroyed our friendship. I hold it dear to my heart."

Peter smiled.

"I think you have suffered enough, Jacob. I forgive you, but if you do it again, I will shoot you. No one can hurt my baby and get away with it."

Jacob embraced his old friend.



Chapter Eight

The morning of the wedding went off without a hitch. Catherine, Jenny, Mary, Jamie and Marilyn were all at Catherine's apartment. Catherine had a surprise for Vincent after the wedding. She had purchased a brownstone and it was ready to occupy. Mouse had made a threshold, and everything was ready.

Mary looked at Catherine and smiled.

"It is time to go Below. Shall we go?"

The group left and went below. When they got there, Mouse was waiting for them. He escorted them to the room above the Great Hall. The group began to dress. The Hall looked beautiful. Vincent, Devin and Joe were in Vincent's chamber. Vincent was pacing. Devin looked at his little brother and laughed.

"Little Brother, you are going to wear a hole in the floor if you do not stop pacing."

Vincent stopped pacing and looked at his brother. He smiled. Just then

Father entered the chamber. He looked at his two sons and smiled.

"You look good Vincent."

"Thank you, Father." He turned away from his father.

It was time to go to the Great Hall. The men walked together.

Father lagged behind. He was feeling sad and helpless. He wanted to talk to Vincent, but he was not so sure Vincent would listen. He wanted to apologize.

The musicians were tuning up their instruments. The Hall was filling up. The Chinese monk had arrived and set up the candles. Vincent, Devin and Joe stood in front of the monk. The music began. Down the stairs came little Kate and Luke. Everyone ooohed and aahhed. Then the music started. Samantha began singing:

The first time I ever loved forever, was when you whispered my name.

And I knew at once you loved me, for the me of who I am.*

Peter took Catherine and began to walk down the stairs. Jenny, Jamie and Nancy were standing beside Vincent now also.

Peter walked up to Vincent and looked at the priest who was standing beside the monk.

"We are gathered here to join this man and woman in holy matrimony. Who gives this woman?"

Peter stepped up and placed Catherine's hand into Vincent's.

"I, her godfather, in the name of her parents."

The monk then began the traditional Chinese wedding ceremony. When he was done, The priest announced them husband and wife.

Vincent kissed his new wife and the room cheered.

When it was time for them to leave both of them walked over to Father.

"Father, we are leaving now."

"Vincent, Catherine, I am sorry, please forgive an old fool. I hope you will be happy." Catherine kissed his cheek.

"Father, I love you. We will see you when we get back."

The children noticed they were about to leave and decided it was time to blow bubbles. Vincent and Catherine laughed as they left the hall.



Chapter Nine

Vincent and Catherine woke up for the first time in their new bedroom in their new brownstone. Catherine was pleased that Vincent liked the house. Yesterday, he roamed through it looking in the different rooms. He turned to his wife and smiled. Catherine was grinning from ear to ear. She was happy. She loved this man so much.

Vincent got up carefully making sure that he did not wake up Catherine. He walked over to the window. This was the first time he felt the sun on his face without worrying about rushing below. He knew that Catherine had explained that the house was heavily shaded from the outside. No one could see in. She made sure of that. The special glass was made to see outside but not inside. He was amazed at the lengths she went through to protect him.

Catherine stirred. She sat up and looked at her husband.

"Good morning my love."

"Good morning, my Catherine."

"So, what shall we do today? I still have three more days before I have to be back at the office."

"Shall we go Below for breakfast? I would like to see Father and Mary."

"Okay, let us get dressed and go below."

They arrived at the dining hall, and everyone cheered. They were greeted with many hellos. Father and Mary were sitting together. The couple walked over to them. Father looked up and smiled.

"Well, it is good to see you back. I did not hear you come to your chamber, Vincent."

"Father, we did not stay in my chamber. Catherine has purchased a brownstone and we stayed there."

"Well, I hope it is secure."

"It is Father, I made sure of it. Why don't you come and see for yourself? You are welcome any time. Mouse made a threshold, and it is not that far from here."

"Well, Catherine, I see you have thought of everything. Come sit, eat,"

Vincent went to get their breakfast and Catherine sat next to Father.

Later on, that day, they were sitting in Vincent's chamber. He had made some adjustments to accommodate Catherine. She was sitting on the bed reading and he was at the desk writing in his journal. She looked up at him.

"Vincent, come over here. Come to me, I want you to make love to me in your bed. I have been dreaming of it."

He stood up and closed the tapestry. He walked over to her and began to undress. She also began to undress. He wrapped his body around hers. He began kissing her. He could never get enough of her. He licked her neck and began to move down her shoulders licking and sniffing the wonderful Catherine smell.

They joined in a fury that newlyweds had. Afterward, they lay in each other's arms. She was twirling his hair around her fingers, he was kneading her breast. Suddenly, Father walked in,

"Oh, I am so sorry, I did not mean to." He rushed back out.

Catherine laughed. She looked at the puzzled look on Vincent's face.

"Vincent, you look like you were caught with your hands in the cookie jar."

"It was, Catherine, your cookie jar." They both laughed.

Later, they went to Father's study. He was reading a book. He looked up and smiled.

"I am sorry, I guess I have to get used to not walking in on you now that you two are married."

"It is okay Father. Catherine and I would like you and Mary to come to our house for dinner tomorrow. Mary said she would be happy to. Will you come?"

"Why yes. I will come."

^{*}The First Time I Loved Forever, Lee Holdridge, Melanie Safka



by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



Catherine's Promise

by Judith Nolan



"Catherine... I don't know what will happen now..."

"You must promise me one thing... That you will share it with me... Whatever happens, whatever comes..."

"Whatever happens, whatever comes... Know that I love you..."

"Know that you will never lose me. No matter how far apart we are, until this is over. I can promise you I will find you. You must never try and hide yourself from me again."

"I know that now. But if all else fails...?"

"Then I will come for you. No matter where you go or what happens. We are bound to each other, forever..."





Vincent & Catherine by Linda Stauffer This technique is called a scratchboard. It's a clay coated Bristol board with a coating of India ink. A tiny sharp blade scratches through the ink layer to reveal the white clay layer underneath.



Halo My Angel

by Paulette Frazier



Rated R

My version of Season Three Song lyrics by Beyonce No infringement intended



It's like I've been awakened
Every rule I had you breakin
It's the risk that I'm takin'
I ain't never gonna shut you out

Catherine sat on her sofa contemplating the past events. She had just left Vincent at the threshold. They had kissed for the very first time. Not a light goodbye kiss, but a real passionate one. One she had a hard time separating from.

She had for the first time since she met Vincent, really seen him. All of him. She watched as he destroyed the three men who tried to kill her. She heard his roars. She could not look away. When it was finally finished and he moved away from the bodies and looked her way, she saw the shame in him. She knew at that moment that he never wanted her to see that side of him. She also saw the love he had for her. His willingness to do anything for her. This included losing his humanity and exposing the beast in him.

What was she to do? How could she fix this between them? Make him understand that it did not matter... she loved all aspects of him. She knew about that side of him. She never saw it for herself. Catherine put her face in her hands and cried. She cried for herself, and she cried for Vincent.



Halo My Angel by Paulette Frazier

Catherine woke up on the sofa where she had cried herself to sleep. She got up and headed toward her bathroom. She would shower and dress and head for the



Tunnels. She knew what she had to do. She had to ease Vincent's pain... let him know that she loved him, all of him.

She arrived at Vincent's chamber to find him gone. She went to Father's study.

"Hello, Father, do you know where Vincent is?"

Father looked up at her and snarled.

"What happened last night? What did you do to my son? Turn him away? Left him for another? I know you socialite types. You use people up and leave them."

"Father, I do not know what you are talking about. I never left Vincent anywhere."

"He came home in such turmoil. He was in bad shape. All he kept saying was your name."

"Oh Father, there were these three men, they chased me under the garage when I went to get my car. They caught up with me and they were going to kill me, when Vincent came." She began to cry.

"Oh no. Catherine, you saw him?"

"Oh Father, afterward, he was so ashamed. he brought me down and took me to my threshold. I did not mean for him to get involved. I have no idea why the men were after me."

"Catherine, Vincent is in the caves."

"I must get to him. I need to tell him that it does not matter. Father, I love him, all of him. I cannot live without him. He is my angel. The very essence of me."

"Jamie will take you to him."



Jamie and Catherine arrived at the caves. They heard the roars. Catherine broke out into a run. She left Jamie standing there. She ran straight into Vincent's

Halo My Angel by Paulette Frazier

arms. He gathered her up close to him and whispered her name into her hair. She held on to him.

"Oh Catherine, my Catherine. I am sorry, sorry you had to see me like that. I thought...."

"Oh Vincent, don't you know, I love all of you. Every part of you. You are the very life in me. I cannot bear to be without you. You must never shut me out. You must always let me know what you are feeling."

You're everything I need and more I'm surrounded by your embrace Baby, I can see your halo You know you're my saving grace

Catherine and Vincent embraced for a long time. Eventually, Vincent looked Catherine in the eyes and kissed her. One thing led to another, and they were soon locked into a passionate love embrace. They begin to tear at each other's clothes. Both finally stood naked in front of each other. Vincent lifted Catherine up and took her as he pressed her against the wall. Catherine wrapped her legs around him to secure their embrace. The love came hard and fast. Afterwards. Vincent let her down slowly and looked at her with tears in his eyes.

"My Catherine, I am sorry, I should have..."

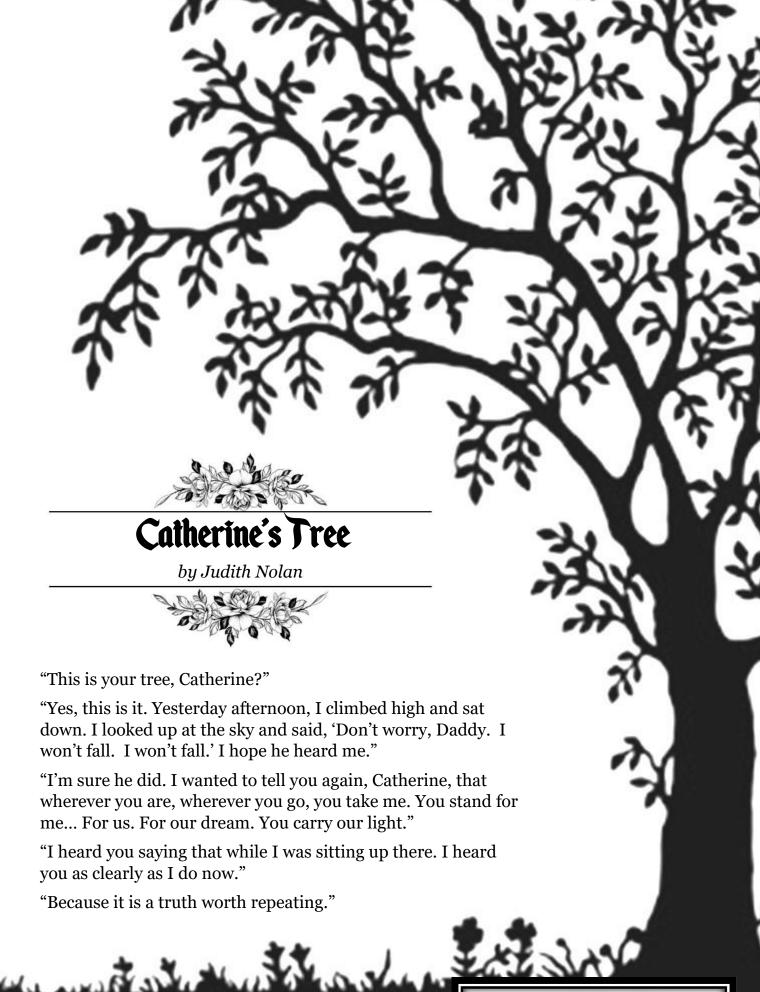
"My darling, do not apologize. I wanted just as much and as hard as you did. Do you not understand, I love all of you. I love the gentle scholar in you, and I love the beast in you. I have a beast in me. We are two people with one heart. Can you not feel it, Vincent. Can you not hear my siren calls to you late at night when the night is still? Can you not hear me calling to you to come to me? Make long slow love to me. Let me feel you inside of me. Filling me with your love essence."

"Oh Catherine, I love you more than life. Will you stay with me, love me, marry me?"

Catherine kissed the tears from his eyes.

"My beloved furry man, I am yours forever. I will never leave you."

THE END





The Embrace by Davide Sannino (Submitted by his wife, Nelly)



VINCENT:

Once upon a time In the city of New York Below the city streets

My heart and soul are floating through the tunnels
Surrounded by messages tapped on pipes and voices coming from the World above

Desperately looking for a light, a sign, something to be bonded to Something to live for Something to make them meaningful



CATHERINE:

Once upon a time
In the city of New York
Above the city streets
I'm on the balcony feeling strange and alone
I can't understand this sadness
But I have to fight it
Finding the way for love and compassion



VINCENT:

After a long trip across my feelings
Exploring the places where I was born and raised
Suddenly my heart and soul are captured by something special
Gentle but sad thoughts are coming to me
I don't know how
But I have to listen to these thoughts and connect them to a voice
To a whisper...

And now, here it is! The most beautiful voice I've ever heard She's sad but full of courage and love A fighter, just like me I start speaking with her firstly asking: "Tell me your name..." And the name comes as a whisper: "Catherine..." When she whispers her name, sadness disappears Love, bond and magic arise All my fears are wiped away My heart and soul are finally in peace

Thank you Catherine for the most beautiful whisper of my life

Vincent



CATHERINE:

Always yours,

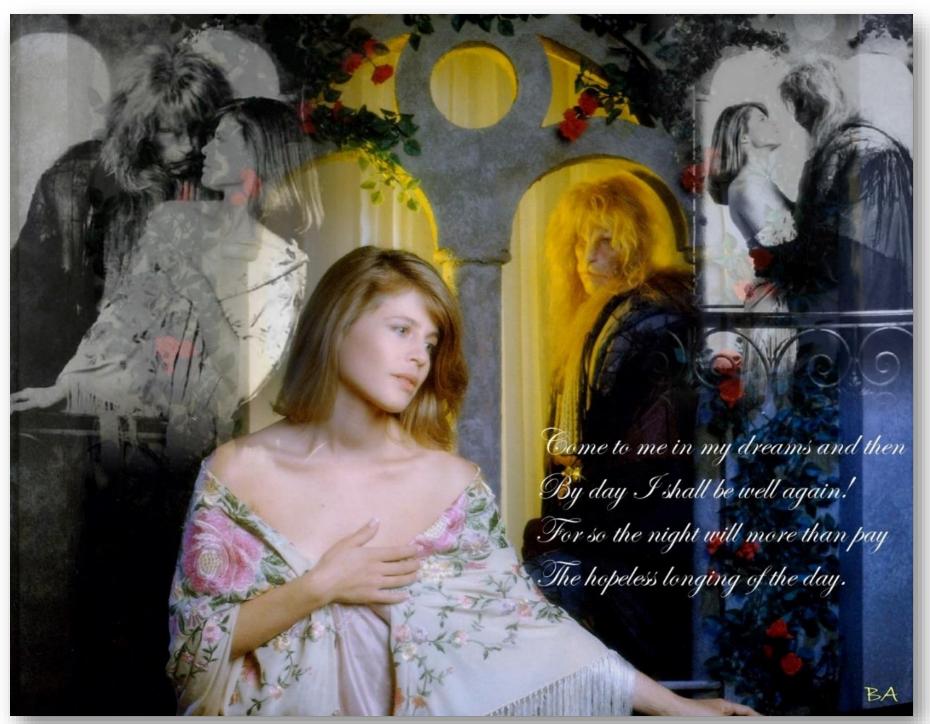
Love you forever...

I don't know how to explain
But my eyes suddenly see a beautiful and hansom face
My heart feels an extraordinary sensation made of strength,
love, compassion
What a strange and amazing connection!
But, who are you?
His voice whispers his name: "Vincent..."
It seems I can fly with you over the city
Even if I don't know where are you coming from
But I feel you near me as I've never felt any other man before
Our bond starts from that whisper and, for the first time in
my life
I thank sadness for having made you a part of my life
A part of ME, forever...

Catherine



⁻Illustration provided by the author



Come To Me in My Dreams by Barbara Anderson



If Tomorrow Starts Without Me

by JessicaRae



A follow-up scene from S2 E22 · The Rest Is Silence







The Tunnels had long ago fallen silent. Once the children were put to bed, only the faint sounds of tapping on the pipes could be heard in the distance. Even those messages faded to near silence as the night wore on.

In the library, Vincent sat reading quietly in his chair. The flickering of the myriad of candles around the room cast a shadow across his face. His long lion-like tawny hair fell around his face and blocked out the outside world, leaving only the world upon the browned pages that he turned carefully every so often. He had come down to the library many hours ago to keep Father company, and after several games of chess and enough cups of tea to keep them awake for hours, he and the elderly patriarch of the Tunnels had fallen into companionable silence with their books.

If Tomorrow Starts Without Me by JessRae

Ind had wonderedAs he turned another page in *Hamlet*, the silence of the room pricked Vincent's senses and he raised his head to glance around. Having been so lost in the hardback that rested upon his knee, he felt a bit disoriented and had lost track of time. His confusion was further cemented as he met the searching eyes of Father, who was no longer reading. The older man sat in his rocking chair, one hand propped under his chin, gazing in Vincent's direction, frowning in pensive thought.

"Father?" Vincent spoke, his voice faltering at the single word. His tone carried a simple question, and a smile quirked the corners of Jacob's lips.

"Forgive me, Vincent, my mind had wandered for a moment."

Vincent glanced at the vintage copy of Macbeth that still lay in the older man's lap, his thumb poked between the pages to keep his place. He could not have been more than two chapters in, judging by the placement. "That moment appears to have been hours ago," Vincent replied softly. "Something on your mind, Father?"

The silence that followed was deafening, the older man's gaze leaving his son's face to focus on the flickering wall of candles. For a moment, Vincent was not sure he intended to respond.

"If tomorrow starts without me," Father finally spoke, his voice barely above a whisper. "Promise me, Vincent, that you will not lose yourself in the void that follows."

"Without you? Father, are you unwell?" Vincent's tone became worried, and he sat up, gently closing his book. Father held up a hand to quiet him.

"No, my son, be calm. I did not mean to upset you. It just has been crossing my mind lately. You are my greatest treasure... and my greatest worry." He looked away from the fixed point in the candles and met Vincent's gaze. "I am getting older, Vincent, much as I hate to think of it. But when I am no longer here, and the responsibility of these tunnels falls on you..."

"Father," Vincent's voice was soft, yet he was visibly troubled. "You have nothing to worry about. The Council will make sure everything stays in order and I will be here too."

"But promise me that you will be okay, Vincent. You have known sorrow, more than most men will experience in a lifetime. I need to know that I have not caused you to lean too heavily upon me."

Vincent smiled a comforting smile that did not reach his eyes." You know I will be here, Father. What you have done for these people will never be lost."

"You can't promise me *that*, Vincent," Jacob replied. "We live in a world below one of the largest cities in our country. What happens if a team of developers decides to excavate the area, and finds these tunnels? You would be forced to move them deeper into the Tunnels. And Paracelsus might show up from somewhere and threaten..."

"Father," Vincent interrupted gently. "I will lead these people as you would. You have nothing to fear."

"I do not feel comforted," Father spoke again, softly, turning his face away from the flickering light, his features lost in the shadows. "Promise me, Vincent."

Vincent laid his book aside and rose, moving to the older man's side, placing one hand on his lined forehead. "Father, are you sure you are well?"

The older man made a noise deep in his throat, a chuckle that soothed Vincent's worries a bit. "Vincent, it... it's fine, I will be fine. I just... just need some rest."

Vincent knelt beside the chair, taking the older man's hand in both of his.

"Father, look at me."

Jacob finally relinquished his focus on the shadows and smiled down at the unique, gentle face of the man he called his son. "I am looking, Vincent."

"What is the meaning of all of this, Father?" You have something on your mind, and you know we can talk man to man."

"Yes, Vincent. I know. But tonight, I am talking to you not as man to man, but father to son. I want to know that if something were to happen to me, that you would not... lose yourself to... the darkness." Jacob reached his free hand to brush back the tawny amber hair that hung around his son's face. "I know it is still inside you, Vincent. Hidden, and well, but still there."

Vincent lowered his eyes for a moment, the recent events of his spiral into that void fresh in his mind. Father was worried, worried that in grief he might...

No.

Unconsciously, his lips curled upward in a snarl, not at Father, but at the darkness that edged into his thoughts. No, he would never let it take him again.

"Even so, it lingers," Father spoke softly, laying his hand on Vincent's arm and squeezing comfortingly. "A Father knows his son."

Vincent bowed his head. "Father, some men are born with shadows that linger over their souls like ravens. They are at constant war with reality, with biased and

discriminatory words and expressions that emanate from the world they live in. But in the Bond, there is Catherine and she... she quiets that darkness."

Father nodded once. "I know, Vincent. I was wrong to have ever thought that she would bring harm to you. She has only brought you joy and comfort. You in turn have given her a place of belonging."

"But you have been a part of that too," Vincent was quick to remind him. "You gave your blessing."

"Ah, that I did," Jacob's eyes crinkled slightly at the corners. "Your intent to always be fair is one of your strengths, Vincent. I appreciate the inclusion. But you were the one who saved her. And in turn..."

"She saved me," Vincent finished the statement quietly, bowing his head again to rest it on their clasped hands. "Father, the darkness... the void... it may always be there. But I assure you," he looked up at the older man again, a calm resolve in his face. "If it ever comes to touch me again, I will seek help, I will seek you and Catherine. I will not fight it alone."

Father squeezed Vincent's arm again, and leaned forward, drawing his son into a sort of half hug, his chin resting atop the bowed head. "That is all I can hope for, Vincent. I fear for you. I fear I have caused too much of your dependency on me and I made you that way by my own selfish grasp on you and my worrying about your every move. Vincent, I am getting older, and each day I feel less attached to this world. My only clinging resolve is to protect these Tunnels and the people who depend on them to survive. One day, I will have to give up even that when my time comes. I hope I have done enough to prove to them that you are capable of stepping into my place."

"You feel as if my time in the darkness has changed that?" Vincent asked, alarmed, pulling away from the embrace, his shoulders stiff with a new fear.

Jacob was quiet for a moment. "No. I... I don't think that has *changed* anything, Vincent. Just... people are human. They become afraid very quickly and lose trust even faster." He reached out and gently touched the hood of Vincent's cloak. "You are not so different from them in that regard."

"I am not afraid or ashamed of who I am," Vincent replied quickly, his tone much less sure than he felt.

"No, but you are afraid of who they think you are," Father smiled in understanding. "That's normal Vincent, unfortunately. But in the end, when

things fall apart, I do believe they will look to you for strength and courage. Promise me that you will..."

"Be there for them?" Vincent interrupted, an edge to his voice that betrayed his unsure feelings. "Of course, Father, I will be there for them. I will protect them with my life. You know that. I always have."

"I am not worried about you protecting them, Vincent. I have no doubt you will put them first above all else. You have always been there in the fray to defend and often to take the painful path to protect us, even at the risk of danger and trauma to your own self. You have taken lives with your own hands to protect this community, and don't think that it goes



unnoticed. It is a burden, a blackness that you choose to bear, and no one can possibly understand the gravity of the chains that killing a man can create on one's soul. But Vincent, I am concerned about you protecting yourself. Do not let the darkness take what you owe to yourself. Do not become a martyr for these Tunnels at the risk of losing what makes you good and beautiful."

Vincent raised one eyebrow. "Beautiful, Father? Of all the words you had to choose from..." There was a twinkle of mirth in his blue eyes, and Father laughed.

"You are beautiful to me, Vincent. I apologize if this rambling has disturbed you. I am so very fond of you, and yet I know I cannot hold onto you forever."

"I will do my best, Father. These people will come first, and whatever I must do to fight the void, I will do it... for you."

"You know I will come back and haunt you, Vincent," Father chuckled again. "If the darkness becomes too much for you, I will find you and I will remind you of this moment."

"I should expect nothing else," Vincent nodded, his amusement evident. "Can I ask what brought on this discussion of your not being here?"

Father looked away again. "Vincent, when you... when you were... gone... I realized that I couldn't help you. None of us could, except Catherine, bless her. Vincent, I felt so helpless, you were so broken, and lost, so very far away from all of us. And in that moment, I was afraid. Afraid of what you would be when I was gone. Afraid you might never come back to me the same as you left. Vincent, you are my son... always. I want to protect you from everything; from staring faces, from inferiority, from... the darkness."

"You always have," Vincent replied with conviction. "I am sorry that I made you feel as if I would forsake you, Father."

"It wasn't you," Jacob replied, setting aside his book. "It was the darkness. You could never forsake me. Perhaps I depended on you too much as well. Now, let us speak no more of darkness and tomorrows."

Vincent nodded once and for another long moment, they gazed silently at each other, more words being said with that look than any they had just spoken.

"Promise me, Vincent."

"I promise, Father."

Somewhere in the deepest depths of humanity, the darkness heard the promise and snarled, fury cruelly black inside its isolating shadow. It reached out to bind the promise in chains of fear before it could do much good. Gently, a touch through the Bond quieted the shadow, reminding the void that Vincent did not stand alone. Vincent was broken, unpredictable at times, that was true. So was the void.

But Catherine feared neither. Fearlessly, she reached out and also promised...

To stand in the gap between the reaching darkness and the man she so completely loved.

Today, tomorrow, and always.



⁻Illustrations provided by the author except where otherwise indicated.



by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



Life Is Nota Fairy Tale - However...

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



"Note: The theme of this story was inspired by the premise for a possible second-season episode of the Beauty and the Beast series, which was never developed into a script and filmed. The idea was suggested by Linda Campanelli and M.M. Shelly Moore."



"I'm sorry, Joe, I don't have the strength to come in today. I feel like my head is about to explode, and I can feel every muscle in my body. You don't even want to know how many boxes of tissues I have been through since yesterday." Catherine suddenly sneezed loudly into the phone speaker.

"Bless you! And me, for not being near you right now," her boss remarked dryly on the other end of the line. "Okay, Radcliffe, I get it. You stay in bed with tons of hot drinks, aspirin and tissues for a few days. Leave the work to me. After all, it's only Wednesday, and I had no other plans for the rest of the week other than taking over your cases." The sarcasm in his voice was apparent.

"I will make it up to you, I promise," Catherine tried to cheer him up. "I'll volunteer for whatever you want for the next month."

"Okay, okay..." Joe chuckled. "Don't get too dramatic. I'll be fine. Get some rest, and I'll see you on Monday if you feel better."

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief, the prospect of her comfy bed and snugly covers for three days was more than enticing in her shattered state.

"You are an angel of a boss, do you know that?" She said with a stuffy-nosed voice.

"Yeah, but watch out, Radcliffe. I might turn into a devil one day," Joe replied, and she heard the amusement in his voice. "Let me know if you need anything. Bye."

"Thank you, bye," Catherine replied with a tired smile and hung up the receiver.

The vintage clock on the mantelpiece chimed 8pm. She sighed and realised that she hadn't eaten since breakfast. The way she had been feeling all day forced her brain to put thoughts of food aside. Not hungry anyway, Catherine turned off the lights in her living room, leaving only the city lights from outside to gently illuminate her apartment. She dragged herself to the bedroom and slumped onto the bed on her back, covering her face with her hands.

Great, just great! And I was supposed to attend the children's concert on Saturday...

The way things were looking at that moment, Catherine would have to wave goodbye to enjoying the junior interpretations of the classics Below for the time being, and she was gutted about it. She had really been looking forward to that evening.

Her mouth felt dry, and her throat scratchy. Everything in her was crying for a hot cup of tea, but her muscles stubbornly refused to cooperate. Therefore, she just remained motionless, stretched out on her bed.

A sudden soft knock on the French doors brought her back to life. Her heart rejoiced, though for a second, her old self was dismayed at the thought of Vincent seeing her in such a state. Nevertheless, Catherine gathered her last ounce of strength to get up and walk over to the French doors to open them for her beloved visitor.

"Catherine..." That was all he was allowed to say before she made a very reluctant step back from him and shook her head.

"I think I've got flu, Vincent. I feel really bad, and I don't want to pass it on to you, so you should..."

She didn't manage to say more because the next thing she was aware of was his arms around her, creating a solid but gentle frame.

"I think we both know that what I should and what I will do are two very different things in certain situations," he remarked softly, smiling into her hair.

Catherine sighed and couldn't help but chuckle into his chest. The comfort of his nearness was too tempting to resist, and her arms tightened their hold around his waist.

"I think I'm glad about that," she admitted and looked up to him lovingly with glassy eyes. Then she reached for a tissue in her pyjama bottoms pocket.

"I'm sorry I disturbed you in your rest," Vincent apologised with a worried look. "I only wished to see if there was anything I could do to help you. I have felt you have been unwell all day."

Catherine's eyes smiled from behind the tissue, and when she blew her reddish nose, she laughed.

"You could wave a magic wand and make me look like a human again."

The warmth in his eyes as he observed the woman in front of him made it clear what he thought of her appearance.

"You could barely look more human than you do right now," he said tenderly with a knowing smile.

She froze for a moment, yet again enchanted by the truth in his words. "In my previous life, any man would rather have stayed miles away from me when I was in this condition," she spoke eventually, shaking her head. "The only man never to have done that was my dad."

A fond smile settled on her lips when she remembered her late father.

"After my mum died, every time I was sick, he used to make me a nice cup of hot tea or cocoa, wrap me in my bed sheets, sit down next to me and read to me until I fell asleep. That continued almost until I was 20." She raised her eyebrows, amused.

Vincent lowered his eyes with a chuckle.

"That's what a loving parent will always do," he remarked. "Father was the same with me on the rare occasion when I was unwell. In a way, those were some of the most precious times we spent together."

Catherine regarded him ardently, for a moment imagining little Vincent tucked in bed in his chamber and Jacob sitting in a high-back chair nearby, reading to his beloved son, probably some Dickens or Twain.

Suddenly, there was a flicker of hesitation in his blue eyes.

"You should be in bed," he said carefully. "I could read you something if you like..."

Her surprise almost made him laugh, but he kept his composure.

I know, Catherine, I never enter your apartment unless it is a matter of urgency.

However her answer shocked him even more.

"Actually, you could tell me a story of your own, from your imagination." The challenging look in her tired eyes gave him no choice.

"As you wish," Vincent replied with a smile. "But before that..." He reached into the pocket of his cloak and produced a little fabric pouch. "Herb tea."

Catherine chuckled and stepped back into the bedroom, holding his hand. Vincent followed her with slight hesitation but then decided that needs must and he put his usual restraint behind him, just for tonight...

She was about to drag herself to the kitchen when he stopped her.

"Please, allow me," the more than welcomed guest offered his help. "Lie down and rest."

When he saw the astonishment in her weary eyes, he teased her. "Catherine, you know I visit Helpers on occasion. The underground may be my home, but I don't live in a hole."

All at once, she felt ashamed. Of course, Vincent didn't live in a hole and knew his way around a kitchen Above. Limited resources Below didn't equal limited knowledge.

"I'm sorry, Vincent," she apologised and exhaled loudly. "I think this flu is completely fogging my brain."

His amused smile calmed her down, and she allowed him to lead her to the bed and cover her carefully after she had lain down.

"Do not worry about anything, Catherine," he reassured her softly, "just rest. I won't be long."

Her eyes followed him as he disappeared behind the folding door of the bedroom, and she closed them, to do as he told her. Then truly in the blink of an eye, her visitor was back with a steaming cup. He carefully put it in her hands after she raised herself to sit up, leaning against the headboard.

"Father said this tea is especially good for fevers," Vincent remarked while watching her sip the hot drink.

"I hope so," Catherine replied with a tired voice. "I took some aspirin already, but it doesn't seem to be working."

"I know. I can feel it."

Vincent's matter-of-fact statement amazed her. Of course, she shouldn't have been surprised after all this time. He was attuned to her physical and mental state like a perfect Swiss clock, always knowing how and what she felt. Yet deep inside, it never ceased to stun her and bring her more comfort than anything else in the world.

"Tell me," she said eventually with a smile after she placed the cup on the nightstand and made herself more comfortable under the covers. "Tell me a story, Vincent."

He returned her smile and sat on the floor next to the bed, leaning his back against it, so that Catherine could see only his profile. For a moment, she thought of telling him to bring in a chair to sit on. However, his silhouette with his long arms resting folded on his knees, and the image of half of his unusual face illuminated by the city lights enchanted her. She didn't want to break the spell, so she kept silent and waited.

While still looking into the distance behind the French doors, Vincent began telling his story.

"Once upon a time, in a wondrous castle in a land far, far away, there lived a beautiful young princess with her father, King Charles, who was a good, kind and wise ruler..."

"What was her name?" Catherine interrupted him.

Vincent couldn't suppress a smile as he glanced at her. "We shall call her Catherine."

A wide smile reached her eyes. "Go on," she prompted him, still smiling. He needed no more encouragement, and looking ahead again, Vincent continued...



Princess Catherine lived what most people considered a happy life, missing nothing that would provide her enjoyment... all the earthly pleasures. She was surrounded by the wealthiest and most desired suitors in the kingdom, many of whom had travelled from foreign kingdoms, wishing to gain her favour.

Her father was not happy, for she could not decide upon which suitor to give her heart to. None of them managed to awaken tender feelings in her, such that would move her heart and make her fall in love.

As the days passed, King Charles started losing hope, and the more suitors the princess drove away, the less likely it seemed that she would find someone with whom she could share her life.

Catherine was slowly but surely becoming exhausted from life in what she regarded as a golden cage. She loved her father dearly and knew he meant well, but she could not make him see that finding true love was not a contest of the bravest and wealthiest knights who fight for a trophy.

Time was passing, and the princess was getting restless. Nothing she used to like doing brought her joy.

One day, in the early morning, when everyone was still asleep (even the guards at the castle gate, who were a little merrier the previous night), Catherine, veiled in a long white cloak, managed to slink away from the castle. Overjoyed at her sudden freedom, she ran as quickly as she could, enjoying the crisp morning breeze, the clear blue sky and the smell and sight of the rich green grass covered with morning dew, shimmering in the warming sun.

The princess had never felt such a thrill or such contentment as she did that lovely summer morning. Overjoyed by sudden freedom, she found herself only a few steps away from the nearby forest. Her big emerald eyes shone even brighter than usual when she remembered the story she had heard the maids in the castle tell many times before.

Legend had it that there was a mysterious, strange creature roaming the ancient forest. It had the looks that made it the rarest being in the world, the only one of its kind, and it would have lived peacefully in the forest, were it not for the constant fear of being hunted down by people... for its uniqueness and because people thought it might be dangerous to them. Therefore, apparently, it lived deep in the forest, constantly hiding from men's eyes.

Catherine was fascinated by the story, which many believed was true, but her father and his advisers told her it was only a childish fantasy. So, when she suddenly stood at the green realm that could have turned fantasy into reality, she didn't hesitate a moment. Thrill added colour to her cheeks when her feet crossed the imaginary boundary between the meadow and the forest ahead of her.

She had never seen anything so beautiful in her life before. How different this was from the cold stones of the castle! Everything around her was painted with vibrant colours, hundreds of shades of green, brown and yellow, with the

colourful dots of red, blue and white of the flowers scattered in the grass. The birds were singing their morning songs, the golden hues of the morning sunlight cracked through the tree branches, making everything glitter like diamonds. It seemed that everything around Catherine was touched by some magical power, living and breathing as one being.

The princess was so captivated by the images she saw and sounds that she heard, that she lost track of time. She kept walking further, pulled by some inexplicable force, drawing her deeper and deeper into the wood. Minutes turned into hours, and it was already late afternoon when she suddenly stopped upon hearing a strange rustling coming from somewhere ahead of her. Her curiosity beat the alarm bells in her mind, and she followed the sound.

After just a few steps, peeking from behind an old oak tree, she spotted something hanging from another oak tree a few feet in front of her. Something was captured in a thick net set as a trap there. She couldn't recognise what was inside the net, for it was constantly moving, wrestling with the net ropes, desperately trying to break free. All at once, the movement stopped and absolute stillness befell them.

Led by a strange pull, Catherine stepped out from her cover and cautiously approached the net. Only then, at a closer look, could she finally make out a figure of something that looked like a human being, though its head was partially obscured by its arms, and she couldn't see its face...



"Strangely, she wasn't afraid," Catherine suddenly interrupted him dreamily, totally engrossed in Vincent's storytelling. "Then she saw them... the bluest, most magnificent, brightest and warmest eyes she had ever seen. They were observing her, at first shyly, but then with keen interest, and she suddenly felt tingling all over her body, right down to her toes. Something was tugging warmly at her heart, something she had never felt before..."

Vincent, who had turned his head to see her, smiled in the semi-darkness of the room.

"The princess decided to free whatever or whoever was trapped in the net. She looked around for anything that could help her," he continued lively. "She heard the sound of water, a brook running nearby. She ran to it, and when she saw many rocks of different shapes lining the stream, she smiled. Catherine inspected

the stone chippings lying near the rocks. Most of them were polished by the stream, smooth and round. However, she spotted some lying away from the bubbling water, the edges of which were sharp. She reached for a few that fit into her hand and rushed back to the entrapped being."

Catherine hastily blew her nose and stepped in again. "After some effort, she managed to cut the main net rope with one of the chippings. There was a loud thump as the net fell to the ground and the being with it. After liberating itself from the tangles, the being stood up with some effort. The princess still couldn't see its face, only its back, but she could surely say it was a man."

She closed her eyes with an enchanted smile on her face. "A tall, majestic figure with broad shoulders and long hair reaching below them, the shade of which reminded her of the gold jewels in her father's crown..."

Vincent couldn't resist a chuckle, but his eyes were full of tenderness, appreciating Catherine's passionate imagery. "I thought *I* was supposed to be telling this story," he teased with a smile.

"I'm sorry," she apologised hastily. "Please, go on."

"The princess wished to see the man's face, but he hesitated. Something was holding him rooted to his spot, unable to turn to reveal himself to her.

'Please, don't be afraid,' she spoke gently, sensing his insecurity. He still hadn't moved, but she could almost feel his heart thumping franticly in his chest. Step by step, she moved closer to him until she could carefully reach for his back, covered under a thick vest on top of a linen shirt. Her small hand touched him gently, encouraging him to turn around.

'I won't hurt you,' she reassured him. He raised his head, and a deep sigh made its way out of his throat. He couldn't have been sure she wouldn't turn against him, but how could he have run away without even thanking his rescuer? Very slowly, he turned to her, revealing for the first time his face. If the princess sensed something before, now she was certain... it wasn't a human face... it was..."

"The face of a lion!" the young woman gasped, excited, clutching her handkerchief.

The intensity of the moment was broken by Vincent's deep, quiet laugh... something she rarely heard, and it delighted her. "I think you would make an excellent narrator, Catherine," he said. "We have storytelling hours for the

youngest children. I'm sure Father would be delighted to have you share your skills."

Suddenly ashamed of her impatience, she lowered her eyes and smiled shyly. "I'm sorry, Vincent. I guess I got a bit..."

"Carried away?" he finished for her, tilting his head.

"Yes," she confirmed quietly.

Hesitantly, Catherine's eyes found his face again and noticed his heartfelt smile. She relaxed immediately when his hand unexpectedly reached for her cheek and caressed it.

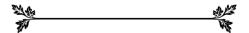
"I like it when you get carried away," he confessed inadvertently.

The Bond between them was singing loudly at that moment, sparkling and changing colours rapidly. Before it could explode, with a great effort, Vincent pulled back his hand and took his previous position at the bedside. The sudden silence between them ended a moment later with Catherine's quiet words.

"I'm sorry, Vincent... please, go on. I promise I won't interrupt you anymore. I really would like to know what happens next."

Her plea didn't go amiss in his ears. He smiled at her and nodded. Catherine relaxed as well and reached for her tea on the nightstand. Then her eyes focused on his face again.

"Where were we?" Vincent mused. "Yes... The man turned to the princess, and she saw his face was not human. It was the face of a lion...



Princess Catherine's eyes widened at the sight. To the man's surprise, she didn't run away as most people after seeing him would. Staring at his face with unmasked awe, her eyes were full of wonder and... compassion.

"I won't hurt you," she repeated, reassuring him of no bad intentions.

"I know," came a quiet reply, stunning her. "Neither will I."

His deep, gravelly voice confirmed his words immediately. The look in her eyes softened, and she smiled. "It's you," Catherine breathed. "The creature they talk about in the legend."

Life Is Not a Fairy Tale - However... by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



The lion-faced man sighed, lowering his eyes. "Yes, the one they fear more than their worst nightmares. The one they hunt day and night, thirsty for its blood and their own fame," he added sadly. "Only once I made the mistake of being too careless and was seen. Ever since then I have been a fugitive."

The princess suddenly felt ashamed of her people. Why does everything different have to be treated as something dangerous? His statement rendered her speechless.

"Can you tell me your name?" she asked when she regained her words.

"Vincent," he answered quietly.

The sound of his name made her smile. "I'm Catherine," she said.

"Catherine..." The man's inquisitive eyes observed her for a moment, finding a sudden peace in his heart, something he hadn't felt for a long time. However, he quickly remembered the danger and was ready to leave.

"I must go. Thank you for helping me," he softly expressed his gratitude and turned to go but froze at the harsh sound of a horn.

"The king's hunters..." the princess whispered. "Go! Go before they see you!" she exclaimed and pushed him toward the thick bushes behind them.

In a blink of an eye, the man-beast vanished as if he had never existed. She didn't see, how just for a second, he had turned back to look at the woman who had saved his life...



It took days until Princess Catherine was able to return to the ancient forest. Her unexpected (and by her royal father much disapproved) escape from the castle had its rather inconvenient consequences. A whole week of forced solitude in her chamber prevented her from looking for her new and unusual acquaintance again. King Charles would have done anything for his daughter, but since her mother had died, he was a bit overprotective of her.

After a week, the princess finally succeeded. She persuaded her father that there was no danger lurking around in the forest and that she could safely stroll under the lavish green tree crowns, without the suggested company of the guards.

And so, the next morning, after the sun had barely appeared on the horizon, Catherine ran out of the castle, eager to explore the forest kingdom again. Exploring wasn't her only wish... her greatest desire was to see the mysterious stranger again. It didn't take long this time.

The sun still hadn't reached its highest point when she decided to rest for a moment, choosing an enchanting spot showered with colourful wildflowers and surrounded by beech, oak and maple trees. Catherine had just surrendered her senses to the rich scent of honeysuckles when she spotted a tall figure in a dark cloak standing in the shadow of an old beech.

"Vincent..." she whispered and hastily looked around to see if they were alone. Only then did she stand up to greet him. "I was hoping I would see you again," Catherine admitted shyly.

"So was I," he confessed as well. "My reason was telling me to stay deeper in the forest as it's safer for me there, but..." His voice faded.

There are moments in life when no words are necessary. Although she barely knew the man-beast in front of her, she felt strongly connected to him, without knowing why. She dared a few steps to meet him, focusing on his deep set blue eyes.

"I would like to get to know this magical place better," Catherine said, genuinely thrilled. What followed was a plea, rather than a polite request. "Would you show me your world?"

Vincent's heart rejoiced at hearing those words and seeing the longing in her eyes.

"Gladly," he replied, and for the first time, the princess saw his lips stretch into a cautious smile...



And so, the princess and the man-beast started meeting in the forest every day. Vincent showed her many beautiful, enchanting places. They watched the golden rays of sun gleam on the surface of the Glittering Pool, sat by the majestic waterfall in the Hidden Valley, and Catherine marvelled at the echo of hundreds of mysterious sounds surrounding them in the Cave of Whispers, Vincent's secret retreat and place of rest.

With each day, the princess and her new friend were becoming fonder of each other. The unconditional respect with which Vincent treated his natural environment and all the living beings in it touched Catherine's heart deeply. They almost forgot for some precious hours that Vincent, although living freely, was not truly free. The threat of the hunters on his heels was hovering over their heads like a thick, dark cloud promising a heavy downpour.

"Can I ask you something... personal?" asked the princess one day when they were passing by the crystal clear, bubbly brook.

"You know you can ask me anything, Catherine," came Vincent's heartfelt reply.

She lowered her eyes and smiled. "Have you always been like... this?" The slight hesitation at her last word didn't go unnoticed.

With a smile, the man with the lion face sat down in the grass, inviting her with his hand to follow him.

"Yes, I was born like this," he said when she made herself comfortable and regarded him with interest. "No one knows why and who my parents were. I was found in the forest by a kind, honest man, a widower, who raised me as his son. He was unafraid to adopt a creature like me, without even imagining what I might grow up to be. Fearing that people would never accept me as one of their own but harm me, he intended to hide and protect me from anyone's eyes. It is because of him that I am still alive. He was my greatest teacher, and I owe him everything. The man that I am today is greatly his doing."

The tenderness with which Vincent spoke revealed his genuine fondness for his foster father.

"Where is he now?" Catherine inquired keenly.

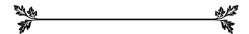
"He lives near a village on the other side of the forest, about two days' journey from here." He paused, as his eyes became distant.

"When I was 17, I realised he could not keep hiding me from the prying eyes of his people any longer. Although he was living in a remote spot away from the village, it was too dangerous for him to live with a creature like me. People can be... difficult about what they don't know... so, I left, and the forest became my second home. I lived in peace until that unlucky day when one of king's hunters spotted me while chasing a deer."

Vincent's voice faded as he lowered his eyes, trying to conceal his sadness.

His melancholy moved Catherine. "Have you ever seen your father since you left?" she asked.

"A few times," Vincent replied and smiled. "He comes to the forest sometimes, mostly to read in the shade of the trees. He says he finds ultimate peace in such moments. I rarely approach him... it's... safer for him that way..."



"That's not fair," Catherine interrupted Vincent's narration, frowning. "He shouldn't be living so alone."

Vincent smiled at her compassion. "No one thought of building tunnels for living in medieval times, Catherine, only for escaping from one place to another," he tried to set the facts straight. "Otherwise I'm sure he would have been beating his father in an early version of chess every day in the underground. Did you know that the game was considered one of the most desirable skills of a knight from the 12th century onwards?"

"No, I didn't, but still... it's not fair."

"That is why our princess came onto the scene," he added teasingly, raising his thick eyebrows. This silenced his beloved as she opened her mouth to speak but closed it immediately after.

"Shall we continue?" Vincent asked, amused.

"Yes, please," Catherine said after taking another sip of her tea. "I think now is a good time to bring some complication into the plot," she added with a twinkle in her eyes.

His deep chuckle made her smile. She was enjoying this storytelling hour immensely, and meanwhile, without even noticing it, her headache had subsided.

"Well spotted," Vincent stated and relaxed back against the bedside again. His eyes wandered past the French doors again. The bedroom was bathed in the city lights, which had a calming effect on him.

"One day, the princess returned home to the castle from her daily walk with her forest friend and found her father, King Charles, waiting in her chamber."

"I bet he came to tell her he felt the weight of his years and thought it was time she finally got married and ruled over the kingdom with her noble husband."

"Isn't that what usually happens in fairy tales?" Vincent teased.

"I'm doing it again," Catherine sighed with frustration, briefly hiding her face in her hands, "interrupting you when you are the storyteller here. Please, continue..."

The lion-man chuckled and continued.

"Well then...



"Why should I marry someone I have seen only once?" the princess cried.

"You couldn't wish for a better husband than Prince Elliot. He is well educated, charming, and the heir to the throne of one of the wealthiest and most powerful kingdoms in the world, which borders on ours. In union with him, together you can rule both his and our kingdom when the day comes. He will make sure that you and our people will be protected and safe," the king presented his case, bringing up arguments that he thought invincible.

Catherine started pacing restlessly around the chamber. "But I don't love him!"

The king stopped his daughter by holding her arms, trying to calm her down. "I only want what is best for you," he said quietly but with underlying urgency. "Elliot is a good man, and perhaps it won't be long until you find that you can learn to love him."

The look in the princess' eyes expressed shock. "Learn?? Is that what you did with mother?" she asked in disbelief.

"Of course not!" denied her father adamantly. "Your mother was the love of my life! However I was not so fussy when looking for a spouse as you have been, my dear."

"I would rather say you had better luck finding your soulmate so soon," Catherine countered quietly, lowering her eyes.

The bitterness and pain were written all over her face, and the king wished he could make it easier for her. Little did he know that his child had fallen in love with a man-beast, a fugitive hunted by his own people. Yes, the princess was sure she was in love, and the man of her dreams was not Prince Elliot.

"Please, Father, don't make me marry him," she pleaded, lifting her eyes to her parent again.

"I have no other choice. Please, understand," he begged her.

Catherine shook her head, unable to stop the tears from falling. "I'm sorry, Father... I can't!"

She ran out of the chamber without giving the king a chance to react. There was only one place she wished to go...



She ran for a long time, without a desire to rest. The lush greens of the forest provided her with much needed asylum, at least for a while. Wiping away her tears in an attempt to regain control of her emotions, her eyes searched for the only person she wished to see at that moment.

"Vincent, where are you?" she whispered desperately when she finally stopped.

"I'm here," the soft reply came from the shadow of a tree. As it happened, he felt her nearing and appeared at just the right time at the right place to meet her.

Her reaction surprised him... Catherine ran into his arms, embracing him with relief but a stabbing feeling in her heart as well. For the first time in his life, Vincent knew what it felt like to be held by a woman. Nothing in his vivid imagination came even close to the burning feeling that washed over him, almost sweeping him off his feet, and for a moment, he forgot to breathe...

"Catherine, what happened?" he inquired with care, watching her lovely but heartbroken face when she pulled back.

"I am about to be married to a prince, someone I barely know. My father says it's for my protection and the wellbeing of the kingdom because he feels the time has come for a new ruler..."

A dark shadow fell over the lion-man's face as he stepped back from the princess, averting his face. "Is the prince a good man?" he asked.

"He is polite, generous, well-spoken..."

Vincent sighed, and dared to look at her again. "Your father wants only the best for you," he said with a lump in his throat. "You should do as he asks of you."

A cold shiver ran through Catherine, and the long held back words finally made their way out. "But it is not the prince that I love..."

His eyes met hers, and Vincent knew in an instant who occupied her heart completely. Her affection for him had been evident for some time, but they had never crossed the boundary of friendship... until now.

"It cannot be..." he whispered, though his heart was crying out to express his own feelings for her.

"We could run off together!" Catherine suggested eagerly, holding his hands. Far away from here, deep into the forest where no one would ever find us..."

The anguish in her voice was making it harder for him to resist. "It would be no life for you, constantly watching your back. You would never be free..."

"The only way I can be truly free is with you," the princess countered with a pleading look. "Only with you, can I be myself."

Vincent's resilience was crumbling quickly. He had to leave before he gave in, and they would be doomed to a fugitive life.

"Then take the memory of me, of us...," he paused, swallowing hard when seeing the hope in her glistening eyes. "Take strength and courage from it and do what must be done."

He released her hands and reluctantly started to retreat. "I will never forget your kindness. Thank you for giving me a dream that I will keep deep within me for as long as I live." His voice broke as he watched her shake her head in denial, trying to stop him. "Go, Catherine... Be happy..."

Before she could say anything more, Vincent vanished into the shrubbery behind him, and the only thing left of him was the image of his silhouette imprinted in Catherine's memory. She was devastated, and yet she didn't run after him. If this was his decision, she would respect it... even if it was a wrong one...



He didn't know how much time had passed since he had left her standing alone as he walked deeper and deeper into the forest...Vincent wished for the first time in his life that he would get lost in it and never find his way back. The green realm had been his sanctuary for many years, but right now it felt like a prison from which he could never escape. His heart was aching, drowning in the sorrow of the memories of the time he had spent with Catherine. It was all a dream, an illusion that could never have lasted forever...

Deep in thought and unaware of the path he was walking, he found himself in a clearing overgrown with tall grass and wildflowers. Vincent stopped abruptly and took cover behind the nearest tree, suddenly aware of the danger in an open space. Then he saw it... an old timber-beamed cottage with a crooked roof, sticking out from the thick shrubs surrounding it.

At first, he wanted to retreat to the forest, for contact with people was the last thing he was looking for. He was about to turn on his heel when the cottage front door opened with a creaking sound, and a man came out into the open. He was tall, dressed from head to toe in black, including a long black cloak with a cape covering his head. Vincent hid behind the tree again and watched to see what the man would do. A part of him was telling himself to run away, but a voice deep within persuaded him to stay.

"The time for retribution has come," said the man and his very deep, resounding voice made Vincent shiver involuntarily. "The king did not agree with my proposal yet again. It is time to show him the power of one man."

Putting down the cape, he looked up at the cloudless sky and closed his eyes. A chilling grin appeared on his face. "The spirits are with us, Erlik," he said to the raven that had just landed on his outstretched arm, casually stroking the bird's shiny feathers. "Tomorrow, we will welcome a new dawn of mankind."

Vincent shivered at the mention of the raven's name. A long-forgotten memory flashed in his mind...

His father once told him the legend of a dark, evil sorcerer living somewhere in the ancient forest. He was cast out from his people for his evil deeds and since then lived alone, only with his raven Erlik.

Vincent always believed the story was only a legend, told by village folks to scare their children to prevent them from going too deep into the forest and getting lost. Never in his wildest dreams had he ever imagined that he would stand only a few feet away from the living man of the legend. What was this agreement proposed to the king the magician was talking about? The lion-faced man needed to know more, so he strained his sensitive ears again.

"I offered him a peaceful retirement, letting me take over the rule of the kingdom, and he dared to reject it! *I* was born to be king! I am the strong one, not he!" The sorcerer threw his arms around in anger, making the raven fly away. "For years, I have been pushed into the shadows, away from people... an outcast sneered at by society, but it is over now! Tomorrow will be the beginning of a new era..."

All at once, Vincent understood why the king so urgently insisted on Catherine getting married. The dark magician was the reason why the ruler was so desperate to get special protection for his child and his country.

Stretching his arm out, the sorcerer invited the bird to sit upon it again. "You know what these hands are capable of, Erlik, don't you? A bit of magic dust, and before a new day begins I will have my own army. By daybreak, I will lead it into

battle. I will make King Charles reconsider his resistance, and before the night falls tomorrow, no ruler in the world will contest my power."

Satisfied with his plan, the sorcerer walked back into his cottage, taking the raven with him.

Vincent didn't dwell on what he had heard for too long... the danger was clear and imminent, and there was no time to waste. He had to warn the king, and then...

First things first, he had to get to the castle somehow. There was no way he could have approached it during daylight, he would have been exposed too easily. Darkness was his ally, so he had to wait until the sunset... then the time would be right.

Silently, he cast one last glance at the clearing before retreating into the forest. However, Vincent knew that before long, he would be back for the decisive act.



The same night, veiled in his long, dark cloak, hiding in the shadows and avoiding the light of the torches, he dared to approach the castle gate. Soon, there would be a change of guards, and he knew that was his chance.

It was not the first time Vincent appeared under the castle. Several times after nightfall in the past, his curiosity (and his loneliness) drew him to this place, observing it from his safe hideout. He knew it bustled with people during the day, yet it oozed with calmness and tranquillity at night. He liked watching the shadows play on the castle walls, feeling the comfort of the light of the torches, yet still feeling the human presence of an occasional late passerby or the watchmen guarding the royal residence.

The tower clock struck ten when Vincent noticed the four guards leaving their posts and vanishing behind the gate. He sensed his only chance, and after searching the surroundings with his eyes, he stole upon the heavy iron gate and hastily dropped something on the dusty ground right in front of it. Then he immediately ran for cover again.

It took only a moment before the new guards appeared to take up their posts. "Hey, what's this?" One of the watchmen picked up something from the ground at his feet. It was a letter, wrapped around with a leather strap. "To Princess Catherine – Urgent," he read aloud, frowning.

"Right." His companion laughed. "Another fool trying to send a love letter to the princess."

The other guard had a strange feeling, though. His eyes searched the nearest surroundings. He couldn't truly explain it but he was gripped by an unpleasant foreboding. "I think I better deliver this," he said and turned on his heel.

Watching them from his cover, Vincent breathed a sigh of relief. It was up to Catherine now to speak to the king as soon as possible. He realised there was no time to idle and set out on his journey back to the forest. There was somewhere else he needed to be...



Vincent interrupted his narration and looked at Catherine. The expression on her face was one of deep interest but also of confusion.

"What is it, Catherine?" he asked, tilting his head.

"I was just thinking of something the sorcerer said," she mused. "He said, 'I was born to be the king..."

"Yes?"

"Why would he say such a thing if—"

"Yes, Catherine, if..." Vincent smiled when he interrupted her. "But we are not that far, yet," he teased.

Catherine nodded apologetically. "Of course, but I'm ready to hear more," she teased back.

Vincent leaned back with a contented smile and continued.



The moon was pale but still overhead when Vincent made his way back to the clearing. The early morning pushed the darkness of the night away, turning the sky into a purple and pink canvas. However, this time, the lion-man didn't remain hidden in the safety of the trees. He pulled up the hood on his cloak to partially conceal his face, and determinedly he walked toward the cottage. In his mind, the confrontation with the dark magician was inevitable.

When he stopped at the front door, his hand reached out to knock, but suddenly, he heard a roaring sound from behind the cottage. Noiselessly, he walked around the cottage and stopped around the corner, staying partially hidden from sight. What he saw almost took his breath away... on the other side of the clearing, flapping his wings wide, roaring and standing on his strong hind legs was a giant, grey-scaled dragon...

Never in his life had Vincent seen a more majestic beast. Hypnotised by its sheer magnificence, the forest guardian forgot his usual cautiousness and took a few steps forward, staring at the dragon in awe.

"He is the king of the forest," a deep, dark voice brought Vincent back to reality. He jerked his head towards it. "The leader of my army," the sorcerer boasted with a grin.

His tall, dark figure and the sly expression on his face made the lion-man shudder.

"You knew I would come," he stated with sudden certainty.

"Of course," replied the magician with satisfaction. "I've been waiting for you for years, ever since I saw you for the first time."

Vincent frowned with disbelief.

"Did you really think you were the only human living in this forest all this time?" The sorcerer raised his thick, black eyebrows. "Back then I knew you would be of use to me one day. And that time has come," he added.

His uninvited guest shook his head. "You are mistaken. I can be of no use to you."

A reverberating laughter cut through the crisp air. "I am never mistaken! Stars never lie. I saw you in their light many winters ago and have waited for your arrival ever since then."

The dark magician turned his focus on the dragon, only a few feet away from them. His eyes widened with excitement as he watched the giant, restless animal pace in circles as if waiting for its master's orders.

"Is this your army?" Vincent asked doubtfully, hinting at the dragon. "I think you need a little more to defeat King Charles and his soldiers."

The sorcerer pierced the man beside him with a curious look. "So, you know about my plan? Well then, at least we don't have to waste more time on

explanations," he added sourly. "And as for your question... no. Let me show you..."

The magician reached into his cloak pocket and threw a handful of something glittery in the air. A sudden breeze picked up the grains of the golden powder and carried them further towards the open space in front of them, surrounding the dragon. Two more dragons, lesser in statue than the first one, appeared out of the sparkling dust, flapping their wings for the first time.

"I can make hundreds of them in minutes," the sorcerer boasted triumphantly.
"They could destroy not only the army but also everyone else in the castle.
Everyone..." he looked at Vincent from the side. "And that's where you come in."

With horror, Vincent pondered the terrifying prospect of the possible outcome of such an attack. Then he asked with confusion... "Why me?"

"Because in the castle lives someone you care about," the magician grinned. "At least, that was my impression on the lucky occasion when I saw you two together the other day," he added matter-of-factly. "So young, so passionate..." he mused before his face turned to stone. "So foolish..."

Vincent tried to control himself, though the blood in his veins was boiling, and he was fighting his animal instinct to attack the evil beside him. Then reason won over his emotions... he remembered the letter in which he had warned the princess, which she must have read by now. If the stars were aligned, there could still be hope.

"How do you think I could be of use to you?" he asked, seemingly calm.

"You could convince the king to surrender his power to me without a fight. I'm sure your lovely lady Catherine would gladly help you. Besides, your unusual... abilities might be of advantage."

Vincent glanced at his furry hands, each finger ending with a sharp claw. Was this evil magician expecting him to kill human beings for the greed of one man?

"Do you really think I would betray the people of my kingdom so easily?" he asked incredulously.

"Your kingdom??" The sorcerer questioned his words incredulously. "You have been hunted by those people! Why would you defend them if they want to kill you?"

"Their desire to kill is driven by their ignorance. They fear what they don't know," Vincent answered sadly. "I'd rather die than help turn them into slaves for the rest of their lives," he added adamantly with a strained voice. "I may be capable of killing easily, but I would never serve the dark side. I have come here to prevent you from turning your plan into reality."

The sorcerer couldn't hold back a laugh. "And how do you imagine doing that?"

"We can solve this without violence. You will refrain from spreading your magic outside your home and leave the king and his people alone. We can all live in peace."

"That's childish and stupid," the magician sneered. "We don't live in a fantasy world where all creatures big and small live happily together in peace. Life is about the survival of the fittest and reaching for your dreams by any means. It always has been."

"Life is not only about surviving. It's also about living. You could still choose the right path and create new dreams," Vincent argued.

"The only right path is the one of power!" the sorcerer stressed stubbornly.

"Then... there is no other way for me but to fight."

The eyes of the dark man narrowed, flashing with hate. "As you please..."

With a swift move, he pointed at Vincent but stared at the dragon. "He is yours! Do what must be done!" he shouted angrily at the giant creature.

The dragon erected itself, letting out a bone chilling roar and breathing fire around him, before standing on all four legs again. Then his eyes settled on the lion-man, piercing him with a cold gaze, ready to strike any moment.

Vincent noticed that the sorcerer stepped back, watching the scene unveil from a safe distance. He briefly eyed the other two dragons... they reminded him of guards, waiting for an order from their captain, patiently standing behind.

There was no time to dwell on them, as their leader attacked his intended victim immediately. Luckily, Vincent was fast and skilful on his feet, outrunning the frightening creature with little effort, often predicting the beast's next move. He even lashed out at the dragon with his clawed hands several times, but more out of reflex than to hurt it. However, he knew that he had no chance of holding it off forever, especially without a weapon. He needed to do something else to stop the dangerous fight.

Vincent knew he was facing a mortal threat, and yet he couldn't help but feel a strange connection to the dragon raging against him... this was a battle between two beasts... or maybe more? As his physical strength was being tested to the maximum, suddenly he saw the dragon's head change shapes in flashes... he saw the face of a handsome young man with the crown of a prince, then the roguish face of the sorcerer, and then... his own animal face...

Confused, he shook his head to chase the images away. This must surely be another trick of the dark man himself...

"Come on, don't fight your true nature!" the sorcerer challenged him from a safe distance. "Don't be a coward... act as the beast that you were born to be!"

As if by the swish of a magic wand, Vincent suddenly froze on the spot, standing tall, exactly the moment the dragon directed his enraged eyes at him again. The look in the lion-man's eyes changed. With great focus but also calmness, he looked into his giant opponent's eyes. His direct but inoffensive gaze surprised the fire-breathing creature and stopped it in its attempt to attack again. Only then did Vincent notice that the dragon's eyes were changing colours, from black to caramel-brown, emerald-green and steel-blue.

"What are you fighting for?" Vincent suddenly called out to his opponent. "He is only using you and will destroy you as soon as he reaches his goal after you and your brothers help him to defeat the king!"

To his astonishment, Vincent was convinced that the dragon was thinking about his words for a moment. There was something in those peculiar eyes telling him this creature wasn't just an "ordinary" dragon...

"Kill him! What are you waiting for? I brought you to life to kill!" the sorcerer shouted at his magical creation from the top of his lungs, unease and sudden fear evident in his eyes. But the dragon kept staring at Vincent.

"It doesn't have to be this way," Vincent spoke calmly, his eyes focused on the majestic being in front of him. "You could live free and at peace with everyone."

Slowly and very carefully, still watching his opponent's eyes, he reached with his hand towards the dragon's snout. Surprisingly, after a short, tense moment, the beast allowed him the contact, and its aggression and rage vanished like candle smoke.

The unexpected turn of events changed the sorcerer into a furious monster. Seeing the disobedience of his own creation and his plans falling like a house of cards, he ran towards Vincent and directed his hand at him, wanting to crush him with his dark magic. But before he managed to do or say anything, the dragon opened his mouth and released devastating flames at the raging man. One mighty breath of fire was all it took to overpower the evil magician and make him disappear with a scream in flames and smoke forever.

Vincent stared at the dying flames where only a moment ago the mighty sorcerer had stood in all his glory. There was no trace of him now. Sudden fatigue gripped Vincent, and he bowed his head, only to be surprised by the sound of a deep, vibrating voice.

"Now you can live free and at peace with everyone, too," the dragon said.

Vincent tilted his head, surprised that the majestic creature in front of him could speak. But he had no time to ponder his discovery, for a sudden light breeze picked up, and all three dragons slowly disappeared in it, turning into the gold dust they were created from.

"Vincent!" A joyous call reached his ears, and he turned around swiftly. For the second time in two days, Princess Catherine ran into his arms. As he held her, with pleasure but also relief, over her shoulder, he noticed the king and his soldiers standing in a wide half-circle not far away from them, watching with curiosity, but also respect...



The sound of Catherine blowing her nose made Vincent stop and turn to look at her.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she apologised, her eyes glistening. "It was so... moving..."

Her emotional statement made him smile. "I'm pleased you liked it," he replied. "Usually, I tell stories only to the children, so I may have slipped into a bit more... romantic side of things."

He lowered his eyes and Catherine could have sworn he was blushing. "You know I love the romantic side of things, especially when it comes from you," she said fondly. Suddenly her smile faded. "Wait, you haven't finished the story yet..."

Vincent relaxed, though Catherine noticed the melancholy on his face.

"There's not much more to tell," he stated hesitantly. "Vincent's selfless and brave act earned him respect from the people in the kingdom who no longer feared the

beast and saw no reason to hunt it. Someone who was willing to sacrifice his own life for the king couldn't have been vicious, could he?

The king was very grateful to him, although he was surprised to see his daughter feel so bound to a man with such distinctive looks. The princess confessed to Vincent that she longed to stay with him, for she was deeply in love. However, Vincent was convinced that they were too different, and there was no way for them to share a life together. He decided to stay in the forest, the place that had become his second home, and be its loyal guardian. The princess and the king promised him to help protect the forest and all living creatures in it forever..."

Catherine felt as if she were hit by an express train. "This cannot be," she whispered, deflated. "There is something missing...," her voice faded in the stillness of the bedroom. "It can't end like this... there must be a way for them! They deserve... more..."

When Vincent dared to look into her eyes, the sheer despair in them almost broke his heart. He sighed loudly and leaned his head back against the bed. A small smile settled on his lips.

"All right, Catherine," he said eventually and rested his arms on his knees again. "It's time to finish the story. The way it should be..."



"I still can't believe my father didn't question anything when I told him about your letter," Catherine mused when they sat side by side in their favourite spot by the brook. "He trusted me, and seeing the danger, he acted immediately."

"Your father knows you and loves you, Catherine," Vincent replied knowingly. "He knew you wouldn't lie to him especially about such a serious matter. His kingdom came first... anything else had to be put aside for later."

"I think you're right," she acknowledged with a small smile. "By the way, do you know who the sorcerer was for real?"

Vincent shook his head, his curiosity aroused.

"He was my father's brother. He was convinced that he was the chosen one, that his brother was too weak, too kind to lead a kingdom. His insatiable desire to become the ruler, although he was the second in line, led him astray onto the path of evil. That is why, many years ago, my father sent him into exile away from our kingdom. He had no other choice in order to keep peace for our people,

although it broke his heart. It seems his brother's thirst for power never diminished. No one knew he had returned."

"He stayed away from people in his cottage deep inside the forest, so that he could be forgotten and unrecognizable... until the time would come to strike again," Vincent mused. "He knew people never dared to go too deep into the forest because they feared the 'beast'..."

Catherine nodded, and her eyes wandered across the glittering water surface into the distance. "When I saw you with the dragon... I've never been so frightened," she admitted quietly, shaking her head. Then she looked at him again in awe. "How did you know that it would listen to you and understand what you said?"



by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

Vincent chuckled. "I didn't. All I did was hope," he replied. "I believe that every creature has something decent in them, something that can be spoken to without using violence, no matter how good or bad they appear."

Her smile was contagious. "Some people would call you naive," she teased.

"I know," he agreed, shrugging. "But what is life if not hoping for the best even in the face of the worst and ugliest that we can ever imagine? To give up is easy... it's the hope and believing in something better that moves us forward." He paused.

"Besides, no living being, whether good or bad, wishes to be someone's slave. So of course, the dragon listened."

The princess watched her 'beast' with admiration and that deep and powerful emotion that makes life worth living. In her still so young life, she had never met anyone with such strong, yet simple conviction and belief in goodness and in people. Even when he was hunted, he didn't seek revenge but rather blamed the people's deeds on their ignorance. Was it even possible to survive in the world with this attitude? She didn't know. All she knew was that she wanted to believe. Vincent made her believe...

"The curse of the beast is broken," the lion-man stated with pretended enthusiasm. Although his life was about to become peaceful again, his heart dreamed of things he was sure could never be.

"You will never be hunted again," Catherine said, smiling. "From now on, my people will not do you harm. They will get a chance to know the real you. They will respect you, protect and love you. From now on, you are free..."

"Free," he pondered. "Everyone has their own definition of freedom. Free doesn't always mean happy..."

"What do you mean?" Catherine knitted her brows.

Vincent sighed and stared at the bubbling water in front of him. "For all my life, I have had to accept what I am, my appearance, my animal instincts... We can't change what we were born to be. We can only influence who we become and what we do with the life we were given." It was becoming more difficult for him to speak, especially when the princess gently took his clawed hand in hers. "And that is why we have to part ways..."

Her heart sank. "I don't care about your appearance, Vincent. I fell in love with you because of *who* not *what* you are!"

"A fish and a bird can fall in love, but they cannot find a home to live together," he breathed sadly. "You deserve better, Catherine."

"I know I do," she agreed eagerly. "That's why I need and want to stay with you."

There was little he could have said to oppose her. His mind understood that sometimes we need to follow our heart even if there is every reason not to. Seeing the determination in her eyes, the genuine desire to share her life with him, Vincent was humbled and overpowered.

"Life is never perfect, Vincent, and none of us is perfect. But as you said, we can influence what we do with the life that we were given." Her hand reached for his face. "What you and I were given was a true gift. We can't waste it..."

* * *

And so it happened that Princess Catherine and Vincent, the man-beast guardian of the ancient forest, remained living in the forest. Together with King Charles and all the people in his kingdom, they protected the forest and lived in peace and harmony with all its creatures forever. They lived happily ever after, and maybe they still do...



When Vincent finished his story, his eyes wandered to Catherine's face. She had tears in her eyes but was smiling at him. His heart rejoiced at the sight.

"Good enough for a happy ending?" he teased with a twinkle in his eyes.

She took his hand and pressed a gentle kiss on its back. "It can always be better," she replied quietly, but her dazzling smile didn't fade. "But it will do... for now."

Vincent noticed the paleness had disappeared from Catherine's face, and her nose didn't resemble a clown's nose any longer. He felt her inner restlessness was gone, as well.

"I think you're on the mend, Catherine," he said, as an amused smile played on his lips.

"I've got the best cure for any illness, don't I?" she teased with raised eyebrows.

His deep chuckle echoed in the semi-darkness of the bedroom. He lifted himself from the floor and reached for the now empty cup on Catherine's bedside. With one look at her and a sweet smile, he turned on his heel.

"You're leaving?" Catherine asked, upset.

"Yes," he answered, looking back at her, and he paused for a moment before adding, "to refill your cup, my princess."

Her disappointment turned to joy and a beaming smile. She snuggled more into her covers and watched him disappear into the kitchen again.

"I'm glad you... I mean Vincent... didn't kill the dragon," she remarked when he returned with a steaming cup in his hands. "I've never imagined you as a dragon slayer."

Vincent smiled and passed the tea to her.

"And how have you imagined me, Catherine?" he asked, tilting his head when his natural curiosity got the better of him.

It took only seconds for her to come up with an answer. "More as a... dragon whisperer," she replied softly and lowered her eyes to take a sip from the hot drink in her hands.

The gentle look in his eyes was the only reply to her compliment. He sat on the bed next to her, watching her with his usual, quiet intensity.

"Vincent, I know that life is not a fairy tale," Catherine stated with a streak of melancholy on her face. "However... that doesn't mean that we couldn't add a bit of magic to it sometimes to make it happier, couldn't we?"

The hope in her bright eyes touched his heart, and he couldn't help but nod in agreement. "Yes, we surely could," he answered quietly, smiling.

She reached for his hand, craving closer physical contact with him, at least for a moment.

Vincent was dazed by his feelings for the woman on the bed. Suddenly he remembered something and reached for the inside pocket of his cloak.

"I almost forgot," he said, producing an old volume. "Classics and poetry are wonderful and soul-enriching, but I thought this might be a nice reading for a change... a little different kind of entertainment."

Catherine looked at the title on the worn out cover of the book in Vincent's hands.

"Grimms' Fairy Tales," she read and chuckled. "You never fail to surprise me, Vincent."

"Magic, Catherine, remember? Sometimes we all need a little bit of magic to make our life happier...



"And for us, this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them, it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures... had only been the cover and the title page: now at least they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

- C.S. Lewis: The Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle -





The Power of the Dream

by Barbara Anderson



*This story occurs not long after the events of <u>Song of Orpheus</u> as it appeared in airing order and was inspired by the wonderful graphic art of Judith Nolan and Lynette Parker that appears in this tale.



All our dreams can come true, if we have the courage to pursue them.



-Walt Disney

Vincent had come to the Whispering Gallery to be alone, something he had been doing a lot lately. There was a spot on the bridge, one of the 'magic places,' where he could listen to echoes from the world Above swirling in the wind. *It is her world*, he reminded himself... where the wealthy and the powerful rule. A world I know I can never be a part of. And yet, I can't help dreaming of being a part of her.

"Catherine," he whispered to the swirling wind.

He heard the halting footsteps well before anyone arrived at the mouth of the tunnel that opened into The Whispering Gallery. The sound of the aided footsteps was unique and betrayed the intruder's identity.

"Hello, Father," Vincent said without turning around as Jacob approached the bridge. "Is there something you need from me?"

Father stopped just short of the bridge and leaned on the rail post. He wasn't used to walking this far and his gammy hip was complaining loudly.

"Mary said I would find you here. She's worried about you. Mouse has informed her that you've been spending a lot of time here of late... alone. He's worried about you too."

There's no hiding from Mouse, Vincent thought wryly.

"And what about you?" he asked, still staring into the Abyss. "Are you worried about me as well?"

"Why... yes... my boy... I suppose I am. I assured Mary I would seek you out... and find out what's troubling you. I apologize for being unaware, I... I've been somewhat preoccupied of late."

"You've been grieving, Father. You have suffered a great loss. There is no need to apologize. It's only been a short time since Margaret's... passing."

Father was silent for a moment as the pain of losing the love of his life only a few short days after they were reunited washed over him.

"If something is troubling you, son, perhaps talking about it would help."



Vincent sighed. "It's Catherine..."

Catherine! Jacob thought indignantly. I might have known it had something to do with that woman again! He had to bite his tongue to keep from saying it out loud.

"She hasn't come Below since..." Vincent's voice trailed off. Speaking of it made the possibility too real... *Perhaps I have taken advantage of her friendship once*

too often... I fear I have asked too much of her... my last request for help put her in very real danger once again.

"Since she rescued me from prison," Father suggested. "She hasn't come Below since she reunited me with Margaret."

"No... not even to check on Ellie and Eric." Vincent sighed again and shook his head. "I can feel a growing distance between us... there is a shadow hanging over her heart... but she insists that all is well."

Well, Jacob thought, perhaps she has finally grown bored with Vincent. I certainly hope that is the case. But he knew that no good would come of saying it out loud. Vincent had made his feelings for her quite clear.

When Jacob didn't reply Vincent turned and looked up at his father. His empathic gift told him that Father knew something about it. "Did something happen when you were Above? Did something occur between you and Catherine?"

There was something in Jacob's silence that told Vincent his father knew something he was reluctant to share.

"Father," he urged. "If you know something... Please... tell me."

Father squinted. His expression was one of suspicion. "She hasn't told you of our exchange just before I returned Below?"

"No," Vincent replied, shaking his head. "Do you believe it was something significant enough to keep her away?"

Jacob stared off into the Abyss below them and cleared his throat loudly. You might as well tell him, you old fool, he chided himself. There is nothing to be gained by lying now.

"As I recall..." he said. "I thanked her politely for her... uhm... her assistance in securing my release and then I bid her goodbye."

Vincent was taken aback by the description his father was painting. "You thanked her politely? What does that mean?"

"It means that I was civil to the woman," Father replied defensively.

Vincent stood up and walked toward his father. Jacob backed up toward the mouth of the tunnel to give Vincent room to exit the bridge. Standing on solid ground he faced his father.

"What happened next, Father?" Vincent prompted. "That can't be all there was to it."

"No, no it wasn't," Father replied nervously. "But I'll have you know I was perfectly content to let sleeping dogs lie. It was Catherine who broached the subject. She called to me as I neared the bottom of the stairs at the subway station. When I turned to her, she assured me that she would never hurt you. Hmph! She even professed her love for you." The contempt in his voice was unmistakable.

"What was your reply?" Vincent asked, trying to keep his temper in check.

"I told her that... that she can only bring you unhappiness!" Jacob admitted sharply. "...because part of you is..."

"A part of me is what?" Vincent asked.

Jacob hesitated before he finally said, "... a man. I told her that part of you is a man." *There*, he thought, *it's out. I've said it*.

"Were you under the impression that she was unaware of that?" Vincent asked sarcastically. "Catherine knows perfectly well what I am, Father."

"Does she?" Jacob countered. "Are you quite sure of that?"

"Catherine put herself in grave danger," Vincent pointed out, his voice rising with each word. "...because *I* asked for her help. She gave it freely, without hesitation, and she was nearly murdered for her trouble! **How could you say such things to her after what she did for you... and for Margaret?"**

"Because it's true! You and I both know it! Do you think I couldn't see how miserable you were when she was with that ... that man..."

"Elliot Burch."

"Yes, Elliot Burch! And then when she accepted that job in Providence..." Father pointed out. "I saw how it tore you apart? ... you nearly died, Vincent! And she has the nerve to tell me she would never hurt you... when she already has!"

Vincent clenched his fists in an effort to control his temper. "This is none of your affair, Father! It's between Catherine and me!"

"It is my affair! Your relationship with this woman puts us all at risk! You must know that!" Father insisted. "And yet you stubbornly persist in this... this... flirtation... knowing the danger it poses for both of you!"

"Flirtation?" Vincent was incensed at the very idea the word implied. "Whatever is happening between Catherine and myself, Father... it is *NOT* a mere flirtation!

"Maybe for you it isn't..." Father countered. "...but for *her* it most assuredly *is!* You cannot convince me otherwise! Sooner or later, she will come to the

conclusion that the limits the two of you face simply *cannot* be overcome. Vincent, you **must** listen to reason. You are both dreaming of a life that can *never* be! This path can only lead to more pain... enough pain to destroy you... and everyone around you."

Vincent was silent.

It was clear to Jacob that his son was trying to control his anger. Father braced himself for more heated debate on the subject. But to his surprise, Vincent turned on his heel and stalked away.

"Vincent!" Father called after him. "Vincent, come back here. We are not finished with this discussion!"

But it was too late. Vincent was gone. Jacob let out an exasperated breath and began the slow walk back to the main tunnels.



By the time Vincent reached the portal beneath the park it was after 10pm. The days were short this time of year, and there was a definite chill in the air. He knew there would be few people, if any, wandering the park at such a late hour. After his discussion with Father, he needed the crisp, fall air to clear his head.

Exiting the tunnel, Vincent instinctively sought the shadows. Even though the park was virtually deserted, he knew he must be cautious at all times.

He searched his heart for Catherine. She isn't far from here, he concluded. Somewhere on the west side of the park... Lincoln Center, I think. She's not alone, he realized. Good, I want her to live her life. But she isn't enjoying herself, he concluded. She is pretending to enjoy herself, but her heart is heavy.

As he walked among the shadows of the trees, he replayed the argument with his father. I shouldn't have been so disrespectful, he thought with some remorse. But Father has no right to speak of Catherine the way he does. He does not know her. He does not understand how wrong he is about her. I must speak with her, he decided. I must speak with her tonight.



Vincent's moccasin shod feet landed noiselessly onto Catherine's balcony. The balcony as well as her apartment were dark. It was clear that she wasn't home.

That's all right, he decided. I'll wait until she returns. I will wait as long as it takes.

It was just after 1am when the lights in Catherine's apartment came on. Less than a minute later she opened the French doors and stepped onto the balcony. She moved to the edge and took a deep breath of the brisk November air as she took in the view.

"Catherine," Vincent said softly, not wishing to frighten her. He felt her spirits lift a little when she heard his voice. *That's encouraging*, he thought. *But she hasn't turned to greet me with open arms and her usual warmth*.

"Is there something I can help you with, Vincent?" she asked without turning around. "... something you need?" She hoped that there was. She'd come to realize that being able to help Vincent or those he loved was one way he would allow her to be in his life.

Vincent winced a little at her question. *Has she come to believe that the only reason I come here is to ask for her help?*

"No, Catherine, there is nothing I particularly need," *Except to be near you*, he thought. "It's just that I... I feel that I owe you an apology."

She turned and looked at him with a confused expression. "I can't think of a single reason why you should apologize," she replied.

"I have abused your friendship... I've taken advantage of your goodness...your willingness to help... and I have asked you to do things that have put you in harm's way on more than one occasion."

"You haven't taken advantage," she insisted. "And you certainly haven't 'put' me in harm's way. I haven't done a single thing I didn't want to do. You've saved my life on more than one occasion, Vincent. Anything I have done to help you or those you love, is small in comparison."

How can I tell you that it's you who have saved my life every day since the moment we met? he wondered.

"I didn't know we were keeping score," he managed to say. "If you are trying to repay me Catherine, you must know, you *owe* me nothing."

She turned away from him again. *So, he no longer wants help from me,* she thought. *I wonder what that means?*

"Your heart is troubled," he said, hoping she would tell him why.

I don't know why I've even tried to hide it from him, she thought. He can feel whatever I'm feeling.

"I still find it a little... disconcerting that you can feel what I'm feeling," she replied without giving him any indication of what was troubling her.

Vincent closed the gap between them and stood just behind her. "Father told me what he said to you, before he returned Below," he said softly.



She shook her head as she continued to look out at the sparkling city lights. "He believes that I can only bring you unhappiness. I don't want that, Vincent. I don't ever want to hurt you... but I fear... there is some truth in his words. I know I have already caused you pain... *and* unhappiness."

"Is that why you've been so distant these last few weeks?
"Yes"

"Why didn't you tell me what Father said to you? I thought we promised we would never withhold the truth from each other." *Even though I* **am** withholding things from you, he thought. Things I can never speak of... things that would surely frighten you and drive you away.

She rubbed her arms against the November chill. "I withheld the truth because I..." Catherine began. "...because I have no desire to cause of a rift between you and your father." She shook her head as she recalled the sting of Jacob's words. They had struck closer to the mark than she wanted to admit. "What he said... he said out of concern... out of *love* for you. He's trying to keep you safe... *from me*."

Vincent moved to stand beside her on the balcony's edge, careful to give her the space she seemed to need. "Bridget O'Donnell said that 'Sometimes we must leave our safe places and walk empty handed among our enemies," he said, quoting his favorite Irish author.

"I hope you don't think of me as your enemy," she replied.

He was silent for a moment as they both stared out at the lights of the city. "All my life I have been taught to fear strangers from your world... to think of them as enemies. But, no, I do not consider you, or Bridget among them."

"Bridgit O'Donnell," Catherine said softly, smiling at the memory of the remarkable woman they had met on Halloween night. "I think she, more than any other person we know, understands our struggle."

"Yes," Vincent replied. "I believe she does. She told me that she and Ian were from different worlds too. So, they tried to build a new world... one they could both live in together."

"It didn't end well for them," Catherine reminded him.

"No," he agreed. "Not a fairy tale ending to be sure."

Will there be a fairy tale ending for us? Catherine wondered. She didn't know how to respond, so she let Vincent's words drift into the night air beyond the soft light of the balcony.

When Catherine didn't speak, Vincent continued. "And yet Bridget wrote that even though the price of their love had been high, she would pay it willingly to the end of her days. That she would change nothing... regret nothing."

"She has great courage," Catherine observed, silently wondering if she had that kind of courage.

They both fell silent for several moments.

"You look beautiful tonight," he observed, trying to breach the widening gulf between them.

Catherine huffed softly. "Yes... I do, don't I?" she agreed. There was no hint of conceit in her voice, only a touch of melancholy. "It's so strange... how I can slip so easily back into my old skin, and no one seems to notice that I'm... that I'm not *her* anymore"

"What do you mean?" he gently prodded.

She thought for a moment, wondering how to begin. "When I was a little girl," she finally said. "... I had a winter coat that I dearly loved. It went down past my knees and was made of soft gray cashmere and lined with satin. It was trimmed with soft white rabbit fur that tickled my face when the hood was pulled up to keep out the cold. It was the most beautiful coat I'd ever seen. It was wonderfully warm on snowy days. Whenever I wore it, I felt like a princess." She paused for a moment and said, "In a way... I suppose I was. I was so sad when spring arrived,

and my mother put it away with my other winter clothes. She assured me that it would be safely stored and ready for me to wear when winter came around again.

"The next fall, I was so excited when the weather began to turn cold. Mother brought down the box of winter clothes, I pulled the coat from the box and put it on... only to discover that it no longer fit. I had to hunch my shoulders to even get it on and I could no longer button up the front. I'd had a growing spurt over the summer and my arms stuck out too far from the sleeves. I looked ridiculous... and I was devastated."

Vincent listened, enthralled by the picture she painted of the child she once was.

Catherine smiled wistfully, "Daddy promised he would get me a new coat just as lovely... and he did. But it wasn't the same. There was something magical about *that coat*. I've never had another coat that made me feel like that one did."

"It's a bittersweet memory," Vincent said. "What made you think of it?"

"I went to the opera tonight with some old friends," she said, seeming to change the subject completely.

"What opera was it?" he asked.

"Rigoletto," she said, simply.

"Did you like it?" he asked, wondering how it would be to go to the opera with Catherine by his side. He felt a stab of jealousy toward the unknown man who had been the recipient of that privilege.

"It was lovely," she said. "They served champagne and caviar. Afterward we went out for a late lobster dinner. It was just like old times... almost."

"Almost," he repeated. "What was different?"

"Me..." She paused, unsure of how to put it into words. "I was different," she finally said. "I slipped into this dress and made myself beautiful... and then I met my friends as I have many times before... but I didn't fit..."

Vincent looked admiringly at the dress she was wearing. He'd never seen her look more beautiful. She was almost angelic. The dress sparkled and appeared to fit her perfectly, clinging to every alluring, feminine curve of her body and draping lightly down her legs giving the illusion that she was floating weightlessly just above the floor.

"It appears to fit quite well to me," he said, feeling himself blush at the feelings of hunger her image invoked in him. For the first time since she stepped onto the balcony, he was thankful she wasn't looking at him.

Catherine nodded. "Yes, the dress fits... but I don't."

"I'm not sure I understand," Vincent said, attempting to concentrate on her words and not the vision of beauty standing before him.

"It's like that cashmere coat I had as a child..." she explained. "I don't fit into that life anymore. I'm changed, I'm a different person. I was surrounded by my old friends. We were drinking wine, and laughing, and talking incessantly about trivial, meaningless things, just like we always have. I used to enjoy it so... but tonight... the entire evening I felt... as if I was surrounded by absurd, two-dimensional characters from an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel. None of them seemed to even notice that I..." She paused again and sighed heavily.

"What, Catherine... what is it they didn't notice?"

"... that I am *not her* anymore... that shallow, conceited, selfish, self-absorbed woman I used to be. I'm not *that* Cathy anymore... and none of them noticed."

"I'm not sure what you are trying to tell me," he admitted.

Finally turning to face him she looked at him earnestly. "Father is trying to protect you, Vincent... from the woman I *used* to be... someone who would amuse herself by toying with your emotions and then carelessly leave you with a broken heart when I got bored. I'm trying to tell you... I'm not *that* Cathy anymore. I hope you know I would never intentionally hurt you."

"Yes, Catherine, I do know that." Then Vincent shook his head. "I find it hard to believe you were *ever* like the woman you've described. I can't imagine you would ever be that cruel."

"Maybe I wasn't as bad as *that* ..." she conceded. "...but I *have* hurt you, Vincent. I know I've caused you great pain. Perhaps Father isn't so very far off the mark after all. Please don't be angry with him. He's trying to protect you the same way my father is trying to protect me every time he tries to convince me come back to Chandler and Coolidge."

"But we are not children, Catherine," he pointed out. "We cannot allow them to dictate the choices we make."

"I agree. This dream we share... we cannot allow anyone to take it from us. The choices we make must be ours and ours alone."

"Father believes this dream... has the power to destroy me," Vincent told her. "...and possibly even those around me."

"What do you believe?" Catherine asked earnestly as she held her breath.

He looked longingly at the woman who had captured his heart. *What I believe* and what I want to believe are very different things, he thought.

He sighed heavily before giving her an answer. "Dreams can be powerful, Catherine. Dreams can lead men to achieve great things... sometimes even great and terrible things. I do not know if this dream has the power to destroy me... What I do know is... when I thought it was ending... I felt great pain."

"When I was dating Elliot?" she offered. "When I thought I might be falling in love with him?"

"Yes... and then when..."

"When I was going to Providence?"

"Yes," he said simply. "The pain was... overwhelming." Even the memory of it still took his breath away.

"I'm so sorry, Vincent," she said, with deep regret. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I was—" Catherine was close to tears.

Vincent could feel her deep remorse and closed the gap between them, taking her in his arms.

Catherine accepted his embrace gladly and buried her face in his chest.

"Catherine," he whispered. "There is no need to apologize. *I* was the one who encouraged you to find someone else to be a part of. I want that for you... *truly I do*. You were only doing what I asked you to do. And if you recall, it was also *me* who insisted you go to Providence to fulfil your destiny."

Lifting her head so that she could look into his eyes, she said, "I know now... that I *can't* do those things. I know you've said you want me to find someone else to be a part of... that you want me to fulfill my destiny. Please don't ask me again to date other men or accept a job in another city. I *can't* do it, Vincent... I *won't* do it."

"But Catherine, you must live the life you were meant to live. You must be open to opportunities when they arise."

"Vincent, do you or do you not always encourage me to follow my heart?"

"Well... yes," he answered hesitantly. He sensed he was about to fall into a trap... and he was.

"You don't seem to understand," she explained. "...that my heart keeps leading me back to... back to you."

She buried her face in his chest once again, and they stood there embracing each other for several minutes.

At length, Vincent sighed heavily and kissed the top of Catherine's head. "Holding you like this, Catherine, is like a dream come true. You have made me happier

than I ever imagined possible... for someone like me. But one day we *will* have to wake from this dream and return to our separate lives and our separate destinies, whatever they may be."

"No! I don't want that," Catherine exclaimed as she wrenched herself from his arms. "Vincent... *this connection*, this Bond we share... it's *more* than just a dream... it's the most genuine thing I've ever known. I've *never* been happier or felt more... complete than I have since I've known you. That *has* to mean something... doesn't it?"

"Catherine, we both know that this dream can never be more than what it is... a dream of a life that just isn't possible for me... for us."

"I don't know that." Catherine shook her head stubbornly. "I won't accept that."

"But Catherine—"

"Vincent!" she interrupted. She couldn't bear to hear him say it again. Looking into his eyes, she continued, "Earlier you said that dreams are powerful things."

"Yes... I did,"

"Will you listen... if I tell you how powerful this dream has been in my life?" she pleaded.

"Tell me, Catherine." He acquiesced, doubting that she could say anything to change his mind.

Catherine took him by the hands and led him to the corner of the balcony. "Come sit with me," she beckoned as she sat on the brick ledge. "Please."

Vincent sat down, recalling the first time he had come to Catherine's balcony and sat on these very same bricks. *She welcomed me*, he recalled, *with open arms and an open heart*. The sweetness of that memory washed over him. "Tell me, Catherine," he urged again. "Tell me about the power of this dream."

Sitting there facing him, Catherine smiled a little, but there was a sadness in her eyes that pulled at Vincent's heart. She held his hands in hers and asked, "Do you remember the night you found me in the park after I... after what hap—"

"Of course, I remember. How could I ever forget?" *How could I ever forget the night my life changed forever?* he wondered.

"Your voice was the first thing I heard when I woke up. I was injured and so terribly frightened... and you told me I was safe. Somehow, I knew it was true. I felt almost as if I knew you from somewhere before.

"That was the beginning of the dream... for me, anyway. For those ten days, whenever I was in pain, or afraid, or worried, the sound of your voice guided me

through it. When I couldn't sleep, you read to me. Vincent, your voice... your beautiful voice was the only light I had in that darkness."



Vincent could only look at her in wonder. *How is it possible?* he wondered. *That I was her light when all that time I was basking in her light?*

"Even after I returned Above," she continued. "...and I thought I would never see you again... it was the dream of you that gave me the courage to heal."

"What do you mean?" Vincent asked.

"When I would wake from the nightmares, I could hear your voice telling me I was safe. When I was afraid to go out into the world again, I could hear you telling me that I was strong enough to overcome what happened to me... that what happened would make me stronger. It was the dream *of you*, that gave me the confidence to leave my father's practice and apply for the job at the District Attorney's office where I'm actually making a difference in the world... because of *you*, Vincent... and the power of *this* dream. It's *that* powerful! Don't you see? I'm a different person than I was... a *better* person... because of *this* dream... because of *you*."

"But Catherine," he replied. "I have felt your pain. I know that this dream we share has made you unhappy. I feel it... even now."

She nodded. "Yes... it's true. There is no point in trying to hide it from you, is there? There *is* a part of me that *is* unhappy."

"Can you tell me why?"

She looked away staring again into the darkness. "I find it... difficult... lying to my father... I've never kept so much hidden from him before... but I know I must. There is a growing distance between us. Yet I know there is no other way."

"Is that the only cause of your unhappiness?" he asked, sensing there was a deeper reason.

"This dream of ours... this connection we share... it's a miraculous gift. I feel we owe it to the universe or wherever this gift came from... to see it through... wherever it may take us... At the same time... everything seems so... impossible. There is so much against us. You must live in your world... and I must live in mine. Sometimes it feels... so hopeless... as if I'm swimming against a great current. Sometimes I want to quit fighting, but I feel that if I stop... I'll drown."

"And yet, you persist... you wish to continue holding onto this dream in spite of the pain?"

She squeezed his hands tighter and drew a little closer to him. "The joy of having you in my life, Vincent, *far* outweighs the pain. You *must* believe that. I've never been happier in my life than I am right now."

How can this be true? he wondered. That a woman as wonderful as Catherine could feel this way about me? But he couldn't deny it. He sensed the sincerity of her words, and the depth of her love. She literally glowed with it. He lowered his face and kissed her delicate hands.

"What are we to do, Catherine?" he asked.

She pressed her lips to his hands and looked into his sapphire blue eyes. "A wise man once told me, 'The only thing we can do, we'll endure the pain and savour every moment of the joy."

Vincent smiled, ruefully. "Ahhh... now you are using my own words against me," he said.

Catherine grinned sheepishly. "Well, I am a lawyer, after all."

Vincent thought for a moment before speaking. "If we are to continue on this path, Catherine, we must promise each other one thing."

"Anything," she replied eagerly. *I'll do whatever it takes to keep you in my life,* she thought.

"We must promise each other... that if the pain ever becomes too great for either of us to endure, that we will let it end. We will both agree to wake up from the dream and return to our lives."

They both leaned into each other so that their foreheads touched.

"I promise," she whispered, hoping against hope that that time would never come.

"I promise," he replied, as he opened his heart to the realm of hope.



After leaving Catherine, Vincent walked the park, pondering all that had transpired between them, and the promise they had made to each other. He didn't return to the Tunnels until nearly four in the morning. Thankful that his world, including his father, was slumbering, he quietly made his way to his chamber without being accosted by anyone. Sleep came quickly as he slipped gratefully into bed.

Later that morning as he was dressing for the day, Father entered his chamber.

"Vincent, we need to finish the discussion we began yesterday. This is something that must be resolved bef—"

"I have a class, Father" Vincent said impatiently. "The children will begin arriving at any moment."

"No, you don't," Father informed him. "I have canceled your class for this morning,"

Vincent looked up from lacing his vest. "You... cancelled... my class?"

"Yes, I cancelled your class," he repeated. "It's imperative that we settle this matter of Catherine Chandler once and for all. So, I have sent the boys to William for a cooking lesson, and I have sent the girls to Rebecca for a candle making lesson."

Vincent finished lacing his vest. "You shouldn't have done that, Father. Catherine and I spoke last night, and the matter has been settled."

Jacob breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, that's good to hear. I'm glad you have come to your senses and put this impossible dream behind you. I take it you told her you would no longer be going Above to see her?"

"I'm sorry, Father, you don't understand. Catherine and I have decided to continue seeing each other. I also intend to invite her to come Below anytime she wishes."

"What?" Father demanded angrily. "You can't do that without my approval! The council should be informed and vote on this matter, at the very least."

"No, Father! This matter is between Catherine and me! No one else may decide for us... not even you... and certainly *not* the council!"

Jacob was appalled. "Why are you being so obstinate? Do you realize that you could receive the silence for this? You could even be banished... for continuing to bring a stranger down here and putting us all in danger!"

"She is NOT a stranger! You will not call her that! If it wasn't for Catherine, you might be spending the rest of your life in prison! You even went to her yourself for help when I was missing! And this is the thanks she gets from you?"

Father stubbornly stood his ground. "This has nothing to do with gratitude, Vincent. This is about the danger you are in... we are all in... if you continue to pursue this woman when you know it can lead only to disaster."

"I am no longer a child, Father. This is a choice that Catherine and I must make together. It's **our** choice..." he said slapping his chest. "...and no one else's!"

Father sat down in the large chair beside Vincent's bed, raking a hand through his hair. He was exhausted from worry, and tired of fighting. Looking up at his son, he said, "I don't understand what would make you risk everything just to be with her? What does *this* woman have to offer you, Vincent?"

Vincent sat back down on the edge of his bed attempted to calm himself. "Catherine... has given me *a dream*, Father," he said softly, sounding as if he still couldn't believe it. "She has seen me... and *all* that I am. And *still*, she has offered me a dream more beautiful than anything I have ever imagined. It's the best dream I have *ever* known."

"And if this dream destroys you, what then?"

Vincent nodded. "It may one day have the power to destroy me... I don't know. What I do know is that it has already had the power to *rescue* me... from a darkness I have sometimes feared would consume me."

"How... What do you mean?"

"There are things I must tell you, Father... things *I need* you to understand. I'm asking you to listen... to hear me out."

Father settled himself and gave Vincent his full attention. "I'm listening," he said reluctantly.

Vincent took a deep breath and began. "You know... better than anyone the struggle I have always had... my struggle with the darkness within me."

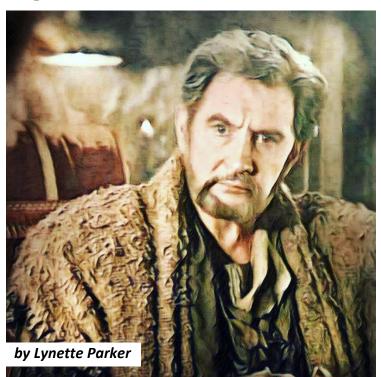
Father nodded. It was something they rarely spoke of, but it was something he was always aware of.

"There are things..." Vincent said. "Things that I have kept hidden from you... things I have kept hidden from everyone... things I didn't want to burden you with."

Jacob leaned forward. "What things?" he asked, with a sense of foreboding.

"In the past few years... my struggle with the darkness has become, at times, almost unbearable... there have been times when the darkness seemed to be pulling me in beyond my ability to resist." Vincent could feel that merely speaking the words drew the darkness closer.

"Vincent, you should have told me," Jacob replied, with obvious concern for his adopted son.



"Why?" Vincent asked. "So that you could worry even more than you already do?" Vincent shook his head. "No, you carry enough weight on your shoulders as it is. I did not wish to add more, especially when there was nothing you could do to help."

Jacob opened his mouth to disagree, but Vincent cut him off.

"The night I found Catherine, beaten and bleeding... near death... was one of the darkest nights of my life. I had resigned myself to the inevitable end of

my struggle... the end of... my life."

Jacob was shocked. "Good Heaven's, Vincent—"

Vincent continued as if he didn't hear Father's voice.

"...I could feel the Abyss pulling me in... and I was so tired of fighting... I knew the end was near... and then I found her... I found Catherine... and brought her here."

"I had no idea it was that bad, Vincent. I... I..."

"In the days I nursed her here in this chamber, I began to realize that it wasn't me who saved Catherine at all... It was Catherine who was saving me."

"I don't understand," Father said. "How was she saving you?'

"Even as she lay here... broken and frightened... after all she had endured... she trusted me, Father... from the very first moment. Can you imagine how that felt to me? During those days she talked to me... she opened her heart to me. She made me feel, for the first time in my life, what it was like to be an ordinary man. Because she was blinded by the bandages, that is what I was to her. Do you know what she told me last night?"

Jacob shook his head. "No, son... what did she tell you?"

"She said that during those days, *I* was a light in *her* darkness. Can you imagine?" There was a look of wonder on Vincent's face as he spoke. "*Me...* someone who has spent my entire life in the shadows... sheltered by the darkness... *I* was her light in the darkness."

"I'm not really surprised. After all, you are an inspiration to many who live here, Vincent."

Vincent shook his head. "It's not the same, Father. They know me... they have grown up with me... but Catherine... she is from the world Above... a topsider... and from the very first moment... she trusted me... even after all she had been through. And then after... when she saw me... and what I am... she was frightened for a moment... but her trust in me never wavered."

Father shook his head. "That must be a wonderful feeling, Vincent. But is it reason enough to continue with this... this friendship? To continue taking these risks?"

"There is more. You must listen, Father. I must make you understand."

Father sat back again, even though he doubted there was anything Vincent could say to change his mind about the situation.

"You blame Catherine for causing me pain... but I was the one who encouraged Catherine to find someone... someone other than myself... to be a part of. She began dating Elliot Birch because of me. And when I felt her beginning to fall in love with him... I told her not to fight it, even though I was in great pain. I could feel my heart dying as she grew closer to him."

"Yes, I remember," Father said.

"When Mitch shot her, I felt it again, even more keenly. When I left her on the steps of the hospital, I knew then that if she died... I would die too."

Jacob was gripped by fear for his son. Can this really be true? he wondered.

"Then after she was offered the job in Providence... I knew, without a doubt, that it *was* true. She came to me, and I told her she must take the job... she must fulfil her destiny. Catherine only accepted the job because I insisted upon it. By the time she found me at the university, in that cage, I was very near death. If she had gone to Providence as I asked her to... I know I would have died."

Father shook his head. "I... I'm sorry, Vincent. I was ignorant of the true circumstances. I only knew that you were in great pain, and I assumed it was *her* doing. I have terribly misjudged the situation... I have misjudged her."

"So, you see, Father... this Bond... this dream we share... is *that* powerful. My life depends upon it. Catherine holds my life in her hands."

"Have you told her this, Vincent?" Father asked with a furrowed brow. "How much does she know?"

"She knows nothing," Vincent replied, shaking his head. "How can I tell her? What could I tell her that would not frighten her? I would have to tell her everything. It's too great a burden for me to ask her to carry."

"But if this is all true, Vincent... if she truly does hold your life in her hands, shouldn't she know?"

"**No!**" Vincent stood and began pacing back and forth. "If I told her, it would only bind her to me more than she already is. Catherine *must* be free to pursue her own destiny, to live her own life. I won't rob her of that."

"Even if it means you would lose yours?"

Vincent sat back down on the edge of the bed. "I feel as if I'm walking a tight rope, Father. I know this dream... can *never* be. And yet, I know it is the only thing keeping me alive. Catherine has already brought me more happiness than I ever imagined possible. She cannot know that my life is hanging by the dream she has so generously given me. I cannot in good conscience ask her to carry that burden. But I must ask you, Father, to stop trying to drive her from my life. *I need* her... and after all she has done for me... for us... she deserves better than that."

"Yes," Father replied humbly trying to digest all that Vincent had told him. "Now that I understand the situation... more fully, I promise, I will welcome her with open arms."

He stood as if to leave. "I'm frightened for you, Vincent.," he confessed. "I'm frightened for you both."

Vincent stood and put his hand on Jacob's shoulder. "So am I, Father... so am I."



Vincent sat alone in the Whispering Gallery, listening to echoes from the world Above. *It is her world*, he reminded himself... where the wealthy and the powerful rule. He searched his heart for her presence. There she is, he thought to himself, she is working, and her heart is at peace.

"Catherine," he whispered, adding his voice to countless others in the swirling wind. "I may never be able to be a part of your world. But I am forever grateful that you want me to be a part of you. Wherever you go, I am with you."



Many, many thanks to Judith Nolan and Michaela Buzsaki Struchova for creating the following amazing music videos to complement this story.

TunnelsOfTheSouth **The Power of the Dream** *by Celine Dion* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqTggx58mdc

MICHAELa1979MJ **The Power of the Dream** *by Celine Dion* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WuLZmHO1ylc





Catherine by Linda Stauffer



by Mel



Season Three and Beyond



In Season 3 and Beyond the Dream Keepers are limited only by the boundaries their own imaginations. It's a special section in the zine that acknowledges the fact that season 3 actually happened. But not necessarily the way we saw it.

Season 3 and Beyond promotes both of the scenarios that Catherine died tragically and that Catherine miraculously did not die.

This is a place of endless potential, where anything is possible for all of those who dare to dream of a "Happy Life" for Vincent & Jacob, for Vincent & Diana, and of course, for Vincent & Catherine.



New Recipes

by Mel





"Sounds like someone's hungry," William said. "When's the last time you ate?" Diana laid a hand over her stomach to quiet its grumblings. "Coffee this morning."

"With all those cases, you work on an empty stomach?" William asked.

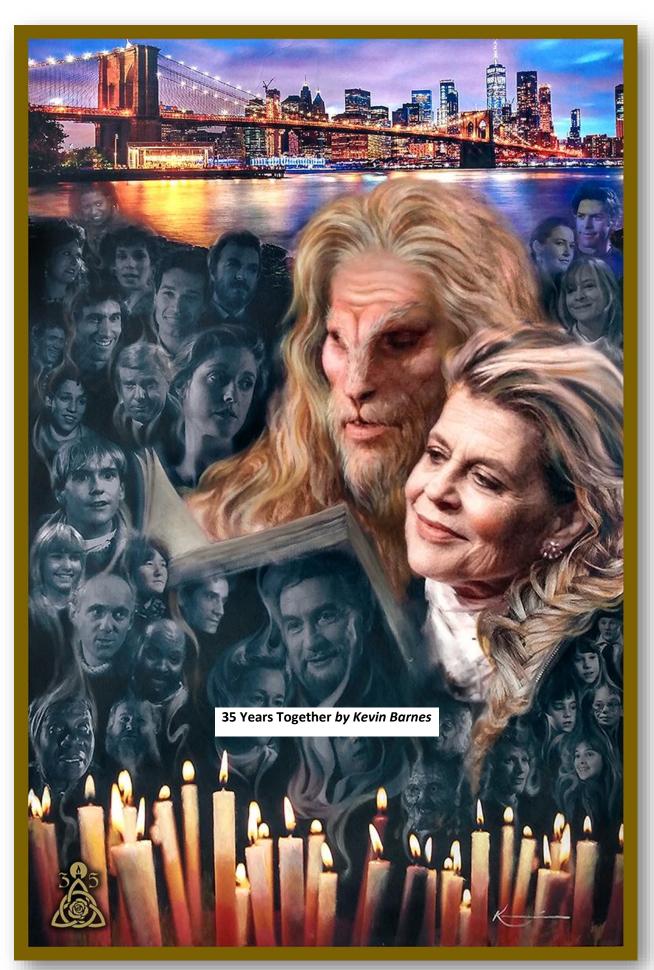
"I'm not much of a cook. Just ask my sister."

William stood and held out his hand. "Well time to fix that. Come on I have a stew to make and you're helping."

Diana shook her head. "You don't want-"

"Yes, I do. Follow me, the kitchen is this way. Vincent should be back soon with some of the ingredients."





Kevin Barnes created this breathtaking work of art specifically for the 35th Anniversary of Beauty and the Beast Convention, that was held in Wichita, Kansas in July of 2022.

Here are a few of Kevin Barnes thoughts regarding this gorgeous painting:

Dearest Tunnel Family,

I am absolutely humbled and overwhelmed by the outpouring of love and kind words that this special piece of art has received...

...While I will not be offering prints or reproductions of this piece, I would like to share this image online for all of you to enjoy as you please. Feel free to share it with any who might appreciate it, to post it in online galleries and fan groups, or even make your own print of it or put it on a t-shirt for yourself... it truly belongs to the global Tunnel Community now.

The Beauty and the Beast family extends beyond conventions, literally and figuratively, and not all are able to travel, to gather physically and share hugs and laughter and light candles with one another. Part of the beauty of the tunnel community was its willingness to share, to reach out to the alone, to the outliers who have no one to hug or hold close. It is in this spirit that I have given permission for my work to be shared online, with whomever might find some light or comfort or joy in its expression of a community that knows no boundaries but knows how to love one another without limits.

Grace and peace to you all.

Kevin

~~~

We here at Treasure Chambers would like to thank Kevin Barnes not only for sharing this painting with fandom at large, but for so generously sharing his incredible talent and other works of art with this fandom over the years.

The following story, **When the Painting Sings**, *by Judith Nolan*, was inspired by Kevin's latest work of art. If you would like to read more stories inspired by this painting, you will find them on Treasure Chambers at the following link: <a href="https://treasurechambers.com/2022/35th2022Sept25.html">https://treasurechambers.com/2022/35th2022Sept25.html</a>

This is a link to Kevins gallery on Treasure Chambers.

<a href="https://www.treasurechambers.com/ArtGallery/FanArtists/KevinBarnes/KevinB

This is a link to Kevin Barnes' website for more of his brilliant artwork <a href="https://fineartamerica.com/profiles/7-kevin-barnes">https://fineartamerica.com/profiles/7-kevin-barnes</a>

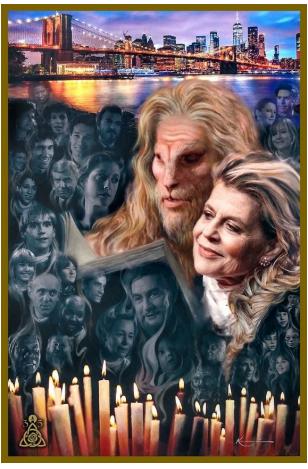




# "Uhen The Painting Sings..."

by Judith Nolan





"The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams..."

### Eleanor Roosevelt



It was after midnight and Vincent's chamber was illuminated by extra candles, holding back the familiar darkness that always hovered in the small alcoves and corners. The cheery brazier flickered and crackled, dispelling the perpetual chill of the underground world.

Catherine and Vincent stood in the centre of the room. They'd decided to remain Below for the night, rather than return Above to their brownstone. None of their four grown children were at home this weekend, so they had no pressing parental obligations.

Often of late they'd found they preferred the quiet solitude of the Tunnel world to the hustle and bustle of their city life. It was a soft sweet addiction to their memories of the past.

They stood side-by-side, regarding Kristopher Gentian's latest gift with wondering eyes. Vincent put his arm around his wife's shoulders, drawing her closer to him. He pressed a kiss into her hair, as she rested her cheek against his shoulder.

He shook his head. "It's almost as if we've stepped back thirty-five years. I remember well that night when you brought down Kristopher's first painting of us," he mused, staring at the large painted canvas resting on the wooden easel before them.

"I found this new one on our balcony when I got up this morning," Catherine mused. "You'd already come Below. I stepped out to enjoy the air and my morning coffee and there it was, wrapped up in old brown paper and tied with bits of ragged string, just like all the others he has left for me to sell on his behalf over the years."

She laughed softly. "He's very careful to only come out at night when the weather is fine and moonless. He would hate to find his precious work damaged by moisture. Yet I've never seen him, so I have no idea how he's really doing these days."

She drew a ragged breath, releasing it slowly. "I have so many unanswered questions. Is he still youthful and impossible to pin down as either living or dead? Does he still wear that awful Mets cap and the rumpled clothing? Does he remember to eat properly?"

She waved a hand in frustration. "I feel this crazy need to mother him. But he won't permit it. All I'm allowed to see are the paintings and the notes he leaves for me from time to time. I have no idea where he's living now."

"Kristopher has always been Kristopher." Her husband nodded. "He is unique and uniquely talented. He could be a ghost or a man and will never admit to being either of those things. Being labelled would only cramp his style."



"Yes, that's Kristopher all right." Catherine shook her head in bemusement.

"But this..." She frowned at the painting. "I knew as soon as I saw my own name on the tag that it would be something very special. He wrote that it was a belated Winterfest present."

She chuckled. "It's only eight months late."

"And yet it is special and very Kristopher," Vincent agreed. "Exhibitions at the Met, record high prices paid for his mysterious works... but he remains the same... simply Kristopher."

He indicated the bottom right-hand corner of the painting where there was a stylised signature. "As he signs all his paintings with a simple K and a line before he moves on to create his next masterpiece."

"That first one he painted of us was breathtaking enough, but I think he's truly excelled himself this time. He had the sketch he did of me at the coffee shop to work from back then..." Catherine mused. "But we guessed he must have painted

you from memory, after seeing you that night at the drainage tunnel when I gave you his first edition of Tennyson..."

She cast a quick look around the chamber. "He was spying on us then. Has he been spying on us all these years... so he can again capture both of us so well? His odd ability to appear and disappear at will has always been one of his more aggravating qualities."

"Ah, but a true magician never reveals how he accomplishes his tricks." Vincent chuckled. "All we can do is watch the show with open minds and applaud at the end. I applaud our magic artist now. I do not think he has painted anything finer."

"Yes..." Catherine shrugged as she looked back at the painting. "This is an incredible and astonishing work, isn't it?"

"It is..." Vincent agreed slowly. "You could say... even magical..."

Catherine turned to smile up at him. "Now you're sounding like Kristopher again. He does that all the time... casts a spell over us and then leaves. The money he makes from selling his paintings is substantial and yet all he wants to buy are more paints and canvas. He leaves the administration of his estate to me. I do worry about him sometimes. I doubt he spends enough money on food."

Vincent raised his eyebrows at her. "Oh, I have the feeling he does well enough. He simply doesn't wish to spoil the well-built illusion of himself being the starving artist who died tragically for his work."

He looked back to the painting. He reached out gently to touch the edge. His lips curved into an enigmatic half-smile. "I thought so..."

Catherine noticed. "And you're smiling again. Just like last time. What have you found now?"

Vincent shrugged. "Kristopher works only in oils."

"Yes, he does," Catherine agreed. "And lots of it. In the notes he leaves for me to find, he demands I buy him a great number of new supplies at least once a month. He doesn't understand if a certain cherished colour is out of stock. Since Mr. Smythe died and the 777 bookshop is no more, Kristopher has turned to me for help and ready access to his money. He's lucky I don't charge him for my services."

She shrugged. "I'm beginning to think poor Mr. Smythe was something of a saint because of what he must have put up with all those years when Kristopher lived above the shop."

"Or a very canny businessman who knew when he was onto a good thing," Vincent replied. "He never struck me as someone easily duped by Kristopher's more eccentric tricks. He perpetuated the illusion around Kristopher's supposed demise in order to become his agent. They had a good deal going for many years."

"Maybe..." Catherine smiled, not grudging their ghostly artist his due. "But it gives me certain leverage to make sure Kristopher's is at least trying to take care of himself. I think this painting is his idea of payment in full."

"Yes. But as we already know, oils take months to dry completely, Catherine, sometimes even years." Vincent sighed. "This canvas holds no moisture at all. I can only wonder about how he does it, time after time... making his work seem as if it's been stored for years in that old warehouse of his and not simply painted last week in a loft somewhere in Soho. I often think that he—"

"Oh, no..." Catherine put a finger across his lips to silence him. "Don't say it. You know how Kristopher likes to play with us for his own amusement. I'm sure he's laughing at us, right now... wherever he is."

She recalled Mr. Smythe's words to her, first uttered in the 777 bookshop all those years ago. *'The world takes away our certainties. And our beauties...'* She studied the incredible painting.

"And sometimes... just sometimes, it gives them back to us," she whispered.

She smiled as she leaned back against her love, the most beautiful, most certain thing she knew. Vincent tightened his arm around her before resting his cheek against her hair. Then they lost themselves in the painting.

It was a scene with their own smiling faces framed in the centre of the work, reading a book together. Vincent with his long mane frosted with silver threads among the gold and sporting the fuller beard he now wore. He looked as strong and desirable as always.

Catherine studied her own painted image. Her hair was simply dressed and creamy-white, long and curling around her neck in the style she favoured. The lines on her face had been drawn there by years of love and laughter. She knew she would not change a single one nor begrudge the march of time.

The lobes of her ears were adorned with her favourite pair of pearl earrings... a fact that had not escaped her attention. They had been a fortieth birthday gift from her loving husband.

She touched the tip of her finger to them now. She was wearing them tonight. Kristopher must have closely observed her at some point to know what she liked to wear. Perhaps he'd passed her one day in the street, secure in his anonymity. She could well imagine his cheeky audacity to do such a thing.

Above their heads on the canvas ran a nightscape scene of the Brooklyn Bridge, spanning the painting from side to side in an iconic view Catherine remembered well. Across the bottom stood a haphazard line of Winterfest candles, thirty-five in total. One for each year of their lives now lived together in both the Tunnels and Above.

But the final richness of the work was in the many incredibly detailed faces that surrounded and framed them. All were unique, identifiable and loved. Pictured were the children who had grown and left the Tunnels and those who remained to raise their own children in the hidden world far below the city streets.

There were the Tunnel dwellers and those from Above who had since passed from this mortal plane. There were so many happy faces.

And then there was Kristopher, smiling out at them with mischievous intent from among the others... exactly as Catherine remembered him all those years ago... charming and boyish and totally impossible to pin down or be made to stand still long enough for a rational conversation.

"I love these most of all..." Catherine reached out one finger to touch lightly on the image of her beloved father, who had died only recently after a long and eventful life. "There are so many. Kristopher has captured them all so beautifully. I feel they could almost speak to us if we listened hard enough."

She caressed her father's painted cheek lovingly. "Hi, Dad... I love you..."

"Yes..." Vincent touched a fingernail to the smiling image that belonged to his own father, carefully detailed on the cover of the book Vincent was reading to his wife. "I know Father will love this. We'll show it to him in the morning after breakfast."

The old man was approaching his one-hundredth birthday. But while he'd been forced by advancing age to leave the mundane day-to-day running of the Tunnel

world to his sons and grandsons, he insisted on being kept informed of all the goings on in his world, no matter how small or insignificant.

"Father..." Vincent shook his head. His stubborn parent loved to think he was still in charge and they indulged his whim because it kept his mind from dwelling on how little time he may have left.

Jacob still enjoyed playing chess, even though his eyesight was failing him and he needed help to make his desired moves. It showed the steel in him, bred deep into his bones by the early years of hardship spent Below.

Still, he refused to give in and be beaten by time. Not yet, not when there was still so much left to do...

"Do not go gentle into that good night. Old age should burn and rave at close of day. **Rage**, **rage against** the **dying** of the **light**..." Vincent quoted his father's favourite Dylan Thomas poem softly.

"Yes..." Catherine nodded, wiping a tear from her cheek. "Be well, Dad. Be well and happy, wherever you are..." she whispered to her father's image, before putting up one hand to cup and stroke her fingers over her husband's bearded chin. "I love you so much... more than the spoken word can ever say..."

"As I love you..." Vincent replied. "Always and forever..."

He nuzzled his lips against the side of her neck. "Hey, lady," he whispered. "I don't have anywhere else I would rather be right now. Do you want to fool around for a bit?"

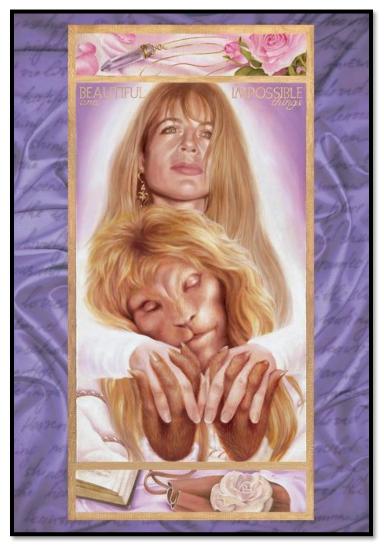
Catherine laughed happily as she turned to him, raising her lips to within a breath of his. "I thought you would never ask..."

As they kissed, they relished the idea that they truly had nowhere else to be tonight. Moving together toward the wide, soft bed, Catherine fancied she could hear Kristopher softly quoting again the same Oscar Wilde poem from their meeting in the park all those years ago...

'We shall lay our hands upon the basilisk, and see the jewel in the toad's head. Champing his gilded oats, the hippogriff will stand in our stalls, and over our heads will float the blue bird, singing of beautiful and impossible things. Of things that are lovely and that never happen. Of things that are not and that should be...'

"Everything is as it should be..." she whispered to the clustering shadows and smiled as she sank down among the pillows of the bed, surrendering fully to her husband's loving embrace. "And I would not change one single thing..."





Beautiful and Impossible Things by Kevin Barnes



"If you want to be happy, do not dwell in the past, do not worry about the future, focus on living fully in the present..."

Roy T. Bennett





by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



# Sharing The Magic

Hi Michaela, I was wondering if you could tell me what program or programs you use to create your wonderful pictures, and how they come together.

**Michaela:** I use a program called GIMP 2, version 8.20, to create my digital art. You can download GIMP online for free. I have been using it since January 2021 and it's been a great learning process. At first, Judith, who provided me with the programme, introduced me to the basics (and some non-basics), but then I started exploring myself since I wanted to use different ways of creating several effects with images. I explore the most on YouTube, watching various tutorials, and some things I've learned myself while trying out different things in GIMP itself. And I'm still learning new things every day.

When I started, I usually blended/combined two pictures at most and added some effect to it - all done within a few minutes. After almost two years of using it, I'm at the stage where much of my digital artwork consists of anything from 5-9 different layers combined together, spending up to even a few hours on it until it's finished. I think the most challenging part for me was learning to cut out parts of images of various shapes and adjusting them so that the transitions look natural when I combine them with other images. I think I mastered it all right, but only the other day, randomly, I found an even better way to make the edges look smoother and even more seamless. As I said, I'm still learning every day!

#### Do you have any advice for someone who might want to try it?

**Michaela:** If anyone wants to try this program out, it might feel a bit overwhelming at the start if you are new to digital art, but the more you learn and the more often you use it, the more comfortable you get with it. I used PhotoShop to create digital art years ago, but since I don't have it anymore and was looking for something available for free, I found GIMP a great tool to get creative. For whoever is just starting with it and have no friends to advise them, YouTube is great for finding tutorials on basically anything you can use in it.



by Judith Nolan



## "Blessed"

by Cindy Rae



Catherine: How do you feel?

Vincent: There are no words.

Catherine: Try one.



From "Though Lovers Be Lost"



#### "Blessed" by Cindy Rae

One? You ask me to describe this feeling, this peace in my soul, this sense of belonging that flows through me, and I'm not sure I can. I'm not sure I can, my Catherine.

But I'm trying.

"Serene?" Too simple, and not enough for this.

"Content?" Too banal.

"Happy?" Too trite.

The music swirls, and I know there's a word for this... joy. I know there is...

What is the word that means I was a beggar who found a queen? That we walked on a beach I've never been to? That you're the end of my aloneness, for always?

You bid me to find one word for this ... this bliss, for the totality of it.

Shakespeare wrote sonnets about this... and Shakespeare knew everything.

I am elevated, and so, I sense, are you.

I'm fortunate among men, to have your love... and that has nothing to do with what I am. It has to do with what you are.

Yet, even "in love" doesn't completely describe this... and that's two words.

Yet, I know there is one... wait.

Ah... I have it.

"Blessed."



This double drabble was inspired by the very talented Judith Nolan, in whose friendship I am nothing less than blessed.



No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love.~ Cindy



## Coming Together

by Allison Duggins



**Classic Season 3** 

Slowly, people gathered for Catherine's graveside funeral. Father stood beside her casket, looking down at the mound of red roses covering it. He held a single rose wrapped in green ferns. Father kissed the rose and added it to the other flowers adorning Catherine's casket. Still standing there, he was joined by Laura. They looked at each other sadly.



Father kissed Laura's hand before she returned to her seat.

After Laura left, Father felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning, he noticed a bearded young man standing next to him, dressed in a leather jacket, sunglasses, and dark jeans.

Not recognizing him, Father asked. "Do I know you?"

"Father, it's me," the man replied.

"Devin!" Father whispered in surprise, instantly recognizing his son's voice.

"I hopped the first plane I could as soon as I heard, and only arrived an hour ago. I came straight from the airport. I'm sorry I'm not more appropriately dressed for such a solemn occasion."

"I'm glad to see you, son."

"How's Vincent?"

#### Coming Together by Allison Duggins

"We'll talk later. The service is about to start. I hope you can stay for a while."
"I'm not going anywhere, Dad."

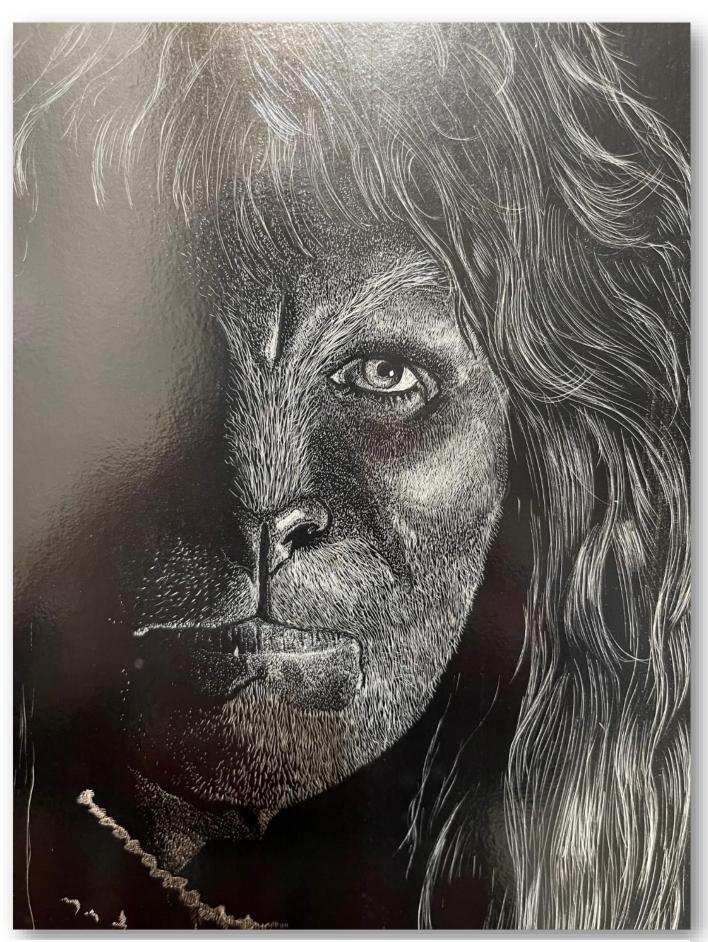
Father went to sit beside Laura. Devin moved to the back of the assembled group, noticing Pascal, William, Mouse, Michael, and many others from the tunnels. Some gave him a questioning look as he sat beside Pascal. but no one realized that it was Devin who was there with them.

When the service ended. Pascal stood, shaking hands with the man next to him, thanking him for coming to the service, thinking he must be a friend or acquaintance of Catherine's. Father also stood and turned away. The crowd began to disperse. With many backward glances at the rose-covered casket, everyone slowly began to drift out of the cemetery.

Devin nodded to Father, and they followed the others back to the tunnels and Vincent.







**Vincent** by Linda Stauffer This technique is called a scratchboard. It's a clay coated Bristol board with a coating of India ink. A tiny sharp blade scratches through the ink layer to reveal the white clay layer underneath.



### Words

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



Note: This short story is based on the premise of some events in S3. However, a few facts were changed to adjust the story to the **SND** arc written as an **alternative version of S3**.



He's here... the man I've been trying to find for weeks is right here, bruised and battered, sleeping in my bed. I found him by the river unconscious, not far away from the place of the explosion that ripped through the night. I thank providence that I couldn't sleep tonight.

The man... is he a man? I'm sitting here with my revolver within reach, for whatever he is, I can't be sure of his reaction when he wakes up.

I shouldn't even be typing this. I'll have to delete it right after I release my thoughts from the prison of my mind, because if anyone found out about him, it would be the end of his life, and I would never be able to forgive myself. But I must talk about what is going through my mind now, at least for a while. Even if it's only to the mute screen of my computer, or else all the words bombarding my mind will choke me...

Rational, intuitive, understanding of minds and psychology, knowledge-driven, emotionally detached... these words describe what I should be as a criminal profiler, and that's what I am, even with this man. Apart from one thing... however hard I try, I can't be emotionally detached. I've reviewed leads revealing something about him and there is a mystery that has intrigued me from the moment I found the first clue mentioning his name. Yet seeing him in person, watching him breathe, at times quietly, other times heavier... being so close to him that I can touch him...

In all my years of profiling I've seen despair, tragedy, victims of violent and appalling acts that defy the very idea of humanity and wash it away from the face of the earth. I thought I'd seen it all and was ready for anything that might come next. I was wrong. Nothing could have prepared me for Vincent.

#### Words by Michaela Buszaki Struchova

I've seen his name signed in books, notes, cards and letters. All these have helped me to join the puzzle pieces together, at least some of them. I never found a picture to match the name with a face, but I'm sure that it is he who is lying in my bed right now. I've known from the first clue that he is someone very special to Catherine Chandler, and that when I found him, he might lead me to her. I've been hired to find Catherine Chandler. That's what I've been pursuing for the past months, yet suddenly I feel my focus shifting from her to him.

Who is he? What is he? Where does he live? How was he always able to find and rescue her when she was in danger? Why couldn't he have rescued her this time? There are so many questions I'd love to ask him, though I am not sure he will even talk to me. I am nobody to him, a stranger who has invaded his life and the life of the woman he loves, for I'm sure that's what binds them together... love, the only human emotion I've never been able to fully understand, although I've seen enough, sensed enough to understand, that they share it. Vincent doesn't know that I want to help find her, that I want to help him too.

It's strange, but for the first time in my life, I can't think clearly. He's been sleeping for hours now, but I find it difficult to take my eyes off him. It's not just his appearance and the mental pain reflected in his face that are striking; words truly can't describe the inexplicable power that surrounds him, a power that draws me to him in a way I've never felt before. I'm trying to fight it, but I'm not in control this time. He holds control over me without even being aware of it.

Something is happening to me. I've been assigned to a case, and all at once, I am the case. It might be the hardest case of my life...

Words, so many words are invading my mind and robbing me of sleep. I'm trying to find meaning in them, but I'm failing. His face is so rough and yet so gentle... A terrible urge to touch him more than just to tend to his injuries is eating me up, the urge to assure myself time and time again that he is real and not just a fantasy, a ghost created by a missing woman craving romantic love. That's not the only reason, though, and it scares me.

I wish he would wake up, and at the same time, I'm afraid of it, not of what he might do to me but of how I would react, what I would say. Talking to strangers is part of my professional life and I've never had a problem with it. Talking to Vincent is something completely different, however.

When the time comes, I must use words that will reach him, make him understand why he's here, why I'm here, and that I need to know everything he's willing to tell me to find Catherine. Those words will determine the fate of all three of us, although I have a nagging feeling that my fate will not do me any favours.

#### Words by Michaela Buszaki Struchova

I'm sitting here, surrounded by a heavy silence... the air of nervous expectation is making it harder for me to stay focused and professional. And among all those words ringing in my head, I can't help but hear one of them calling louder than all the others, refusing to let my mind rest... Vincent...



by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

#### Stories by Michaela in this arc include:

- 1. They Shall Rise Again
- 2. Meeting the Lion-man
- 3. Don't give up
- 4. Where Life Begins and Love Never Ends.

#### They can be found at this link:

 $\underline{https://treasurechambers.com/FanFiction/Michaela/MichaelaLibrary.html}$ 



## Special Message

by Mel





"So, this is based on Morse code?" Diana asked. The pipes overhead banged gently with various conversations. How was it possible for Pascal to distinguish between all of them?

The pipe code master lowered his stethoscope and draped it around his neck. "Based on... yes, but also more complex. Do you want to try?"

Pascal held out one of the tubes he carried toward her and gave her instructions.

Diana tapped out the message, feeling ridiculous. It was like a child playing with a toy. "What did I say?"

Pascal merely grinned.







by Judith Nolan





# "Love Will Find a Way..."

by Judith Nolan





"The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing..."

#### **Socrates**



The brightly lit Manhattan skyline glowed against the shroud of the dark night, blotting out all view of the stars. Darkness surrounded the tower block where Vincent had finally found his beloved Catherine after searching for several long months.

He cradled her limp body in his arms, willing her to live... for him, for their love. But he could see she appeared to be beyond all help or hope.

The sound of the departing helicopter carrying the accused Gabriel beyond Vincent's immediate reach faded into the distance, merging with the muted sounds of the bustling city far below. They had stared at each other, man and beast, taking full measure. Gabriel had smiled, knowing he'd won the battle and

dealt Vincent a terrible blow from which he would not recover.

Vincent sighed, his wide shoulders slumping in defeat. But none of that mattered now. He bowed his head over his love, trying to drive the chill from her body with the warmth of his own. Her words echoed back to him, words of confession and confusion.

"We loved..." Catherine struggled to tell him the truth she'd kept hidden since she had first known. "There's a child..."

"A child...?" Vincent questioned disbelievingly, not truly understanding what his love was trying to tell him with her last ragged breaths.

To him, everything seemed to have slowed to a crawl. His usually sharp ability to plan, to understand, even to think, had been submerged in a flood of indescribable grief. Gabriel had truly dealt him an awful blow in his cynical drive to conquer all around him.

Vincent's love was dying before his disbelieving gaze, and he knew he was powerless to stop it from happening. Had he found her in one breath, only to lose her in the next?

"He's beautiful..." Catherine struggled to whisper in reply.

"Catherine...?" Vincent shook his head as he held her.

What could he say to such a statement? They had loved? When? Where? How? He heaved a long breath. Surely, he would remember such a momentous event in his life, but the tatters of his tortured memory were blank and bare.

"Catherine..." He tried to keep her with him.

"Though lovers be lost..." she struggled to repeat the quote.

Vincent waited, hoping against hope she would go on. Finally, he prompted, "Love shall not..."

But then his love went limp in his arms, her head falling backwards. Drawn from him on a tortured breath he finished the quote. "And death shall have no dominion..."

Lost to all sense of his own safety, he pulled her limp body up into his arms, holding her against his chest as his tears fell, unheeded, into her hair. He shuddered with grief and the impending sense of loss that hit him like a tidal wave, threatening to destroy him and everything he loved.

He knelt on the roof between the stairway leading down into the building and the empty helipad. He held Catherine closer in his arms with her face against his neck.

In that moment he no longer cared if he lived or died. He could cease to live right here, and no one would know the truth. Anyone finding them would not guess at the tragedy that had unfolded on this dark night... no one except Gabriel.

Everything else around them faded into oblivion. He bowed his great head over Catherine's as the wind gusted across his hair, the only sign of life. She was silent and still in his arms, her spirit gone from her now.

The uncaring beast deep within him stirred into sibilant life, rejoicing in the dark tragedy. It urged Vincent to stand and leave his love behind... to walk to the building's edge, jump from the roof and finally put an end to all the pain and despair.

'You know you want to, Brother...' the dark voice within whispered. 'I promise it will not hurt...' The being chuckled bleakly. 'Well, not for long, anyway. Then you and I will be together again, forever... without <u>her</u> to come between us. You know you want that...'

"There is a child..." Vincent replied to his darker self. "My child..."

'She lied!' the entity hissed. 'How could someone like <u>us</u> have a child? It's impossible! I would have known! I would have seen! You are deluded by grief.'

"You know only what I know, Beast," Vincent replied harshly. "Your memory is as blank as my own of such an event. And Catherine would never lie, not to me. She said there is a child, and *he* is beautiful. I will live for him and search for him."

'Maybe, maybe...' the darkness conceded. 'But look at her now. She is of no use to you dead. Put her down and come with me, brother. Be with me! You know you really want to. If you will not jump, we can pursue another course far from here. I know of places nobody ever goes. We will be safe there, you and I...'

"No..." Vincent drew back to look down at his love. "No!"

Then he gasped in alarm. With the movement, Catherine had breathed the shallowest of breaths against his neck. It was almost as if he had imagined it.

If he had not been so preoccupied mentally arguing with his darker self, he would have seen the faint pulse that began to beat again in the side of her neck. Then a second breath, shallower than the first. She was slipping away from him again.

"No! You will live! For us! For our son!"

'She's <u>dead!</u> You're a fool! Look at her with the eyes of a doctor, <u>not</u> a lover. She's gone from you and good riddance!'

"No!" Vincent shouted again, as he held Catherine upright against his chest so that her head rested against the hollow of his shoulder.

He surged to his feet, holding her close in his arms. "She still lives!"

'<u>Bah!</u> You are not worthy of my time or my patience,' the beast within snarled. 'I can wait. I will always be waiting for you to come back to me when you see the sense of my words...'

Vincent ignored his inner darkness as his cloaked shadow hurried onwards, carrying Catherine to safety and concealment. An entrance to the world Below was not far away down a side street, but it was also several stories down. He hurried to the stairwell, taking the steps two at a time, trying not to jolt his love, but having no choice in his haste.

Finding the old warehouse in the alleyway behind the tower block, he ran inside, scrambling around detritus and stacks of cardboard boxes to the basement door. Dragging it open with one mighty hand, he pushed through, leaving it to clang shut behind him.

In the immediate darkness he was forced to feel his way forward toward the far wall where an old upright dresser concealed the entrance to the hidden world beneath the city. Inserting his elbow behind the furniture he pushed it aside, squeezing through the darkened opening with Catherine in his arms. He reached back to drag it closed behind him.

The familiar world of the upper tunnels closed around him. With his love held close against him, he bent to pick up a piece of old brick from the tunnel floor. The rattle of a passing subway train drowned out the short, frantic message he tapped out on the nearby pipes. He called for Father to meet him in Vincent's chamber.

Dropping the rock, he gathered Catherine's limp form closer against him before he began to run. He flew past the outer sentry posts, not caring who saw him or called after him in astonishment. None thought, nor tried to detain him.

He entered his chamber to place Catherine carefully on the bed. Drawing the covers up over her, he knelt on the floor beside the bed, beginning a detailed assessment of her vital signs. What he found gave him little hope. Her pulse was shallow and erratic. He smoothed the hair away from her forehead in desperation, urging her silently to stay with him as he worked.

He had no idea what they'd given her. But the needle marks on her arm told their own story. There were many, some old and some very new. One still bled a little.

Father came stumping into the chamber, leaning heavily on his stick, his medical bag clutched in his free hand. "The message said you've found her," he breathed worriedly, casting aside his stick as he came up to the side of the bed. "Is she alive?"

"I have found her, and she is alive... but barely," Vincent acknowledged even as he bent forward and gently kissed Catherine's pale forehead. "She wants to fight. I can feel it in her, but she is very tired and heartsick..."

He smoothed his hand over her moist skin. His touch made Catherine groan as she turned her head against the pillows.

"Then we must do everything within our power to help her survive," Father tried to reassure his son as he began his work in earnest. "Do you know what they injected her with?"

"I have no idea..." Vincent replied helplessly. "Whatever it was it must be powerful."

A worried looking Mary appeared in the chamber entrance. "What do you need, Jacob?" she asked quickly.

Father turned to her, giving urgent instructions. "And send a message to Peter. We're going to need his knowledge and expertise."

"I will." Mary looked toward the bed and its unconscious occupant before she turned away and hurried out.

Behind his parent, Vincent leaned over his love. "While I live, you live... with me... in me." He cupped her cold, pale cheek in his warm palm. "Always..." He breathed deeply. "I will *not* allow you to die."

Again, as if hearing his voice, Catherine turned her head against the pillow. "Vincent...?" she groaned, managing to lift one hand clear of the covers. Her fingers opened and a half-full medical vial fell out among the covers.

The movement was too much for her abused body and her arm fell back onto the bed. On a ragged sigh she slipped away from him again, back into the danger of deep unconsciousness.

Vincent picked up the vial, frowning at its label. "This..." He held it out toward Father. "They injected her with this. Somehow, she managed to keep hold of it."

"Brave girl." Father took it to study the label. "This is a powerful sedative. Someone did not want her to survive."

"Gabriel..." Vincent breathed the hated name. "He didn't want her to live. He wanted me to suffer and die of despair."

"Well, all I can say is, be glad someone must have miscalculated the dosage and only gave her half." Father shook his head. "For whatever reason."

"Our son..." Vincent lifted his shoulders helplessly. "Catherine told me there is a child. A boy child."

"A child?" Father's eyebrows rose in shock. "How is it possible?"

"Simple biology, it seems..." Vincent murmured brokenly. "I thought I had lost her forever. And now, this..."

"That possibility remains, I'm very much afraid," Father laid out his fears bleakly. "But the fact that she has survived this long gives me a small glimmer of hope."

"She must survive, Father. She will survive," Vincent replied vehemently. "For us and for our son. It is why she fights even now... why she kept that vial."

"Yes..." Father breathed, shaking his head. "You will stay with her?"

"Always..." Vincent bent over the bed. "I will never leave her alone again."





by Judith Nolan

"Don't be pushed around by the fears in your mind.

Be led by the dreams in your heart..."

Roy T. Bennett

<sup>-</sup>Illustrations provided by the author.



by Judith Nolan



# Tell the Nightmare to Flee

by Jessica Rae<sup>5</sup>



Season 3 SND



#### "Vincent?"

The room that Catherine awoke in was dark. The typical gentle glow of the stain glass window was gone, leaving only grey shadows in its place. The stillness was deafening, leaving a slight ringing in her ears as they sought for the typical sounds; sounds of gentle snoring, a baby cooing ... "Vincent!"

She rolled over, hands reaching beneath the blankets, finding only smooth, cool sheets. He was gone.

"Vincent!" Throwing off the covers, Catherine swung her legs over the edge of the bed, grasping blindly for her robe. Drawing it on as she stood, she fumbled about in the darkness for the crib that rested beside the bed that she and Vincent shared.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Illustration provided by the author.

Her hands once again met with cool, occupant-less blankets. No! Jacob, their son, was gone too.

"NO!!" Catherine fell to her knees, feeling as if her entire world was breaking apart and crumbling into the very dust beneath her feet. Somehow, they were gone. She was alone.

"You really thought that he would come for you?"

She knew that voice. How many days and nights she had listened to that voice, hoping beyond hope that he would not speak of Vincent being captured or worse. She had grasped their son tightly in her arms, promising the universe that she would protect him from harm at all costs, as if to protect him from that smooth, evil voice.

Now, she was childless, her arms empty, and a cold smile danced across her captor's face.

"I have taken him," Gabriel spoke sullenly, victoriously, gloatingly. "The child is mine. He will come to save the child, and I will no longer need you. However, I will keep you around to see the action, and when he comes, he will get to see you die."

Her empty arms fell to her sides as despair flooded her heart.

"Give him back!" She wailed, both in sadness and anger. "Give me back my son! I will go with you – kill me if you wish - but give me my son! Spare my son!"

Gabriel smiled, a smooth, snake like smile and stepped back into the shadows. In the distance, she heard a lion roar and a lonely baby cry.



With a gasp, she sat up, immediately feeling strong arms circle around her. A voice was already in the process of shushing the frightened yelp that escaped her at the sudden change of mental location. There he was. His voice was warm and deep at her ear. "Dearest Catherine, shh, it was only a dream. What happened?"

"You - you were gone." She managed to say between gulps of air. "You were gone, and so was Jacob. Oh, Ja-Jacob!" She half turned, half fell out of bed, reaching the crib, but Vincent moved quickly and restrained her.

"Shhh, breathe, Catherine. I am here. Jacob is well, he is resting. He is right here... we are all safe."

She caught the sound of Jacob's baby snores, and relaxed into Vincent's chest, sensing through their special Bond that he knew their safety to be completely true, and she burrowed her face into the white shirt he slept in.

"Oh Vincent, I was sure that I was back... there. You were gone and they had taken our Jacob."

Vincent said nothing, and she felt his sorrow as well. "I could never live without you, Vincent."

"Nor I you," he replied softly, one hand brushing across her face. "You are my life, Catherine. My every hope and dream rests in your hands. You spoke his name."

"Jacob's?" She asked, brow furrowing.

"No," Vincent replied, and her throat constricted with bridled grief. She had spoken Gabriel's name aloud then.

"You are still quite afraid, Catherine. That is normal. It will pass in time."

"It has only been a few weeks since, Vincent, but that time without you felt like decades. I was so afraid."

"You shut me out," Vincent replied softly. "Catherine, I would have come immediately."

"And he would have captured you and I would be alone even now," Catherine replied with conviction, raising her head to look up into Vincent's shadowed face. "I could not lose you, Vincent. I could not allow him to make you suffer."

"Like he made you suffer?" Vincent's reply was quick and stinging, and she felt his sorrow. "In return for my safety, you have lost so much of yourself. The fear, Catherine, I wish I could take it from you."

His arms wrapped around her shoulders, pulling her close, and she felt the tremor of suppressed emotions running through his body. It was taking all his resolve to control his feelings, and for a moment, she was unsure what to do.

"Vincent, you are afraid." she said, pressing her face more firmly against his chest to steady the shivers running through him.

"I must admit you frightened me," Vincent replied. "When you spoke his name, I felt as if I could leap into your nightmare and ..." He did not finish the statement, but Catherine knew what he would have done, if given the miraculous chance. Those weeks ago, when the authorities had finally rescued her, she had half hoped that it would have been Vincent's lion roar that had broken down the door.

Her slight disappointment that it had only been the SWAT team's arrival had quickly washed away with the knowledge that she could now be free to seek the Bond to let him know she lived.

But she did not think she could ever forget that first sight of his face, the terror, the haggardness, the pain in those eyes was etched into her soul, faded only slightly by his realization that there was a child, and it was theirs. Was it worth the pain to have denied his calls for so long?

"Come back to bed," Vincent gently commanded, feeling his Catherine becoming lost in thought again.

She sighed and allowed him to guide her back to her place beside him. She wound her arms around him, and he gladly accepted, resting his chin atop her head. "I had to try to save you," she said softly, hoping he would understand. "He would spend hours telling me what he planned to do to you, and I just could not bear to see you in his hands. He would have broken you, Vincent."

"I would rather have died a thousand deaths than let him hurt you, dearest Catherine. Your strength is great, and your courage beyond that of most. I feel that I have exploited that courage in your intent to save me. That would never be my intention. I will always put you first."

"As I recall, you have saved me many times as well at risk to your own life and discovery by others." She shuddered slightly at the memory of some of the close shaves she had endured, and he pulled her impossibly closer.

"Let us call it even then. No more saving. Now we save each other together, as one. Jacob will grow up to need us both. I cannot raise him without you beside me," Vincent spoke softly.

In the distance, the tapping of the pipes grew slightly louder as the dawn brought new messages and chatter from the many tunnels. The world was waking, but Catherine felt as if her whole night had been sucked away in the one terrible nightmare. "I will always protect you, Vincent, and our son. And I know you will protect me. I am so very tired, Vincent, the night seems to have taken every ounce of peace with it."

"Close your eyes and rest," Vincent replied. "I will keep watch over you both."

"What if the nightmares come back?" Her voice was small, and his heart fluttered with love.

"Then I will be here," he replied. "You will not be alone."

Within moments, she had fallen asleep, the quiet sounds of her and Jacob both snoring softly a gentle balm to his fears.

He never thought he would get the chance to have his Catherine here in his arms again. With every passing day that the Bond was broken, he drifted further and further into himself and further and further away from his humanity. Now he had her back, and with her came the most beautiful gift he could have received ... the little bundle they had named Jacob. Vincent's keen eyes made out the sleeping shape of his son in the nearby crib, and he marveled at the perfect little fingers and the features so like Catherine.



"We have chosen a name, Father," Vincent announced proudly. He glanced sideways at Catherine, who held their son out for Father to take into his arms. Startled, the older man reached out and took the child with great care, glancing from his son to Catherine, trying to read their expressions.

"We will announce it to everyone at the naming ceremony tonight," Catherine added, looping one arm through Vincent's, and leaning against his shoulder. "But we felt that we should tell you first, just between us."

Father's brow furrowed and he shook his head in confusion, but his eyes reflected the joy in the faces before him. "You can wait till tonight, Vincent, dear Catherine. No need to break tradition on my account."

"We want to," Catherine replied. "It is our gift to you." She glanced up at Vincent and he smiled.

"We have named him Jacob, after you, Father."

The sheer joy and overwhelming emotions that flooded the older man's face was a thing of beauty to behold. Vincent took one last glance at his sleeping son then lowered his head to the pillow next to Catherine's with the scene from that special moment rolling over and over in his mind, soothing the fears of the night.

Somehow, they had gotten to this point of joy after all the lost months. The days of terror were over, and bright hope for the future lay ahead, stretching onward as endlessly as the Tunnels in which they lived.





## New Fashion

by Mel





"What do you think?" Mary asked, holding up half a knitted green sweater.

Diana smiled at the fine craftsmanship while simultaneously releasing an inward groan as her fingers played with the tips of her red hair. *Why does everyone think green and red?* "It's lovely. Where do you get all the thread?" Diana asked.

"The Helpers keep me well stocked, but my skills are maintained by mending the kids clothing."

Diana nodded. Mary's skill with a needle was remarkable.

Mary smiled, as if reading her mind. "It's for Lena's little girl as a Christmas gift." Diana grinned. "She'll love it."





Under a Full Moon by Lynette Parker



# 1My Heart

by Angie



Classic S<sub>3</sub>

"... suffering ... had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be."
- Charles Dickens (original ending of Great Expectations).



Vincent looked along the line of his books, trying to decide which to read. He had read them all, of course, but old friends needed to be re-visited once in a while. It was comforting and relaxing to do so, to enjoy them just a little differently to the time before. His eyes fell upon the faded, redbound book he remembered too well, the one he had left on Catherine's balcony, so long ago.

He pulled it out and automatically blew the dust off it. He had not opened it since that night, when he had written to Catherine inside it. He turned the book over in his hands, belatedly realizing it had something attached to the corner of the latter pages. He looked closely at it, realized it was a kind a bookmark, and opened the book. It was a leather heart, two of them actually, a red and a white, stitched together with leather lace. It marked two pages, but automatically he turned to the further page marked by the white heart.

Of course. Catherine had read the last chapter to him, having left the tunnels to return to her world before he could read it to her. He could still hear her reading those final words. He read them softly to himself now, remembering.

'I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her.'

Vincent sighed and felt the warmth of her love surrounding his heart, just as it used to, just as if she was merely somewhere else in the world, just not with him .... not gone beyond reach, forever.

This time, the thought of her did not bring tears. He held the open book tightly to his chest, as if the warmth would escape and leave him cold and alone again.

And he began to wonder. When had she made this and put it in their favourite book? He had no doubt at all that it was Catherine. He could feel her love

#### My Heart by Angie

emanating from the little hearts, imagined her smiling as she made it for him. He knew there were many of these bookmarks in Father's library, but had never thought to ask about them. He could only conclude that they had been a project devised while he was recovering from his madness that last time, where Catherine had found him and they had made love, bringing him back to the land of the living - and ultimately giving him a son.

She had made a bookmark and chosen this book, knowing he would find it, eventually. She could not have guessed how long it would take. He had been distracted, first by his own memory loss, and then by her loss and his search for her and their son. Later, this book had been a painful memory. It was not so now, he realized. It was a precious one, one he would never forget, one he would never deny again.

He placed the bookmark back on the page, the red side to the last page this time. He had always thought of her as his red rose, while she had given him a white rose, one he still wore in the pouch she made for him.

He glanced at the facing page, and recognized Dicken's original ending, one he and Catherine had agreed was somehow ... anticlimactic, unnecessary even, as had the author's friend, Bulwer Lytton, who had convinced Dickens to change it.

Vincent shut the book carefully.

The warmth around his heart seemed to throb now and spread outward. He closed his eyes and sat on his bed. Catherine's love had not left him, neither had she. So many things reminded him of her. He could not deny them, and remembrance did not need to be sad. He felt a joy that humbled him, as if he had found the secret to life - his life at least.

He stroked *Great Expectations* reverently again and rose to replace it in his bookcase. He did not need to read a book tonight. He wanted to sleep, to dream ... and remember.



**END** 



## All Heart Corner Bookmark

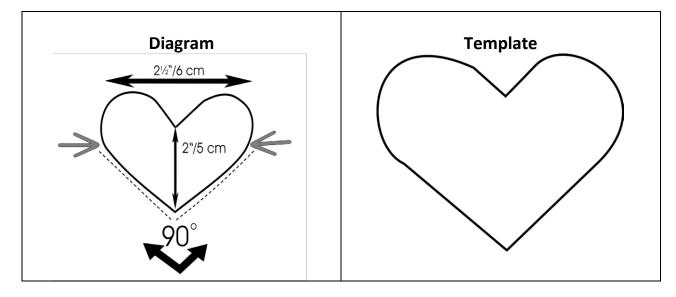
Submitted by Angie

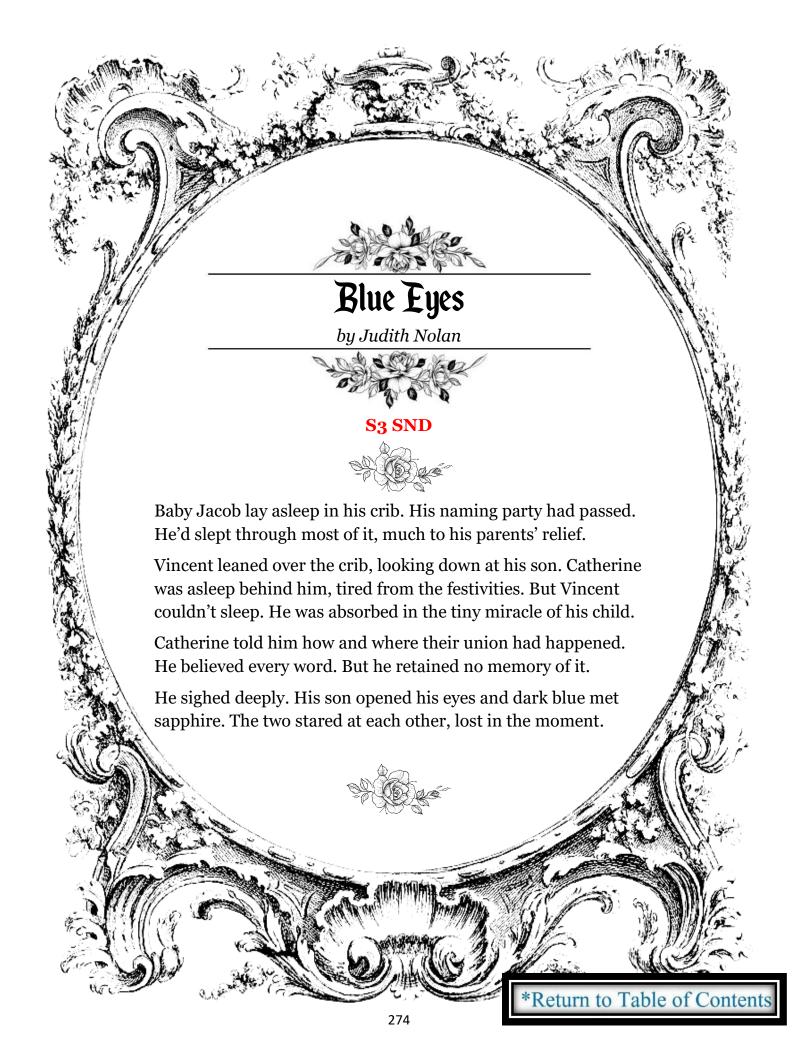


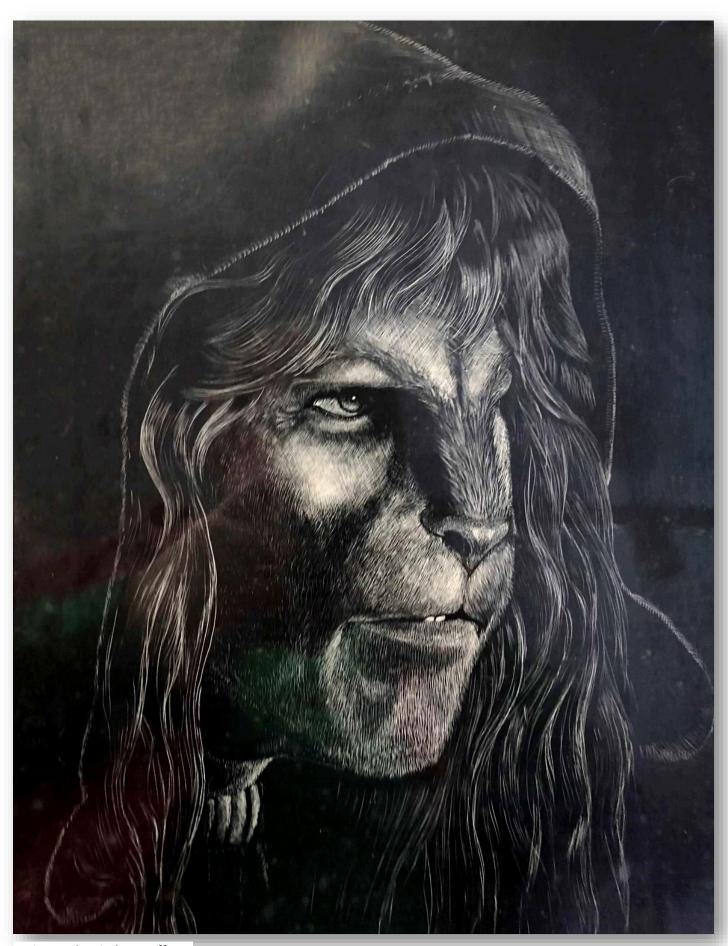
This elegant bookmark is a unique way to keep your place and won't fall off. It can be used for any sized book and magazines.

First, cut a template for a heart out of cardboard. Fold your template in half to make sure it's uniform. Then use the template to trace two hearts out of scrap leather or card stock (fairly stiff material that won't fray). Use the template below for the one shown in the photo (about 2 1/2 in/6 cm wide). Be sure that the sides leading to the point are 90 degrees apart, so they will fit neatly over the corner of the page.

Match the hearts. Using thin ribbon, lacing, string, yarn or thick sewing thread, sew the edges of the two hearts together, using a running stitch close to the edges, or a whip stitch over the edges, from the point to the beginning of the curve (marked with dotted line and arrows below).







Vincent by Linda Stauffer



# One More Dance

by Cindy Rae



The gusting wind on the descending stone staircase was slightly warmer than it had been in wintertime, and the difference made sense, for it was now early June, and the whistling wind, though just as strong in the deep places of Vincent's world, now held traces of a verdant spring-turning-into summer.

Even here, deep in the Tunnels, the change of season could be slightly felt. The air held a touch more humidity, and to Vincent's sensitive nose, it even smelled a little different. It just did.

He led Catherine toward the Great Hall doors, fully aware that this was not the usual time of year for that.

"Stay near the wall," Vincent instructed, as he guided her down the stairs. The huge doors stood shut and barred before them.

Catherine obeyed, curious as to what they were doing here. Winterfest was a long time away.

"You're being very mysterious," she told him, trailing one hand against the wall as she descended the stairs after him.

Vincent gave no answer to that. He merely held the torch aloft as he turned, making sure she was safe, as her softly booted feet followed his. All was well.

"We should have brought Jacob. He loved Winterfest this year," Catherine remarked.

He had. Vincent knew he had. Their almost three-year-old son had scampered across the dance floor and beneath the great table as fast as his sturdy legs could carry him. He'd danced with both his parents and swiped a cookie off Father's plate. He'd looked beautiful and happy and so like Catherine, and just a little like him, that Vincent's heart felt as if it would burst.

"We'll bring him again some time," Vincent demurred, reaching the bottom of the stairway and handing his love, his wife, the flickering torch. The steady wind teased the flames.

Catherine stood content to watch him as he moved. It was a thing that never failed to give her pleasure. He pushed the cape back from his shoulders, making sure his arms were free of the fabric. Catherine knew those arms, knew them better now than she ever had.

These three years had wrought changes in both of them, both large and small. Chief among them to Catherine was the fact that to the world Below, Vincent was now her husband... a word that never ceased to make her heart skip a beat.

She watched as he pulled upward on the huge beam with an ease that belied its weight. The shifting breeze was teasing the ends of his silky, blonde hair and lifting several of the tresses. The muscles on his back and shoulders bulged a bit, even beneath the cover of his brown vest and white shirt.

He was a wonder to behold. He always had been.

Vincent paused a moment, holding the long, wide board aloft. He could sense Catherine's feminine perusal, and now knew it for what it was. Feeling her attraction for him always made him smile inwardly.

You give me so much that I never thought to have. So much, Catherine, he thought.

"Well, why ever we're here, I'm glad for it," she said, as Vincent settled the board against the wall. "It's been a while since we left Jacob with Luke and Olivia."

"Two months," he replied, letting her know he'd been counting.

Catherine's mind tracked backward. "So it has been," she agreed easily.

"We won't stay long if you don't wish to," Vincent said.

"Oh, don't put this on me. You know you're as bad as I am when it comes to leaving him with a sitter. Worse, in fact," she answered, moving to stand beside him.

Vincent knew it was true. Since the day Catherine had decided to move down to the Tunnels for good, they had seldom left their son in the care of others, despite the presence of many willing, helping hands. Vincent found that having his family... a word he utterly adored... all living under his stony chamber roof was a pleasure second to none, and he enjoyed simply having them all near. Though the rooms had been expanded to an area behind the stained glass, theirs was a comfortable, intimate space for a married couple.

And baby made three, Vincent thought, pushing the huge doors inward.

They creaked and groaned, the great weight yielding to the strength of Vincent's arms.

"You're very good at that," Catherine complimented him. "But you still haven't told me why we're here."

Taking the torch back from her, Vincent produced a music box from his left pocket. "Do I need an excuse to dance with my wife?" he asked, showing her the lovely piece of carved wood, he now held in his hands.

Catherine smiled. Oh, so that's what this is about. It's been a while since we've had time alone together, and you wanted to come down and dance. I love you, Catherine thought, knowing he could sense her pleasure in their Bond.

"Of course not," she replied easily, stepping gracefully past him.

In a few moments, Vincent had criss-crossed the room, setting several candelabra alight, all pushing back the dark with the soft glow of ivory tapers. He set the torch in a ring in the wall.

"You planned this out," Catherine said, knowing he must have carried the lighting down.

"Did I?" he asked almost coyly, winding up the music box and opening it. He set it near the middle of the long trestle table, which had been pushed against one wall. The box began to play a Strauss waltz.

"How pretty." Catherine's smile grew.

Vincent inclined his head and offered Catherine his unusual hand, and she accepted it, gratefully, as she knew she always would.

You've always held out your hand for me... always helped me forward, she thought, remembering the first day she had to return to her world from his. There had been a jump to make, one across a break in the Tunnels, with a huge pipe running along the bottom of it.

"Come. You won't fall," he'd said, as he made the leap first then extended his hand back for hers.

She hadn't... and then of course... she had.

She had fallen... deeply. She had fallen in love with him, and with this place, and with these people, with a son she was still amazed by, and a life that had changed so much she barely recognized it, except for the part of her that did.

"This is lovely, Vincent," she said, sliding into his embrace with the ease of practice. "I remember the first time we danced together. Do you?" she asked.

"Winterfest. Only a fool would not remember such a thing," he replied.

His mind turned backwards. You wore white and pearls. You were the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. You asked me if I danced, and in reply I simply took you in my arms. We danced the rest of the night. We danced until everyone left, but I swear there was still music somewhere, drifting in on the winter wind. The candles burned low, and our shadows danced with us. Remember it? It's carved on my heart like the most precious of memories.

"You were beyond beautiful. You wouldn't admit it when you were growing tired, even though I could sense you were," he added.

Her head gave a thoughtful tilt. *I was tired. But I wouldn't admit to it. You knew, didn't you? All these years and there are still things I'm discovering about you... about us.* 

"I didn't want to stop. It was like being a part of a... a magic spell," she confessed. "One this place weaves around you. I love you."

She settled her head on his chest loving the reassuring thump of his steady heartbeat. They'd faced dark times together, abysmally dark, some of them. He'd been ill. She'd been pregnant... and taken. She'd been held for many long weeks, but then, like a light from heaven, he was there... there saving her.

Saving both of them, her and their unborn son.

She'd given birth to Jacob in the Tunnels, and moved down shortly after. The last three years of her life had been amazing, filled with a kind of quiet joy she could only have guessed could be.

His deep voice rumbled beneath her ear. "That first night after we danced at Winterfest... after I took you back to your threshold... I couldn't sleep," Vincent said.

She looked back up at him. "Really? You never told me," she replied, enjoying this additional, small revelation between them.

"I was too... full of you for sleep," he admitted. "I walked the park, and stayed up until dawn chased me down. When I finally fell asleep, it was with the image of you dancing with me that I carried with me, into my dreams."

Oh, Vincent.

"I never knew," Catherine said, a touch of wonderment in her voice. *After all this time, we're still finding things out about each other.* 

She gave voice to the thought.

"You know, after the years we've spent together, I'm still finding out things about you," she said.

Yes. And I am discovering things about you, Vincent thought, a touch of worry creeping in. I just hope they make you happy...

"I suppose we'll just have to keep discovering each other," she declared with a smile. The song tinkled on.

You have no idea how true that is, he thought, worrying about it a little more. It was his nature to do that in the best of times. He wasn't sure if this was that. She stumbled a little against him.

"You're getting tired again," he said, leading her around the turn. This close to the stone wall, their shadows grew small, and there was no separation between them.

"No." She shook her head in denial. Her soft, shirred bangs breezed across her forehead. "We just started. I can't be tired, not yet."

But she was, and Vincent could feel it. He could also feel her rallying from it.

It's all right, Catherine. Let yourself feel it. It's all right.

He moved her across the floor gently, with the customary grace that belied his size. "Perhaps we won't stay long," he replied. He slowed his feet.

"No... don't stop. It will pass. Please," she asked.

He thought about it for a second then resumed their pace.

Catherine continued to move with him, aware of her slight fatigue, but dismissing it. Maintaining a life that was sometimes spent Above but now mostly Below was sometimes tiring.

She tried to deflect her husband from any concern over the matter. "We should have brought Jacob after all. Maybe given him a few dancing lessons?" It was a question, and she asked it like one.

"Next time," Vincent demurred, tucking her hand under his, and allowing it to rest on his chest, rather than in an extended position away from their bodies. Their shadow/silhouettes on the wall did the same.

*They look content*. Vincent thought, eyeing the shadow couple. He wished he felt that way and hoped for the best for them... for all of them.

Catherine lifted her head. "It feels like it's been a long time since we did this," she said, smiling up at him. Vincent allowed his pace to slow again.

"Not so very long," he reminded her, waiting to see if she would blush from the memory.

She did, and the soft pinking of her cheeks enchanted him. That the woman he loved as his wife and mother to his son could still blush in his presence was a thing that never failed to please some secret, masculine part of him.

She remembers. She remembers two months ago. She remembers the soft music on her stereo. It was Strauss then too. She remembers dancing with me, inside her apartment. And what came after...

"Our anniversary. We danced in my apartment. But there was hardly any room! Not like here," she said, smiling up at him.

"No. There wasn't," he replied. So we danced a different way, all the sweet night long.

It was a thing he could think, but not speak about. In many ways, Vincent was still the reserved being Catherine had always known him to be.

And you are definitely getting tired, he thought, sensing her. It's all right, Catherine. I have you.

He guided her halfway down the long side of the room then stopped near the music box, almost where they'd begun.

"You don't have to," she said, knowing he was stopping their dance on her account.

"It's all right," he replied. He carefully closed the lid on the music box, as she sat on the table's edge, not wanting to admit she felt a little winded.

I have to call Isaac and start working out again, she thought. I'm getting slow in my old age.

"Did you like the music?" he asked, his eyes still on the lid of the music box. It's carved and inlaid pattern suddenly seemed very important to him.

"You know I did. But then, you always know what I am feeling," she replied easily. Yes. Yes I do, even before you do sometimes.

She reached a hand over and covered his. Then she surprised him.

"You can tell me, you know," she prompted.

At his quizzical look, she added, "I may not have a connection in the Bond like you do, but that doesn't mean I don't know when there's something on your mind, Vincent." She looked around the gigantic room. "Evidence suggests that there's something you wanted to bring me to a private place to tell me. And you wanted us far away from everyone else when you did it."

Vincent met her steady gaze. For all your beauty, all your strength, and all your goodness... how is it I sometimes forget you have the sharp mind of a lawyer?... he wondered.

He squeezed her fingers and brought her hand to his lips, brushing a kiss across her knuckles then sparing a kiss for the simple twisted gold wire band that served as her wedding ring. Mouse had crafted it.

"I wanted to be with you. One dance... one last dance before..." The next word wouldn't come easily.

"Before?" Catherine prompted, curious now. Her husband had a secret. She wanted to know what it was.

"Before... things change," Vincent said, kissing the ring again. He nudged her legs apart tenderly, and she parted them so he could stand between them, drawing as close to her as he could. He brushed back a strand of her honey-colored hair with a gentle finger.

"Our lives... they change, Catherine. This year will not be the same as last year. Next year will not be the same as this year."

Catherine considered his words and replied as best she could.

"No, they won't. Jacob will be older. He'll start going to preschool with the other boys, I suppose. Is that what you're worried about? He's so smart, Vincent. But if you want to wait another year, I guess we could just..."

"No, it's... it's not Jacob," he interrupted. "You're right about him. He is bright and curious and knows his letters. Lena loves teaching the littlest ones, and it would be good for him to spend more time with the other children. Father says we spoil him too much, even though *he's* the worst."

Catherine smiled at that. "We can wait until after the first of the year then, if you want. There's no need to rush," she replied, trying to soothe the great man in front of her.

He released her hand and placed his own on either side of her. "If that is what you wish," he replied.

"But you said this isn't about Jacob?" she prompted. *So it must be about you*, she concluded. *Tell me, Vincent*.

"No." No. No, this isn't about Jacob. But in a way, it is. In a way, it's about all of us... and so much more.

"In a way, perhaps it is," Vincent allowed, drinking in the sight of her. Her skin looked luminous in the candlelight, and her hair gleamed subtly. *I love you. You're mine, and I love you. Please don't forget that. Please don't think I... cursed you, Catherine*, he thought.

The thing he'd come down here to say now felt distant and perhaps like it was a thing best accomplished back in their chambers, or even up on her balcony, with the entire starlit sky above them.

"If you're going to make me play twenty questions, this is going to take a while," she said, reaching up to cup his strongly slanted cheek. The gesture took any sting there might have been out of the words.

He covered her hand with his. Very well, he thought.

"Are you certain you remember that night we danced in your apartment?" he asked, willing her to recall the details, all of them, a few pertinent ones in particular.

"Of course," she said, the heat returning to her cheeks. "It was... lovely... transcendent even." He knew she was remembering the intimacies they had shared.

 ${\it Transcendent.}\ {\it What\ an\ appropriate\ word\ for\ this}, he\ thought.$ 

"Yes... it was." He paused. "Catherine... I feel what you're feeling. You know this. You've always known it. Since the beginning, you've known."

"Ye-es." She drew out the last syllable, willing him to continue.

The blue eyes flickered and in them there was something Catherine couldn't quite name.

"Even... sometimes... Even when you don't know you're feeling it," he said, in a way that sounded like a conclusion.

Catherine's arched brows knit with sincere confusion. "Vincent, I don't know what you're talking abou-"

The next words came out in a rush from Vincent. "You're going to have a baby."

She was rocked back, and it showed. Inwardly, Vincent cursed himself for his inelegant delivery of a thing he was both hopeful of, and fearful about.

"I... I... what?" she stammered.

Vincent took a deep breath in and tried to do better this time. Holding both her hands, he said, "We're going to have another child, Catherine. You're... pregnant. And we both know... the baby is mine."

She blinked, her mouth still open on the sound of the "t." She looked at him, and then down at her still-trim waistline, then back up at him.

"But... we use precautions. We..." Her voice trailed with memory.

His low voice said what she was now thinking. "Not that night. We were... incautious." He paused again to allow her to remember, and to give her a moment to let the shockingly unexpected pronouncement settle.

Catherine let herself remember the night from mid-April, two months ago. We... we were... incautious. Yes. We were... naked and so passionate with each other, no barriers between us. No one likely to walk in or interrupt us. Jacob was with a sitter. The balcony doors were open to the springtime night. The curtains danced on the wind. We felt so free...

Vincent's voice interrupted her reminiscence. "If this is not a thing you wanted... I can only tell you I'm s--"

"Don't. Wait." She released his cheek and held up her hand. "Let me... let me catch up with you. I... you're sure?" He could see her mentally calculating how many weeks it had been since her last cycle. Too many, by the look of awareness she suddenly had.

He was as sure about this as he'd ever been about anything. "I believe it to be so, ves."

We were careless. And now we're... pregnant? Again? Shouldn't I be... feeling something?

Then she remembered when she donated blood for Joe Maxwell. It was the nurse at the hospital who told her that first time.

That's why I'm fatigued, she thought. Getting tired after just a short turn or two around the big room made sense now.

"I... at first... I guess I didn't have much in the way of symptoms with Jacob either." She looked down at her waist again, knowing that once it did start growing, it would do so apace. Jacob had been born when she was a little more than six months along.

Four months. I have only four months left?

"Then... you're positive?" she asked.

Vincent stood still, trying to gauge if she was feeling happy or terrified, or both.

He couldn't tell. Too many emotions were hitting her at once. Vincent closed his eyes.

"I... yes, I am sure, Catherine... as sure as I can be, before Father or Peter confirms it."

Catherine's mind spun back to the night of their anniversary again. They'd had dinner in the Tunnels, then left Jacob with Luke and Olivia while they visited her balcony, a thing they'd seldom done while she'd been living Below. They'd opened a good bottle of wine, but barely had any. At some point during the night, they realized her bedside drawer was devoid of the contraception they usually used. Neither had wanted to stop. So they simply hadn't.

We were together. It was our anniversary, and we were together in a way that we almost never have been. I felt like I was a part of you...

Catherine considered that night one of the most romantic and fulfilling of her life.

And now... there were consequences.

"I can't believe it. I..." She looked up into blue eyes that were positively uncertain.

Oh, Vincent. It was so hard for us last time I was expecting. So hard for you. I didn't intend for this to happen.

"Please don't be angry." She was fairly certain he wasn't. But she wasn't quite sure what he was. His expression still seemed guarded, for lack of a better word.

"It won't be like last time. I'm here. I'm safe," she said, willing him to forget the long weeks she'd spent in the clutches of a madman, when she'd been pregnant with Jacob.

Yes. Safe. You're safe, now... perhaps.

"This is not something we... planned," he acknowledged, very much aware that until this moment, they both thought they would be parents only to their son.

She looked down at her waist again. "I know, but it... it isn't a *bad* thing... is it?" she asked, begging for his understanding. *Please don't ask me to be sad about this. Or God forbid, end it. Please don't ask me that, because I don't know what I'll do, if you do.* 

"I do not... ask that you be sad," Vincent said, realizing that even for all she now knew, Catherine didn't know the half of it. *But you might yet be,* he thought, bracing for what was to come.

"I can't... I can't believe you can know this! Before... before, you didn't know," Catherine said, aware that pregnancy had likely caused her to put her foot in her

mouth. They rarely discussed the circumstances surrounding Jacob's unexpected conception.

"I know," Vincent replied simply. "I had lost our Bond. I didn't know."

No, he hadn't known before. Not until Jacob was close to being born. Not until his life energy had finally led Vincent to both of them, and to their rescue only weeks before Catherine was due to deliver. It had been a harrowing time, for all of them.

"I mean... not that that was your fault," Catherine stumbled. "You were ill, and Jacob was--"

She was about to use the word "unexpected," when Vincent cut her off.

"A gift. Jacob was a gift. The greatest gift of my life, and one I never thought to have. I will always bless you for that, my Catherine," Vincent said. *And this truly isn't about Jacob. It isn't about any of that.* 

Catherine put a hand over her stomach. *Maybe there's a little something going on there*, she thought, trying to feel for changes.

"Then you... then you're not... upset about this?" she asked uncertainly. Vincent was now going to be the father of two children. Neither of which he'd said he wanted, neither of which he'd asked for. And even though Catherine knew he adored his son, she also knew that childhood and children were a touchy subject for Vincent. He already mourned not being able to participate in what would one day become Jacob's "Above life." Now he was going to have to do that again, with another child.

"You're not unhappy?" Catherine prompted.

I am not. But you may be, Vincent thought.

"That is not all I have to tell you," Vincent replied. His features grew even more guarded, as if he was half-expecting some sort of blow.

There's more? But how can there be more? Catherine thought.

"Vincent, how is there more than... than we weren't careful, and we're going to have another child together?" Catherine asked, confusion warring with fear inside her. We're pregnant... again... and you're not overjoyed. Or you're furious with both of us for being so clumsy. Then, what?

He stepped back a pace from her and that was when Catherine knew that they were somehow in trouble.

"Because there is something I haven't told you. Something that I... I fear for you... for us."

Say it. You have to say it, she thought, willing him to do so.

He faced her as squarely as he could. "From the beginning... I never wanted to be the curse of your life, Catherine. I *never* wanted my limits to become yours, not ever."

Are you telling me... that you could handle one child, but that this is too much? That you think I should just ... what? Take Jacob and go? Live up Top in my apartment? But... you'd never get to see him. We both knew it, the day he was born! And now there's another one...

"I... Vincent, you're scaring me," she said. "I know you're... sensitive to limits and limitations. But we're already a family. That bridge has been crossed. I *left* the DA's Office. I go Above when I want to or need to, but I *live* here... with you, with our son, with... everything. We do the best we can. I might call that a compromise, but I'd never call it a curse."

He swallowed and Catherine could feel him grappling with something.

Compromise? How many of those before you can do it no longer, Catherine? How many, before you break? And... is this the one that breaks you? Breaks us?

"Please tell me what you're feeling," she asked, aware the request usually came from him, in one form or another.

"This child is... a girl. I think," he answered.

Catherine's eyes widened. "A girl?" *Is that why you're so worried? That it's a girl, rather than a boy?* Catherine smiled, and the smile deepened, the more she thought about it. "A little girl? For us?"

Vincent hated to dash her hopes. He knew what she was picturing... a little blonde cherub of an angel, one with sunny curls and a tinkling laugh. One she could dress in pink ribbons and bows, and take for walks in the park, and out shopping. One with perhaps eyes like his and skin like hers, like Jacob had been.

Not this time, Catherine. Not this time, he thought.

"She is... like me, Catherine." Vincent let the almost-whispered sentence go, and watched the woman he loved absorb the shock of it.

"This child is featured like me," he repeated. "I think that is perhaps why I can feel her now. I think that's why I already know it's a 'her."

He let the words stay there, with all they implied, and half-dreaded/half-prayed for what Catherine would say next.

You hold all our fates. Don't hate her. Please don't hate her. Don't get rid of her before she's even born. But then... oh, the limits your life will have, if someone like me is your daughter! This isn't like with Jacob. Jacob, who you can take up into the park, or play with in the sunshine. No stroller rides this time. No trips to the

stores. Yet... I know you'll love her. How you will fight to protect her! How you'll worry, and fear. What will you give up this time, Catherine? How many compromises will you be forced to make? Does either of us even know?

"She's... like you?" Catherine echoed, placing a protective hand more firmly across her belly. There was a definite swell, she felt certain of it.

"You're sure?" she asked, changing the image in her mind from a "normal" child to one of a fierce little lioness of a daughter. One who was able and strong, full of love and generosity, like her father.

Vincent answered as carefully as he could. "I think so. I can... feel her. Sometimes I think she's reaching for me." A lone tear slipped down his cheek. "She feels... beautiful... and a little wild... like her mother."

"Like her father," Catherine said, meaning it in more ways than one.

Vincent's blue eyes implored hers. "Can you accept--"

"Don't you dare ask me whether or not I can accept my own daughter!" Catherine snapped hotly, just a ring of her old debutante self-apparent in her voice. She slid off the table and closed the distance between them. "Do you think I won't love her? Won't protect her with all that I have? All I am?"

All you have. All that you are. Yes, Catherine. Yes. I believe you will do that. No matter what it costs you. I love you.

"This is... different. You know it is," he said, frightened for her. The "mother" in her was coming to the fore, the part of her that could give any lioness - of any size - a run for its money.

"Then it's different!" she said, throwing up her hands. "And you must *never* imply that I don't love her because she's not like me <u>ever again!</u>" She stalked away from him a few paces. Then stopped, realizing she didn't want to be too far.

There is strength in you, Vincent said, realizing he was echoing something he'd said to her the first day he had ever sent her back Above.

"I'm not... I'm not who I used to be," she said, struggling with the words.

Of course you aren't. None of us are, Vincent thought.

"It's not that I doubt you. But this is... it isn't the same. I... I've been... struggling, inside," he confessed, closing the small distance between them.

"I'm not what I was before I met you. I'm not that person anymore. You have to know I love her. That I'll do anything..."

He shook his head. "That might not... that might not always be a good thing, Catherine. What will this child cost you? Do you even know?"

Her green eyes were rock steady. "Nothing I'm not willing to pay. And I will get more in return. That has to be enough, Vincent, enough for me, enough for anyone."

He pulled her into his arms, asking for a level of understanding she freely gave. *I* love you. But this is new ground. You don't know the half of what's coming... and with a girl! His mind could barely contain the thought.

"Each time our life changes... I'm... frightened, for us," he admitted.

"Then let me share your fears. The same way you always share mine," she replied, craving his strong embrace. "I don't know what comes next. I only know I need you."

He held her more tightly. "I'm here. Always. I'm always here, Catherine. Here for you. Here for... for them," he said, speaking of his children as a plural for the first time.

"We must face our fears and move through them. A very wise man once told me that," Catherine said.

Vincent almost chuckled, despite himself. She was using his own words to make a point. "He didn't know the half of what was in store for him."

"Maybe he did... inside. Maybe he hoped," she replied.

Perhaps I did. No. I didn't. Never in my life would I have had the temerity to think I would be holding you in my arms in the Great Hall in summer, pregnant with our second -- our second! -- child.

"There are limits even to my optimism," he answered, a touch of humor in his voice.

"Then I'll believe for both of us for a while," she answered.

She nestled against him. Don't be afraid. Not now. Not ever again. Not about this. Whether we have two children or twelve, don't be afraid, Vincent. They'll be part you and part me. That will have to be enough... for anybody.

"How long have you known?" she asked, the sound muffled against his vest.

He considered the question a moment. "A day or two, perhaps a little more. I wasn't sure at first. Then... when I looked across the table at you tonight at dinner... it was like I could see it. You were... glowing, Catherine. It's all around you, like candlelight."

She hugged him tight, her arms locked at his waist. "Jacob was born at six months, a little more. If I'm already seven or eight weeks gone..."

"She'll be born sometime in October, perhaps. In the fall, on a fine, cool night with a handsome moon to guide her," Vincent predicted.

"Like the night we went walking all over New York City," Catherine said, recalling the memory of their first Halloween together.

"Or if she's born later, like you, perhaps she'll be a Winterfest baby," Vincent mused, not sure what the future was going to hold, but knowing it was going to be amazing, for all of them.

"I can't believe it!" Catherine said, loosening her hold on him. Her green eyes held happy tears.

"Are you... all right, Catherine?" he asked, not sure how else to say all he wanted to.

He was asking, and it wasn't about just her physical health, Catherine knew. This would be a big change for them. Make that... another one of those.

"I was feeling tired," she answered, deciding to keep her answer simple. "Now I feel like I could fly," Catherine enthused, drawing back from him just a bit.

"This will... change your life... again," Vincent said, aware that it would, probably more aware than Catherine was at the moment.

"Then it will change... again," Catherine replied, suddenly feeling very sanguine about that.

A child. A child like Vincent. Born and raised in these Tunnels. Someone to chase after Jacob and charm Father. Someone to protect this place, when Vincent and I are too old to.

She glanced over at the music box and the candles. *Our light carries on. Our song...* continues.

"Vincent... I know this is a huge, unexpected change. But... we can either choose to make this easy, or we can choose to make it hard. Given how much "hard" we've had... I think I'm going to vote for "easy" this time."

She stepped blithely away from him. She began fingering the music box, as if that was the important thing in the room, and not everything else.

"So pretty," she said.

"It is," he replied, watching her.

She traced an inlaid bird with a tapered nail. "Maybe we just have to have faith."

He was amazed by her... again and again, and as always.

So... that is it? This is... just that simple for you? This complex, complicated, life changing, life shattering event is going to be... easy? ... Because you simply will it so? As a matter of ... what? Faith?

Vincent knew he was the last person on Earth – or under it - who was going to argue with her.

"Reality may intervene," he warned. He felt he had to.

"Reality can get in line then," Catherine replied, declaring the subject closed for now.

She'll have her brother and she'll have you and me. That will do, for starters, Catherine thought.

She lifted the music box and wound it up.

"I think I'd like one more dance," she decided, setting the lid up. Tinkling music began to drift into the room.

"Would you?" Vincent asked, wanting only what she wanted, and swearing that whatever that was, he would try to make it happen for her.

"I'm sure I do," she replied, holding her arms in the waltz position. "Just one more dance, while just you and I know... one more, before we tell our son... before we tell... everyone."

Vincent slid easily into her waiting embrace. "Just one more," he vowed, knowing that three of them were dancing now.

Inside his sensitive mind, he felt the tenuous line that stretched between him and his unborn daughter. He didn't know if she could "hear" yet. It was too soon. But something told him she liked the music anyway.

We dance, little one, he thought, enfolding his incandescently beautiful wife in his arms and squiring her around the room once more. We dance for our joys, for fellowship and the year's ending. For all of our new beginnings. I danced with your mother in this room, once... when our way was new and I was certain of nothing at all, other than how much I loved her. Sometimes, that seems like a lifetime ago and at other times, it seems barely more than yesterday.

Catherine shifted in his embrace and matched her feet to his. He shortened his step, aware that he was trying not to tire her again.

He leaned his head low, his unique lips close to her ear. "I love you, forever. And no matter how much I think I love you... you do something that makes me love you even more. How is that possible?" he whispered, knowing it was true, nonetheless.

"You have no idea how much I feel the same," Catherine replied, loving the man who both was not her husband in a way the rest of the world would recognize, but who absolutely was in her heart of hearts. Their shadows moved along the wall again. And this time, Catherine knew there were three of them, together, and not just two. It was an amazing feeling.

"Thank you for dancing with me," Catherine breathed, loving him all the more. "Thank you for all the times you ever danced with me," she said, letting the word "dance" mean whatever he wanted it to.

Vincent touched his forehead to hers. On the wall, it looked like their shadows were kissing. "Thank you for accepting that I could," he replied, feeling his heart explode with love for her... for them.

A father. I'm going to be a father, again... of a little girl. I wonder what that will be like? he mused, forgetting for a moment that she would be featured like him, and just focusing for a moment on the sweetly feminine presence that now permeated the link between himself and his love. This was not like it had been with Jacob. This little being was far more... something... something he couldn't quite name... something good, of that he was certain.

You'll have me wrapped around your little finger, Vincent predicted, as he guided them all around the turn once again.



And before Autumn was over, he was right.



No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love.  $\sim$  Cindy

<sup>-</sup>Illustrations were provided by the author.



# Cost

by Mel





"Ah, Diana, just the person I wanted to see," Father said.

Diana looked up to see Father leaning over a banister. Holding her hand up, as if shielding it from the sun, she grinned. "What are you doing up there?"

"I'm trying to find a book," Father said, returning to the pile. "For Jake."

Diana climbed the iron spiral staircase. "What's the title?"

"Can't remember, but it was one of Vincent's favorites. He gave it to the nursery, but Mary can't find it. It's like the blasted book just walked-"

"Is this it?" Diana asked.

Father beamed. "You're a wonder."





by Mel



# Sharing the Magic

# Mel, could tell us what program or programs you use to create your digital art?

**Mel:** I don't use any fancy programs, just Microsoft Word. As to how, I find a picture I like from the Ep Cap Library (Thank you Angie and everyone who made that possible) I want to use, copy it and the put it into a word document.

On the top with all the "Home, File, Insert, there will come up a slot that says "Picture Format" will appear when you paste the picture will appear automatically. That's the section that one can play then play with the picture. You can remove unwanted backgrounds or pieces of the picture, use "artistic effects" to change the picture into let's say a "chalk drawing". You can add a border around it.

If you want more than one image, there is a little icon at the corner of the picture you selected that will say if you want the current picture to be in front of or behind another and that allows you to have two pictures/images on the same page. If you want more creative backgrounds, like the more fantasy ones for example, you can go up to "Insert", go down to the option of "Online Pictures" and then you can type in what kind of picture you want. But make sure your other images are set to "Behind" or "In front of" otherwise you'll lose them. The rest is just trial and error. Even that can be a ton of fun!:)

# What advice you would give to someone who wants to try making digital art of their own?

**Mel:** There are a lot of things you can't do without the fancy digital programs, but for those who can't afford or just want to have fun playing around, using Microsoft Word is a fine place to start.



by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



Note: The concept of the latter part of the story was inspired by the wonderful "**Sibling Ribaldry**" by Olivia K. Goode.



#### **SND**

The circular wooden desk in the middle of the chamber was covered with sheets of paper, neatly piled into two batches, accompanying the usual selection of old books and a few candles. On that afternoon, he was sitting in his favourite high-back chair and slowly but attentively making his way through the papers in front of him. A shuffling sound from outside the chamber made him raise his maned head.



"Vincent?" Jacob asked and peeked in from the corridor.

"I'm here," the man of the chamber answered.

The older man approached his son, followed by Diana Bennett, who was suppressing an amused smile.

"The newest member of our chess club has agreed to play with me tonight," Jacob said with a cheerful expression. "Diana said she hasn't played for years.

Don't worry," he turned to the detective. "I'm sure you'll remember a move or two in your favour."

The young woman nodded in agreement. "I hope so," she added hastily, keeping a straight face.

"Joe is trying to close a big case, so I thought I'd give him some space and catch up with the Tunnels," she explained to Vincent with a smile.

"I bet he is sorry to miss the chance to even his score with Father tonight," the lion-man remarked, amused. Joe had only won one out of the last five games with the Tunnel patriarch, and his competitive nature called for revenge.

"Maybe I can teach Diana your master move," Jacob remarked with a conspiratorial wink, making Vincent chuckle. "We thought you might wish to join us and watch, since Catherine won't be back with the boys before dinner. I'm sure they are having a great time at the cinema. What is it they are watching?"

"A Bug's Life," Vincent replied.

"Oh, I see." Jacob raised his eyebrows. "Well, Catherine surely knows what she's doing, I suppose a little biology in their free time never harmed anyone." He flashed a quick confused smile.

Both younger people in the chamber lowered their eyes, hiding their amusement.

"Anyway, will you join us then?"

Vincent shook his head lightly. "Not today, Father; I'm sorry. I have all these assignments to correct for tomorrow." He gestured to the piles of paperwork on the desk. "But I am sure you will enjoy yourself even without me," he added fondly.

The patriarch sighed inwardly, a little disappointed at what he thought was a lost opportunity to show off his skills for once. "All right. I bet you gave the children some riveting topic to write about. Zach always complained that he had no time for learning, only time for writing assignments."

"Until he followed Michael and was accepted to a college Above," Vincent added, making all three of them laugh.

"What is the topic of the paper?" The patriarch was curious.

"A question: "What is love?" We have been reading Romeo and Juliet," his son replied. "Would you like to contribute?" he teased.

"Oh... I'm more than certain that the children have provided you with eloquent enough answers to that question," Jacob answered evasively. "Well, we won't disturb you then," he concluded.

"I'll see you at dinner," Vincent said, amusedly watching his beloved parent mumble a 'yes, yes' and slowly walk out of the chamber.

When Jacob was out of sight, Diana leaned to Vincent. "He has no idea I was a champion during my years at college," she whispered. "Three years in a row."

Her friend raised his eyebrows.

"Hey, 'What you don't know..." The detective winked with a cheeky smile, and followed her challenger out.

Vincent couldn't help but laugh... yet another chess player out of his father's league. Dinner that night should definitely be entertaining.

Returning to his duties, he took the sheet on the top of the first pile of papers in front of him and leaned back against the comfortable padding of the chair. While reading the lines, he had to chuckle every now and then.



What is love?
by Joey

I must confess that I have never properly thought about this specific question. Of course, the boys don't talk about anything else these days, but I don't really understand a word of what they say... something about blonde girls looking better but having less brains or something like that. (Tommy got a smack from Leah when he mentioned it in front of her, her hair is the blondest you can imagine as you know, but please, don't tell Mary!)

I'm not sure how to describe love. You can't smell it (maybe only on Valentine's Day, that's when William has to bake more cakes and usually burns one because he's got too many to do).

You can't hear it (unless Mouse tries to repair something for Father but almost blows himself and us up in the process, and Father fights not to scream at Mouse when scolding him, and later apologises and tells Mouse he was only worried about him).

And you surely can't touch it (unless Mary knits another blanket for Father, though she already made him six before, claiming it will make his hip feel better, and he still accepts it and gives her a kiss as a thank you).

But I sure think you can see it. The eyes of people who love look somehow different, brighter, softer and more eager (almost like Mike's eyes when he is about to bite into his birthday cake). It is as if they wanted to say you're my everything. That's what I also see whenever I see you and Catherine looking at each other. (Too much detail? Sorry...)

I haven't been in love yet, though I am 10 already. But I do love Father, Mary, Catherine, Jamie and Mouse (the gadgets in their chamber are so cool!). I love all the other children (maybe sometimes I love Katie less, when she bothers me by asking if I like her hair or stuff like that and doesn't let me go until I tell her to grow up and ask about something more important, for example, if she could see the new ship model that Devin helped me make when he was visiting recently). And I love everyone else in the Tunnels. Especially you because although sometimes you can be really demanding on our lessons, you always listen to us and encourage us, and because you always cheer me up when I have a bad day.

That's all I can think of now. Maybe I'll know more when I'm older. Maybe, but I wouldn't count on it...



Vincent's soft laughter resonated in the pleasantly warm chamber air. This was one of the reasons why children were so dear to him... they were always direct when speaking their mind, never sugar-coating anything. His long fingers gripped a pen and wrote a large A at the bottom of the paper. He didn't focus on a specific form or grammar this time. All he was interested in was the content, and Joey deserved the best grade for his paper, his teacher thought with a grin.

The vintage silver grandmother clock on the mantelpiece quietly chimed five times when Vincent had made his way through almost all of the assignments. Most of them made him chuckle, and he couldn't help but mark all of them generously. Every child had a different perspective regarding what love is, but there was truth in all of them, and Vincent was very proud of the logical thinking the children showed in their answers.

Naked truth first; poetry comes later.

Mechanically, he reached for the last paper in front of him and his eyes instantly focused on the handwriting. He would have recognised those strokes before any others in the world. His eyes twinkled as he leaned forward and began to read.



What is love?

Poets have been searching for an answer to this question for centuries. I myself often wondered, and I know that love has many faces.

Sometimes it looks like a red clown's nose, appearing during those times when we feel down, frustrated or not worthy.

Sometimes it feels like a soft hand caressing our cheek before bedtime, smelling of rose-scented soap.

Sometimes, it sounds like the happy laughter of children playing in the park with their father in the moonlight.

Sometimes it smells sweetly like a red rose, freshly opened and still warm from being carefully protected under the cloak of someone who cares.

And sometimes it tastes like the first eager, yet brief, kiss of the lips we have been craving for eternity...

For me, it is all of these things and so much more.

It is the getting up in the morning and seeing the blue of the sky rising in the eyes of my beloved.

It is the ending of the day in the arms that I know will never let me fall.

It is hearing the voice that awakens my spirit and opens my heart.

It is the knowledge that wherever I am or whatever I do, there is only one place to which I will always return and call my home.

Most of my life, love was simply love, but now, it has a name: YOU...



Any coherent thought deserted him. The only feeling flowing through his veins and filling his heart at that moment was the one he himself had once described as the end of his aloneness and the beginning of a new life.

The elegant, beautifully flowing handwriting on the paper he was still holding spoke of the calm focus on the emotions of its author. Vincent's thumb gently traced a few words as if looking for an even deeper connection with the writer, as if that was even possible. The smile on his unusual lips perfectly complemented the dreamy look in his deep-set blue eyes. Suddenly, he felt a flutter reaching his heart.

"I'm glad the boys enjoyed the movie," he spoke with his eyes still on the paper and smiling.

Then he turned his head to the woman leaning against the wall only a few feet away from him.

Her expressive green eyes regarded him affectionately. "Charlie already dragged Jake to Father's library to see whether they can find something more about ants," she replied, amused.

Vincent leaned back with a soft laugh. His eyes focused on her, his brain looking for appropriate words to express what he was feeling right then and there.

"I see you finished going through the schoolwork," Catherine remarked innocently.

He had to admire her playful ways. He always had, ever since they had made a



habit of sharing them when they started living together, and his smile confirmed it.

"Yes," the simple statement came, his eyes still burning into hers.

"Any good?" she teased, raising her eyebrows.

"Always," Vincent replied, happily playing along.

"Hmm, those papers must have been really good," she pondered. "You seem at a loss for words."

Vincent tilted his head before he spoke. "My words fly up, my thoughts remain

below. Words without thoughts never to heaven go."

His wife nodded in agreement. "Men of few words are the best men."

"Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice," Vincent came back with a swift reply and shrugged.

Catherine grinned, and without losing eye contact with him, she slowly walked over to her husband. "Speak, for my heart is full," she demanded eagerly.

Vincent thought only for a moment... his look softened as he spoke.

"My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep; the more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite..."

"Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs," she contemplated, glancing at her own words on the paper, now lying on the desk. "But are you so much in love as your rhymes speak?" She turned to him suddenly with a challenge.

Vincent leaned forward, his need for being closer to her overpowering him. "Doubt thou the stars are fire, doubt that the sun doth move. Doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt I love," he stressed the last few words. "Lady, by yonder blessed moon I vow…"

The urgency in his voice made her lean closer to him. Hypnotised, she was unable to look away from his eyes. And yet... "Do not swear by the moon, for she changes constantly. Then your love would also change. All that glitters is not gold."

"Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom," Vincent insisted ardently, his face only a few inches away from Catherine's. Then he added with a cheeky smile. "It is the very error of the moon; she comes more nearer earth than she was wont, and makes men mad."

Her beaming smile could have melted his insides. "The tempter or the tempted, who sins most?" she pondered while closing the distance between their faces even more.

"Sin from thy lips? O trespass sweetly urged! Give me my sin again..." he whispered, his eyes transfixed by her inviting mouth.

"Stars, hide your fires; let not light see my black and deep desires!" Catherine whispered with equal intensity in her burning eyes. Just when their lips were about to meet, she pulled back an inch, knitted her brows in thought and asked, "Is it not strange that desire should so many years outlive performance?"

Abruptly, Vincent leaned back against his chair. "The lady doth protests too much, me thinks," he said dryly, though he couldn't resist an amused, small

smile. Inwardly, he laughed at the truth of her words, remembering the beginning of their relationship.

"Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak." Catherine was having too much fun to stop. "For which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me?" she inquired eagerly.

Without a blink of an eye, Vincent offered his answer. "Hear my soul speak: The very instant that I saw you, did my heart fly to your service..."

Catherine hesitated for the first time since the start of their exchange. Suddenly the words came out. "I wish my horse had the speed of your tongue."

A few seconds of silence were followed by a heroic effort of both not to burst out laughing. However, it was too great a task, and a moment later, Catherine's heartfelt laughter filled the space, accompanied by her husband's deep and softer one.

Finally, Vincent rose from the chair, his tall figure towered over her as his arms enveloped the delicate body of his beloved. "I would not wish any companion in the world but you," he spoke softly, regarding her with a look full of all the powerful emotions residing deep within him.

Catherine leaned into him even more, bathing in the feel of his broad chest covered by his favourite quilted vest. "O speak again bright angel, for thou art as glorious to this night, being o'er my head, as is a winged messenger of heaven," she demanded with ardour.

Vincent smiled, and his hand gently reached for her cheek. Then his lips moved, his voice touching her ears as no one else could.

"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight For the ends of being and ideal grace...

I love thee freely, as men strive for right.
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death." <sup>6</sup>

Catherine was so under his spell that she only felt the tear on her cheek when his thumb tenderly wiped it away. All at once she realised something. "But Vincent, that's not---"

"I know," he replied with a chuckle before his look softened again. "But it's true, every word."

She sighed, and reluctantly, only briefly, she looked away from his eyes, hinting at the paper written by her own hand. "So is this, every word."

What is love? A clearer answer to the question at that moment could not have been easier... a smile, a gaze, a kiss...





All quotes apart from the poem come from the works of William Shakespeare: Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Henry V, As You Like It, Sonnet 116, Othello, Measure for Measure, Macbeth, Henry IV, Much Ado About Nothing, The Tempest.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> From the poem "How Do I Love Thee?" (Sonnet 43) by Elizabeth Barrett Browning



<sup>\*\*</sup>Illustrations provided by the author except where otherwise indicated.



# Music Lover?

by Mel



The lingering notes of the Moonlight Sonata echoed off the walls as Rolley's fingers stilled on the keys.

"That was great, Rolley. You might turn me into a classical girl after all," Diana said.

The new music teacher gave a soft and hesitant smile. Even five years later, the haunted look remained in his eyes. "Thank you."

"Do you know any other music?"

Rolley played a scale and looked at her. "Anything in particular?"

"Would you like me to teach you?"

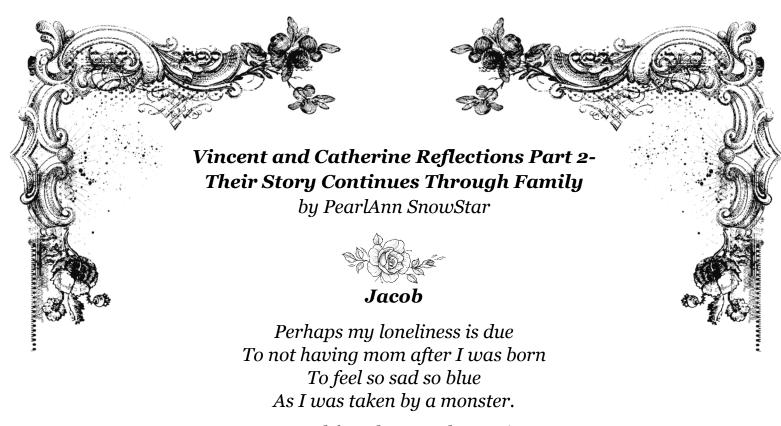
Diana shook her head. "I might damage the piano with my playing." Rolley lightly chuckled and began to play.







People Magazine Cover by Judith Nolan



But Dad found me, and more joy Mom came back into my life Dad, Mom and Son, so happy this boy, Now we truly were a family.

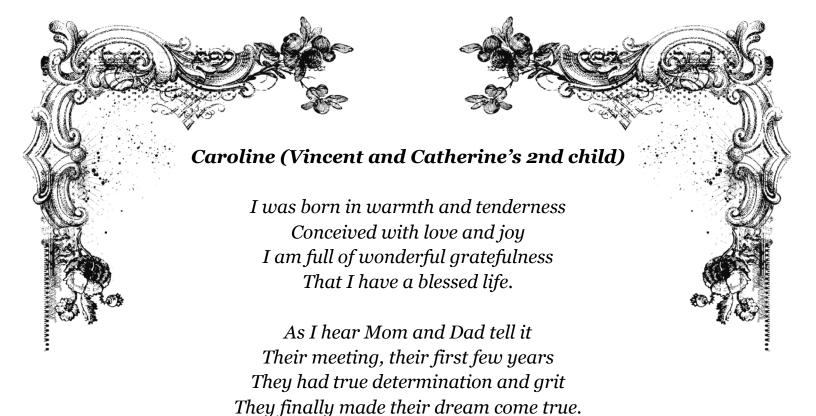
I made sure to learn every story Learn about their favorites, So that I can pass on to posterity This tale of love so true.

As I grew, knew joy, sadness Our family is living proof That lovers can have happiness That deep soul love ends happily.

Now as I have grown old
I tell my children and their children
This tale of love so bold
A love that death could not destroy.

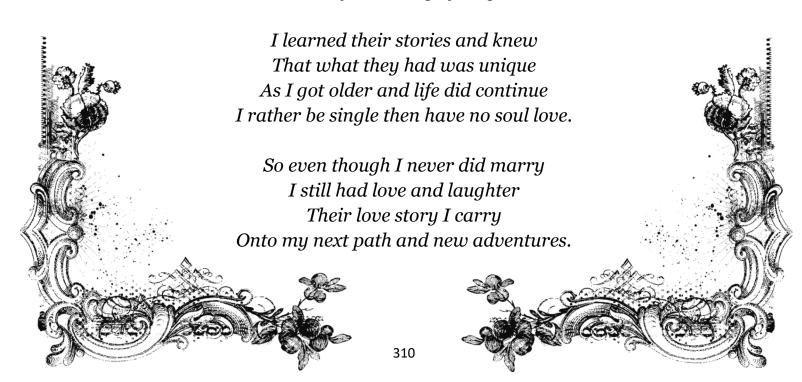
Vincent and Catherine wherever you be It will soon be my time to transcend To join with my family for eternity Knowing the stories will continue.

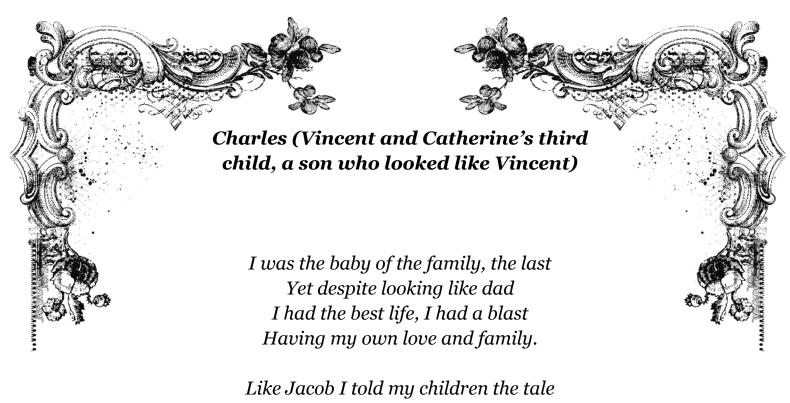




I never felt lonely like my brother Always felt loved, treasured Safe, never was there another Taking me from my family.

I understand that the trial by fire, the torment
That mom and dad went through
Made them truly treasure each moment.
The rest of their long life together.

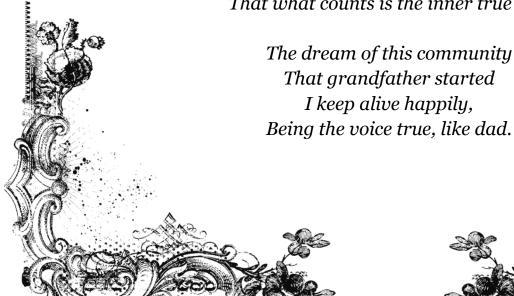




Like Jacob I told my children the tale
And it will continue through generations
A story of love that did not fail
That survived, thrived and grew.

I understand how people can fear The way I look, where I came from Yet I want them to hear That it is what is inside that counts.

Perhaps in the future we shall see
People accepting differences
And know unity in diversity
That what counts is the inner true self.

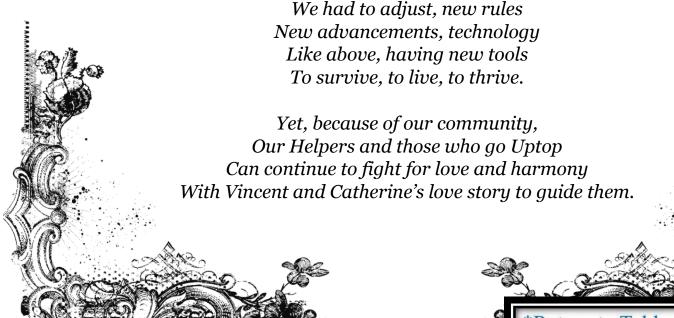




Yet our worlds do continue
One Uptop, one Below
Despite all the changes.

They would not recognize this life Our world above has less love More hate, divisiveness and strife Yet Below, we care, we share.

Changes into our lives do come From storms to rebuilt passageways Below we always do welcome Those who need safety, love and rest.









(Intro-This story is about Caroline, who, in my stories, is the second child of Vincent and Catherine. Her brothers are Jacob, who is older than her, and Charles, who looks like Vincent and is younger than her.)



Caroline was walking down the passageway deep in thought. Again, someone tried to hook her up with another man, another blind date.

Why can't they just let me be me? Single. Free.

Feeling as if no one cared about her feelings, she wondered what it is about a woman choosing to be single that makes people feel as if they should find someone for them.

Someone slammed into her with such speed that Caroline nearly fell.

"What the..." Caroline glared at her brother, Jacob. "Watch it, bro."

He smiled. "I am so excited. I am going to be a dad!"

"What?"

"Yeah, you heard right. Linda is expecting. I got to tell Mom and Dad." He hugged her, then went quickly on his way.

She shook her head. Jacob and Linda just got married last year. Despite the pandemic and everything else going wrong with the world, they chose to marry. Now they chose to have a baby!

"Oh well, that is life. It keeps on going."

As she continued down the passageway, she thought about her life.

I never found a love, never married. Yet, I don't feel sad or feel as if someone is out there for me. I wanted this life of independence.

She got bumped into again.

She looked up at Charles. "Again?"

"What do you mean again?" He was excited. "Did you hear the news? I am going to be an uncle!"

"I nearly got run over by the bearer of such news." She sighed. "I am going to be an aunt, but I am not charging down the tunnels like a mad bull."

He smiled and blushed at the same time. "More news."

She rolled her eyes. "If this is about your love, I told you I am happy for you. Rachel loves you as much as you love her. I can tell."

He grinned. "We are going to have a joining ceremony. We are getting married."

She felt as if the ground fell beneath her feet. "You two have only been dating for a few years. You are only 26. You..."

He lifted his hand. "I know it in my heart. Besides looking like Dad, I, too, have empathetic abilities. When we met, I knew she was the one. I can feel what she is feeling. We know it is right."

She shook her head. "Cupid is running amok through the tunnels. Last year, it was Mouse and Teresa, as well as Jacob and Linda. And now you and Rachel."

"You're next!" He hugged her tightly.

"No...I...am...not." She felt anger rising to the surface. "Why does everybody think everyone should have a mate, partner, whatever. I am happy being single, being free to do what I want when I want to. I have love. You love me, Jacob, Mom, Dad, the community...."

"Not the same thing."

"So, there are plenty of people who stay single, no children, no loved one, the rest of their lives and are very happy. They are loved by family and friends. This is not the olden days, where you HAVE to get married."

"Still, I feel you will find someone."

"HAH! I am not going to be bonded and tied and be concerned if my love is going to live, die or leave me. Being single is the life for me."

He winked. "Until you find someone."

"Not going to happen."

"Well, if does or does not, you are still my sister and I love you." He embraced her. "Got to tell Mom and Dad."

She watched him walk quickly away.

She said to herself, "The tunnels have gone mad. Cupid I am going to find you and when I do, I am going to pull those damn arrows from you and take away your bow."

"Caroline?" She looked ahead and saw Kipper standing there.

"Let me guess, you and Jackie are having another child."

"What, no, I just heard on the pipes about two great bits of news."

"Already?"

"Hey, news travels fast, pipe speed." He chuckled. "Seems you are a bit upset."

"Because now everyone is expecting me to go out, mate, and have babies."

He laughed. "I don't. I know you are still a fierce Amazonian. Ready to protect your independence, home, and family."

"Oh stop."

"Besides, your life choices are your life choices." He walked up to her and whispered, "Yet there is nothing like a good wedding night."

Caroline glared. "Stop it."

He chuckled. "Okay, but in all seriousness. Caroline, be who you are meant to be. We may tease, but we won't push. Besides, being single, if we need a babysitter…" He spread out his arms.

"Funny. Look, I need to check the new lift project Mouse is working on with John. It will help our elderly dwellers to go Uptop easier, instead of using those winding stairs."

"Umm, I just saw Mouse and John, they...."

As if right on cue, Mouse, John, and Teresa, Mouse's wife, were coming down the passageway, along with others.

Nothing is going to get done today. She moaned.

"What is it?" Kipper asked her.

"Heard news," Mouse said.

"No, I am wondering why Caroline moaned," Kipper said.

"Maybe excited," Teresa piped up.

"Isn't it wonderful!" Jackie's voice was heard in the back of the group.

Everybody started talking at once, all excited.

Caroline looked at the group. "All right, all right. No projects will get done until we congratulate the happy couples." She shrugged.

Mouse looked at her. "Happy news. Celebrate. Beats lift trouble."

"Is something wrong with the lift project? I thought you said you figured out which tunnel walls are hard rock and which are not."

"Did that. But rock changes at every level. Yet will work. You see." Mouse smiled. He moved past her. "Now happy news. Lift later."

Everyone followed Mouse, except Caroline. She just stared at the group.

"Next it will be Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. No wait, the Helpers."

She looked around. She did not want to get trampled by someone else. Odd, now even the pipes were quiet.

Eric should be at the pipes. It was his turn today. She heard footsteps coming her way.

Oh, just give it up and turn around.

She resumed walking back the way she came, going toward the sound of people in front of her. She also heard the sound of people coming up behind her.



Caroline sat on the bench sculpted into the rock and looked out at the Mirror Pool. One of their Helpers had worked with Cullen and Kanin and their children to make this bench. They realized that Vincent, her Dad, loved to come to the Mirror Pool, with her Mom, Catherine, but he was getting older and he did not move as easily as before.

It's just amazing how they made this bench for two. Took them months. Grandfather Jacob would have loved this.

"Caroline?"

She turned to see her Dad standing by the entrance.

"Care to join me, Dad?"

He nodded and sat down next to her.

"You were quiet when Jacob and Linda officially announced the coming birth of their first child. As well as when Charles told the community that he will join with Rachel."

"I nearly got knocked down twice because of the news."

He looked at her.

"And I started to wonder. When is everyone going to leave me alone?"

"About what?"

"Being single."

"They just want you to have a happy life and do not want you to be lonely."

"But I'm not! And I don't need a knight in shining armor to save me, either."

He nodded. "Jamie felt the same way."

"See. She never got married. She entered archery competitions and won many trophies. She had adventures. She is enjoying her life. Does she look unhappy? No."

"I sense that she is happy with how her life is progressing."

"That's right, she's happy. Why is it so hard for people to accept others who don't want a partner and want to be single and free with no kids?"

"Perhaps because we, who have found a person to love, can't comprehend a life without our partner."

"That's just because Mom and you are happy, as well as others. There are many who are not. Who due to culture, peer pressure, religion or whatever, are forced to find someone and then years later get divorced or stay miserable in a sad unhappy union."

He reached over and held his daughter close. "Catherine and I want our children to be happy and loved." He kissed the top of her head. "But I do understand what you are going through. I have been teased as well about my choices. Especially when young. I was also told I would never have a happy life, that what Catherine and I had was only a dream, something that lovers like us will eventually lose."

"That is so stupid. That is why I am not into Romeo and Juliet but into Deal with the Elf King and other happy ever after stories. Especially about two different people of two different worlds. The stories are hard to find, but nowadays they can be found."

"Deal with the Elf King?"

"It's by Elsa Kova. I will let you read it, but it is R-rated. Mom might not approve."

She looked up and noticed a strange smile on her Dad's face. "What?"

"It's all right, I was just realizing that maybe Mom might."

"Dad...." She gave him a look. "You know kids don't want to know what their parents do at night."

They both laughed at the same time.

"Still, I would like certain people just to stop making blind dates and feeling sorry for me. There are only a few who accept me for me. The rest just won't stop, even when I ask them to."

"They should realize you must follow your heart."

"Your mantra. How many times did you tell Mom and us that?"

He grinned.

"Thanks Dad."

"Don't let the opinions of others stop you from living your own life."

"That's true. But it's so annoying." She looked up at him. "Dad, I know the stories about how Grandfather was not pleased with Mom and you being together. It must have been hard for both Mom and you to keep following that dream."

"Yes." He had a far-away look in his eyes.

"But you both did. And here I am." She sighed. "At least I know one thing."

She paused before she continued.

"Jamie is sure glad I came along because now people are stopping from arranging 'meetings' with someone for her and are starting to do it with me."

He chuckled.

"And another thing, too."

"What?" he asked.

"I am going to make sure Cupid is found and arrows and bow removed."

Vincent looked at her. They both erupted into a hearty laugh.

"What is going on here?" Mom's voice was heard.

Caroline got up as Mom moved toward them. Catherine sat next to Vincent, as Caroline moved to stand next to Catherine.

Caroline said, "I am about to attack Cupid."

"Cupid?" Catherine looked at them both. "Is that someone new in the tunnels?" Caroline giggled, as Vincent tried to suppress a chuckle.

"Mom, I am talking about the guy that goes around with a bow and arrows." Catherine got it. "Oh."

"I believe, my love, that we must let Caroline enjoy her single life. She loves being single and she is not lonely. She wants everyone to know this is her path for now and that we must stop trying to find her someone."

Mom and Dad looked at each other. Mom nodded in agreement.

Mom looked at Caroline. "Jamie is the only archer I know around here. And if Cupid is like Kristopher, he is only going to be seen when he wants to be seen."

"Maybe, but I am sure he is hanging around, with all the lovey-dovey announcements going around."

Mom held Dad's hand and gave him a loving look, then turned toward her daughter. "I know you will follow your heart. But, know, I am so happy in love that I want the same for you."

Caroline hugged her Mom. "I understand that, but I don't. At least not now. OK?"

"I will respect your choices, Caroline. You are a confident and successful woman." Catherine paused. "Hard to believe my children are all grown up. I love you, as well as Jacob and Charles, so much."

Dad looked at her. Catherine smiled. "And I love your Father, too."

"Dad, you're safe."

Caroline turned toward the Mirror Pool and had a realization. Sometimes when you love someone so much, whether a lover, a child, or a friend, you want the best

for them. You can't help but try to make things better for them, even if what you want may not be what they want.

"I can ask to the community to please respect your wishes, as their comments are upsetting you." Catherine held her daughter's hand. "And I can also make sure there are no blind dates in your future."



"Thanks, Mom, it's just lately, with love running amok in the tunnels, I have been asked so many times about my love life, did I find anyone, or worse, there is such and such we can set up for a nice dinner meeting."

"And it got to you." Catherine squeezed her hand. "Well, have you also explained yourself to them?"

"Yes, and it's like talking to a brick wall." Caroline looked at Catherine. "I guess they mean well, but if every second or third day some comment or suggestion is made, it can wear you down."

"Well," Catherine let go of Vincent's hand and turned towards her daughter. "You must let me know exactly who. I can politely tell them to give you peace."

Catherine and Caroline looked at Vincent, who had given a soft growl. "And I will make sure your request will be honored."

"Dad, don't go too wild on them."

Catherine chuckled.

Vincent had a quizzical look on his face as he looked at Catherine.

Catherine just smiled and looked up at Caroline. "I believe you will now have a few days of peace. Yet, some will just resume teasing you and asking you about your life. So be firm. Say no, again. But they better be careful. Your Dad can get very protective of his little girl."

Catherine looked at Vincent. "Caroline, I believe when you were a teenager, that besides his special abilities to strengthen out an over-zealous young man, there must have been a shotgun somewhere."

Catherine and Caroline laughed as Vincent quickly said, "I do not have a shotgun."

"No, Dad, you have teeth and claws. Besides, it's just an expression."

"You know, we better see what plans Linda and Jacob have, as they might want to live in the brownstone. Linda might not want to have the baby Below." Catherine paused, deep in thought.

"And there is Charles and Rachel's wedding!" Catherine stood up. "We are going to be so busy."

Vincent sighed. "So much for peace and quiet as children get older."

"DAD!"

Vincent stood up and hugged Caroline. "Don't let things get you down, Caroline. You will get Cupid and I will find that shotgun."

"Oh really? See, I knew it," Catherine said sarcastically.

"Thanks for understanding, Mom, Dad. I don't know why I am so agitated, but I think I better not attack Cupid. He is armed and if he is anything like Jamie..."

Smiling, Caroline looked at her parents. "I'm going to go back to my chamber. But you two should spend the few moments you have to be together. I have a feeling that with everything that is going on, you two won't even have time to read poetry to each other."

Catherine grinned. "She noticed."

Vincent gave a Cheshire Cat smile.

Caroline walked out of the Mirror Pool Chamber and made her way down the passageway. She felt as if she will no longer be pestered by the ones who kept insisting that they help find her someone. That the inquiries about her love life will be put to rest. At least for a few days.



Caroline was with her Mom, at her parents' brownstone apartment, helping her out with the invites to the baby shower for Linda. Jacob and Linda had an apartment upstairs and that was where the shower was going to be.

Catherine, with a look of reflection, spoke up. "I should mention to the community that we should do a small joining party for Rachel. Sort of like a wedding shower Above."

"That would be great, Mom."

"Glad to see how relaxed and calm you are this week." Catherine looked at her daughter as she gathered the completed and sealed envelopes.

Catherine paused before she added, "Celebrations that are Below are much easier to plan for."

"It's been a month and no set-ups for any blind dates, yet..."

"What?"

"It's odd. At first, I hated all the 'I have a nice guy I want you to meet' or even the one 'there is a nice girl that you might like' or all the 'why do you want to be single' questions."

"And now?"

"Well, it's odd, but now, I kind of am missing those pesky inquiries."

"Trust me, after all these special little celebrations and the lift project and not to mention the Winterfest preparations coming up, I think a few might start asking those questions again."

"Well, Mom, talking with Jamie helped. She told me she was upset at those same questions, then she decided not to let them get under her skin." Caroline stretched out.

"It's getting late, where's Dad?"

"He is with Charles at the Mirror Pool."

"Alone? Oh-oh."

Catherine laughed. She touched her daughter's hand. "I think it is much too late for the birds and bees talk with him. Vincent just wanted to be with his son. After all, Charles will take up the responsibility of the community when Vincent gets older."

"God, what you guys told us about the older days of the community. Paracelsus. The passageways that needed to be sealed up for safety reasons. All the dangers of living Below."

"Well, even though we got modernized Uptop and Below, we still must keep this world Below secret as much as we can. We are a safe refuge from the Above world that has technologically advanced, yet still is very violent."

"We are lucky. Mouse has not installed security cameras like Uptop."

They both chuckled.

"Mom, just to let you know. I am open to all possibilities, but I just can't see myself barefoot and pregnant."

"Caroline. I was never barefoot when I was pregnant!"

"You know what I mean."

"I am glad we could help."

"Well, Kipper told me that Julie and David, who were the worst teasers, have been so well behaved, he wonders what 'punishment' Vincent told them he would give them if they weren't. And I wonder too. But it's nice to have a whole month of peace without those pesky questions."

"I wonder what your Father told them, too. Guess we will never know."

"Or Dad might tell you later. I hope he did not growl and show teeth and claws."

"Or maybe he does have a shotgun."

"Well," Caroline grinned. "I am his favorite daughter."

Catherine gave her a look.

"What?"

"You are his only daughter."

"But I am the favorite."

Catherine rolled her eyes. "Not this again."

"What?"

"When you were younger you let Jacob and Charles know in no uncertain terms, that you were Dad's Princess."

"Still am."

"OK, but like I told you at that time...."

"You are Dad's Queen."

The two smiled and then hugged each other.

"You know, Mom. I think I was bothered by those questions, because somehow, inside of me, I was not sure about my choice of a lifestyle. In a way, it did help me to realize something."

"And that is?"

"Stop comparing myself to others and if you make a decision and decide to stick with it, then do so."

"Good advice, hmm..." Catherine paused. "I should have followed a lot of decisions in the past and not let others dissuade me from them. But that was in the past."

Caroline nodded. "Follow your heart and you won't have regrets later."

"I see you made Vincent's favorite saying your own."

"Yes." Caroline looked at her. "Now as an adult, I think I am beginning to understand certain things you both have taught us. But I still disagree on some."

"Shall we go Above and drop these off at the Post Office?"

"Good idea. Let me write a quick note to Dad about where we are and that we will be back soon."

"And put in there that we will buy two scoops of ice cream and no one will look twice."

"What? Mom what are you...."

Catherine blushed. "Something between your Father and me."

"And I will add: thank you for the peace and quiet, and if you need ammunition, I will get some."

They both laughed.

Caroline wrote the note, then placed it on the table. Both walked out of the apartment to go to the Post Office.





The following story was inspired by a prompt on the Cultivating BATBland monthly challenge page that ran from 2015-2018. Sobi's challenges on that webpage are still inspiring new stories today.

http://www.batbland.com/challenges/challenges.htm

From the monthly challenge website: Write a B&B story of max 2000 words including all of these words;

| lovely      | plump           | fetching      |
|-------------|-----------------|---------------|
| proper      | efficacy        | enormity      |
| beautiful   | omit            | discombobulat |
| swell       | loath           | intrude       |
| absurd      | abominable      | cleave        |
| flawless    | balderdash      | beam          |
| unique      | peckish         | eminent       |
| precious    | skedaddle       | accuracy      |
| hullaballoo | thrall          | delightful    |
| scrumptious | winsome         | breathtaking  |
| dandy       | mayhap          | worthy        |
| squabble    | evolve          | solitude      |
| secure      | purpose         | enthralled    |
| contemplate | behalf          | sorrowful     |
| audacity    | thankful        | taught        |
| lousy       | gruesome        | resplendent   |
| embrace     | residency       | dictate       |
| likely      | tangible        | present       |
| inflection  | superfluous     | regardless    |
| pompous     | great (in size) | mimic         |
| sleepy      | gumption        | realm         |



# Bonded Expectations

by Mel



A Vincent and Diana Story



"Are you working on a new case?"

Diana Bennett spun, laying a hand over her heart when she saw the teenage boy climbing down into her loft. The plump infant face she remembered had grown into mirror image of his mother, the beautiful Catherine. Or as her sister might say, he was turning into a fetching young man. Dressed in a blue t-shirt and black jeans, the young Jacob Wells, looked like a normal teen she could have passed on the street except for a tiny layer of dirt crusted along the pant hem. He hung his jean jacket on the coat rack.

With a sigh, she flipped her braided auburn hair back over her shoulder and said, "I have a door you know, Jake."

"The roof is cooler." The winsome and cheeky grin of youth faded as a look of melancholy frustration entered his contemplate blue eyes. He shifted his weight and glanced at the board behind her. "New case?"

"Sorry, just finished this one. The report is now on Joe's desk."

"Did Vincent help?" Jake asked, stepping around Diana to examine the half-covered board of photos and newspaper clippings.

"Yes, your dad was very helpful in this case," Diana said. "Joe is happy we got the killer."

"Yay for Vincent," Jacob muttered.

Diana let the comment pass. Teenage rebellion was natural, and she had seen plenty of children turn to far more terrible devices to achieve that end than coming to vent and want to help on cases. If anything, such actions proved how similar father and son were, seeking to bring justice to an increasing unfair world. A purpose to fulfill. Still there was something in the way that Jake talked and moved tonight that spoke of a different reason for his visit.

"Does your dad know you're here, Jake?" While Vincent had no problem roaming the night streets, she had yet to see him extend that same freedom to his son unaccompanied weather with him or another adult from Below, regardless of his son's age.

Jake shrugged. "Do you want to help with this?"

Jake eyebrows rose. "I thought detectives got into the action."

Diana tossed a couple pages at him. "Get those organized and in their proper place before they make a break for it then."

Jake caught the pages with a grin.

Diana laughed and smiled. How was it that a father and son could bring out her more humorous side? She was praised for her efficacy in her job, but not many people saw the stern and practical detective Bennet's more playful side. Those at the 210 office and even some people Below sometimes teased that she didn't have a funny bone in her body.

"And welcome to the more glamorous, and ninety eight percent of detective work," Diana said.

Jake shook his head almost fondly as Diana turned back to unclipping items from the board.

Over the next half an hour, Diana and Jake worked in a companionable silence. While Diana preferred mostly to work in solitude, there was something about father and son's presence that her willing to open her loft.

"Who was she?" Jake asked, examining one of the pictures.

"She was a...mother of two. Fourth-"

"They were telling it again," Jake said, running a hand through his blonde hair. He plopped down on the couch. "Can't they talk of anything else? Pompous as-"

"Hm," Diana cleared her throat.

Jake shook his head. "I've heard worse from you."

"And your grandfather hasn't forgiven me yet," Diana said.

"Balderdash," Jake said, in a perfect mimic, including inflection, of his namesake, the patriarch of the world Below. Both knew the elder Jacob would forgive Diana nearly anything after all she had done in ensure the world Below remained safe. And most importantly the safe return of his son and grandson.

Diana sat across from him, sympathy began to swell her heart. Like the plays of Shakespeare, the great love story of his parents, Catherine Chandler and Vincent Wells, and their son's birth had become an eminent legend Below. Most of the horrible details were glossed over until it was little more than a unique, but tragic fairy tale. It wasn't absurd to imagine how Jake had come to simultaneously loathe and be thankful for the actual ending of the tale. Growing up in the shadow of a lovely, flawless according to some, saint and the expectations of others would be tough on any child. Diana herself had heard it at various points throughout the years told in excited whispers among the younger kids Below. And each storyteller made a point to never to omit Diana's role in the narrative, even if they weren't her biggest supporters. Indeed, she could envision a time, mayhap in a couple generations, when the tale growing into an innocently turned game of make believe.

"Until I'm eighteen I'm stuck down there."

"Then how are you up here?" Diana asked with a smile. At his pointed look, she gave a half shrug. "Same rules apply Above for kids. It's how adults keep them saf-"

"Safe. Yeah, I know. But you of anyone knows you can't always keep them safe."

Diana nodded. Her work was full of terrible, even gruesome at times, stories, many ending in tragedy or at most tepid happiness, with everyone's lives still changed forever.

"Have you discussed this with your father?" Diana asked.

Jake shrugged.

Diana read the words beneath the simple motion. What was the point in talking when one shared a physic bond with a parent that hid nothing. But feeling an emotion was much different than truly understanding its meaning.

"Could you move into a chamber further away?" Diana asked. All the hullabaloo of community should have been easy to escape within the vast terrain and chambers Below.

"Actually." Jake straightened, meeting her eyes. "Could I come stay with you?"

Diana blinked. The teen certainly had gumption to just ask point blank without any superfluous words. A trait the others Below would most likely attribute to her. While his father and grandfather were wordsmiths, they were not always as direct when they spoke at times.

"Have you talked to your dad about-"

"Come on, Diana, it'll just be for a week. I'm not asking for permanent residency or anything. Your case is done and I..." Jake sighed.

Diana ran a hand through her hair. She didn't want to intrude in a father and son mild squabble. But the teen's sorrowful and pleading gaze pulled at her heart as he sat slouched and defeated on her couch.

"I'll talk to him tomorrow." She tipped her head in his direction. "But you're getting the couch. This case took a lot, and I don't need another lousy night's sleep. And don't be counting on any of William's scrumptious meals."

Jake playfully frowned. "Then I better skedaddle as grandpa says."

Diana shrugged. "Okay, but I'll warn you deal's only open for another minute."

Jake turned back and shook her hand, his grin returning. "Dandy."

Diana laughed and, with an added eye roll, headed toward the kitchen area. Jake's perkish face reminding her she too hadn't eaten all day.



Diana tapped the pipes overhead with a message, again marveling at Pascal's work. What had begun as a mimic of morse code had grown into its own system with complex meanings. Diana glanced at her watch. She didn't have time for labyrinth of tunnels to discombobulate her if Vincent wasn't in the main community hub. She tried to remember the last time she had visited the, at times, resplendent and breathtaking realm beneath the city streets. A case had taken her away last Winterfest and then before that her sister had been ill. Anyone Below would say she was welcomed anytime, but over the years, she had fallen more and more into the natural Helper role where visits were limited to a few times a year, and then even life had kept her away even more. Had it been two years already?

Diana hid her own misgivings. Over the years it had become clear a full romantic relationship would never evolve between them, they remained friendly. And still a part of her felt like an ex-wife coming to speak on behalf of the kid. And while Diana hadn't given him life, the young teenager she had left in her loft, was the son of her heart.

A beam of lantern light drew her eyes to the right before the shadows moved to reveal Vincent walking toward her.

"Jake's fine." The words sailed confidently, but inside she felt like a child getting caught.

"Yes, I know,"

The bond, Diana realized. A bond, she knew the child wanted to cleave from himself while the father, unconsciously, clung to, even after fifteen years, like some tangible lifeline. At one point been enthralled by the concept, but Jake's reaction last night made her rethink her desire to share such a thing with anyone. She valued her privacy too much and no one deserved to see the darkness within her own soul; the light of her own innocence stripped away bit by bit with each abominable monster's mind she willing dove into. Still traitorous butterflies swam in her stomach as she gazed upon the great, big lion protector of the tunnels. From the semi darkness his deep blue eyes seemed to pierce into her.

An awkward silence fell between them. While they had continued to work together on the occasional case, their conversations were stilted and halting otherwise.

Not unlike teenagers then, Diana mused to herself.

"Did he say anything to you, Diana?" Vincent asked. "Lately he seems so...like his uncle Devin. There's a restlessness I don't quite understand."

"Don't understand or can't accept it?" Diana said. "It may not be your intention, but it's what you're doing. Jacob wants more freedom."

Vincent frowned. "He has it. He comes to see you and goes with the other children-"

"Who constantly remind him of the expectations you and everyone else has for him. And only when you deem it safe or good for his education."

Vincent swallowed.

Diana watched as the accuracy of her words had stunned him into silence, taking a moment to contemplate her words. After the tragic loss of his beloved Catherine and the hunt and torment he endured at the hands of Gabriel, Vincent wished for nothing more than his son to remain safe and secure beneath the city.

"You barely seem to trust me with Jake at times," Diana said.

Vincent started and glanced at her. "Diana...there is no one, *no one*, I trust with my son more...than you." He moved to her side and gently laid his hands on her shoulders. "You brought us together and back home."

Diana stiffened. She didn't only want to be remembered for that one case, even if she cherished it more than the others.

"But I never wanted to intrude on your life and when you stepped back, I thought you wanted your space," Vincent said. "Isn't that true?"

Diana looked away. How was she meant to answer that question? She had taken a step back, telling herself she was content as a Helper. It had been expected that she and Vincent would become a couple and she hadn't wanted to place that preassure on him. And yet...

"Diana, I may have a solution."

Diana glanced up at him.

"Now I've heard that sometimes teenagers go on these exchanges for school to expand their horizons," Vincent said.

"That's true. Susan went to France for her exchange in collage."

"I'm not suggesting quite an extreme, but we could do a weekend exchange. Jacob can stay at the loft, and you can stay Below...." Vincent swallowed. "If you want."

Diana's lips lifted in a tentative smile. "I would like that."

Vincent mirrored her own hesitant smile as they gazed into each other's eyes. No longer would they let the past or their fears dictate their lives as they looked towards a potential future.



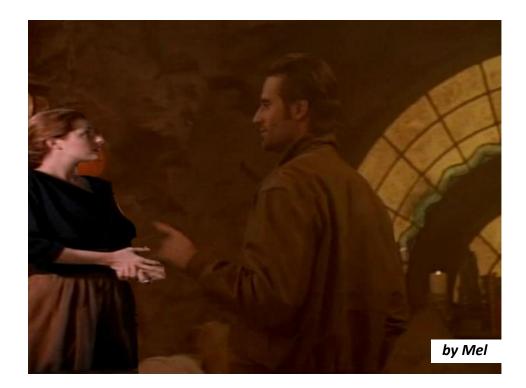
<sup>\*</sup>Illustrations provided by the author.



# Family

by Mel





Diana looked up as a man in his early 40s entered Vincent's chamber. He was dressed in a brown leather jacket, sandy pants and blue shirt.

"Ah, you must be *the* Miss Diana Bennett I keep hearing about," the man said, offering his hand. "Word travels fast around these cramped tunnels."

"Indeed." Diana held out her hand. "And you must be Devin."

Devin grinned, shaking her hand. "Did my rugged charm give me away? Or did you use your great detective powers?"

Diana merely held his hand in a firm grip. "Neither. Vincent told me you were stopping by."





Love Shall Not by Barbara Anderson



# The Last Goodbye

by Cindy Rae



**Classic Season 3** 



Inspired by the above graphic image, created by Barbara Anderson



"A candle loses nothing of its light by lighting another candle" ~ James Keller



"Safe. You're safe, now." Vincent whispered. He set his son gently into his cradle. The months of pain and disaster were over. His child was safe and with him now.

Were it not for the losses Vincent had suffered, he knew this day would be a cause for celebration. As it was...

Jacob kicked a little and then settled down. Blue eyes met blue, as Vincent gently set the small cradle to rocking. *You've endured much. We both have. Tomorrow is another day. Sleep, my son sleep, and forget the horrors we've both seen. Forget, if you can. I know I never will.* 

He stepped away once the baby's eyes began to close. From inside his soft confines, Jacob didn't seem to mind. The blue eyes drifted shut and stayed that way. Vincent remained near and looked down at his child.

His child, and his only living link to the woman he loved.

Beautiful, he thought. You're so beautiful, so perfect... just as you are, Jacob. Your name will be Jacob. In a few days, we'll have a naming ceremony for you, and Father will declare your name to everyone. It's the only gift I have to give you. To name you after the only father I've ever known...

A certain realization struck Vincent anew. *Father*... *I'm a father*, now, truly a father... a father in a way that I never was before.

Through their new Bond, he felt Jacob's infant mind begin to relax, and wander. And then begin to dream.

Let it be a good dream, Vincent prayed silently, feeling his son settle further into the land of slumber. It was a peaceful sensation, at least for now.

In a way, he knew that should have comforted him. He had a Bond again... a Bond with someone who should mean more to him than anyone.

But there was no real comfort in that, at least not right now.

It feels different. It's not the same as with... Catherine.

It was an inevitable comparison, and one he didn't want to think of, or to feel.

The knowledge that he'd never share a Bond again with the woman he loved made the loss of her seem that much deeper.

Catherine...

She was never far from his thoughts. He went to his writing table and dropped heavily into his chair, not meaning to sit down as hard as he did. The heavy wood groaned beneath his weight and gave a warning creak.

*I'm exhausted*, he thought, knowing that he felt strangely wired at the same time.

Out of habit, he tugged his journal over and flipped it to the next open page, but he had no real desire to write there.

Yet he knew he *should*. He knew that the words *should* be flowing, especially on a day as momentous as this one had been... something about having rescued Jacob, with Diana's help... something about having his son home at last, and within arm's reach... something about the sensation of holding his child, without a gun pointed at either of their heads... something about feeling his baby, as it entered the land of dreams.

He was game to try. He picked up his pen.

The blank page stared up at him... and stayed that way... blank.

He sat for a long moment then set the pen down. He closed the journal. The words wouldn't come. Deep down, he feared that might be the case. This had been happening a lot lately.

Perhaps this is another thing I've lost, he thought, the ability to compose my thoughts on paper. It's been slipping for a while now. Ever since... ever since Catherine... ever since she... I can't even think the word.

He sighed deeply, grief and resignation in the sound.

I haven't been able to write as I once did, he admitted to himself. The words used to flow, used to come to me almost spontaneously. Sometimes, I knew what I was going to write before I even sat down. Other times, I'd just look at the blank page, and something would come to me... some feeling, some instinct, some need to explore, or to express...

But now...

I don't know. I blamed it on losing... everything, then, on needing to find Jacob, on having no time for things like a journal, or recording my thoughts. But perhaps that's just the way it is now. Perhaps this too, is lost to me. I don't know...

He replayed the events of the incredible day in his mind... all of them.

Then, he glanced back toward his sleeping son and his mind reached the part of the day when he'd brought the baby into this room for the first time.

He tried to impress the sensation of "home" upon his infant son's mind, knowing that the baby, in all of his short life, had never had one. That Vincent himself, for all his own infant hardships, had had better than Jacob had. So, through their

Bond, he tried to send his child sensations of "safety" and "comfort" and "love," all the words that meant "home," to Vincent.

He hoped Jacob understood.

It was a full minute before he realized what he had said to his son, when he had lain him down to sleep.

"Safe. You're safe, now." The claim echoed, in his too-sensitive ears.

It also echoed within him, inside his battered heart. The words awakened a distant memory of Catherine, almost the most distant one he possessed of her, it being one of their first interactions, ever.

"Safe. You're safe, now."

He'd said those very words, and in almost the exact same tone... and in this very room, to someone else he'd taken it upon himself to protect, to someone who was then, to him, a stranger... a beaten, ravaged stranger.

She had woken up in his bed, injured, blind, and frightened... disoriented and weak. Thanks to a cracked rib, it hurt her to breathe, and she couldn't not do that. Thanks to everything else, it hurt her to think, and she couldn't not do that, either. Her face had been swathed in bandages, and she was terrified.

Catherine...

Her name was like a knife in his heart, a heart he wasn't sure why was still beating. He tipped his head back and closed his eyes. A lone tear slipped down his cheek.

"Safe. You're safe, now."

He'd given her those very words, in his gentlest voice, he'd given them. As far as he could remember, they were the first words he'd *ever* given to her.

A lifetime ago. It was all... a lifetime ago... your lifetime, at least.

It was a harsh bit of reflection.

And now, he'd given the same words to Jacob. He brushed the tear away.

"Safe. You're safe, now."

He lifted his head.

"What a lie that was. What a terrible... brutal lie," he stated, to no one in particular.

"I'm sorry, Jacob," he said to his sleeping son. "You are not safe. No one is. Safety is an... illusion. It's a thing we tell ourselves we have so that we can... sleep at night."

Sleep... the deep impression more than the word came to his mind. For a moment, he thought he'd received it from his son.

He rubbed his face, exhaustion in the gesture. "Sleep? No. Sleep is for you, but not for me. I'm... tired, but awake. Too full of the day to sleep. Too full of... everything."

*Everything...* he thought. What a word that was, considering all that had happened.

He remembered carrying Jacob away from harm, at Diana's urging.

He'd been clear of the room, clear of the madman the moment he heard the gunshot he knew had ended Gabriel's life. His sensitive ears had heard Diana's claim:

"This is Cathy Chandler's gun."

Diana had spared him, had spared making him murder a man in front of his infant son.

So, she'd done the deed herself, as soon as Vincent and Jacob were out of harm's way. She put herself between him and a maniac, a very homicidal one... and then she ended him.

Vincent had no idea what kind of strength that took, and no idea what payment there might be for Diana's part afterward.

The day had contained too much... much too much, in so many ways. There had been a fierce desire to protect his son... despair and hope... fear and victory... redemption and revenge. It was more than any single word could encapsulate.

*Invictus,* Vincent thought.

Invictus, he thought again. Perhaps that's the word I should write. That and nothing more.

Still, he didn't reach for the pen.

He spied his cape, hastily tossed at the foot of his bed.

Perhaps I'll go Above... go for a walk in the park, try to clear my-

The sentence was barely formed, before it was dismissed.

He realized that he couldn't do that, not now. The hour was late, and his Tunnel family were in their beds, just as little Jacob was. Vincent was a father now, a true one of those, and his infant son was dozing a few feet away. He couldn't just don his cape and go Above. He couldn't just leave the baby.

The habit of a lifetime was curtailed, both in his actions and within himself. It was a strange feeling, this new responsibility and all the things it entailed. It was a sensation Vincent knew he was only now discovering.

Or perhaps I'll just stay here, he thought sardonically, remaining right where he was.

He didn't resent the curtailment. He had searched too desperately for Jacob to even vaguely resent the boy's unexpected yet blessed presence in his life, in any way.

It was the newness of this reality that surprised him.

I'm more tired than I thought if I was entertaining the notion of leaving you, he mused, leaning his head back against the chair again.

*Sleep. Rest. Safe. You're safe, now.* Again, the impression of that, more than the actual words, shifted gently across his battered consciousness.

He tried to fall asleep, but after several long minutes, found he simply couldn't.

He lifted his head and reached for his journal, but again found he had no will to write.

What do I say? What do I tell these pages? he wondered. Do I say that I am a father now? Or that I have been a father since... since the night Catherine... that she was taken from me, but I'm only now realizing all that it means, all that it entails?

"I wish you were here," he said, knowing full well to whom he spoke.

Silence answered him. Silence, and the sound of his son's even breathing from inside his cradle.

Perhaps... I am here.

The impression of a softly feminine and familiar presence was unmistakable, as it came into his sensitive mind.

"No. No, you're gone. I searched... everywhere," Vincent whispered. "I couldn't find you... couldn't find you in time."

Not your fault.

"Perhaps it was," he disagreed. "I lost my mind. I lost our Bond. Then I lost... you... everything."

Not your fault. One gift was lost. You found another.

"Catherine... Catherine said that to me," Vincent whispered again, fairly certain he was having an argument with himself.

*I can't go mad... can't lose myself... not again. Jacob... Jacob needs me.* But even as he thought it, Vincent knew this wasn't that. It didn't feel like that. He tried to pierce what was happening.

Catherine?? He concentrated on her with all he had.

You aren't losing yourself. I'm here, Vincent, she answered.

He stayed very still, as if to move would be to chase her away somehow.

Here? You can't be. You're--

I had to stay, she interrupted. Had to make sure you found our child... had to make sure... that you were all right. I couldn't leave before. Now, I can.

"Catherine!" Forgetting all intentions to remain motionless, Vincent stood up from the table, knocking the edge hard enough so that it rattled. The sound set Jacob to stirring.

Shh. You'll wake the baby. He needs his rest. So do you.

The "sound" was louder now, inside his mind. It was definitely Catherine's voice. The voice he'd heard in the Tunnels, weeks ago.

"Catherine," he whispered softly. "My Catherine."

From the corner of his eye, he almost saw her... which was to say he was very aware of her presence.

Don't turn around, she said. You know me. You've seen me once before.

He had. He knew he had... in a dream, after a heartache... in flowing white, in ethereal softness, he'd seen her once before.

"The image of you. The one I carry in my heart," he said, just above a whisper.

Yes.

Jacob stirred again.

Vincent remained still until the baby settled, then sat back down in the chair, aware that the image of Catherine was standing just to his right, and a little behind him.

I love you, she said.

As I love you, he swore. How I miss you. How I... don't think I can do this without you.

He "felt" her reply, as much as he heard it.

You must. You don't have a choice. I can't stay, Vincent.

But you're here! Please!... He almost rose again but willed himself to stay seated.

He was rewarded in his stillness by sensing that she drew a little closer. He felt a world of sympathy from her.

I can't. You know I can't. I have to go. My mother... my father... they're waiting for me. Love... in all its forms... exists, Vincent.

He remembered those words. He remembered saying them, once. He couldn't remember why he had, but he knew he had. That somehow, it had seemed important.

I think... I said that, once, he replied. It was so long ago.

Did you? she asked. He almost got the impression she was teasing him in some subtle way. Or did you just live your entire life believing it? I learned it from you.

It cannot be taught, only experienced, only... understood.

Vincent thought he almost felt the ethereal presence smile, just behind and beside him.

We... loved. We have a son, she prompted.

Vincent's blue eyes went in the direction of their sleeping child.

He's beautiful, so beautiful, Catherine.

I know. I've been watching. He's safe, Vincent. And you're safe.

He knew he had to disagree with her.

There is no safety, he said swiftly. If I've learned nothing else—

The next thing you'll be telling me is... there is no love, she argued back.

### Catherine,--

There is, Vincent. For me, there was and is... love, in all its forms. It exists. And it doesn't end, Vincent. It never ends. Death doesn't end it. Nothing does. Nothing can. That's its strength. Love is the only thing that never truly dies. You take it with you. You carry it, always. That's its power. That's its goodness. The love you give, the love that's given to you... it stays with you... always.

He remembered the white light he'd once snatched her from, the day she'd drowned. It was shining and beautiful and... full of love. Her mother had been there, and her father, waiting for her... and others, so many others. He'd felt only love from them. Love for her. Love... and destiny.

And you... you have to go to that love, he said, understanding. He didn't like it, but he understood it.

*I have to go to that love*, she agreed gently.

Vincent hung his head, acknowledging it. You do. I know you do, he said.

And... so do you, she replied.

The head came back up, quickly. What? No. I can't leave him, Catherine. Not yet. Not even to be with you. He knew it was true.

He felt her shake her head in negation.

I don't mean that way. I mean <u>here</u>. You have to stay <u>here</u>. You have to stay here and... find love again. A love that exists. In some other form, yes, but love, just the same.

Ah. So that's what she'd meant when she'd referenced him saying it. Not the love in her passing, but the love...

Vincent's stubborn streak rose in him. Not for the world would he endure that hurt again.

No. It was a flat, emphatic denial.

Vincent...

I'll love our son. I'll love your memory. Don't you dare ask for mo—

Then you doom what we were. She cut him off.

He spread his hands in a Gallic gesture. I have no idea what you—

If you never love... our story has only a tragic ending. One that means 'Don't you dare reach for love, because it won't be enough... because it will hurt you,

will break you.' Is that what you want? Is that what you'll teach Jacob about love? That it has a terrible cost? Too terrible to even reach for it?

Vincent shook his head. I have no idea what I'll teach Jacob about love.

Her soft voice felt unbelievably close to his ear. How about that love, in all its forms, exists? Even through loss. Even through pain and tragedy. Even through disaster... it finds a way.

Catherine... He wasn't sure how to refute her, or even if he should.

Love heals. It's redemptive. A new love... it builds anew that which was lost. Even ... even what <u>you</u> lost.

No.

Yes. Her reply was as short as his was.

"Is that why you came here?! To tell me I must love again?!"

The moment Jacob squirmed and began to fuss, Vincent realized he'd said – and nearly shouted - the words aloud.

#### Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

It was more than just a sound in his mind. It was a sound that swept through the entire room, and immediately comforted the baby. After a few moments, Jacob settled back down. Vincent felt him begin to dream again. Their child was happy.

Vincent, however, was not.

You are mad if you think that's the way it will be for me, he thought to her... loudly.

Again, he felt her smile. This time, almost subtly.

You're made for it. You've always worried that you aren't, but you are. Your heart... it's built for love, my love. It just is. Fight it if you think you have to. But love will win, Vincent. It always did with you... with me... with us. That's our legacy. That love wins. That nothing, not even death, can stop it.

Vincent pondered her words. It was difficult to argue with her when proof that he could love a woman with his heart, his soul, and even his body was lying in a crib, smiling as he dreamed.

She won't be you, he argued, aware that he was somehow losing this fight.

No, she won't. And I'm not saying "right now," the spirit beside him conceded, content in her upcoming victory. In a year, or two... maybe sooner. Who knows?

All I'm saying is... don't push it away, Vincent. Don't be afraid of it. She'll wait for you. But don't make her wait too long. Don't make her wait forever, competing with a ghost.

It won't be the same, he thought to her.

It's all right that it isn't, she returned sanguinely. Love in all its forms, remember?

He sighed, knowing he couldn't begrudge her the capitulation she clearly wanted.

*Perhaps... I'll try not to fight it,* he thought. She would get no better than that from him.

*Thank you.* He felt her smile, again, as he sensed somehow that he'd just surrendered. He felt more confused than ever

Are you telling me all of this because... do I know her? Do you?

The smile turned as close to a laugh as Vincent could sense.

I'm not telling. But... you could do worse than the woman who saved our son... and you... from a terrible fate.

Diana! He seized upon the name.

She is... words failed him. How to describe the incredible woman who had saved him, saved all of them? Insightful? Intuitive? Relentless? Compassionate? Brilliant? Brave? A friend? None of it was "love." But Vincent was too smart a man to know that it couldn't become that, in time.

She is... he tried again.

I know, Catherine replied. Even if you don't quite know yet, I do. It's all right, Vincent. It's all right if it's Diana. It's all right if it isn't. You'll find your way. You always do.

Now it was Vincent's turn to almost chuckle aloud. He leaned back in the chair. It allowed him to see her just a touch more clearly. The flowing sleeves of her gown billowed a little.

If there's one thing I think I've never done, it's "find my way." You were... chance, a twist of fate. "Find my way?" Stumbled onto it, yes. Wandered into it. Wondered about it, chanced upon it, written pages about it... but 'find it?' That would require a plan. And I don't think I've ever had one of those. Not when it comes to love.

Her tone was almost indescribably sweet. Then... don't have one. Not now. See where life takes you. It took you to me. As you say, that was just chance. See where it takes you again... where it <u>keeps</u> taking you.

"I'll try," he whispered, aware that he'd just made her some sort of promise, no matter how loose a vow it was.

That's all I'm asking. We were more than just a... a cautionary tale against falling in love.

He was awed that she'd come to tell him that. To tell him that if he refused to love again, if he couldn't... then that's what their story might mean to some.

We were. We were more than that... much more.

He loved her with all his heart. He knew that in some ways, he always would. It pleased him to know that when the grief softened, when it became more muted, the love would remain.

We are not a cautionary tale. We're one for taking impossible chances... and succeeding, he replied.

He felt her approval. Ah. So perhaps that's what you'll tell our son someday.

Perhaps I will. He knew he would... someday.

He felt her step back from him and hated the sensation.

And now... you know it's time, she said.

He did.

Catherine...

They both knew he was about to try and delay her.

I can't keep that baby asleep for much longer, Vincent.

Vincent struggled for the right words. Don't... Don't go... Catherine...

Vincent... I love you. But if I stay... even if I could, and I can't... you'd <u>never</u> heal. You'd never move on from this place, right now. You'd always be caught between, like I am, right now, between this world and the next.

Would that be so bad? His heart forced him to ask it.

Her reply was delivered in tones of complete kindness and love. You'd be caught and trapped. You'd never be whole again. I'd never want that for you, she replied.

I... I don't know what I want, he said honestly.

It's all right that you don't. Want me to be at peace, she said. I can be. And one day... in the here and now... so can you.

I... I'm not sure...

All will be well, she comforted. It's all right, my love. This will be our last goodbye, I promise. The next time I see you... it will be 'Hello'... many years from now.

*'Hello.' What a beautiful word,* he thought to her. He could imagine her, inside a doorway full of light, her arms stretched out to him in welcome.

It is beautiful. I'll tell Daddy you said 'hello,' she replied.

He knew she was leaving him. There was loss in that. But this time, there was something else. Something like acceptance. Something like... love.

Until our next "hello," then. I love you.

I know. I know you do. Vincent... Remember what you know... All that you know. Remember love...

And with that, and an errant breeze that flickered the candles and shouldn't have been down here, he knew she was gone.

Vincent sat for a long moment, then rose from the table and went over to check on his sleeping son. The boy still dozed peacefully, in spite of Catherine's concerns. Carefully, he pulled a soft, crocheted blanket up over the proof that he and Catherine had loved... in every possible way.

"I love you," he said to Jacob, truly allowing himself to feel it for the first time. Fear had kept it banked. Fear that he'd never find the baby, or that if he did...

"I love you, Jacob."

The tiny spark grew to an ember, and it warmed a previously cold place in Vincent's heart, one that had known too much loss, and too much pain, for the better part of the last year.

"Love, in all its forms, exists. You have to remember that. You have to ... remember love."

Whether it was from the words, or just the sensations they shared through their Bond, from inside the crib, he felt Jacob stir a little and almost awaken.

You've had a hard day. We both have. Sleep. Sleep. You need your rest.

He wasn't sure if it was his words, or just the boy's natural inclination, but be felt Jacob settle. Then, he felt him begin to dream once more. It felt good, for both of them.

"Sleep well," Vincent whispered. "Dream of your mother... of love. You *are* loved... so much... so much, Jacob. My son."

Vincent sighed and watched his child doze peacefully, for several long moments. There was peace in the stillness, a kind of peace that filled Vincent's soul. When he was satisfied that Jacob wouldn't stir again, Vincent took a step back.

Once more, some part of him wanted to go up into the park, even though he knew he couldn't for now.

*Later,* he promised himself, not knowing quite when that might be.

Still, he was restless and too full of all the things that had just happened... and of all the things that had happened before that.

Did I imagine her? he wondered. Like I did before, when I dreamed of her? Or was she as real then as she was a few minutes ago? Was I arguing with myself? Or...

His head spun. He didn't know. He suspected that perhaps that he would never know for certain. He also knew that his heart was nowhere near ready for love again. Not now, at least.

Catherine's words came back to him.

But... in a year... perhaps two...?

His battered heart was still broken, his grief too fresh, and the pain inside was still too raw. Most of him recoiled against the thought of love, even in a year or two.

But part of him didn't. And he was canny enough to know that that was a good thing.

*I was never sure which one of us was more stubborn*, Vincent thought of his love. The barest hint of a smile ghosted his lips. *Perhaps now, I know*.

The smile felt foreign. But at least it didn't feel forced. And inside his griefstricken heart, he felt something good... something that almost felt like the beginning of healing. He returned to his chair, and this time, sat down in it more gently.

He flipped open his journal and picked up his pen, feeling the familiar urge to share all that he was thinking in the one place he'd always done that. This time, words felt like they actually wanted to flow.

The blank page stared up at him.

Usually of late, this was when he closed the journal and put it aside, either unable to force the words out, or not wanting to share the darkness of his thoughts, or not willing to hope for the light.

But this time, he didn't do that. This time, he put pen to paper.

The first words he wrote surprised even him:

Her name... is Diana...



No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~ Cindy



Many thanks to Barbara, for her gift of inspiration. We are still, after thirty-five years, all a part of each other.









by Barbara Anderson



