

Beauty and the **B**east 33rd Anniversary 2020



Together Forever Volume IV:
Two Hearts One Destiny

TreasureChambers.com

September 25, 2020

This volume is dedicated to the
dreamers





by Judith Nolan

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Beauty and the Beast



33rd Anniversary 2020

Together Forever
Volume III

TreasureChambers.com

September 25, 2020

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



A Treasure Chambers Publication

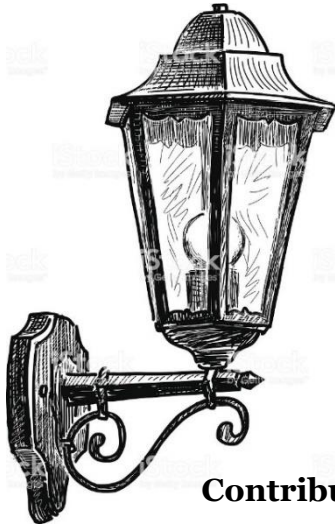
Acknowledgements

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Allison Duggins
Barbara Anderson
Cindy Rae
Janet Rivenbark
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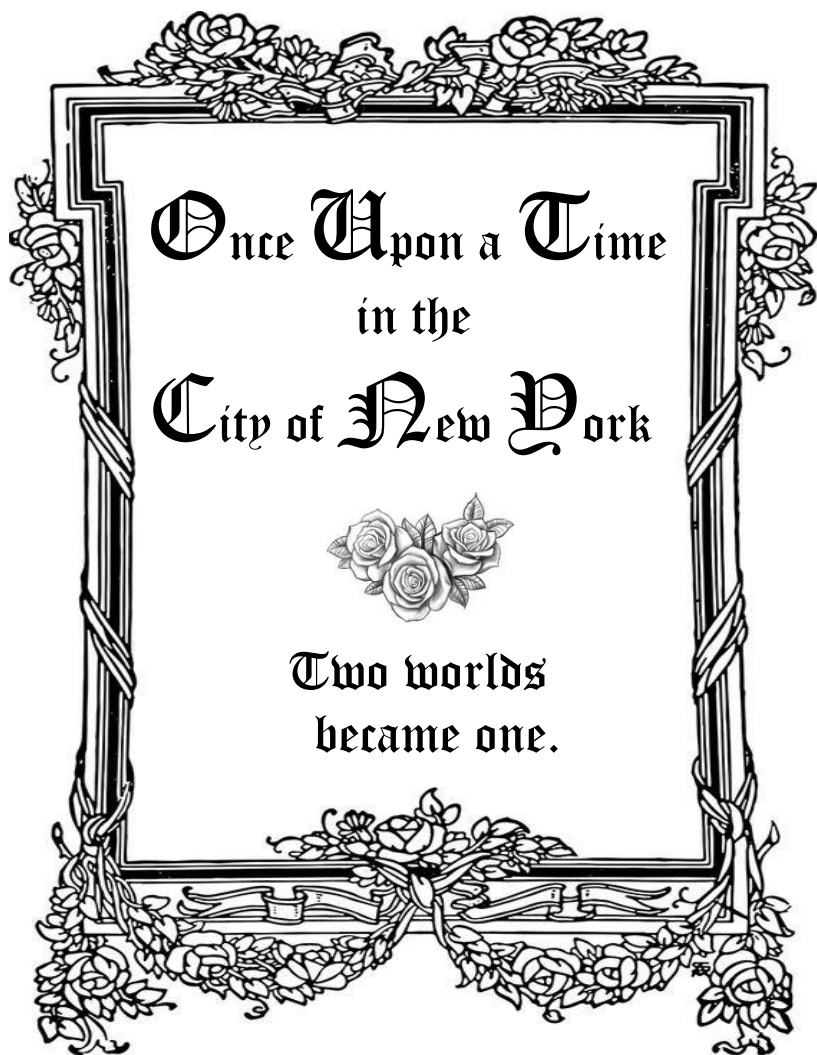
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Wayne Kelley and Anna Deavers Kelley



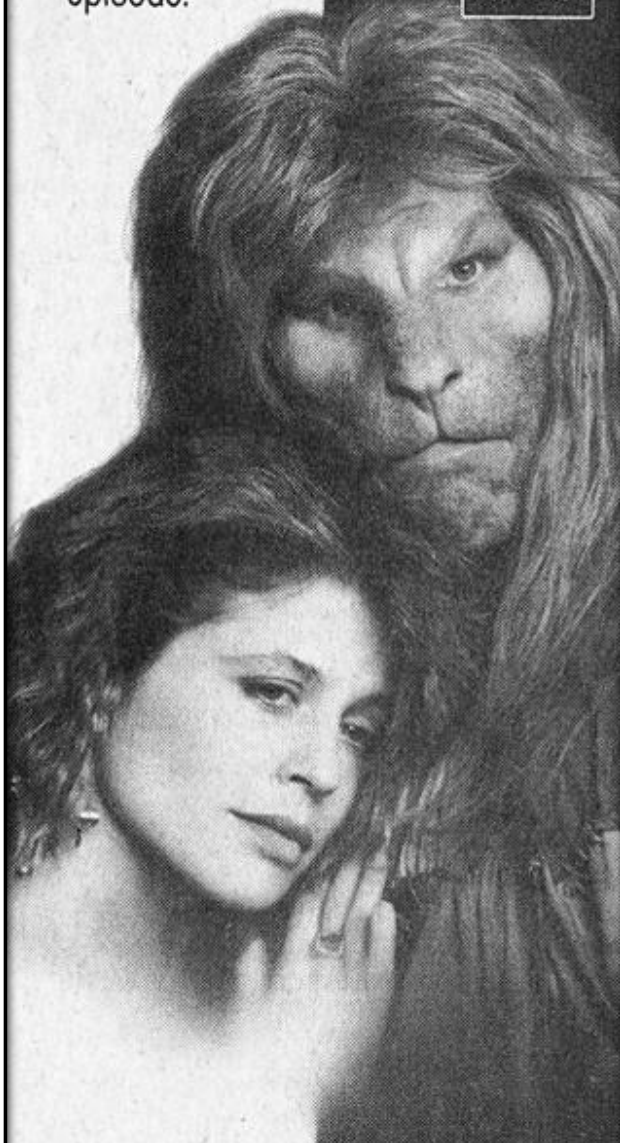
Contributing Artists

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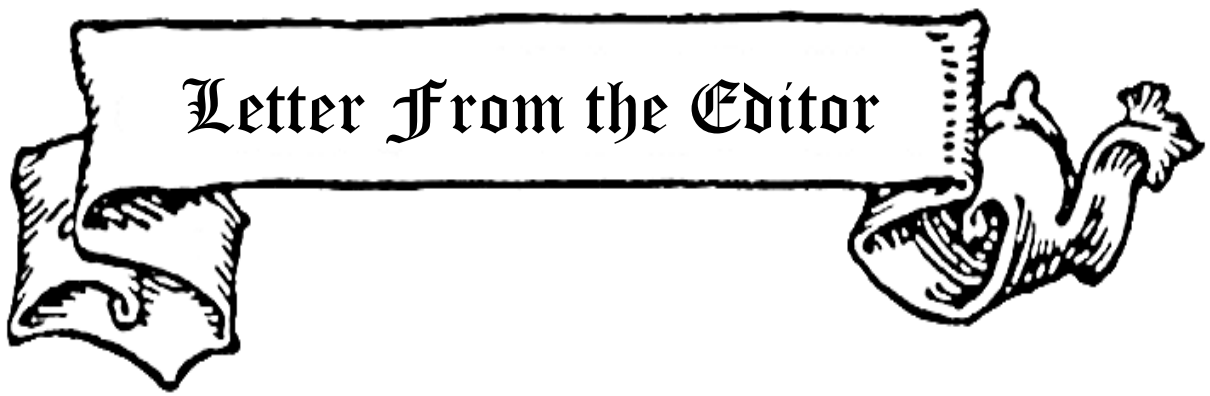
A special night.
A different time.
An unforgettable
episode.



Beauty and the Beast

10PM
CBS 
3, 7, 13, 21

Letter From the Editor



2020 has been a hard year for everyone... one that has been filled with worldwide troubles that none of us could ever have imagined or predicted. It has been a year of illness, heartache, and tragedy for some... a year of fear and financial insecurity for others, and a year of loneliness and isolation for all. This has been a year we are all ready to see come to an end. There is not one of us who hasn't been affected in some way.

If there was ever a year when we needed a free zine, *this is that year.*

We may not be able to gather in person, but our Tunnel World is always here when life just gets a little too hard to handle. The Tunnels are a place we can go to when we need a break from the stark realities of life.

When you need to find a safe place to rest from it all, run, do not walk, to the Tunnel World for a little while, and bask in the romance and the beauty of our beloved show. Even when we are physically apart, we can still be a light in this darkness for each other, as long as we always remember...

*We are all part of one another... one family... one community.
Sometimes we forget this, and so we meet here each year
to give thanks to those who have helped us... and to remember...
even the greatest darkness is nothing, so long as we share the light.*

I humbly thank all the authors and artists who have generously shared their talents to make this year's zine possible. I applaud all of the Dream Keepers who have boldly and bravely written their own stories.

As Father once said:

*The darkness... almost engulfed us this year, but our unity...
gave us strength. Our shared light... showed us the truth.
As we part for another year, let us remember that darkness is only the
absence of light... and all winters end.¹*

This zine is our way of sharing a little bit of light with you, lifting up your hand as you in turn lift up the hands of others. We all share equally in this circle of light we call the BATB fandom.

May it always be so.

~Barbara Anderson



¹ Dialog from BATB Season 2 Episode 4 Dead of Winter

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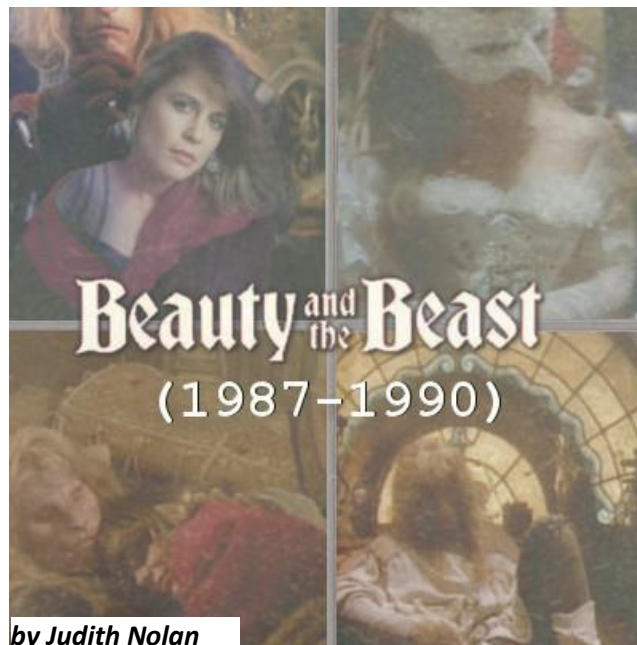
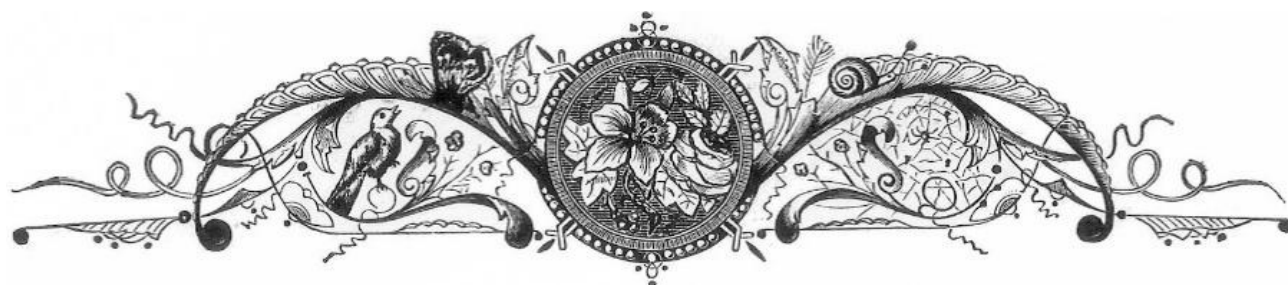


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by Judith Nolan





Cover Art by Barb Gipson

Barb Gipson is an exceptional, incredibly talented artist who has shared her gifts with this fandom for many years. Her marvelous art has appeared in more than forty **Beauty and the Beast** fanzines. Today, her breathtaking art continues to capture the imagination of fans fortunate enough to get their hands on some of those zines.

Great art isn't just a wonderful image... great art evokes feeling. Great art tells a story complete. You look at it and you get the distinct feeling that you know the beginning, the middle, and the end of a wonderful tale. Barb Gipson captures this better than almost anyone. And in that sense, her pictures are worth far more than just a thousand words.

Any author who has been blessed to have Barb Gipson's work in their story has had an easy time of it. The tale was half told by the illustration.

Portraits are hard. The artist doesn't have the freedom to "make something up." The person looks like they do. The nose and eyes are a certain shape, and have to be drawn that way. Good portraits are even harder because they present the subject in a certain moment in time. They have depth and expression. But great portraits, like Barb Gipson's? Through them you can all but tell what the subject is thinking.

Portraits of Vincent abound. It's no small thing to capture that amazing face. But Barb's portrayals of Vincent are a cut above. I look at one, and I don't just know that "it's him", I know what he's feeling. Happy, sad, content, concerned... Barb's images always convey the emotion of the character in that moment. The more of her work you see, the more you realize how much range she has in this area.

Barb's pictures are often vignettes, ones that leave the reader free to imagine the story.

Like a photograph, Barb Gipson's images capture the characters in the act of both "doing something" and "being something." Not every artist has that gift.

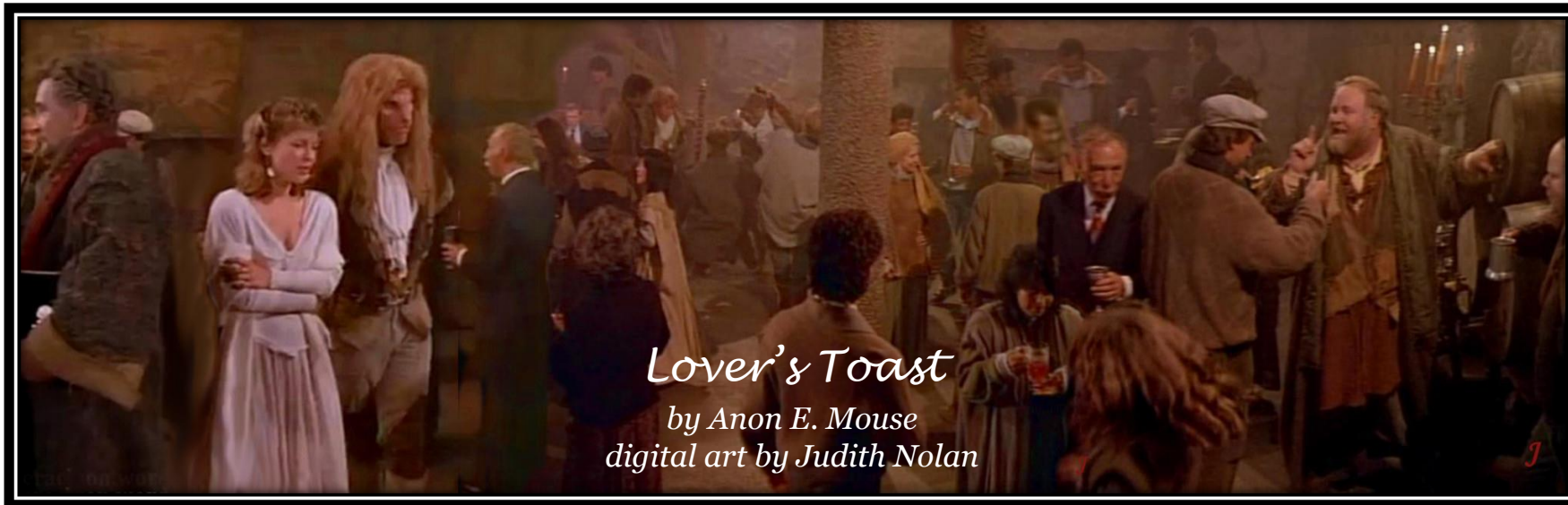
The problem with most portraits is that they are a good representation of the face, but often not a good representation of emotion. The character is facing you. They look like they do. And if the image captured strikes us as "accurate" in its detail, we say it's a good drawing, and that it is.

Barb takes you a step further. In her drawings, you not only know who you're looking at, you know that they've just "done" something, and they're about to do something else. She hasn't just captured a representation of a person. She's made them dynamic, and whole. A life is being lived on that formerly plain, flat, white little piece of paper.

There's magic in that.

Barb Gipson has a way of conveying "tone" in nearly every one of her drawings. What a TV show gets to develop using background music, lighting, and dialogue, she has to show using only a pencil and a piece of paper. Those pages are "silent." Yet you feel the spoken word and music in them, always.

Thank you, Barbara for the light you have shared, and continue to shine in this fandom.



Lover's Toast

by Anon E. Mouse

digital art by Judith Nolan



*Do you love a party, surrounded by your friends?
Do you crave a story of a love that never ends?
Then gather round the table here and sip a cup of ale.
And listen as we weave for you a beauty of a tale.*

He loved her with his every breath.

She loved him heart and soul.

We cheered when he would hold her close.

We sighed when he would go.

*We've kept the dream for all the years,
since the writers called it 'fin.'*

*For we all knew it wasn't so,
and love must always win.*

*So, hold your glasses high my friends, and toast to lovers true
And feast upon the magic we've created here for you.*





True Beauty

by Barbara Anderson



Gazing lovingly into Catherine's eyes, Vincent tucked the hair behind her ear, exposing the scar on the side of her face.

"You're still as beautiful as the night we met," he whispered. She chuckled softly.

"Why do you laugh?"

Grinning, Catherine replied. "The night we met, I was unconscious, covered with bruises, and my face was slashed and bleeding. I should hope I look a bit better than *that*."

"You know what I mean."

"What exactly *do* you mean?" she asked.

"*Your* beauty runs much deeper, Catherine. *True Beauty* shines from within. *That* never fades."





by Judith Nolan



Drabbles 2020

by Judith Nolan

Illustrations submitted by author



“If I Lay Here...”



“If lay here... If I just lay here... would you lie with me and just forget the world?”

Catherine sighed. From her player, the song sifted throughout her being. She curled onto her side above the bedcovers.

Rain splattered across her balcony windows, at odds with the warm summer’s night. Her eyes drifted to the un-curtained panes, but there was no shadow of another, beyond.

“Vincent...” She sighed, long and low.

She drew her knees closer towards her chest. The scant confines of her cotton nightie seemed too much. She felt tempted to discard it.

“Vincent...” she breathed again.

“I Don’t Know...”



don't quite know how to say how I feel..."

Vincent ignored the rain. His cloak was sodden, but his whole focus was on the song playing within Catherine's living room.

The apartment was in darkness. He was well aware his love was in bed. The restlessness of her soul had called to his through the night and the deluge. The truth of the words he could barely hear carried a great deal of meaning. He could not say how he felt. The words remained locked deep within him.

He pressed one hand against the drenched window, fingers spreading slowly...

“They’re Not Enough...”



hose three words are said too much... They're not enough..."

Catherine sat up, hands reaching for the hem of her nightie. In the same breathless moment, she heard a faint tapping on the window of her living room.

She stilled in disbelief. The tapping came again, more imperious this time.

“Vincent...” she breathed, still not quite believing, as she hurried from her tangled bedclothes and into the lounge.

He was there, leaning against the panes of her windows, his shadow full and strong against the drowned city lights.

Her fingers unsteady, Catherine unsnapped the lock and the doors flew inwards...

“I Need Your Grace...”



need your grace to remind me to find my own...”

“Catherine...!” Vincent caught her as she began to stumble backwards. He kicked the doors shut again with his heel.

His wet hands clung warmly to the soft flesh of her upper arms, even as his darkened eyes devoured the beauty of her, clad only in the flimsy nightie. He would’ve needed to be made of stone not to notice.

“I should get dressed...” she murmured, understanding his sudden tenseness.

It was the first time she’d felt so uncomfortable dressed like this, in his presence.

“Yes...” he breathed, without conviction.

“All That I Am...”



ll that I am. All that I ever was, is here in your perfect eyes, they’re all I can see...”

“You’re soaked,” Catherine whispered, wriggling free of his slackened grasp.

“Here...” She snatched up a folded throw from a nearby couch, intending him to take it and discard his sodden cloak.

Vincent accepted it silently, only to unfold it and draw it around her slender shoulders, covering her beauty from his gaze. Catherine grimaced sadly at his courtly gesture, even as she pulled the soft cashmere folds close beneath her chin.

“You’re still dripping on my carpet...” she commented softly.

“Never Change For Us At All...”



don't know where, confused about how as well. Just know that these things will never change for us at all...”

Vincent shrugged wordlessly from his cloak, tossing it onto the step leading up to the French doors. He turned back to her, his inner turmoil still obvious in his expression. To ease the mood Catherine reached to turn on a nearby lamp.

“Don’t...” Vincent stopped her intention with a firm hand on her wrist.

“Why not, Vincent?” She looked up at him through her lashes.

“Because... in the dark... I find some things easier to say...” he managed, hesitantly.

“Forget the World...”



f I lay here... If I just lay here... would you lie with me and just forget the world?”

“What is it, Vincent? Tell me. What do you find so difficult to say?”

He exhaled roughly. Seeming beyond his conscious control, his broad palms settled again on her upper arms, sliding up to her shoulders. She didn’t flinch or pull away, as the cashmere shawl was drawn gently down from her shoulders.

“If we lay here...” His eyes strayed to the chintz couch beside them. “If we just lay here... would you lie with me and just forget the world...?”

Snow Patrol

"Chasing Cars"²



*We'll do it all, everything on our own.
We don't need anything or anyone...*

*If I lay here.
If I just lay here.
Would you lie with me and just forget the world?*

*I don't quite know
How to say
How I feel*

*Those three words
Are said too much
They're not enough*

*If I lay here
If I just lay here
Would you lie with me and just forget the world?*

*Forget what we're told
Before we get too old
Show me a garden that's bursting into life*

*Let's waste time
Chasing cars
Around our heads*

*I need your grace
To remind me
To find my own*

*If I lay here
If I just lay here*

² Snow Patrol **Chasing Cars** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NINe6ZCRgBQ>

Would you lie with me and just forget the world?

*Forget what we're told
Before we get too old
Show me a garden that's bursting into life*

*All that I am
All that I ever was
Is here in your perfect eyes, they're all I can see*

*I don't know where
Confused about how as well
Just know that these things will never change for us at all*

*If I lay here
If I just lay here
Would you lie with me and just forget the world?*

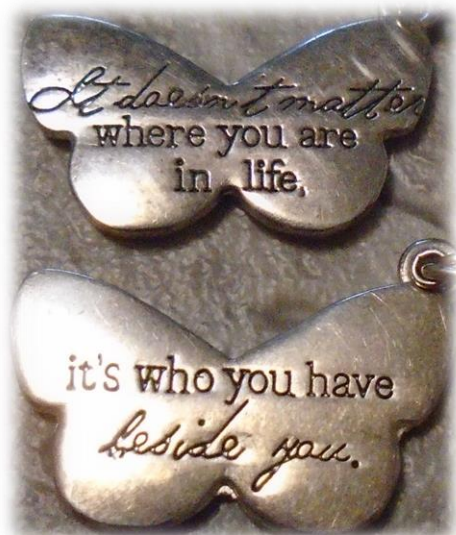


by Judith Nolan



Who You Have Beside You

by Cindy Rae



Sometimes, a vignette is inspired by a simple, cast off thing. This was such a one. Many thanks to Angie, for sharing what she finds.



“You’re about to be married, my son. I could wish for you no greater blessing than that.”

Vincent kissed the familiar forehead of his only son. As the sandy blonde bangs were ruffled by the kiss, Vincent had a slight feeling of déjà vu. *How many times did I kiss Catherine like this?* he wondered, loving his child... his child who was now a man, and who would be meeting his bride in less than an hour.

He brushed a second kiss across the same terrain, loving the feeling of the silky hair beneath his lips. *How many times, when we were new... and when we weren't?* he mused.

“Blessing indeed,” Jacob agreed, gratefully accepting his father’s embrace. “I love you, Father.”

Vincent stepped back and reluctantly let Jacob go. In many ways, he was the image of his mother. Sandy hair fell from a side part, his jaw was familiarly firm, and he had the same fair color of skin.

Catherine...

“You’re thinking about her again,” Jacob added wisely.

There was no sense in denying it. “Always... I am always thinking of her. She’s always with me, Jacob, just as you are.”

Vincent touched the by now ancient pouch that hung over his heart. The leather was worn, and shiny in spots, the holes where the leather thong threaded through had been pulled large by age and frequent tuggings. It had been made by Catherine Chandler’s hands, and for that, it was at least as precious as the rose that still sat ensconced inside it.

“I think of her... especially in times of joy. That will never, not be true,” Vincent stated. He looked down at one of the very few mementos he carried of Jacob’s mother, and cradled the pouch reverently.

Vincent’s words made the younger man solemn. “I’m sorry, Father. When I think of how much I’ll have, how much Linda and I will have... the... the things you didn’t get, that you never got to enjoy...” His voice trailed off, wistfulness in his tone.

Blue eyes met blue, as Vincent shook his head. “And what is it you think you’ll have that I have not, Jacob?” Vincent asked.

Where to begin with such a list? Jacob shrugged, the gesture lifting the tailored fabric of his morning coat. “Much... so much. A honeymoon. A chance to see the woman you love with her hair, gleaming in the sunlight. The freedom to go anywhere you like with her. To do... anything... and everything.”

Vincent’s memories turned back to one of the few days he’d seen his Catherine’s hair bathed in sunlight. It had been November 1st of the first year he met her; the day after Halloween. The sun was coming up just beyond the 59th Street bridge, and early morning light gleamed on Catherine’s honeyed tresses. She looked young, happy, and impossibly luminous.

And... *his*. In some small way, she looked like she was his. She told him she wanted to show him the beauties of her world.

But you did. He told her as much, and he meant it.

And then, in time, she gave him a beauty all his own. A son. A beautiful son. One with skin like hers and eyes like his. He could never repay her for that... for any of it. Not that repayment was possible.

"I saw your mother in the sunlight," Vincent said, much to Jacob's obvious surprise. "Down by the water." The deep blue eyes looked back to a memory Vincent could clearly see, even if Jacob couldn't.

"The sun was just coming up, laying a path on the water. At dawn, it was. There was an errant breeze, toying with her hair, and she looked... more beautiful than I think I'd ever seen her. It was... transformative," Vincent added, fussing with Jacob's cravat. No matter how many times he tried to teach his son how to tie the knot properly, the boy never seemed to learn.

Boy. Not a boy. A man, now. A man about to take a wife. A man about to take a chance... on love... on fate... on... everything.

"I bet it was," Jacob replied softly, knowing his father carried every memory of his mother close. "I just wish--"

"Don't." Vincent shook his head, saying the word as gently as he could. "Don't feel sorry for me, Jacob. Sorry for us. Don't wish your life was limited, because mine was. I don't want that for you. It's something your mother would never have wished for you. And we both need to honor her today. Today, above all days."

"Because her courage made everything possible?" Jacob asked, knowing the answer before he even posed the question.

"Because her courage made everything possible," Vincent agreed, smoothing the ends of the cravat inside his son's vest. "There. Now, you look like a respectable bridegroom."

Jacob brushed the fabric down, instinctively. "A bridegroom. In some ways I still can't believe it's about to happen for us. I love her, Father. I love her so much."

Vincent smiled a small smile, age deepening the lines near his mouth. "Does it seem like a dream, sometimes?" he asked, knowing it did.

"Better," Jacob answered, sounding so much like Vincent once had, that the elder Wells couldn't help but smile even wider.

Vincent tied his own cravat. "When I look back on my life... I divide it into two halves. All the years before I met your mother... and all the years after," Vincent said, deftly working the cloth.

“It’s not that all the years before were sad... or even that all the ones after were without pain. It’s just... it’s just how it is,” he concluded, unable to explain it any better than that. “I think you’ll do the same.”

Jacob nodded, as he watched the man who never used a mirror tie the silky white fabric, perfectly.

“You know, we’re getting married again, tomorrow, Up Top, with her people. But I want you to know that this is the only wedding day I’ll mark, to that Linda and I already agreed. No matter what it says on the marriage license, *this* is our wedding day. This day. This one. With you.”

Vincent was touched. There had been no wedding for him and Catherine. There simply hadn’t been.

“I’ll hold this day as precious... *always*,” Vincent replied.

“So, will we,” the young man vowed.

He lifted his chin as he said it, and the stubborn look and the angle at which he held his head were so his mother’s, that it nearly made Vincent cry.

He cleared his throat. “Eric tied the rings to the pillow? Firmly?” Vincent hoped he disguised the regret in his voice. Weddings always made him a bit somber, not unlike the time he looked over at Catherine during Henry and Lin’s. He was determined that this one wouldn’t make him sadder than it was already destined to. *You’re not losing a son. You’re gaining a daughter. A beautiful, brilliant woman. Not like Catherine, no one could ever be like Catherine... but beautiful, still. Inside and out.*

“I checked this morning. He swears he did,” Jacob answered. Eric’s son, Adam, was acting as ring bearer, while Eric was Jacob’s best man.

Vincent tugged on his coat. It was deep blue, and somewhat military in style. It would do for the father of the groom. “Eric is a good man with a fine son. I don’t think either of them will disappoint you,” Vincent said, remembering the first time he’d ever laid eyes on Eric: He was a skinny, bespectacled boy, asleep on the sandy tunnel floor. Now, he was happily married, and a father of twins, Adam and Juliet.

Time went on. No matter what, time went on. No matter what we did or didn’t do. The sorrows we faced, or the joys. No matter what, time went on, and today came, Vincent thought.

“Thank you for giving away the bride,” Jacob added. “Considering her father has no idea...”

“It is an honor to do it,” Vincent brushed the thanks aside, as he buttoned the coat over a dark vest.

They each removed a rose boutonniere from a small white box. Jacob’s was red. Vincent’s was white.

“I watched your mother plant the bush these came from,” Vincent recalled. “She was ... intense... working there, on her balcony, shoveling soil into a pot. Determined... in a way I rarely saw her.”

Jacob knew the story, but he let Vincent tell it again, anyway.

“She didn’t see me standing there for the longest time, so intent she was on her task. Her hair was pulled back, in a way she almost never wore it. She looked... beautiful, and stubborn.”

“That’s the pot calling the kettle ‘stubborn,’” Jacob replied. Vincent had hardly been the most tractable parent on some things.

“She pricked her finger on a thorn,” Vincent ignored the subtle jibe. “I bent to kiss away the hurt...” The blue eyes grew wistful as he recalled the distant day in his memory and pulled it close. “I knew she was my life. That she would *change* my life... forever,” Vincent reminisced, piercing the stem of the rose with a florist’s pin, so that it would stay in place.

“And she did,” Jacob concluded, knowing tears were near, for both of them. Too near, considering how close they both were from going down the aisle. The Great Hall was waiting for them. It wouldn’t be long now.

“And she did,” Vincent echoed, helping Jacob pin his own rose in place. Arthritis was creeping into his fingers... fingers that had never worn a wedding ring, or for that matter, a ring of any kind. Putting any kind of jewelry on clawed fingers like his, had always seemed ridiculous to Vincent, so he never attempted it. He knew he never would.

“Will Linda change mine?” Jacob asked, wanting it, yet terrified of it as well. Not every love story has a happy ending. Fate could sometimes be unkind. Jacob knew that all too well.

“I promise she will,” Vincent replied. “I swear that no matter how happy you think you are right now, how loved, how... fulfilled you are... after today, those words will have a very different meaning. And all of them will mean ‘love.’”

Jacob reached out to embrace his father, trying not to crush the flowers. “I love you, Father.” He whispered fiercely. “I love you always. You know that. No man has a finer father than I.” He gave Vincent a subtle squeeze, which the larger man returned.

“I think I may have,” Vincent demurred. “But today of all days... let’s just say I agree with you.”

From the doorway to the chamber, an elderly throat cleared. “Ah... gentlemen, I know you can’t hear it from here, but the violin players are getting tired, and the bride is starting to wonder. Do you think we might get this young man married?” Jacob Wells asked, as he tapped his way into the room. All but completely white-haired, his blue eyes were as sharp as ever, and his book of ceremonies was tucked tightly under his arm.

“Father, I’m afraid the time got away from us,” Vincent said, presenting his son.

Jacob checked his pocket watch, peering at it more closely than he used to have to. “Well. You’re not actually late. Not yet. Just not... early is all. The guests are waiting.”

“Linda?” Jacob asked.

“Just inside the Great Doors, behind a curtain with Adam and Juliet, and out of the wind. Looking nervous. You might want to claim her before she decides to bolt, Jake,” the oldest Wells said to his grandson. There was just a hint of mischief in the old man’s eyes.

“If meeting you lot didn’t make her do that, I think it’s too late, now,” the young man replied, brushing lightly at his father’s shoulders. Blonde hair still fell along the broad length, though it was liberally sprinkled with grey.

“We can always hope,” Vincent intoned, nodding toward the doorway.

Young Jacob preceded the pair out of the room, while Father and Vincent followed along behind him. “Giving him last words of advice?” Father asked.

“I dare not, considering. Only that, *who* he has in his life is the important thing, the most important thing.”

“He’s a world class surgeon, Vincent, with the soul of a doctor.” Father nodded toward his erstwhile grandson. “And she is his match.” The older man clearly approved his grandson’s choice.

“‘World class’ may be overstating it,” Vincent replied, not minding a bit if it did.

“He’s young yet,” Father proclaimed. “Think of all the people he’ll save.”

A shadow crossed Vincent’s eyes. “And all the ones he’ll lose,” he said somberly.

Father stopped walking, allowing Jacob to make some distance ahead of them. The physician raised an arthritic hand and placed it on Vincent’s shoulder. “I

know. I do know, son. It's hard... so hard. Perhaps especially on days like today. The people we've lost..."

Vincent's mind embraced those he had loved and lost and let them go. He knew that his Father had his own loves he had buried.

"But we mustn't let it steal our joy. Mustn't we, Father?" Vincent replied.

The gnarled fingers slid away down the arm of the blue coat. "Indeed not. We mustn't. They wouldn't want us to, and it would make this place very dark, indeed."

Vincent waited until Father had steadied himself on his cane, and the two finished the walk toward the Great Hall doors.

The winds seem calmer today, than usual. Perhaps a bit of divine intervention? Vincent thought, hoping it was true. It was nice to think that those who had gone on before were still here, somehow, still participating, in some way. Even if it was just to gentle the wind.

I love you, he thought to all of them. *After all these years, it's still there. Maybe that's the secret. You carry the love with you, all of your days.* It was a poignant thing to think.

The whispered ruffle of a white gown edged out, just inside the left door, as Father eased inside, then took his place down in front, his book of ceremonies in his hand. Young Jacob was already down there waiting for him, standing to one side, Eric at his shoulder. The two had been friends all of Jacob's life.

Vincent allowed himself a moment to scan the room; one which had been transformed, thanks to his son's wedding. The chandeliers gleamed with white tapers, and the great table had been turned long ways, and was serving as part of the bridal altar. It was covered with red and white roses, as the marriage candle sat in its middle, tall and fat, brightly gleaming. It was infused with rose petals, and an aging Rebecca said it took her several tries to get it "just right."

Getting everything "just right" seemed important today, for everyone. No one needed to explain "why."

The guests were seated in rows of chairs, a few mismatched, to accommodate the many guests. Some chairs were vacant, deliberately, as a way to honor those who had passed on before. Vincent sighed, missing them already. *I wish you were here,* Vincent thought to the person he missed most, right now. Most of the empty chairs were on the groom's side of the aisle. Though there were some on the bride's side, as well.

How Peter would have loved this day. How Mary would have fussed, and William, and Winslow, Vincent thought.

“Father?” A feminine voice whispered from behind the door. A brown eye dared a peek around it. A curling tress of long hair dangled, as did one of Catherine’s pearl earrings.

“Get back,” Vincent warned. “It’s bad luck if he sees you.” *And God knows you don’t need any of that. We all have too much, at times.*

The lovely head withdrew back behind the door, and Vincent joined his future daughter-in-law hidden by a concealing drape. Adam and Juliet both gave him a gap-toothed smile, and Linda’s satin gown rustled expectantly.

“You look lovely,” Vincent complimented. “Truly, Linda, my son is a lucky man.”

In an antique gown smoothed over with ivory lace, the future Linda Chandler truly did. “It’s me who’s the lucky one,” Linda insisted, reaching up to plant a kiss on Vincent’s whiskered cheek. She brushed away the trace of peach lipstick the gesture left behind, as Vincent helped pull the blusher over her face, and settle it down the front of her gown. The beautiful, lace-edged veil made her features look misty, and unreal. For a moment, it reminded him of how Catherine looked, through the curtains of her apartment windows, the ones that led onto her balcony.

But it wasn’t balcony sheers he was looking through. It was a wedding veil.

“Beautiful,” Vincent declared, wishing again that he’d had such a moment with Catherine. *I never gave you a wedding. Even though we gave each other a son, he thought. We never had the chance. Of all the sins I have ever committed, that one bothers me most, right now.*

“Thank you,” Linda replied. “You’re sad?” she asked, mistaking his expression for that of a father about to lose his only son to marriage.

“No,” Vincent lied a little. “Just wistful.” He didn’t want to talk about it. Least of all with a woman who was about to become a bride. “Jacob tells me you’ll mark this as your wedding day. I can’t tell you how much that means, Linda.”

Linda smiled beneath her veil, as the violin section changed the tune. The wedding march was about to begin. “It’s absolutely and only right,” she said, taking his arm. “I love Jake. And I always will.”

Linda peeked around the edge of the drape and nodded to Lena, who handed Juliet a beribboned basket of rose petals. Adam proudly held the pillow that cradled rings.

“Any last words of advice?” Linda asked, squaring back her shoulders.

“Only what I told Jacob,” Vincent replied. “That it isn’t where you are, or what you do, in life. It’s who is beside you that truly matters.”

Linda’s head dipped. “You’re reading the charms,” she replied.

“Charms?” Vincent asked.

“They’re on the ends of the ribbon. The one that’s holding the rings on the pillow.” Linda raised a quizzical brown eyebrow his way.

Vincent had seen no such charms. “I don’t know what you...”

Linda gestured down, as Adam held up the pillow. They were there. Two gleaming butterflies, each attached to a thin piece of satin ribbon, holding two simple wedding bands on a white pillow.

It doesn’t matter where you are in life, said one.

It’s who you have beside you, concluded the other.

How appropriate, for a wedding, Vincent thought.

“Jacob said they came from a bag of findings in Mary’s chamber. Surely you saw them?” Linda asked.

“I swear I didn’t,” Vincent replied, fingering the pretty silver charms. They looked old, and like much else down Below, like they’d been repurposed for this use.

“Well, isn’t that odd?” Linda asked, knowing they’d just missed their cue. They would have to go out on the next round.

“Odd,” Vincent agreed, knowing a dozen other words probably fit as well. *Happenstance. Coincidence. Sheer chance. Miracle. Divine intervention.* And Vincent’s personal favorite: *Tunnel magic*, he thought, running the list.

He looked up, and thought again of the empty chairs, and this time they seemed not quite so empty. *You’re here. You’re here, somehow, aren’t you? All my old friends. All my old... loves.* And indeed, some of the mismatched chairs seemed not empty at all anymore.

“We missed our cue,” Vincent said, straightening.

“We won’t miss this one,” Linda declared, tightening her hold on his arm.

“Father...” she swallowed, her deep brown eyes bright with tears. “Thank you. Thank you for raising him. He’s... wonderful... exceptional, like his father.”

“Like his parents,” Vincent corrected her gently, knowing it was true. *Catherine, I love you so much. I’m sorry we never had this. But I’m not sorry we had each other.*

The tune changed to the expectant notes, and Luke and Lena drew the tapestry back, revealing Juliet, Adam, Vincent and Linda. The crowd gasped expectantly, as they made their way down the aisle, Juliet strewing red and white rose petals before the bride. Vincent felt hundreds of loving eyes upon them, and his own son’s deeply piercing blue ones.

The look in Jacob’s eyes was a telling one. He could see nothing but his bride. His deep blue gaze fixed on her, in wonderment, and love.

That’s how it should be, Vincent thought, as they reached Jacob, at the makeshift altar. The scent of roses and vanilla candlewax permeated the warm air.

“Dearly Beloved...”

Vincent held himself erect as Father said the words. At the appropriate moment, he reverently gave the bride away, as he placed a gentle kiss on the back of her hand, then pressed it into the one belonging to her future husband.

Vincent then seated himself in the chair nearest the aisle; and right next to the most beautiful woman in the world.

“She’s so beautiful. They both are,” Catherine whispered, unashamed tears running down her cheeks. She dabbed them with a lace handkerchief. Right next to her, one of the empty chairs sat. The placard on it held the name “Charles Chandler.”

“They are,” Vincent agreed, putting his arm up and around her.

She leaned into him and rested her head on his shoulder, only slightly rumpling the powder blue dress Catherine insisted was the standard outfit for most mothers of the groom. “I love you,” she whispered into his ear.

“And I you. You have no idea how much.”

They listened to the words of the ceremony, and Vincent let his tears flow, knowing there was no shame in them, only the sweet poignancy of remembrance. *We did it. All of us. Winslow. This day happened because of you, because of your sacrifice. I miss you so much, my old friend. I’ve been missing you all day.* He glanced at the empty chairs, knowing there was one for Winslow, Caroline Chandler, Old Sam, Peter Alcott, and Margaret Chase, as well. All of them had played a part in Vincent and Catherine’s story. All of them, each in their own way, made sure this day had happened. Peter helped birth his wife, just as Anna Pater rescued him.

We all... save each other. We all love each other, he thought.

The groom raised the blusher on his new wife's veil, and kissed the bride, to thunderous applause. Father presented them as a married couple, and everyone rose, applauding the beaming pair. Devin put his fingers in his mouth and whistled, as Charles the Dragon man gave the newly marrieds one of his shy smiles.

"You're thinking of someone. Who?" Catherine asked in a low voice, so that only Vincent could hear her.

Clever woman. No wonder I love you so much.

"All of them," he gestured to the chairs, both occupied and not. "But Winslow, mostly. He helped me save you, all those years ago. But he told me he had never found this for himself. I can't help but think how sad that is. And how you never got to wear a white veil. And you should have."

Catherine watched her son lead their new daughter-in-law up the aisle and slid her arm into the crook of Vincent's elbow. "I suppose we're allowed some few sorrows, as the parents of the groom. For me, it was my parents, and Peter. I wish they could be here. And maybe Margaret Chase. The last twenty years would have been wonderful for Father, if he had only had her with him," Catherine nodded to Father, as she and Vincent stepped behind the bridal couple. Father followed behind them.

"A day for regrets, then?" Vincent asked. That didn't seem right, for such a special occasion.

"More like remembrances, I think," Catherine replied, stepping through rose petals with him. "I think we remember people who made the journey with us. People who made it possible or made it the loving thing that it was."

Not for the first time in their years together, Vincent realized how wise his wife was.

"Jacob and Linda tell me they'll mark this as their anniversary. Even as they will have a ceremony Above.

"We never do things the traditional way." She smiled up at him. "Maybe that's all right. It's not nearly as important as having been in the company of the people we love. Even the ones who aren't here anymore." A glistening tear shone on her fair cheek. He brushed it away.

"I have felt them near me all day," Vincent confided. "I know they're happy for us. For all of us."

“Then we have no reason to be sad,” Catherine insisted, following her son and his new wife through the Great Hall doors.

The room behind them was a flurry of activity as the tunnel folk and guests rearranged the tables and chairs into banquet style seating. In almost no time, the hall resembled a bridal version of Winterfest.

Vincent leaned down to Adam and commended him on a job well done. “You were very good in your duties, Adam. May I take these?”

The little boy nodded, and Vincent gently untied the two silver charms from the ribbons that held them.

He approached his son... his married son. *Married. To the woman you love. Life is a miracle. Maybe everything is.* “Take these,” Vincent said, placing them into the new groom’s palm. “Take them and make them into something for your wife. Something special. Something she can keep close, so that the two of you never forget how true the words are.”

“I will,” Jacob replied, looking at the inscription, then showing them to his bride, he pocketed the little butterflies. “Earrings... or a charm bracelet, before our first anniversary.”

“Or perhaps a keepsake. One for you and one for me,” Linda replied. “Like the gifts your parents always wear.”

“Don’t forget,” Vincent admonished.

“I won’t let him,” Linda smiled, the picture of bridal joy. She stood up on tiptoe and threw her arms around her father-in-law’s neck. “They’re words we’ll treasure... always,” she said, giving him a squeeze.

Vincent returned her hug then let her go, admiring the beautiful heart of her. Her lovely smile was radiant, and her words were sincere. His son had chosen well. There was strength here, and compassion, and acceptance. So many of the things he first sensed in his Catherine, so many years ago.

“There is strength in you,” he replied, knowing it was a thing he told Catherine, so long ago.

“And in you,” she returned happily.

Her joy was contagious. Vincent couldn’t help but smile.

“They’re setting up for the toast. After which, there will be dancing,” Catherine said, coming up behind her husband.

“Dancing you say?” Vincent replied, loving the thought.

Catherine slid her hands into his. “I have it on good authority. Do you think you’ll have time for a waltz?” Crow’s feet crinkled lightly, beside her still-lovely eyes, as she smiled up at him. Eyes he could lose his soul in, and still not mind.

He leaned down. “I wouldn’t miss it. Do you think we’ll be the last ones here? Still dancing, after everyone else is gone?” he asked, the whispered question not a question at all, but a statement of intent. Catherine knew well the determined, happy look in his blue eyes. It was one she’d seen often in their years together.

“I think we will,” she replied, loving him all the more.

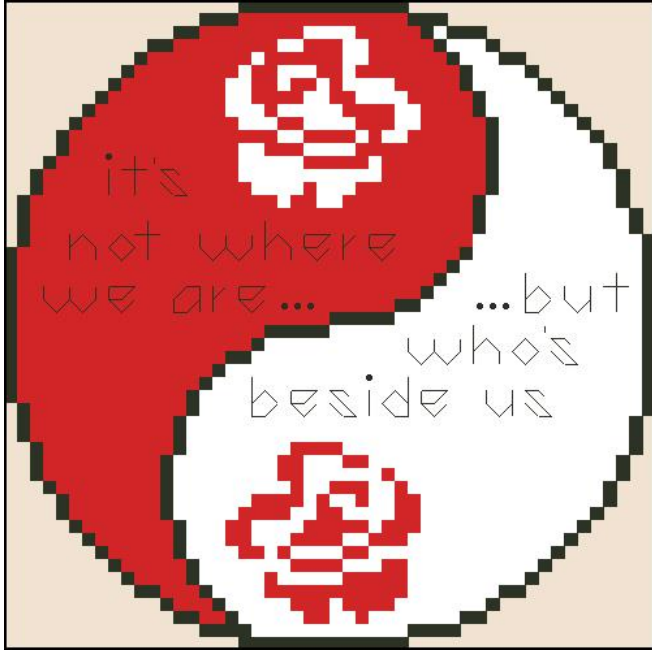
And they did.



No matter where you are when what is cast away becomes found treasure, I wish you love. ~ Cindy




Yin Yang Rose

by Angie



Fabric: Aida 10, Cream
50w X 50h Stitches
Size: 10 Count, 5w X 5h in

Floss Used for Full Stitches:

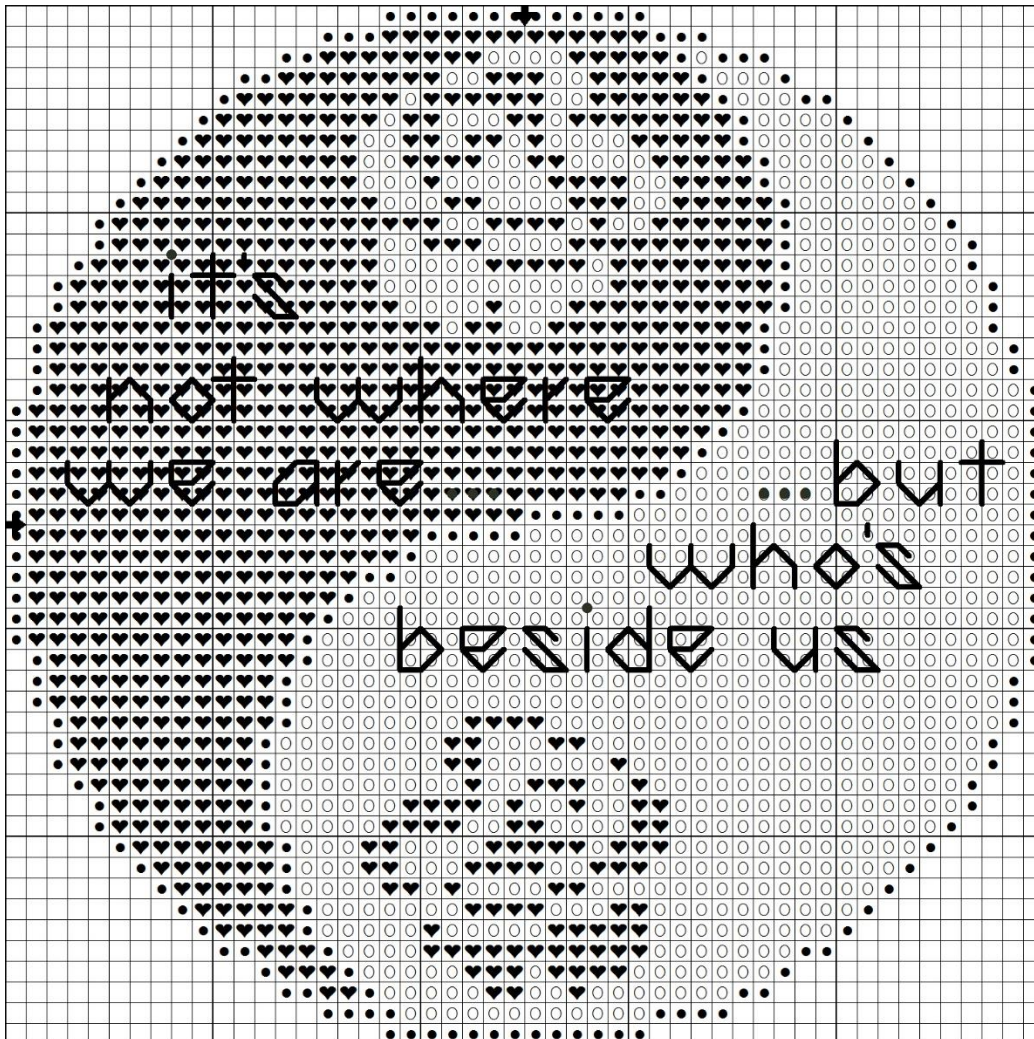
	Symbol	Strands	Type	Number	Color
	0	2	DMC	1	White
	§	2	DMC	310	Black
	W	2	DMC	666	Christmas Red-BRT

Floss Used for French Knots:

Symbol	Strands	Type	Number	Color
●	1	DMC	310	Black

Floss Used for Back Stitches:

Symbol	Strands	Type	Number	Color
—	1	DMC	310	Black





by Barb Gipson

Blame

by Allison Duggins



ather's chamber exploded with several voices all at once clamoring to be heard.

"Vincent should be punished!" Rachel called out, louder than the rest. "Paul and the others almost died because of him. Ellie did die."

"What would you have us do?" Father asked, dreading the answer.

"Banish him!"

"Banishment! Who would protect us if Vincent was banished? You?" Father stated in an angry tone.

"We have the sentries," Rachel angrily retorted. "We don't need his protection."

"Oh really?" William stated. "What about the outsiders? You saw what they did to Randolph. Would any of you be able to handle them?"

Rachel and the others looked around at the crowd, realizing William's comments were true and that they would be unwilling to volunteer for the job if the need arose.

"Then he must be given the silence," another voice chimed in.

"That's not enough," Rachel replied.

"What about other restrictions?" someone shouted.

"Such as?" Father questioned.

"Something he would be forced to abide by." a voice responded.

"Restrict Vincent Below, don't allow him Above." another said.

"Do not allow Catherine down either until the punishment is over," Rachel commanded.

Vincent looked at the others, alarmed at the idea of not seeing Catherine.

Father bowed his head and nodded in agreement.

"A message should be sent to Catherine so she is made aware of the punishment and that she must abide by our rules," Rachel stated in a flat voice.

"Father, please..." Vincent stated.

"It must be done. I'm sorry, Vincent." Father said regrettably. "For the crime of bringing Dimitri down and introducing the illness that infected us and killed Ellie. Judgement is suggested for the silence and restriction to the tunnels for one month. All in favor, please so indicate."

Vincent and Father watched as a majority of the community turned their backs on Vincent. A small smile became visible, as Vincent noted that Father, Mary, William, Pascal, Mouse and Jamie did not turn their backs on him. Still, they have to abide by the majority vote.

"I will tell Catherine myself. The sentence will begin now."

Vincent bowed his head in acceptance, wondering how he was going to live without Catherine's presence for a month. He could send notes, of that he was certain. We will endure this. We will.



by Barb Gipson



by Judith Nolan

A Candle for Elliot...

by Judith Nolan



*"Yesterday is but a dream.
Tomorrow is only a vision.
But today, well lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness,
and every tomorrow a vision of hope. . ."*

Kālidāsa



No note, no warning of any kind..." Elliot complained, as he turned the thick candle in his hands. "This is crazy! I don't have time for mysteries, and why now, after all this time?"

He grasped the candle's stout thickness with a force that almost broke it in two. "I guess she finally wants to talk..."

He sighed roughly, as he unleashed his grip, placing the candle gently on the blotter of his office desk. He sat back to contemplate it, and its significance.

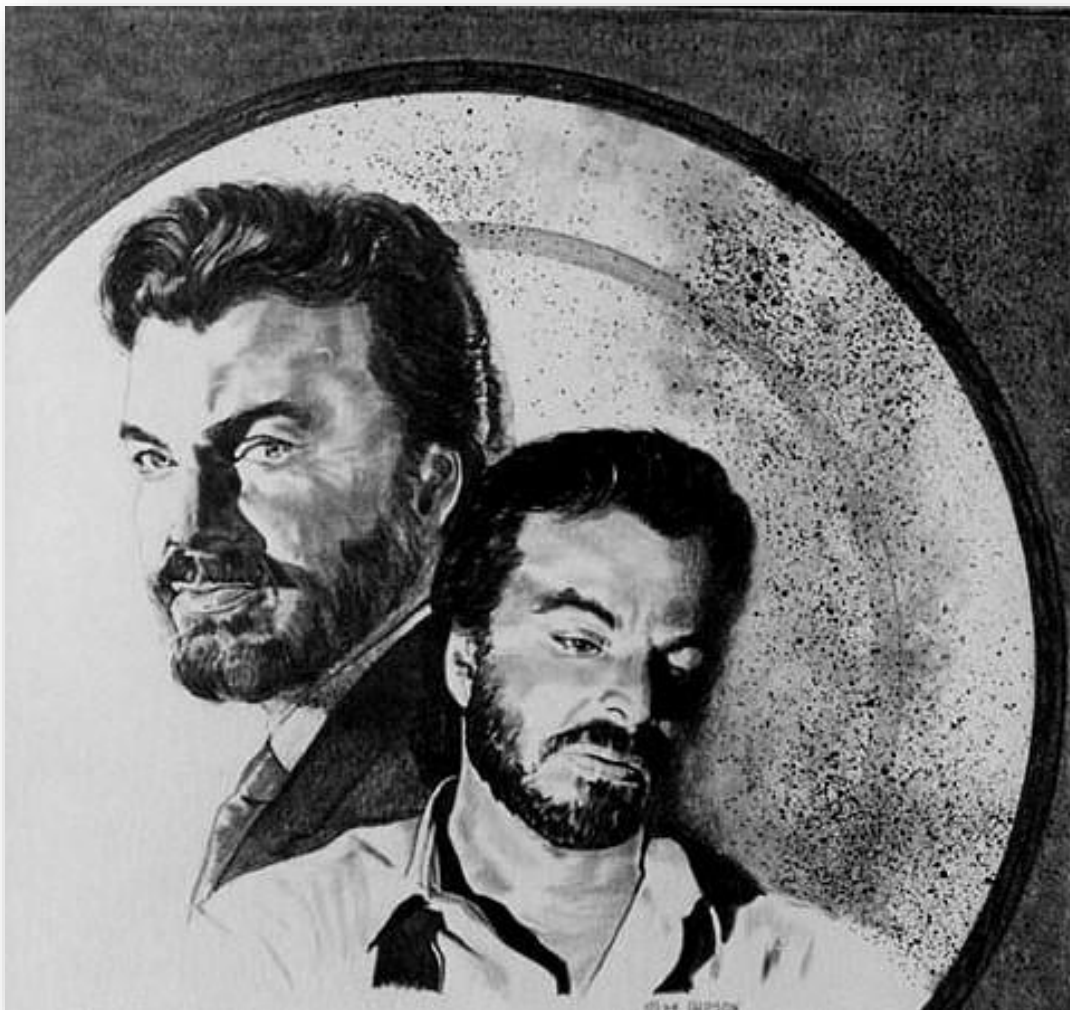
His tie had long been discarded, and his shirt sleeves rolled up. He'd been burning the metaphorical candle at both ends to get done all he wanted to do before dawn. He rarely slept, or took the time to eat

these days. He knew he was starting to look haggard and drawn – people had commented on it – but the tasks at hand seemed endless and ponderous. He'd been unavoidably preoccupied some weeks before, now he was playing serious catch up.

The afternoon had waned, stretching into late evening without his noticing or caring about what happened beyond the four, oak-panelled walls of his lair. He'd purposely constructed the office with the most expensive soundproofing for that very purpose.

Three armed guards were always on duty in the long hallway leading to the outer office doors. He'd left nothing to chance, allowing for no unexpected visitors to interrupt his work.

There was no music playing, just the hollow sound of his pen scratching across the endless sea of paperwork... that, and the lonely half-empty glass of whiskey at his elbow, were his only company.



by Barb Gipson

It wasn't until the boy appeared again, as if by magic — Geoffrey — looking, as always, like a tattered refugee from a pantomime, that Elliot felt uneasy with his self-imposed isolation. He was reminded that life beyond these office walls went blindly on without him.

Seeing the kid again brought back so many memories, exposing unhealed wounds and regrets, memories of a night a few months ago when Elliot had gotten more answers than he bargained for.

He surveyed the kid with resignation. Geoffrey even smelled like Catherine's elusive lover; of earth, spicy smoke and candlewax, at odds with their current surroundings that spoke strongly of money and power.

And where, exactly, had all that money and power gotten him? Elliot grimaced sourly... alone and talking to himself...

"How did you get in this time?" Elliot scowled when the boy suddenly materialized right in front his desk, like some crazy genie out of a bottle. "I thought I told you to make an appointment next time."

"And you wouldn't have consented to see me," the boy reasoned softly. "You'd have told your guards to throw me out into the street."

"Yeah..." Elliot regarded him with dislike. "You got that right."

How the boy managed to gain entry again was even more frustrating. He'd done it a number of times before, appearing without warning, bringing messages and requests from a mysterious world which Elliot had yet to see. He paid very good money to keep people out, unwanted visitors, and any other taxes upon his limited stock of patience and time.

But here was Geoffrey, again, tall and gangly, standing before Elliot's desk, watching him with that oddly contented look. It was as if he knew something, something really big, that he wasn't about to share. In his hands he held a candle, a large white, yellow and red candle he'd pulled from a bulky leather sack slung over his right shoulder.

Elliot stared at it, his stomach churned with distrust. What now?

"Your guards were all looking the other way, like they must've heard something." The boy shrugged. "Can't see me, not if I don't want them too."

He held out the candle. "This is for Winterfest, when we get together and celebrate with all our helpers. It's on the twelfth. Catherine said you gotta come. Said I was not to take no for an answer."

The boy's dark eyes scanned the vastness of Elliot's desk with its cluttered litter of files, blueprints, plans and assorted pens and pencils. "She said to say you've been working too hard, and it's time to take a break."

His gaze became thoughtful. "Father said you've been a great help to us these past few months, and back when we needed your help to rescue him and Vincent. He said it was time, but it was Catherine who sent you the candle. She wanted to be sure you'd come."

"Catherine..." Tossing aside his pen, Elliot half-rose from behind his desk, watching the kid suspiciously. He had made no move to take the candle. "How does she know what I do? And why? I mean, why now? She won't even take my phone calls. I have not seen or spoken to her for almost four months, not since we –" He sighed roughly, not enjoying having to share his chaotic, inner thoughts with this oddball kid.

Elliot shrugged. "I figured she still hated me." He ran a distracted hand up around the back of his neck beneath the open collar of his shirt. "For what I did... back there at the tunnel... that night..."

"But you made it up," Geoffrey reasoned quietly. "You kept your word. You didn't rat on us. You didn't spill any of our secrets, and you have helped us. That counts in my world. Ya gotta have trust."

"No, I didn't do that, did I?" Elliot's shoulders sagged with relief. He suddenly felt ridiculously happy. "I kept my word... about all of it. Especially about him..."

"So, I'll mark you down as attending?" Geoffrey queried. "The details of when and where you'll find out later. We'll send someone to escort you down, so you don't go and get yourself lost."

"Yeah..." Elliot nodded. "Tell Cathy you couldn't keep me away. The twelfth, you said..." He reached to tear the relevant page from his desk calendar. He crumpled it, throwing the ball of paper into the trash bin. "Tell her this time it'll be different. I'll be different. And tell her, thanks, for everything."

"She knows..." Geoffrey shrugged. "And he does too... But I'll tell them anyway." His grin flashed as quickly as lightning. "It's okay, Elliot. I get it."

"Okay, then..." Elliot sighed.

Catherine trusted him. Finally! He wanted to leap across the desk and hug the boy. Instead he accepted the impatiently proffered candle with a nod of thanks before sinking back into his seat.

"Who made this?" He studied its sturdy design and vivid colours, turning it over and over in his hands. It was functional, but elegant. He liked that it had purpose as well as meaning.

“Cat suddenly got your tongue?” He looked up, about to ask what this Winterfest thing meant, but the kid was gone... again! Just up and vanished as swiftly and soundlessly as he’d arrived. It was really annoying when he did that.

“Ghosts...” Elliot breathed now, on a rueful sigh, shaking his head. “Or maybe I’m just getting too old to believe in fairy stories.”

But one fairy story in particular still haunted him. He vividly remembered the night he finally overstepped the unseen boundary Catherine had erected between them and stumbled headlong into that secret world below the city... his city. Abandoning his work and leaving his protesting bodyguards behind, he’d trailed Catherine for weeks, watching everything she did and everywhere she went. The itch to know everything would not let him sleep, or work.

To his puzzlement she often went into the drainage tunnel in the middle of Central Park, re-emerging soon thereafter. A few times, especially on Friday nights and weekends, she didn’t reappear until early the next morning, and she was always alone.

Those nights had been the longest to endure, wasting Elliot’s precious time as he huddled against the cold in the shelter of some trees. But he couldn’t seem to tear himself away, he had to know who she was seeing, why she’d forced him to abandon his tower project, and why had she needed those explosives and detonators...

He joked about hard rock mining at the time, but it had been much more than that. She was in deep emotional pain and serious trouble when she came to demand he instantly supply what she needed, without any explanation... like it was a real case of life or death...

After that night, to Elliot’s amazement, Catherine kept her word. She saw him on several occasions over the following three weeks. They went out to dinner and she allowed him to escort her to the opera. But then they began to be noticed and photographed and speculated about in the press. Elliot couldn’t help that, even though Catherine seemed deeply displeased to be exposed in such a way. She placed limits on anything more than that.

Stay the night with him, make love with him, assuage the intense ache for her softness that burned deep within him, she steadfastly refused to do, no matter how many times he asked. Okay, begged... It was like she’d already made promises to someone else, and she wasn’t about to break them. Not for anything Elliot had to offer her.

He knew it wasn’t Tom Gunther... not down some dark, dank drainage hole under the park. That relationship had ended some months before. The man had moved

on and not looked back, recently marrying a New York heiress who was rolling in seriously useful connections and old money.

It drove Elliot crazy that Catherine would not let him in and help him understand who or what she was protecting so carefully and completely. Suddenly their agreed upon acquaintance had fallen away. She stopped taking his calls... she ignored his messages and his occasional dropping in at her place of work, as if he was an annoying puppy that needed to be taught its true place in her life. It was as if she had other places to be, other people to see, another man to share her life with... and her bed, no doubt.

Elliot didn't operate like that. He went after what he wanted, it was who he was, and it had been there right in front of him all along. He was just too blind, too in love to see it. What she wouldn't share with him, she was sharing with someone else. Elliot knew he'd been used, he could see that now.

"A means to an end." He grimaced at the memories. They left a bitter taste in his mouth. All along she had someone else waiting in the wings, waiting for her return to him, duty done. But who was it? Where was he?

Therefore, when he wasn't seeing her anymore, he took to following her. There were some nights when Catherine never reappeared from beneath the ground at all. It puzzled him, until he realized that somewhere there must be another way out, because she would always appear at work on Monday morning, leaving Elliot frustrated and fuming. He detested secrets.

If he couldn't see something, measure it, weigh or understand it, he drove himself onward until he knew everything, every facet. And yet nothing of what Catherine did over those weeks made any sense at all.

Finally, Elliot bolstered his nerve enough to follow her into that drainage tunnel, all the way in to where her secrets were hidden. Incredibly he'd walked into a greater mystery than he could ever have imagined. Even now he could only shake his head in wonder. How had he been so blind for so long?

She must have heard him coming before he found her, because he heard her say to someone, "Go! Go, before they see you —" There was a muffled reply which she overrode frantically with, "No, you can't stay! I'll be all right. Just go! Now!"

"I mean you no harm..." Elliot straightened up out of the drainage tunnel, raising both hands to show he was unarmed. "I just wanted to know, Catherine."

"Elliot!" Catherine whirled around the moment he stepped into the open within a sandy floored junction where three tunnels converged. "Why are you here? Did you follow me? How dare you!"

She was standing at bay before a half-open, barred gate, trying to obscure his clear view of a much larger someone behind her with her slender body. A massive, circular, steel door had been rolled back and within the shadows of the old brick tunnel mouth a man stood, a leathered hood half-obscuring his features, a black cloak swirling around his massive frame as he turned to hurry away.

But Elliot had already seen enough to know he would never forget that man's face as long as he lived. "Stay, please..." Elliot held out a hand to detain him. "I just want to understand all of this, any of this. Please!"

The other man paused in his retreat beyond the steel door. Elliot saw his broad shoulders sag, his head half-turning. He caught a glint of eyes reflecting in the depths of his hood as he looked back, obviously considering his options.

Then he turned fully, his massive hand settling on Catherine's slender shoulder even as she continued to push at him with her smaller hands, still mutely urging him to flee. "It's too late, Catherine. We must make the best of the situation. I am sure Elliot means us no harm. He loves you too well to contemplate such an act."

"Thanks, I think..." Elliot's shocked eyes swiftly noted that the man's hand was covered in fur and had claws, and Elliot stood there with his mouth wide open for several seconds.

He had not known what he would find down this cramped and damp tunnel... but a man with the face of a lion, and an unforgettable voice he had not expected... had he somehow strayed into a crazy version of Alice's Wonderland...?

Surely lack of sleep was making him hallucinate. He would've laughed at the absurdity of it all, if it hadn't been so deadly serious. Catherine glared at him like she wanted to do him physical harm.

"How could you?" she accused with a stabbing finger, stepping towards him, again trying to block the larger man. "I trusted you. You have no business being here. There's nothing for you here. Go home! Forget anything you think you've seen tonight!"

"I just needed to know, Cathy..." Elliot held his hands out pleadingly, his grey eyes still assessing the man behind her. "You wouldn't talk to me or return my calls. And after that crazy request of yours for plastic explosives and drill bits, I thought we had an understanding. I thought we were finally getting somewhere, as a couple..."

He did have the good sense to look somewhat ashamed and apologetic... but he wasn't able to stand the not knowing of what she was doing, or who she was meeting any longer. He'd done his best to win her, and all he had to show for it

was a throbbing headache the size of Manhattan, and an intense desire to go home and forget what he had seen.

He felt drained. He couldn't sleep, eat, or even think, and it was now affecting his ability to function properly. His work was suffering, and that he could not allow any longer.

"Well, now you know," Catherine snapped at him. "So, what do you intend to do with this knowledge? I will not allow you to hurt Vincent, or those he cares for and protects. Be very sure of that. I can and will bring the weight of the whole D.A.'s office down on your head if you so much as breathe one word of this to anyone!"

"Vincent... so that's your name." Elliot traded acknowledging stares with the man he'd been hunting for months. "Okay, so now I know. Now I will keep your secrets. All of them." He waved a hand at Vincent. "Just please don't try to shut me out of all of this. I care for you, Cathy, I always have. I would never hurt you. You know that. I would do anything for you... help you in any way I can."

"Yes, I know that." Catherine nodded slowly. "And we will always be grateful to you for helping us, without strings." She glanced back at Vincent who inclined his head in acknowledgment. "Very well, if Vincent is prepared to trust you, then I will trust you. But I still don't like it. You could've asked."

"And what would you have told me?" Elliot's steeply raised eyebrow said it all. "How could you have told me?"

Catherine glared at him, chewing on her bottom lip as she tried to formulate an answer and failing. She shrugged her shoulders mutely.

"I think we must make the best of the choice that has already been made for us." Vincent folded his arms beneath his mantle and leaned back against the side of the tunnel. "We still have a lot to be thankful for. If not for Elliot's generous help given to a complete stranger that day... I would not be here now." He shook his head. "The proof of his words will be shown in what he chooses to do next with the information he now possesses."

His steady blue gaze assessed his erstwhile rival. He seemed to be daring him to contradict his words.

"All I want now is to go home and get a good night's sleep." Elliot laughed as he ran a tired hand up around the back of his neck. "Keeping track of you two is wearing me out."

He approached Vincent, holding out his hand. "I will keep your secrets." He frowned critically at Vincent's face. "Though I'm not sure anyone would believe me anyway." He shook his head in disbelief. "You are truly amazing."

“I am only a man,” Vincent stated simply, his gaze flicking to Catherine’s furious expression as she surveyed the two of them together. “But I can understand your frustrations.”

He took Elliot’s hand in a strong grip, and the two of them stood there for a long time, each closely surveying the other. Catherine watched them both, without comment. But her face reflected her deep sense of disquiet.

“Yeah...” Elliot smiled now, staring at the gift on his desk. “I understand all too well...”

The memory was as fresh as if it had been yesterday. The two men shook hands, before falling into a conversation neither expected to conduct. They stood together and talked for some time about the city they both loved. Like old friends meeting by chance in the park, they had fallen easily into conversation. It had been...an interesting evening.

Catherine had looked on in bemusement, appearing none too pleased, but powerless to act. She simmered quietly, contributing little to the conversation, and Elliot knew he would not make any more progress with her for some time.

He shook his head as he lifted the candle into the light, turning it once more between his palms. He’d finally gotten the answers he wanted and some semblance of peace.

Of course, Catherine still denied his phone calls. She had refused to speak to him at all for nearly four months now. Geoffrey was one of his contacts with the tunnels and the boy revealed nothing, no matter how many times Elliot asked him.

There was also the old sax man playing his music in the street. They’d exchanged money for a note several times, often a request for assistance or supplies for some urgent project or other that Elliot could help them with. Once Elliot had even been accosted in a secluded corner of one of his own building sites by an oddball kid who said his name was Mouse. That had been an experience that burned long in Elliot’s memory.

The boy had wanted more explosives, and some of those nice detonators. He’d rubbed his hands together in glee, looking hopeful and more than a little crazy! Elliot had been wise enough not to supply him.

But his firm refusal didn’t appear to put a dent in the boy’s boundless enthusiasm. He just grinned and said, “Okay, fine. Okay, good, next time. Mouse come back. Elliot’s stuff real good.” He vanished as quickly as he had appeared.

“The odd company you keep, Catherine...” Elliot stared at the candle in his hands. “But now you trust me again, or Vincent does, at least.”

He thought about Vincent often... and Catherine, of how they had trusted him, of how little they asked in return, of how much he would have loved Catherine, if only she'd allowed him to show her. But her choice had been made, even before they first met on the night he had gifted the art collection to the Met.

He found he couldn't begrudge her the love she had found with Vincent. He was an unusual man, and someone Elliot would be proud to call his friend.

"God help me, I don't have many of those, not genuine friends anyway." He shook his head, smiling grimly. "Am I getting old and maudlin, or is it just the whiskey talking?" He lifted the cut crystal tumbler at his elbow. "To fairy tales and all those who believe in them, heaven help them!" He drained it of the rich amber liquid in one long swallow.

The slowly spreading warmth drove the chill from around his heart. Finally, the invitation had been issued, Catherine trusted him enough to ask him to attend this Winterfest party of theirs. It was well past time he ventured back and renewed some old acquaintances...

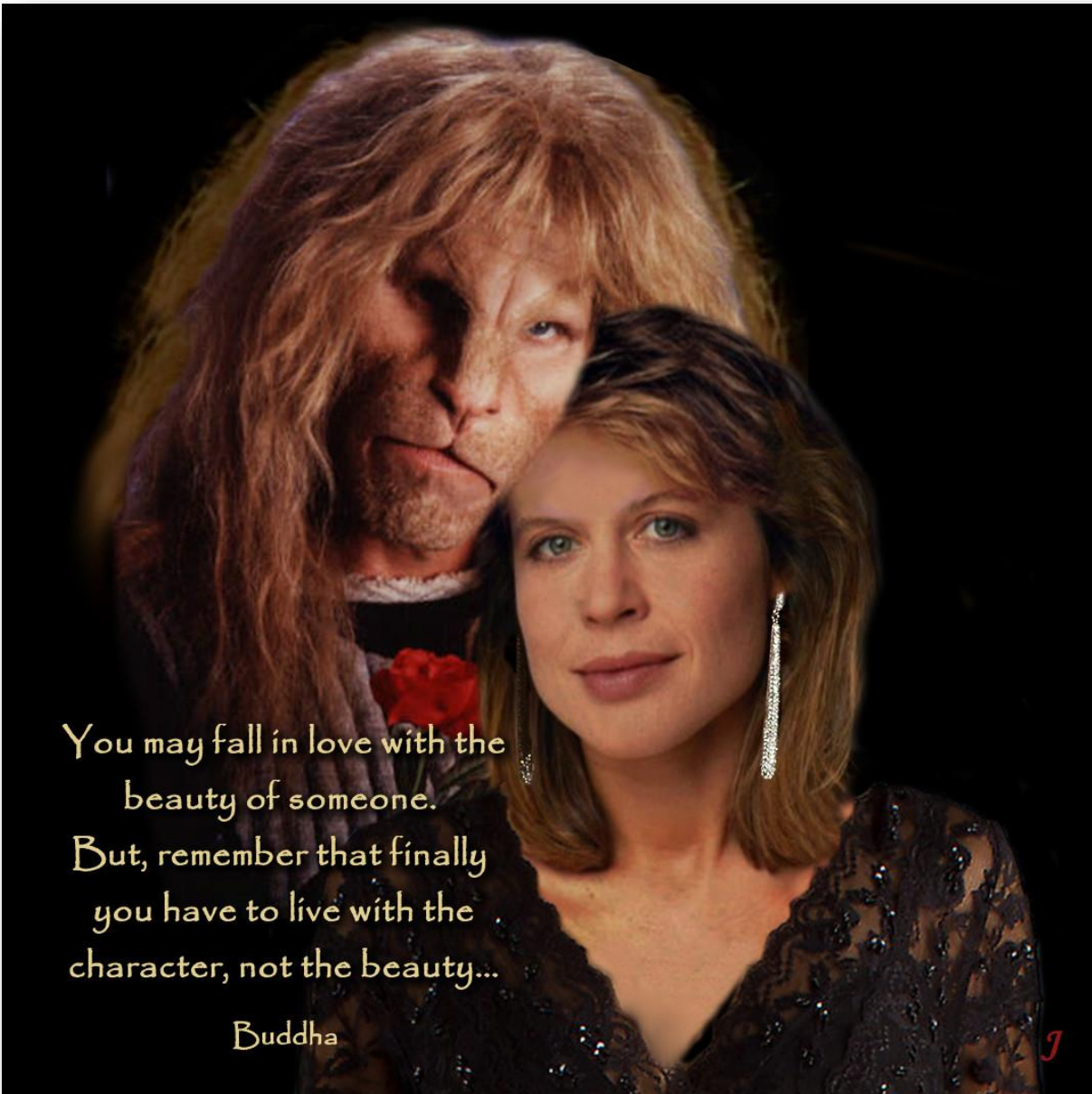


"Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth."

Oscar Wilde



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by Judith Nolan



A S3 JOURNEY TOLD IN VERSE
A NARRATIVE SERIES OF POEMS

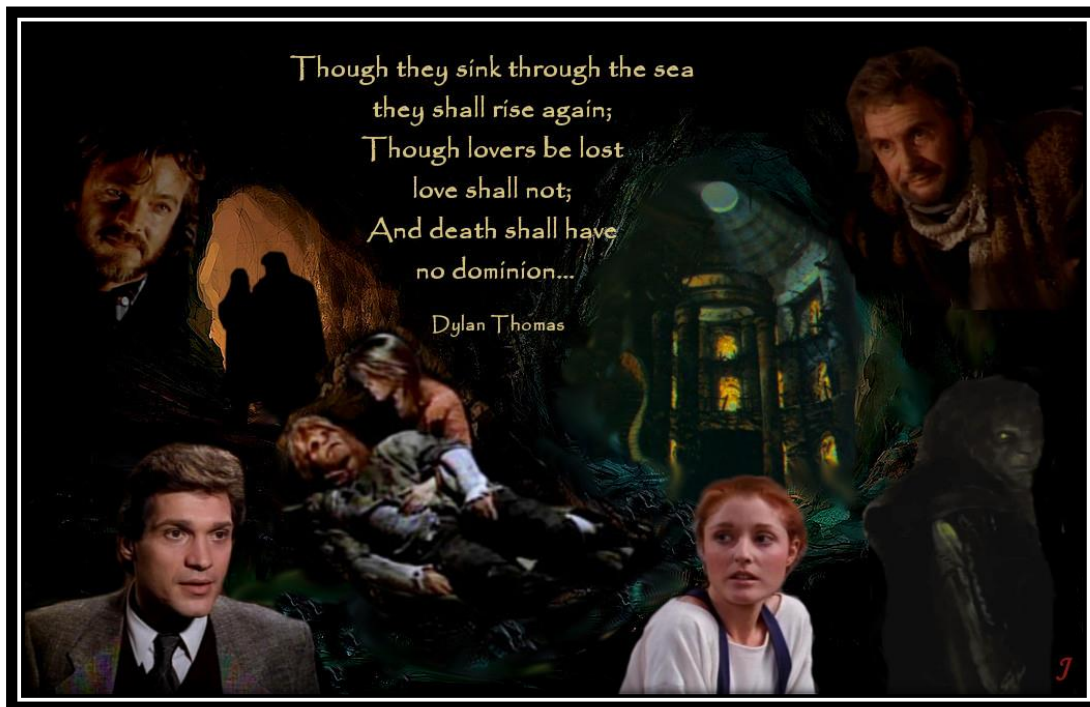
by Katrina Relf

Season 3



Many of our characters are here (Vincent's Beast, and Vincent. Cathy. Father. Elliot, Joe and Diana), all bringing us their own unique points of view. It struck me that they often disagree with each other almost as often as they disagree with themselves. In that sense, this is a bit of a "lover's quarrel" between all the principals, in the season where no one got what they deserved, and barely got anything they wanted, but did, sometimes, get something they needed..

See if you agree...



*What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
"Ode on a Grecian Urn" - by John Keats*



The Dying Of The Light



Dreams surround me.
The mists of time drench my skin with their vapours –
Cooling the fever that burns through me.
I am in this place alone –
For whatever lived within me hours ago – eons ago –
Knew that I must be alone.
Cries reverberate from the stones –
Torturous cries, cries that know the pain, the rage,
Of being trapped and knowing no escape.
I taste blood.
Yet I know the only blood being shed in this darkness
Is my own.
Rocks tear at my flesh,
Shredding clothing –
Now the only remnant of that time past.
Hands that are no longer mine
Claw at the rags, the darkness, the rocks,
At spectres that move in the swirling mists,
In the blood-stained dreams of my imaginings.
Then, in a moment, I hear a sound,
Sense the movement of another in my domain,
And I am pulled towards the shadow, the scent,

By the need to kill that which has invaded my prison.
I taste the blood on my lips,
Feel the fire ~ the ice ~ in my veins
And then her voice is there,
Shattering the deepening shadows of my madness.
Calling
Crying out
A name that awakens a memory
From somewhere lost,
From somewhere before ~ beyond ~ the dying of the light.
And in the remembering of it,
My heart breaks...



by Barb Gipson

Only The Silence



I cannot speak ~ I have no words ~
Words died with the gentleness.
The beast can only cry ~
Cry out against his tormentor.
Cry out in pain, in rage,
In hatred of this place of darkness ~
Beyond man, beyond everything.
Yet his broken body still feels,
Still needs,
And wants ~ with an urgency unknown before.
It is aware of every look,
Every movement you make.
I know who you are,
And I know who I am.
I cannot refuse the promise in your eyes.
You touched, you kissed,
You awakened feelings always denied,
Always feared.
I hunger for your softness, your fire.
He also hungered ~

Hungered too much,
And asked for too little.
In me there is no gentleness, no love,
Just an undeniable need
To take all that you offer.
To fill you with my being.
My flesh bleeds, my spirit aches,
And I am consumed by the madness that destroyed him.
By a need beyond all needs.
Only the release you offer can end the torment,
Can bring us back from this hell,
From the pain that he chose.
I am lost in the fire of my body,
In the taking of you,
And I am powerless to stop.
But I taste the blood on your lips,
Feel the smallness of your body beneath me,
And I cry out for your forgiveness.
I cry out in the darkness,
But you cannot hear,
You cannot understand.
For I have no words,
Only the aspect of the beast,
And the pain that lies between us.



Towards The Light



I promised you forever, Vincent,
But there is no forever for us now.
Our dreams, our happy life, destroyed –
By my world.
They have taken our son,
And I have so little time.
But for you there will be no consolation,
For you will never know, never know.

Suddenly I hear your voice –
Distantly – calling my name.
Is it a dream?
Is this sleep I am trying so hard to fight
Claiming me so soon?
But even in dreams we must try.
If heaven has sent you to me,
Awake or asleep I must find you.
And, somehow, with all the strength in my body,
I follow your voice –

And you are there.
That beautiful face I thought I would never more see,

Is above me,
And I am in your arms.
The pain has gone, the longing has gone,
And I am at peace.
For words are being spoken that I thought I would never hear,
And hands are touching me that have not touched me
For so long a time.
And, as I close my eyes, your face is still before me.
You take my hand, and, as you lead me towards the light,
Forever is all there is



by Barb Gipson

Did You Know? (Joe's Eulogy)



I wonder, Cathy, did you know that I loved you?
When you looked into my eyes
Did you read the words that they spoke?
We were friends –
And I valued your friendship too much
To ever tell you how I felt.
We were a good team, Kiddo.
You gave so much to your job – to people –
And sometimes you scared me sick,
Yet you always seemed to have a guardian angel
To help you –
To protect you –
Until this time.
I'll miss the fun we had, Radcliffe,
The laughs,
The arguments.
But above all, the way you were always there for me
When I needed a friend.
You cared so
That sometimes I let myself believe

That maybe, one day, you would love.
But then you told me there was someone in your life.
I was pleased for you,
You deserved that happiness,
Yet my heart ached
For that was the end of my dream.
No-one will ever know how I miss you,
How I cry for you,
How I love you.
I wonder, Cathy, did you know?



by Barb Gipson

Without You



How can I live without you?
I no longer have the strength.
You were my life ~
Without you I have no right to live ~
Nor will to live ~
Nor heart to beat when yours is still.
Around me I see caring faces,
Trying to soothe me with their words.
Do they not know that the only voice to bring me comfort
Is silenced forever ~
Save in my tortured dreams?
Waking or sleeping your face is before me,
Yet when I reach to touch you,
You are not there.
Catherine, come to me ~ take me home ~
For without you there is nothing.
My heart is shattered,
I can feel it bleeding ~
Unending tears falling from my eyes.
This sadness I feel is more than I can bear.
Would, when it was broken
This heart stopped beating,
And I could spend eternity in your arms.





by Barb Gipson

A Father's Love



I wanted to protect you, Vincent,
From a world I knew would hurt you,
Maybe even destroy you.
A world that is filled with hatred,
A world which cannot protect its own,
And has no understanding or compassion for those who are
different.

How would such a world deal with you?
That was something I dared not think.

I wanted to protect you from her ~
A woman of that world.
She would give you dreams that could not come true.
And I couldn't bear the longing in your eyes,
And the pain in your heart because of her.
But then I saw the joy she brought you,
Her warmth, her strength, her courage,
And her love of you above all else ~ even life.

I cannot protect you now, from this sadness,
This unbelievable sadness that you feel.

Let it wash over you,
Let it engulf you in its depth, do not fight it,
Let it sweep you along in its tide.

You will return, you will survive.
You have Catherine's love to guide you,
And my arms to always hold you.



by Barb Gipson

All That He Is



I loved you, Cathy,
And for a brief moment, you loved me too.

But we were always close,
And always the dream was there
That one day, we would love again.

But this was never to be.
Suddenly you were gone,
And my hopes, my dreams,
And part of my life was gone, too,
And all that was left was tragedy.

And then he came to me –
To ask for my help –
This creature that you loved,
And whose child you bore,
And I could only doubt what I saw,
Yet what I knew to be the truth.
I could have given you the world, Cathy.

What could he give you?
What life could he offer you?

Only a life apart from those you loved.
So why did I lose you to him?
To one who could give you nothing.
But then he spoke –
He spoke of what it meant to love you – to lose you.
And I heard the tears in his voice
As he whispered your name.
I saw the gentleness in his eyes
As he beheld my fear,
And knew the courage it took
To bring him to me.
And I understood why you loved him.
I could have given you everything,
But he could only give you himself,
And all that he was,
And all that he had,
And that meant more than my entire world.
It was the only wealth you would ever need.





by Barb Gipson

The Crystal and The Rose



If walls had tongues to speak
I would beg to share their secrets –
Forever lost –
Of the time when gentleness and love
Overcame the beast,
And brought me back from wherever my tortured soul had taken me.
I know she touched me with her beauty,
But I know not how beautiful it was.
If rocks could only speak,
Their words would bring comfort, perhaps even peace,
With their recollection of the miracle that happened
Here in this place, beyond man, beyond everything.
Here in this place once so hated,
Now a shrine to the memory of her love.
Her crystal lay hidden in the sand,
A mute teardrop for her departing,
For all that is lost and can never be found,
For all that is gone forever.
Catherine told me that we had loved,
So why does my mind deny this?
Why does it keep the memory from me?
Was it too beautiful to be of this world?

Or was I, unworthy of its beauty ~
Fated never to remember?
Oh, rocks, sand, darkness,
Speak to me,
Share with me that time,
Give me something to hold close,
As I hold her rose against my heart.
The crystal and the rose ~
My only keepsakes of Catherine,
And all that is left between me and the endless night.



by Barb Gipson

How Could I Know?



I had often pictured you in my mind,
Through the words that you wrote her,
Through the books that you read her.

I thought I knew you,
Knew who you were,
Knew what you'd be.

How could I have known?
How could I have imagined what it would be like,
How it would change my life
When I found you,
As the Beggar's Comet streaked the night,
And you came to her grave to die.

And through those long and magical hours,
I watched that strange and beautiful face,
And understood why Catherine loved you.
I knew the gentleness in your heart,

Saw love in those hands
That could also kill.
I can only dream of what you shared,
And can never tell you how I feel.
But, Vincent, somewhere deep inside you, know
That time can mend a broken heart
And memories now that make you weep
Will one day make you smile.



by Barb Gipson

Towers of Light



And now the night is all there is ~
The night, the city and me ~
And always, the memory of Catherine.
Elliott has gone, and with him his towers of light,
And the world is a lesser place without him.
Once I could not understand this man ~
Envied him perhaps ~
He could give Catherine so much,
And I so little.
He could walk with her in the sunshine,
And I could only give her the night.
But now I understand him all too well ~
He was strong and weak,
Good and bad ~
And he had dreams, as all men dream.
He loved Catherine ~ and who is to say his love was any less than
mine?
But he lost her ~ as I lost her,
And the emptiness within our hearts
Made us as one.

But others would have him betray me,
Tried to fill his heart with their evil.
But at the last he gave his life for my life,
For a dream perhaps ~
For Catherine's child.
And tonight the world is a darker place ~
For we have lost his dreams,
We have lost his lights,
And we have lost Elliott ~
And this man truly was a king.



by Barb Gipson

Helpless Yearning



This helpless yearning that I feel for you, my Catherine,
Fills my life.

But life is no more,

Love is no more ~

Since you are gone.

I walk the night ~

The long, empty night,

That once I shared with you.

Now only the darkness can understand,

Can share the pain of a world without you.

Rain falls ~

Mingling with my silent tears,

Soft as the touch of your hand.

The wind echoes your voice,

Speaks your name.

Why are you everywhere, yet nowhere, so far away?

The moon, the stars still shine,

Yet I see nothing but the night.

There is no light without you,

No love, except in your memory.

A heart so broken, so washed with tears,

Will never be whole again,
Will never find peace ~
Except in your arms.
So, call my name, Catherine, call my name,
And I will follow you.
But should I walk too far behind
Take my hand and lead me ~
Away from the words never spoken,
The promises never kept.
Away from this helpless yearning
For a dream that can be dreamed ~
Nevermore.



by Barb Gipson

Never Alone



I will be with you as night streaks the sky,
As you walk the empty streets
You will feel my hand in yours –
You will not be alone.

I will be with you in your solitude,
When the silence is all there is
And the emptiness closes in –
You will not be alone.

Without love the world is a cold and lonely place,
So, let my love surround you,
Feel it – touch it.
I promised you forever –
And forever is all there is.
Nothing can part us now,
Love is stronger even than death.

I will be with you as you hold our son,
In his laughter, in his tears,
You will see me in the love in his eyes –
You will not be alone.



by Barb Gipson

And So I Dream



How I love him ~
Feelings deeper than any I have known.
Yet feelings I know to be hopeless.
His heart bound by a love beyond all words.
By a love which defies even death.



by Barb Gipson

And so I dream, and live in my dreams.
Only then can I touch his face and brush away his tears,
Only then can I feel the softness of his hair and the strength of his
hands.

In dreams we are so close and yet still he is apart from me,
As though ~ even then ~ the spirit of Catherine is between us.

How she loves him ~
For Catherine there can be no peace until Vincent finds peace.
And somewhere ~ in my deepest being ~ I know that
Through her love he will open his heart
And again learn to love ~ and be loved.

Until then, Diana dream.



To Share a Heart



I know you love my son ~
I can see it in your eyes, in your smile ~
When he is near.
But I can also see the pain, the hopelessness
Of a love that is not returned,
And my heart cries for you, Diana,
For your pain, and his pain,
And the wasted life that brought you together.

He would never want to hurt you,
You are so dear to him ~ to us all.
You are part of us now,
Part of our world.
He owes you his life ~ his son,
And he will never forget.
But his heart is bound to Catherine
In life and in death.
She will never leave his heart,
But perhaps, in time, she will share it with another.
Catherine taught Vincent to love,
Taught him that he was worthy of love.
Perhaps she can also teach him that by loving again

He will not defile her memory ~ rather glorify it.

So, Díana, do not lose hope,
Do not let your heart ache.
For time will pass and time will heal,
And hearts that are broken can mend
And learn to love again.
And dreams that were once dreamt
Can be dreamed anew,
And this time, if love holds any sway,
They will come true.



by Barb Gipson

Cherished



Diana, are you weeping?
Are the tears you cry for me?
Love can sometimes hurt more than pain.
Pain is but a part of you –
Love is all.
Do not let your feelings make you sad.
Love is never wasted,
Nor is it ever really lost.
Your love has given me life,
Given me purpose.
Without your understanding I would have lost all compassion,
All humanity.
Everything that Catherine taught me.
I can never give you all that should be yours –
My heart will never hold another inside.
But I give you all the love left in me to give,
All the comfort I can share.
So, weep not for what might have been,
For what can never be.
Rather know that you are as dear to my heart
As anyone will ever be.
Know that you are cherished above all others.
For without your compassion, your courage, your utter selflessness,
I would have nothing.



Cry Softly



I know you are hurting,
And there are no words to ease your pain.
No-one will ever take Catherine's place in your heart,
Not even the child you hold.
Every time you look into his eyes
You will see her.
But every time he smiles
She will be smiling.
Catherine lives through your son,
She lives through you, within you.
Let that fill the emptiness in your heart,
Let that bring you the peace you deserve.
All I can offer is my hand in friendship,
And my heart in love ~
The love that your world has so freely given me.
Let me be here when you need someone.
Someone to help you through the loneliness, the emptiness, the pain.
And when it is strong ~
So strong it breaks your heart anew ~
Bring me your tears, your sorrow,
Let me hold you, let me take the hurting from you.
Come to me, Vincent ~
Cry softly in my arms.

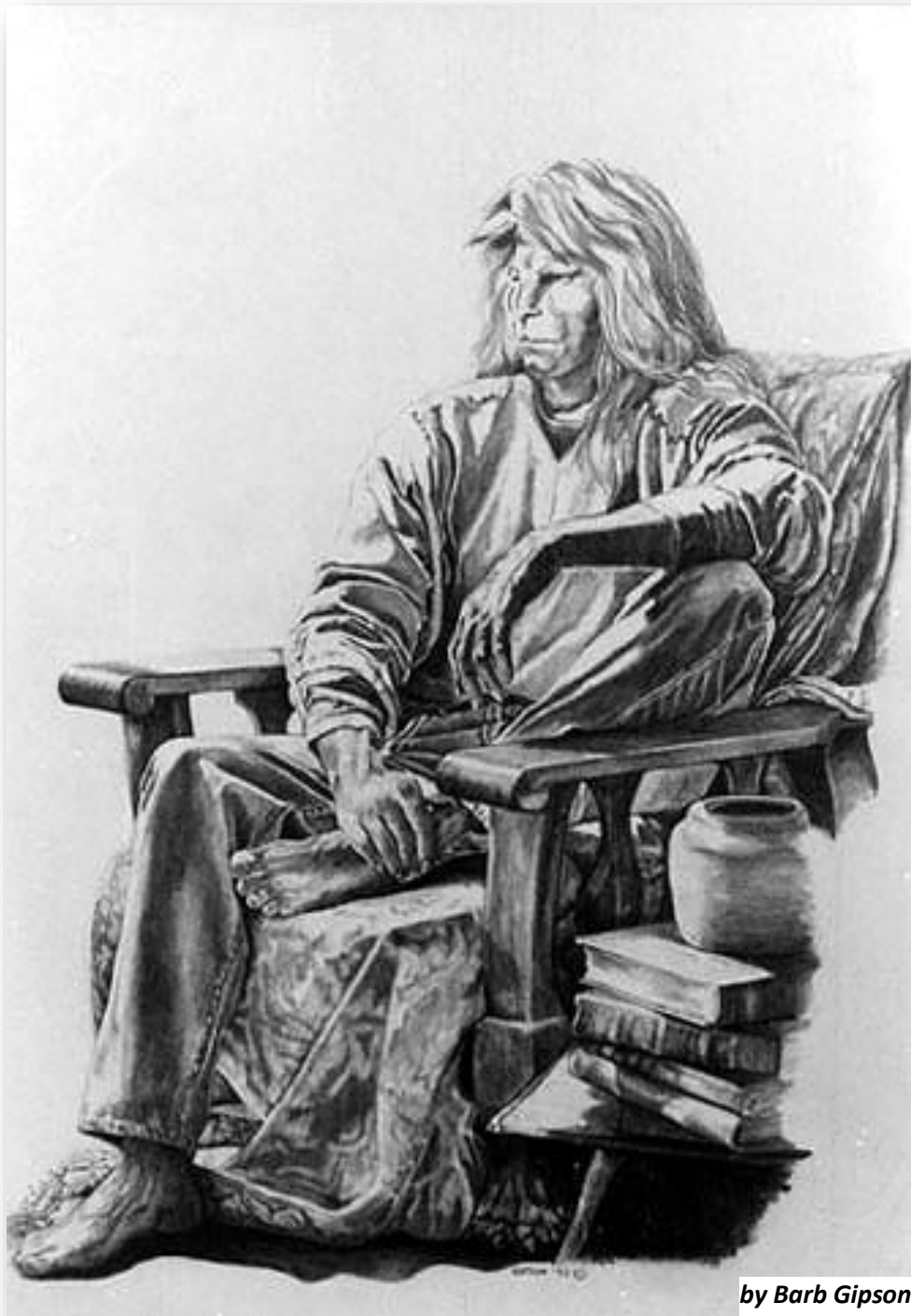


Something Deeper



I have no love to give,
My heart, my love, were taken from me
The night that Catherine died.
She was my life, my world,
She opened doors for me that are now closed forever.
I was changed because of her,
And now I am lost without her.
Yet you have given so much of yourself to me,
So much that I do not deserve.
You have shown me beauty where I saw only ugliness,
And love, where I saw only hatred.
You brought me comfort and hope when there was nothing,
And I am bound to you forever by something deeper than gratitude,
Perhaps by a kind of love, born of our sameness, our aloneness.
There may be other doors to open, other paths to walk,
For you cared, when there was nothing left to give,
You risked all for a dream you knew could never come true.
Diana – if I ever learn to dream again, to hope again,
It will be because of you.
And if I ever find the courage to open my heart,
It will be you that I hold inside.





by Barb Gipson

*"Beauty is truth, truth beauty — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."
"Ode on a Grecian Urn," by John Keats*



Super 'Coon

by Skippy Flink



Someone gave Mouse a photo of Arthur, saying that he was going to be the official mascot for 2020.

The photo showing a very handsome Arthur said that he always wears a mask, compulsively washes his hands, and if you mix up the letters RACOON, you come up with CORONA!!!

Needless to say, Father wasn't too impressed, especially when Mouse suggested that the photo be framed and hung in the Great Hall.

Neither was William!! The tunnel chef told Mouse that, even if Arthur wore a cape, he *still* WASN'T welcome in his kitchen!!

"GO, ARTHUR – SUPER'COON!!!



Don't Die, Catherine

by Allison Duggins



Catherine hit Mitch across the Adam's apple, took the gun out of his pocket, and bolted out of the car, running for cover. She hid behind a dumpster and fired off a shot at her pursuers. Rado returned her fire. Vincent was in the alley and started running towards her. Rado fired off another round. Catherine shot him and he fell backward. Mitch ran toward her and she shot again but missed. Vincent came upon the scene just as Catherine broke from cover and Mitch shot her in the back. She screamed and fell to the ground right in front of him. Mitch saw Vincent.

In a frightened whisper, Mitch croaked. "Let's get out of here."

Vincent crouched beside Catherine, rolling her over. She was limp and lifeless. Vincent's anguished roar split the air. Denton drove away as Vincent picked Catherine up and ran, carrying her to the hospital. Gently he laid her on the steps of the emergency entrance.

Vincent whispered, "Don't die, Catherine... if you die... so do I." A car approached and he reluctantly left her, turning for one last look before he went in search of Denton.

An orderly came out of the hospital and spotted Catherine there on the sidewalk. "Hey, there's somebody lying out here!" the orderly yelled into the open door from which he had just exited. "Grab a gurney!" As he rushed down the steps a doctor and nurse followed him. When they reached Catherine, they could see a small pool of blood beneath her.

"It looks like this person has been shot," the doctor said, as he rolled her over onto her side to see where the blood was coming from. A backboard was swiftly placed against her back and she was rolled onto it and lifted onto the stretcher.

"Take her to trauma one. I'll examine her there. Call Dr. Saroyan, he's the surgeon on call. We'll need him to take the bullet out so we can report this to the police. Do we know who she is?"

A nurse searched Catherine's pockets after they removed her jacket. "I found an ID. Her name is Catherine Chandler and it says she works for the Manhattan DA's office."

"Call the 33rd precinct and report this immediately and they can get in touch with her family." Dr. Booth ordered

"Dr. Saroyan is on his way down." a nurse poked her head in to relay the message to the doctor.

A few minutes later, Dr. Saroyan arrived.



"33rd precinct, Officer Higgins."

"This is the emergency room at Lang General. We have a gunshot victim, shot in the back. She's being prepared for surgery."

"Do you have a name?"

"Catherine Chandler. Her ID says she works for the DA's office."

"Chandler, Chandler, I know that name. Hang on. Hey, Charlie, isn't Catherine Chandler friends with Greg Hughes from homicide upstairs?"

"Yeah, that's her, Why?"

"Is Hughes upstairs?"

"Yeah, I saw him go up a minute ago."

"Thanks."

The desk sergeant turned back to the phone in his hand.

"One moment and I'll transfer you to someone who knows her."

The officer told Greg that Catherine was in the ER with a gunshot wound. Greg picked up the call seconds later.

"Detective Greg Hughes. You say Catherine Chandler has been shot? When? Where?"

"Sorry sir. We don't have that information."

"Is it serious?"

"They're prepping her for surgery. That's all I know right now."

"Thank you for calling. I'll notify her boss."

Greg immediately called Joe.

"Joe, it's Greg. Lang General just called. I don't know all the details but Cathy's been shot. Is there anyone else I should call?"

Joe felt like he'd been kicked in the stomach and was about to vomit.

"Her father is Charles Chandler of Chandler and Coolidge. Tell him I'll meet him at the hospital. I'm on my way. "

As Joe threw the phone down, he heard Greg say he would meet him there. Joe went flying out his apartment door, dreading what he'd find at the hospital when he got there.



"Where's Catherine Chandler?" Two voices asked the nurse at the same time. The men looked at each other, unsure of who the other was as they stood at the nurses' station desk. A third man stood in the background.

"I'm Dr. Alcott, Miss Chandler's doctor," Peter announced.

"Dr. Alcott, right this way." A nurse pointed to one of the bays.

Joe followed the two men and the nurse and waited with them outside the room while the nurse went in to speak with the doctor inside. Joe waved Greg over.

"Joe Maxwell, this is Catherine's father, Charles Chandler," Peter introduced the two men. "Charles, this is Catherine's boss at the DA's office."

"What happened? How did Cathy get shot?" Charles demanded.

"She was investigating problems concerning some dock workers. I don't know all the details as to why she was down there tonight---on her own. But I assure you, Mr. Chandler, I take full responsibility for this. She never should have been down there alone." Joe tried to explain.

"Joe and I will get to the bottom of this, Mr. Chandler. You can count on that." Greg stated after introducing himself.

"How did she get here? Did someone call an ambulance?" Charles asked.

The nurse came out and overheard Charles' question. "No. The orderlies say she was lying at the foot of the emergency room entrance. They never saw who dropped her off."

The men entered the bay and watched as the ER doctor and Dr. Saroyan examined Catherine. Dr. Saroyan ordered immediate surgery to remove the bullet.

"Dr Saroyan....."

"Peter, hello. Do you know this patient?"

"Yes, she is my niece. This is Charles Chander, Cathy's father and Joe Maxwell, her boss."

"How's is she?"

"She has a bullet lodged near her spinal column. It's going to be a little tricky to get it out safely, but I will do everything I can."

"Can we talk to her?"

"For a few minutes. She's drifting in and out of consciousness. The operating team is getting scrubbed and will be ready to go in a few minutes. I'm on my way up now. They'll follow shortly. We'll be going to O.R. Five."

Catherine whispered, "Vincent...Vincent..."

She repeated this a couple of times and then Peter overheard her say softly, "Don't leave me. Take me Below. Take me Below to Father." Charles was stunned.

"Who is Vincent?" Her father asked. "Does Cathy know someone named Vincent?"

"I don't know, Charles, but I think I know who I can ask," Peter whispered to himself, surprised and alarmed at the same time.

Hours later, the doctor approached the men outside the surgical wing. "We were able to remove the bullet and stop the internal bleeding. She's in recovery right now and will be moved to a room in an hour or so."

"I want her to have a private room." Charles told the doctor.

"I'll make sure of that, Mr. Chandler. You can see her for a few minutes." The doctor led Charles away.

"Well, I've got to get back to the office and find out what happened," Joe mumbled.

"I'll collect the bullet and get ballistics working on it and canvas the docks to see if anyone knows anything about this." Greg nodded to Joe and quietly left.

"I'll keep you apprised of her condition, Mr. Maxwell."

"Call me Joe."

They shook hands and headed toward the exit. Peter's pager went off and he walked to the nurses' station. "Dr. Alcott" he said after dialing the number. "Okay, I'm already here. I'll meet Mrs. Andrews upstairs. Thank you." He looked toward Joe. "Duty calls." Joe nodded and headed to the exit alone. Peter rushed for the elevator and the expectant mother anxiously waiting.

Peter never did get the chance to speak to Catherine and soon forgot all about her whispered comments until the events that brought them together in the abandoned warehouse... but that's another story.



by Barb Gipson

The First Time You Touched Me...

Episode expansion of: **Once Upon a Time in New York**

by Judith Nolan

Catherine,

I sit here at Father's table, lost in awe and shock. I am trying to write down my thoughts and feelings, as I always have, but they keep skittering off the page and running back to you. You rest in my bed. Do you sleep?

That thought alone fractures my breathing with such an intense longing. I wish I had the courage to return to my chamber, just to watch you sleep. I've watched you before, tossing and turning, in your tortured dreams. I have wanted to reach out and hold you, to soothe away your fears. It seems so right, and yet, all wrong. How did we come to this fraught impasse?

Tonight, you touched me for the first time. It was an unwary contact that should have meant nothing. I was feeding you some of William's potato soup, when you suddenly laid your hand on mine, for the briefest of moments.

I was utterly transformed. I was not quick enough to prevent it from happening. I was too entranced with your soft voice, I briefly forgot who and what I am.



You reached out, in an attempt to not feel so alone and helpless, in your enforced darkness. Anyone would have done so. You wished only to make a human connection.

Instead, you found my hand. You flinched the moment you touched me. Of course you did, I do not blame you for that.

To your credit, you tried to cover your astonishment about what you found beneath your fingers. I drew back quickly, not daring to explain, as I fled from my own chamber to this one. Thankfully it was empty. Father is tending to the sick, in the tunnel hospital.

I needed the space to think, and to try to make sense of what happened between us. I never meant for you to ever touch me. I must make sure you will never see me. In that lies only pain and confusion. I would not inflict that upon you. There are no explanations for who or what I am.

Father has instructed that I get you out, as soon as you are well enough to travel. He was adamant I tell you nothing of my world. That edict I broke, as we both well know, because I needed to allay your fears and worry. I would never willingly hurt you, never!

But Father is right. As soon as you are ready, it is best you leave us, and this place. Even though I am aware that my heart will break with the certain knowledge I can never see you again. I've already decided that Mouse will take you Above, when that awful time comes. It will be better that way. The break needs to be clean and permanent.

It must be so, Catherine... for your sake, and for the safety of all those I am honour-bound to protect. But you, my amazing Catherine, have already entered deeply into my heart. From the very moment I gathered you into my arms in the park, you settled into my troubled soul. There, I will keep you safe, always. Whatever happens, whatever comes, you are safe. You are safe now. Sleep, my love...

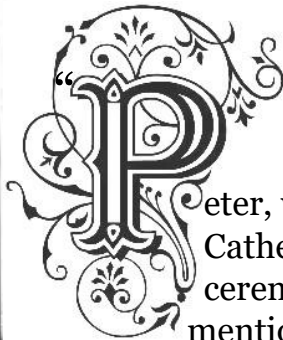
Always,

Vincent



Secrets

by Allison Duggins



Peter, why didn't you tell me you were a Helper?" Catherine asked after the letter-burning ceremony? " Vincent or Father must have mentioned me."

"Father did mention your name when Vincent first brought you Below but he never told me your last name." Peter commented. "And you being so mysterious this past year, I never put two and two together."

"All this time..."

"Yes, we could have confided in each other. Not kept the burden alone."


"It's been tough, but it's also been worth it."

"And we are richer for the knowing."

"We are, indeed, my dear Catherine. We are indeed." Vincent said as he came up alongside her and pulled her close.



by Judith Nolan



I Would Give You Everything

by Barbara Anderson

Episode Expansion of **God Bless the Child**

Dear Vincent,

As I watched you with Lena's baby tonight, I was struck by the look of wonder on your face as you held her tiny miracle in your hands. I couldn't help but imagine how it might feel to give you a child, a precious life that was proof of the love I have for you, evidence of the love we have for each other. It awakened an ache in me that I didn't even know was there... an ache I don't want to burden you with. And yet I can't help wishing that perhaps one day... but I know I shouldn't... not when you're so sure these things can never be.

But I wonder, Vincent, do you ever allow yourself to wish such things? Do you ever allow yourself to dream that I might one day give you such a gift?

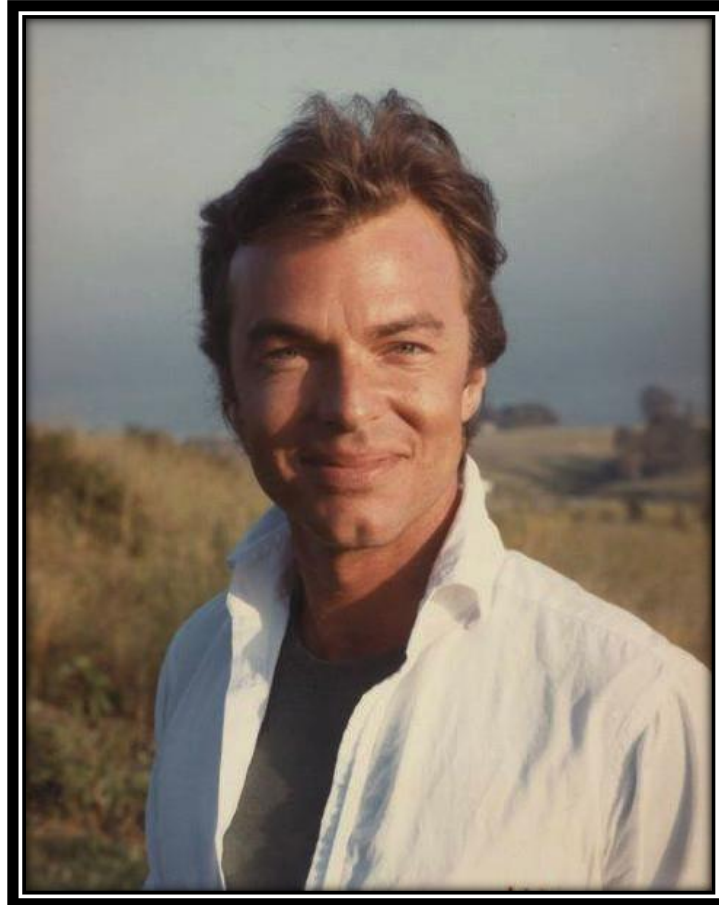
*If you asked me, I would give you anything, Vincent.
I would give you everything!*

*Always,
Catherine*



Everybody Loves Me, Baby...

By Judith Nolan



*Afraid of the dark and the beat of my heart, yet knowing there had to be more.
Though it sounds like a great contradiction, it's the easiest thing to explain,
you see, I was afraid I might never love again..."*

John Denver



'But all the victories I've led, haven't brought you to my bed. You see, everybody loves me, baby, what's the matter with you? Won't ya tell me what did I do to offend you?'

Catherine frowned at the words. She paused to listen, seated before her bedroom makeup mirror, applying lipstick with a not-quite-steady hand. The words of the song playing in her living room held sudden clarity.

Because everybody loves me, baby, what's the matter with you?

What is the matter with me? She sighed, frowning at her reflected image.

She was getting ready for a night at the opera, then dinner afterwards at one of New York's top restaurants. She would be in the attentive company of one of the city's most eligible bachelors. She should be looking forward to it.

But inside, she was trembling with confusion. Against all odds, she had managed to save Vincent and Father from being buried alive in the tunnel collapse. She asked for, and received help, from the one man she'd determined never to see again.

"Elliot Burch..." His name feathered past her lips, on a frustrated sigh.

She hadn't gone to bed with him, despite his growing insistence that they should take their relationship to the next level. It would have been so easy to give in to his persuasive words, and allow him to sweep her away, and give her everything money could buy. Her good friend, Edie, had encouraged her not to allow Elliot to escape.

"It's complicated, Edie..." Catherine shrugged the idea aside. She couldn't tell her good friend the truth... that she had managed to hold back from making such a deep commitment, because of one very important reason...

Vincent...

"Only one more night, then we are even," she promised her reflection, as she replaced the cap on her lipstick with unnecessary force, dropping it back into the basket of makeup.

She turned her face to the side, sweeping back the fall of her hair to expose the scar evident before her ear. It was a constant reminder of her unspoken commitment to Vincent. It had given her the strength to deny Elliot's renewed demands on her time and patience.

She bit her lower lip. She was also a woman of her word, and she'd promised Elliot she would see him again. To his credit, he hadn't denied her when she barged back into his life, only two weeks ago...



She paced nervously back and forth across Elliot's outer office, glaring at the closed door of the inner sanctum. She was fast running out of time, and she needed his help, and yet still he delayed seeing her...

"Oh, come on..." She sighed impatiently, as she watched the door open and Elliot rush a group of architects out of his private office.

He crossed toward her, giving her his best smile. "This must be my lucky day..."

Catherine fought to control her expression. Anger and disgust roiled through her, but she was here, and she needed him. "I'm sorry to barge in on you, but it's very important."

Elliot's welcoming smile didn't diminish. "I'm thankful for such a lovely interruption. Please..." He stood back to indicate she should go before him, as he showed her toward his inner sanctum.

"What's this about, Catherine?" He closed the door behind them. "Isn't D.A. Moreno satisfied with what I've given you on Max Avery?"

Catherine turned to him, trying to keep the urgency from her voice. "I'm not here on business. I need a favor."

Elliot's smile faded, as he studied her with concern. "Are you all right? Here, sit down, you look a little shaky. Let me get you a brandy..."

He tried to steer her toward a chair, but she wasn't having it. "I don't want a brandy!" Catherine snapped, then did her best to recapture her shattered composure. "What I need is your help."

Elliot watched her with real concern written large on his handsome features. She avoided his gaze, knowing he was still carrying the torch for her, but he was also nursing a bad case of hurt pride. And it made him hesitate.

He crossed to the bar to splash whiskey into a glass. He sipped it, staring at her over the rim of the crystal vessel.

Catherine grimaced as she twisted on his silence for a long moment, before anger surged anew, and pushed her toward the door. "I was a fool to think –"

Elliot raised a denying hand. "Catherine! Don't walk out on me again!" He saw her hesitate. "Just tell me what you want."

Catherine turned back. She'd never felt more out of control and frightened. Not even when she was attacked. But then, this situation was not about her, it was all about Vincent. And she was the only one who could save him...

She opened her purse and pulled out her notebook. She tore off a sheet of paper as she crossed the office to hand it to Elliot.

He read it quickly, and laughed. "A drill bit?! Giving up the law for hard rock mining, are you?"

"It's no joke," Catherine flared. "The need is real, and immediate, and I don't have time to spar with you!"

Elliot stared at her. "Don't I even get an explanation?" He held up the note.

"I can't. There's too much at stake." She sighed roughly. "I'm asking you to trust me."

Elliot frowned. "That's all I ever asked of you," he replied pointedly.

He crossed to his desk, bending down to find a number in his rolodex before he picked up the telephone receiver. He glanced back at Catherine as he punched the numbers. "I must have called you fifty times since... our disagreement. I even wrote. The letters were returned unopened. Are you always so certain you're right? Things aren't black and white, Catherine. They should be, but they're not."

He turned away as his call was answered. "This is Elliot Burch. Let me speak to Jack Maitland..."

Catherine remained stubbornly silent, as she watched Elliot, her emotions surging and conflicting. There was nothing she could say, nothing she could tell him.

Elliot straightened. "Jack? I'm sending a friend down there to see you. Give her what she needs."

He hung up, before jotting a note on a piece of paper. He crossed the office to hand it to her. "He'll be expecting you."

Catherine took the slip of paper, holding his gaze for a long beat, before she turned away and headed for the door. At the last moment she looked back. "The next time you call... I'll be in." It cost her a lot, but she had to say it.

Elliot jumped. "Why?" he demanded to know.

Catherine held up the note. "Because you didn't put a price tag on this."

She slipped out, knowing she was leaving an extremely perplexed Elliot staring after her in consternation...



Catherine heaved a sigh, her worried gaze not seeing the expensive meal being placed in front of her by an attentive waiter. Nothing was right with this evening. She felt deeply uneasy inside her own skin. Being with Elliot again only served to throw the truth into much sharper focus.

This was not where she belonged. She could never belong in this world again. The woman she was had been changed, deeply and irrevocably. Only a blind man couldn't see it.

Soft candlelight flickered before her unseeing eyes, reminding her of other places, far from this expensive restaurant, and all it represented. She felt trapped. She wanted to run, escape from everything around her.

She longed to feel the tunnel chill against her skin. She wanted to hear the soft tapping of the pipes, instead of the muted piano music, and to have Vincent's strong arms around her, keeping her warm as she leaned into his massive frame, knowing this was where she truly belonged, always...

Her lashes veiled her eyes, as she sighed unconsciously. *Is Vincent waiting for me on my balcony?* She had left a note for him on her table, saying she regretted not being able to see him again tonight. She was fulfilling a rash promise she'd made in a moment of extreme terror...

"A penny for them..."

Elliot's voice intruded on her turmoil. She looked up to see him watching her over the rim of his wine glass. He looked utterly dissatisfied with her introspection.

"Sorry..." She raised her shoulders in apology.

'Won't ya tell me what did I do to offend you? I'm held in very great value by everyone I meet but you 'cause I've used my talents as I could, I've done some bad, I've done some good. I did a whole lot better than they thought I would so, c'mon and treat me like you should!'

The words of the song she had listened to earlier in the night swirled inside her mind. She had no hope of beginning to explain anything to him, or why she was so distracted.

"You look very far away." Elliot studied her ruefully.

Won't you tell me what I've done to offend you?

This was the third time she'd agreed to come out with him, and they were no closer than the first time. He sensed her slipping, inexorably, away from him, and he felt totally powerless to stop it from happening again.

“Do I?” She raised her eyebrows, along with her glass, giving nothing away of her inner thoughts, as she sipped the chilled wine.

“It’s almost as if you don’t want to be here with me.” He tried not to allow his frustration to show. But he was deeply aware she was not thinking of him in that moment. “I thought this time it would be different. *We* would be different. Give it time, Cathy. That’s all I ask.”

“I never gave you any reason to expect things had changed between us,” she replied evenly. “We made a bargain. This is business, that is all. After tonight –”

“Let’s not talk about that,” Elliot rushed to command. “I’m allowed to hope, aren’t I?” He raised his shoulders. “Besides, you’re not seeing anyone else right now, are you?”

“You’ve been investigating me?” She stiffened, her gaze snapping back into focus. “I... don’t see that my private life is any of your concern.”

The idea sealed her determination never to see him again. It was too fraught with danger. She could not afford to expose Vincent to scrutiny.

“I disagree.” Elliot’s hands curled into fists on the pristine tablecloth.

He often sensed there was a shadow, a darkly intrusive shade of another, always reaching out to frustrate and stymie him. He hadn’t found a way to counter it. *Not yet...*

Seated across from him, Catherine looked breathtakingly lovely in a red evening gown that left her shoulders and neck bare. She was everything a man could desire, and more. He longed to clothe her soft, pale skin in diamonds. He ached to see her in nothing else. His whole body tightened with anticipation. But he was vitally aware he had to tread carefully, show her the new Elliot, the man she could grow to love.

He’d booked out *Delmonico’s* for the entire evening, so they could dine alone. He could do that, he was Elliot Burch, and his name carried weight. But still, she was not *with him* in any true sense.

“Things are never black and white, Catherine. I told you that, not so long ago.” He pushed his barely touched meal aside, as he watched for her reaction. “With me, you could have everything you have ever wanted. We could go places and see things you have only dreamed about.”

“I know that...” Her green eyes lifted to his. They were filled with confusion, and some deeper emotion he could not define. “But you’re only speaking of material things, Elliot.”

“I like the way you say my name,” he countered quietly. “Catherine, you know you can trust me. Tell me what I need to do to win you...”

“I can’t help you, Elliot. I’m sorry...”

“I see...” He swallowed tightly.

Her softly parted lips tempted him. He wanted to reach out and touch her, pull her closer and tell her nothing would ever hurt her again. He’d read the newspaper reports of her kidnapping, and mysterious survival. He knew she’d been through hell. He wanted to reassure her she would never need to suffer again, if only she would trust him to protect her.

No other woman had ever affected him so much, or so deeply. He knew he would do anything to win her favor, and love, if only she would allow him to get close enough.

But somehow, somewhere, there was always that same long, powerful shadow cast over their stuttering relationship. The more he pushed, the more she pulled back, ultimately dismissing him like an annoying puppy that needed to learn its place.

He suspected another man was the cause of her introspection, but all of his attempts to find out were frustrated. Every private detective he employed to watch her, had always come up empty. If they were to be believed the woman did nothing but eat, work and sleep.

Elliot wasn’t so big a fool as to believe such reports. She was here with him now, in exchange for a selection of hard rock mining equipment. Another mystery she refused to explain.

Catherine was hiding someone from him, and he was determined to find out the truth. No matter how long it took. He had the money, the resources, and the patience to wait. After all, *she* had come to *him* in her hour of need. Surely that counted for something...



He’d rushed a group of architects out of his private office, as soon as he knew Catherine was waiting to see him. His heart rate had accelerated the moment he set eyes on her again. She looked deeply upset and overwrought.

It had been too long since their last disagreement. She still had the power to move him. He ached to rush to her side, hold her again and kiss away all her anxiety; replace it with laughter.

He'd given her his best smile. "This must be my lucky day..."

Her taut expression dismissed his urbanity. Anger and disgust filled her eyes, but it was obvious she needed something from him. That would have to do for now.

"I'm sorry to barge in on you, but it's very important," she snapped.

Elliot managed to keep his smile warm and welcoming. "I'm thankful for such a lovely interruption. Please..." He stood back to indicate she should go before him, toward his inner sanctum.

"What's this about, Catherine?" He closed the door behind them. "Isn't D.A. Moreno satisfied with what I've given you on Max Avery?"

Catherine turned to him. "I'm not here on business. I need a favor."

Elliot studied her with concern. "Are you all right? Here, sit down, you look a little shaky. Let me get you a brandy..."

He tried to steer her toward a chair, but she wasn't having it. "I don't want a brandy!" she declared hotly. "What I need is your help!"

Elliot watched her with real concern. She avoided his gaze, but he could see she was suffering, and it made him hesitate. He wanted to hold her. Instead, he crossed to the bar, to splash whiskey into a glass. He sipped it, staring at her over the rim of the crystal vessel.

Catherine grimaced, obviously waiting for him to speak. When he didn't, she headed for the door. "I was a fool to think –"

Elliot raised a denying hand. "Catherine! Don't walk out on me again!" He saw her hesitate. "Just tell me what you want." He sensed an opening, something he could grab hold of and use to his advantage. After all, she had come to see him...

She turned back with obvious reluctance. She opened her purse and pulled out a notebook. She tore off a sheet of paper as she crossed the office to hand it to Elliot.

He read it quickly and laughed. "A drill bit?! Giving up the law for hard rock mining, are you?"

"It's no joke," Catherine flared. "The need is real, and immediate, and I don't have time to spar with you!"

Elliot stared at her. "Don't I even get an explanation?" He held up the note. Nothing made any sense, but he was willing to play the strange hand he'd been dealt.

"I can't. There's too much at stake." She sighed roughly. "I'm asking you to trust me."

Elliot frowned. "That's all I ever asked of you," he replied pointedly.

He crossed to his desk, bending down to find a number in his rolodex before he picked up the telephone receiver. He glanced back at Catherine as he punched the numbers. "I must have called you fifty times since... our disagreement. I even wrote. The letters were returned unopened. Are you always so certain you're right? Things aren't black and white, Catherine. They should be, but they're not."

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He hung up, before jotting a note on a piece of paper. He crossed the office to hand it to her. "He'll be expecting you."

Catherine took the slip of paper, holding his gaze for a long beat, before she turned away and headed for the door. At the last moment she looked back. "The next time you call... I'll be in."

Elliot jumped. "Why?" he demanded to know. He could see the admission had cost her, but she made it anyway. His heart rate quickened with anticipation.

Catherine held up the note. "Because you didn't put a price tag on this."

She slipped out, leaving a perplexed Elliot to stare after her in consternation... "Well, I'll be..." he muttered, frowning at the closed door.

She'd thrown him a lifeline, something he'd learned not to long for. "This time, Cathy, it will be different. I will be different... you will see I can change."

He shook his head, trying to determine how much time he needed to allow, before he called her. A day? A week? Tonight? He ran a distracted hand up and around the back of his neck, trying to decide.

He sighed roughly, turning away to hurry across to his desk and thumb the intercom. "Janice? Get me Delmonico's, immediately..."



Elliot reached across the table to entwine his fingers through hers. "You will come back to me, of that I am certain. You know I don't give up so easily, Cathy."

Catherine pulled her hand from his. "We made a bargain, Elliot, and it has been fulfilled."

She made to rise, but he was before her, standing so close to her she could feel his warm breath feathering across the bare skin of her neck. "Tell me what I did to offend you?"

She moved back to look up at him. This close, this intent, she couldn't think how to formulate the words. It was all too much, and far too late. "You betrayed a trust. You couldn't see what you were doing to defenseless people like Sophie and Mischa."

"Is that what this is all about?" Elliot stepped back, raising both arms wide in appeal. "I thought we settled that months ago. I told you I had no idea what was going on."

Catherine reached to pick up her evening bag from the table. "That statement is wearing more than a little thin." She pushed her arms into her evening coat.

"Goodbye, Elliot. Thank you... for your help. I will always be grateful." She stepped away walking around him, heading towards the restaurant entrance.

"Take the limo." Elliot reached to detain her. "Morris will take you anywhere you wish to go."

She avoided his touch. "Thank you, but I prefer to catch a cab. Good night, Elliot."

Her heels clicked across the polished floor as she left him standing there, looking like a prize fool. The worst of it was he had no idea what he'd done this time.

'Tell me what did I do to offend you?' he wanted to shout, but didn't.

He became aware of the *maitre de* hovering attentively at his elbow.

"Will the lady be returning tonight, sir?" the man asked, with fawning deference.

"Not tonight, Maurice." Elliot shrugged. He laughed shortly. "I think a brandy is in order... a large one of your most expensive."

"Yes sir." Maurice nodded, as he stepped back, hurrying to fulfill the order.

Elliot reseated himself. He signaled for the hovering waiter to clear the table. He linked his fingers together, frowning at them.

It was not over between him and Catherine. It would never be over. Not while he had the power and strength to change it. He just had to rearrange his game board and make the white queen very aware of his intentions.

"I'm held in high regard by everyone I've met, but you..." He accepted the glass of whiskey. He held it up in mock salute. "This is not over. Until the next time, Cathy..."



*Fortune has me well in hand, armies wait at my command
My gold lies in a foreign land buried deep beneath the sand
The angels guide my ev'ry tread, my enemies are sick or dead
But all the victories I've led haven't brought you to my bed
You see, everybody loves me, baby, what's the matter with you?*

*Won't ya tell me what did I do to offend you?
Now the purest race I've bred for thee to live in my democracy
And the highest human pedigree awaits the first-born boy baby
And my face on ev'ry coin engraved, the anarchists are all enslaved
My own flag is forever waved by the grateful people I have saved.
You see, everybody loves me, baby, what's the matter with you?
Won't ya tell me what did I do to offend you?*

*Now, no land is beyond my claim when the land is seized in the people's name
By evil men who rob and maim, if war is hell, I'm not to blame!
Why, you can't blame me, I'm Heaven's child, I'm the second son of Mary mild
And I'm twice removed from Oscar Wilde, but he didn't mind, why, he just smiled
Yes, and the ocean parts when I walk through, and the clouds dissolve and the sky turns blue
I'm held in very great value by everyone I meet but you
'cause I've used my talents as I could, I've done some bad, I've done some good
I did a whole lot better than they thought I would so, c'mon and treat me like you should!*

Everybody Loves Me Baby by Judith Nolan

*Because everybody loves me, baby, what's the matter with you?
Tell me what did I do to offend you? (whoo, yeah!)*
*Everybody loves me, baby, what's the matter with you?
Tell me what did I do to offend you?*
*Yeah, everybody loves me, baby, what's the matter with you?
Tell me what did I do to offend you?*



- DON MCLEAN /// 7. Everybody Loves Me, Baby - (American Pie) - (1971)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XG6SCDUiFZs>





by Judith Nolan

A Letter for a Ghost

Episode expansion of: **When the Blue Bird Sings...**
by Judith Nolan



Dearest Catherine,

You didn't have to send him away tonight. I know you were trying to protect me from discovery, and I love you for it. But I felt such a strange connection to your mysterious Kristopher. I cannot begin to explain it... even if he seems a very impulsive young man.

Father worries that he may have seen me, and perhaps wonders about what he saw. He talks of risks and the dangers of our being carelessly lost in the night, and the stars, and each other. Nothing could be further from the truth of how things really are.

I tried to tell him that this is not how it is between us. How could I ever forget the constant perils we face, whenever we are alone together? I truly do hear it all; the sounds of the traffic, the wind in the trees, and the activities of those who make the park their home. All was there tonight. I knew, heard and understood everything. But I did not hear Kristopher approach, until he spoke. How can that be, Catherine?

Is it possible he is some kind of ghost? A mischievous spirit from another realm, sent to uncover our failings? He appeared real enough, the glimpse I

had of him. And then he spoke.

Catherine, he read his part from *Idylls of the King* so beautifully I almost wept. I wished I could have stayed, sharing the moment with you both. We might have talked, like two men who met by chance, and may never see each other again.

But, of course, I dream of impossible things. I wish for a fool's paradise where all of us are equal, and I do not frighten people with my appearance. The bitter taste on my tongue tonight is because of this wish, this wilful dream... to be a part of you, always, wherever you go, and whomever you meet. Is it truly too much to ask?

Sadly, I fear so. Therefore, we must live in the small moments of joy, in the quiet places, between our worlds. We share your balcony and my drainage tunnel entrance, equally. In these places, we can be ourselves. It is all we can have, for now. But one day, my love, one day, could that dream show us more, give us more than we ever thought possible?

Sleep well tonight, my Catherine. And I will sit here and think more on Kristopher, and about the blue bird, floating above our heads, as it sings of beautiful and impossible things. Of things that are truly beautiful, of things that are lovely and never happen. Of things that are not and should be...

Always,

Vincent



by Barb Gipson

Clothed in Beauty...

by Judith Nolan



*"She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright, meet in her aspect and her eyes. . ."*

Lord Byron



he hour was very late by the time the gallery party,
featuring Kristopher Gentian's stunning artworks, finally
wound up.



The evening had been an outstanding success, and no one seemed eager to leave. But finally, Jenny and Catherine were alone in the gallery. They said their goodbyes on the sidewalk in front of the shop, as the lights began to go off behind them.

"It went great," Jenny acknowledged. "Don't you think it went great?" She shook her head. "Those paintings were something else..."

“Yeah, I’m happy,” Catherine replied, realizing she absolutely was.

Jenny sighed dreamily, lifting her eyes to the night sky. “You know, I didn’t realize they made artists like Kristopher anymore.”

“They don’t...” Catherine smiled, knowing it to be true.

“Okay, I need to go home, while there’s still some dreaming time left in the night.” Jenny shrugged, as she stepped towards the curb to hail an approaching taxi. It came to a stop beside her. “Want to share?” She opened the rear door.

“No, thanks.” Catherine shook her head. “I feel like walking. The night’s so lovely...” She moved close to hug her friend goodbye. “Thanks for everything.”

“My pleasure! And dinner?” Jenny kissed her cheek. “Shame you can’t bring Kristopher along with you.” She raised her eyebrows naughtily.

“I’ll see you Tuesday,” Catherine promised. “And as for Kristopher, he’s dead, remember? They found his body in an alley off Bleeker over two years ago.”

“Shame...” Jenny compressed her lips. “But a girl can fantasize, can’t she?” She shrugged. “All right, don’t forget you’ve promised me Tuesday. You take good care of you now.” Jenny turned away to climb into the cab and shut the door.

“You too.” Catherine watched her friend being driven off, before starting down the street with a faraway smile on her face. But she hadn’t walked more than a few feet when the gallery owner hurried out of the front door, carrying a large canvas, carefully wrapped in cloth and tied with twine.

He called after her. “Oh, Catherine *darling*, I was so afraid you’d gone. Here...” He hurried down the sidewalk to thrust the bulky painting at her.

Catherine was completely baffled. “What’s this?”

The gallery owner shrugged. “Well, I couldn’t say for certain. But whatever it is, it’s yours. It turned up when we were rooting about in that dreadful warehouse... way in back, all sealed up like this.” He shuddered artistically. “But it has your name on it, see?” He showed her a large cardboard tag attached to the twine. “I put it aside for you. Did you know the artist when he was alive? Oh, well, you must have, of course, never mind. Enjoy.”

He hurried back inside the gallery, leaving Catherine standing under a street light, holding the large canvas. *A painting? With my name on it? There... must be some mistake?*

She heard the gallery doors being locked behind her, and the last light went out. She was left standing on the pavement, clasping a large present with unknown potential to cause havoc. She had no clear idea about what she was going to do with her new possession. Then it occurred to her that there was only one safe place she could go, to uncover the truth in a private setting, away from the potential danger of prying eyes...



Vincent's rock-hewn chamber was lit by several candles, each bravely trying to hold back the darkness that hovered in the shadowed corners. The air of silence was underscored by faint hissing from the flickering kerosene brazier beside the bed.

The two occupants of the chamber stood side by side, both spellbound. Catherine and Vincent could only stare at what they'd just uncovered. They gazed at Kristopher's unexpected gift, neither quite knowing what to say.

"He had his sketch of me to work from, I suppose..." Catherine finally mused, frowning at the exquisite painting. "But he must have painted you from memory. Astonishing, isn't it?"

Vincent regarded the painting with wondering eyes. "You might even say... magical..."

Catherine turned to smile up at him. "Now you're starting to sound like Kristopher." She shook her head.

Vincent raised his eyebrows at her. "Am I?"

He looked back to the painting. He reached out to gently touch the edge, smoothing the ball of his thumb lightly across the painted surface. His lips curved into a strange, enigmatic half-smile. "Hmmm..."

Catherine noticed his abstraction. "Why are you smiling?"

“Kristopher... worked only in oils...” Vincent mused slowly, dropping his arm to his side.

“Yes...” Catherine looked back to the painting.

“Oils take months to dry completely, Catherine. Sometimes even years.” Vincent sighed. “This canvas...” His wide shoulders lifted in defeat.

Catherine put a finger to his lips to silence him. “Don’t say it... I have to hold on to *some* of my certainties. Don’t I?”

She recalled Smythe’s words to her, back in the bookshop. *‘My dear, young lady, so young and so cynical. You should not be so certain. This world devours our certainties... and all our beauties, as well...’*

Catherine had stared at him, not at all sure of what, or who, he’d been referring to. She eyed the incredible painting. *‘And sometimes... just sometimes, it gives them back,’* she concluded.

She smiled as she leaned back against her love, the most beautiful, most certain thing she knew. She nestled into his shoulder, still gazing at the painting. Vincent put an arm around her and rested his cheek against her hair. They lost themselves once more in the inexplicable beauty of the painting.

It was a portrait of Catherine and Vincent, standing together, as breathtakingly romantic as the rest of Kristopher’s work. Catherine wore a lush, red velvet gown. Vincent stood behind her, his arms wrapped possessively around her body, his cheek resting against her hair. They looked like sated lovers from antiquity, finally having succeeded against all the odds.

Still consumed by the incredible painting, Vincent pulled Catherine closer to him with an arm around her waist. He recalled Kristopher’s quote, from Idylls. *‘She sent the deathless passion in her eyes through him, and made him hers, and laid her mind on him, and he believed in her belief.’* His own expression in the portrait, left no doubt of it. They were bonded, for all time.

Be well, Kristopher. Be well, wherever you are...

As they stared at the creation, Catherine fancied she could hear Kristopher softly quoting the same Oscar Wilde poem from their meeting in the park...

'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.'



Far above the tunnels and Vincent's hidden chamber, the tall, rumpled figure of a young man, wearing a Mets cap, walked through the cool, early morning air of Central Park. His hands were pushed deep into the pockets of his too large overcoat against the cold, and he wore a plaid scarf tied around his neck.

He smiled to himself as he ambled along, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings and the possibility of assault from the park's less savoury denizens. His lips were moving, shaping the poem he was softly quoting, "*'And on that cheek, and o'er that brow, so soft, so calm, yet eloquent. The smiles that win, the tints that glow, but tell of days in goodness spent. A mind at peace with all below. A heart whose love is innocent...'*"

"A mind at peace with all *Below*..." Kristopher Gentian stopped walking as he repeated the line. He laughed softly. "I wonder what they're making of my painting right now. I hope they like it."

He pushed his boot at a rustling pile of dried summer leaves. "How could they not? I *knew* she would take it to *him*. Where else could she go, with such a secret? Maybe I should go down and have a look. I'm sure they wouldn't mind if I chose to drop in... would they even notice me at all?"

He shook his head, as he lifted his eyes to the concrete drainage tunnel in the middle distance. Its dark mouth seemed to beckon, and he could see again the shadows of two lovers merging as they came together in a warm embrace. *Two young lovers who so badly needed to go to Camelot...*

"Okay..." Kristopher smiled whimsically. Maybe, just maybe, he could make that happen. He could take two very stubborn people who loved each other, all the way to Camelot. Surely he, of all people, could do that.

“I guess I’ve got nothing but time, and even less to lose...” he decided, looking from the drainage tunnel up into the dawn sky, still full of stars despite the dawning golden streaks of the rising sun.

A dawn wind picked up at the same moment, gathering the leaves he’d so recently scattered. They rose up and fluttered around, seemingly aimlessly, for now there was nothing, and no one, to inhibit their progress across the path. The rumpled young man simply faded into the dawn, almost as if he had been nothing more than a ghost...



*"Painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt,
and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen..."*
Leonardo da Vinci



by Judith Nolan



The Storyteller Tale 3 Misery and Magic

by Angie

"I shall relate quite simply how things happened and without adding anything of my own, which is no small feat for an historian."

- Voltaire



Vincent considered what tales to tell next. Warnick had told so many, but now the stories from the early days in the tunnel world were carefully written down, and so much of what followed was already well-known; about how Anna had found him one cold winter night, and Father had cared for him and Anna had miscarried hers and John's child (and the lie Paracelsus had used). Those tales were not needed now, not in this book.


Instead, he should tell some tales that, although sometimes told over the years, were seldom related after Warnick died. Their storyteller had had a gift. He was the only one who could do them some justice. His deep voice and sincerity – and the fact that he had lived through the events – made his stories real.

But there was one in particular which was never told now – and had not been for many long years. Warnick only half believed it, even though he had been there, so he preferred to tell others. Vincent himself personally had a small part in that tale, but he had not understood its import until much later, yet it had never failed to move him. It was just a little... or more than a little... magical. Yes, it was one that should be recorded.



Vincent uncapped his fountain pen and opened to a new page of the journal he was using for his project, 'The Storyteller'. This part he decided should be called 'Misery and Magic'. Yes, that was appropriate. As before, he would attempt to recreate the 'voice' of Warnick their storyteller. He had told it once, not long after it happened. Vincent remembered it well, because he had seen it personally.

Misery and Magic



Back when this place had not existed long, but after we had stretched our bridge over the Abyss, we welcomed a new family, a couple and a little girl. We found them on a subway platform at the end of the line, huddled in the darkness against that cold wall, with three small, cheap suitcases, some personal items and food in bags. Pascal Senior found them – he used to go above occasionally, to check pipe courses and trace them. He brought the family down to us, a long journey then, but made a little shorter by the bridge. He took them into the cave we all used in those very early days, not yet a library, but often a gathering place. He showed them where they could rest and the pile of blankets and pads we kept there for that purpose.

Pascal was a quiet man, like his son. Gradually he heard their tale, and later he told it to me. For even then, I was the memory, the storyteller. Pascal shared news over the pipes, short and to the point, often urgent. This was something new to him. Many of us did not tell of our lives before the tunnels. There was little to say, in any case, and most was best forgotten. We lived in a much better world now, so the old one above was irrelevant, except as a source of necessary goods.

The family we found that day was Japanese. They had been evicted from their apartment in the city after the war, for no other reason than their nationality. Animosity against all Asians was common then, but particularly the Japanese, because of Pearl Harbour. No one bothered to distinguish between them or consider that they had been in New York for years before World War 2. Even though Pearl Harbour happened on the other side of the country, there were many ex-servicemen in the city, and they resented being unable to find a place to live, especially if an Oriental was living in one they thought they deserved. Their apartment, they told me, was old and small, but it was solid, and the landlord had been pleasant to them.

So, it came to pass, the landlord evicted the Takashi family. They lived and worked in New York – Taro was a mechanic, Su a teacher, and they had a little girl, Yuko, now 8 years old. They all spoke excellent English.

We welcomed them, as we do all outcasts, and found them polite and hard-working.

Taro, who was good with his hands, chose a cave overlooking the Great Falls to make into their chamber. I helped him carve stairs up to it. It was small, but they made it comfortable. Su helped in the kitchen, showed our cooks how to properly cook rice and how to make a meal out of very little. She was talented in other ways, darning our sweaters so well that the mending could not be seen.



Warnick boasted for years that he still had a sweater Su had repaired invisibly, Vincent remembered. Warnick displayed the elbows of his favourite cardigan, patched of course, but above both were areas that had been mended skillfully. Around the buttons had also been mended. One had to look very closely indeed to see those mends. They were almost magical, they were so well done.



The family kept apart... not unfriendly, just somewhat sad, and careful. They did not completely trust even us. They couldn't know that all of us were outcasts in our way, that we looked after each other and judged no one. They took an interest in Vincent as a baby, and Su was the only person he allowed to hold him, besides Father.

Ah, Su. She was a beautiful woman, a beautiful spirit. She said very little, but she did assemble some books for the children to read, Devin now being old enough, and Vincent almost so. Yuko, who was the oldest child in the tunnels, used to read to our children – Winslow, Devin, and of course, little Vincent. Her voice was unusual – deep and a little scratchy. Taro said it was a special voice, the voice of a bright spirit. Vincent loved him for that, because he too had a voice that was a little unusual, almost hoarse. In his case, everyone assumed his vocal chords were not quite human. Little did they know... until later.

Su always seemed a little sad, not sad because of their fate, but sad for herself. One day some years after they had joined the community, they told their tale.

Yuko was a quiet child, helpful, but too young on their arrival to do much labour. Still, she kept places clean and swept all the public areas, something most of us did not worry too much about. These tunnels are dusty, and we concentrated on making them warmer and drier. She used to sweep the dust into the Abyss, but she also minded the braziers in the big chambers we all used, when we had the fuel.

One day, some time later, I helped Yuko haul some charcoal to their cave. We had found several huge, but wet paper bags of it. Everyone got quite a lot, but it was heavy. Taro and Su did not come out to greet us, so I assumed they had gone for a walk. They loved to explore the tunnels, as others did, or go outside to forage. We carried the charcoal to their chamber, up the narrow, carved steps, Yuko in the lead. It was daylight in the chamber of the Great Falls, so the lantern was left at the bottom of the steps. There would be candles in the chamber.

Once we were in the dim chamber, we put the bags of charcoal near the door, near the brazier.

Then there was a groan. I stared into the dim space, which had been brightened somewhat by small holes punched into the rock to allow the light from the Great Falls to come in. Nevertheless, there were deep shadows, and no candles were burning. I wondered about that. We all used candles and made more from whatever wax items we could find. Light was all that kept us sane, kept the darkness at bay.

I walked past the light from the windows, concerned that Taro or Su was sick. As my eyes got used to the dimness, I could see Su lying on a floor pad covered with a patched blanket. Taro sat next to her on a cushion, silent. He looked up at me and even in the dim light it was obvious his eyes were despairing.

“What's wrong? Is Su sick? Do you want me to fetch Jacob?” I asked.

Taro shook his head. I moved closer and sat on the ground beside him. Yuko sat beside me, silent now too.

“It is not something that can be cured with modern medicine,” Taro said softly.

“Nor should it be.” He looked at his wife. I bent a little to look more closely and saw that Su's face had planes I had not noticed before, sharp ones. A hand outside the cover seemed claw-like and the skin had a strange mottling. But maybe that was the light.

“Tell him,” Su whispered, her voice like a rusty hinge, worse than I had ever heard it.

Taro shifted a little, and so did Yuko. I looked at Taro, sensing a story.

“Tell me,” I suggested, quietly.

Taro looked at me and nodded.

“We are an old race, we Japanese. We have our own legends, our own history, very different from that of the West. We are related to the Chinese, whose legends we sometimes share. But there is an even older race, one we tell stories about in our myths and revere in our culture, but which everyone assumes is fantasy. It is not. Su is one of them. Her full name is Tatsu. Her real name is something she cannot reveal – and we could not reproduce it, even if she could. Sometimes her people are simply called 'ryu'... a short name for a being so long in body and rich in history and memory. It means 'dragon'.



At this point in the story, Vincent remembered, Warnick had paused to address the inevitable scoffs of older children. He looked each of the doubters in the eye, and said a few words, the same words, each time.

“You don't believe this. But you have a being among you who is just as magical, in his way. Who in the world above would believe Vincent existed? Do not be so quick to dismiss magic. Every day is magical, to those who know how to see.”

It was the only time Vincent enjoyed being identified as 'different'. Later, he recalled, Narcissa had said something similar to him, asking him to look at his reflection.

There was more to the story of Su, though. Warnick told the story as he had heard it from Taro.



Taro told the story slowly, but proudly.

“I met her in the mountains of Japan, many years ago, before we came to the United States. I found a woman who had been shot with an arrow and left to die. I do not know how this happened, but even in our small country, there are people who live lives we do not understand. She was fevered, so I carried her to my home in my village at the foot of the mountains and tended to her. It was still dark, so no one saw me. Later, I told everyone she was a visiting cousin. I did not know then she was ryu, for she was thin and dark, like one of the native peoples from very long ago in our history. When she was well, she showed me. Not long afterwards, we decided we must come to the United States, so that our lives could

be less restrictive. Su had skills in weaving and embroidery, which she sold, and I was good at fixing machines for a small fee, although the ones in my village were small and mostly for farming. We saved our money, and about a year later, took passage on a cargo ship that crossed the Pacific and Caribbean, travelling slowly, picking up and delivering cargoes to many places. The crew were mostly Filipino, and they taught us English, while we taught them Japanese. Su helped in the kitchen and I helped the engine mechanic.

“After over a year, the ship arrived in New York, and we disembarked and applied for citizenship. With our skills, we soon found work. Su was an educated woman and became a teacher of small children. Then the war came, and we realized there would probably be trouble. Yuko was born at the end of the war, but we hoped for the best. There was nowhere else to go. We could not go back to Japan. Our landlord evicted us, sadly, and then you found us when we were despairing and considering following a tunnel just to escape. If we had died, no one would miss us. We are all very grateful Pascal found us. You are good, kind people.

“Yuko will stay with you, as she wishes to, but Su and I must leave, soon. It is the Year of the Dragon, 1964, and at the next new moon, we must go back to the mountains where Su was born and still belongs.”

I was silent for long moments, but questions filled my head, naturally. How could this be? But I did not ask that..

“How can you leave, Taro?” I asked. Are you a dragon too?”

“No, Warnick, but Su can effect the change in me, because our lives are bound together and because this is a special year. She is powerful now. We will leave you through the light that shines above the Great Falls and you will not see us again. I am sorry, but Su must do this, and I cannot live without her. It is a long way home, but Su says she can ensure we are not seen, by travelling secret paths she knows, outside time, using her magic. It is how her folk have survived to the present day.”

I looked at Yuko. Surely, she would not become a dragon too.

“It's okay,” she said. “I know they must do this. I have known this since I was a child. One day I will visit them in Japan. I know how to find them. They gave me life. They are my parents. I owe them everything.”

I wished them both well and thanked them for the years they had given us. What else could I do? I said goodbye, bowed and left them.



The next scene was Vincent's. He had never told anyone about it before. It was time, he decided. Yes, and it should be in the first person too.



Meanwhile, I was now a precocious nine years old, wondering where my friend Su was. I had not seen her for a long time - at least as I measured time. It was several days. I approached their chamber, hiding when I saw Warnick leave, and waited until he had gone past. I could not have said why I hid, but I always sensed when I needed to be cautious. I climbed the steps to where the Japanese family lived and knocked on the chamber wall to announce myself. Taro came to me with a candle in a holder.

“Come in Vincent,” he invited, and I followed him to where Su was lying. She looked strange in the candlelight, but I was not afraid. I sensed her love for him. She seemed... longer, thinner. I sensed that more than her voice was 'different' now.

“Vincent,” she whispered to me. “I am glad you came. I would not want to leave you without saying goodbye, but I cannot move right now.”

“You are leaving us?” I asked, a hard hand gripping my heart at the thought.

“I must go, as must Taro. We... have another place to go.”

“Will I see you again?” I asked, somehow knowing as I did so that I would not.

Su did not reply to the question. Instead she moved a little and turned her head to look me in the eyes.

“I am very old, Vincent, much older than anyone you know, maybe older than anyone else on earth. My race is even older, and very special, as you are very special, Vincent. You must learn not to let the darkness and the rock of this place be all that you are. One day you will discover a miracle, but I cannot tell you more. I sense that your future will be challenging, but also loving and beautiful. I want you to promise me that you will not be sad, that you will be patient. It may be many years. Can you do that?”

I nodded, because she wanted it, although I did not understand. I had already learned to be patient and silent and knew when that was important. I was different from the other children, for all those reasons, and I knew it, even then.

Then Su took my hand and held it as if it was a precious object, with reverence. Her long, smooth, almost scaly fingers stroked my small, hairy ones with its sharp nails. She spoke softly.

“You are a special person too, Vincent. Never doubt this. You will not always enjoy this difference, and it will make you sad, but you will survive to be strong, caring and intelligent. This I see.

“And remember, like me, you have a dark and a bright side. One side gives you strength, the other compassion. They must work together for you to be whole. Do not try to deny one, for you will weaken the other.”



Vincent remembered Su looking at him, seeing him as few others did, not as someone different, but as someone unique. It was a moment he would never forget.



Su sighed. “You are yet very young, Vincent, but you are intelligent. I hope you will remember my words and believe in yourself.”

She turned my hand over, palm up, and placed a largish round metal object into it.

I looked at it curiously. It had a square hole in the middle and something inscribed – dragons! Two of them. I looked at it more closely, then at Su.



“This is a lucky feng shui coin from China,” she told him. “I want you to have it to remember me. If you should ever need a friend, hold it. I cannot come, of course, and you cannot come to me, but you will know I am listening. I have given it just a little of my magic. It cannot do anything to help, but perhaps knowing I love you will give you comfort in dark times.”

I thanked her, of course, and clasped the coin tightly. I would never forget. I never forgot anything.

“I must rest now, Vincent. I have a long way to go... and I am not yet ready.”

I didn't question her further. I assumed she meant she had to pack. But in fact, I never saw her or Taro again. I put the coin in a little cotton drawstring bag I begged off Devin. I strung a length of cord through the drawstring and wore it around my neck.

Yuko approached Father two days later, while he was playing chess with me, to inform him that her parents had left. Father merely nodded, apparently already knowing what he needed to know. I was surprised and saddened but remembered the coin and said nothing.

Yuko stayed a year or so longer, then went above to work in a small gift store owned by a Japanese couple. They were occasional helpers, often sending down small gifts for the children. Yuko did not return to the tunnels, but I saw her occasionally and once, many years later, learned that she had travelled to Japan and found her parents.

“They are quiet and happy,” she told me, “there on their mountain in a little house, remote from everything. The local people know of them and bring them food and gifts. The villagers consider that they are fortunate in this situation, to have such in their area. No one speaks of them outside that little village, as that would endanger their fortune, so the legends tell.

“I cannot go again because it is too dangerous now, too difficult to not be seen, too many people. Even the villagers have become very careful. They built a shrine, one that looks like many others, where they leave their gifts.

“My parents are always with me.” Yuko showed him a coin, much like his own, and he understood immediately.



Vincent had not thought about the coin for a long time. He had not remembered it in the confusion of Devin disappearing, or later when he became ill when Lisa left. He had not even remembered it during his most recent illness. Catherine's death had left him feeling so empty, he thought of nothing else, and baby Jacob was keeping him occupied now.

Where was the coin? Vincent rummaged through his knickknack shelves, moving things carefully and disturbing more than a little dust. Eventually, after

a massive sneeze at a particularly dusty recess, he found the little cotton bag with the drawstring, almost invisible in the darkness of the old cupboard. Its weight told him the coin was still inside. He shook the dust off carefully and opened it, half expecting the bag to disintegrate. It didn't, but the string did.

The coin was unchanged, of course, and now it seemed to fit his hand better. He closed his eyes and concentrated. He would like to know that his friends still existed, that they were well. He sensed that they were. The coin warmed and he opened his eyes and looked at it in amazement. The dragons on one face were glowing slightly. He turned it over carefully, and looked at the Chinese characters, which Yuko had translated for him. He saw that the Chinese character that meant 'peace' was also glowing. The other characters, which meant 'clear', 'admirable', and 'coin', were still dark. Perhaps they were a form of message.

Vincent smiled and returned the coin to the bag. He must replace the string and keep this gift closer. He put it on his table to remind him to repair it. Right now it was time to feed Jacob, so he left his chamber to fetch his son and his bottle.



He was just sitting down to continue his story the next day, when he heard a message on the pipes that Yuko was arriving. He stood up, astonished. He had not seen her for some time. Catherine had never met her. Yet, Yuko never forgot her tunnel family, occasionally sending down gifts. How amazing that he had found the coin Su had given him only the day before! Perhaps it wasn't coincidence, he thought.

Yuko arrived shortly afterwards, and he invited her to sit down.

“Thank you, Vincent,” she replied. “I had a reason for coming today, one I cannot explain. I just felt that I had to come – to tell you the story of my parents. I think perhaps they did not want to tell you everything back then because you were so young. My mother did tell you what she was, I remember. Did you believe her?”

Vincent nodded. “Even then, I knew when someone was lying to me. I believed her, even though it was so fantastic. But then I existed, and I knew I was ... unusual. It was perhaps easier for me to believe her.”

Yuko nodded, understanding this better than he realized. She too was somewhat fantastic, although perhaps she would tell him that story later.

There was a silence, and Vincent regarded the older woman quietly. She DID

resemble her mother somewhat. The planes of her face were not completely those of her father, whom he vaguely remembered. She too had inherited something from her fantastic parent, as he had. And her eyes were hazel, not dark brown like those of most Asians. He was sure they changed colour, for now they seemed almost amber in the candlelight of his chamber. He remembered them being green once. Her mother's had been the same, he recalled.

Yuko looked at Vincent, as if she had caught his train of thought, sighed, and began her tale. "They told me their story and I think they now want you to know also. I have brought some gifts for you, one of which I think was actually my mother's idea. She gave it to me, and I have enjoyed it often - but I think you need it more now."

Vincent was puzzled but said nothing, merely nodding. Yuko related her tale quietly.

"As my father told you, he found my mother shot by an arrow near the village where he lived in Japan. He didn't know anything about her, but took her home and cared for her until she healed. They fell in love. Then one night, when there was to be a full moon, Su, my mother, told Taro that she had to leave, that she would return when she could. She did not explain then, but Taro did not try to dissuade her, he just watched her walk into the dark with a great sadness.

"A short time later, the moon rose, and he went into his small garden to gaze up at it, so serene and peaceful. He missed Su, having grown used to her being beside him. He saw a long dark shape cross the moon, but could not tell what it was. In the dark, distances are deceptive. He decided it must have been a late dragonfly. He went back inside, then made his dinner and went to bed. He was alone in his house for the first time in many weeks.

"For several days, he remained alone and spoke to no one, except to buy food and saki. Then as the moon waned, Su walked into the house as he was eating, and sat down beside him. She looked happy and healthy and smiled at him.

"Say nothing," she told him. "I will explain, and it is a long story. I ask you not to comment until I am finished."

"Taro, of course, nodded, and Su began her story. She told him she was of the ancient race of dragons, and was far older than she looked. She told you some of this, Vincent, but she didn't mention that she only has her full power during the full moon, and that it wanes with the moon. Her greatest power is in the Year of the Dragon, every 12 years on the lunar calendar. That year arrived and she had to return to her rocky home and be a dragon for a while. She communicated with her kin, now very few... they communicate silently, by mind. Soon, however, she missed Taro and returned as her power diminished. She would not

go back there again soon, she said, but she wanted him to know what she was, so he would understand.

“They lived together for many years, before taking the ship that eventually brought them to America, and New York. I was born here, as you know.

“But Vincent, Su was still what she was, and she could not deny it forever. However, she still had some magic and when Taro agreed to accompany her home, she was able to take him with her during the full moon in the Year of the Dragon.

Yuko paused here and reached into the cloth bag she had on her shoulder. She brought out a little book.

“This is what I believe she wanted me to give you, Vincent. It is a book of poetry by a 9th Century Japanese 'wako' poet, a woman, famous for her beauty, her love affairs, and her poetry in her lifetime. My mother knew her...”

Vincent looked at Yuko and then stared at the book. He could say nothing, but Yuko smiled at him, nodded, and continued.

“Yes, my mother is very old, older than I can easily imagine. She can change her form, as you saw, and she is very wise, although for a long time she did not live in the land of her birth. She told me that her favourite poem in this book is the one she recited to herself that one time she left Taro to return to her birthplace. This is it, one of those by Ono No Komachi ...

'This night of no moon

There is no way to meet him

I rise in longing

My heart pounds, a leaping flame

My heart is consumed in fire'

Vincent could only be amazed that a woman from so long ago would understand the passion that had ruled him, that drove him to wait on Catherine's balcony so many nights. Now, there was only grief, and love for her son, but he could not forget - nor completely come to terms with what he had lost.

Yuko saw the look on his unique face and knew the sorrow he held deep inside was again giving him pain.

“I think these poems may give you some solace, Vincent. There is a short

biography of the poet inside and her words, even translated into English, are powerful.”

Vincent nodded and thanked her. He offered her tea, but she declined.

She decided to continue the story. It felt right and she could feel the warmth from her mother inside her.

“There is one other thing I wish to give you, Vincent. It is my own handiwork, but it perhaps will mean something to you, as it does to me. I am much like you, in that my heritage is... unusual. I did inherit some of the... character... of my mother, and of course I am also my father's daughter. I know you do not know your parents, but I believe they were good people, Vincent. Both of us have the potential for great good and great harm. I cannot be a dragon, not like my mother, but I have some of that strength and I too can read the hearts of those I care about. It is a wonderful... and terrible... thing to be what we are, Vincent. Who else could possibly understand?

She handed him a lovely embroidery, which he understood immediately.

Vincent thanked her and she smiled.



“We are alike in so many ways, Vincent, but I have never had the courage to love as you have. I have never found anyone with whom to share my life, perhaps I am too cautious. I think you know what that is like too. I have friends, and I value you and my tunnel family more than I can say. I am content that it should remain so. Some things were meant to be.

“But you, Vincent, were made to love. Do not give up.”

Yuko rose and taking both Vincent's large, hairy hands gently in her smaller ones, she looked into his eyes.

"My mother cared greatly for you, Vincent. She saw the strength in your heart, and love in your soul. She asked me to wish you well on her behalf and to tell you that you WILL find peace."

"Thank you, Yuko," Vincent replied, and she let go of his hands and left quietly. Vincent looked at the little embroidery and decided he'd better find a frame for it. Cullen might have something. He set it aside, picked up the little book, and began to read.

It was not long, but each poem captured his heart and made him feel a little less sorry for himself, a little more aware that he was not unique in love. Inevitably, he also felt guilt. Guilt that he had left Catherine alone so many nights, when he could have relieved the sadness he could feel when she was missing him... guilt for not making more use of their time.

He sat for some time, after putting down the book, tears falling unheeded down his face. He had not been able to cry since that terrible night on the rooftop. He felt... relief, as Yuko had said. He felt the knot in his chest soften and fade away.

Looking at the image on the front cover, he sighed. Here was a woman from a thousand years ago, who could express what he felt, and no doubt what Catherine also felt. How had she put up with him? What patience she had shown him in the face of his fears – and what courage she had shown at the last... giving him hope amidst his despair, telling him of their child.

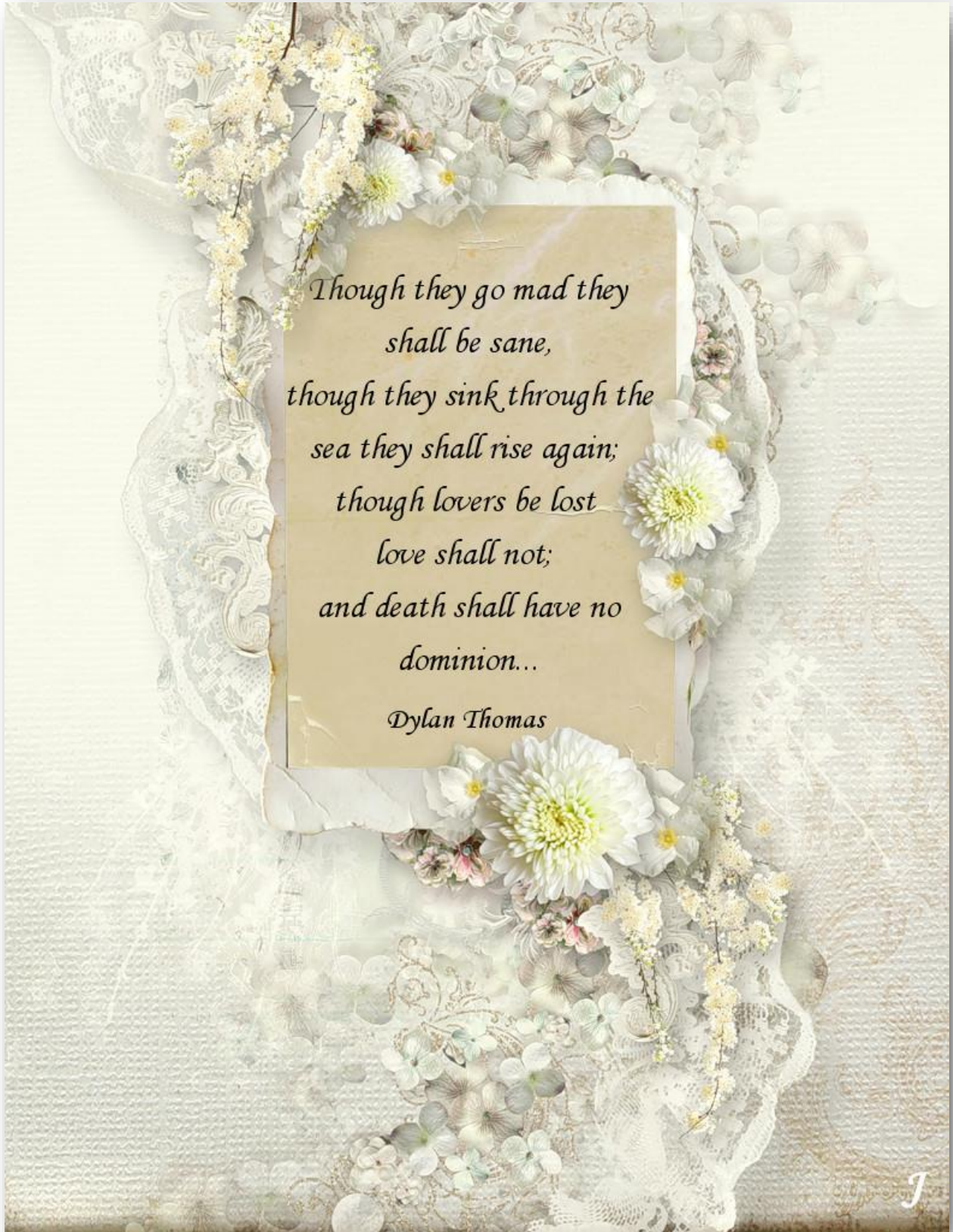
Vincent looked over at baby Jacob. His son deserved more than a father who hid his emotions and couldn't come to terms with the death of his love. Jacob and he had a bond, and perhaps he was being too cautious. After all, his son was likely going to be the only person he could share with that way, now.

Vincent sighed again. It was time to look forward, to try to live again – not forget, but be a full father and member of the tunnel community.

He looked over at the little bag holding the coin Su had given him. He was not alone, not really. There were people who loved him, and he must not retreat any longer. His history of the tunnels must continue. Stories were important. They linked the present to the past, of course, but they also had lessons. Yuko and Su had taught him a valuable one.

He must end his little history story somehow. He thought about it and decided there was no better ending, as other writers had said, than "they lived happily ever after to the end of their days." He wrote that down and closed the journal.

END



*Though they go mad they
shall be sane,
though they sink through the
sea they shall rise again;
though lovers be lost
love shall not;
and death shall have no
dominion...*

Dylan Thomas

Mists of Memory

by Katrina Relf



I was lost, lost in the hell that my other self had created, sinking deeper and deeper into the unending abyss of madness, alone and afraid of the being that now possessed me... a frightened creature raging against the dying of the light.

I was suddenly aware that I was no longer alone. A movement at the mouth of the cave made my body tense, claws ready to strike. But then the voice – the name screamed in terror – hauntingly familiar. My other self would have me destroy that which would invade my prison, my hell; but even as I raised my arm to strike, I felt myself descending into the void of an impenetrable nothingness.

I will never know how much time passed, nor what nightmares shared those hours with me, but I awoke suddenly, as if from a dream, and all that had gone before was no more. Feeling returned, the feeling of soft lips pressed against mine, breathing life into my being. She spoke my name, her soft voice caressing me... a voice remembered from long ago. I opened my eyes, her face drifted in mists above me. Her name was lost in those mists, and yet I knew her. She was the woman I loved. I tried to speak, but I had no words. She touched my face - the softness of her fingers against my skin sending tremors throughout my body. I wanted her. I needed her as I have never needed or wanted anything before. She was my life, the meaning of everything that had gone before or would ever be. As if by instinct, my arms closed around her, pulling her to me. I took her in love – in wanting – in needing to be within her, as one, for all my life and beyond.

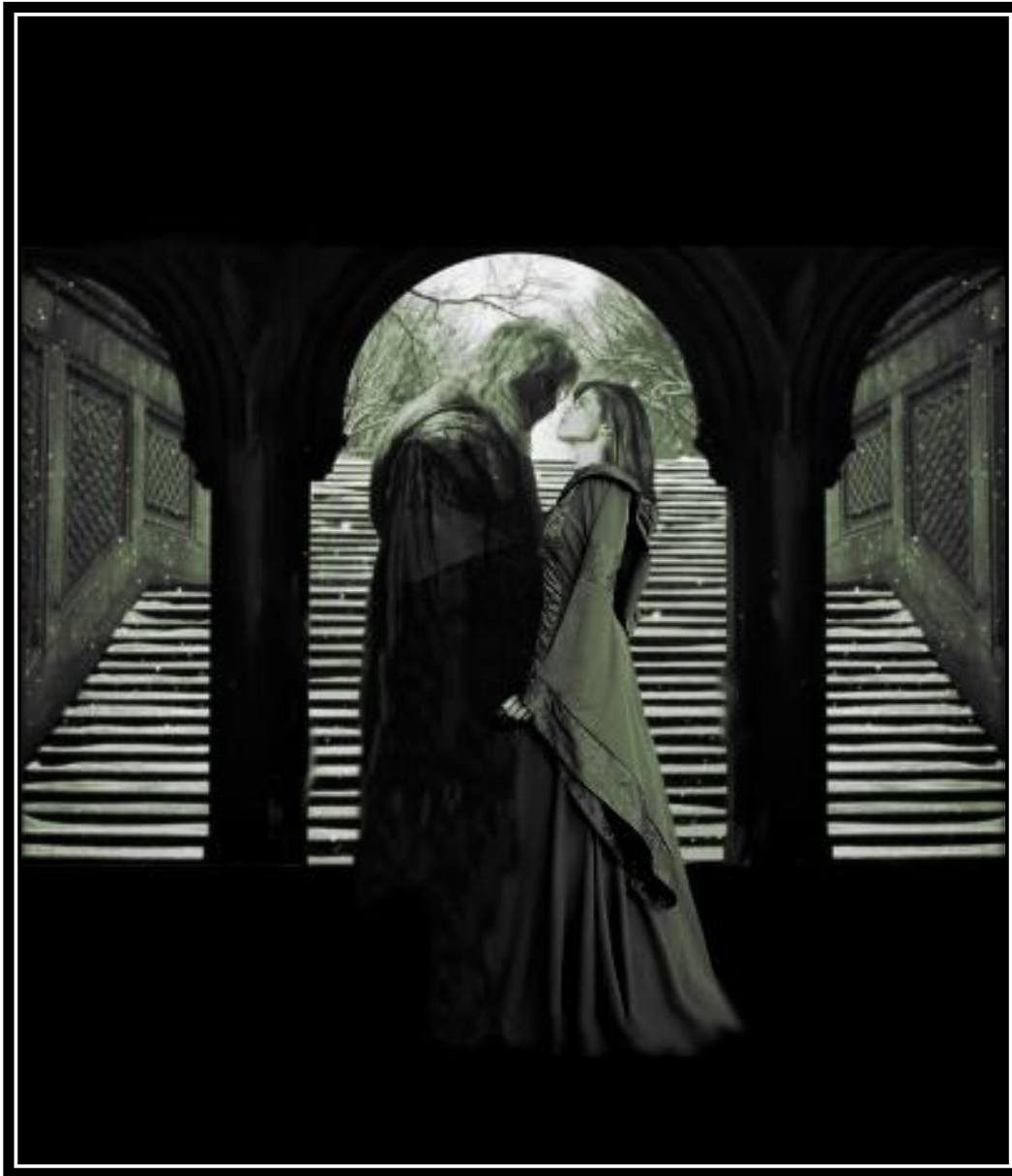
I awoke in a mist of memories – a cold grey mist. Fearful of those memories my mind closed, and they were forgotten – until now...



Ending Drabbles – Season Two

(How it could have been...)

by C.J. LaBelle



by Judith Nolan



*"Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength,
while loving someone deeply gives you courage..."*

Lao Tzu



In Fanfiction, Drabbles are a quick kiss of a thing: few words, to convey a moment, a part of a scene, or a particular thought. They add colour to what we already know, or sometimes show things we never saw, onscreen. They can be deep and distinct, or fantasy and fun...

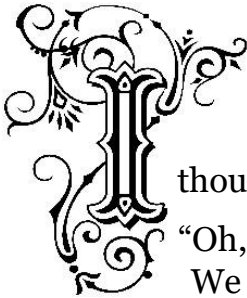
Anything goes – in 100 words...

This series portrays a set of drabbles framed around the ending of every episode from the Second Season. They appear in the original airing order.





Remember Love ~ Never Lose...



thought I lost you!"

"Oh, Vincent, don't you know? You could never lose me. We could never lose each other. As long as we remember."

"Remember...?"

"Remember love..."

They shared a long look, before Vincent smiled. Smiling back, Catherine leaned forward to rest her head on his chest. He gathered her closer, gently caressing her hair, as she curled into his warmth.

"Wherever you go, I will go..." Vincent whispered.

"Be careful..." Catherine sighed against him. "I might just want to keep you to that promise. You know, there's a secret glen where I used to play, in Connecticut..."





Ashes, Ashes ~ There Is No Other Direction



incent sighed, gazing at his love. “One either moves toward love or away from it, Catherine. There is no other direction.”

Catherine nodded. She went up on her toes, throwing her arms around Vincent’s shoulders, and hugging him closely. “And if this balcony, and the night, are the only time and place we have, then so be it.”

Vincent drew back. “But is it enough? For you? I worry, sometimes.”

“Then don’t, please. Dmitri had a dream he pursued across an entire ocean, against all odds. We must do the same. We must believe in the dream we share, always...”





Chamber Music ~ More Down to Earth



grand piano sat in a deserted chamber, its dust-covered lid a puzzle of re-assembled pieces. Hands clasped, Vincent and Catherine contemplated its decay, mourning the loss of a good friend.

“I would share a wish with you, Vincent.”

“Anything...”

“I think Rolley would’ve approved of our Schubert adventures.”

“I’m so glad I shared that place with you.”

“And then we attended the Brandenburg concertos...”

“It was clear that night, without a chance of rain...”

“They’re playing Mozart on Friday night. I can get off work, early...”


“But, Father’s newspapers say there’s a strong probability of rain, that night...”

“Perfect!”





God Bless the Child ~ Naming Day


Her name... is Catherine.”
Vincent cradled the tiny bundle. Lena’s infant daughter dozed, sucking one tightly curled fist.

“You have a beautiful name,” he whispered. “A strong name. One that means... more to me than any other. May you find your courage in it. I know I have.”

“Are you telling her a story?” Catherine asked, stepping closer. The whispered words hadn’t carried. The naming day party was in full swing.

“I was,” Vincent answered. “About a beautiful princess. Strong, and brave. Brilliant, and exceptional.”

“Sounds like quite the paragon.” Catherine smiled.
The leonine head inclined. “She is,” he replied.





Dead of Winter ~ Perchance to Dance...



Can you hear it, Vincent?"

"Only the quiet... and the wind outside, crying to get in."

"Listen! You can hear it if you try... the music..."

Vincent listened, smiling. "Yes... I hear it..." He inhaled. "Catherine... that question you asked me earlier..."

"I remember..."

Wordless, Vincent guided her across the room. With one hand at her waist and her other clasped within his, they began a graceful, slow waltz.

"Who taught you to dance?" Catherine breathed.

"William."

Catherine missed a step.

Vincent smiled at her surprise. "He's a man of many talents."

"Your world continues to amaze me," Catherine marvelled.





A Fair and Perfect Knight ~ Without Limits...



Who could not love her?"

Vincent stood on the bridge and pondered the question again. *Who could ever... not love her?*

All anger gone, he tried to pull some sense of peace, from the stillness.

"What do you think... happened?" Catherine had asked it. Painfully.

"Nothing. Nothing... happened."

But something had. And they'd nearly quarrelled about it.

"You deserve a life with no limits."

"There is no life without limits!"

Vincent, more than anyone, knew how true that was. But thanks to her love, he knew at least one thing more:

Perhaps. But there is no life without love, either...





Sticks and Stones ~ In Each Other's Powers...



“You’re still ... concerned about Laura?” Father asked.

“How can I not be?” Vincent replied, frowning.

“You say this man... Jerry... she’s staying with him?”

“As he recovers. Yes.”

“Are his injuries more than you think Laura can handle?”

Vincent shrugged. “It isn’t that. I think that Laura... loves him. Very much, perhaps.”

Father’s gaze grew canny. “And this makes you... fear for her? Because she may get hurt?”

Vincent nodded. “He’s good man. But...”

“But you fear the power he has, over her. How badly she can be injured by him?”

“Yes,” Vincent admitted.

“Welcome to my world, Vincent.”





Labyrinths ~ Always There...

“What’s his name?”

“Vincent.”

“Is he a new character?”

“No. He was always there.”



Brian contemplated the kingly figurine, thoughtfully.

Catherine Chandler had a huge secret. One he was now a part of. It felt good to be part of something.

He closed the game and set the “Vincent” figurine next to “Lady Catherine,” on his shelf. They looked like they belonged there, side by side. It looked right.

“Like he’s always been there,” Brian whispered, smiling.

“Brian! Dinner!” his father called. The voice was gentler than it had once been.

Brian turned from his ‘fantasy characters’ to the real one, who was waiting for him. His smile remained. “Be right there!” he promised.





Brothers ~ No Freaks, Here...

Charles The Dragon Man – “They won’t want a freak, an ugly freak.”

Vincent – “There are no freaks, here.”



Vincent reclined on his bed, the now-empty chamber his, once again. A distant memory called.

“I’m never going back! Never!”

“Sure, you will. You won’t be able to resist,” Devin replied.

“I won’t! And I’m never going to see the moon again!” Hot tears stained his cheeks. Tears of regret. And an almost unutterable sorrow.

Devin waited, knowing there was more.

“I... scared a little girl. She... she looked at me.... like I was a... a freak!”

Devin clasped Vincent’s shoulder. “Vincent, I want you to remember something. Always. Promise?”

Vincent sniffed. “What, Devin?”

“There are no freaks, here.”





A Gentle Rain ~ All That's Left Behind

"Now maybe the healing can begin."



Olivia slapped Luke's folded nightgown down. *Laundry.* It was a quiet chore. One that wouldn't wake the sleeping baby.

Kanin was gone, a family Above and a jail cell, between them. Olivia frowned.

Luke squirmed, then settled. He slept lightly, now, and fretfully.

Olivia could relate.

She wondered what Catherine was doing, tonight. *Probably on her high-up balcony.*

Tunnel-born Olivia had no love of heights. Nor any for Catherine, right now.

Resentment flared. *It's all so unfair. Kanin and Mrs. Davis have closure. Above has justice. Catherine has Vincent. What do Luke and I have? Heartache.*

Behind her, Luke whimpered.



Orphans ~ To Stay or To Go Now...



Catherine sat in the huge tree, smiling. Bright sunshine flooded her vision, as she looked around her lofty perch. Her breath hitched, as she imagined someone seated on the branch beside hers. Her heart rejoiced.

“You would like him, Mummy. He’s so good to me. And... I love him...”

“Oh, sweetheart...” A soft hand seemed to brush her bangs, as a gentle kiss feathered across her forehead. “*Love is truly all that matters...*”

“I wish you and Daddy could have met Vincent...” Catherine sighed.

“*Who says we haven’t...*” A gentle chuckle underscored the startling revelation.

Catherine was left alone, incredulous...





The Outsiders ~ Now That You've Seen...



It should never have happened.

It was bound to happen.

Our world exists by the slimmest of threads.

Not today. Today, the thread snapped.

No secret can be kept forever. It was a matter of time. A matter of time, before evil found its way down. Down to my home. Down to me.

I can still feel a sliver of bone beneath my nail. The big man, I think. Not Micah. Not the man I... eviscerated, before your eyes, Catherine.

Eviscerated. With abandon.

I'm too tired to remove it. Too... exhausted.

How can you love me, now that you've seen?





When The Bluebird Sings ~ To Camelot!



ristopher stared the concrete drainage tunnel. Once more
he saw their shadows merging into a warm embrace.

Two lovers who needed to go to Camelot...

“Okay...” He smiled. He could make that happen. He could take them to Camelot.

“I guess I’ve got nothing, but time, to lose...” He looked up at the sky, full of stars despite the golden streaks of the rising sun.

A dawn wind gathered the dried leaves. They fluttered, dancing across the path without anything to inhibit them. The rumpled young man had faded into the dawn, as if he’d been nothing but a ghost...





Arabesque ~ First True Love...



These hands are beautiful! These are *my* hands..."

Catherine kissed each of Vincent's hands in turn, before looking up to reassure him.

Vincent stood speechless, his tears eloquent of his despair. He hadn't the strength to deny her. Their foreheads touched, as his tears continued to fall.

"Lisa will always see herself as the central character of any drama," Catherine continued. "She lives to make people love only her. *Want* only her. Do you understand now, Vincent?"

"That's what Father said..."

"It's the truth. However unpalatable."



"Yet, she believed it. Every word..."

"I never said she wasn't a consummate actress..."





The Watcher ~ I Would Die For You...


e have endured... much.”

“Yes, we have. And I know, in the deepest part of who I am, that whatever happens now, Vincent, we will endure. We will...”

“To think, if I hadn’t gone Above, that night. If I hadn’t found you, in time...”

“Yes, but please, let’s not dwell on the past. You found me, that’s all that matters. Maybe it was meant to be so. Maybe we both have a guardian angel...”

“Narcissa always says I must put more trust in the spirits...”


“She’s a wise woman. There’s so much of your world I have yet to understand...”





A Distant Shore ~ The Bond We Share...

‘Vincent, it’s the strangest thing. We’ve never been so far apart. And yet I can feel you with me so deeply. Sometimes it’s if I’m seeing things through your eyes. The sun is coming up now. The sky is pink. The ocean is deep purple, and I feel like a child . . .’



Catherine sat, with Vincent’s arm around her shoulders, re-reading the letter she’d sent from California. He’d arrived with the night, carrying the box of sand and shell tucked beneath his cloak.

As the moon rose, they’d shared a meal, sitting together against the balcony wall, before examining the box. To Catherine it now seemed like another world, a universe of un-explored possibilities.

She told Vincent the story of her incredible dream. Of how he’d somehow found her on a distant shore, and they’d walked for miles together, on the beach, in the sunshine.

“And Vincent, no-one looked twice...” She smiled.





Trial ~ “I Know Of A Place...”



stood in front of a jury, in a courtroom, at a trial.

A place where we are sworn to tell the truth, and so I did.

I told them of a place where every child is loved, cared for, accepted, and safe. I told them such an impossible story, they could only imagine it as fiction.

I told the story for a little boy whose father beat him to death.

Vincent, you said we won because the truth was on our side.

Why does it sound like fantasy, when I describe a place where all the children are protected?





A Kingdom by the Sea ~ Elliot's Price to Pay...



A man stood on a hill, silhouetted against the night sky. He had a crumbling empire to rebuild, but here he stood – *alone* – wondering. He'd seen and heard things no sane man should, *and yet...*

Elliot lifted his gaze from the dank concrete tunnel he'd walked out of the night before, to *her* balcony. He knew which one it was, out of the hundreds that overlooked the park. He could picture her there, knowing she was with *him...*

His hands closed tight. *Who* his rival was, or *what* he was, Elliot had no idea. But he intended to find out...





The Hollow Men ~ All Our Beasts Are Loose



Do you kill for sport?
Do you track your prey?

Do you play cat-and-mouse-games, before you strike your killing blow?

Amateurs.

Do you think yourself sophisticated? Powerful? Dominant? Clever? God-like, in choosing who dies, and when? You do, yes?

Novices.

I know a thing or two about that. Just as I know a thing or two about the two of you.

Beginners. Fools!

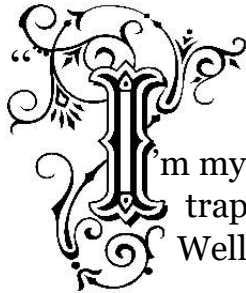
I am not the thing that hunts you. I am the thing that lives *inside* the thing that hunts you. And I tell you this:

We do not kill for sport, *Hollow Men*.

We kill for pleasure...



What Rough Beast ~ How Can We Go On?



I'm my father's son..." Vincent walked an endless circle, trapped in his empty chamber. "I'm the son of Jacob Wells. I *am* Vincent Wells..."

He halted to raise his fist at the empty shadows that mocked him. *'Are you so sure, Vincent?'*

"Yes!" He spun about, roaring at the gathering darkness that snickered back at him, mocking all he held dear; all he'd tried to protect and save.

Above him, in the upper entrance, Mouse huddled, undetected. He watched his good friend going through the agony of not knowing.

He too, didn't know who he'd been, before he became Mouse...





Ceremony of Innocence ~ We Must Be Together...



o..." Vincent's head rolled on his pillow. "No..." But the demon of unrelenting memory continued to ravage his tormented soul.

"It's all right, Vincent... It will be all right..." A cool hand caressed his brow, as Catherine's soft voice enticed him back to reality.

But the demon persisted in its siren call. *'Oh, Vincent, imagine the taste of it. Like copper and fire on your tongue...'*

"No!" He thrashed, trying to escape the cold clutch of Paracelsus's last words. *'Don't be afraid. At last, you are my son...'*

It was said with satisfaction, and a grim certainty that was inescapable...





The Rest Is Silence ~ Whatever Happens...



Whatever happens...'
Catherine remembered Vincent repeating her vow. Standing in her sunlight-filled lounge, he'd whispered those words. Now she'd been forced Below, to find him, before it was too late...

"He's gone below the catacombs."

"Do you know the way?"

"They're very far down."

"Take us there. Pascal, please! Take us there."

"All right."

'Whatever comes...'

Vincent had said that, too...

"No, you can't!" Father reached to prevent her progress.

"I must!"

"Catherine, *please!*"

"Father, he is my life. Without him, there is nothing..." She ducked into the cave and was swallowed by darkness.

'Know that I love you...'

"Vincent!"



"I am nothing special, of this I am sure. I am a common man with common thoughts and I've led a common life. There are no monuments dedicated to me and my name will soon be forgotten, but I've loved another with all my heart and soul, and to me, this has always been enough..."

Nicholas Sparks



THE PRICE OF INNOCENCE

by Katrina Relf

Season 3

*I remember long ago when the way was new
And our love was young.
It was so easy then - just being with you,
Just talking with you.
Your nearness was all I ever wanted,
And I found my heaven in your arms.
The night had wings when you were close,
And my heart soared in the innocence of your love.*

*But then came the time - that fearful time - when you
were lost to me,
Lost somewhere deep within your darkness.
I knew that unless my soul could reach you in that far-off
place,
Unless my lips could awaken you, and my breath bring
you life -
My life had no meaning.
Hands, damp with fear, touched you, caressed you,
Drawing your soul back with love.
That night, in that place beyond man, beyond reality -
You were mine.
I took you, and held you close until our spirits became
one,
Until your body awoke beneath me.
I felt your heartbeat with longing, saw your eyes burn
with desire.
Your innocence became mine.*

*And now you are healed, and the nightmare forgotten.
Oh, but Vincent, you have lost so much more.
Our miracle has died - the wonderment of all that we
shared that night.
Let me take your hand and lead you back to love,
Let your heart be reassured and your dreams renewed.
Or would such memories cost you dearly?
Do you forget because you fear to remember?
Was the chasm that we crossed too deep
And the price of innocence too high?*



by Barb Gipson



The Note

by Allison Duggins



To whoever gets this note, my name is Catherine Chandler and I'm being held prisoner at 1900 sixth avenue. Tell Joe Maxwell. He'll know what to do. Please help me. Please.

Gabriel nodded to the guard, ripped up the note and placed it on his desk.

"Foolish girl," Gabriel muttered to himself. "The universe is run by the complex interweaving of three elements; energy, matter, and enlightened self-interest."

Gabriel calls Moreno and tells him to eliminate Joe Maxwell.

Moreno asks, "Why? He's no threat."

Gabriel answers, "He taxes me, Mr. Moreno. He taxes me."

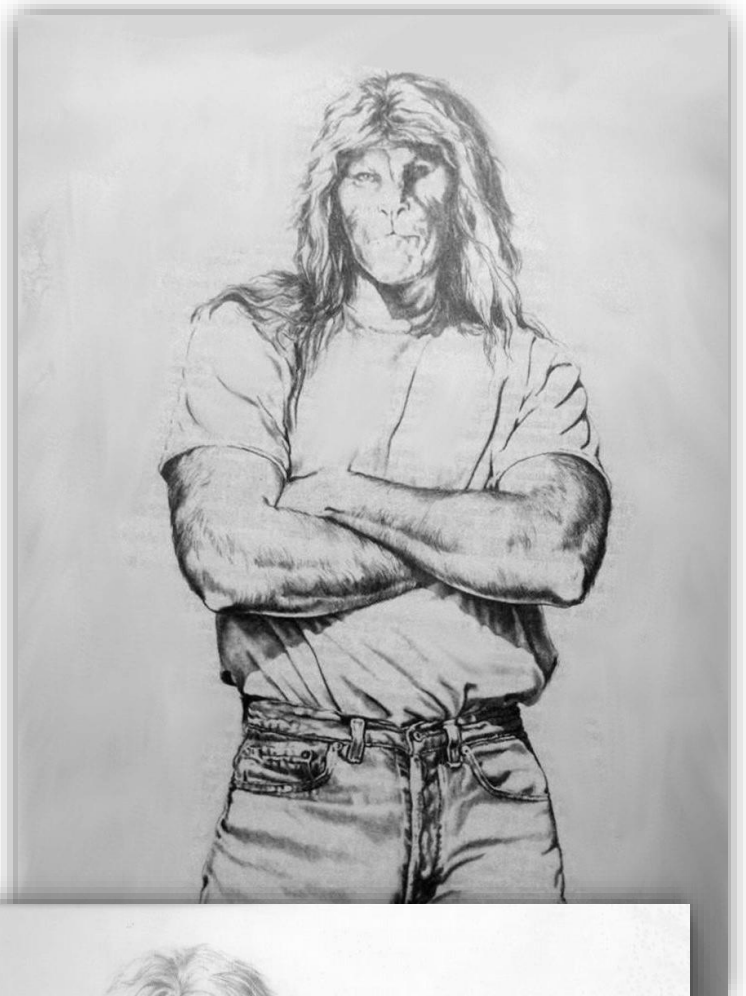
Moreno replies, "It will be done."



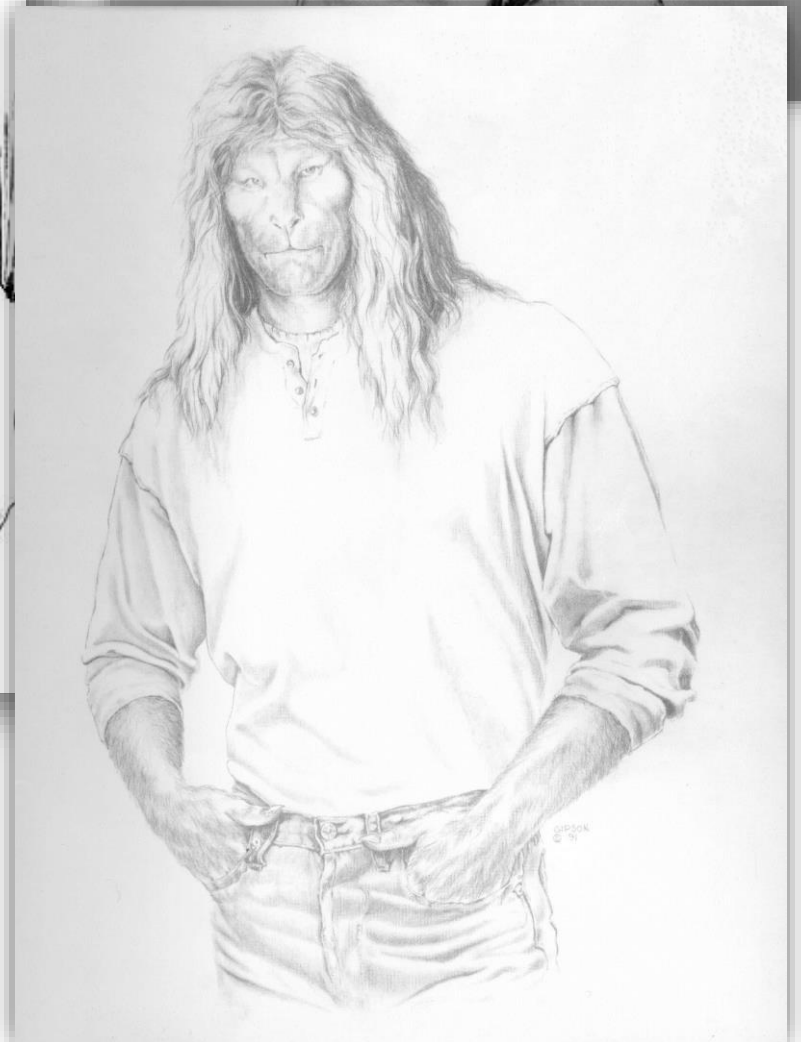
In my head, Vincent wears blue jeans,
from time to time. And that impression
is 100 percent from looking at Barb
Gipson's art... Barb's images are my
head canon. My fanon.

She's that powerful...

-Cindy



by Barb Gipson



Don't Begrudge Me

by Anne-Alden France



by Barb Gipson



*Don't begrudge my patchwork life,
The cast-offs and refuse.
Don't begrudge the books I read,
Or other things I use.*

*Don't envy me my writing desk,
Or my statuary.
They're just mementos of this place
My stone sanctuary.*

*Don't resent the luck I had
That I found family.
A father, brother, and my friends,
They mean the world to me.*

*That stained-glass window's mine to keep.
My cape, my boots, my vest,
They're just the trappings of a life -
I tried to do my best.*

*So, don't covet my sturdy chair,
Or the gloves that hide my fur.
But mostly, as you run your list,
Please - Don't begrudge me Her.*





Kanin's Prison

by Barbara Anderson



*Sixteen years, Kanin thought, as he faced the judge.
Sixteen years I've dreaded this day.*

The dead boy's mother looked on. Her broken heart, her broken life etched in every line of her face. *Sixteen years, she thought. Sixteen years I've waited for this day.*

"Guilty," Kanin said.

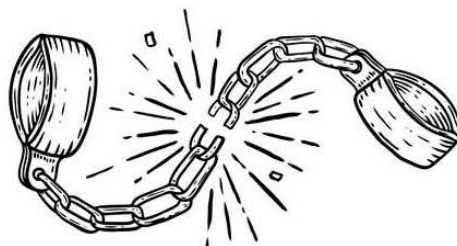
It took only a moment to declare his sentence.

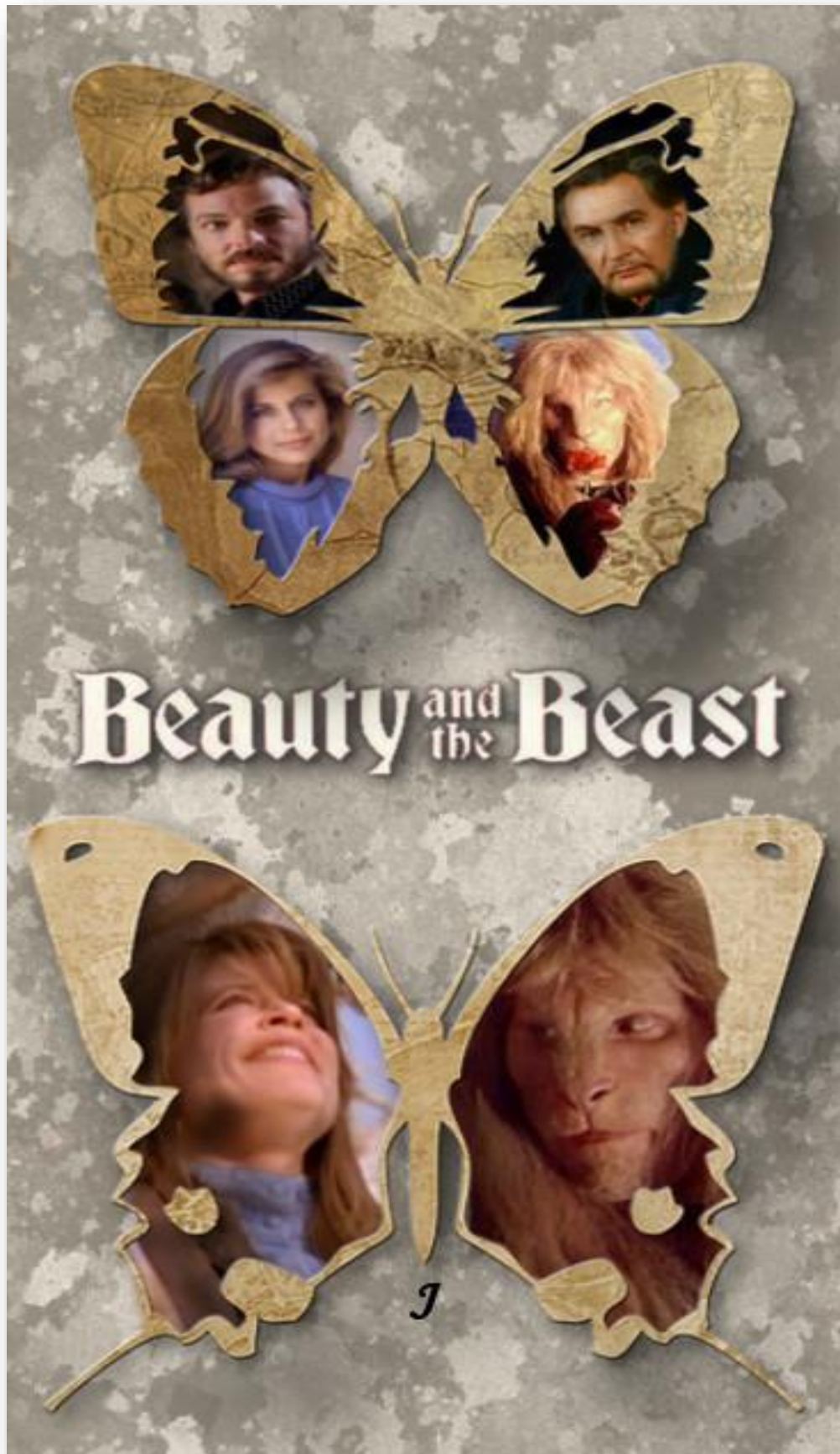
In a small conference room, two broken people faced each other, neither knowing what to say.

"I'm sorry," Kanin said, sobbing with regret.

Nodding, Mrs. Davis tearfully replied, "I am too."

And with those few simple words, two prisoners were finally set free.





by Judith Nolan

How Vincent Got His Door

by Janet Rivenbark
Rated R- Adult Content



Vincent sat back in his chair. He had just finished an entry in his journal, about his visit to Catherine's earlier in the evening.

He put down his pen and read what he'd just written.

I could feel Catherine's disappointment when I left tonight.

She changed the furniture on her balcony; she kept the small metal table and chair, but replaced the single chaise lounge with a double chaise.

When I arrived this evening, she was sitting on the new chaise, reading. She looked up and smiled, and I could feel her joy radiating. She was as happy to see me as I was to see her. It had been over a week since we were last together. When she invited me to join her on the chaise, I didn't hesitate. I took off my cloak and sat next to her.

She showed me what she was reading and asked if I'd ever read it. I had, and we talked about it for a while. I offered to read to her, and she gladly gave me the book, snuggling next to me as I read.

I found myself rubbing my cheek over her silky hair, and before I knew it, we were kissing. I don't remember who made the first move. This has happened more often of late, and I usually stop before it goes too far. But this time, it was more difficult to stop, and I was more aroused than ever before by the time I jumped to my feet, grabbed my cloak and said my goodbyes.

I could feel her disappointment. I was disappointed too, but I just couldn't allow myself to let it go any farther.

I've got to do something. This is driving us both mad.

Can I allow it to go farther? He wondered. How can I not? Catherine must have some say in this decision. We need to talk about it. We must know each other's limitations and expectations. I'll speak to her the next time I see her, he resolved.

When Vincent made his way back to her balcony a few nights later, he still wasn't sure how he was going to bring up the subject. But he needn't have worried. As soon as they greeted one another with a hug, Catherine brought it up. He remained standing, and she sat at the end of the chaise.

"About the other night, Vincent..." she began.

"I know, Catherine," he interrupted. "I want to talk about it too. I'm sorry I left so abruptly and disappointed you."

"That wasn't where I was going with this," she told him with a smile. "I just wanted you to know that I didn't buy this chaise to try to steer you in any particular direction. When I saw it, I just thought about how much more comfortable it would be than sitting on the balcony floor. I didn't think about anything else."

He knew she was telling the truth, but that wasn't what he wanted to talk about.

"I understand, Catherine. I will admit that sitting on the floor all the time is a little uncomfortable, but I'm used to it... I live in a hole in the ground after all," he added, trying to bring some levity into the conversation.

"Or so your brother says," Catherine agreed with a smile. "What did you want to talk about?"

Vincent was quiet for a moment, putting words together carefully before he spoke.

"I know I disappointed you when I left so abruptly the other night. And I'm sorry. It's just that my reaction to you, to your kisses, was so strong and came on so suddenly, that I felt as if my control was slipping and I needed to put space, a lot of space, between us, so I could think about what I was doing, or contemplating doing."

"It's all right, Vincent," she assured him. "I know how you feel, and I'm sorry I responded so strongly when you kissed me."

"I kissed you first?" he asked incredulously. In the past, she'd always kissed him first, and then he would respond to her.

"You don't remember?"

"It's a little fuzzy," he admitted sheepishly. "But that isn't the point. The point is that I wanted more, and I realized after I left, that my control hadn't slipped as much as I thought... I was able to maintain enough control so that I was able to leave..." he paused, looking intently at Catherine, gauging her reaction, both visually and through the Bond. "... and I think I'm ready to... take the next step."

Catherine was so shocked and surprised by his words that she couldn't speak for almost a full minute. And stupidly, all she could think was: *When was the last time I shaved my legs?*

But she shook it off and drew in a deep breath.

"Now?" she asked, hesitantly.

"No!" He moved and sat next to her on the chaise. He took her hand and shook his head. "I didn't mean that 'no' to sound so adamant. I just meant that I would feel better if it... when we..."

"Make love?" she added when he couldn't seem to say the words.

"Right... I would feel better if it happened Below, just in case. I'm sure that the Bond wouldn't allow any harm to come to you, but it would just make me feel... safer... if we were Below with Father close by."

“You’re not going to tell Father?” she asked. She knew that if Vincent said anything to his parent, he’d likely try to talk him out of it.

“No. At least not beforehand,” Vincent assured her.

“So when?” she asked, feeling almost as awkward as she knew Vincent was feeling. She’d never had this kind of conversation before. It always had *just happened*. “Not when are you going to tell Father, but when should I be there?”

“Um, maybe Friday evening. You could come for dinner...” his voice trailed off.

“How about a little later than that? Say around eight?” she suggested. “That way, it will give me plenty of time to get home from work... your chamber?”

“Yes,” he said with a nod. “I’ll meet you at your threshold.”

He only stayed a little while longer. The conversation got very weird after that, edging on stiff, since neither of them was going to talk about the enormous elephant in the room.

After Vincent left, Catherine did a little happy dance. She wasn’t convinced that his chamber was the best location, but she was more than ready to go along if it made him more comfortable.



Catherine was busy at work, so most of the week passed quickly, but Friday crawled. Every time she looked at the clock, she was sure it was going to be later than it actually was.

She managed to leave work on time, and when she got home, she did all the things that any woman who had been anticipating just such a momentous occasion would do, but when she checked the clock, the time to leave was still hours away.

Should I take a bag? A nightgown? she wondered as she stood in front of her dresser in her robe. *Will I spend the night? Or will he expect me to leave afterward?*

She finally decided to wear her prettiest bra and panty set and carry her leather tote. She could put a few necessities in it without being too obvious.

It was a few minutes before eight when she left her apartment.

Vincent had been nervous and on edge all week. He was sure someone would notice and comment, but not even Father noticed. He was grateful for that.

When Friday arrived, he cleaned his chamber. Mary did notice and commented when she passed him in one of the corridors, noting he was carrying an armload of clean sheets.

“What are you up to, Vincent?” she asked.

“J-just cleaning,” he said with a stutter. “I thought it was about time?”

“Didn’t you just do that?”

“I don’t think so. But if I did, there was still a lot of dust.”

“I thought you changed your sheets earlier this week?”

“I did,” he conceded, as he crossed his fingers under the sheets he carried. “But one of the children spilled something on the bed during literature class earlier today.”

Mary nodded and smiled and continued on her way, and Vincent uncrossed his fingers and headed for his chamber, hoping he wouldn’t run into anyone else who would ask questions that required he lie.

After dinner, he headed back to his chamber to bathe and dress. It took so long for him to dry that he had little time when he left his chamber.

He stopped long enough to take a look around before leaving. The chamber was clean, and the stained-glass window was lit, as were several candles. The bed was made, and he’d found several additional pillows that he added. Everything was ready.

It seemed almost as if he was fated to be late. As soon as he left his chamber, he ran into Lena, who insisted on thanking him for lending her a book. She wanted to talk about it, but he told her that he was meeting Catherine and they’d have to talk later. She understood and waved him on with a knowing smile.

He had to run, but Catherine was just stepping off the ladder as he turned the corner.

“Is something wrong?” she asked as she reached for his hand.

“No. Nothing. Why?” he answered.

“You’re out of breath,” she pointed out.

“I was running late,” he told her. “Literally. Lena stopped me and wanted to talk. I had to run to make it here on time.”

“I would have waited, or met you part way,” she assured him.

"I didn't want you to think... I'd changed my mind," he said, dipping his head to hide his face.

She saw his skin darken.

I'll be... she thought. *He's blushing.*

She squeezed his hand as they started back toward his chamber.

About halfway there, Mouse came flying around the corner and almost ran into them.

"Slow down, Mouse," Vincent said, catching him by the shoulders and steadying him.

"Vincent!" Mouse said with a grin. "Mouse needs to talk to Vincent!"

"Not right now, Mouse," Vincent said. "Can we talk later?"

"Sure. Later. See you!" Mouse took off at the same high rate of speed with which he had arrived.

"We caution the children about running in the tunnels, but we've never managed to slow Mouse down," Vincent commented as they walked.

"I think his feet are just trying to keep up with his brain," Catherine said.

Once in his chamber, they tried to act *normal*. Catherine seated herself on the side of the bed and Vincent in his chair. Catherine was sure that if anyone had been watching, they would have laughed.

"How was work?" asked Vincent.

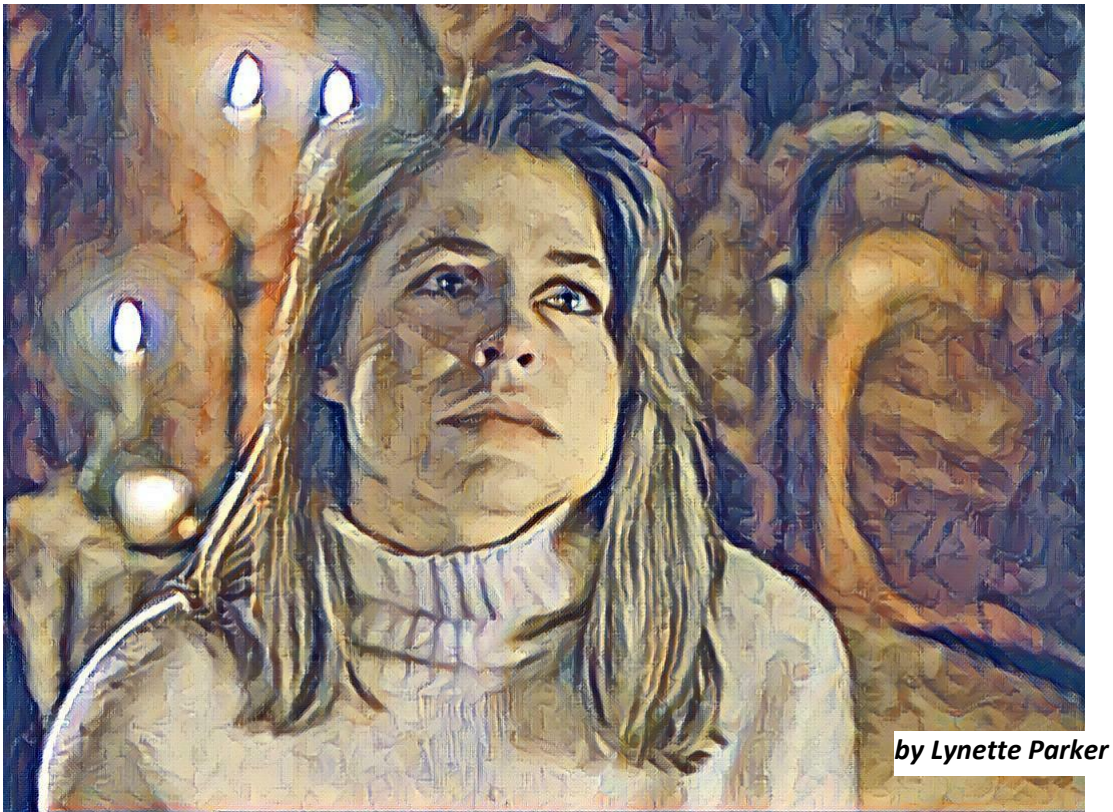
"Same as usual... too much of it and too few people to do it. The city has promised to budget for more people next fiscal year, but until then, we all work until we drop," she answered. "And you?"

"As you said, it was the same as usual. We had a council meeting during which I thought William and Pascal were going to come to blows."

"Pascal?" Catherine could see William getting irate; in fact, she had many times, but Pascal?

"There is a section of the pipe chamber where the temperature is constantly around 40 degrees Fahrenheit. William wants permission to use it for food storage. But that would require rerouting several pipes to clear the area and make a new entrance. Pascal was against it because it would change the tone of the pipes and make it difficult for him to identify where a message was coming from."

"How did you resolve it?" she asked.



“We didn’t. It was tabled and after the meeting, I promised William I would look into it and discuss it further with Pascal.”

The conversation went on like that for almost half an hour; they bounced from the original topic to something Samantha said in literature class, to a bug the younger children had succumbed to. Then finally, after those topics interspersed with long minutes of painful of silence, Catherine stood and crossed the room to where Vincent was sitting. She calmly seated herself on his lap, draped her legs over the arm of the chair, and her arms around his neck.

“Now, what were we talking about?” she asked.

Vincent was stunned for a moment. Leave it to Catherine to get to the heart of the matter.

He managed a smile. “I love you,” he whispered.

“And I love you,” she said, nuzzling his ear. “This doesn’t have to be so... serious,” she told him.

“But it is,” he argued. “I want to do it right. I don’t want to disappoint you.”

She sat back and looked at him, then smiled and shook her head.

“It’s supposed to be enjoyable,” she pointed out, “for both of us. If you are too worried about ‘doing it right,’ you won’t enjoy it. We’re in no hurry. We have all

weekend. I'm sure that if we asked, someone would even deliver food. We should just take our time."

She nuzzled his ear again and kissed his mouth. He responded and kissed her back.

It got more heated when he threaded his fingers through her hair and tilted her head to a better angle. He deepened the kiss as her lips parted, and his tongue met hers. She had taught him that, and he knew she liked it.

He had just scooped her into his arms, preparing to rise and move to the bed when they heard a scuffling noise behind them.

Catherine, who was facing the entrance to the chamber over Vincent's shoulder, opened her eyes as she leaned back.

"It's Mouse," she whispered, sitting back a little farther.

"What is it, Mouse?" Vincent asked in a strained voice.

"Vincent said, 'talk later.' It's later," he announced with a big smile, that Vincent didn't see.

"By later, I meant tomorrow," Vincent suggested as Catherine rose from his lap and stepped back to sit on the side of the bed.

"But Vincent didn't say 'tomorrow,' he said 'later,' and it's later," Mouse insisted.

Realizing that Mouse wasn't likely to leave until he said what he wanted to say, Vincent sighed.

"What is it?" he asked.

Taking that as an invitation, Mouse crossed the chamber and sat on the side of the bed next to Catherine. Knowing that Mouse never sat down unless he meant to stay awhile, Vincent almost groaned.

"Mouse needs advice," he stated.

"What about?" Vincent asked.

"Girls," came the answer.

"Okay, I think this is my cue." Catherine rose and headed for the chamber entrance. She dropped a kiss on Vincent's temple as she passed him. "I'll just go talk to Father for a while."

She left, and Vincent turned to Mouse, vowing to be patient with the young man but to get rid of him as quickly as possible.

When Catherine entered the study, Father appeared delighted to see her.

“I didn’t know you were here,” he told her. “I’ve been looking for a worthy chess opponent all evening.”

“You mean someone you can beat?” she asked with a smile as she took a chair at the table where the chessboard was set up.

Father joined her. “I wouldn’t say that, but at least you and I are more evenly matched, and I have a *chance* of winning.”

They had played two games by the time Vincent joined them. Father had won the first one, but Catherine won the second. They were going for the best two out of three. But when Catherine won the third one, Father insisted on one more game. That one ended, and they were two and two, so there had to be a fifth game to decide who was the better player. By the time that was over, it was after midnight. Catherine had skillfully thrown the last game, just to end it.

“I guess I’m just tired,” Catherine told Father as they put the board and pieces away. “It’s been a long week.”

As Vincent and Catherine were walking back to Vincent’s chamber, they stopped for a kiss, but before it could go anywhere, Catherine heard Vincent groan.

“What is it?” she asked. She had heard the pipes but didn’t catch the message.

“Intruder alert.”

“Where?”

“The Battery Park threshold. I have to go.”

“I know. Go. The sooner you get there to take care of it, the sooner you will be back.”

He kissed her again quickly and took off at a run, not even bothering to get his cloak.

He ran all the way to the sentry post from which the alert had come. Cullen was on duty and he stepped out into the tunnel when Vincent arrived.

“What is it?” Vincent asked.

“There are 6 of them,” Cullen told him. “They found the manhole about a week ago, and they’ve been sheltering near it ever since. I told Father, and he said to make sure all the sentries knew and to keep an eye on the intruders. They had only been there at night, until this morning. It’s been raining all day, and they moved a little farther from the manhole but were staying put. Right after I came on duty at midnight, I heard them talking about exploring. One of them noticed

that there are a lot of tunnels that go off in different directions. That was why I called you. They split up into pairs and went in three different directions.

Vincent groaned and leaned against the wall.

“Which tunnels?” he asked.

Cullen pulled out the map that they kept in the sentry post and spread it on the floor.

“Two of them went this way,” he pointed to the tunnel that led off the junction under the manhole and went to the west. “That one is a dead end. They were walking slowly. It should take them at least half an hour more, maybe longer to reach the end, and then the same to get back to the junction. Two others took the tunnel to the east, and it has several branches, but they are all dead ends. If they explore them all, it will be a few hours. The other two took the one in the middle that heads north. I’m surprised you didn’t see anyone. They must have been off on one of the side branches when you passed.”

“I was in such a hurry to get here, I wasn’t paying attention,” Vincent said.

“What’s the plan?” Cullen asked.

“You wait here and when the ones who headed west get back, use the recording we made. Maybe it will stop them. Then, you’ll be able to push them back to where they came in. I’ll do the same with the ones who headed north. If I can get between them and the main part of the community, maybe I can push them back this way.”

“And the other group?”

“If they return before I move the other group back, use the recording.”

Catherine had provided several mini-cassette recorders to be used for just this kind of thing. They recorded Vincent growling and roaring, and since that time, they haven’t had to call him for intruders. They just used the recording, and with the way the tunnels echoed, it sounded like more than one lion had escaped from the zoo. Vincent knew, when Cullen asked for help, that it was more than the average intruder.

Cullen went back to his crevice in the wall, as Vincent headed north, back the way he’d come.

Catherine settled herself on Vincent’s bed with a book, and finally, a little after 2am, she decided that he wasn’t coming back anytime soon. There had been a few updates on the pipes that she understood, and she knew that they were still dealing with the intruders.

She decided that she should leave. By the time Vincent got back, he'd be tired, and she didn't want him to feel pressured or rushed.

She found a piece of paper and wrote him a note:

I know you'll be tired when you get back, so I decided to go home. We can try again soon. Please let me know.

C~

PS: This is Labor Day weekend... and I have Monday off. ♥

Vincent felt it when Catherine left. He wanted to curse, but there was still work to do. He found the two men he was following and managed to get on the north side of them. He was now in the process of pushing them back to where they'd come in. That would probably take at least another hour unless he could scare them enough to get them running. Then he was going to have to help Cullen move the temporary barrier into place. It would likely be very late, or early, depending upon the point of view, by the time he got back to his chamber. It was probably best that Catherine left. She needed rest too.

It was a little after 5am when he finally got back to his chamber and found Catherine's note.

He smiled at the little heart she'd drawn, and the reminder that she was off on Monday was welcome. Labor Day was one of the holidays that they didn't observe Below. He hadn't realized.

Before he went to breakfast, he wrote a note and asked Kipper to deliver it for him.

"Don't knock," he told Kipper. "She was up late last night and may still be asleep. Just slide it under her door."



When Catherine woke just before noon, her first thought was *coffee*. Then she wondered how the intruder hunt had gone the night before. She knew that there had been six of them, which was the reason Vincent had been called, and why it had taken so long.

After she put the coffee on, she went to her door to collect her Saturday newspaper and found the note that had been left.

She opened the note after she dropped her newspaper onto the couch.

Catherine,

I'm sorry everything went askew last night. With all that out of the way, I'm sure it will go better the next time. Tonight? Same time?

V~

She smiled. She briefly wondered if she should send a note accepting his invitation, but she knew that he would sense her anticipation and that she would be there.

Just before 8:00 that evening, Catherine retraced her steps from the night before. But this time, Vincent was already at the bottom of the ladder waiting. He lifted her down and turned her into his arms, where he kissed her soundly.

"Everything go well last night?" she asked when they came up for air and started walking.

"With the intruders, yes. Cullen and I herded them out, with the help of the recorders you gave us. Then we moved in a temporary barrier. Mouse made it more permanent today."

"So, they won't be back?" she asked.

"No farther than the junction under the manhole they used. The other tunnels have been blocked."

As they got closer to his chamber, Catherine's anxiety grew, and Vincent could feel it.

"And no one will bother us?" she asked.

"They shouldn't. Everyone usually leaves me alone on Saturday evening." He tried to reassure her.

"I hope so," she said as they reached his chamber.

"You didn't bring a bag tonight?" Vincent asked as he took her jacket and hung it next to his cloak.

"I left it last night," she said, pointing to the leather tote sitting next to his armoire.

He led her over, and they both sat on the side of the bed.

"There were six intruders?" Catherine asked, making conversation.

“Yes. Cullen said they’d been sheltering in the junction just under manhole for several nights. But when they were forced to spend most of the day there because of the rain yesterday, they got curious and decided to go exploring... in three different directions. We were at it until very late. I didn’t get back here until 5am. It’s probably good that you didn’t wait.”

He leaned over, nosed aside her hair, and kissed her neck. She guessed that he wasn’t going to take his time tonight. She smiled as her arms went around his neck.

When he kissed her this time, it was electric. She felt it to her toes.

He eased her onto her back on the bed, then pulled back and looked down at her.

“Is this all right?” he asked, his eyes moving across her face taking in her shining eyes before settling on her lips.

“Yes,” she whispered. Then she pulled his head back down and lightly kissed one corner of his mouth then the other.

“Catherine,” he growled at her teasing.

“Hush,” she whispered. She moistened her lips before she pressed them firmly against his. When his lips parted, she slipped her tongue into his mouth. She loved the way he tasted.

Vincent groaned as he deepened the kiss. He was lost somewhere between the heaven of Catherine’s mouth and the everyday world. He was concentrating on Catherine, but also had one ear open to what was going on around them.

Catherine wrapped her arms around Vincent, holding him to her, almost as if she was afraid he’d try to escape. For someone who had done very little kissing, he had certainly learned quickly.

His hand slipped under the hem of her sweater, and he pulled back to look at her, almost as if he was asking permission. At her slight nod, he continued moving upward. They were both concentrating on the sensations when they were suddenly brought back to earth very abruptly by a sound from the entrance to the chamber.

“Oh, my word,” came Mary’s voice. “I’m so sorry.”

Vincent groaned and buried his face in the quilt. Catherine was sure she heard a muffled curse. They both sat up, but Mary was gone.

“I should go after her,” Vincent said, sitting up. But after a look down at his lap, he turned to Catherine.

“Maybe I should go,” she said, jumping up and running after Mary.

She was relieved when she caught up with Mary, who didn't appear to be heading to Father's study.

"Mary," Catherine called after her. "Do you have a moment?"

"Of course, my dear," Mary said with a broad smile. "I'm so sorry I interrupted."

"Um, that's okay," Catherine assured her, adding "we're used to it," under her breath.

Mary heard her and laughed.

"One of the not so wonderful things about living Below," she told Catherine. "No privacy. I've heard a lot of complaints about it, but it's even worse in Vincent's case. Everyone thinks they can demand his attention at any time of the day or night."

"I've noticed," Catherine said with a wry chuckle. "We just wanted to make sure that Father, ah... isn't informed. You know how he is."

"I wouldn't dream of it!" Mary patted Catherine's arm. "He's worse than an old woman. He'd worry himself sick, so in this case, what he doesn't know won't hurt him."

"Thank you, Mary!" Catherine hugged her.

"Now hurry back to Vincent," Mary told her. "I would imagine he's waiting for you... impatiently."

Catherine smiled before turning and jogging back to Vincent's chamber.

When she got there, she was surprised to see Pascal sitting comfortably in Vincent's chair as Vincent perched on the side of the bed with a pillow on his lap.

A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth at the sight of the pillow.

"Pascal has taken the night off from the pipe chamber," Vincent said with a wan smile.

"Yes," Pascal agreed. "I decided that Zach needs to learn that he is quite able to take over the pipes on his own. I've always hovered so close that he's never developed the confidence he should have."

"I understand," Catherine said with a nod. "I worked as an intern with my dad's law firm until I passed the bar. It did a lot for my confidence. How long are you going to let him be on his own tonight?" Catherine looked at Vincent, who looked like his head was going to explode.

"I thought I'd let him go until about midnight. Then I'll go back and let him go to bed."

She saw Vincent take a breath as if he was going to say something.

“I guess I should be heading out then.” She walked over and kissed Vincent on the cheek. They briefly made eye contact, and she saw an apology there. “I know you two don’t often have the opportunity to spend time together. I’ll see you tomorrow evening, Vincent? Same time?”

At his nod, she walked over to the coat rack, where she grabbed her jacket and headed home.



Third time’s the charm, Catherine was telling herself as she dressed, yet again, for her evening with Vincent.

It was Sunday, so they would still have the whole night, and she wouldn’t have to rush off early to make it to work. She just hoped that they would manage to get some time alone. She wondered if perhaps there was some other place Below where they could go.

I could try to talk him into coming here, she thought as she looked around. *Maybe I can convince him that he can always call Peter if something goes wrong... not that I think it will.*

With that in mind, she headed Below one more time.

When she made her suggestion, Vincent shook his head.

“No, I wouldn’t be comfortable doing that,” he insisted.

They walked into Vincent’s chamber. Vincent took her jacket and hung it up. Then he picked her up and carried her to the bed. She expected him to deposit her there in the same place they’d been when they were disturbed the night before. But he surprised her by sitting and moving her so that she straddled his hips and was facing him.

As soon as they sat, he took her lips in a scorching kiss.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this... frustrated in my life.” He said when he finally broke the kiss.

She could feel that frustration pressing against her, and she smiled.

“I know the feeling,” she agreed.

He grasped the hem of her sweater and looked at her.

“May I?” he asked.

His boldness thrilled her, and she smiled as she raised her arms over her head, giving mute permission.

He pulled the sweater up and dropped it on the rug behind her. He took a moment to lean back a little and look at her. She was glad she hadn’t exhausted her supply of pretty, matching bra and panty sets. This time she’d chosen a light blue set.

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

She’s so beautiful! he thought. And he watched in fascination as she reached behind her, unhooked her bra and pulled it off, leaving herself bare to his eyes.

Her hand went to his, and she drew it up to cover her breast with it as she leaned in for a kiss.

Vincent was losing himself in Catherine. He left her mouth and kissed his way down across her chest and had just caught one nipple in his mouth when they both heard the gasp and the exclamation from the entrance to the chamber.

“Oh, my dear Lord!” was the exclamation.

“Oh, God! It’s Father,” Catherine whispered as she felt Vincent release her nipple and pull her into his arms as if to shield her.

“Father!” he shouted.

“I will see you in my study... NOW!” Father said as he turned and stalked out.

They were both frozen for a moment, feeling like teenagers who had been caught making out on the sofa. Then Vincent spoke. “Perhaps you should leave. You don’t need to hear what he has to say.”

“We’re in this together,” she told him as he stood and set her on her feet. He bent down, retrieved her bra and sweater, and handed them to her.

“No, it would be better if you left,” he insisted.



by Lynette Parker

“Then come Above to my place when he’s done ranting,” she told him. “We can drop back to my backup plan.”

“I will. I’ll try not to be long.”

He kissed her quickly before turning and following Father.

Catherine quickly dressed and left.

When Vincent finally joined her almost two hours later, she was waiting on the balcony.

“Was it bad?” she asked as he dropped his cloak and pulled her into his arms. He noticed that she’d changed clothes and was wearing a blue satin nightgown and matching robe.

“I was lectured as if I was 14 years old again,” he said with a shake of his head.

“He reminded me that anyone could walk in on me at any time. And that I need to set a better example for the children. I am, after all, a role model.” The sarcasm in his voice surprised Catherine.

“If you were afforded the same courtesy of calling out and asking permission to enter as everyone else below, it wouldn’t be a problem,” she pointed out.

“I told Father that, and he just grumbled. But it would be hard to get everyone to change their habits overnight,” he said in resignation.

“It’s all right, Vincent,” Catherine told him. “We have my place. No one can walk in, and I’ve turned the ringer off on the phone and turned the sound down on the answering machine. I hate it that you’ll have to leave before the sun comes up, but at least we will have this place.”

She took his hand and led him through the doors into her bedroom.

As soon as they stepped down into the bedroom, Vincent pulled her into his arms and just held her for several minutes.

He helped her out of her robe and was kissing her and just starting to pull her nightgown up when they both heard a strange siren sound.

“What is that?” Vincent asked, his head coming up.

Catherine listened a moment, then groaned.

“It’s the building fire alarm!” she said, pulling out of his arms and reaching for her robe.

“There’s a fire?” Vincent asked, incredulously.



by Lynette Parker

“It would seem so. I didn’t see any notice that they’d be testing it, especially not at this time of night.” She pushed him toward the balcony. “Go. If there is a fire, you can’t stay here. The firefighters will check every apartment.”

Vincent went to the balcony and grabbed his cloak.

“Come with me,” he urged. “I can carry you to the roof, and we can go down the fire escape.”

“No, I’m not dressed for a walk through the park, and if I don’t turn up downstairs, they will come looking for me. I don’t want to put anyone in danger.” She pushed him again. “Go.”

“I’ll be just across the street, in the trees, if you need me,” he told her before he kissed her and left.

She watched him go over the wall to the roof before she ran inside, grabbed her keys off the mantle, and left.

Why do I live on the 21st floor? she wondered as she made her way down on the stairs. *And why didn't I put on shoes?*

When she finally made it down to the sidewalk, the firefighters had just arrived and were directing everyone to the sidewalk across the street.

“Did you smell any smoke?” one of her neighbors asked her as they made their way over to the wall so they could sit.

“Nothing,” Catherine told her, wrapping her robe tighter and tying the belt. Several others agreed, no one had smelled smoke or seen anything.

Vincent made his way down to the alley and managed to make it across the street and into the park after the fire department arrived and blocked traffic from both directions. The chaos it created gave him cover.

He was just behind the wall where Catherine was. He could hear her talking to other people, and he knew she was safe.

It was over 3 hours later and well after midnight when the Fire Department cleared everything and allowed everyone back in the building. There had been no fire. They speculated that it had been a short in the system and that the management should get an electrician in the next day to check it.

Vincent watched as Catherine gingerly made her way across the street in her bare feet and into the building. He was debating whether or not to go back to her apartment when he saw her come out onto the balcony and look down toward the park. He decided that it was just too late to go to her, especially since he'd have to leave before dawn.

He stepped out into a clear spot under a light, hoping that she'd see him and know that he was going back Below.

Catherine looked down at the trees and noticed movement. It was just a dark shape against other dark shapes, but she knew it was Vincent when he stepped into the light. When she saw him turn and walk toward the area of the park where the threshold was, she was disappointed but knew it made sense.

We'll figure it out, she thought as she turned and went back inside.

Vincent wove his way through the trees toward the threshold.

It's as if all the gods that ever were are against us, he mused. *I have to come up with a way to fix this.*

By the time he reached his chamber, he'd thought of and discarded at least six different ideas.

There has to be a way, was the last thought he had just before falling asleep.

When he woke the next morning, he was sure he had the solution, at least the beginning of one. He'd need Cullen's help and expertise to make it work.

When Vincent reached the dining chamber, he could tell by the way Father looked at him then quickly looked away, that he hadn't been forgiven for his defiance quite yet, so after he got his breakfast, he looked for Cullen. He was sitting by himself at a table in the back.

"May I join you?" Vincent asked when he walked up to Cullen's table.

"Sure," Cullen said, looking up. "I thought you always ate with Father."

"Under normal circumstances, but today, I'd prefer to avoid him." Vincent put down his tray and sat down across from Cullen.

"You have a falling out?" Cullen asked.

"Something like that... more like a difference of opinion."

"I imagine he'll get over it," Cullen said before he changed the subject. "Mouse got the wall up near the Battery Park threshold. He only put one in the main tunnel that comes back here. Said that the others didn't need them since they were dead ends. Made sense to me."

"Yes, and it saves on resources," Vincent agreed. He ate a few bites then looked up at Cullen.

"Has anyone Below ever requested a door for their chamber?" he asked.

Cullen shook his head. "Not that I know of, at least they didn't ask me, and I don't think there are any except on a few storage areas. William has one on his pantry."

"Would it be feasible to install a door on my chamber?" Vincent picked up his mug and took a drink of tea.

Cullen briefly visualized the wall inside Vincent's chamber.

"Yeah, I think so. I've got several designs that I've thought about. I'm sure one would work for you."

"Would there be a way to secure it from the inside?"

"You mean lock it?" Cullen asked. Vincent could tell he was catching on.

"Yes. Lock it."

“I could make that happen,” Cullen told him. “I’ll walk back with you after breakfast and get some measurements.

“Thank you, Cullen.”

After breakfast, Vincent wrote down measurements as Cullen took them and called them out.

“I think I have the perfect solution for you,” he said when they were done. “And I probably have everything I need. If I don’t, I’m sure Mouse does. I just have to find it all.”

“How long do you think it will take?” Vincent asked.

“If I have everything, I’d say today to build the actual door. I should be able to install it tomorrow or the day after. You could have privacy well before the weekend,” he said with a wink.

“Thank you, Cullen. You just might save my sanity with this.”

The next day at lunch, Vincent was reading as he ate, when Father joined him.

“What is Cullen doing in your chamber? It looked like he was carrying building materials there earlier.” Father asked without so much as a hello.

“He’s installing a door, Father,” Vincent told him without looking up. “Now we won’t have to worry about one of the children or *anyone else* walking in on me when I’m engaged in *private* activities.”

He expected another tirade from Father but was surprised when he just stalked off to join Mary at her table.

When Vincent returned to his chamber later that afternoon, Cullen was just gathering the last of his tools.

“You’re just in time,” he told Vincent. “I’ll show you how this works.”

“It looks like a barn door,” Vincent commented as he stood back and looked at Cullen’s handiwork.

“It’s based on that,” Cullen told him. “When it’s open, it rolls behind the cabinet on this wall to the left of the door, where it is barely noticeable. I put a rod in the wall there to act as a stop, even though there is a stop on the track. Wouldn’t want it to jump the track and fall off. I did the same thing to the right side so that when it’s closed it stops in the right place. And this...” he indicated a rod that was

hanging from the handle by a cord, “is how you lock it. When the door is up against the stop on the right, this hole in the door lines up with a hole in the wall, and you just put the rod in it...” he demonstrated. “And the door is locked and can’t be opened from the outside.” He tried to move it back, and it didn’t budge.

“That’s brilliant!” Vincent said with the biggest smile anyone had seen on his face in weeks.

“Mouse isn’t the only inventor here below,” said Cullen with a grin of his own.

“Absolutely,” Vincent agreed. “I foresee you getting a lot of requests once everyone sees this.”

Cullen picked up his toolbox. He turned back toward Vincent.

“So, when is Catherine coming Below again?” he asked with a wink.

“I’m not sure, but I’m going to invite her to dinner Friday evening,” Vincent said.

In fact, he wrote the note and sent it up with Kipper as soon as Cullen left.

Catherine—

I have found a remedy for our problem. Please join me for dinner on Friday night. I will meet you, same time, same place.

Always,

V—

Catherine found the note that had been slipped under her door when she got home from work that evening. She smiled.

What has he come up with? she wondered.

When Vincent met her at the bottom of the ladder this time, he was smiling and didn’t appear to be the least bit nervous. He could feel her confusion, or maybe it was more just a feeling that there were questions she wanted to ask, and that made him smile more.

“What is going on?” she finally asked. His smile was contagious, and she was smiling too. “Your note said that you had fixed the problem... how?”

“Wait until we get to my chamber, and I’ll show you.” He took her hand. They had been walking slowly... now, he moved faster as she practically trotted alongside him.

When they reached his chamber, Catherine expected to see something, anything that was different. But as far as she could see, there was nothing. He’d set up his writing table as their dining table for the evening, with candles and even a bottle of wine. There were candles all over the room, very reminiscent of what Kanin had done for Olivia. There was even a red rose lying across one of the dinner plates on the table. But other than that, there was nothing she could see that was different.

“What is it?” she asked as she turned back to him, taking off her jacket.

He took the jacket, hung it, then reached beside the armoire and started moving something from behind it. Catherine watched with delight as he rolled the door across the chamber entrance.

“A door! You figured out how to get a door!” she exclaimed.

“I didn’t. I just asked Cullen, and he figured it out,” he told her.

“It’s wonderful!” But then she stopped and frowned. “But what is to stop someone from just opening it and walking in? You know there are some people that no door will stop.”

“Cullen thought of that too,” he said. He showed her the rod hanging from the handle. He put it in the hole and then demonstrated how the door couldn’t be moved.

“Remind me to kiss Cullen next time I see him,” she said just before she threw her arms around Vincent and hugged him. “Privacy!” she whispered. “It seems to be a concept that no one down here understands.”

“At least not as far as I’m concerned,” he agreed. “Everyone else is extended the courtesy of being asked before anyone enters their private chamber. But no one has ever thought that I might like to have the same respect.”

“Well, now they will have to extend that courtesy to you,” she said with a grin.

He took her hand and led her to the table where he seated her, then took the seat across from her. He poured the wine and invited her to help herself to dinner.

“It’s not fancy,” he told her, “just William’s beef stew, but he added some wine to it this time, so it’s a little different.”

After her first bite, she smiled at him. “Mmm... You can tell William that I’ve had Boeuf Bourguignon in France, and this is just as good, if not better. Now I know

why he asks me to keep him supplied with Burgundy. I thought the cook had a nip now and then.”

Vincent laughed. “Well, he does, and I’ve had a glass now and then with him, but it’s mostly for cooking. You should taste his beer bread and the stew he makes that has Guinness in it.”

“I look forward to it.”

The rest of the meal went well and was very relaxed. Catherine was surprised. She wondered if part of Vincent’s nervousness had been caused by his fear of being walked in on. She wasn’t going to bring it up now but filed it away for a future conversation.

After dinner, Vincent piled all the dishes on a tray and set them outside his door, then closed it and locked it again. Catherine had moved to the bed and was hunting through the bookshelf behind it. When she found what she wanted, she waited for Vincent to join her on the bed and get comfortable.

“What have you found?” he asked when he was settled.

“Maya Angelou,” she said as she leafed through the pages looking for what she wanted.

“Will you read for me?” he asked.

She smiled and then began.

***We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight
live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.***

***Love arrives
and in its train come ecstasies
old memories of pleasure
ancient histories of pain.
Yet if we are bold,
love strikes away the chains of fear
from our souls.***

***We are weaned from our timidity
In the flush of love’s light
we dare be brave
And suddenly we see***

*that love costs all we are
and will ever be.
Yet it is only love
which sets us free.*³

Vincent couldn't believe what he had just heard. It was as if Maya Angelou had been there for every moment of their relationship. He sighed and pulled Catherine into his arms and started to kiss her.

The knock on the new door a few minutes later startled them both.

"Ignore it," Catherine whispered.

"Vincent, are you in there?" It was Father, and he sounded anxious.

"Perhaps I should at least answer him," Vincent suggested.

"You're right. He just might take it into his head to find someone to break it down if you don't," she agreed.

"Yes, Father?" Vincent called out.

"We need to talk," Father said. "I need to apologize."

"Apology accepted," Vincent called.

"But can we talk?"

"Not right now, Father... I'm busy." Catherine burrowed into his shoulder to stifle her giggles.

"Oh... ah... well, all right." They heard him grumbling as he left. But at least he was going.

"That was close," Vincent said, letting out a deep breath.

"We probably should make sure we see him in the morning," Catherine said.

"Just to reassure him that everything is okay... Now, where were we?"

Vincent swallowed hard, closing his eyes as if he were pondering what to do next.

"Show me," he told her.

"Maybe you should tell me what you have in mind," she suggested.

They were on their sides, facing each other, and she watched as he closed his eyes as if picturing it. Then he started to speak.

"I think I would like to kiss you again," he whispered, leaning closer until his breath tickled her neck. It sent chills over her body. He brought one hand to the

³ Touched By An Angel, Maya Angelou

back of her head and used the other to encircle her waist to draw her closer. “Then, I think I can do some things that will hopefully capture your attention.”

Her breath hitched. “And what else?”

“Once you are aroused, I want to make love to you. I’d like to make love to you over and over again if you allow it.”

Catherine pulled back a little to look at him. His eyes were now open, and he was staring at her intently. She had never dreamt that he would say something like that.

Once he sensed her consent, Vincent didn’t waste any time stripping off her clothes, and she was just as helpful getting him out of his. Clothes were piled next to the bed.

Vincent rolled Catherine onto her back and then did everything he told her he would, and then some.

First, he kissed her, but not just her mouth. His lips traveled over every contour of her body, her breasts down to her belly button, her arms from shoulder to hand. He followed with his fingers, and even after she cried out in ecstasy, he continued to caress and explore her before he finally slowly entered her.

Catherine was in a passion induced haze. She couldn’t imagine the control that Vincent possessed. He entered her so slowly. Stopping if he felt the slightest bit of discomfort transmitted to him through the Bond. When he was finally fully inside her, she couldn’t believe he’d fit.

She looked up at him as her hands traveled down to his butt.

“That is so good,” she said on a groan. “You are finally where you are supposed to be!”

With that, they started to move against each other. They caressed whatever skin they could reach. They kissed, letting their tongues move in time with their bodies. They explored each other’s bodies and learned each other’s needs. They started slow and tender and worked their way up to hard and fast.

It was as mind-blowing as Catherine had always known it would be. But as they lay in each other’s arms afterward, a little anxiety crept through Catherine’s sated haze when Vincent was quiet... too quiet.

“Are you okay?” Catherine finally found the breath to ask.

“Yes! I’m more than just okay,” he told her, using her word. “I was just wondering why I was so frightened about taking this step. And I will admit that all of our abortive attempts at intimacy over the last week likely overshadowed my anxiety and made it easier.”

She surprised him by bursting into tears, sobbing onto his chest. He waited for her to get it all out, and then he finally lifted her chin so he could see her eyes.

“What is it?” he asked, wiping her cheeks with his thumbs. He sensed that she wasn’t sad, or even upset, just overwhelmed.

“I’m just a little dazed, I guess,” she told him with a sniffle and the beginnings of a smile. “I never expected this. I’ve always made it a point not to compare a current lover with any of my past ones, not even to myself...” She felt his body tense up, and she rushed on, reassuring him. “But this time it’s impossible not to. This was so much better.”

“Better? How? I’ve never done it before.” He sounded incredulous.

“Yes, better! I think it’s just your nature. You are generous and giving in every other aspect of your life. I guess it’s just natural that you would be in this too.”

“I don’t understand.”

She could tell he was genuinely mystified. She didn’t want to get into specifics, but it looked as if she had to.

She took a deep breath and dove in. “I’ve never had an orgasm like that before, and never more than one. In the past...” She was picking her words carefully. “... No one has touched me as you did... I mean, they touched me, but I seldom climaxed when they did. I think they were only checking to see if I was aroused. And I never climaxed when they were... ah... inside me. Once they knew I was aroused enough for penetration, they forgot about me, and it became all about them. They were only there for their own pleasure.”

She felt as if her face was beet red by the time she finished explaining.

“Then you’ve never...” his voice trailed off.

“Hardly ever,” she said. “And never twice. And on top of all that, you are still awake and talking to me.”

“I did read that most men do tend to fall asleep afterward,” he admitted.

“And you didn’t,” she said, cuddling close again. “Why is that?”

“I think it’s because I think I’d rather to it again, instead of sleep.”

And they did... several times.



When Catherine woke the next morning, it took her a moment before she realized where she was. She stretched and was smiling when she turned over.

“If you were a cat, you’d be purring,” Vincent commented as she turned into his arms.

“I sensed a similar reaction from you,” she said as she stretched up and kissed his chin. “Only it wasn’t purring... You roared! Do you know what that did to me? It made me feel as if I was the biggest femme fatale ever.”

“I’d prefer to call you an enchantress,” Vincent said as he nuzzled her neck. Then he sighed. “But as much as I’d like to stay here, I think we should follow through with your suggestion from last night, and go to breakfast, so Father will be reassured that everything is all right and that we both survived our... encounter.”

Father hadn’t seen them come into the dining chamber; he had his back to the entrance. Mary was sitting with him. She saw them but only smiled when Catherine raised a finger to her lips, asking her not to say anything.

When Catherine put her plate and cup down on one side of the table and Vincent on the other, Father’s head came up so quickly that Catherine was sure he almost gave himself whiplash.

“Good morning, Father,” she said as she took her seat.

“Father,” said Vincent, not sounding quite so friendly.

“Catherine...” he looked to Vincent. “Vincent. Ah... how are both of you this morning?”

“Wonderful, Father,” Catherine said with a broad smile. “Never better.”

“I’m well, Father,” Vincent added.

“That is good to hear,” Father said.

Father looked across the table at Mary, and they could all see that he was begging for her conversational help.

“Well, I need to be going,” Mary said as she gathered her dishes and rose. “I promised Olivia that I’d pick Luke up on my way to the nursery this morning. She leaned down to touch her cheek to Catherine’s.

“Don’t let him off too easily,” Mary whispered before she left.

“So, Father,” Vincent began. “What was it you wanted to speak to me about last night?”

Father took a sip of his tea and swallowed. He looked decidedly uneasy as he glanced back and forth between his son and his son's... *What is she now?* he wondered. *Girlfriend? Lover? Fiancée?*

"As I said last night, I wanted to apologize. I was judgmental, and acting as if you were a child... A child whom I could direct and chastise and expect complete obedience from. You are a grown man. You make your own decisions and..." he paused for breath "since the installation of your door... well, the concerns I voiced the other night just do not apply any longer. To be honest, I should never have made them to begin with."

Both Catherine and Vincent were stunned into silence for a moment. Vincent was sure he'd never received that kind of an apology from Father before. Catherine reached over and put her hand over Father's, where it lay fisted on the table. She glanced at Vincent before she spoke.

"Father, we know that what you said was said because you were concerned... for both of us."

Father looked at Catherine then turned to look at Vincent. Clearly, he was wondering if Vincent concurred with what Catherine had said.

"Yes, Father," Vincent agreed. "I was angry the other night when you lectured me as if I was a child, but you were correct in that anyone could... and did... walk in on me... us... at any time. That is why I got Cullen to build the door. I understand your other concerns also. I shared them, but Catherine proved us both wrong on that count. Nothing untoward happened."

Father visibly relaxed, and he turned his hand over under Catherine's and gave her hand a squeeze before withdrawing it.

"I've never been so happy to have been proven wrong," he said with a smile. "So, what are your plans for the day?" When he realized what he'd just said, he blushed.

Catherine laughed. "I think we might just spend the day in Vincent's chamber. I didn't get much sleep last night." She winked at Vincent. "And I think I'm going to need a nap."

Father's face turned even brighter red, and he became very interested in the eggs on his plate.

"Ah... Well... Yes. I can understand that. Have a good... day... both of you." He quickly rose, gathered his dishes, and left the table.

Both Catherine and Vincent were stifling laughter as they watched Father hurry across the chamber as quickly as his limp would allow.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be laughing at his embarrassment,” said Catherine after her laughter subsided.

“He will survive. I think it’s good for everyone to be more or less put in their place now and then. And that includes Father.” Vincent reached across the table and took Catherine’s hand. “So, you said you think you’re going to need a nap?”

“Oh yes,” she said with a sultry smile. “Right after I finish breakfast. I need to keep my strength up for all the *napping* I have planned.”

“I think we may have to ask for lunch to be delivered to my chamber, then,” he told her with a look that she was sure would melt the polar ice caps.



by Lynette Parker



by Barb Gipson

Don't Look For Me...

by Judith Nolan

Prequel to: **Once Upon a Time in New York**



My Dear Peter,

"Do not stand at my grave and cry; I am not there. I did not die..."

Mary Frye wrote those words, but they also hold true for me, my friend. Do not look for me, for I am nowhere to be found. At least, not in this world.

But, please, do not weep for me, thinking I am dead. The newspapers will report that I have taken my own life through despair. They will paint the headlines with lurid details of my demise. Believe me, at times I have been sorely tempted to end it all. I came very close to doing so last night. I had planned it all out, down to the smallest detail. But I was miraculously saved by a strange, new acquaintance.

My new friend stopped me, at the very point of no return, as I stood beside the East River, trying to muster sufficient courage to cast myself upon the

tide. She offered me sanctuary, in another place, far from this city, where my skills as a doctor will be put to good use. I am told I'll find a renewed purpose in this life. It's all I have ever asked for.

I've also written to Alan Taft, instructing him to dispose of all my property, and give the proceeds to a charity of his choice. It seems I will have no more use for money and all its vices. I am truly glad to be free of it all... all except for you, my dear Peter.

You have been too good to me, my friend. And I love you for it. You held fast to my lost cause, when others sought to blacken my name, and deny my life's work. You were there when Margaret left me. It seems you are destined to gather up the pieces of my life, as I once gathered the remains of yours, when your beloved Elaine died.

I wish I could tell you more about where I am going, but I have been sworn to secrecy. It seems that this new world, to which I now travel, relies on silence for its very survival. So be it. I have kept many secrets and confidences, what is one more?

But you, I will truly miss. If I ever have need of you, one day in the future, you will hear from me again. I'm not sure how I will get a message to you

as there is still so much I need to learn. But I know that you will do your best to help me, as you always have. You I can count on, beyond every other human being I have ever known.

That is your unenviable curse... to be my faithful friend, through all the trials that life has heaped upon us both.

For now, I must remain faithfully yours, always...

Your friend,

Jacob

To read more about Father's entrance into the world Below, please click here:

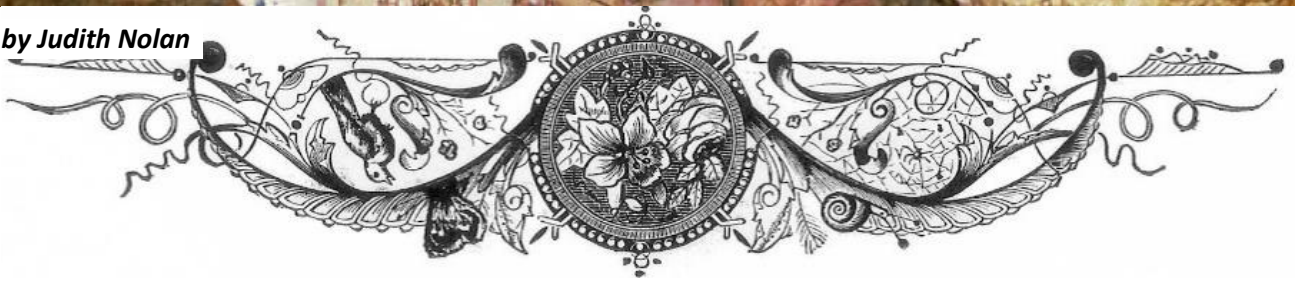
<https://treasurechambers.com/FanFiction/Judith/BeginningsFather.pdf>

And read about his first renewed contact with Peter Alcott:

<https://treasurechambers.com/FanFiction/Judith/BeginningsPeter.pdf>



by Judith Nolan



Kristopher Gentian Returns

by Ana, Carol & Skippy



Vincent found a note from Pascal left on the table in his chamber when he returned from picking up Catherine that afternoon. “I find this rather strange. Narcissa has sent on a message for us from Kristopher Gentian!”

Catherine looked up from where she was sitting on the side of the bed. “What does he want, or should I ask, how did he get in touch with Narcissa?”

“Catherine,” Vincent replied, “you should know that Narcissa has her own way of contacting people, especially those who seek help from her.”

He tapped out a message to let her know that her message had been delivered, and he would look into it.

He then told Catherine that Kristopher had visited Narcissa and told her that he had hidden more paintings somewhere in the tunnels for them to find.

Catherine was highly skeptical, and asked, “How, tell me –are we to find them? There are a lot of tunnels down here, and the paintings could be anywhere.”

Narcissa had let Vincent know that they needed to search the lower tunnels and Catherine asked once again, “But who is going to help us?”

Vincent suggested that the older children often played around the lower tunnels, and that they all enjoyed a “Treasure Hunt”, but that they would need Father’s permission to go ahead. The two then set off to Father’s chamber where the children were listening to the nightly reading of stories.

When Vincent told Father of the proposed hunt, the tunnel patriarch immediately fired up “Not a good idea, Vincent!!” The children clamored to be allowed to hunt for the ‘treasure’ and were told “It’s too dangerous and it’s just a ridiculous idea from that crazy old woman!”

Some days went by, and the older children seemed to keep disappearing for various lengths of time, but always returned for meals before they took off again.

Finally, Kipper and Eric came hurtling into the dining room just before the evening meal, with the news that they had found something hidden in one of the old storage chambers on a lower level. Vincent went to check on what the children had uncovered, and it was indeed the missing paintings.

Catherine arranged for an exhibition of the canvasses, and it was to be held at Samhain, so that Vincent and she would be able to attend the “opening” together.

The night of the Official Showing, Vincent and Catherine walked to the building where the paintings were displayed, and much to Catherine’s surprise, the door was opened as they arrived by Kristopher Gentian himself. Kristopher leaned towards Catherine and kissed her cheek, and she replied, shaking her head – “Forgive me for doubting you!”





by Judith Nolan

Perchance to Dream...

by Judith Nolan



Oh, Vincent,

You came to me in such a wonderful dream last night I couldn't bear for it to end. I have never felt so close to you, in both mind and body. Could it be that you dreamed of this place too? And me? I wish I knew the answer, but such an impossible question must remain unspoken, hidden here among the prosaic pages of my journal.

Vincent, I dreamed we were in a huge cavern. An endless, magical place, full of green and blue lights, that glistened and sparkled. I felt I could've stayed there forever, with you...

My hair had grown so long and wild, falling all about my shoulders, and tumbling down my back. It seemed so natural to have it that way. You said you love to run your fingers through it. You told me solemnly that I must never cut it again. I laughed happily at your seriousness. You pulled me close and kissed my hair, sealing the bargain.

You brought a great fur blanket to this hidden place. You wrapped it around both of us. 'To keep me warm,' you whispered. But I wasn't cold, even though my nightdress was thin and so fine, I could've been wearing nothing at all.

That too, seemed not to matter, as did the fact that all of your masculine beauty was finally open, to my curious gaze. You sat silent, allowing me to look my fill, so unashamed were you, in your nakedness. I could've sat within that blanket for days, simply looking at you. Have I told you how truly beautiful you are, Vincent?

My conscious mind struggles with the memories, now that I have come to write it all down in the dawn light. Did we make love together, there in that secret cavern of translucent light? When I woke up, my whole body felt relaxed and replete, but my mind couldn't quite grasp the true answer to so potent a question. I like to think we did, right there on that fur blanket, beneath the sparkling stars that surrounded us. It felt as if we were floating in space, weightless and free...

Wishful thinking, I sigh now, with confusion and regret. That time, in that place, shall remain precious to me. An enchanted dreamscape where anything is possible and nothing is truly as it seems. Maybe I shall return there tonight, my love. Maybe one day soon, I will gather enough courage to finally ask you something.

Do you dream, Vincent? And, if so, of what do you dream? Deep, blue/green caverns, with endless stars and a great fur blanket spread beneath us, as we're swept away on the rising tide of our love?

Yours eternally,

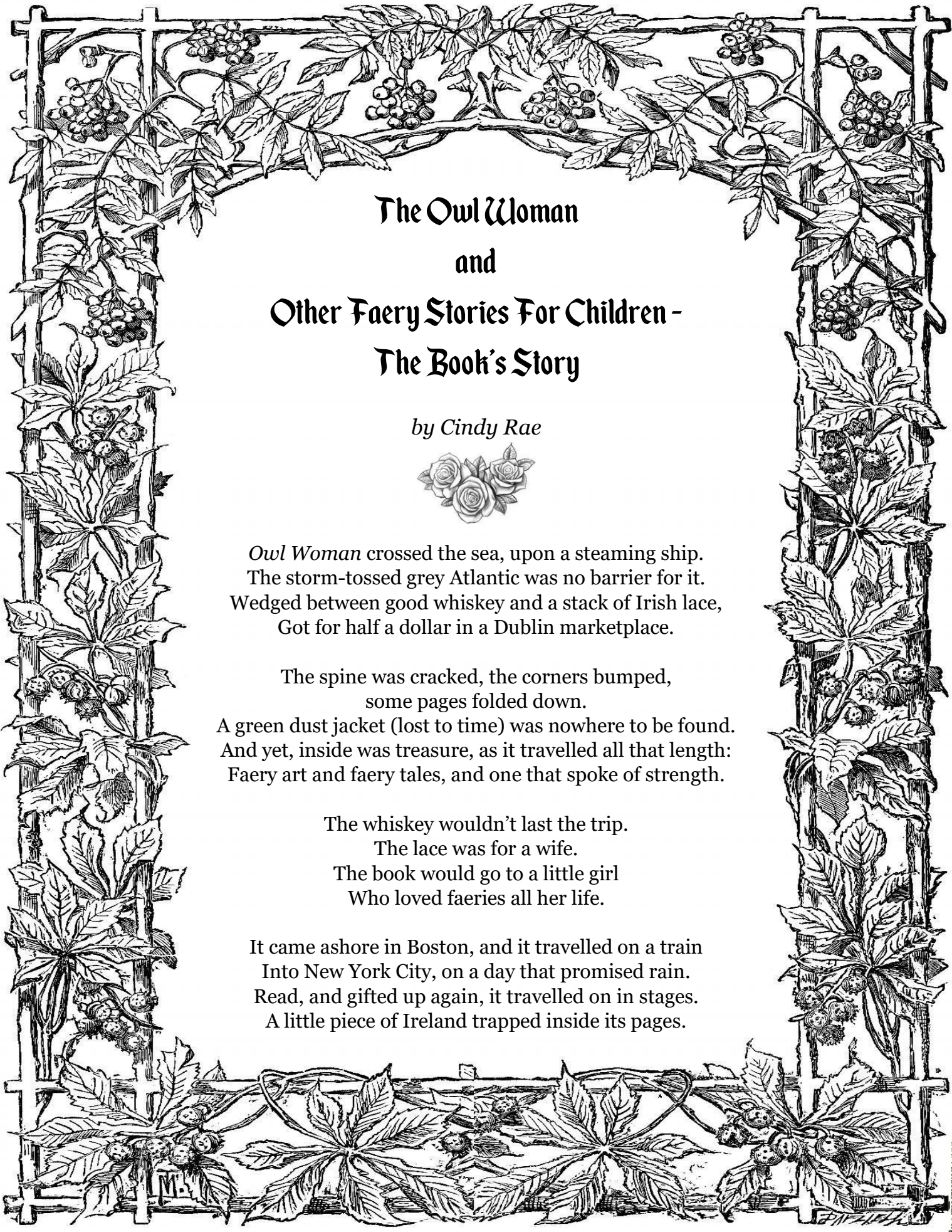
Catherine



by Judith Nolan

**Tunnel Adventures Inspired by
Brigit O'Donnell's
Owl Woman
and
Other Faery Stories For Children**





The Owl Woman and Other Faery Stories For Children - The Book's Story

by Cindy Rae

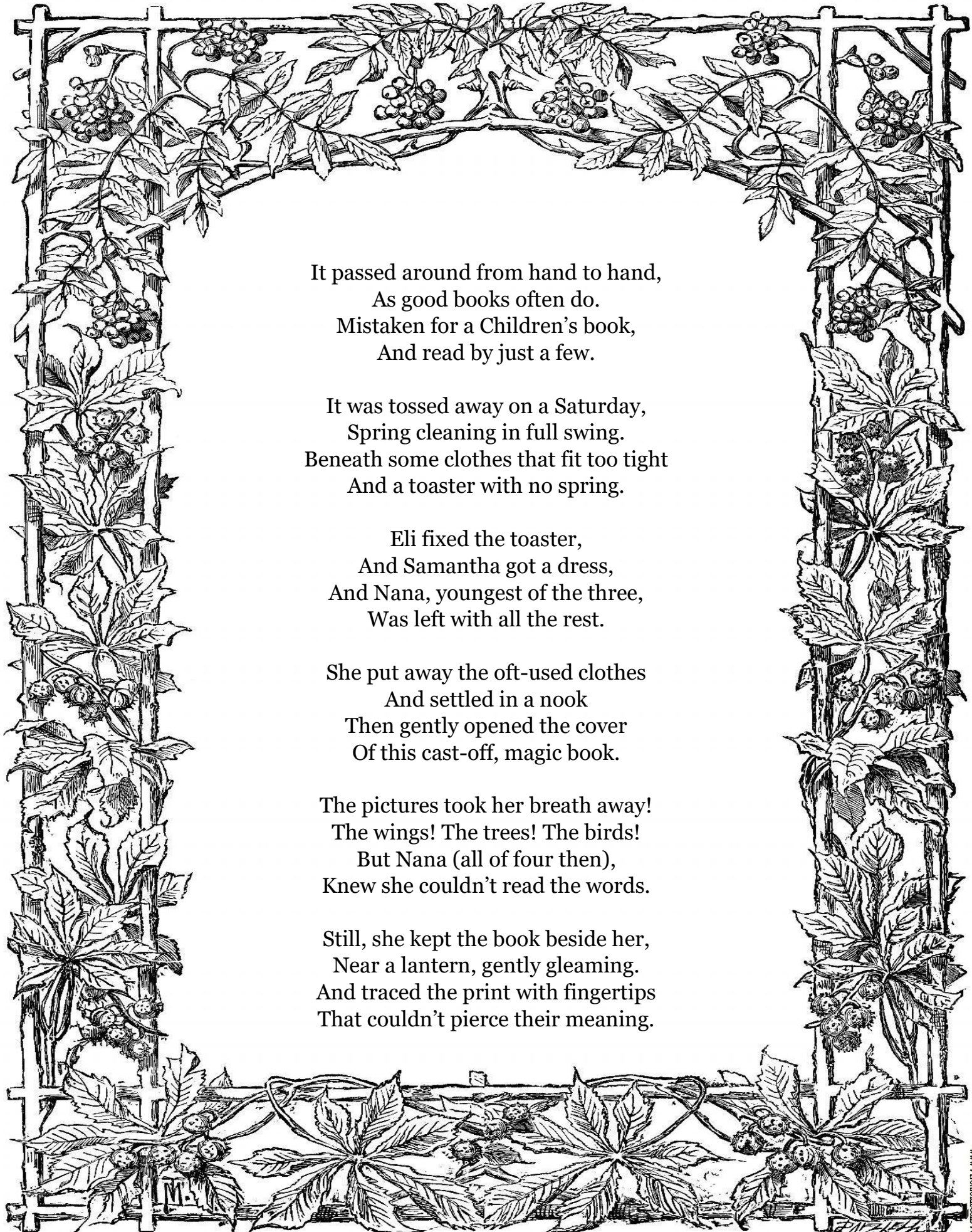


Owl Woman crossed the sea, upon a steaming ship.
The storm-tossed grey Atlantic was no barrier for it.
Wedged between good whiskey and a stack of Irish lace,
Got for half a dollar in a Dublin marketplace.

The spine was cracked, the corners bumped,
some pages folded down.
A green dust jacket (lost to time) was nowhere to be found.
And yet, inside was treasure, as it travelled all that length:
Faery art and faery tales, and one that spoke of strength.

The whiskey wouldn't last the trip.
The lace was for a wife.
The book would go to a little girl
Who loved faeries all her life.

It came ashore in Boston, and it travelled on a train
Into New York City, on a day that promised rain.
Read, and gifted up again, it travelled on in stages.
A little piece of Ireland trapped inside its pages.



It passed around from hand to hand,
As good books often do.
Mistaken for a Children's book,
And read by just a few.

It was tossed away on a Saturday,
Spring cleaning in full swing.
Beneath some clothes that fit too tight
And a toaster with no spring.

Eli fixed the toaster,
And Samantha got a dress,
And Nana, youngest of the three,
Was left with all the rest.

She put away the oft-used clothes
And settled in a nook
Then gently opened the cover
Of this cast-off, magic book.

The pictures took her breath away!
The wings! The trees! The birds!
But Nana (all of four then),
Knew she couldn't read the words.

Still, she kept the book beside her,
Near a lantern, gently gleaming.
And traced the print with fingertips
That couldn't pierce their meaning.

Then, Vincent tucked her in one night,
And saw it on her bed.
He asked, "What's this?" and picked it up.
"Just some book," Nana said.

It was "some book." It really was,
The pages gently tattered.
But Vincent sensed the inner beauty
Between its covers, battered.

Then Nana gave the child's plea,
The one that opens doors.
The one that sent her and Vincent
Chasing fae-folk across the moors.

The one that found an Owl Woman
Perched in a Druid's tree.
The one that brought it to his heart:
"Will you read to me?"





by Deidre Lockyer



The Owl Woman And Other Faery Stories for Children

by Judith Nolan

*"Extraordinary! You look as though you might have ridden
with Cuchulainn, or sailed with Theseus..."*

Brigit O'Donnell

—

"For many Pagans, Beltane is traditionally a time when the veil between our world and that of the Fae is thin. In most European folktales, the Fae kept to themselves unless they wanted something from their human neighbours. It wasn't uncommon for a tale to relate the story of a human being who got too daring with the Fae – and ultimately paid their price for his or her curiosity! In many stories, there are different types of faeries. This seems to have been mostly a class distinction, as most faerie stories divide them into peasants and aristocracy..."



Catherine settled herself, cross-legged, on the old, threadbare Persian carpet covering the floor of Father's chamber. She felt very nervous. It showed as she wiped her damp palms down the side seams of her serviceable jeans.

She looked around, fully aware that the crowd of children seated expectantly before her were a very knowledgeable lot, and could be far more critical than any high-court jury, if she stumbled over any part of her storytelling.

She glanced to where Vincent was standing, with his arms folded, at the back of the group, watching her with a look of calm encouragement. It was all *his* fault! Her eyes narrowed. It was Vincent who'd talked her into this fraught situation where all her natural poise had deserted her.

It was the night before Halloween, and he'd arrived on her balcony at dusk, bearing a hand-written request from the tunnel children for Catherine to please come Below and participate in the story-telling rituals for this time of the year.

"Surely, that's Father's area," she'd prevaricated swiftly. "I know he loves to tell them all the old ghost stories. I'm afraid, against his expertise, my telling would be very dull."

When she was in court, giving her opening or closing statements, she was usually sure of her ground, and the facts of the case. She was well-used to handling the deep annoyance of endless continuances, and Joe's displeasure if the case didn't go exactly to plan. But, in front of the children, she felt that any, and all of her faults, would be exposed the moment she opened her mouth.

Vincent nodded. "Tomorrow night he will tell his usual tales, before the children go trick or treating Above. For tonight, they've asked for you to read for them." He held out a small, green book. "I have a special gift for you, from Brigit."

Catherine glanced at the title, and her heart sank. *'The Owl Woman and Other Faery Stories for Children.'* Brigit O'Donnell's recently published book of collected stories.

They'd first met the Irish author, under incredible circumstances, during the previous Halloween. Catherine had voiced her wish to read more of Brigit's stories for children.

The memories of that night were bitter-sweet. It'd been their first night together, exploring the city as a couple, before waiting for the dawn, seated on a bench beneath the 59th Street Bridge. They had almost shared a kiss, before they'd been rudely interrupted by the reality of an early morning runner who'd loudly declared that *'Halloween was yesterday...'*

Now Catherine's desire for more stories had been unexpectedly granted. She looked up and sighed. "You expect too much of me." Her shoulders lifted. "What if I fail?"

"I won't allow you to fail." Vincent gathered her close to him, beneath the shelter of his cloak. "I'll be there, for you."

"I guess I'll have to make the best of it..." Catherine murmured, against the warming security of his steady heartbeat.

She lowered her gaze now, breathing deeply to steady her nerves. As she began to thumb through the book of Brigit's Celtic legends, trying to decide which of them was the quickest and easiest tale to tell, Father took sympathy on her. He was seated behind her right shoulder, a calm, comforting presence, and someone who was well used to enthralling the group of tunnel children clustered at his feet.

"I have something to say, before you begin..." He put one hand on Catherine's shoulder, as he smiled at the children. "When she wrote this book for you, Brigit wanted us to understand that the Faerys are often depicted as mischievous and tricky. But this is not always so. You need to understand that no-one should make offerings or promises to them that can't be honoured. Don't enter into any bargains with them, unless you know exactly what you're getting into. And what's expected of you in return. With the Fae, there aren't any gifts, and every transaction is an exchange. It's never one-sided and rarely simple."

Father looked up to Vincent to continue the tale. The children's heads all turned in unison, waiting with breathless anticipation for the faery story to continue. Catherine also found herself becoming enthralled with the story. The small book in her hands was momentarily forgotten, along with her trepidation over the task still ahead of her.

"You *can* access the world of the Fae, if you manage to find the secret entrance." Vincent's expression was solemn. "But these are always guarded. Once in a while, an enterprising adventurer might find their way into the underground world. There they would find a place where anything is possible, and nothing is quite as it seems..."

Vincent lowered his voice significantly, smiling as all the children leaned forward. Behind them he could see Catherine's eyes sparkling with anticipation, also caught up in the storytelling.

He nodded to her, as he continued. "However, upon leaving that hidden realm, you will find that more time has passed than you expected. In several tales, any mortals who spends a day in the faery realm, would often discover that seven years have passed in their own world. So, one must never disturb the peace of the Faerys, unless you're prepared to pay the price of admission to their secrets..."

"So, we could even have an entrance down here, somewhere?" Samantha demanded to know. She looked around the chamber, her eyes wide with trepidation.

"Can't be," Zach replied importantly. "If there was, Vincent or Mouse would've found it, by now. Right, Vincent?" He looked to his idol for confirmation.

"There are places and realms Below that have yet to be discovered." Vincent shook his head slowly. "Not even Mouse has found everything. You're forgetting just how far down our world goes. Some places, like the Abyss, are said to be without end."

"Yeah, there's that..." Kipper worried the point, well-made.

The children exchanged sceptical glances, unsure if they were being sold tall tales, or true. But they couldn't shake off the idea that there were secret places yet to be discovered, and stories yet to be told. The air of expectation rippled through them all, as they began to chatter about all the possibilities.

Vincent glanced again at Catherine, seeing her haloed in candlelight and looking utterly desirable. Like the consummate storyteller he was, he gave her a small nod, and a slight indication of his left hand towards the book she held in her lap.

"Oh, right... Yes... Where was I?" Catherine raised the book, quickly re-finding her place.

Her trepidation had dissolved as if it had never been. She cleared her throat, as she angled the book towards the brightly flickering light of the nearest candelabra.

She'd re-captured the children's attention, and they all turned towards her, as she began to tell her story. "*Connla of the Fiery Hair was the son of Conn of the Hundred Fights. One day, as he stood by the side of his father on the heights of Usna, he saw a maiden, clad in strange attire, coming towards him...*"

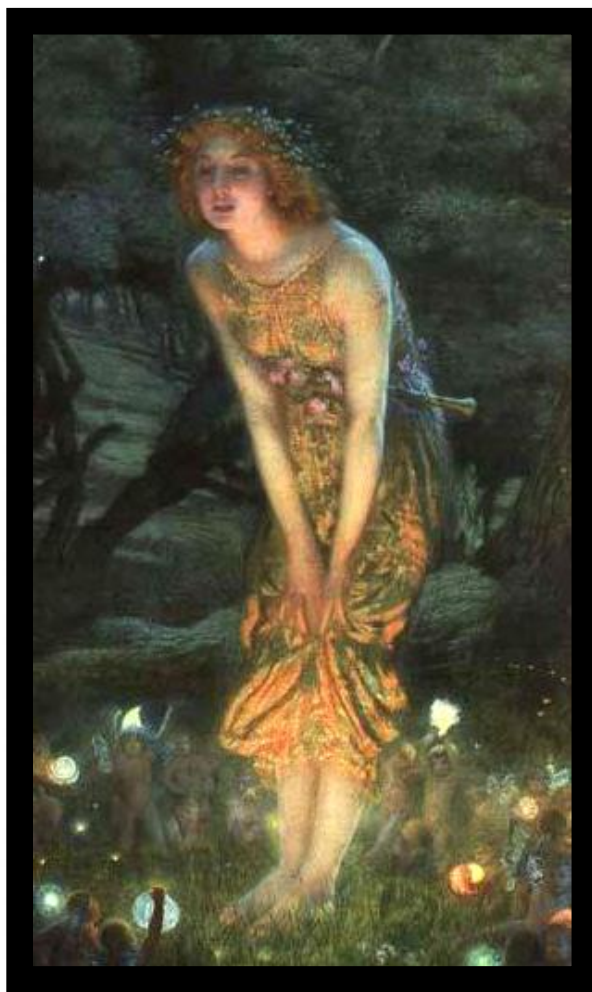




by Deidre Lockyer

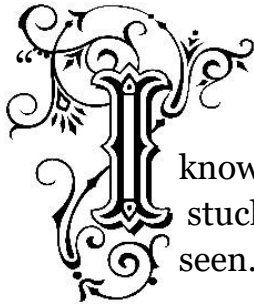
A Faery Story

by Judith Nolan



"I believe in everything until it's disproved. So I believe in fairies, the myths, dragons. It all exists, even if it's in your mind. Who's to say that dreams and nightmares aren't as real as the here and now?"

John Lennon



I know what I know. And I've seen what I've seen." Mouse stuck his chin out stubbornly. "And I know what I've seen."

"You are not honestly trying to tell me that you think you have actually seen real fairies in some unknown chamber down at the end of a previously undiscovered tunnel... literally." Father shook his head on a disbelieving laugh. "Even for you Mouse, that is truly going too far. Have you been sipping some of William's winter ale behind his back?"

"Not fairies, no! Of course not." Mouse's scruffy blond hair bounced indignantly as he shook his head. "That chamber's not the place of the fairies. Narcissa says they live in another place, higher up. She said it's much closer to Above and the park. They need to fly in and out... for the flowers and sunshine."

"They need to fly in and out..." Father shook his head. "I truly do not believe this. Narcissa and her flights of fancy. Really, Mouse."

He expelled his breath on a ragged sigh. "You really need to keep to the engineering projects and stay out of Narcissa's chamber." He turned to Vincent, who was leaning with one hip hitched onto the corner of the table in Father's chamber, watching them both without comment. Father lifted his shoulders in defeat, lost for words to make the boy see sense.

"What exactly did you see in that previously undiscovered chamber at the end of the unknown tunnel?" Vincent raised both hands in enquiry. "An intruder?"

"An intruder, yes. But little person..." Mouse's voice dropped to a whisper. "Had on a green jacket and black hood. Sitting on the floor. Had a lantern. Counting out gold coins and muttering. Must have

heard me. Stopped to listen but didn't see Mouse. Too quick." He flicked his hand sideways. "Gone like that."

"A leprechaun...?" Father's eyes grew wide with disbelief. "Oh, Mouse, please. Now you're saying you've actually seen one of the little people. Come on Mouse, this is just too much, even for you. Tell me the truth right now. What exactly *did* you see?"

"*I am telling the truth!*" Mouse flared indignantly. "Saw him! Same as I'm seeing you now." He held his hand out at the level of his shoulder. "Little guy, about this high, maybe. Don't know. Was sitting down. But sounded mean. Talked all funny, like he was arguing with someone."

"Perhaps it is as Mouse says. We cannot dismiss it out of hand." Vincent shrugged. "Popular myth states that they are often no taller than a small child, sometimes with a beard and hat. If he was ever captured by a human, the Leprechaun possesses the magical power to grant three wishes in exchange for his release. They are said to be descended from the Tuatha Dé Danann, the magic people of Old Ireland. They were said to be very powerful."

"I am well aware of the myth and the legend, thank you." Father rolled his eyes in disgust. "But please, not you too, Vincent. You surely cannot believe in Narcissa's sad flights of fancy, and Mouse thinking he saw something. He'll have the whole place in an uproar if he goes about spreading stories."

Vincent stood up from the table. "Well, Mouse has seen something or someone, an intruder, no matter what he was wearing or what he looked like. Remember Paracelsus loved gold above all things. He went to great lengths to secure as much as he could carry, even endangering his own life to retrieve his stash. Perhaps he has returned once more, looking for his lost property. I doubt he managed to retrieve it all in time."

Father grimaced. "We both know John would not dare to come Below again and risk being seen or caught. He knows I doubled the patrols after the last time and sealed up all of his access points. And besides, he is a tall man and he certainly does not dress in a green coat. I'm not sure what Mouse thinks he's seen, but it cannot be Paracelsus. For that, at least, I am grateful."

"Then, perhaps Mouse has discovered one of John's adherents instead. Perhaps his master has sent him down to collect some secret stash of gold and Mouse is simply mistaken in what he saw."

He ignored Mouse's vehement shaking of his head. "Either way, we cannot allow this to pass without some investigation. There is only one way to be sure..."

Vincent turned to gather his cloak, pulling it onto his shoulders. "Come on, Mouse... show me. Take me to where you saw this man."

"Okay, good, okay, yes. Show Vincent. He believes Mouse." The tinker nodded quickly, slanting Father an *I-told-you-so* look before he bounced up the steps leading to the upper level of Father's chamber and disappearing through the entrance.

"Just don't let that boy lead you on some wasteful wild goose chase," Father counselled gruffly. "You have far more important things to do, Vincent, than chasing after shadows and fantasies. We simply do not have the time to spare."

"I only wish to satisfy my curiosity, Father." Vincent leaned down to kiss the old man's forehead. "And maybe I'll have the chance to capture a little magic."

"Oh, go on, then." Father flicked a dismissing hand. "Go and have your fun. But make sure you're back in time for this evening's meeting with Winslow and Cullen regarding the new drains. We need to get that sorted before the first winter storm arrives, and we need Mouse's full attention on the project. Winterfest will be here soon enough."

"I will return in time, Father. Please do not concern yourself. I only wish to discover the truth." He took the steps two at a time, following Mouse, who was waiting impatiently in the tunnel beyond the chamber's entrance. He took the boy's arm, trying to calm his agitation as the tinker hopped from foot to foot. "Show me, Mouse."

"Mouse went this way." The boy picked up a nearby lantern before darting off down the tunnel. "Long, long way down. Mouse was looking for stones, for stuff for —" He stopped, pressing the back of his hand to his lips. His eyes darted back to Vincent's before falling away again. He looked decidedly guilty about something.

"For...?" Vincent prompted.

"Nothing. It's not important. Just stuff I need. Stones, crystals and such. For something me and Jamie are making." Mouse shrugged, bounding several steps ahead like a startled deer that had just seen the closing-in of the hounds.

"Nothing for you to worry about, Vincent."

"But you will tell me about any new projects before you start, won't you, Mouse?" Vincent caught up easily, stilling the boy's hurried forward progress with a hand on his shoulder. "I don't wish to be told after the fact, when it's too late to repair the damage."

“Uh huh, of course.” Mouse bobbed his head quickly in agreement. “Always tell Father or Vincent before starting any new work. You need to know what you need to know. Okay, Vincent?”

“Yes, Mouse.” Vincent frowned with suspicion at the boy’s suddenly guileless expression. “Very good.”

“Okay good, okay fine!” Mouse nodded, smiling happily, as he tapped the side of his nose with one forefinger. “Mouse knows what he knows, and knows what he’s seen.”

“Then show me, Mouse,” Vincent encouraged. “I wish to see as well.”



More than four hours passed before they were standing and looking into a tunnel that led down into darkness. Except at the far end of that darkness, there were flickering shadows cast by a lantern or candle illuminating the narrow mouth of a small chamber.

“See, just as Mouse said,” the tinker whispered. “What ya gonna do now, Vincent?”

“I am going to pay our uninvited guest a visit and ask their business.” Vincent handed Mouse their lantern. “Stay here and keep out of sight. You don’t know who else may be down here. Make some noise if anyone comes.”

“Mouse knows what to do.” The boy pressed back against the rock wall behind him. “But be careful, Vincent. Catherine and Father will kill me if anything happens to you. Leprechauns can put spells on people, make them go crazy. We need you, Vincent.”

“Just keep watch and I’ll be fine,” Vincent assured him, before turning away to creep down the tunnel on silent feet.

As he neared the chamber entrance, he too could hear someone talking in low tones, but the words were unintelligible. Then there was the distinct clink of metal on metal, as if coins were being counted into a bag. Vincent shook his head in disbelief. *Surely it could not be as Mouse had said...*

He edged closer into the chamber, leaning forward around the rocky entrance to finally see into the pool of flickering light in the centre of the chamber’s sandy floor. And it was exactly as Mouse had said. Someone was seated on the floor, a hooded figure in green, counting coins into a bag by the glittering light of a

lantern. The coins were being taken from a hole dug in the floor, from what appeared to be a wooden strong box buried up to its open lid.

But, from what Vincent could see of the figure, the intruder was certainly *not* a man...

“What can you see, Vincent...?” Mouse hissed from the shadows behind him. “Do you see him...?”

“Stay back...” Vincent extended his hand behind him, waving it urgently to try and shush the boy, but it was already too late. The figure in the chamber had heard their voices and, sitting up from its task, turned quickly to see what was happening.

Suddenly, before he could move or react, a foreign voice spoke in Vincent’s mind. But he understood nothing of the torrent of unknown words, except the tone was angry and the voice was most certainly not masculine. Vincent shook his head in bafflement when the words stopped abruptly, but the presence in his mind was still there, very real and alive. In the brief silence he felt icy fingers sorting through his memories, dipping into the deep well of his love for Catherine and those he cared for — understanding more than he wished it to know. He threw back his head on a muffled growl, closing his eyes as he pushed back against the unwanted intrusion, forcing a marginal retreat. But the mental intruder would not be banished.

For long moments of confusion Vincent fought a fierce mental battle to keep the strange mind from dipping into the security of his innermost thoughts and feelings. Beads of sweat stood out on his brow before he finally managed to force another partial retreat, but his breathing had accelerated under the great effort and he felt as if he’d just run a marathon.

But the things he had seen in that alien mind — breathtaking things of magical green hills, the *Sidhe* and tremendous battles won, and ultimately lost in impossibly ancient times, baffled and confused him...

Just who was this intruder...? In the background of those incredible images, hovered the figure of a man. A tall man dressed in black, whom Vincent recognised with a sickening slice of dread that pierced his vitals...

“What is it, Vincent...?” Beside him, Mouse put a worried hand on the great muscles of his friend’s tensed forearm. “What’s happening? I don’t like it.”

“It’s all right, Mouse.” Vincent finally answered, breathing heavily, as he pressed the flat of his hand to his chest over his racing heart. “I think there is more here than we guessed. Our intruder is not at all what it seems. This could be a trap, so we must tread carefully now. But I have the strong sense of the hand of

Paracelsus in this somewhere. I saw him, in my mind, just now — waiting and hovering...”

“Show yourself!” The figure in the chamber before them suddenly commanded, rising gracefully from the floor in one easy movement, the green cloak swirling into place about the ankles over a full-length dress of yellow linen. “I know you are there.”

“Tread carefully, Mouse.” Vincent frowned. “And keep behind me. There is a vast evil at work here.”

He quartered the chamber quickly, seeking the unseen dangers as they both moved forward cautiously. But the intruder appeared to be alone. He brought his attention back to the hooded figure watching them impatiently.

The intruder was slender and tiny, shorter than Mouse, but neatly proportioned and most definitely a woman. Hers was the same voice that had spoken so angrily in his mind, but now he understood the words. Her accent was deeply intriguing, whispering of Ireland certainly, but with unique inflections that owed nothing to the present-day inhabitants of the Emerald Isle.

“*Hey!*” Mouse shuffled to a halt at Vincent’s side, holding out his lantern as he glared accusingly at the figure within the chamber. “You’re not a man!”

“That I am most certainly not!” The figure laughed gaily. It sounded like the tinkling music of a running stream.

“Your powers of observation truly pass all expectations, Mouse,” Vincent commented drily as he finally stepped forward into the chamber; the element of surprise well and truly destroyed by the boy’s unwanted interference.

The figure in green straightened imperiously. “What do you want here? You have no place here.”

“Our tunnels. Our place.” Mouse scowled. “Why you here?”

“Please, Mouse, allow me to handle this.” Vincent clapped a warning hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Mouse...” The figure in green huffed a derisive laugh. “A most appropriate name for such a predictable creature of furtive and scuttling habit.”

“But none the less, the question is a fair one.” Vincent frowned at the accuracy of the description. He studied the intruder closely. There was a gold brooch pinned to the right shoulder of her cloak. It was an antique brooch of curious design, fantastical whorls and patterns that interlocked endlessly.

“Very well, I will admit that...Vincent.” The intruder nodded. “And I suppose, since you are standing in the way of my egress, you think you have captured me...”

that I am now at your mercy and your command. A mistake others have made and regretted.”

“Say, she sure talks good.” Mouse shook his head, peering up at Vincent. “Too good. Just like Father when he’s angry. Mouse not happy.” He scowled at the intruder who stared haughtily back at him. “And Mouse not sure about what she said about me. Mouse does *not* scuttle.”

“If you wish to leave, then we will not impede you.” Vincent stepped slowly aside, taking a protesting Mouse with him. “But we would know your purpose here first. And your name...”

“To know my name is to capture me twice.” The woman’s large green eyes darted from Vincent’s to the mouth of the chamber and then back again. “But my task here has already been set by another, and I am late in returning.”

Her shoulders slumped. She pushed the hood of her cloak back from her head revealing the full glory of her long, tumbled hair, which gleamed with the rich colour of burnished copper. “I wish it were not so. But he commands my obedience.”

“She sure don’t look like any leprechaun,” Mouse observed grumpily.

“Leprechaun, I am not!” The woman spat the label distastefully. “I am a daughter of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. Leprechaun indeed! I should shrivel you where you stand, *little man!*”

“Well, it seems you have hit quite the raw nerve, Mouse.” Vincent folded his arms beneath his mantle. “But for someone such as you — if you are who you say you are — surely digging up gold would not be needed.”

“As I said, I have been tasked by another.” The woman sighed. “I must take this treasure to him to be released from the spell he has cast upon me. He said he cannot approach this place for fear of being captured, but the property is his by right and he will not rest until it is returned to him. He required my help to regain possession of his wealth.” She waved a dismissive hand at the half-filled sack on the floor. “I know no more than that. I cannot deny the command.”

“And yet you have had hours to complete your task and leave as you came, undetected.” Vincent watched her face carefully. “Why did you choose to linger?”

“As you said before, that is a fair question.” The woman’s large green eyes widened with consternation. “I... heard the boy when he came here before. I knew he had seen me, but he did not seek to capture me as he was well able to do. I tried to read his mind, but the confusion I found there defeated me. I could make no sense of any of it...”

She spread her hands in bafflement. "But when he left again, I began to hope. I desired he would bring others to help me escape my bondage. If I waited long enough, perhaps someone else would come. And then you came, and in your mind, I found the words to ask for your help. I found the truth and more besides..."

She approached Vincent, looking up into his face. "You truly could have ridden with Cuchulainn and the fabled warriors of the Red Branch as the O'Donnell woman said to you, that night. It was long ago, when we were free, and what times they were. You do have a special face. I wish..." She shook her head regretfully. "Perhaps it is already too late."

"What do you require of me?" Vincent felt an intense chill feather along his spine as he remembered the words of the Irish author, Brigit O'Donnell, on the long ago night he had gone Above on Halloween to speak with her, to tell her what her work meant to him.

That was such a special night for him and Catherine. One he longed to repeat. "Ask me and we shall see what I can do."

The woman in green gathered herself. "My name is Finnguala. There, you have it. I can do no more than beg for your help to escape my curse. I do not wish to remain here, but I am tasked to return to my new master without delay." She glanced at the sack with disdain. "With his gold."

And his name..." Vincent prompted. "Would it be Paracelsus?"

"No way!" Mouse jumped. "He wouldn't dare!"

"I see you know my master already. He said there would be those down here in the underworld who would seek to prevent me from returning his property to him." Finnguala shrugged. "He said I could see a man with the face like a god, and he would try to tell me things I must not listen to. Things he assured me are grossly untrue. He said all who live down here hate him. He was most adamant you were not to be trusted."

"That sounds like him." Vincent grimaced. "You are merely a pawn in a dangerous game. But how did you come to be in his thrall in the first place?"

"The Tuatha Dé Danann are people of the underworld, the forgotten places. It has been so since time forgotten." Finnguala sighed. "When our treasures and cherished possessions are taken from their safe places and sent travelling, we do the same, to guard and protect. From the peaceful drift of watching the centuries turn, I was awakened to find myself in a strange city, in the thrall of a man I did not know. But he possessed both the power and the magic to command me to do

his bidding. He had studied the arcane arts and knew the spells that must be cast.”

Vincent frowned. “Do you speak of the Celtic Antiquities exhibition at the museum in the park?”

“If that place is in the land of the great city of chaos and confusion above us, then yes, that is so. He drew me from my invisible realm into this one and bound me to his will. He pledged on his honour that if I did his bidding and returned his property to him, he would allow me to return to my own world.”

“I doubt Paracelsus would allow you to escape him once he has enslaved you. Any tool he possesses he always keeps close by in case he has a need for further use.”

“Then I am doomed to his service.” Finnguala raised her shoulders eloquently. “There is no escape.” Her slender body slumped.

“You have uncovered his gold. He wants it very badly. You could bargain with him for your freedom.”

“I have given my word, I cannot deny him. I must return to him before the sun sets.”

“Trap him, when he comes to collect,” Mouse muttered. “Make him sorry for what he’s done. Make him release you.”

“That would only work if he had a conscience, Mouse.” Vincent grimaced.

“Paracelsus cares for nothing but himself and his gold. He is not troubled by emotions.”

Finnguala looked back to the strongbox. “Then I must return to him. I cannot delay any longer. He will already be angry with me.”

“You are tasked with retrieving his gold. But did he secure your agreement to actually hand it to him?” Vincent questioned, trying to think of ways out of the bad situation.

“I don’t remember...” Finnguala frowned, folding her hands together in agitation.

“It could have been as you say. He became agitated when I questioned him.”

“So, he could have overlooked the need for you to agree to hand over the gold yourself, once you had retrieved it for him.”

Finnguala’s face brightened. “It may have been as you say. He may have overlooked that requirement. I knew I was right to wait for you.”

“Then, if he wishes to possess his gold again, he must release you from his power.”

“But, once he is aware, he will simply try to cast another spell.” Finnguala returned to the box and picked up the bag of gold. She fastened it to her braided belt. “Yet, your words hold true. I will make a bargain he cannot counter.”

She paused and looked back. After a moment’s hesitation, she unfastened the gold brooch from her cloak. She moved closer and held it out to Vincent. “You have earned a reward for your service... for not demanding more from me when you could have done so.”

She reached for his hand when he didn’t move, placing the brooch in his palm and closing his fingers around it. “Give this to your Lady Catherine, with my blessing and gratitude. One day perhaps, we may meet again.”

“Thank you.” Vincent did not look down at the gift.

“Be well, Vincent...” Finnguala smiled up at him, her green eyes lighting with warmth and a touch of mischief. “And love well. It is surely not your destiny to be alone in this life.”

Spreading her hands wide, the edges of her green cloak clasped in her fingertips, she went up on her toes, pirouetted once and vanished into thin air — as if she had never been...

“Wow!” Mouse gasped. “How’d she do that...? Where’d she go?”

“Old fashioned magic...” Vincent opened his hand to stare at the brooch nestled in his broad palm. “Not everything in this world can be explained or measured, Mouse.”

“Tell that to Father...” Mouse shrugged, frowning at the spot where the girl had been standing. “Think I’ll stick to what I know. And I know what I know.” He walked over to pull the strongbox from the sand, closing its lid before tucking it under his arm. “At least I have this to show him.”

“I think that is an excellent idea, Mouse.” Vincent gripped his shoulder and they laughed quietly together before they turned and headed home. “Now, about those stones and crystals you said you were looking for this morning...”





by Deidre Lockyer



*From the pages of The Owl Woman
and other Faery Stories ~*

Paradoxical

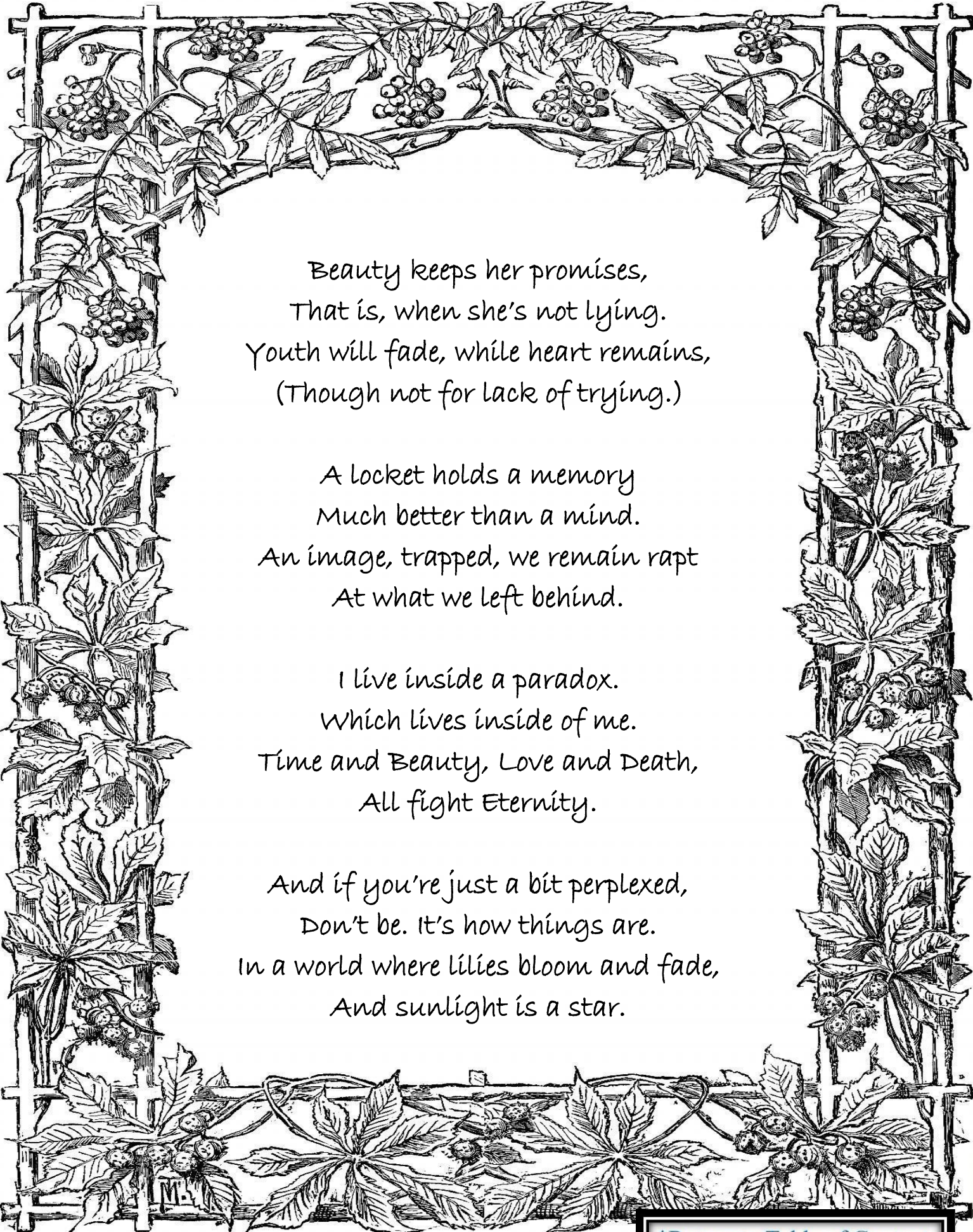
By Cindy Rae

Inspired by the Amazing Artwork of Dee Lockyer

A lily is a fading thing,
The sun, she is a star.
A bird will perch, or fly or fall.
And that's just how things are.

A woman is a "sometimes" thing.
Yet, if her heart is true,
She'll tell you she's an "always" thing.
That's just what women do.

True love's red rose can turn to dust.
But love is still worth chasing.
Our Springs become our Autumns,
And time crawls - when it's not racing.



Beauty keeps her promises,
That is, when she's not lying.
Youth will fade, while heart remains,
(Though not for lack of trying.)

A locket holds a memory
Much better than a mind.
An image, trapped, we remain rapt
At what we left behind.

I live inside a paradox.
Which lives inside of me.
Time and Beauty, Love and Death,
All fight Eternity.

And if you're just a bit perplexed,
Don't be. It's how things are.
In a world where lilies bloom and fade,
And sunlight is a star.





Lily Loved the Wild Places

by Cindy Rae



*Lily loved the wild places,
Amber loved the moon.
Lily loved October trees,
While Amber, she loved June.*

*One wore scarves, and one wore braids,
And one loved satin gloves.
One loved lilies, one loved lakes,
And both, the just loved love.*

*One had brown eyes, one had blue,
And Lily loved to dance.
One wore a pearl, but both were true,
And both would take a chance.*

*I can't say 'they are opposites'
Can't say which one I'd be.
I can't say which one I prefer-
When both of them are me.*



Inspired by the amazing art of Dee Lockyer

[*Return to Table of Contents](#)



by Deidre Lockyer

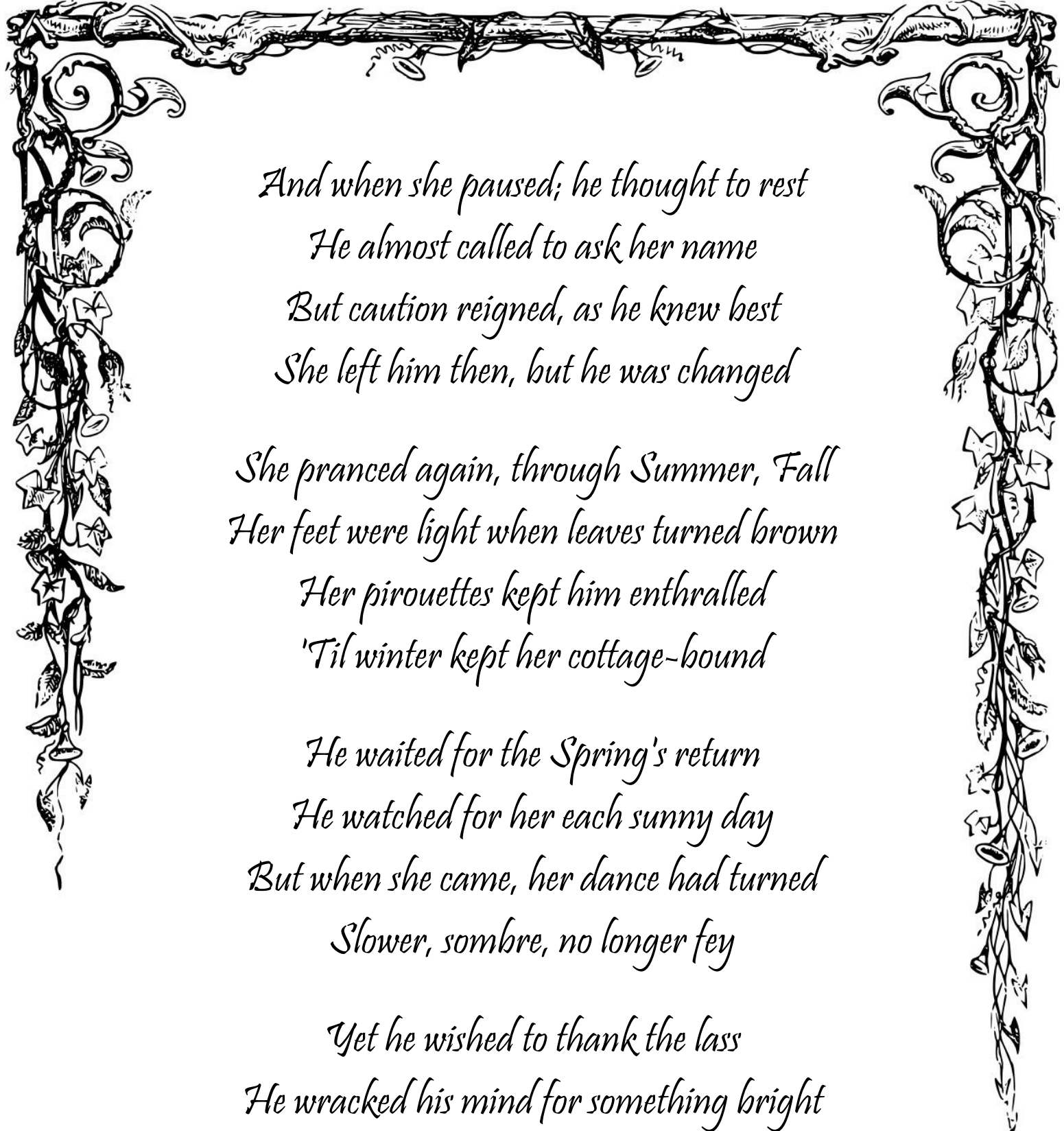
A Gift for Love

by Angie



*The Oak King watched her as she danced
On the soft leaf bed she didn't tire
The sun's rays bright upon her chanced
To turn her auburn hair to fire*

*From his hidden place he viewed her glide
Her shoes found footing, her eyes were closed
She whirled and thumped, arms thrown wide
As Sun went down and Moon arose*

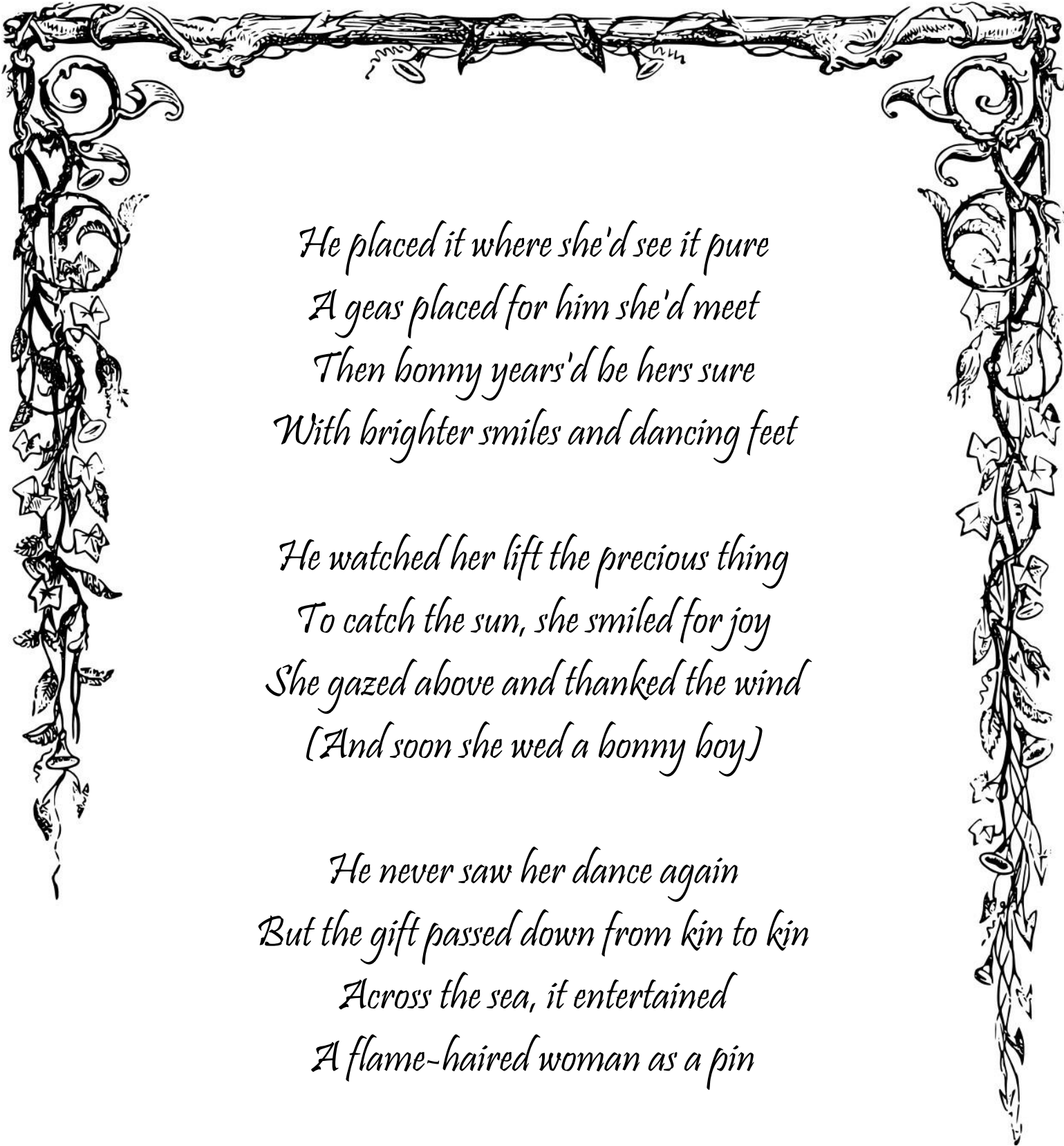


*And when she paused; he thought to rest
He almost called to ask her name
But caution reigned, as he knew best
She left him then, but he was changed*

*She pranced again, through Summer, Fall
Her feet were light when leaves turned brown
Her pirouettes kept him enthralled
'Til winter kept her cottage-bound*

*He waited for the Spring's return
He watched for her each sunny day
But when she came, her dance had turned
Slower, sombre, no longer fey*

*Yet he wished to thank the lass
He wracked his mind for something bright
Aha, he thought, and root tips grasped
What'd long been hidden from the light*



*He placed it where she'd see it pure
A geas placed for him she'd meet
Then bonny years'd be hers sure
With brighter smiles and dancing feet*

*He watched her lift the precious thing
To catch the sun, she smiled for joy
She gazed above and thanked the wind
(And soon she wed a bonny boy)*

*He never saw her dance again
But the gift passed down from kin to kin
Across the sea, it entertained
A flame-haired woman as a pin*

*Diana regarded the olden round
And pinned it high, close to her heart
Where magic sought until it found
Vincent's chest for Oak King's dart.*



Note: The pin above, a family heirloom, is dated 1886,
the year that WB Yeats published his poem *The Stolen Child*:

*We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances
Mingling hands and mingling glances
Till the moon has taken flight;*



Dark-Eyed Faë

by Cindy Rae

*(From the pages of
Owl Woman and Other Faëry Stories,
by Brigit O'Donnell)*



by Deidre Lockyer



*A moon of red, a sea of grey,
In a land of emerald green.
Let's weave a spell. I'll never tell
Of all the things I've seen.*

*Sharp mountain tops, and jagged drops
To gentle leaves below.
A faery tune, I'll wear the moon,
And take you down Below.*

*A wing of white, a black-cloaked wight,
A velvet dress of blue.
A life not planned, a golden band,
That's binding me to you.*

*A shifting sky, a child's cry,
Go up a secret stair.
You know it's true. (It's all for you.)
And I will meet you there.*

Inspired by the Fantastical artwork of Dee Lockyer.



Celtic Story

by CJ LaBelle



Chapter One *Autumn Whispers*

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

~Gautama Buddha, Sayings of Buddha



"Fate is like a strange, unpopular restaurant filled with odd little waiters who bring you things you never asked for and don't always like."

~ Lemony Snicket



The last strains of Debussy had drifted away several minutes ago, and as Catherine sat beside Vincent in the Concert Chamber, she felt peace, a gentle peace, in the following stillness. A few tardy music lovers hastened by, passing directly above them. Before long, most of the crowd had hustled away, leaving snatches of conversation to drift down, along with the scattered moonlight. Pieces of lives, being lived. Pieces of dreams, being shared. They all fell softly to the sandy floor and settled there, noted, but unremarked upon.

The night was a cool one, and Catherine tugged her thin jacket higher, brushing the collar up, to give her neck more protection against the brisk night air. Unlike a certain previous night, there had been no rain this evening, no unexpected squall appeared to interrupt the music. But there had definitely been a chill in the air.

Vincent, noticing her movement, extended his arm farther outward, caught the edge of his cloak and brought it back in around her, sheltering her from autumn's nip. Accepting the beloved garment's warmth, Catherine settled herself under the crook of his arm and gratefully leaned against him.

The silence continued, neither seeming particularly willing to move, or break it.

Peace. Peace in the stillness. I feel it, still. I feel it every time I'm near you, Vincent thought.

He sighed, and Catherine felt a measure of tension leave his huge frame. One she had not been aware of, previously.

"Long week?" she whispered, loath to break the quiet spell between them.

"I sat up reading, long into the night," Vincent replied softly, feeling guilty for not being better rested. Any time spent with her was precious.

“Something good?” Catherine smiled, as she asked it. She knew better than most how much Vincent lived through his books.

“Myths of Ireland,” Vincent confessed. “Cuchulainn, mostly.”

For a moment, Catherine thought that was all he would say. But then, he continued...

“The weather changed, and then the month and that reminded me of words I had exchanged with Brigit. She spoke of him.”

Catherine knew he was referring to the events of almost a year ago.

“Brigit O'Donnell? That must have been quite the conversation,” Catherine observed, breathing in the early October air. The last of the straggling crowd was now completely gone, and it was just the two of them, but she felt no urge to raise her voice above a whisper.

“It was,” he admitted. “I think the shortening of the days reminded me of it. Autumn is here again. The leaves are changing. A warm fire feels good. Old stories feel right, when the weather gets chill.” He brushed the top of her head with an absent kiss.

“I can't argue with that,” she agreed. “Do you like those stories? The old myths from Ireland?” she asked.

Vincent considered the question. “They have a different... flavor than the Greeks, I think. Cuchulainn goes to his death all but aware that's what he's doing. He's being tricked, but his honor won't allow him to react any way but... honorably,” he replied. “It's like he can't escape his fate – or even take up action against it.” The furrow between Vincent's unique brows told Catherine that the notion troubled him, somewhat.

“That sounds a bit like the Norse gods,” she observed, drawing a parallel.

Vincent hugged her tighter against the autumn air then agreed with her. “Yes. Fate stacked against you. The act of dying well, when that is all that matters... when there is nothing left but to fall upon your sword.”

“Or maybe just the act of making sure whatever it is you do, that last thing must be done heroically,” Catherine replied.

They sat in a considering silence for a few beats.

“Do the stories bother you?” she asked.

“They... intrigue me, I think,” Vincent said, searching for the right word. “The women and men in them are very strong, very determined... yet sometimes also... helpless. They are powerful, yet very... fated, somehow.” He seemed unable to get away from that word. “But they accept that fate with their heads held high.”

“Fate...” Catherine mused. “Such a small word for such an end.”

She shivered a little, and Vincent knew the dropping temperature was to blame. In spite of his cloak and his proximity, the cold air was sweeping down in through the open grate, and the late hour meant the temperature would do nothing but fall.

“Speaking of fate, I need to be getting back to mine,” Catherine said, a touch of regret in her voice. “I have court in the morning,” she explained, watching him rise as she offered him her hand. He enfolded it in his, as he drew her to her feet.

“There’s Tchaikovsky in two weeks. The last outdoor concert before the Winter Festival,” she said.

Vincent inclined his head in acceptance of her invitation. “I’ll bring a blanket if the temperature keeps dropping. I swear, I cannot recall a summer ending so suddenly.”

Catherine nodded to him as he took her out through the round tunnel entrance, and then to the passageways beyond.

“It is a bit like, once the kids went back to school, it became coat and scarf weather right away,” she said companionably, hugging her russet colored coat around her more closely. It wasn’t a thick one, but it matched her dress. *Next time I’ll have to wear something heavier. And boots, she thought*, picking her way over the sandy ground in low heels. Her legs were bare, and she was feeling the cold.

Through their bond, Vincent could feel her mild discomfort. *You wore a beautiful dress... for me... and an ill-advised one, perhaps.* Vincent couldn’t help but be a touch flattered, even as he quickly squired her home.

Before long, they were at her exit.

“Tchaikovsky in two weeks will be wonderful. You must go and get warm, Catherine,” he said, shooing her toward her ladder.

"I'm having Jenny over. I told you about that. Her apartment is getting painted." There was a subtle warning in the words. *You can't come and visit me. Someone else will be in my apartment for the next few days.*

She had told him, and he remembered. It meant they would both have to endure a bit of an enforced separation for a short time.

"I remember," he replied, forcing himself to keep the regret from his voice. *Jenny is her friend. Catherine needs more time with those, not less.*

"Sleep well, Catherine," he bid her. *I love you.*

"I'm sure I will."

She looked beautiful, standing there in haloed light. Her soft hair was still full of sun drawn highlights. Highlights that would fade some, as autumn wound its way to winter.

She tugged the pretty coat even more closely around her shoulders, clearly loath to separate from him immediately. "And you do that as well. Will you read some more, do you think?"

"Perhaps for a bit," he confessed, taking her in as she stood there. *You are so incredibly lovely. And I do love you. Be well, Catherine. Be well.*

"I'll leave you to Cuchulainn and the little people then... and banshees... and Morrigan." She smiled and stepped backward, fading into the soft fall of light. In a moment she turned and went up her ladder. He waited until she was completely out of sight.

Vincent returned the way he'd come, listening idly to pipe tappings, as he made his way to his chambers. As he passed by Father's room, the old man's light was already out. *Pleasant dreams*, he thought, passing by the large entrance. He continued on his way. Chill air drafted its way through the tunnels, he knew his Chambers would be warmer.

The cluttered, cavernous space was just as he'd left it, with the cover of the book staring up at him from his bed. He thought about writing in his journal for a while, but rejected the idea in favor of the book.

The Celts, by title, the cover picture held mystery in it, and just a touch of magic. A formless woman held up her palm, an odd rune drawn there, though whether it was for protection or power, he had no clue. Another walked with a raven

perched on her finger, thick braids swinging behind her back. Their expressions were solemn. Their influence, undeniable.

He wanted to explore there. He wanted to try to understand it more, as he'd done last night.



by Deidre Lockyer

Vincent settled himself down and flipped to the page he'd left last night, the strains of Debussy, and Catherine's voice still faintly sounding in his ears.

Speaking of fate, I need to be getting back to mine...



The dream, when it came, had a familiar feel. Vincent knew he'd had snatches of it the night before. He had met Cuchulainn. He'd ridden with him and was considered one of his men. The Irish folk hero was huge, powerful, and distant, in his aspect. He was both a force to be reckoned with, and a force unto himself. He had many allies, but few friends. As independent as the land he sprang from, he had been a legend since childhood.

It was not his childhood now, however.

Cuchulainn was nearing the end of his life... his own last chapter. Certain dominoes were in place, some of them set there by his enemies.

Once they started to fall...

Vincent stayed near the Irish legend, often in the background, often frustrated by his own inability to effect change. He tried to warn the Celtic hero that Morrigan hated him, and would bring down his doom. He tried to disrupt the story at this part, or that, but to no avail.

No matter what, Cuchulainn met his preordained end. Vincent, still in the background, stood by, helpless.



In the morning, Vincent woke feeling tired. The book, its depth and its stories had riveted him, but the dream had not. The dream had left him feeling defeated, more than anything else... defeated and impotent.

Fate is often cruel, he thought, getting up to prepare for his day.



Chapter Two

The White Knight and the Black Queen

"Man is something that shall be overcome. Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman — a rope over an abyss. What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end."

~Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra



The day turned out to be a long one, and Vincent, try as he might, couldn't quite get the stories, or the dream of Cuchulainn out of his mind.

"You're... quiet this evening," Father observed, as Vincent studied the chess board between them.

Vincent placed a long-nailed fingertip on his white knight. Of all the pieces on the board, it was one of the hardest to master, thanks to how oddly it moved. The knight traversed the board in the shape of an "L," rather than in a straight line. Grand masters wrote whole books on how to effectively use it, both on offense and on defense.

Vincent pondered it for a moment.

"I've been... thinking," he confessed, keeping his finger where it was, the knight motionless beneath it.

Jacob frowned. "You have, but not about the game, I don't think. I'll have you mated in six moves. Four, if you move your knight. He's all that's protecting your king. My black queen will have him, no matter which way he goes," Father stated, watching the thoughtful expression on his son's face. He knew that look. This was more than just "thinking." Vincent was stewing over something.

Vincent's broad shoulders rose and fell with indecision. *If the white knight is Cuchulainn, the black queen is Morrigan*, he thought idly, eying the pieces. Father wasn't wrong. There was little possibility of escape.

His contemplative blue eyes scanned the board. "I may yet have a chance," he said, doubting it. His bishops were gone, and one rook was about to be taken by a pawn. There was always hope, as long as his queen was still in play, but Vincent realized he'd lost too many important pieces to Jacob's less important ones. The prediction of six moves probably wasn't far off.

"Play then," Father encouraged, with a generous wave of his hand. "And we'll see how it goes." His mouth quirked ironically at the corners. "It's not often these days, that I can say I've bested you in a game." He leaned forward, eager now to see what move his son would make.

Vincent still hesitated, as he viewed the board again. He couldn't move his queen without exposing the entire left side of the board. Two pawns were trapped, blocked in the corners. The free rook was out of position, and harassing a bishop who would easily elude it, then trap it with a deftly placed pawn.

"You're right," Vincent concluded. "You'll have me in six." He took his finger off the knight and advanced a pawn of his own, trying to take back control of at least some of the board. He knew it was a useless gesture.

Jacob countered the move, and the game played out. The results were just as predicted. Vincent lost. The victory gave Father a little pleasure, but also pause for thought.

"You could have just laid down your king, four moves ago. Why play out the game?" he asked. He kept his eyes on the board, studying again the moves made, memorizing them against a future contest.

Vincent considered his question. It aligned well with what he'd been thinking about.

Fate. I wanted to fight it, he thought.

"Last night... I dreamed of Cuchulainn," he said, by way of reply.

"Cuchulainn... the Irish folk hero?" Father asked, not understanding what the one had to do with the other. But his interest was piqued. He leaned back from studying his victory.

Vincent nodded. "Brigit O'Donnell mentioned him, the night we first met. She said I might have ridden with him. Last night, for a while... I think I did." The images were hazy, but the impression had been a distinct one.

Father nearly smiled, as he leaned forward again, and reset the black pieces for tomorrow's game. "That sounds... pleasant. Adventurous," Father replied.

"It was not," Vincent replied, returning the white chessmen to where they belonged.

“Oh?”

“It was his last ride, and I knew it. He went willingly to his death, and *he* knew it. The die was cast before he even got on his horse.”

“I’m afraid it’s been a long time since I read those stories,” Jacob apologized. “But I do remember he was a great hero for his people.”

“But not for *all* the people.” Vincent sighed. “Cuchulainn was slain by those who sought revenge upon him for wrongs they thought he’d done to them. He was tricked, yet his honor wouldn’t permit him to deviate from his course. I have a memory of dreaming that I would try to prevent it from happening, yet for some reason, I couldn’t.” Vincent stroked the white knight again, thoughtfully.

“As if it was fated?” Jacob asked, putting his pawns on the proper squares. “As if nothing he did made any difference at all, to his ultimate end?”

Vincent pondered the words. “Fated. Yes. A fate I couldn’t change... even though I knew. It was a destiny I could not affect.”

Jacob sat back in his chair once more. “Ah. Appointment in Samarra.”

“In a way,” Vincent replied, recalling the famous John O’Hara short story about a servant who tries to run away from death, but only succeeds in running towards it.

“I find it... disturbs me, Father.” He settled the knight back in its proper place, in the back row. “Do you believe in fate? That our lives are foretold, in some way?”

Father knew that this was a tricky subject, and with Vincent, it was trickier still. He answered carefully, as he so often did. “I think some outcomes are... more predictable than others. I don’t think I hold with predestination as much as some do, but, well... I do understand that there are truths beyond what we think we know.”

Father looked at his side of the freshly set up board with a satisfied nod. Another game would be played with the pieces, perhaps soon.

“We play the game because we must. Then hope that somehow, somewhere, someone really does hold us in the palm of his hand,” Father concluded, giving his king a fond pat. “You mustn’t lose hope. Life has taught me that there’s always more to whatever is happening than we think we know.”

“There is a truth beyond knowledge’... You once said as much.” Vincent finished restoring his side of the board to its proper order. Across from him, Jacob’s black queen seemed to be glaring at his white knight.

You won. This time, Vincent thought.

“So I did,” Jacob recalled the warning he tried to give Vincent when he first dealt with Paracelsus. He noticed that Vincent’s gaze was still on the board. *You look tired, my son. Tired... and troubled.*

“What about you? Do you believe in it?” Father asked, knowing that was perhaps the more important question.

Vincent gestured toward the board. “It is like the game. At some point... we both knew I was going to lose. But yet... we played it to the end.”

“Like Cuchulainn?” Father asked cannily.

“Like Cuchulainn,” Vincent agreed, rising. “I’m sorry I didn’t give you a better match. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“You aren’t going to see Catherine, tonight?” Father asked. *I know she has the power to... settle you, when you’re upset.*

Vincent shook his head. “Not tonight. She has a guest. And I was tired before I even sat down. I think I’ll just go to bed.” He looked exhausted.

“Do you think you’ll dream of *him* again?” Father asked, at least a little concerned for his son.

The blue eyes seemed to lighten a little. “I almost hope I do. In my dream... I’m sure I’d like to save him,” Vincent replied, stooping to give the old man a familiar kiss on the head, then leaving him to his book-strewn chamber.

“Sleep well, Vincent,” Father said to his retreating back.



Vincent didn’t. And when the dream came again, it came more clearly than it had before.



In the Valley of the Deaf, there was no sound. No sound meant no sounds of battle, and nothing to tempt a hero away. Cuchulainn had been guided here. In the myth, it was a way to try to save him, to save his life. A way that wouldn’t work, ultimately.

Vincent sat in its silence, realizing that a chess board had been placed before him, on a huge, plaid blanket, woven from many unearthly colors. It seemed to glow with an autumnal fire, a stark contrast to the black and white pieces that occupied the board.

Cuchulainn sat cross-legged on the ground across from Vincent, studying the game, with his chin resting on one, huge, upheld fist. His great weapons lay around him, carelessly discarded on the dry grass.

Vincent frowned. He noticed he was playing black this time, rather than white. Like Jacob, he was winning the game, and he realized that the pieces were sitting just as they had been when Jacob had beaten him this evening.

Cuchulainn nodded his impatience. 'It's your move,' the gesture said, though the big man across from him didn't say anything with words. Sound didn't carry here. Nothing did.

Vincent chafed uncomfortably, moving the black bishop just as Jacob had. He was penning in the white king. Ultimately, the white knight wouldn't... couldn't save it.

Cuchulainn pondered the board a moment, then moved the knight, the piece that, in Vincent's mind, best represented the great Celtic hero.

The knight was exposed. Vincent's queen would now take it, easily.

'No. I don't want to. I don't want it to end this way,' Vincent thought, advancing a pawn instead. 'If I can change the outcome of the game, perhaps I can change the rest of it...'

Cuchulainn looked up from the board, and his deep, brown eyes bored into Vincent's. 'You're cheating,' they said. 'You know that's not the move. Play straight or leave me be. Leave me to my chosen fate.'

The doomed hero's great hand reached out and committed a foul. He returned Vincent's black pawn to its square, then moved the queen to take the knight. It was the logical move. And the one that meant the white side of the board, now Cuchulainn's side, would soon be mated.

'You can't change the game because you don't like the outcome.' The message was clear.

But the game didn't finish. Cuchulainn looked up to see what he thought was his friend, Niamh, coming towards him. Vincent knew it was a disguise and that the false Niamh would take Cuchulainn out of this safe, silent Valley, and that the single act would lead to his doom.

Cuchulainn rose with the subtle, nimble grace of a born warrior. Vincent shook his head, trying to compel the other man to stay by the very force of his will 'No. Don't go. We still have a game to finish.'

But he couldn't say it. Words were no currency here.

Vincent rose to his feet, reaching out to tug on Cuchulainn's arm, just as the mighty warrior leaned down to sweep the pieces on the board away in frustration. Again, his unspoken message was clear...

'It is my fate. Leave me to it.'

The legendary hero might as well have been shouting it in the eerily silent domain. Blue eyes met brown. In the latter, Vincent saw nothing but resilience, even as he saw doom.

Cuchulainn shook off Vincent's concerned hand, gathered up his weapons, then strode away with Niamh, into a rising, thin mist.

Just as he'd done last night. Just, as it seemed, he always would.

His fate was set, and no child's play of a chess board could change the story or deviate from the ultimate outcome. Cuchulainn seemed predestined to always move toward the glory of a great hero's death, and to his legendary end...

Vincent felt rooted to the spot. He sighed heavily, knowing he had failed once more. When he looked down, he was holding a chess piece in his hand.

It was the white knight.



Chapter Three

Morrigan

"It was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice."

Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness

The night left Vincent unrested again, and the day seemed determined to try his patience. He pushed the memory of his dreams aside, but that didn't seem to deter the avalanche of bad luck that came his way during the day.

His students were inattentive and seemed to have chosen this particular day to have nothing to say about Charlotte Bronte, or anything else, save going up into the park to enjoy playing in the autumn leaves. After an hour of struggle, Vincent finally let them go.

Just as they departed, Arthur skittered across the wobbly table Vincent used as a grading desk, and the raccoon sent a stack of essays sliding to the ground. Before Vincent could collect them, the pipes rattled to a strident kind of life. There was an emergency, summoning him to help with a pipe leak.

Of course, there is. What else can go wrong today?

He gathered the papers in a haphazard heap, knowing the day was going to continue to deteriorate.

The prediction was not an incorrect one.

The leak gave him nothing but trouble. The ancient pipe was heavy. Winslow's patch wouldn't hold, and after an hour of grunting and straining, Vincent had an aching shoulder and a wet set of clothes to show for his considerable trouble.

By the time the patchwork job (finally!) held, he was soaked, in a generally foul mood, and even more tired than before. Even the sensation of Catherine, her mood lifted, could not relieve him. He felt her time as a hostess to her friend must be ending, yet the knowledge could not cheer him. He made straight for his chamber, barely stopping long enough to exchange a hasty greeting with Mouse.

He stripped out of his wet things, meaning to find dry ones; but found himself drawn instead to the haven of his bed. The closed book was on his bedside table. He had no interest in it.

Sleep. I need sleep. Just a nap. Even a short one.

He dried off, tugged on a nightshirt, pulled the rumpled bedclothes back, then up under his chin and tried to rest.



Vincent followed Cuchulainn out of the strange, silent land. In a few steps, he crossed some invisible border. In the dream, it almost startled him to hear the ambient sounds of nature again. Ahead of him, the Irish hero mounted his great, grey stallion, and went on ahead. Vincent followed on foot, feeling like he could catch up, if he tried.

There were crickets in the grass, and off to his left, the cawing of crows. The sound soothed him for a while, and some of it felt like his own park.

But only for a while.

Following the great horse, Liath Macha, wasn't hard. Few animals were so huge, so laden, and left so deep an unshod print embedded in the earth.

But then he met someone who left no print at all, as she perched nimbly on the twisted branch of a dead tree.

There were crows all around her, and she was wrapped in a cape that made her look like one of them. The woman who was much more than a woman was all inky, dark feathers and hard, deep eyes. Her hair was short, like a pixie, and her aspect was ill-favored.

Vincent knew her immediately and he knew her for the trouble she was... Morrigan... Goddess of battlefields, death, and all the slain.

"Go away, Lion Man," she hissed, from a spindly branch that shouldn't have been able to hold her weight, but did. "This isn't your myth. This isn't even your story," she scoffed. "It's barely even your dream. You can't save him. No one can."

"You are Morrigan. You can spare him," Vincent replied.

The crow nearest her snatched a grasshopper off the branch and ate it, tilting back its head to swallow down its prey. She watched it for a moment, then turned back to him.

"You are Vincent," Morrigan replied. "And no, I will not." She returned her attention to the feasting bird and gave it an approving glance. "I will not, in spite of the fact that you've sent me offerings often enough, my servant." She looked back at him. Her tone indicated that the last was meant as a compliment.

Vincent searched his memory. 'Sent her offerings? What did she mean...? Oh.' The Goddess of Battle... all battles. Battles he'd won, when he'd fought. The offerings he'd sent her had been those he'd vanquished.

"I am not your servant," Vincent insisted. "And I oppose you in this." He stepped closer to her. The largest of the crows hopped to the branch nearest Vincent and sidled over, threateningly.

Morrigan shrugged, and the cape of crow's feathers rustled. "You're more mine than most. And the answer is still 'no.' My pet," she addressed the huge bird, and reached out a hand and stroked the back of his neck with a blood red nail. "You'll feast today on the meat of a hero. Won't that be nice?"

"I defy your... judgment," Vincent bit out the last word and moved to follow Cuchulainn.

Morrigan's voice held a touch of warning, and stayed Vincent's progress away from her. "Succeed, and you'll unmake him. Succeed, and you'll unmake yourself. We are our fates, Vincent. Don't you know that by now?" She turned back to the bird, and stroked its glossy wing. "Didn't Catherine teach you as much?" she tossed out.

"It will be the worst day of his life. But it will solidify his legend. It will make him who he is. I can't stop that. I don't want to. And neither does he. It's fate. Catherine understands."

Vincent spun back to her, aware that the dream now held an element of confusion for him. This was a dream about an Irish folk hero, and trying to save him from a cruel fate. This was not a dream about Catherine, and up until now, never had been.

"What do you mean by that?" Vincent demanded.

Dark eyes that had swallowed souls regarded him. "If Cuchulainn doesn't die today, if he doesn't meet his mortal blow, doesn't bind himself upright to the stone, doesn't die facing down his enemies... what does he become?"

Vincent struggled for the answer. He knew his silence only encouraged the dark goddess.

Morrigan hopped to the ground with the ungainly, off-balance pounce of a crow who's found its dinner, but she walked toward him with the grace of a sensual woman. One who covered ground with deceptive swiftness. "What does he become, if he dies any other way?" she asked, circling Vincent. He turned, to keep eye contact with her.

"Will they say he is great if he dies old, rheumy, and in his bed? If he's arthritic, and frail, and half blind? Too deaf to hear the horn of the battle call? Will they still call him 'mighty' then? Will they? Do you think?" She stopped moving, leaving the tree at her back, and Vincent facing it.

He eyed her warily, as he considered her words. His great heart sank a little.

She paused, before she continued. "Ah, there it is... understanding. They won't. So he can't. Heroes don't do that, Vincent. So he can't do that. Any more than you can." She dropped the last comment then she brushed close by him. The feathery cape rustled again, and Vincent detected the faint, sour smell of carrion in its folds.

"You can't mean to imply you're helping him to a glorious fate. We both know better," Vincent replied.

"Help him... hurt him... Those words don't mean anything to me. I rule the battle. I own the slain. Him, today... You, tomorrow... if you're not careful." There was no warning in the words; just simple fact.

She looked down the path Cuchulainn had taken, and her sharp eyes narrowed. "I'm immortalizing him. And since I hate him, I can assure you that brings me only so much pleasure." She spat on the ground, and Vincent swore he heard the hiss of acid as it landed.

"Catherine wouldn't be so thick. She understands more than you, I think." Morrigan's derision was plain.

"Catherine? What has Catherine to do with this?" It was the third time the mysterious goddess had mentioned his love's name.

Morrigan turned back to him, tired of their parley. "Everything. Nothing. Maybe. It depends on what you learn. Or what she can teach you. Or what you already know, and hate to admit." She nodded toward the path.

"This day will make him. More than all the others have. This one." She glared down the way the Irish hero had taken.

Vincent followed her uncompromising gaze.

"What day made you, Lion Man?" she asked suddenly.

The question confused Vincent. "I don't understand you. What do you mean?"

She adjusted her foul cape. "Not every man is his death. Most men aren't. So? What day? What day made you, made you who you are? Was it your worst day? Or your best?"

From the dead tree, the largest crow spread its wings, lifted from the branch and flew off, as the uncompromising goddess simply stood there. Vincent had the feeling that she could see what the crow could... that the bird would catch up with Cuchulainn soon.

Vincent felt he should go, too, yet knew he couldn't. Morrigan compelled him to remain there. "What day?" she pressed.

Vincent struggled to answer her. Morrigan almost seemed to enjoy that, or at least she enjoyed it as much as she enjoyed anything.

"We're forged, you know," she reached down, and adjusted a dagger, strapped to her hip. "We're forged on those days. Forged in challenge. Forged in blood."

She unsheathed the dagger and touched its sharp point to her thumb. A drop of blood welled there. "Since the oldest of days... and the oldest of magicks. So? Do you have an answer?" She glared at him a little, then sucked the blood from her thumb and put away the knife.

"Whatever it is, cruelty doesn't have to be a part of it," Vincent replied.

Her smile was terrible to behold. "Oh, you think so, do you? Fate. Chance. Love. Hate. Fear. Blood. The end is the beginning. Or it isn't. Find your answer, and you find the truth. Find the answer, find your fate."

Vincent had no love for her riddles. "There is no truth here. No great and magical wisdom to behold. There is only death. And deceit. You, and your malice. Him, and his arrogance." Vincent gestured toward the winding path Cuchulainn had taken with Liath Macha.

Morrigan wouldn't be shaken from her question. "What day made you, Vincent?" she repeated. "What day, out of all the others? Was the sky blue? Were they selling ice cream? Were children playing?" She paused. "Or was there a dark night with no moon, and blood in your nose?"

She shrugged her caped shoulders, causing the air to reek of decay. "Answer that, and you know why Cuchulainn dies. Answer that, and you know why he has to. Catch."

She tossed something small from beneath her robe, and Vincent reflexively reached out a taloned hand to snatch it from the air.

"I have a place to be. I have a hero to bring down," Morrigan said, turning away from him. She transformed into a murder of crows and flew off in the direction Cuchulainn had ridden. She would trick him. She would bring about his end. Vincent knew it, and hated the fatality of it.

He felt something small hit his palm. It stung, and it was cold. Cold as ice. Cold as death.

He knew he'd failed... again.

When he opened his fist, he saw a chess piece.

It was the black queen.



Chapter Four

"If this is my fate. . ."

"I have always believed, and I still believe, that whatever good or bad fortune may come our way we can always give it meaning and transform it into something of value."

~ Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha



The night was cool and cloud-shrouded, and the slight breeze felt good on Vincent's warm skin. Autumn was playing its usual tricks with the weather. It was a night for a good jacket, nothing more. The real cold, the kind that bit through you, would start in a few weeks, maybe, but for now, this: A bracing night with scudding clouds playing a game of peek-a-boo with a reluctant moon. Vincent used it to clear his head.

The night wind felt good, after two straight days of being cooped up inside. It felt good after all the dreams. *"What day made you, Vincent?"* He could still hear Morrigan's harsh question, ringing in his sensitive ears. It felt easier to think up here.

He cut across the greensward toward Catherine's. Deep shadows, ones that moved as the breeze shook the branches, helped conceal his passage.

What day made me? He asked himself, wondering. *Was there really one that stood out, more than any other?*

He thought of childhood days spent with Devin, inventing stories and chasing each other through the tunnels, exploring everything south of Oz and north of Shangri-La. He knew those days had formed him and his opinion of himself, and his relationships with other people. He was a son. He was a brother. He was a friend, of sorts, and the dreams Devin dreamed that included him had been vital, to his self-concept. He had a place in the world. It was a limited place, and sometimes a tenuous one, but it was his.

Then, there came the carousel ride.

And then, Devin was gone.

Later, there was Lisa Campbell, and another kind of relationship. A girl he could never hope to win, tied to a heartbreak he could never hope to avoid. That, too, had shaped him. There was no sense saying it hadn't. But had it "made" him? It was hard to say that it had.

Father was a constant presence, and as such, was probably the most important person in Vincent's early life. Teacher, mentor, protector, advisor... the old man had done much to help Vincent through his most difficult days, and often through his most pleasant ones. Jacob had been a forbidding voice sometimes, but even he had admitted that if he'd made mistakes, they were made out of love. Vincent didn't doubt it.

But no one day stood out among the others, for being "the one that had made him." The day after the first terrible sickness, where he'd become a scholar, maybe.

But there were many days in a life. And many events that made a man. Vincent knew it.

Morrigan makes no sense. Why is Cuchulainn's fate so sealed? Why can he not turn from his path, after all? Vincent shook his head. "It is a dream," he said aloud, not aware he'd done so until he heard the words in his ears. He'd meant only to think it.

"Is it?" He swore he heard a soft, taunting whisper, and he spun around, expecting to see the Celtic enchantress, strolling through the park.

The wind rustled the dark leaves of a stand of oak, in answer. The path behind him was bare, save for the dry leaf fall, skittering across a winding sidewalk, driven by the wind.

He tugged his cloak a little closer, and continued on.

I must clear my head. I've no wish to bring such dark thoughts to Catherine. Catherine...

He climbed to her rooftop, feeling her soft, gentle presence inside their bond. Just drawing closer to her made him feel better.

She was home, of course, and she was waiting for him on her balcony. Beautiful Catherine, his Catherine, his heart-achingly beautiful love.

She was warmed by a leather jacket and soft, tan pants, her feet tucked into low boots, her hands bare, her face uplifted, as the evening breeze teased the ends of

her hair. She was standing on one end of the balcony, awaiting his approach, as happy to be reunited with him as he was with her.

He watched her for just a moment, from overhead, taking the welcome sight of her in, as she waited for him. She tucked her hands in the pockets of her jacket for warmth, and took a few steps closer to where he now sat watching her.

Vincent. He could all but feel her thinking his name.

The phone rang, and the impression was broken. Catherine went back into the apartment. The call took but a moment, and by the time she re-emerged, Vincent was standing on the balcony waiting for her, arms wide open.

Catherine, my Catherine. How I have missed you. Has it really only been two days? It feels like so much longer...

“Catherine...” he said her name just for the pleasure of hearing it.

“Vincent!” Her joy was a living thing between them. “I know Jenny was only here for a couple of days. But I swear it feels like it was forever.”

She gave him a squeeze, and he smiled at the similar paths their thoughts had taken. It *had* felt like forever. It simply had.

“You are well?” he asked, knowing full well she was. The bond would have told him otherwise. At the moment, the connection between them fairly hummed with their mutual contentment.

“I am.” She smiled up at him, the Catherine smile, the one that said he was welcome, and accepted, and loved. “You?” she asked.

How to answer that? he mused. “It has been a ... difficult few days.” *And nights.* “Better now,” he added.

Her smile grew more luminous. “The weather is lovely. A bit cool, but that won’t stop us. Shall we read a while?” she asked, indicating their spot by the balcony wall.

“If you like,” Vincent replied, turning over the old book of selected poems he’d left with her. A ragged piece of paper held their place. He seated himself as she settled beside him on the terrace stones, the cold from the bricks at their backs seeping in a little.

It didn’t matter. They were together. Nothing else mattered more than that. Nothing else ever could.

He opened to the page they'd left, and read to her, his soft voice caressing every syllable of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. By the last verse, the sheer normalcy of the act of reading to her left Vincent feeling restored. He spread his arm out, making an inviting space for her to nestle, covered by both her jacket and his cloak. There was familiarity in the gesture, and consideration. It was one of the many ways Vincent showed his love for her, and one of the ways she accepted that love, easily.

She cocooned herself close to him as he turned the page, and he felt the soft, intimate sensation of her shoulder, nestling itself beneath his arm.

We fit together, he thought fleetingly, loving the sensation of her laying her head where it did indeed fit so well.

He closed his eyes, as the now familiar feeling of love slammed into him, much as it had the first time she'd ever laid her head there. That was the first time they'd parted from each other, at her threshold. The deep, still-surprising feeling came, and coursed through him as it always had, warming him down to his boot-clad toes.

I love you. Lord, how I love you, he thought, bringing his gloved hand in to hold her shoulder. *Close to me. Stay close to me, Catherine. I've had too many nights when you felt too far away, lately.*

"Shall I read next?" she asked, when he didn't begin the next poem.

"If you like," he replied, giving control of the book to her.

Her soft, breathy voice further calmed him, and he felt himself almost begin to drift. She took him through Wordsworth's *Daffodils*, then Christopher Marlowe's *Passionate Shepherd to His Love*. Both were pretty poems, and their familiarity was a balm to Vincent's recently battered sense of purpose.

The failures he'd endured during the dream nights drifted away, and he knew he'd sleep well tonight... that he might even begin on her balcony, finding a place in that world where "everything shimmers and floats."

Then, the poem changed.

She was reading William Ernest Henley's *Invictus*. They were words Vincent had often read to himself, both as a boy and a man. Words he'd mentally recited too often, and sometimes knew too well.

“...Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed,” she recited.

“Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.
“It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul...”

Her sweet, soft voice had grown firmer, and more serious. The lawyer in her, the woman who used words in her living, was aroused. In the bond, he could feel her shifting as she took in the lines of the poem, and incorporated them into herself.

Being what he was, Vincent had always assumed the words from Henley’s poem belonged to him, perhaps more than anyone else. Now, feeling Catherine as he did, he wasn’t so sure. Vincent forced his eyelids back open, and he looked down at her.

The book was open in one hand. The other was thoughtfully stroking the page, touching the words, lingering on the ones that had the most impact. A gentle forefinger had paused under “The master of my fate.”

Like him before, Catherine had grown silent, thinking.

Morrigan’s words taunted Vincent. *“It will be the worst day of his life. But it will solidify his legend. It will make him who he is. I can’t stop that. I don’t want to. And neither does he. It’s fate. Catherine understands.”*

“Catherine?” Vincent nudged gently, as she drew her eyes away from the page and up to his. “Are you all right?” he asked.

The smile she gave was a reassuringly wry one. “I wrestle with fate, sometimes,” she confided. “Usually, right before it wins.”

The words hit him like a cudgel blow. *Wrestle with fate. Yes.* “Do you?” he asked, willing her to explain.

She sighed. “As a lawyer, we’re not supposed to believe in it. Or at least we’re not supposed to believe in it more than we believe in choice, in our own free will. After all, you can’t let a criminal go, saying ‘It was his fate to steal the car.’”

Vincent considered her words. "And yet, many things led him to that moment, and to that choice. Is that fate?" Vincent pressed, wanting to know what she thought of it.

Catherine shrugged. "I don't know. I only know that for me... if I had to do it all over..." She looked very thoughtful. "I can't undo any of it, Vincent. I wouldn't. Not even the worst day. If I had to do it all again, knowing what I know now... I'd do it just the same."

The formerly lazing eyes grew focused, and attentive.

"Would you? Your worst day? You would live that again?"

She looked down, then away, considering for a moment before she answered. "I would. I'd have to. I... I guess you know which one that was."

"*Catherine understands.*" The words, Morrigan's words, hissed back, at Vincent.

"*This day will make him. More than all the others have... this one.*"

Vincent inhaled deeply, letting the chill autumn night into his lungs. His love had known many sorrows. Sometimes too many to bear, he thought, for a frame so small. She'd buried her mother too young, and trusted her heart to a few who'd proven themselves to be unworthy. She'd drifted through law school unhappily, secure in a position at her father's firm, yet not really wanting it. She'd known loss. She'd known heartache.

But she'd only known real, abject terror one night in her life.

"Catherine. No," he said, knowing they were both talking about the night she was attacked.

She raised her head, pride and stubborn determination in the gesture. "If I had to live through it all over again... I would," she repeated, her green eyes somber, her voice trembling only slightly on the last word. She meant it. Even remembering the fear now, she meant it.

How like him you are, Vincent thought, remembering Cuchulainn's stubborn streak. *Perhaps Brigit O'Donnell picked the wrong one of us to go riding with him.*

Catherine's green eyes were subsumed by her pupils, as adrenaline, spurred by the memory of the night that had united them, sped through her system. The years-old fear was close, and she was feeling it. Vincent tasted her remembered terror through their bond. An echo of the real thing, it still had the power to move him.

"Catherine, you can't mean that. It was too... terrible... too cruel."

She didn't deny that. But she did explain it. "It brought me to you. It brought me to change," she insisted. "It brought me to myself, the version of me I am now. I'd have to, Vincent. I wouldn't be the same person, without that day. Without that... that night."

Vincent hated to admit there was some measure of truth in her words. The awful day had helped to shape who she now was... distinctly.

"What day made you, Lion Man?"

Catherine... You would not be the same without that day... Realization hit.

And neither would I.

Vincent knew it, and was both awed and terrified by the knowledge. *Your worst day... the day that made you... It also made me.*

"What day made you, Vincent?"

The understanding had the power to rock him.

Morrigan's accusations taunted him. *"We're forged, you know. We're forged on those days. Forged in challenge. Forged in blood."*

For no one was that more true than for Catherine and by extension... him. He was who he was, thanks to her. He was no longer alone, no longer apart. No longer an outcast from love, thanks to who and what he was. He had someone, someone to be a part of. And he had hope, hope for more.

Without Catherine, that didn't happen. Vincent knew it. Morrigan's challenge assaulted his memory.

"Since the oldest of days, and the oldest of magicks. So? Answer. Find your answer, and you find the truth. Find the answer, find your fate."

Vincent beheld his love... his beautiful, stubborn love. The woman who would not unmake the worst day of her life, for fear that it would unmake the best of them, unmake her fate.

The day that made you... made me. Terrible. Incredible. Wonderful, yet also horrible. I wasn't made on my best day. I wasn't even made on my worst. I was made on your worst.

Vincent tugged the book out of her hands, and let it fall closed, on the pavement. "I would spare you that day. Spare you all of it... if I could," he said, realizing for the first time in his life that the sympathetic platitude might not be entirely true, as awful as that sounded. *If I could. But I can't, can I? I've been struggling with why Cuchulainn had to die, had to go to his fate. And now... now I struggle with why Catherine had to... I think I understand. I think I understand, now.*

“This day will make him. More than all the others have. This one.”

And so it had.

“I know you would,” Catherine answered, unaware of his other thoughts. She leaned further into him and drew her arms more tightly around him, as he turned and enfolded her in a sheltering embrace. He laid his head protectively over hers, and absorbed the good, solid feel of her.

How we were made... it's in the past, all in the past, Catherine. It will never happen again. Never hurt you again, he comforted himself – and her.

“I would give anything to spare you the pain of that night. Even if I understand what it brought to you... brought to us,” he finished softly.

He held her for a long moment, and then she drew back. Her soft eyes were bright with what he knew were unshed tears.

“You know... sometimes I like to think we would have made it anyway. That we would have... found each other, somehow. That we would have known.”

It was the hopeless thought of someone who had discovered there was no other way but the hard path that had been taken. No other way but an uncompromising brush with fate.

“I’d like to think that as well,” he replied, fairly certain such a scenario was utterly impossible. If Catherine Chandler, New York socialite and Tom Gunther’s girlfriend had ever caught sight of him any other way than how she had, he’d have been lucky to escape without a bullet in him. A nightmare he’d once had had told him as much.

“But... I know that can’t be so,” she admitted. “We were forged where we were. And how we were. And Vincent...” she rose on her knees, bringing him with her. “Vincent... I wouldn’t change that. I wouldn’t change it for anything.”

She threw her arms around his great neck and hugged him, as he all but crushed her to him.

Catherine. My Catherine. What the world asks of you. What I ask of you. How can this be fair?

And then, her voice, in a memory from not so long ago, words she’d given him after the falling out with Michael, when he’d been struggling to control the jealous Beast that had raged in his chest... her words... soft words, soft, but full of meaning.

“If this is my fate... I accept it. Gratefully.”

She did. He knew she did.

"You leave me humbled," he said into the curve of her neck, drawing her as close as he possibly could. "You leave me humbled," he repeated, knowing she had.

He felt her press an accepting kiss into the raised collar of his turtleneck, and for a moment, he cursed it for being there, wishing it was skin she touched her lips to.

"You leave me the same. Every day," she replied, near his ear.

He drew her back so he could look deeply into her eyes. "Catherine. I would never wish such a terrible day for you... such a hard, cruel, frightening thing. But I am a fool if I pretend I don't know what it brought me. That day... it made us. Your fate became mine. You changed my life... *forever*."

"*What day made you, Lion Man?*" The taunting voice seemed gentler now.

The same one that made her, he answered mentally. He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to hers. *The same one that made her, made Catherine*.

He felt her sweet love flow to him, flow through him.

There you are. There is my love. It's all right, now. We've found each other.

"I went to a party. I had a quarrel with Tom. I left early," Catherine ticked off the events that had led to her mutilation. "And I... and I found you. Eventually," she said, purposely skipping over the most gruesome parts of that long-ago night.

If she could, he would. He lifted his head. "Eventually," he agreed, letting that night, and the cost of it, go.

"I guess it sometimes feels like we're all pawns in someone else's game," she said, sighing at the truth of it.

Yes. Chess pawns, he thought. *Still. A pawn can win the game.*

He settled her back down where they had been sitting and retrieved the book from where it had fallen.

"Sometimes. Sometimes we're the pawns," he returned. "But sometimes... sometimes we're the knights... and the kings and queens." He nodded sagely, as she moved closer to him.

"Shall I read some more?" he asked, just as the clouds parted from around the moon. The soft orb gave off a gentle, blessing light.

It's the same moon here as it is in Ireland, he thought, strangely comforted by the knowledge.

Catherine looked up at it, knowing she'd seen many such moons in Vincent's company.

And if God wills it, I'll see many more, she thought, the image of them together bringing her pure comfort. Vincent felt it flow through their bond, from her to him. It felt warm, and good... sacred, like a benediction... sacred, like her love.

Sometimes, fate curses us. And sometimes... it gives us blessings, he thought, knowing not only that both were true, but that sometimes, and inextricably, they were both true at exactly the same time.

"There are still a few pages left," he prompted.

"I'd like that," Catherine replied, lifting his arm to take back her most beloved position, next to him. He settled his arm around her shoulder again.

"I'd like that very much," she concluded.

The next section of the book was from the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius. Vincent's deep voice caressed the words.

"Accept the things to which fate binds you, and love the people with whom fate brings you together, but do so with all your heart..."



No matter where you are in your own fate and fairy tale, I wish you love -

CJ LaBelle



"Amor Fati - "Love Your Fate", which is in fact your life."~ Friedrich Nietzsche





by Judith Nolan



Welcome to the Time Tunnels...

... where we bring stories from the dusty forgotten stacks of hardcopy zines of long ago, and bring them back into the light.

This year we have chosen to spotlight three authors in two stories, as well as one artist.



Wayne Kelley and Anna Deavers-Kelley are an incredibly multi-talented BATB fan couple who have been a part of fandom since the early days. As well as writing fanfiction and poetry, Wayne was known throughout fandom for being an incredible Vincent impersonator known as “Vincent D’Beast.” His portrayal of Vincent brought joy wherever he appeared.

Along with her writing skills, Wayne’s wife, Anna Deavers-Kelley is known for her incredible artistic talents, and her amazing ability to replicate costumes from **Beauty and the Beast**, particularly in her husband’s costumes.

In addition to the story “**Guardian Spirit**,” that we share with you in this zine, they teamed up in 1990 to create the poetry and art zine, **Captured Moments**. Their work also appears in the fanzines **Remember Love, Always** 1991, **Once in a Lifetime** 1992, **Phoenix I** 1992, **Tunnelcon II** 1992, **Great Expectations: A World of Dancing Lights** 1993, and **Tunnelcon III** 1994. Anna’s beautiful artwork also appears in many other zines, including several zine covers.

Wayne and Anna’s love for the BATB fandom is a reflection of their love for each other. In real life they lived their own love story. Wayne once referred to Anna on his Facebook page as “the Beauty to my Beast.” They were married for about 28 years before Wayne sadly passed away on May 7th, 2019, when he lost his battle with pancreatic cancer.

Though Wayne Kelley’s light and passion is surely missed, his lovely contributions to fandom will continue to shine as brightly as they did when he first wrote them. We are so grateful to his wife Anna for giving us permission to share one of them here with you.



Christine Cunningham is one of the many UK fans who have contributed to BATB fandom from across the pond. She has been a fan since the very beginning. She ran the **Diamond Cavern Newsletter** for a number of years, and wrote stories that were published in the UK fanzines. According to fanlore.org Christine is credited for having stories published in the following zines: **A Secret Place 10** 1992, **Masquerades** 1994, **Sensual Dreamers** 1994, and **Below the Belt** 1995. She has attended conventions over the years and feels fortunate to have met Roy Dotrice in person several times, along with his daughter Michelle. Although Christine no longer writes, she continues to enjoy reading zines.

Guardian Spirit

by Wayne Kelley and Anna Deavers Kelley

This story was previously published in the 1992 fanzine
Daydreams and Fantasies 4



Now boarding for New York City," a tired voice announced over the public address system.

A dozen or so groggy passengers rose from the benches of the Philadelphia Greyhound station, taking bundles and bags with them. As they filed onto the bus, a young man with a battered canvas backpack fell in at the back of the line.

Once on board, he found a seat near the middle of the bus. Sliding over against the window, he set the pack on the seat next to him, hoping to assure some solitude for the next couple of hours. Scrunching down into the seat, he leaned against the cool glass of the window. The odor of stale cigarettes and sweat had become nauseatingly familiar in these buses, and he'd grown to prefer the faint breeze from the air vents.

As the bus rolled onto the highway, Phillip watched the lights of the city slip away into darkness, and felt the time slipping away in his mind.



It was one of the hottest days of the summer, and Julia Hawk hurried to get her groceries moved from the truck into the house. Two large box fans were going full blast in the kitchen, and she found her husband sitting at the table, sorting through another batch of papers.

Julia put the bags on the counter, walked over, and kissed her husband on top of the head. "What's all this?" she asked quietly.

"This," he began, indicating the paperwork with a disgusted tone, "is what we have to sort through in order to get federal aid. I cannot believe the amount of red tape we have to unwind, working with the Bureau of Indian Affairs."

Julia sighed, lost for some way to quell his growing frustration. Phillip had been like this for as long as she'd known him--- proud, stubborn, impatient. He'd taken most of the surprises and reversals that had come along pretty much in stride. But for weeks lately, the tensions within him had not ebbed, but began building upon and feeding one another.

Just then, a child's voice from the next room cried out wearily. Julia went in and found her four-year-old daughter lying on her bed, bathed in sweat despite the breeze from another fan blowing directly on her.

"Mama, it hurts," she moaned.

"Where, honey?" Julia asked concernedly.

"My legs," the girl replied through clenched teeth.

Julia could see the muscles in her daughter's thighs and calves spasming and began massaging them gently. As she did, she began humming softly. After a few moments, the spasms subsided, and the girl relaxed visibly.

"Better?" Julia asked.

Her daughter nodded and managed a weak smile.

"Now, you try to rest, okay?" she added, kissing her forehead lightly. "Later, we'll go get some ice cream," she promised. Julia watched for a moment until her daughter seemed to be resting comfortably, then went back to the kitchen.

Phillip was waiting, concern lining his face. "Is Maria all right?" he asked.

"She's fine, now," Julia assured him. "It was a light spasm."

Phillip shook his head. "She's been like that every fifteen minutes since you left. I don't think the medication is helping her at all."

Julia came back to the table and sat down next to him, taking his hand in hers.

"How long until we can get her to a specialist?" she asked calmly.

"With all of this?" he shot back, pushing the paper away from him across the table. "Months, at least. Maybe never."

"That bad?" she questioned incredulously.

"Worse. The application takes six to eight weeks to be processed, and then it goes to Washington, where it'll probably sit on some bureaucrat's desk for God knows how long," he ranted, his tone rising steadily. "By the time we get the money and find a doctor who knows what he's doing, she could be..."

"Phillip," Julia interrupted sharply, "please keep your voice down." She paused until his anger seemed to be in check. "You said so yourself, there is no other way. We simply have to do the best we can until..."

"But there is another way," Phillip broke in. "I talked to Paul this afternoon, and he says he's sure that he can get me a job."

"Doing construction work, in New York City," she objected quietly.

"Julia," Phillip pressed on, "the work is steady, and the pay is good."

"It's dangerous," she insisted. "And it's so far away. We need you here."

"I need to be where the work is," he countered. "With the drought this year, the farmers are going to be hard-pressed to care for their own families, much less pay for hired help. And the reservation is a dead end; there's no tourist trade, no industry."

"Phillip, you can't..." she began again.

"I have to, Julia." His voice softened as he added, "I promised to take care of you, both of you. My grandfather would never let me rest if I didn't."



They had talked for hours that evening, trying to come up with other options. The basic conclusion that they'd reached was that no one was going to suddenly rescue them from this situation.

Phillip promised to come home as soon as the government assistance was approved.

Parking and driving to the bus station in Tempe had been difficult, but not as hard as saying good-bye to Julia and Maria. As he drifted into a restless sleep, his wife's last words to him echoed through his mind.

"Take care of yourself and come back to us soon."



Sundays were always special to Vincent because they were usually spent entirely in Catherine's company. Even when her workload was heaviest, she managed to come Below for an hour or two.

Today had been a full day together---looking at recent additions to Elizabeth's Painted Tunnels, visiting with Father and Mary, sharing a late lunch in the common hall. They talked of everything and anything that struck them, and finally settled into Vincent's chamber with hot tea. Catherine challenged Vincent to a game of backgammon, in which she believed her own skill might be a match

for him. Her hopes, however, had been firmly gnashed by Vincent's expert choice of moves and some distinctly bad luck with the dice. He was already beginning to move pieces off of the board, while two of here were trapped on the bar.

"I'm going to stop playing games with you," she decided, pouting with mock childishness. "You know them all too well."

"We have several volumes in the library on games, including Hoyle's,"

"You know them all too well."

"Oh?" she mused. "You never told me that."

"You never asked," Vincent teased her.

"Well, there must be something I can teach you, and beat you at, Mr. Wells," she challenged him. "How about card games?"

"Bridge?" he inquired. "Whist? Canasta, Pinochle, Gin Rummy..."

"Poker," she interrupted, "I bet you never played..."

"Five-card, Seven-card, Stud and Draw," he answered. "And I know forty-six different versions of Solitaire."

"Oh," she said, somewhat dazedly. "Well, there are board games..." she began.

"Parcheesi, Checkers, Chinese Checkers, Sorry, Battleship, Stratego, Scrabble..."

"Monopoly!" she suddenly exulted. "I know I could beat you at Monopoly."

"Catherine," Vincent explained patiently, "I am the only person in the Tunnel community to ever win a game of Monopoly by bankrupting all of the other players."

Catherine's face fell. "You're kidding? That takes..."

"Six and a half days," Vincent continued. "Father, William, Sebastian, Michael, Pascal, and I---we played for eight hours each day. Pascal was the last challenger; it was the longest he ever spent away from the Pipe Chamber, before or since."

Catherine let out a long sigh and was about to suggest a rousing game of Rock, Scissors, Paper when Samantha entered the room.

"Hi, Catherine," she called out cheerfully as she approached. "Father sent me down to bring Vincent to the library for story time."

"Thank you, Samantha," Vincent replied. "I'll be there in a few moments." He watched her bound across the room and back out, then said, "We can finish our game later, if you like."

"That's okay," Catherine assured him. "I was about to concede anyhow. When did you begin reading to the children?" she asked.

"Many of us take turns sharing stories with the younger children on Sunday evenings," he told her. "Mary just finished **The Jungle Book** last week, and now it is my turn to choose a book and read it to them."

"What did you have in mind?" Catherine inquired.

Vincent picked up a book from a nearby chair and handed it to her.

"**Oliver Twist**," she read from the spine. "This is my favorite Dickens story."

Vincent rose from his seat, stepped around the table, and offered her his arm gallantly. "Then allow me the pleasure of reading it to you as well, Catherine."

She stood and took his arm, squeezing it gently as she twined her fingers with his. "I wouldn't miss it for the world," she answered softly.



The New York City Greyhound terminal was busier than late registration at Arizona State, Phillip mused. And the assortment of people was entirely different---punk teenagers, elderly couples, mothers with children in tow. He set down his backpack for a moment, trying to find a comfortable spot to wait. Then, he heard his name called out from behind. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw a bearded gentleman approaching him in long, rolling strides.

Phillip mentally subtracted the facial hair, and his expression lit up with recognition. "Paul!" he called back, turning to face his friend. He shook Paul's extended hand and added, "I almost didn't recognize you."

Paul rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I've been hearing that a lot lately---I don't know why." They chuckled for a second, then Paul asked, "How was the trip in?"

"Long," Phillip replied wearily. "Boring. Uncomfortable. Lonely. Would you like me to keep going or do you get the idea?"

"Yeah, I remember coming here three years ago," Paul assured him. "You'll feel better after you've had some real food, my treat."

"No, Paul," Phillip objected, "I really have to find a place to stay..."

"Nonsense," Paul called him off. "I'm taking you to dinner, and you can crash overnight at my place."

"Are you sure..." Phillip began uncomfortably.

"Of course, I'm sure," Paul assured him emphatically. "You're a frat brother, and I'm sworn to aid you in any way I can."

Phillip relaxed a little and conceded the point, grateful for some real help in solving his problems.

Together they left the terminal, and Paul took him to a small Italian restaurant before returning to his townhouse apartment.

Everything---the car, the apartment, the choice of restaurant---confirmed that he was doing quite well for himself.

"I can't believe you make so much money just finding jobs for other people," Phillip marvelled.

Paul shrugged it off. "We work with some of the biggest companies in the city-- Fortune five-hundred material. And they pay big money. But I still keep a hand in the unskilled labor markets too."

Phillip took a shower and spent a couple of hours discussing the construction job with Paul before crawling into bed in the guest bedroom.



At first, everything seemed to be going well with the new job. The construction foreman was a bit gruff but was pleased to hear that Phillip had no problem with heights. He signed a sheaf of paperwork and was told to report to work the next morning.

That afternoon, Paul took him to the Manhattan YMCA. "It's not fancy, but it's clean, and close enough for you to walk to work," he explained. The room they rented him was about the size of a large walk-in closet, but Paul paid the first two weeks rent ahead. Then they picked up some work clothes and boots, and again Paul insisted on paying.

"I don't know how to thank you enough," Phillip said as Paul dropped him off again."

"You already have," Paul shot back. "Just don't be late for work in the morning."

Phillip did get to work on time, dependably, each morning for the next three weeks. They put him to work hauling tools up to the higher floor of the building they worked on, a skeleton of steel and concrete. And despite the haze of pollution that hung about on most days, from forty stories up, the city was a majestic sight.

But the biggest reward was his first paycheck, totaling nearly five hundred dollars, more than twice what he'd been paid as a farm hand. He was so excited when he received it at the site, Phillip could hardly wait to call Julie with the

news. She was pleased and relieved, but still urged him to come home as soon as he could.

It was during his fourth week that the situation began to change. Another worker, with whom Phillip had become well acquainted, turned up at their usual lunch spot looking dejected.

"What's the matter, Sanchez?" Phillip asked through a mouthful of baloney.

"Foreman gave me my pink slip," he replied, frustration edging his words. "Said my work was 'unsatisfactory'."

Phillip thought for a moment, trying to decipher the reasoning for such a thing.

"And they just fired you?"

Sanchez nodded his head. "No warning, just...wham," he explained, chopping one hand into the other for emphasis.

From behind Phillip, a deep voice inquired, "How long y'been working here, buddy?"

"Almost three months," Sanchez answered. "I was supposed to go for my physical next week."

"Uh-huh," the older man grunted. "Think about it."

Phillip twisted around to face the black gentleman seated behind him. "Does this happen a lot here, George?"

"You kidding?" he shot back. "This here's a 'Burch Enterprises' project. He don't pay union, and don't pay benefits 'less he's gotta."

"So, they're cutting people loose before their ninety days are in," Phillip surmised.

"Give the man a prize," George said with mock enthusiasm. "Of course, if y'come back next week, they'll prob'ly hire you on again."

"And get canned again at ninety days," Sanchez guess disgustedly.

"More'n likely," George confirmed.

Phillip kept his thoughts to himself and began listening to some of the permanent members of the crew. He also began pitching to the foreman about wanting to work the high steel of the uppermost floors. Moving up, literally, was the surest way to secure his position on the crew, and the pay was even better.

During his sixth week on the job, one of the hod carriers from the upper floors was injured on-site. Phillip was in the tool shed when the foreman came over and asked if he wanted to work as a replacement. Automatically, Phillip said yes, and by the end of the day was moving about the tangle of girders that comprised the top levels of the building.

It was about a week later that the word passed through the crew that Michaels, the injured hod carrier, had been axed from the payroll. There were a lot of different theories as to why, but the general consensus was that the company was trying to avoid paying any workman's compensation.

Finally, the implications of the event worried Philip enough to make him act. He was able to get Michaels' phone number from another crew member and called him up after work.

When Phillip explained who he was, and why he'd called, Michaels' tone grew bitter. "Well, you better pray you don't get hurt, man," he warned.

"Why?" Phillip asked concernedly.

"Because Burch's lawyers are running a scam, that's why. Y'know that batch of papers they have you sign when you're hired?" "Yes," Phillip prodded.

"There's a couple of neat little clauses wedged into the fine print. One's a waiver of workman's comp, and the other lets the company arbitrate all insurance claims. I can't get a dime outta these people unless they decide to pay," he finished angrily.

"Can't you take them to court?" Phillip asked.

"Court?!" Michaels barked over the line. "Who's got the money???? I've got kids to feed, and I'll be laid up for at least another week."

Phillip wished him good luck, and then called Paul immediately. At first, Paul claimed no knowledge of Burch's shady practices.

"How could you not know?" Phillip demanded. "Didn't anybody tell you what was going in?"

"Listen, Phil," Paul answered defensively, "what Burch Construction does with their people is none of my business. I'm just a referral agent. Nobody ever came back to me with anything like this."

"I just can't believe you got me into this mess," Phillip began.

"Now, wait a minute," Paul interrupted angrily. "You needed money fast, and I got you a good paying job. I mean, just look at how much they're paying you."

Phillip had been growing more and more frustrated at Paul's callous attitude, when suddenly, it all made sense. The money, the apartment, the car--- everything made sense.

"And how much are they paying you, Paul," he accused.

"How big of a kickback do you get from Burch?"

A moment's silence, and then a weary, "Phil..." over the line confirmed his suspicions. He didn't bother waiting for the explanation, however.

"Take the money, Paul. Take the money and get out of my face. Friends like you, I don't need."

It took all of his self-control to make his weekly call to Julia without telling her the situation, but he managed it. Maria was still no better, despite a change of medications, but Julia had located a pediatric specialist in California who might be able to help.

During the following week, he cast about for another job, checking the want ads and making phone calls. By mid-week, he'd made arrangements to work part-time cleaning at an all-night market near the Y. For now, he reasoned, the extra cash would help at home, and if something happened at the site, he would have something to fall back on.

It was another week and a half later when the storm moved in. The sweltering August weather suddenly became cool, and the crew was restricted to the lower and intermediate floors. Phillip continued to work long hours in the rain, and then do clean-up in the store at night, before going to bed exhausted.

On the fourth drizzly morning in a row, Phillip awoke with a headache and sore throat. Stopping at a nearby pharmacy, he pumped himself full of cold medication and bought cough drops on the way to work. By the end of the day, however, the cough had grown rough and persistent. Phillip fairly dragged himself back to the Y and stood under a hot shower for almost forty minutes. He finished cleaning up and got dressed again, and then made his way over to the market. The Korean gentleman who owned the store took one look at Phillip and marched him back outside.

"You no work around food while you sick," he insisted. "You come back when you better." So, Phillip dragged himself back to the Y and fell exhausted into bed.

He was able to make it to work for three more days at the site, but awakened Friday morning vomiting violently. Phillip stayed in bed, sleeping fitfully for most of the day. He managed to make one trip out to the pharmacy, and ordered Chinese delivered to his room.

By Saturday morning, he was suffering from chills and a fever, and felt his chest becoming congested. Nothing seemed to stay down, not even soup, and his entire body was wracked with pain. Phillip spent the day in bed, sleeping without resting.

By Sunday, the fever and chills seemed to have subsided, and he was left with sore joints and a massive headache. The congestion in his lungs was still making

deep breaths an effort, and his cough was turning his throat into a throbbing patch of nerves. Phillip went to bed early and set the alarm for work.

When he got up on Monday, he was still exhausted, but dressed for work anyway. He managed to force down a bagel and some coffee on the way to work, and picked up his gear on time.

The elevator ride to the upper floors, however, proved to be his undoing. When Phillip stepped onto the platform and looked down momentarily, his queasy stomach did a somersault. He doubled over the railing and upchucked as a number of co-workers looked on.

When his heaving stomach finally quieted, he spat the acid dregs from his mouth. He tried to straighten up, but his legs and shoulders were still shaking, and wouldn't support him.

Then from behind him, Phillip heard a sarcastic voice chime, "That's what happens when you give an Injun whiskey." There were a few snickers from the remaining watchers. "Hey, Tonto," the guy continued, "Why don't you go back to the reservation and sleep it off, eh?"

With a strength spawned of sudden anger, Phillip pushed himself from the railing and slammed headlong into his taunter's midsection. The two men twisted and fell together, the impact slamming Phillip back into the opposite railing. There was a flash of white pain, and then blackness.

When he awoke, Phillip found the foreman standing over him. "Are you okay, Hawks?" he demanded.

Phillip sat up slowly, clutching his stomach. "Yeah, I think so," he muttered.

"Good," the foreman said sternly, "because I want your butt offa my building in three minutes. We don't need people who can't keep their cool. Pick up your check from the paymaster and go home. Everybody else," he hollered loudly, "Get to work."

It was ten days later when he finally called Julia again, to tell her he was all right. She was worried when he told her that he wasn't working.

"Don't worry. Paul's going to line me up a new job," Phillip fibbed. "I'll call again as soon as we get things straightened out."

Unfortunately, 'straightening things out' was not even close to describing what was actually taking place. His job search had been hampered by recurring bouts of exhaustion from what he stubbornly insisted was the flu. Each day of pounding the pavement was followed by a day of sleepless exhaustion and a running barrage of medicines to ease his clogged lungs and aching body.

On the Friday after his last check, Phillip consulted with the management at the Y. He was informed in no uncertain terms that the room rent was to be paid in advance, in full, or he would be locked out.

And so, it was that Monday morning found him packed up and checked out of his room. He turned in his key and made his way down to the coffee shop through a heavy downpour. After a fitful night's sleep, his stomach was upset again, and his temperature seemed to be rising.

Rather than slog through the rain to check on jobs, Phillip walked a few blocks over to a large indoor mall near Times Square. He spent most of the day window shopping or browsing through the stores, doing anything to distract him from his predicament. When he bought dinner in the food court, however, he counted his remaining cash---one hundred dollars.

Enough to buy a bus ticket home, he mused as he ate. Julia had said that there was enough in the bank to last them a while, if they were careful. But with no jobs at home, and the cost of Maria's treatments and medicine, they'd soon be back to square one, he reasoned. He had to stay and make it work.

Phillip finished eating and headed back outside, where rain continued drizzling from a darkening sky. The air cooled the flush of fever in his face, and he headed for Times Square with determined strides. There was a youth hostel near Columbia University where he could stay for the night, if he could find it in time, he remembered.

He only reached the south end of Central Park, though, before the rain began pounding down again. Instinctively, he ran into the park and ducked under a bridge to escape the deluge for a moment. By now, the rain had soaked him to the skin again, and he began to feel chilled. Crouching with his back against the concrete, he drew his knees up to his chest, and closed his eyes for a moment, hoping to wait for the rain to slacken.

When he woke again, he was curled up on his side, clutching his pack to his chest. The first thing he was aware of was a blinding headache and fever. The heaviness in his chest was suffocating, and his body was stiff and sore. He focused his gaze on a nearby lamp, and finally realized that the rain had stopped at last.

Rolling to his knees, he stood slowly, hoisting the pack onto his shoulder with a grimace of pain. Groaning with each step, he headed across the park towards the west side. Every few minutes, convulsive fists of coughing would force him to stop, each violent shudder sending waves of pain through him. One spell turned into dry heaves, which brought him crashing to the ground again.

Phillip's mind began to haze over from the pain, and he rose again, feeling colder than he could ever remember feeling. There was a light in the distance, and he

stumbled wearily toward it, praying for someone to help him. By the time he reached the culvert, his system was spent, and he collapsed.



Vincent had looked forward to visiting Catherine for several days but had been hampered by the torrential rains Above. The weather not only ruled out a trip to her balcony but had caused some damage in the upper passages which had required his attention. The work, however, was now completed, and the Mirror Pool showed no immediate threat of rain. Father warned him, though, to be cautious, and so Vincent promised to check the skies thoroughly before going out.

And so, Vincent chose to go Above via the park entrance, since it would provide him the fastest route to Catherine's building. He was looking forward to seeing her within the hour, as a matter of fact, when he discovered the body lying in the drainage tunnel.

From the clothing and the pack, Vincent surmised that this was not a vagrant seeking shelter. He was still soaking wet from the rain and shivering with chills. He glanced at the beckoning exit, knowing that he could draw unwanted attention by standing so near. Working carefully, he rolled the man onto his back, lifted, and carried him back to the tunnel junction.

Laying him on the ground again, Vincent looked him over carefully. The unconscious man had the dark tan and chiseled features of a native American. His breathing was shallow and labored, and he continued trembling. For a moment, he was torn between calling for help, or going Below to Father directly. Finally, he decided to ascertain the man's condition as fully as possible before contacting Father. Crouching, he took off one leather glove, and gently lay a hand to the side of the man's throat, feeling for a pulse.

Then, without warning, the man's eyes sprang open, and a long moment hung between them.

Under Vincent's hand, the young man's skin was hot to the touch. His pulse was thready and weak, until their eyes met; now his heart was racing, and Vincent could sense the fear flooding through him.

Phillip had been roused again by the sensations of being moved, and of a presence over him. When he felt a hand at his throat, with the light pressure of claws, he opened his eye. Staring down at him was a creature unlike any he'd ever seen. Unbidden, a memory came to him---sitting at a campfire with his grandfather, talking about the old legends. In the flickering light, the old man had

told of a spirit creature, which guides the souls of the dead and guards the sacred burial grounds---'a mountain lion that walks as a man,' he'd said. The creature would come to those about to die, to test them in combat. Defeating the creature would stave off the warrior's death.

The memory faded, and Phillip realized that this creature had a hand at his throat. With a strength and speed born of desperation, he grabbed Vincent's wrist and pushed him away, causing him to roll nearly onto his back. Rolling onto his hand and knees, Phillip scrambled towards the iron gate, while Vincent shook himself and got to his knees again.

Both men reached their feet at the same time, Phillip by pulling himself up along the bars. Vincent stood still and said, "Please don't be afraid. I won't hurt you." Phillip was startled by the voice, and a look of confusion passed over his face.

"Are you hurt?" Vincent asked.

"No," Phillip snapped defensively. "I'm fine, and I'm not going with you."

Now it was Vincent's turn to be confused. "Please," he offered, "Let me help you."

"NO!" Phillip shouted, gasping for each breath now. "I have a wife... a daughter... I can't leave them."

He steadied himself, then added angrily. "I'M... NOT... GOING... WITH... YOU!"

Phillip launched himself across the room, trying to ram into the beast.

Vincent watched the man fling himself across the room with a last burst of fury before collapsing just short of where Vincent stood.

He waited only a moment, then signaled for help.



Phillip awakened several hours later, feeling as though he'd been tossed from a tall building. Every inch of his body ached, but he was aware of a bed beneath him. Opening his eyes, he found himself in what looked like a cave, lit by lanterns and candles. A kindly woman was sitting by his bed, soaking a cloth in a pan of water.

"Where am I?" Phillip asked quietly.

"In a safe place," the woman replied, smiling down at him. "Now you be quiet and rest." She lay the cool cloth across his forehead, and Phillip closed his eyes again. He drifted into a light sleep and dreamt of Julia and home.

He was awakened again by a gentleman who took his temperature and felt his skin. Removing the thermometer, he frowned and shook it, then remarked, "Well, at least your temperature is down."

"Sir," Phillip asked again, "where am I? What is this place?"

"This," the gentleman explained patiently, "is a place of safety for good people in need of help. I'm sort of in charge here; you can call me 'Father'."

"Are you a priest?" Phillip inquired.

"No," Father replied with a faint laugh. "I'm a doctor. And you, sir, are a very sick man. Have you been ill long?"

Phillip coughed, fresh pain shooting through his sore joints. "A couple of weeks," he admitted.

Father shook his head in annoyance. "You are very fortunate to even be alive," he chided the young man. "You have the worst case of pneumonia I've seen in many years."

Phillip shifted uncomfortably under Father's disapproval. "I guess I'm not used to the weather here," he offered weakly.

"Yes, well, regardless, you will not be going anywhere for a few days," Father informed him, as he scooped a couple of pills off of the low table by the bed.

"These are for the infection in your system," he explained.

Phillip took the pills and drank the glass of water that Father handed him.

"Now, I realize you must be very confused, and we understand that. Please remember that you are safe here, and that we are only seeing to your well-being. It is important that you remain in bed and rest until the infection in your system has cleared. If you need anything, someone will be near." Father rose and turned to head for the surgical chamber.

"Father," Phillip called out. He turned, and the young man said, "Thank you."

Several hours later, Phillip was visited immediately after dinner of soup and crackers. The visitor was a dark-haired lady, dressed in tasteful but comfortable clothes. She stood at the end of the bed for a moment, then said, "Hello, Phillip. My name is Catherine Chandler."

Phillip frowned. "How did you know my name?"

"Father told me," she answered. "He wanted me to find out a little about you."

Phillip eyed her warily for a long silent moment, then asked, "What kind of place is this?"

"A very special place," Catherine explained patiently, "one which requires protection, to ensure the safety of those who live here. That's why I came to talk to you. The things I've been able to find out about you are just facts and numbers; they don't really tell me how you wound up face down in a storm drain in Central Park."

And so, Phillip began to talk, starting with losing his job and going backwards. Cathy made her way to the bedside chair, listening with genuine concern and acceptance. Before long, Phillip was talking about other things---his love of his Indian heritage, studying art and history at Arizona U., meeting Julia in college, falling in love, quitting college when she became pregnant, Maria's birth and subsequent medical problems, and a dozen other things. At length, the words refused to come, and Phillip felt drained.

"Well," Catherine said at last, "Father tells me that you will need some time to recover from the pneumonia. Perhaps we can get you some help with these other problems as well. Let me talk to some people, and I'll be right back."

Catherine left Phillip and returned to Father's chamber, where he and Vincent were awaiting her return. She was convinced of Phillip's sincerity, and felt he could be trusted, and that he needed their friendship and help. After a brief discussion of how they could actually assist him, Catherine convinced Father to let her introduce him to Vincent, to prevent a repetition of their initial encounter. She took Vincent back with her, leaving him in the surgical chamber while she talked to Phillip.

Seating herself beside the bed, she explained, "I've spoken to Father, Phillip, and he has decided to let you remain here until you are completely recovered. Before we do, though, you have to understand why this place exists."

Phillip nodded; a bit confused.

"I'm sure you've guessed by now that we are underground, beneath the city," she continued. "People came here long ago, to find shelter---people who had no place in the world Above. They formed a community and continue to live and work together. The safety of their world here depends, in part, upon the fact that only a few outsiders know of its existence. If this were made known to all, this place would no longer be safe, and many good people would lose their home and family. We are entrusting you with the lives of dozens of people, and, in exchange for helping you, we ask that you help keep this place safe by keeping its secrets."

Phillip nodded again, less confused now, and was growing more curious.

Catherine took a deep breath, let it out slowly, then continued by asking, "Phillip, when you came into the storm drain, did you see anyone?"

Phillip froze, knowing that he'd discussed his 'fight' with no one. After a moment, he replied, "No."

Catherine sighed and changed tactics a bit. "Phillip, I know what you saw, and you don't..."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Phillip interrupted.

Catherine began again. "Phillip, what you saw was not a hallucination, it was real. The person who found you is a friend of mine."

Phillip's attempt to stonewall her, faltered, and his confusion returned.

"He's very concerned about you, and wants to see that you are all right," she continued. "His name is Vincent."

Catherine watched his face as Vincent entered the chamber and came to stand at the foot of the bed. Phillip paled, and gasped for breath, and Catherine took his hand reassuringly.

"Hello, Phillip," Vincent said quietly. "I'm sorry that our first meeting could not have been under better conditions."

Phillip looked back and forth between Catherine and Vincent, trying to reconcile his fear with Catherine's obvious trust of the man before him. Finally, he calmed a bit, and said, "I'm... sorry... for the way I..." Phillip looked at Catherine helplessly. "I thought..."

"You said that you didn't want to come with me," Vincent filled in.

Phillip's resolve broke, and he began to cry. "I thought I was dying," he explained, his voice tight and shaky. "I thought I'd never see my wife and daughter."

Catherine kept holding his hand as Phillip explained the legends of ancestors.

Vincent was intrigued by the story. "Indian folklore is not familiar to me," he remarked. "I shall have to research it sometime."

Between the two of them, Catherine and Vincent recounted how the Tunnel community came to exist, and why. Phillip was amazed that such a place could function without the support of a working economy or government assistance.

"We work together for the good of all," Vincent explained. "We give aid to those in need and accept the help of all who can aid us."

"And we also bear in mind the best interests of each person here," Father interjected loudly as he entered the room. "Which, in your case, means rest," he added sternly, fixing each of them in turn with a meaningful look. "There will be time for discussions once Phillip is fully rested."

Phillip looked up at Vincent, and then back at Catherine again. "I don't know how to thank you enough," he said quietly.

Catherine patted his hand. "You already have," she answered.



It took several days for the infections to clear from Phillips's system, and for his strength to return. During his convalescence, there were daily visits from Vincent, who seemed never too tired of hearing the stories handed down from Phillip's grandfather. And there was Father, stubbornly refusing Phillip's request to get out of bed until there was no danger of relapse. And there was Mary, and Jamie, and an endless assortment of children, much to Phillip's astonishment.

When his strength returned, Phillip went to the upper levels with Vincent, where he marveled at Elizabeth's paintings. The older woman was pleased to explain the meanings and stories behind each picture, and embarrassed by Phillip's admiration.

"It's just like the cave paintings we have in the Southwest," he told her. "This is a history of this place, of your people here."

Vincent left them for a while, letting them talk about artistic things and escorted Catherine Below from her apartment threshold. She was very excited to see Phillip but wouldn't tell Vincent why.

Vincent chose to remain in suspense and led Catherine back to Elizabeth's tunnels. Phillip and Elizabeth were both pleased to see her.

"I wanted to let you know that there's good news for a change," she explained.

"Good news about what?" Phillip asked.

"I spoke to a friend of mine yesterday," Catherine continued. "She manages an art gallery in the Village and has agented work for a friend of mine before. She sounded very interested when I told her I knew someone who could procure authentic Indian art and handicrafts."

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then Phillip's jaw fell open in astonishment.

"I told her you could interview with her Monday," Catherine added with a smile. "And I made arrangements for you to talk to Doctor Peter Alcott, another friend of mine. He's a Helper and told me that he can put you in touch with a specialist for Maria."

Phillip's eyes welled with tears as he struggled for words. "Why do you do all of this... for me?" he asked, choking with emotion.

"Because we can," Catherine explained simply. "Giving has rewards of its own, because it makes it possible for others to give, too." She gave his shoulders a friendly squeeze. "At times, it's hard to accept help, especially when you've worked so hard. But once you're on your feet, you'll be able to return the favor, I'm sure."

Over the next few hours, Catherine, Vincent, and Phillip discussed arrangements for bringing his family to New York. Phillip was amazed by the resources available to help, through the various Helpers Above.

"Of course, we can only help provide opportunities," Father reminded him, as the discussing wound down in his chamber. "It's up to you to make use of them."

"I will use them," Phillip promised.

Just then, Samantha came bounding into the room. Confronted by a roomful of adults, she immediately toned down her usually boisterous nature. "Hi," she greeted them quietly.

"Hello, Samantha," Father replied. "Was there something you wanted?"

She suddenly remembered her mission, and answered, "It's storytime, and the kids are waiting for Vincent."

"Storytime?" Phillip questioned.

Vincent and Catherine explained as they retrieved the book from Vincent's chamber and walked to the classroom area. He watched with a mixture of amusement, wonder, and homesickness as Vincent settled into the midst of a roomful of children, cross-legged on the floor, and began to read.

"It amazes me," Phillip commented to Catherine as they watched. "They have so little, and yet they have so much that is missing in the world."

"Maybe because no one here does anything alone," Catherine said.

The next day's interview went well, despite the lack of dress clothes. Phillip remained Below in the evenings during his first week's work, then moved to a small apartment, in a building managed by one of the Helpers. It was about a month later, after staying in touch mostly through Catherine, Phillip finally returned Below to visit and share news of his family.

"They weren't sure at first, but the gallery is really happy. The Southwestern art is selling well, and I'm even able to help the reservation a little. And Maria is getting therapy each week," he reported. "In a few weeks, I'd like to bring them to meet you all."

"We would look forward to meeting them," Vincent assured him.

After visiting Father and the others, he made one last stop at Vincent's chamber. Vincent was surprised when he produced a small package. "I can't begin to thank you properly for all you've done, but this is a start."

Inside the brightly wrapped box, Vincent found a small ceramic figure, an Indian storyteller with several children crawling upon him. To Catherine's delight, and Vincent's chagrin, the storyteller was a remarkable likeness of him. After some congenial laughter, and thanks, Phillip took his leave, as Catherine and Vincent marveled over the gift.

"You really are a Guardian Spirit," Catherine needled him lovingly. "A creature of ancient magic perhaps."

"Perhaps," Vincent acceded grudgingly.

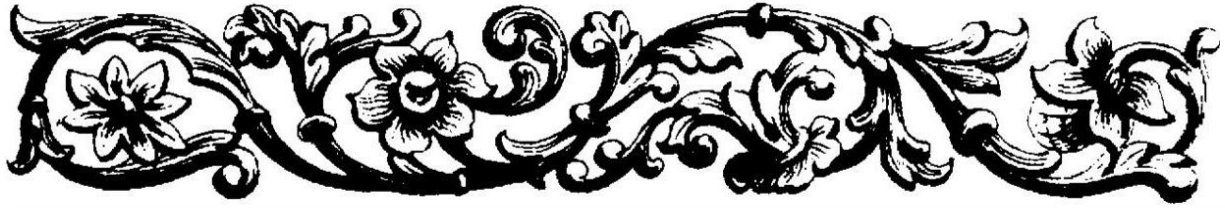
"There are many kinds of magic in the world."

"Like the magic of reaching out to others," Catherine suggested.

In answer, Vincent held out his hands and pulled her into his embrace.



by Barb Gipson



by Judith Nolan



Maxwell and the Doctor

by Christine Cunningham

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SENSUAL DREAMERS



Catherine passed Joe's office on her way home after a particularly busy day in court. They had finally managed to close the case they had been working on for months and she realized that days like this one, all too few in her opinion, made her job worthwhile.

She couldn't wait to get home and tell Vincent; she knew he would be so proud of her, and relieved it was all over, especially as he'd had to endure hours of her practicing her closing speech on him.

She tapped lightly on Joe's door and strolled in. "We did good today, didn't we, Joe? I feel great."

Joe leaned back in his chair and stretched; he was bone tired. "Yeah, I guess so. One creep off the streets and two more taking his place."

Catherine frowned. "What's up, Joe?" She paused for a moment. "I'm a good listener, you know."

Joe stood and grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair. "Don't mind me, Cathy. I'm in one of those '*Is it all really worth it*' moods. We all get 'em," he replied with a shrug. Seeing her worried frown, he smiled, "Come on, I'm beat. Let's get out of here."

Catherine didn't believe a word he was saying. Joe didn't have those kinds of moods. It was something more than he was willing to share with her and she was the last person to pry into other people's personal lives.

"Well, if you're sure there's nothing else on your mind."

He smiled reassuringly. "I'm sure."

They walked out of the building together in the direction of the parking lot. It was almost deserted.

"Tell you what, Radcliffe, how about a drink? You know, just to celebrate."

Catherine unlocked her car and casually threw her briefcase onto the passenger seat. "Oh Joe, I'd love to but..." She shrugged regrettably. "I have someone waiting for me."

Joe felt a slight twinge of envy. "That's great, Radcliffe," he said with a shrug. "Just great. See you Monday." Joe turned abruptly and walked in the direction of his car.

Catherine watched his retreating back for a few moments wishing she could have taken him up on his offer. She almost called him back, then remembered Vincent would be waiting for her. With a sigh she slid behind the wheel of the car and started her journey home. *Joe's a great guy. I just wish he had someone to go home to, like I have.* She shook her head sadly, suddenly impatient to get home to Vincent.

Joe had no inclination to go home to an empty apartment. There was no one waiting for him except his fish, and somehow, he found conversation with them rather one sided. He gave a humourless laugh. *Here I am, successful, home of my own, not a bad looking guy, some good friends, especially Cathy,* he paused his thoughts. There was no getting away from the fact that he was lonely. It seemed he felt that way most of the time these days. Even his work couldn't take his mind off the way he'd been feeling of late.

He allowed his thoughts to wander and suddenly found himself thinking of Jenni. It seemed a lifetime away now and yet she had been the only woman he had ever loved, truly loved. It was funny he hadn't thought of her in years. A sad smile crossed his face as he remembered how desperately he'd loved her. It suddenly occurred to him that maybe all his other romances to date had never come to anything because subconsciously Jenni was still there. The closest he had come to loving anyone as deeply was when he'd fallen for Erica Salvin. He immediately dragged his thoughts away from the memory. The wound was still raw even though it had been over a year since it had all happened.

'I wonder what Jenni's doing now?' Suddenly a wave of nostalgia swept over him. Where had all the years gone? He shook his head as if to clear it and muttered aloud. "Go home, Maxwell, and quit being so maudlin. That was in another life; It's no good wondering how it might have been." On impulse he took the next turn and headed in the direction of his favourite bar. He needed some company, at least for a while, before he went home to his lonely apartment.



As Catherine approached her apartment building, she glanced up to see the balcony aglow with light. Vincent was home, waiting for her. She drove into the underground garage under her building eager to get up to her apartment. The ring on the third finger of her left hand caught and sparkled with the light as she entered the garage. She smiled. She had been Vincent's wife for six months. Six incredible and beautiful months and still sometimes she found it hard to believe it was true. She'd never taken her ring off since the day Vincent had placed it there, yet no one at the office had seemed to notice it, and that was surprising considering the amount of speculation there had been about her personal life.

Unfortunately, being married to Vincent didn't mean they spent any more time together, but it did mean that their time together was different and there were no more unfulfilled partings. She raced along the hallway and eagerly entered the apartment. Vincent was on the terrace and as he turned to face his wife, he braced himself as she flew across the room and into his waiting arms.

"Congratulations, Catherine. I saw the news on the television. I'm very proud of you."

His wife pouted up at him. "Oh shoot. I wanted to surprise you."

Vincent smiled and pulled her back into his arms. Catherine gently nuzzled his neck. "Anyway, I couldn't have done it without Joe." She sighed as again her thoughts turned to Joe. "I wish you could meet him, Vincent. He's a good friend and..." she paused and again looked up into her husband's eyes. "He doesn't have anyone to celebrate with tonight."

Vincent sighed deeply, knowing this was yet another drawback to their relationship. Catherine could not share her friends with him, or him with her friends. "I'm sorry, Catherine."

Catherine nodded sadly. "His heart took a real battering over Erica Salvin last year and he's lonely; even though he would never admit it."

Vincent knew the story of Joe and Erica and although he had never met Joe, he still felt sad for him. He knew he was indeed a very fortunate man to have found his soul mate in Catherine. He hugged her close. "Then... Erica was not the one for him. He will find her someday." He kissed the top of her head. "Just as I found you, Catherine, there is a woman out there worthy of Joe's love and he will find her."

Catherine's eyes softened as she gazed up into his china blue eyes. "Yes Vincent... you found me." Vincent lowered his head and kissed her gently on the lips. He drew away from her after a moment. "We should eat; you must be hungry, Catherine."

"I am, Vincent... but not for food." There was no mistaking the look in her eyes or the response he felt in her. All thought of food disappeared from his mind as wordlessly he lifted her into his arms and strode through to their bedroom.



Spring arrived and Catherine went into work with a smile on her face and a spring in her step these days. She was happy and even the heavy workload couldn't diminish her joy. She was looking forward to seeing Joe. He'd been out of town for a couple of weeks tracking down a reluctant witness for the case they were working on.

She dropped her briefcase on her desk and poured herself a cup of something that only faintly resembled coffee then strolled into Joe's office next door.

"Hi Joe. Everything work out okay? I hope so because we need that witness real bad or we don't have a case and..." She stopped abruptly in shock. Joe was slumped over his desk. Rushing to his side she placed cool fingers to his face. She was alarmed to discover he was burning up with fever. He looked terrible. His pallor was a sickly grey and beads of sweat dotted his forehead.

"You're burning up. Joe, can you hear me?"

Joe could barely raise his head. He'd never felt so ill in his life and he was sure he was dying. "I think I've poisoned myself," he groaned. "I got back so late last night and I just ate whatever was in the ice box. I was too tired to cook anything." Just talking was taking what little energy he had left and with another groan closed his eyes and prayed for oblivion.

Catherine immediately phoned for an ambulance and while they waited she tried to make him more comfortable. Joe had lapsed into delirium and was rambling incoherently about someone called Jenni. Catherine had never heard Joe mention her in all the time they had worked together and what he was saying didn't make much sense. He kept going on about college and Law degrees, so she assumed that this Jenni was a girl he knew back then.

The paramedics arrived and took Joe away. Everyone in the office crowded around Catherine wanting to know what was wrong. A heart attack was their first fear; or nervous exhaustion. Catherine did her best to calm their fears.

"Take it easy, it's not a heart attack. It looks like a bad case of food poisoning." She handed the notes of the case they were working on to a colleague and followed the ambulance to the hospital, frantic with worry. Food poisoning was a serious business and it wouldn't have happened if he had had someone at home

waiting for him. "Oh, Joe, please be well."

Catherine sat by his bed for hours, listening as he called for Jenni and she only wished she understood. This woman was obviously very important to Joe, and although it had been a long time ago; he had not forgotten her. A nurse came by and sternly, but kindly told her to go home, telling her. **'Yes, he is sick but in no danger.'**

Catherine wanted to be sure she could safely leave him and went in search of the doctor. The nurse on duty said it was Doctor Robinson who would be taking care of Joe, so she located the doctor's office and knocked, surprised to hear a feminine voice.

"Come in."

Catherine entered the office. "Doctor Robinson?" she questioned. The attractive woman sitting at the desk nodded, so Catherine continued. "My name is Catherine Chandler and I'm here about Joe Maxwell. He was brought in with food poisoning earlier today."

The doctor reached for a pile of case notes from the corner of her desk and extracted Joe's notes. She glanced briefly at the comments made by the duty doctor who had examined Joe on his admission. She looked up at Catherine. "According to my colleague's notes, Miss Chandler, the patient is responding well to treatment. He'll be with us for a day or two, but I shouldn't worry, he'll be fine."

Catherine let out a relieved sigh. "Thank God. I've been scared half to death. He's been delirious for hours, keeps calling for someone called Jenni, but I don't have a clue as to how or where to locate her."

The doctor looked sharply at Catherine and then back to the notes, re-reading the patient's details more carefully this time. "My God, then it is him. Everyone in the old neighbourhood always called him Joseph; that's why I didn't make the connection." She sat back in her chair, stunned that her first love had re-entered her life.

Catherine was confused. "I'm sorry, I don't follow."

Doctor Robinson looked at her and said quite calmly. "I'm Jennifer, Miss Chandler."

To say Catherine was shocked was an understatement. What had Vincent said about there being someone for Joe out there somewhere? It was unbelievable.

She studied the woman in front of her more closely and even though she didn't realize, more critically, but she liked what she saw. Dr. Jennifer Robinson was a

beautiful woman in her early thirties, and despite the very English sounding name, her looks betrayed her obvious Italian ancestry. She had long, glossy, almost black hair that was worn in a thick chignon at the nape of her neck and the most beautiful big brown eyes set in a perfectly structured Latin face.

Even though Jennifer was still seated behind the desk, Catherine guessed her to be tall, certainly a good few inches taller than herself. Her navy suit was tailored on very expensive classic lines, appropriate to her position, but the ruffled collar on her white silk blouse allowed a touch of softness.

To Catherine's trained eye it clearly spoke of a woman who worked in a predominantly male oriented profession but was nonetheless determined to hold onto her femininity. Yes, Catherine definitely liked what she saw.

"I've heard a lot about you in the last few hours," commented Catherine with a warm smile, and held out her hand to shake Jennifer's. "I'm pleased to meet you."

Jennifer stood as she took Catherine's hand and smiled nervously, suddenly wondering just what Catherine Chandler meant to Joseph.

Sensing her thoughts Catherine put her fears at ease. "Joe's a good friend, and he is going to be knocked out when he sees you." She laughed delightedly. "It will be quite something to see Joe lost for words." Shaking her head, she turned to leave but stopped as she opened the door and looked back. "I'll be back sometime tomorrow, Doctor Robinson. It's nice to have met you."

"It's nice to have met you, and please, call me Jenni."

Once Catherine had gone Jennifer let her thoughts fly back over the years. They had been so much in love and confident that nothing would ever part them. Oh, the plans they had made for their future, but it had all come to nothing. She remembered the day he had left for college. The promises they had made to each other, the tears she had shed on parting. They had fallen in love too soon, had been too young. Both had so much they wanted to achieve, that the years had gone by and somehow, they had lost each other.

She came back to the present with a start and looked at Joe's personal details on his file. For some reason she was relieved to see that Joe was not married. Jenni had been too involved with her profession to consider marriage, but now, she paused as a surge of possibilities swept through her then shook her head regretfully. *'No, it's too late now.'* She donned her white coat and prepared to make her rounds, hoping that Joe would be asleep when she went to see him; she wasn't quite ready to face him yet.

As she had hoped, Joe was sleeping deeply. The professional in her checked his vital signs and marked them on the chart, and when that was done, she allowed

herself a little time to really look at him. Even sick, she would have recognized him. He had hardly changed at all. He was still boyishly handsome.

She had read his history earlier and saw he was with the District Attorney's office and had made quite a name for himself over the years. It seemed then as if both of them had achieved their goals. *'I wonder if he's happy though. I know I'm missing something in my life.'* Just then Joe opened his eyes and looked straight at her. He spoke her name just once and then drifted back to sleep. She doubted he would remember in the morning. "Goodnight, Joseph," she whispered and left the room.



After leaving the hospital, Catherine couldn't face going back to the apartment, instead she drove to the Park and quickly made her way to Vincent's chamber; their chamber now. Seeing Joe so sick had really scared her witless and she needed her husband's arms around her.



by Lynn Wright

They lay together on the bed, Vincent stroking her hair gently. "What is it that troubles you so, Catherine?"

She told him all about Joe's illness and all about Jennifer. Suddenly she giggled. "Joe won't believe his eyes when he sees her. I'd love to be a fly on the wall when they meet up again." A thought popped into her head and she sat up. "Vincent, wouldn't it be wonderful if..."

His bond with Catherine served him well and he knew instantly what was going on in her mind. Shaking his head, he pulled back against his chest. "No, Catherine. I know you want to get them back together again, and if it is meant to be, it will be, without any help from you."

He was right, of course, that she should not interfere, but still. "I know, I know, but it wouldn't hurt to help things along just a little." To her way of thinking Joe deserved it and if she could make him as happy as she was, then she wanted to try.

Vincent gently rolled over, adjusting their position so she was almost beneath him. "I think Joe Maxwell is more than capable of sorting out his love life. You, my love should concentrate more on keeping me happy." His head came down to

take her lips in a scorching kiss.

All thoughts of Joe and Jenni fled from her mind as her body responded immediately to Vincent's lovemaking and she returned his kisses fiercely.



The next morning Joe woke up wondering where in the hell he was. The last thing he remembered was sitting in his office talking to Cathy. After that, nothing, except once he thought he had seen Jennifer. He must have dreamt it. *'I've been thinking about her lately, that must be it.'* He looked around taking stock of his surroundings. It was obvious he was in hospital. "I must have been pretty sick," he muttered. There was no denying he felt as weak as a kitten and the rolling sensation in his stomach was damned unpleasant. He hated to be ill, always had done, and he hated hospitals, but worst of all he hated doctors. They seemed to take a perverse delight in poking and probing and talking about you as if you were not there.

"Good morning," chirped the middle-aged nurse who entered his room. She was short and rotund in build, but her eyes sparkled as she smiled at him and he noticed the dimples that appeared in each of her rosy cheeks. "You look much better today, Mr. Maxwell. Anything I can get you?" she inquired pleasantly.

Joe thought for a moment then scowled slightly. ***"Yeah. Get me a doctor, I want out of here,"*** he replied none too politely.

The nurse sniffed indignantly, *'Men.'* She reached for the thermometer beside the bed. "You're not going anywhere for a few days yet, young man," she said in mock severity, making Joe feel like a naughty schoolboy. *'How come nurses were so intimidating,'* he thought and scowled again.

"Food poisoning isn't the common cold, you know," the nurse said, waving the thermometer in front of him to emphasize her point. Shaking down the small glass tube she pointed it in the direction of Joe's mouth, and she said, more kindly this time, "Open up, I have to take your temperature."

He threw a disgusted glare in her general direction but did as he was told, nonetheless. The nurse walked around to the end of the bed and picked up Joe's notes, taking her time as she listened to him puffing in annoyance, waiting for her to remove the instrument from his mouth. He felt an utter fool and completely at the mercy of the martinet in starched white. Finally, she was finished and after straightening the bed clothes, left the room.

Joe breathed a sigh of relief. He really hated hospitals and he was bored already.

'Maybe I'll give Radcliffe a call and get her to bring some work over. I know she's been run off her feet these last two weeks, what with me being away and now this. Poor kid.' Then it suddenly occurred to him. *'Still, she's looking really good, had been for months now. I'll have to find out her secret.'*

His musings were interrupted when the door opened again, and he was about to make a sarcastic retort when Jennifer appeared in the doorway and not the little nurse he was expecting. He blinked, then blinked again, just to make sure he was really awake. "Jenni," he breathed, suddenly realizing that last night had not been a dream. "It was you. I thought I was dreaming." He'd been thinking of her for months and now here she was right in front of him; a doctor no less. She'd made it and he was genuinely glad for her.

"Hello Joseph. Long time no see," she said softly. Her voice seemed to caress his name and Joe was hard pressed to remember how much he hated the full version of his name. Finding his voice at last and praying it wouldn't betray him he said, "It's just Joe, okay?"

He watched almost spellbound as Jenni moved across the room and sat on the edge of the bed, afraid to take his eyes off her in case she was only a figment of his imagination. He still couldn't believe she was here.

"Sorry, Joe it is then," she said and smiled at him, her eyes taking in every detail of his face now that he was awake. "I had just as much of a shock when your colleague, Miss Chandler, told me your name." She paused. "it's been a long time, Joe, and we have a lot of years to catch up on, but for now you have to do as you're told so you can get out of here. Your nurse just about threatened to quit, and it reminded me of how much you dislike hospitals and doctors. Will you cooperate?"

Joe just stared. She was so beautiful, more so than he remembered and he felt something crack around his heart.

"Will you, Joe?" She repeated, unable to keep the smile from her lips and feeling rather pleased that her presence was affecting him.

"Huh?" Joe managed to drag himself out of his reverie. "Oh, sure Doc, you can bet on it."

Jenni laughed and slowly shook her head. He had not changed a bit. He was still easily distracted. "Fine. I'll see you later then."

As soon as Jenni had left Joe's room, he called the nurse and surprised her by asking very pleasantly for the phone. He had no one else but Cathy to talk to and he desperately wanted to make sense of what had just happened. He still couldn't believe it. Jenni was actually here.

Jenni was still smiling as she walked along the corridor on her way to her next patient. "Hold up Jen," said a familiar voice behind her, "What time shall I pick you up tonight?"

The smile instantly left her face as she remembered Matthew. He was a brilliant surgeon, a good few years older than she and they had been dating on a regular basis for nearly three months. She had been really looking forward to this evening as it would be only the second time in their relationship that neither one was on call. She was extremely fond of Matthew and had begun to think that maybe he was the one; but now, everything had changed. Joe Maxwell's reappearance had seen to that.

Matthew Jordan was a very distinguished forty-nine-years-old surgeon. He had everything except the woman he wanted, namely Jennifer Robinson. The moment she had joined the staff he had been determined to pin her down, but so far, she was proving to be a hard nut to crack. His expertise with women was letting him down and he was faintly annoyed with himself, and her, for not playing the game. On the surface he was the epitome of elegance and gentlemanly charm, but underneath there was a sinister streak which Jennifer had yet to discover.

"Matthew," she said, fixing a welcoming smile to her lips. "I'm running late, sorry."

He stifled the urge to scowl and smiled disarmingly. "No problem. I just wanted to know about tonight?"

Jennifer bit her lip. It wouldn't be fair to let him down, especially as he had gone to a lot of trouble to get seats for the ballet, and they were like gold dust. Seeing Joe again had knocked her sideways and changed her thinking. However, she knew she could not let Matthew down. She smiled up at him. "Seven o'clock will be fine. I'm looking forward to it."

"Seven it is and wear your hair loose. I like it that way." With a perfunctory kiss on her cheek, Matthew sauntered away.

Jennifer looked at his receding back, irritated at the way he had told her how to dress. He had done it several times before but only now had she noticed, and she realized that she did not like it. She was going to have to rethink where this relationship was headed.



With Joe in the hospital the workload had doubled, and Catherine didn't know if she was coming or going half the time. She still had to interview the witness Joe had managed to persuade to testify; and it was only after iron clad guarantee of a new identity under the Witness Protection Programme had been given, that he agreed. With the information he had, both verbal and documented another crime boss would be behind bars. She only hoped that Joe had been careful and that the syndicate had no knowledge of his part in the whole business, otherwise he could be in a mess of trouble.

Joe wasn't used to field work. He was a desk jockey and preferred it that way. Catherine was the best investigator he had and she always seemed to have a guardian angel on her shoulder, looking out for her, if only he knew.

The phone rang and Catherine was tempted to let it ring, she was so far behind, but she picked it up.

"Cathy, it's Joe. I need to talk. Look, I know you must be going crazy with all the extra work so bring some over. I'm bored stiff just laying here."

Catherine could not help but smile, he sounded a whole lot better and she wondered if he had seen Jenni yet. "Okay boss. Give me a couple of hours to finish up here and I'll be over. I'm glad you're feeling better. You had me worried for a while there. The guys send their regards," she held the phone in the direction of his work mates and Joe was rewarded with shouts of "Take it easy, Boss." She put the receiver back to her ear. "Two hours, Joe. Bye."

Two hours ran into three and when she walked into Joe's hospital room, he was ready to explode. ***"You said two hours, Radcliffe. Get in here."***

Catherine raised an eyebrow. "Well, excuse me, but even Superwoman has to eat. I've been on the run since seven this morning. Here's the work you asked for. Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?" She sat in the chair beside the bed, hiding a grin and waited. It was obvious that Joe had seen Jenni at last and was busting a gut to tell someone.

Now that Catherine was here, Joe found he didn't quite know where to start. "Ah, the nurse told me I was delirious when I was brought in. What was I saying?"

"Well, it was nothing that could land you in court," she joked, but seeing the seriousness of his expression told him the truth. "Okay, it was all a bit garbled, but you kept calling for someone named Jennifer, and then you rambled on about going to college. Like I said, it didn't make much sense."

Joe took a drink of juice from a glass on the cabinet alongside the bed. "I've never told you about her, have I?"

Catherine shook her head. "Not a word, and you say I'm secretive."

"Well, we grew up in the same neighbourhood and I was crazy about her." He smiled, reminiscing, his mind slipping easily into the past. Jenni was figuratively the girl next door and as the years passed, they both came to the mutual conclusion that their respective parents expected them to marry one day.

At first it had been a source of great amusement to them. The very idea of them marrying was enough to send them both into hysterical laughter, but when they reached young adulthood, their amusement changed into a growing awareness of each other. No one was more surprised at the change than they were. When they finally did acknowledge that they were in love, they would spend hours planning their future lives together.

"Cathy, those days were the happiest of my life. We used to have marathon discussions about what we were going to do in our chosen careers." He gave a short laugh. "I was gonna be a big-time attorney and Jenni was the famous doctor. We thought we had all the time in the world, and then the day came for us to go to college."

Catherine watched as Joe drifted back into the past again and she wondered what he was thinking, but she sat quietly waiting for him to return to the present.

Joe was seeing their last few minutes together at the bus station before he left for Westfield. Jenni's tearful smile was enough to bring him back to the present.

He looked at Catherine and smiled sadly. "Funny the things you remember, isn't it? Anyway, we promised we'd write, and we did, for a long time. I really missed her. But then the letters became fewer and the visits home never coincided. I got involved with new friends and joined all the college clubs, and in the end, there was nothing left and we each went our separate ways. I thought I'd forgotten, but she came into my head the night we won the last court case, remember?"

Catherine nodded. "I remember, Joe. I remember wishing you had someone to go home to."

"Yeah, well. She came into my head that night and she hasn't left it since. God knows why."

She smiled inwardly. "Maybe you should try looking her up, Joe. Could be she hasn't forgotten you either." She couldn't resist a little matchmaking. She just couldn't help herself.

"I don't have to look her up. She found me. She's my doctor, can you believe it? I can't. If I hadn't been lying in this bed, I would have collapsed from shock when she walked in here this morning. She's really here, Cathy." He was as excited as a schoolboy and Catherine was happy for him. She only hoped Jenni would feel the same.

"It's incredible, Joe. I'm happy for you."

Joe gave her one of his boyish grins. "Thanks, but I have to tell you, I'm a bit nervous."

Catherine frowned slightly. "How so?"

He was silent for a moment, contemplating his reply and he shook his head, slowly. "I don't know really. I guess I... It sounds crazy, but I feel as though I've been given a second chance," he paused, his face serious. "I don't want to screw it up this time, Cathy."

Catherine knew he was thinking not only of his earlier relationship with Jenni, but of Erica as well and she understood his apprehension.

"You won't screw it up, Joe," she smiled reassuringly. "I know you won't; I think Jenni means too much to you, even if you don't realize just how much yet. It is a second chance, Joe. 'Don't knock fate,' I always say. When you get out of here, I'll expect you both to come to dinner, okay?"

"Hey kiddo, I'm not going to try to run before I can walk. We'll see." Joe shrugged his shoulders. "You know, see how things go. One step at a time."

Catherine smiled inwardly; how many times had she used that last statement over the years where Vincent was concerned? "Okay." She gathered up her briefcase and purse. "Now, as much as I'd love to stay, I really have to get back. With you doing some of this paperwork we should be finished by the end of the week, and don't worry about our witness. You brought him in, so I'll take his statement. Fair division of labour. Don't overdo it, Joe."

"Sure thing, and thanks. I'll see you around, Radcliffe."

"Bye, Joe." Catherine could hardly contain the grin that spread across her face as she left the hospital. "Go for it, Joe."



That night while Joe lay in a sterile hospital room pondering on the possibility of rekindling his romance with Jenni, the lady in question was sitting in the theatre wondering the same thing. Her companion could not fail to notice her distraction, and considering how much he'd spent on the tickets, coupled with a worrying phone call he had received earlier, he was not in the best of tempers.

Jenni was oblivious to Matthew's thoughts as well as the performance on stage. Why did everything have to get so complicated? She could almost resent Joe's

intrusion into her calm and structured life, but then she thought of him lying in a hospital bed, probably hating every second he was there, and any resentment vanished. *'Face it, Jennifer Robinson, you've never really got over him.'*

The thunderous applause and standing ovation broke into her reverie and she automatically got to her feet, enthusiastically applauding a performance that she had missed completely.

As Matthew escorted her to his Rolls Royce he asked. "Is something on your mind, Jen? You've been very quiet all evening. In fact, you seemed a touch off balance when I spoke to you earlier at the hospital. Is it a patient?"

Jennifer waited until they were driving before she answered him. "I'm sorry, Matthew. I haven't been very good company, have I?" She knew he was a very, astute man and would not be fooled by excuses. Truth, or as close to it, was always the best policy where he was concerned. "Yes, I suppose you could say it's a patient, although it's nothing to do with his condition. Actually, he was only admitted with a nasty case of food poisoning, self-inflicted at that."

Matthew took his eyes off the road briefly to glance across at her, noting again the way she bit her lip. He had noticed she always did it when she was wrestling with a problem. "So, where's the problem?" he asked, looking back to the road again.

She debated how much to tell him. She did not want to make more of it than it was. "There isn't a problem as such, not really. It's just that I know him from way back and it was a shock seeing him again."

"Ah," said Matthew, "you're worried about the ethical side, treating someone you know personally."

Jenni hadn't even considered the ethics of the situation but grabbed at the lifeline he'd unwittingly thrown her. "Exactly," she lied. "I've never been in this position before and I'm not sure how best to handle it. Should I mention it to someone. I mean, it's not like he'll be receiving long term treatment. He'll be discharged within a day or two."

"What's his name?"

She saw no harm in telling him. "Joe Maxwell."

How Matthew kept the shock from his face was something he would always wonder, and a credit to his consummate acting ability. He swallowed before saying, quite calmly. "The name sounds familiar. Should I know him? Is he on TV?"

Jenni laughed. "Maybe. He's the Deputy DA in this City and by all accounts he's been making quite a name for himself over the years. I expect he has been on the

television occasionally. He always wanted to be in the big time. I haven't seen him in years." Her eyes misted over as she continued softly. "We grew up together."

They pulled up outside her apartment and Matthew got out of the car and walked around to help her out. His mind trying to take in the startling information he had just received. At the entrance to her apartment building he stopped. "Would you mind very much if I didn't see you to the door. I have some important calls to make."

To be honest Jennifer was glad of the reprieve. She had not been looking forward to the end of the evening. Matthew was becoming very persistent of late, wanting to further the relationship, which she rightly took to mean, on a physical level, and while she was very fond of him, she was not ready for anything more.

"Of course not, and I'm sorry for tonight."

He was already backing away as he replied. "Don't be, you worry too much. Goodnight, Jenni."

Funny, that he hadn't even tried to kiss her goodnight. Maybe he was getting tired of waiting, and she was slightly surprised at how little the idea bothered her. "Joe Maxwell, either you've got a lot to answer for, or I've got a lot to thank you for. I'm not sure which yet," she muttered.

Matthew drove like a demon back to his brownstone house. He could not believe his luck; Joe Maxwell practically falling into his lap. *'Shame Jen was involved though.'* Then again, he thought, she had not come across as he had hoped, and he was getting bored with the chase. She was then instantly dismissed from his mind as more important thoughts of Joe Maxwell crowded his thoughts.

Parking the car in the garage he rushed into the house and made for his study. Snatching up the phone he punched out a number from memory. "Matthew Jordan. Let me speak to Mr. Angelo. Now." he emphasized.

He listened with growing impatience as the lackey on the other end of the phone tried to put him off with feeble excuses a moron could see through. His latest employer must be losing his touch having idiots like this one on the payroll.

"Listen to me, you snivelling little ass kisser, I don't care if he's balling the entire cheer section of the New York Giants, you get him on the phone pronto. He'll want to hear what I've got to tell him."

He smiled as he imagined the idiot breaking into a cold sweat at the thought of interrupting the boss. Come to think of it, he could well be indulging in a spot of group therapy. He was well known for it. It was enough to make Matthew laugh out loud.

"This better be damn good, Jordan," said a disgruntled voice in Matthew's ear. He sobered instantly. Angelo was not a man with a sense of humour.

"Sorry to call so late, but that little problem you told me about earlier?"

"Yeah, yeah, what of it?"

Matthew smirked. "Well, you may be interested to know that Joe Maxwell is, at this very moment, laid up in my hospital with a bad case of food poisoning, which accounts for why we couldn't get him at home."

He listened to Mr. Angelo's instructions before saying goodnight and replacing the receiver. He sat there for a while wishing there was another way, but the boss was right. Best do it while Maxwell was in a weakened state and unable to fight back; Quick, clean and the minimum of planning. He would have preferred to keep the hospital out of it though. After all, that was his cover, his respectability.

Matthew grinned suddenly. It was difficult deciding what he was best at, saving people as a skilled surgeon, or killing them as an equally skilled assassin. He enjoyed both of his diverse careers and came to the conclusion that he must be a regular Jekyll and Hyde. The thought did not bother him in the least.

He drove back to the hospital on the pretext of checking one of his critically ill patients. He made absolutely sure he was seen doing this by the night duty staff before slipping into the elevator and riding up to the twentieth floor where he knew Jen's patient would be, after that it was a simple matter of finding the right room. He opened the door very slowly and glanced inside. The light from the moon shone through the window enabling Matthew to see that Joe was sleeping deeply. He came fully into the room and picking up a pillow from a chair behind the door, advanced toward the bed with the intention of smothering the man who lay there, unaware of his impending fate.

He came within inches of Joe's face when there was the sound of an alarm outside on the nurses' station, signaling cardiac arrest. Joe mumbled in his sleep and turned over. The moment had been lost and Matthew dropped the pillow and eased out of the door. With the crash team rushing backwards and forwards from the heart attack victim's room he was able to mingle with the staff, who paid no attention to another white-coated figure, and slipped unnoticed back into the elevator.

"Shit," he swore viciously. He was unlikely to get such an easy chance again. By the time word got out that the syndicate was onto him, Maxwell would be impossible to take out. Matthew figured he had three, maybe four weeks, tops. It would take that long to learn Maxwell's daily routine and figure out which method to use for a clean kill.

Matthew was not a shootist or a blow 'em up mechanic. He preferred more subtle means, whereby the cause of the death could be attributed to natural causes.

Being a doctor, he had a vast knowledge of drugs and their effect on the human body in varying doses. He doubted any one of his hits had been ruled as anything but natural causes. A fact he was proud of. In Underground circles he was something of a legend and knowing this, he commanded huge respect and huge fees, which he undeniably received. Once he accepted a job, he saw it through, no matter how long it took.

Seated in his car, he pounded the wheel with his fists. **"Shit."** Breaking the news to Mr. Angelo was not going to be pleasant. Hell, he was a professional and could quite easily sweet talk his way around the foul up. It was a damned shame though.



The next morning Joe woke up feeling one hundred percent better and none the wiser how close he had come to being one hundred percent dead. He hoped Jenni would come by and pronounce him fit enough to leave, and so he could ask her out for dinner.

The martinet in starched white breezed in and did what she had to do with barely a word. When she had filled in his chart, she just gave Joe a dirty look, sniffed, and exited the room. He roared with laughter and promised himself he would buy her the biggest bunch of flowers he could find when he left. He felt the need to apologize for being such a pain in the butt.

Jenni dropped in around lunch time and indeed gave him the all clear to leave.

"That's great, Doc. Where do I sign?"

She laughed. "Can't wait to get away from me, is that it?"

Joe sobered. "Just the opposite. You said we had a lot of years to catch up on and I was wondering if maybe we could have dinner sometime soon?"

Jenni's heart skipped a beat. "How about tonight?" she said eagerly, then cursed her forwardness. "That is if you haven't anything else planned."

Joe was inordinately pleased to note her enthusiasm even though she had tried to cover it up. Nevertheless, he wanted to take it slow. Pretending to consider her question, he was silent for a few moments. "Nope, can't think of a thing. What time shall I pick you up?"

Jenni shook her head. "Joe, you've only just this minute been discharged and

you're weaker than you realize. I was thinking I could fix us dinner at my place, if that's okay with you."

"Sure," said Joe with a grin. "See you about eight-thirty."

She wrote her address and phone number on a piece of paper and handed it to him. "Eight-thirty, it is."

As she turned to the door, it opened to admit Matthew. "Ah, there you are, Jen, I've been looking for you all over. I wanted to apologize for not seeing you home properly last night. Forgive me?" He glanced across at Joe and smiled, then looked back at Jenni again. "Excuse me for barging in like this, but I wanted to be sure I was forgiven."

Joe took an immediate dislike to the oily charm of the man and he particularly disliked the familiarity of the way he was touching Jenni's shoulder. Joe's hands automatically closed into fists under the bedcovers.

Jenni moved away from the touch and smiled at Matthew. "Of course, you're forgiven. If you recall I was not the best company myself last night. By the way, let me introduce you. Joe Maxwell, Matthew Jordan."

The two men nodded to each other in acknowledgement but neither attempted to shake hands.

"A pleasure, Mr. Maxwell. Please excuse me now, I have patients waiting. Maybe we can have a coffee later, Jen?"

"Maybe," she replied.

Joe scowled at Matthew's retreating back. "Who's that?"

"That," said Jenni, "Is one of the most gifted surgeons in the country and if you ever need an operation, then you couldn't do better than Matthew Jordan." Jenni could tell by Joe's continuing scowl that it was not what Joe meant and knew it.

"We've been seeing each other for a few months."

Joe's heart sank, he had been foolish enough to think there was no one in her life. *'Why shouldn't there be? She's beautiful and he's not a bad catch, even if he is years older than her.'* The fact that Joe hated his guts was neither here nor there.

"Is it serious?" he managed to say.

Jennifer sighed and bit her lip. *'If she said yes, Joe might give up, and if she said no, it might look as if she was too eager.'* "Too soon to say," she compromised.

"Anyhow, I have to go. I'll see you tonight. Bye, Joe." She left the room before he could ask any more awkward questions.

Joe sank back against the pillows. His brow furrowed, not quite sure what to

make of her answer. Still, *'if, as she said, it was early days in the relationship with this Jordan guy, then he wasn't really treading on any toes.'* The thought cheered him immensely.

He left the hospital with a cheeky grin for the nurses and a smacking kiss and a bunch of flowers for his martinet in starched white, who blushed like crazy and swatted his backside as he sauntered away.



Promptly at eight-thirty that evening, Joe rang the doorbell to Jenni's apartment. From the moment she invited him inside the hours just flew by. She had prepared a relatively light meal, knowing that Joe's stomach would be somewhat delicate. After the meal they sat together in her tastefully decorated sitting room that somehow reminded him of Cathy's sitting room. They seemed to have the same taste as far as decor and furnishings were concerned. The one thing they did not have in common however, and Joe was extremely pleased about, was *'dinky couches.'* Jenni's apartment was larger than Cathy's and her sitting room could accommodate a larger couch.

He lost count of the *'remember when'* stories. it was soon gone midnight and reluctantly Joe said, "I should get going, Jenni."

Jenni was suddenly held spellbound by Joe's intense look. She felt breathless as she gazed into his dark eyes and read in them what she knew was clearly written in her own.

All evening they had, without realizing it, been leading up to this one moment. Joe's hand slowly reached to touch the side of her face and his fingers softly caressed her cheek. "If you want me to go, just say so."

Jenni knew he was asking her if he could stay, and if he stayed, he would make love to her. Jenni had never made love with anyone on their first date. Then she reasoned. This was not their first date. Throwing all caution to the wind and hoping Joe's feelings for her were deeper than just a *'one-nighter'*, she whispered. "I don't want you to go."

Joe slowly moved toward her, intending to kiss her lightly but somehow the kiss seemed to explode and neither had any control over the myriad of feelings that surfaced. Feelings that had lain dormant inside them both, waiting for the moment when they would be released.

Jenni was almost overcome with the feelings surging through her body. Joe had been her first love, and her first lover, so this intimacy was not new to them; but

she knew tonight it would be different for them both. They were no longer college kids. She didn't doubt Joe was a more experienced lover.

They parted breathlessly. Joe's eyes were almost black with desire as he sought hers. He hadn't realized until this moment just how much he had missed her and what a fool he'd been to ever have let her slip away. Jenni was regretting all the years they had wasted by being apart. Her body ached for him. She wanted him--- now. "Make love to me, Joseph." In her rising passion she had used his full name, it seemed so right.

Joe needed no other encouragement and every other woman he had ever known paled into insignificance as he made love to the only woman he had ever truly loved.



The next couple of weeks saw Joe and Jennifer spending as much time together as they could. They found they still had the same things in common, and both had no doubt at all about the passion they shared after their first night together. Their long separation had only served to heighten their desire.

They were happy in each other's company and it was inevitable their happiness overflowed into their respective workplaces.

Matthew noticed that Jenni had a permanent smile on her face these days and knew Joe Maxwell to be the reason for it. He almost felt sorry for her, knowing her happiness would not last. Maybe when it was all over, he'd have another shot with her. She might be more willing to come across if he offered the proverbial shoulder to cry on. The depths he was willing to sink knew no bounds.

Everyone at the DA's office commented on Joe's happy demeanour too and asked Catherine what miracle had been performed on him at the hospital. She smiled and said nothing, but inside though she was thrilled, and she again pestered Joe to bring Jenni for dinner.

"All right, all right, Radcliffe, for you anything. When?"

"Friday night about eight, okay?"

He agreed and they then set about preparing an airtight case. Catherine was still concerned about Joe's safety, but he waved away her worries.

"Don't worry about it, everything's fine."

Catherine shook her head, exasperated with him. "Come down out of the clouds, Joe. This is big time we're working on here. We're talking syndicate here and that

means being very careful. Promise me you'll keep a low profile, Joe. I mean it."

He appreciated her concern and loved her for it, but as far as he was concerned there was no problem, but he promised her anyway, knowing she would give him no peace until he did.

"Okay, I promise, Cathy. Now, can we get on?"

Unfortunately, things were far from fine. The net was closing in on Joe Maxwell. The syndicate had discovered his part in getting the witness to come forward and a contract had been set up to take him out before the trial. He was blissfully unaware of what was taking place and went about his business with no thought in his head regarding his possible demise. He had no idea of the elaborate and sophisticated surveillance being carried out on him every minute of the day. Matthew Jordan was a methodical man leaving nothing to chance, which was why he was considered one of the best in his field. In a matter of days, he would know everything there was to know about Joe Maxwell, right down to the famous chocolate cheese balls he was so fond of.

Catherine could not shake the feeling about the danger he could be in and finally voiced her concern to Vincent. She went Below, as she did most nights now. She knew Vincent was never really comfortable in the apartment although he did his best to hide the vulnerability he felt about extended visits Above. Since their marriage, her side of their bond had been growing steadily stronger.

She paced the floor of their chamber as Vincent sat in his chair, listening intently while his wife told of her concern.

"Joe won't listen, Vincent. He thinks it's all signed, sealed and delivered but I don't like it. Everything has gone down too easy in a case this big. Let's face it, our man Angelo is not going to calmly sit back and let himself be indicted without some sort of insurance. He must know by now that we have a witness and he must know of Joe's involvement."

Vincent nodded, agreeing with her logic. "It would appear that Joe's life could well be in danger. He is your friend, Catherine, and I will do all I can to help."

She stopped pacing for a moment. "I know you will, Vincent," then a thought suddenly occurred to her. "If I can stick with Joe as much as possible, maybe I'll be around if anything happens and then you would know, wouldn't you?"

She hated to put him in this position and promised herself she would never do it again. Joe was her friend and she had to do all she could to keep him safe. He just was not used to field work and she was feeling guilty because finding witnesses and getting them to come forward was usually her portfolio. However, due to the high profile on this case and the heat coming from above, Moreno had gone over

her head and assigned the job to Joe.

Vincent was not happy with his wife courting trouble, but that was her way and he would protect her to his last breath. "Be very careful, my love, and know I am always near."



On Wednesday evening Jenni had dinner at Joe's place and she somehow felt that tonight would be special and her stomach fluttered with nervous excitement. The dinner passed pleasantly with Jenni expressing approval of the bolognaise sauce.

Joe grinned and tapped his nose. "Mama's secret recipe. I guard it fiercely."

She remembered well, the meals she had eaten in Joe's house all those years ago. "You know, it's a wonder I didn't end up looking like the New Year Blimp, the way your mama fed me."

Joe burst out laughing. "You ought to know Italian mamas. They firmly believe a girl's got to be as big as a house before any man will want them as a wife."

He cleared the table and walked to the kitchen whistling happily, while Jenni moved to the couch and sank back among the cushions.

Joe had a nice apartment. It looked lived in, if a little lacking the feminine touch. Jenni let her eyes roam around the room at leisure, visualizing certain things she would add to the decor, before abruptly halting her train of thought. She was getting carried away, just because they were still compatible in bed didn't mean Joe wanted to make a lifetime commitment.

Joe returned with two glasses of wine and was about to hand one to her when his toe got caught in the edge of the carpet and he tripped. He managed to save himself, but not the wine, and he watched in horror as it spread outwards in a dark red stain over Jenni's blouse. "**Damn it,**" he rushed towards her with a handkerchief desperately trying to soak up the worst of it.

"It's all right, Joe," she tried to reassure him.

Almost in slow motion he raised his eyes to hers. The subtle scent of her perfume invaded his nostrils. A little voice inside his head reminded him about taking it slow and not rushing her into any commitments she may not be willing or ready to make; but his heart said, '**to hell with slow.**' The time was right. He knew it as surely as the sun would rise in the morning.

"Jenni?" He questioned slowly; his eyes boring into hers.

Any decision seemed to be taken away from her as she gazed up at him. Her breasts rose and fell as her breathing quickened and the only word she could utter was, "Yes."

Joe cupped her face and very softly kissed her lips, barely moving. She conveyed her need for more by opening her lips slightly, giving him the encouragement, he sought to deepen the kiss as her arms stole up to his neck pulling him down beside her.

Joe dragged his mouth away and took a lungful of much needed air. "Jenni," he whispered, "This isn't a game for me. I need you to know that. I don't want to go any further if it isn't what you want too." He smoothed away loose strands of hair from her face and felt as if he would explode if he didn't tell her how much he loved her. Part of him was scared to death that he would be hurt again, and it was a hurt he didn't think he would ever recover from, but another part knew he had to take a chance.

"Jenni, I..." He swallowed. *'God, this was hard, laying himself wide open.'* He had never felt so vulnerable in his life.

Jenni felt tears sting her eyes. He did not need to say a thing, she saw the truth of his heart in his eyes. Laying her fingers against his lips she whispered, "Shhhh, Joseph, I know. It isn't a game for me either. The minute I saw you again I knew, and that first night we spent together, even though we had only just found each other again, I knew, and even when you make love to me so beautifully and never voiced your love for me, I knew. I knew you could never have loved me as you did, as you have since we found each other again." She paused for a moment then spoke the words he had been so afraid to say. "I love you, Joseph. I always have and I always will."

On the surface Joe was a world weary, cynical Assistant D.A. but underneath he was pure Italian with emotions to match. He felt too full to speak, and his voice was barely a whisper, "I love you, Jenni," before pulling her into his arms he kissed her fiercely.

Jenni felt all her love for this wonderful man rise inside her, as well as a sharp pain in the region of her heart, because as sure as she sat here with him now, she knew by the depth of his emotion that someone had hurt him and hurt him badly. She made a solemn vow that she would make him forget the hurt and pain he had suffered at the hands of another woman.

Jenni took his hand and together they slowly walked toward the bedroom. Her eyes and body promising him everything as they unhurriedly undressed each other.

With infinite care Joe lay her down on the bed and carefully caressed her body with his hand. He was again in total control of his emotions. "I love you, Jenni... and my body aches for you... but there's something I..." he paused and gently kissed her lips. "Will you marry me, Jenni?" he whispered.

Jenni looked up into the eyes of the man she loved and whispered, "On one condition."

Joe frowned slightly. "What?"

Jenni bit her lip gently attempting to hide the smile that threatened to come to her lips. "You give me your mama's recipe for Bolognese sauce."

Suddenly they both dissolved into laughter and all the tension drained away from Joe as he looked down at his future wife. "Done."

"And you won't mind if I get big and fat?"

Joe gave her one of his boyish grins. "Only if you get big and fat... with our Italian babies."

"I can't think of a better time to begin making babies."

Joe looked down at her, his eyes beginning to darken with desire. "Neither can I." He captured her mouth in a smouldering kiss and they made love in wild abandon knowing that should Jenni conceive, the child would truly be a child created from a deep and everlasting love.



Matthew Jordan sat in a rented car at the end of the block keeping watch on Joe's apartment building. Thoughts of what they were doing inside were interrupted by the buzzing on his mobile phone.

"Jordan," said the unmistakable voice of his latest employer. "Things are moving too fast. Maxwell has to be taken out by Friday at the latest."

Matthew protested. "Can't be done, Mr. Angelo. I need another week minimum, to do it clean."

Angelo practically screamed down the phone. ***"I'm paying you to do a job and I want it done by Friday. I'm about to be indicted in case you'd forgotten. Now get yourself over here."***

Matthew grimaced and switched off the phone. He hated being told how to do his job. He surmised that Angelo was beginning to panic and that could lead to mistakes being made. He, for one, had no intention of getting caught out in any of

this. He had worked too long to have his reputation ruined by amateurs.



The table was set and the candles cast a soft glow over the room. Catherine was satisfied. Now all she needed were her guests. The doorbell rang precisely at eight and she went to let them in.

"Jenni, it's good to see you again. Hi Joe, come on in."

After a pleasant dinner, they sat in the lounge, chatting and sharing a bottle of wine. Jenni kept staring at the painting hanging over the fireplace. She loved it, and finally had to ask about its origin.

"Where on earth did you find it, Cathy, it's beautiful."

Catherine let her eyes roam over the picture, remembering. She had had no photographs of her wedding day, like other people, and this was the next best thing. She had visited Elizabeth in the painted tunnels and described Vincent's special place to her and asked if she could paint a picture of it. What resulted was perfect and now had pride of place in the apartment. Elizabeth had even painted in two figures. Their faces obscured by the spray from the waterfall.

"A friend painted it as a gift. We both love fairy tales you see. Wouldn't it be wonderful if everyone were as happy as the two in the picture?" She glanced at the couple sitting close together on the couch and added, "You two seem pretty close to it though."

She was astounded to see that Joe was blushing to the roots of his hair.

"As usual Radcliffe, you're a step ahead." Joe grinned. "We want you to be the first to know. We're getting married."

Catherine clapped her hands together gleefully. "I knew you guys would make it." She only wished Vincent was here to share the news. "This calls for champagne."

Joe shook his head regretfully. "Sorry Cathy, but Jenni's on early call in the morning and we really should be going. Thanks for dinner."

"I understand. I'll walk down with you."

They left the apartment and went down in the elevator, standing together on the front steps of the building waiting for a passing cab so Joe could flag him down.

Three men sat watching from a parked car on the corner of the street. One of the men was arguing heatedly with the other two, but getting nowhere, so he slumped back in his seat wishing he was anywhere but where he was. He felt a

crawling sensation of fear in his spine, something he had never known before, and he had a certain knowledge that this night was going to be his last.

Back on the front steps Catherine was hugging her two friends happily.

"Congratulations again. I'm so happy for you both." She was about to say more when they were suddenly confronted by three men carrying guns.

"Well, Mr. Hot Shot D.A. It appears you have angered the wrong people, so be a good boy and say goodbye to the ladies; we're taking you for a ride."

Matthew Jordan cringed in embarrassment at the cliché dramatics. *'The idiot had seen far too many gangster movies. They were rank amateurs,'* he thought with disgust.

Jennifer screamed when she saw Matthew. Joe instinctively pulled her behind him. He was only faintly pleased that his first impression of Matthew Jordan had been right on target. Turning to Catherine, he shrugged. "Looks like you were right, kiddo. I guess I should have listened."

Catherine tried to push down her fear, knowing Vincent was close. *'How in hell were they going to get out of this?'* She tried talking to the men, stalling for time. "Look, killing him won't get you anywhere. We'll still have the witness and no way will Angleo get to him."

Matthew Jordan felt the need to apologize for the mess they were all in. "You were right, of course, and all this could have been avoided had I been given a little more time. Unfortunately, Mr. Maxwell did his work a little too well and as my employer will be indicted any day now, he had hoped that Mr. Maxwell's sudden and, shall we say, tragic death, would have halted proceedings for some considerable time. Believe me, I am a reluctant participant in this fiasco."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Catherine was completely bemused by the turn of events. *'Who would ever credit a hit man apologizing?'*

Suddenly from out of the darkness, a threatening growl was heard that made everyone freeze in their tracks. "Vincent." Catherine breathed in relief. "Thank God."

He stood menacingly in the shadows. "Go, Catherine. Take your friends to Father." With those words, he leapt at the nearest man and felled him immediately. The other two raised their weapons but Vincent vanished into the night. The assailants gave chase momentarily forgetting the reason for being there. Matthew ran through the alleyways. The fear he had felt earlier now intensified to horrendous proportions. *'What in God's name was it?'* A deathly scream reached his ears and he felt himself lifted off the ground, as he came face

to face with death, suddenly realizing the scream was his own. He was dead before he hit the ground.

In the confusion Catherine grabbed her friends, none too gently, and dragged them back inside the building and down to the basement.

Once safely Below, they stopped to catch their breath. Panting heavily Catherine asked. "Are you both all right?"

Joe and Jenni were completely disoriented. "Who was that up there, and where are we?" asked Joe.

"Just trust me, Joe, okay? We will be safe here and whatever either of you see or hear down here from now on must be forgotten." She turned to Jenni and said, "You are a doctor and what you see could well arouse your professional curiosity. Don't let it." Her tone of voice brooked no argument. She turned back to Joe. "Friends trust each other, don't they, Joe?"

"Yeah, they do."

"Then please don't betray what you see here. I need your promise." She waited, there was no way she would take them any further until she had it. This was Vincent's home and she would sacrifice everything, including Joe's friendship, to protect it.

"You have it, Cathy," said Joe, and Jenni nodded her agreement as he continued. "Whoever that was up there saved our lives."

Catherine expelled her breath in relief. "Thank you." They continued along the tunnel. "Stay close to me." The tunnel twisted and turned so many times that her two companions soon completely lost their bearings.

"Does she know where she's going, Joe?" asked a very frightened Jenni.

He squeezed her hand. He was scared too, but he did trust Cathy. "Don't worry, she knows." They continued to walk, and Joe took note of the torches lighting the way at measured distances along the tunnels. This told him quite plainly that the tunnels were inhabited. *'What kind of people live here and how does Cathy know of them?'*

A while later, Catherine stopped as someone came out of the shadows. "Hello, Mouse. I have two friends with me, and they are in trouble."

At the sight of another human being, and a ragged one at that, Joe and Jenni stopped abruptly almost crashing into Catherine's back. They held their breath without realizing it.

Mouse looked them over carefully. He had been taught to be very cautious around strangers, but Father had said it was all right, so he supposed it must be.

"Father's waiting. Come."

Joe and Jenni gaped in disbelief as they suddenly entered a huge chamber filled with people, all similarly dressed in the haphazard fashion as was their guide. Many pairs of eyes stared back at them, more out of friendly curiosity than any fear. Jenni thought for one crazy minute that she had walked straight onto a film set and any second the Director would shout. "Cut."

Joe saw at least a dozen children who gave him a cursory look over, before dismissing him and running off into what he assumed was another tunnel, no doubt to continue their game.

He kept a firm hold of Jenni's hand and watched as Catherine rushed to a man, whom Joe took to be the *'Father'* the disembodied voice above had mentioned.

"I'm sorry, Father. I know it's against the rules but there was no other choice and I trust them totally. They will not betray us." She beckoned to her friends. "Joe, Jenni, this is Father. He's the head of this Community."

Father and Joe shook hands, each feeling an instant rapport. "Vincent explained Catherine's fears for your safety and you are welcome to stay."

Joe thanked him and asked where they were.

"Well now," said Father smiling. "That will take some explaining but Catherine will tell you everything you want to know. I am familiar with your work, Mr. Maxwell. Catherine speaks of you often, so I think the time has come for you to learn of us. It has been difficult for her to keep the existence of this Community a secret, especially from you."

While they were talking, Catherine looked all around for Vincent. "Has he returned yet, Father?"

"Not yet, but do not worry, my dear. He will be back very soon."

As Joe and Jenni took in their surroundings, Catherine tried not to worry about their reaction to Vincent, but she had to be sure.

"Joe, what I said earlier about what you see here. You won't let me down, will you?"

He turned puzzled eyes on her. "There's something else, isn't there?"

She nodded slowly. "You've heard Vincent's name mentioned. He is not as other men and could never live in our world, up there," she motioned with her hand.

"He's very special and he is the main reason why this place must be protected at all costs. Do you understand?"

Joe didn't understand but he saw how desperate she looked and took her hand.

"We both promised, and we won't break our word."

"Thanks, Joe. I appreciate it more than you know."

A commotion outside the chamber made them all turn. Vincent stood silently in the shadows. "Vincent!" She cried and flew across the distance into his arms.

"Thank God you're safe. I was afraid for you."

He held her close and moved into the light, tipping her face to his and kissed her fully for all to see. The others in the chamber were used to seeing them kissing, they were always kissing, after all, they were married; but to the newcomers it was a revelation. Jenni in particular now realized what Catherine meant by curbing her professional curiosity, and for a split second, all she could think of was what could be learned from studying such a unique specimen. However, she had promised. Compared to their lives, it was a small price to pay, so she relaxed and let it go.

Catherine released herself from Vincent's arms and led him to her friends. "I have wanted you two to meet for a long time. Joe, this is Vincent, my..." She looked to Vincent for permission to continue and he cast loving eyes upon her and nodded. She thanked him with a quick kiss and turned back to Joe. "Vincent is my beloved husband and for obvious reasons I could not tell anyone, not even you, Joe."

Jenni could not tear her eyes away from him and suddenly exclaimed. "It's you two in the painting. You and Catherine."

Vincent smiled gently at Jenni and she fell under his spell, as did most people who met him and took the time to know him. "You have seen it?" he queried. "Yes, Elizabeth is a talented artist. That is the place where Catherine and I were married. It is very special to us." He paused for a moment taking in their bewilderment. "I can see that you are finding this difficult to assimilate. I suggest that Catherine shows you to the Guest Chamber where you may rest. Then later we will sit with Father and decide what to do next." He kissed Catherine and said he would wait in their chamber.



Exhausted as they were, Joe and Jenni found it impossible to sleep until the very early hours, partly due to the rumblings above them and the strange banging of pipes, which they found oddly comforting, and partly because of all that had happened. Now that they were safe Jenni began to shake with reaction. The fear she had valiantly held at bay during those terrifying moments Above had to find release somehow; and, there was the added shock of seeing Matthew. How could such a gifted surgeon, supposedly dedicated to saving lives, find such pleasure in

killing, and how could she have been taken in so completely?

She was confused, afraid, and her calm structured life had turned upside down from the moment Joe had reappeared. Yet he was the one good thing to have come out of the whole situation. It was too complicated to work out and so she just cried.

Joe held her, soothing her as best he could. He, too, was suffering from delayed shock himself. He got to thinking that if he hadn't poisoned himself and landed up in the hospital, he and Jenni would never have met up again and she might well have ended up married to Matthew Jordan. He held her tighter still. He was not normally a superstitious man, but it seemed to him that unseen forces, the fates, call it what you will, were at work here and that scared him as much as anything else. He didn't like the idea of his life being preordained, but on the other hand, if it hadn't happened as it did, all the way back to him going after the witness instead of Cathy, then he wouldn't have found Jenni again. So many ifs, buts, and maybes, and he was too tired to try and make sense of it.

They fell into an exhausted sleep holding each other tightly like lost and lonely children, which was how Catherine found them the next morning. She was loath to wake them, but it had to be done. There was still a problem Topside. She moved closer to Joe and tapped him on the shoulder, waking him so suddenly that Catherine was startled.

"Sorry to wake you, Joe," she said sincerely. He still looked tired out. "Father is waiting."

His eyes focused and he looked around the chamber as he tried to remember where in the world he was. "This place is real, those people are real, he's real." He didn't realize he'd spoken aloud until Catherine answered him softly.

"Yes, Joe. It's all very real and you're safe."

Jenni opened her eyes and on seeing Catherine sat up quickly, panic filling her face. "**What's happening? What's wrong?**" she cried.

Joe immediately reached for her. "Shhhh, honey. We're okay."

Catherine reassured her too. "Joe's right. You're completely safe here and among friends. I came to tell you that Father is waiting for us in his chamber, and he would be happy for you to join him for breakfast. If you're hungry, that is."

Joe looked up. "Will you and Vincent be there?" He wanted another look at Cathy's husband, sure that in the panic of the night before, he had exaggerated Vincent's appearance. Fear can play strange tricks on the mind at such times.

At the sound of Vincent's name, Jenni, too, began to wonder if he was really real.

Catherine smiled. It would appear that her husband was now uppermost in their thoughts. "Yes, we'll be there. Oh! If you need the bathroom, you'll find one just next door. Not what you're used to, but I think you'll be suitably impressed. Samantha is waiting outside to guide you to Father's chamber. About fifteen minutes okay?"

She was turning to leave when Joe's voice stopped her. "You've got some fancy explaining to do, Radcliffe. How long have you known about this place?" He paused, then looked her square in the eyes, plainly asking for the truth this time. "About Vincent?" Now that the immediate danger had passed, he wanted to know all the details.

She knew he would ask sooner or later and at last she could tell him, although not at this very minute, there were more pressing matters to attend to.

"Joe, it's a long story and you've been a true friend by not pressing me about my private life. I've wanted to tell you, a hundred times I almost did, but I made a solemn promise to keep his secret. Now that the circumstances have changed, I can tell you everything, but not right now, there isn't time. Funny, isn't it?" she pondered aloud. "If none of this had happened, you would never have known anything of this place."

Joe groaned. "Tell me about it. I've been going crazy half the night with all the ifs, buts and maybes. Seriously though Cathy, you can trust me."

"And me," said Jenni, much more relaxed now.

Catherine impulsively hugged them. "I know and thanks. See you in a little while."

Half an hour later, seated around the table in Father's chamber, they discussed the best thing to do.

"You will have to stay here for now," said Father. "Unfortunately, one of the men got away so it will not be safe for you Above."

Vincent apologized for having lost the man, yet no one asked what became of the other two, there was simply no need. Jenni knew without being told that Matthew Jordan was no more. She shuddered inside at the thought of Matthew meeting his end at Vincent's hands, and yet, at the same time, felt compassion for Vincent, who even now was still coming to terms with what he had had to do.

Father continued. "Anything you need can be provided here and messages will be left at your offices. Peter would be the best person to do that. Do you agree, Catherine?"

She explained who Peter was and it was agreed that they should stay. The trial

was two weeks away and as Joe and Catherine had done their work well, they were not really needed until then.

Father asked if they would like a guided tour of his world and they eagerly accepted the invitation.

"They appear very much in love, don't they?" commented Vincent after they had left.

Catherine felt quite smug as she replied. "They're getting married. What do you think of that?"

Vincent laughed indulgently. There was no stopping his wife when she got an idea into her head. "What have you been up to?"

She looked so innocently at him that he was not fooled for an instant. "Nothing, honestly. I just gave them a few ideas about each other and left them to it, really." She snuggled into his body. "Worked through, didn't it?"

The organization of this world was a shock to the system and Joe and Jenni seemed to ask endless questions which Father did his best to answer. Jenni was very impressed with the Hospital Chamber and asked Mary, who was the nurse and midwife; and how they managed to get supplies. Mary proudly told her that the Community had many Helpers Above and as some of them were in the medical profession, there was never usually a problem getting what they wanted. Jenni suddenly wondered how many, if any, of her colleagues were Helpers to these wonderful people.

Joe strolled alongside Father, keeping his pace slow to accommodate the older man's limping gait. "Father," he stopped, then grinned sheepishly. "Can I call you that? It seems to be catching."

Father laughed, genuinely amused. "Of course, everyone does."

Joe smiled his thanks. "Father, most people with a knowledge of New York are aware of the existence of tunnels under their feet. You only have to go to City Hall and look at the maps. So, what has me beat is how on earth you've managed to live down here for so many years without being discovered."

Father thought for a moment and debated whether he should tell Joe the truth. After all, Joe was a District Attorney and what Father and John Pater had done all those years ago had been a crime, and he hoped the Statute of Limitations on such a crime had run out a long time ago.

"Well now, Joe Maxwell. When this business is all over, I suggest you take a closer look at those maps in the City Hall."

"Huh! Why?" asked Joe.

Father leaned closer. "Because you will see that all the entrances to the tunnels have been very expertly sealed off, so, no one comes down here because, according to the maps, there's no way down." He looked at Joe very closely, noting the younger man's surprise and continued. "We had to make sure you see that we would be left undisturbed to live in peace. So, John and I broke into City Hall and tampered with the charts.

"Of course, we have been breached over the years by several people, but luckily for us they understood the reasons for this world and kept the secret, eventually becoming Helpers, our eyes and ears Above. Some of those Helpers from the early years ended up coming to live with us. So, I suppose you could say this world is a sanctuary for those who cannot cope up there and we continue to survive because we help and trust each other."

Joe stared at Father, trying to picture him breaking into City Hall but he just couldn't manage it. He laughed and said. "I gotta hand it to you, Father. You're one clever guy and I won't breathe a word, I promise."

Father nodded, expecting no less from this man. "I know you won't, Joe. If I had thought otherwise, I would never have told you. Now, shall we rejoin the others?"

The days passed in a happy haze for Joe and Jenni. The danger they had been in served to bring them even closer together and they made many new friends. It was still hard to take in, but both agreed they had been privileged to witness another world, another way of life, and Joe now understood Catherine's glow of happiness over the last few months. The questions remained, how on earth had she met Vincent. It was obvious that they adored each other.

"What do you make of him?" he asked Jenni.

Jenni had been thinking of nothing else since she'd seen Vincent. She had been completely stunned and her mind still could not take it in. The experience she had been through, facing men with guns, paled into insignificance compared to the myriad of questions arising from her introduction to the fascinating man who was Vincent. He could, quite conceivably, keep scientists and anthropologists fully occupied for years trying to determine how he came to be; and in different circumstances she would have been as eager as they in discovering his origins.

If she had come across Vincent in a laboratory somewhere wired up to numerous machines, she would have thought nothing of poking and probing, and generally treating him as nothing more than a curious specimen to be experimented with and studied. It shamed her to think that, but it was the truth, and she vowed that any future research she became involved in would be conducted with a great deal more respect for the patient than she had shown hitherto.

Having taken the time to get to know Vincent she could answer Joe's question truthfully. "I don't know without making tests, but I'm not going to do anything about it. I promised Cathy and to be honest, now that I know him, it wouldn't feel right anyway. He's a good person and that's all that matters to me."

"Yeah, he is. We tend to go by appearance alone in our world, don't we? That's the beauty of this place; people are accepted just as they are with no judgements. I like it." He gently pulled her into his arms. "I'm sorry I got you involved in this. I could have got you killed, and I love you so much."

Jenni shook his gently. "I love you too and we're in this thing together, okay?"

He silently thanked God he had found her again and vowed he would never put her in danger a second time. "As soon as this is over, I want to marry you. I don't want to wait."

She melted against him. "Right now, would suit me. We've waited a long time for each other."

"Great, now that we've got that settled, can we get some sleep? I'm bushed," he winked slyly at her.

"You're wicked, Joseph Maxwell," and she pinched him, hard.

"Ouch! You'll pay for that." He pushed her back on the bed and soon the giggles turned to sighs.

For a little while Jenni let herself be carried away on a tide of pleasures, but then she froze and Joe suddenly found himself holding what seemed like a plank of wood, rather than the soft yielding body of the woman he loved. "What's wrong?" he asked worriedly.

"Joe, we can't."

"What? Of course, we can, we are unofficially engaged, you know," he stated firmly.

Jenni giggled at the look of outrage on his face. "I don't mean that, silly. Look around Joe. Haven't you noticed anything odd about these chambers?"

Joe rolled his eyes. "Give me a break. Everything's odd down here."

She had no argument with that statement, but she wanted to draw his attention to something more specific. "Joe, there aren't any doors, not a single one anywhere."

He glanced toward the entrance. *'Hot damn, she was right.'* He turned back to her and shrugged. "Okay, so there aren't any doors, but have you noticed how many kids there are down here, and five will get you ten they're not all orphans."

There's got to be Moms and Dads making out all the time. Doesn't seem to have inhibited them any. Come on, I dare you, just keep your voice down." He laughed at the indignant look she threw him.

"Me! I'll have you know that I'm a very quiet lover. You're the one who..." The rest of the sentence was smothered by Joe kissing her breathless and any thoughts of being discovered melted away to nothing.



A short distance away in their own chamber Vincent and Catherine lay in bed talking quietly.

"I like Joe and I believe we shall become good friends."

Catherine was glad they had met, and she was relieved that Joe had not shown the slightest trace of fear or revulsion. She could sense Vincent's surprised gratitude and that endeared her all the more to Joe. Aside from a medical one there were no real worries about Jenni's reaction, as most women could look beneath the surface and see the gentleness of him. Catherine now had someone to talk about Vincent and their life together. She had often felt lonely keeping the secret. "I'm glad," she said at last, stroking his chest idly, with no thought as to what it was doing to his thought processes and then mused thoughtfully. "Do you realize that this is the longest time we have spent together. It's been almost like a honeymoon."

Vincent stayed her wandering hand---it was affecting him so much that it was taking away his ability to think clearly. "We never did have one, did we? You still have a week left here, we could use that time to go back to our special place."

"Oh Vincent, could we? I'd love that."

He said he would inform Father in the morning. Soon they fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms.

A few days later Father happened to see their visitors strolling around the community talking to people, playing with the children and he thought they fitted in well. He called to them to his chamber.

"Vincent and Catherine will be back some time today. You must forgive them for deserting you, but they have so little time together that each moment has to be cherished. Arrangements have been made to take you back tonight. I'm afraid someone is watching your apartment building, Joe. Probably the one that got away, so Jenni's apartment would be better for you. Peter has informed the Courts of the situation and they agreed that your appearance be deferred until the

last minute. You may not even be called so there is no point in taking unwarranted chances."

Joe was grateful for all they had done. "We owe you our lives and you can trust us to keep your secret. If you ever need us, don't hesitate to ask and I hope you will allow us to return here from time to time."

Father smiled, they were indeed good people and he had no reservations at all about giving his permission. "Of course. You will be welcome at any time."

Vincent and Catherine returned, deeper in love, if that were possible. Joe and Jenni said their goodbyes and Vincent led them along the tunnels to the nearest exit to Jenni's apartment. Joe took his arm. "We'll be fine from here. Cathy will let you know how things turn out. Thanks again."

Vincent inclined his head. "Goodbye and be well." He watched them leave and then turned to Catherine. "I will be very near, my love. Now go, while I can still let you."

Catherine kissed him lingeringly, not wanting to leave the safe haven of his arms. "I love you. I will be back as soon as I can." He watched her vanish into the night.



On the day of the trial crowds of people gathered outside the Court House; this case had been headline news for months. If there was any justice in the world then there would be one less crime boss loose by the time it was finished.

Microphones were pushed into Catherine's face and questions came at her from all sides. After repeating "No comment," to every question, she managed to push her way through the crowd and reach the court room with a sigh of relief.

Joe was already there waiting, and he was laughing at her. "Should have come in the back way like I did. You look a mess, Radcliffe."

Catherine was not amused. "You really know how to make a girl feel good, Joe. By the way, the City's finest picked up the man watching your apartment, so you're in the clear now."

He was more than glad to hear it. "I wish this was all over. I want to go home to Jenni." He sucked in a lungful of air. "God, that sounds good. Home to Jenni."

"Sounds real good, Joe," smiled Catherine.

Just then the doors burst open and people streamed in.

"Well, here we go, Cathy. Good luck."

The first day was taken up with the opening statements by the prosecution and defense attorneys. The proceedings moved very swiftly for a trial of such magnitude and even Angelo himself looked resigned to the inevitable. He sat in the court staring straight ahead, but already he was planning for the future. Within weeks he would be running the penitentiary, all the way up to the Governor. Things could be worse.

By the end of the week it was all over, there was no question of guilt. The witness Joe had produced had enough information to make the verdict a foregone conclusion. In this instance the wheels of justice did not grind slowly. Joe and Catherine were under no illusions though. They knew Angelo would still be running his empire from behind bars, but at least his influence would be less menacing.

They made a brief statement on the Court House steps to satisfy the reporters and then made their way back to the office in double quick time. "Phew, what a week," said Catherine.

Joe made straight for the telephone and punched out the number, drumming his fingers on the desk impatiently, in the absence of his customary elastic band. A few seconds later his face broke into a boyish grin.

"Hi honey. It's all over. When can you get away? My place in two hours? Love you."

He replaced the receiver but could not stop grinning. He hauled Catherine off the chair and swung her around.

"Okay, okay. Put me down, you're making me dizzy," she complained happily.

Joe set her down and then had a thought. "Hey, we have to tell Vincent and the others."

Catherine giggled. "With the communications system they have, they probably already know, but I'll go anyway. You go home and wait for Jenni."



Two hours later Joe was a nervous wreck wondering if he looked all right, or if he was over-dressed. *'Oh Hell, what if she doesn't like the ring? I should have let her choose her own.'* He had been on his way home from court midway through the trial and seen the ring in a Jeweler's shop. It was a purely impulsive reaction to buy it and now he was having second thoughts. With his luck it probably wouldn't even fit.

The doorbell rang and he almost jumped two feet off the ground. He took a last look in the mirror, then sent a prayer heavenward. *'Don't let me mess this up.'*

Jenni, waiting on the other side of the door, was equally nervous. She'd been ecstatic when Joe had called, and she could hardly concentrate on her patients. As soon as she could, she had dashed home and changed into the best dress she owned. But now, looking down at herself she was afraid she had overdone it.

The door opened and the nervousness on both sides fled. It was going to be all right. Joe pulled her inside, kicking the door shut with his foot, and kissed her until the need to breathe forced him to release her. He found he couldn't stop touching her though, as he realized he could have lost her forever.

He needed to explain, and the words bubbled from his lips. "Listen honey. What happened isn't usual, you know. I hardly ever leave the office. Cathy normally does the field work. It'll probably never happen again, honest."

Jenni shook her head. "Joe, Joe, it doesn't matter now. As long as we're together I can take anything. Look, Vincent and Catherine have almost impossible obstacles, but it would never part them, would it?"

Those words gave him pause for thought. What Cathy and Vincent must have had to deal with over the years could scarcely be imagined but their love was sure and they endured, and so would he and Jenni.

"No, we don't have half their problems, do we? Okay, it's forgotten. Where shall we get married?"

He stopped himself suddenly, remembering how he had planned to propose again, this time officially, especially now he had the ring. He was getting ahead of himself. *'Damn fool.'* He took her hand and led her into the sitting room. His deeply romantic nature, unknown to anyone except his immediate family, took over.

His hand trembled as he gently caressed her cheek and softly smoothed a stray lock of hair away from her face; his eyes never wavered but remained locked with hers.

Jenni stared back, feeling herself melt from the inside out; the look in his eyes was one she had never seen before, from anyone. She felt him take her left hand then suddenly she was looking down at him as he knelt on one knee.

Joe swallowed. "I have always loved you, all the years we were apart, you were still inside me, and you would make me a happy man if," he paused for a moment. "Will you marry me? Please."

Jenni's eyes filled with tears of happiness and all she could do was nod her

acceptance, but it was more than enough for Joe. He slipped the ring onto her finger and stood up.

She admired the ring, resting on her finger as though it had always belonged there. It was plain, just a simple solitaire with no frills. A clear, pure stone, flawless, just like her. Joe could not have chosen better.

"You can choose another one if you don't like it," he muttered nervously.

"Joe Maxwell, don't even think about it. I love it and I want to marry you more than anything." She touched her lips to his and whispered, "You make me feel complete."

When their highly charged emotions had settled somewhat, they began to discuss the wedding arrangements. Both of their families lived out of state and Joe commented that it was just as well that their respective Mamas would no doubt take over everything and turn the day into a three-ringed circus which neither of them wanted. Jenni agreed absolutely.

"I love my parents very much, but you're right. I want something quiet, just for us. Maybe later we could go home and have our marriage blessed by the neighbourhood priest."

"Sounds good to me," said Joe. Personally, he didn't care where or how it took place, just as long as it did.

Eventually they decided on an open-air ceremony, somewhere where their newfound friends could witness it from a safe distance. They owed these people so much. The trouble was, as newcomers to the underground community, they had no idea what was considered safe and what was not. Joe said he would ask Cathy's advice. They then toasted their good fortune and their future life together.



Catherine hugged Joe to pieces when he told her what they wanted to do. Such a wonderful gesture and typical of Joe, who was as soft as marshmallow under that cynical exterior. She had always thought so and now he was proving it.

Jenni too received similar treatment when she asked Catherine to stand with her. She had never been a bridesmaid and she was thrilled to bits.

Catherine found the ideal place in a remote part of Central Park, close to a disused tunnel entrance. No one would ever guess that hundred eyes were witnessing the ceremony. Joe was pleased.

"Great, Cathy. Thanks. We want them included as much as possible."

Catherine had already spoken to Father about giving them a reception Below. Neither of them had any close family in New York and it would be the ideal gift and a wonderful surprise.

Two days before the wedding Joe's buddies gave him a party to end all parties. He was the last of the '*guys*' to get hitched and they wanted to give him a great send off. He deserved it, they said, since he had held out the longest.

They travelled to each of the old haunts, frequented when they were footloose and fancy free, and had a wild night.

Joe woke up the next morning to find himself naked as a jay bird and handcuffed to his mailbox. The keys were lying just out of reach, but he dare not move in case his head rolled off his shoulders. The pain was excruciating. "Never again," he groaned.

The mailman came by at seven-thirty and didn't turn a hair. This was after all New York and a lot stranger things had happened. "Morning, Joe. Heavy night?" "Damned if I can remember," Joe groaned. "Get me out of these cuffs, Max. The keys are on the floor over there."

Max soon had Joe out of the cuffs, found the front door key and helped him inside. He disappeared into the kitchen, returning a couple of minutes later. "Coffee's on and here's your mail. Take it easy, Joe. See you around," and he left, whistling, making Joe's head pound all the more.

Jenni's night out was more subdued. She and Cathy, along with a couple of girls Jenni knew from the hospital, went out to dinner at the classiest restaurant in town and spent a fortune on good food and champagne.

It had been decided that Cathy would spend the eve of the wedding at Jenni's apartment and when she arrived they spent the night talking about the men in their lives, coming to the conclusion that no two finer men walked the planet, either Above or Below.



Jenni was in dire need of a drink, but she didn't dare. Her hands were shaking so much. This was her wedding day and she had never been so nervous in her life. She was grateful Cathy had stayed overnight.

She kept returning to the full-length mirror in the bedroom, twisting first one way and then the other, checking and rechecking her appearance.

"Do I look all right? Maybe I should have put my hair up. Oh Cathy, I feel such a mess."

Her Matron of Honour, dressed in a knee-length blue outfit, which just happened to be a favourite of Vincent's, laughed as she gave Jenni's glossy hair a final brush through.

"You look gorgeous and you know it. Joe will be knocked out when he sees you. Now, take some deep breaths, Doctor. I don't want you fainting on me. Your profession would never live it down."

The bride-to-be giggled as Cathy had intended her to. "You're good for me, Cathy. I don't have many friends in the City; I haven't been here long enough to make any. Thanks."

"You're welcome, friend. Now, let's get this show on the road before we both start crying and ruin our make-up. We have a wedding to attend."

Joe was standing, waiting anxiously at the spot where their marriage was to take place. He kept moving from one foot to the other and running a finger around his collar. When he caught sight of her, all movement ceased. He could only stare. He doubted he had ever seen anyone as beautiful in his life. She was a vision in white, her calf length dress billowing in the breeze. She carried a posy of pink rosebuds with matching flowers in her long, flowing hair.

It was a truly moving ceremony and as the priest blessed the couple, Catherine let her eyes stray to the tunnel. She could not see him, but she knew he was there, watching. The bond opened wide allowing her to feel his every emotion. She mouthed the words *'I love you,'* across the distance separating them, knowing he would hear.

Joe had told their other guests that they would be leaving for their honeymoon straight away, so there would be no reception. It was not true, of course. They thought they were going to celebrate their marriage with Vincent and Catherine at her apartment and were completely unaware of the surprise waiting for them Below.

After bidding goodbye to the bride and groom, the few guests drifted away and then Catherine took charge, making sure the area was clear, before leading them to the tunnel. Even standing right next to it, Joe had difficulty seeing the entrance.

After all the congratulations, they proceeded to the Communal Chamber, which had been decorated especially for them. On the long table was a feast worthy of any banquet and the newlyweds were overcome.

"Just having you near today was enough but this," Jenni was so overwhelmed by

their kindness and generosity she had great difficulty keeping down the lump that rose in her throat.

Father patted her shoulder kindly and explained that they all wanted to do something for them and what better than for their newfound family to give them a party. He chuckled and lightened the atmosphere by saying, "Now, tuck in and enjoy."

It was a day to remember which would be talked about for a long time to come. Joe and Jenni led the dancing, and soon the floor was crowded with couples; Vincent and Catherine included, who were in a world of their own as usual.

Vincent felt his wife lean closer to his body. "They're staying at my place tonight before going on honeymoon." Catherine looked mischievously at him and he could not control the shiver which ran through him as he willingly joined in her game.

He raised an eyebrow and purred seductively. "Hmmmmmm, then it would appear you are homeless for the night. I have a very large bed. Would you like to share it with me?"

His wife giggled, obviously in a playful mood, and her sparkling green eyes made him want to drown in them forever.

"I thought you'd never ask."

The newlyweds at last made their farewells in a flurry of homemade confetti. "Vincent, Cathy, will you walk with us a way?" asked Joe.

The four walked slowly through the tunnels, the sound of music fading behind them as they got further away from the Communal Chamber. They walked in companionable silence, the newlyweds still marveling at the generosity their new found friends had bestowed on them so willingly, and they were doubly appreciative, knowing as they did how scarce the resources were in this underground world.

Even though they walked slowly, it seemed like no time at all before they arrived at the basement entrance to Catherine's apartment. The bright shaft of light reflecting the iron ladder set into the wall that would take them out of one world and into another.

Jenni impulsively hugged Vincent, suddenly understanding the lengths Catherine would go to protect him. She herself would do all she could to do likewise. "You have made this day so special for us and we will never forget it. Thank you."

Joe, in turn, hugged Catherine, his very special friend. "Thanks, Cathy." He turned to Vincent, feeling like Jenni, that he was honoured to know this man.

"Look after her, she's one very special lady."

Vincent drew Catherine into the safe haven of his arms. "I know. Be as happy in your love as we are and be well."

They watched as Joe and Jenni disappeared up the ladder to her basement to walk into the future together.

Catherine leaned back onto her husband's chest, immediately feeling his arms fold around her, giving her total love and security. She blinked away the moisture gathering in her eyes and sighed. "It was a beautiful wedding, wasn't it?" Her voice almost a whisper.

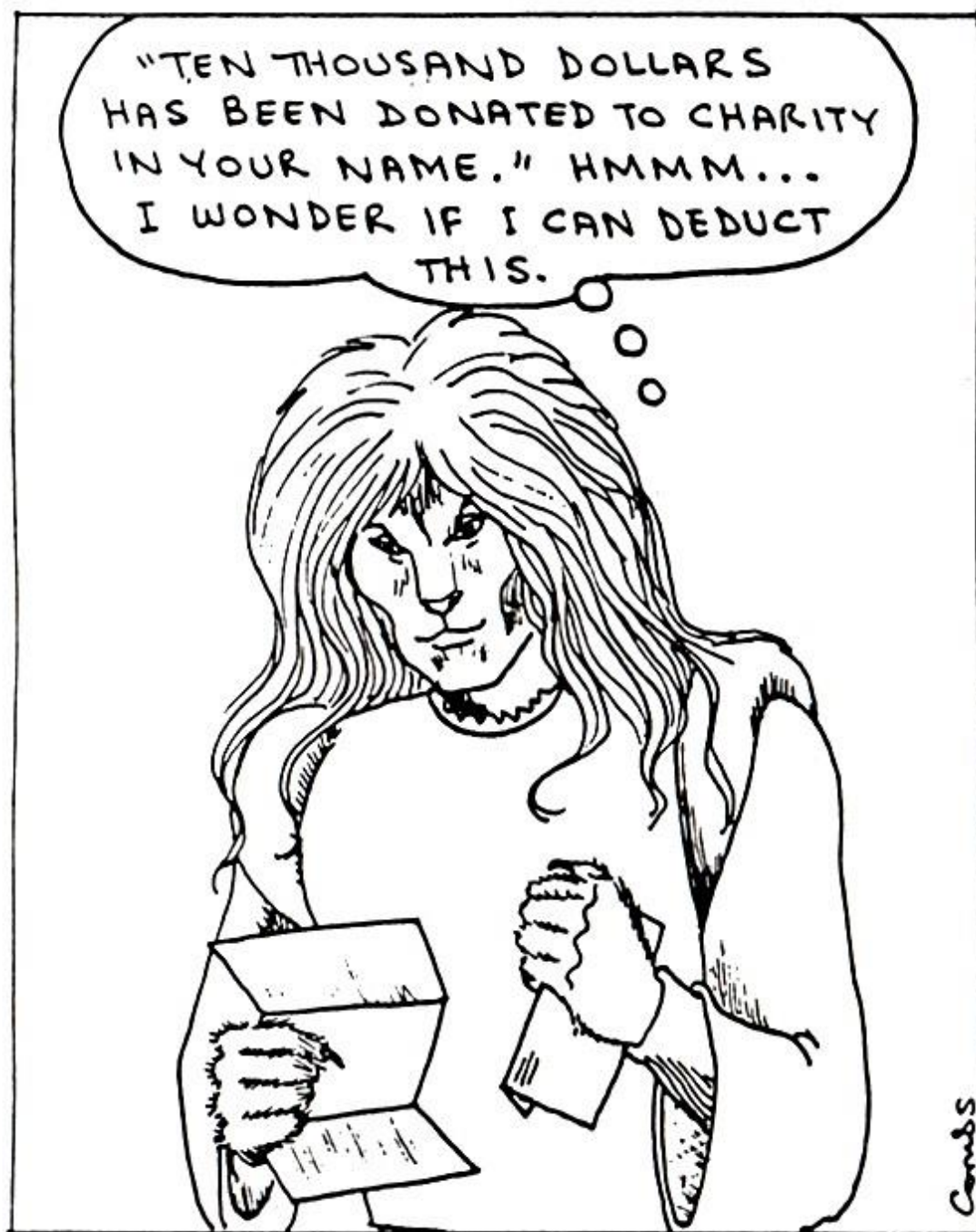
Vincent squeezed her a little tighter, kissing the top of her head. "Yes, my love, it was, and I seem to recall that you say the same thing at every wedding."

She turned in his arms and smiled up at him. "I know I do, but this wedding was special because it was Joe, and he deserves everything."

"And they, too, will know a happy life. Come, it is time for us to go home."

It sounded so good to hear him say that, so right. Home. Hand in hand they turned, retracing their steps through the half-light of the magical, mysterious and peaceful world; two shadows blending into one.





by Lynette Combs: This cartoon originally appeared in the Beauty and the Beast zine Circle of Light



Lynette Combs has graciously allowed us to use this delightful cartoon of our Vincent. It is only a tiny sample of the multiple talents she has shared with this fandom over the years. Lynette is well known throughout fandom as a talented writer, poet, artist, and editor. Her work can be found in well over twenty zines, some of which she singlehandedly wrote, illustrated, edited, and published herself. She can easily be considered one of the most prolific and talented fans this fandom has ever seen.



by Barb Gipson



The Last Chapter

Submitted by Allison Duggins

Song by ALAN OSMOND <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWWhScTslKo>



It's the last chapter in the book of life



From the beginning we knew wrong from right



*Would have to be decided
Would have to be made clear*



Maybe that's the reason we're all gathered here



*It's the last chapter we will make our lives
Fill all the pages the author said to write*



*To make the perfect ending
To make all dreams come true*



*That's why he gave us heaven
That's why he gave us you*



We love you



*We promise you it's true
So hold on until the world is through*



*Put away your fears
Put away your sorrows*



As long as we're together bring on tomorrow





*It's the last chapter why worry about the end
In all his wisdom the messenger did send*



*Answers to all reasons
The meaning to all rhymes*



*A love that last forever
Eternal in its time*



*So, when you're feeling down and tears fill your eyes
Just remember now who's standing by your side*

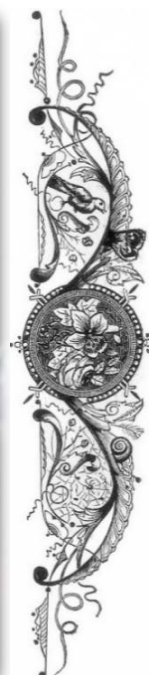


*A love that lasts forever
A love we know that's true*



*As long as we're together
As long as we have you*





*We love you
And promise you it's true*



So, hold on until the world is through



*Put away your fears
And put away your sorrows*



*As long as we're together
Bring on tomorrow*





In the last chapter why worry about the end



In all his wisdom the messenger did send

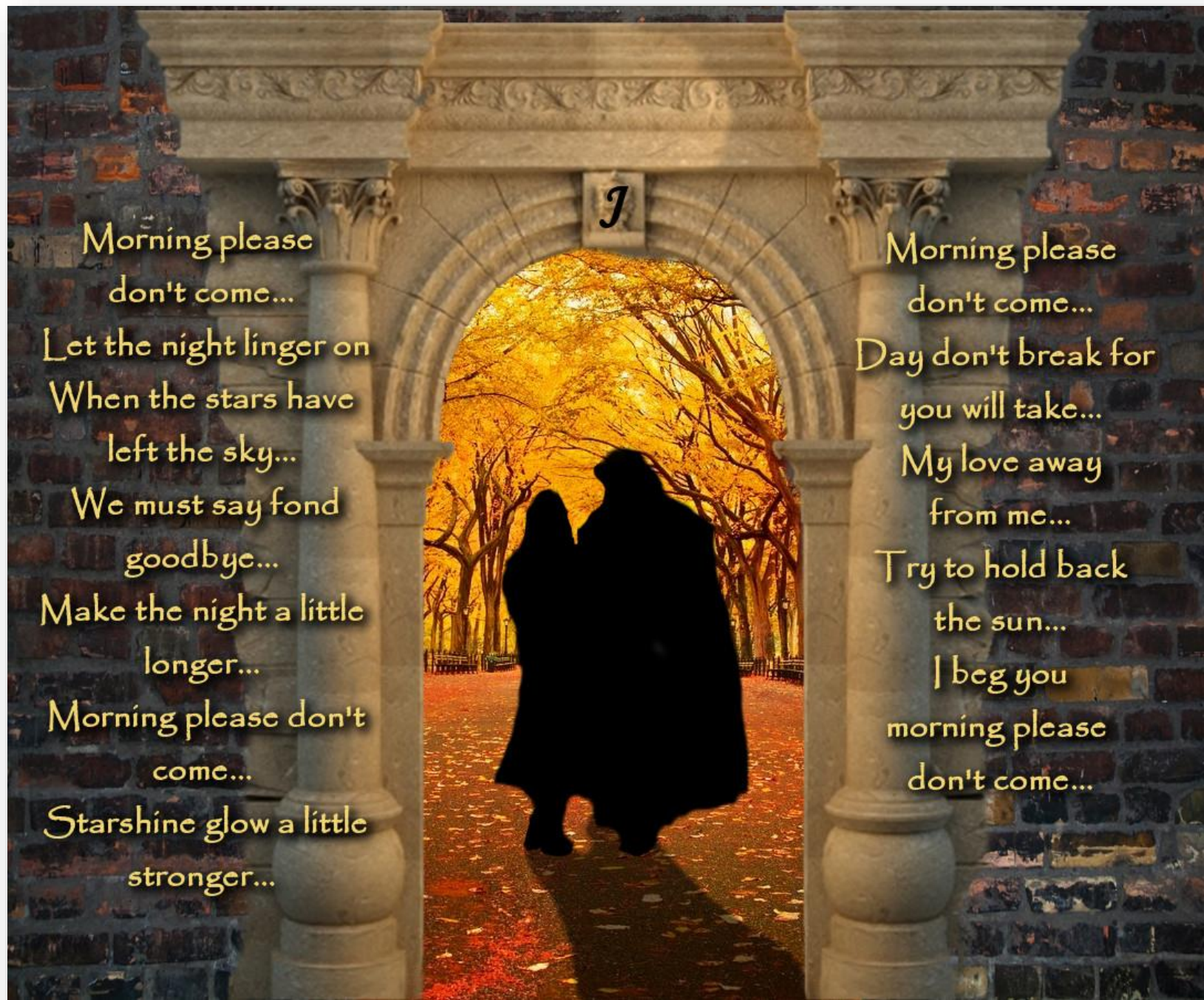


*Answers to all meaning
Reasons to all rhymes*



*That's why he gave us heaven
That's why he gave us you*

We love you



Musical Art by Judith Nolan; *Morning Please Don't Come*, Sung by Roger Whitaker, Written by Tom Springfield
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXdPV-SitHs>



*Many, many thanks to **Barb Gipson** for so generously allowing us to use her amazing art in our 2020 OnZine.*