

Where Magic Lives ...

The Annual Beauty and the Beast Convention



SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS  
July 8th-15th, 2026

Vincent by Crowmama



## *A Message from Your Con Chair*



Welcome, everyone, to the town *Where Magic Lives!*

I am so pleased to have you all come to Salem and experience the Magic. The Magic of Sights; the Magic of Sounds; the Magic of Tastes. Salem is truly a magical place filled with a rich history. I know you will come to love Salem as much as I do. It is a place where you can do as little or as much as you desire. You can set your own pace whether that be bustling or leisurely!



This year's charity is the Peabody High School's Arts Department. I chose this in honor of Chan and all our wonderful artists. I also chose a high school Arts Department because of how much art classes meant to me during my school years.

These days, when schools are forced to make budget cuts, it seems that it is the arts

## *A Message from Your Con Chair*

that get cut first. I am hoping our donation helps to ease some of the burden placed on teachers and students. There is no civilization without art.

I don't know if any previous charities have ever participated directly with our fund raising, but this year the students and faculty have a unique opportunity. I have asked the teachers if they thought any of the students would like to create an art piece to be sold in our auction. They were beyond excited and even asked if the faculty could also submit something if they wanted to!

Thank you to all that have gone above and beyond to bring this magic to you. I never, ever could have done this alone! In true tunnel fashion our "Helpers" have out done themselves! All I did was choose the setting!

Enjoy!


~Cyndi Day


Catherine by Crowmama






# Table of Contents


 [Convention Logo](#) by CrowMama ..... cover page


 [Vincent](#) by CrowMama..... i

[A Message from Your Con Chair](#) by Cyndi Day..... ii

 [Catherine](#) by CrowMama .....iv




 [Beauty and the Beast](#) by Tunnellizard ..... 1

 [The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1](#) by Linderial ..... 2

[Feline Reflection](#) by Laura G ..... 5

[Lucky](#) by Laura G ..... 9

[The Great Cat God and I](#) by Lucky ..... 14

 [The Truth](#) by Paula ..... 16

 [Out of the Ashes](#) by CandlelitChandler ❖ Rated R ..... 17

[Vincent](#) by Laura G ..... 20

[Embrace](#) by Laura G ..... 24

[Catherine](#) by Laura G ..... 42

[Father](#) by Laura G ..... 50

[Jenny](#) by Laura G ..... 54

[Vincent](#) by Laura G ..... 63

[Going Home](#) by Laura G ..... 68

[Kipper](#) by Laura G ..... 72

[Vincent](#) by Laura G ..... 77

[Vincent](#) by Laura G ..... 83

	<a href="#"><u>Courage</u></a> by Paula .....	85
	<a href="#"><u>Neath the Sidewalks of New York</u></a> by Denise .....	86
	<a href="#"><u>Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent</u></a> , by Maryann N Wood .....	87
	<a href="#"><u>Despair</u></a> by Laura G .....	92
	<a href="#"><u>Mourning</u></a> by Laura G .....	96
	<a href="#"><u>Father</u></a> by Laura G .....	112
	<a href="#"><u>Catherine</u></a> by Laura G .....	115
	<a href="#"><u>Vincent</u></a> by Laura G .....	120
	<a href="#"><u>Catherine and Vincent</u></a> by Laura G .....	124
	<a href="#"><u>Reunion</u></a> by Laura G .....	129
	<a href="#"><u>Catherine</u></a> by Laura G .....	136
	<a href="#"><u>Vincent</u></a> by Laura G .....	141
	<a href="#"><u>Family Portrait</u></a> by Laura G .....	153
	<a href="#"><u>Feeling</u></a> by Paula .....	160
	<a href="#"><u>For Those We Protect</u></a> by CandlelitChandler .....	161
	<a href="#"><u>Father</u></a> by Laura G .....	163
	<a href="#"><u>Catherine</u></a> by Laura G .....	171
	<a href="#"><u>Meeting</u></a> by Laura G .....	181
	<a href="#"><u>Confession</u></a> by Paula .....	184
	<a href="#"><u>I'm a Dreamer</u></a> by JoAnn Baca .....	185
	<a href="#"><u>Dreamy Devin (For Cyndi!)</u></a> by Laura G .....	187
	<a href="#"><u>Devin</u></a> by Laura G .....	190
	<a href="#"><u>Connection</u></a> by Paula .....	195
	<a href="#"><u>Oh, What Lovely Teeth You Have</u></a> by Denise .....	196
	<a href="#"><u>Open Wide</u></a> by Laura G .....	199
	<a href="#"><u>How About Them Mets?</u></a> by CandlelitChandler .....	203

	<a href="#"><u>Joe</u></a> by Laura .....	208
	<a href="#"><u>Catherine</u></a> by Laura G .....	211
	<a href="#"><u>Joe</u></a> by Laura .....	215
	<a href="#"><b>Father</b></a> by Crowmama .....	220
	<a href="#"><b>The Last Word</b></a> by JoAnn Baca .....	221
	<a href="#"><u>Devin</u></a> by Laura G .....	225
	<a href="#"><u>Eliot</u></a> by Laura G .....	230
	<a href="#"><u>Catherine and Joe</u></a> by Laura G .....	235
	<a href="#"><b>Through the Looking Glass</b></a> by CandlelitChandler .....	240
	<a href="#"><u>In the Looking Glass</u></a> by Laura G .....	242
	<a href="#"><u>Central Park</u></a> by Laura G .....	245
	<a href="#"><u>Vincent</u></a> by Laura G .....	250
	<a href="#"><u>Catherine</u></a> by Laura G .....	257
	<a href="#"><u>As It's Meant to Be</u></a> by Laura G .....	259
	<a href="#"><b>Awakened</b></a> by JoAnn Baca ❖ Rated R .....	261
	<a href="#"><u>Catherine and Vincent</u></a> by Laura G ❖ Rated R .....	262
	<a href="#"><b>Mouse</b></a> by Crowmama .....	264
	<a href="#"><b>A Small Light</b></a> by Denise .....	265
	<a href="#"><u>Narcissa</u></a> by Laura G .....	267
	<a href="#"><b>Between Two Lives</b></a> by CandlelitChandler ❖ Rated R .....	270
	<a href="#"><u>Peekaboo</u></a> by Laura G ❖ Rated R.....	274
	<a href="#"><u>Heartbreak</u></a> by Laura G .....	281
	<a href="#"><u>Elliot</u></a> by Laura G .....	292
	<a href="#"><u>Elliot</u></a> by Laura G .....	296
	<a href="#"><u>Poor Mouse</u></a> by Laura G .....	308
	<a href="#"><u>Elliot</u></a> by Laura G .....	311

<a href="#"><u>Catherine and David</u></a> by Laura G .....	314
<a href="#"><u>Catherine</u></a> by Laura G .....	318
<a href="#"><u>Joe</u></a> by Laura G .....	336
<a href="#"><u>Bow Bridge</u></a> by Laura G .....	358
<a href="#"><u>Catherine</u></a> by Laura G .....	368
<a href="#"><u>Jenny</u></a> by Laura G .....	376
<a href="#"><u>Catherine</u></a> by Laura G .....	384
<a href="#"><u>Vincent and Catherine</u></a> by Laura G .....	390
<a href="#"><u>Catherine</u></a> by Laura G .....	397
<a href="#"><u>Vincent</u></a> by Laura G .....	407
<a href="#"><u>No Shirt Required</u></a> by Laura G .....	412
 ... <a href="#"><u>And Oh, What Things We'll Do</u></a> by Denise .....	415
<a href="#"><u>Vincent</u></a> by Laura G .....	417
<a href="#"><u>Catherine and Vincent</u></a> by Laura G .....	422
<a href="#"><u>Catherine</u></a> by Laura G .....	427
<a href="#"><u>Vincent and Catherine</u></a> by Laura G ❖ Rated R.....	431
 <a href="#"><u>Who Ya Gonna Call</u></a> by Pearlann SnowStar .....	433
<a href="#"><u>Jaime</u></a> by Laura G .....	436
<a href="#"><u>Krisopher</u></a> by Laura G .....	444
<a href="#"><u>Mouse and Arthur</u></a> by Laura G .....	448
<a href="#"><u>Mouse</u></a> by Laura G .....	454
<a href="#"><u>Vincent</u></a> by Laura G .....	460
<a href="#"><u>What It's Like to Have a Love</u></a> by Laura G .....	472
 <a href="#"><u>Healing</u></a> by Paula .....	474
<a href="#"><u>Vincent's Window</u></a> by Laura G .....	476
<a href="#"><u>Rebecca</u></a> by Laura G .....	481
<a href="#"><u>Vincent</u></a> by Laura G .....	484

[Vincent](#) by Laura G ..... 488

[Father](#) by Laura G ..... 494

[Salem Word Search](#) by Teresa and J'écris ..... 497

[Bewitched Word Search](#) by Teresa and J'écris ..... 498

 [Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine](#), by Maryann N Wood ..... 499

[Catherine](#) by Laura G ..... 502

[Catherine](#) by Laura G ..... 508

[Catherine and Vincent](#) by Laura G ..... 514

[Vincent and Catherine](#) by Laura G ..... 519

[In My Arms](#) by Laura G ..... 523

[Vincent](#) by Laura G ..... 529

[Father](#) by Laura G ..... 534

[In Their Chamber](#) by Laura G ..... 539

[Vincent](#) by Laura G ..... 544

[Father](#) by Laura G ..... 550

[Vincent and Catherine](#) by Laura G ..... 556

[Together](#) by Laura G ..... 561

**❖ Rated R/Adult/Explicit for sexual/adult situations**

Thanks to BatBland for hosting this conzine.

The contents of this conzine are Classic/Continued Classic and are rated G/PG unless specifically rated differently under the title of an individual story.

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Beauty and the Beast by TunnelLizard



# **The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1 Lindariel**

*Written in part for the Winterfest Online 2026 Plot Bunny Challenge and  
completed for the July 2026 Conzine*

*[Some introductory notes: This story is the 19<sup>th</sup> in my Beauty and the Beast AU series, which picks up after the Season 2 episode “A Kingdom by the Sea” and then goes in a different direction. No Hollow Men, no Paracelsus abducting and then masquerading as Father, no mental breakdown for Vincent, and most importantly, Catherine is never abducted by Gabriel (I deal with him in other ways) and therefore DOESN'T DIE! And Elliott Burch doesn't die EITHER!!*

*My previous stories for this AU in chronological order (all are posted under the name Lindariel across both versions of CABB Tunnel Tales and on Archive of Our Own) are The Last Straw ...?, Pay It Forward, Arthur's Gift, The View from Here, Do You Happen to Have the Time?, Happy Umbrella Day!, A Fine and Private Place, His Own Kind of Nobility, Walking Unfamiliar Ground, Songbirds of North America, A Second Harvest, What Cuddly Beast, The Ache for Home, No Way UP!/The INsiders, Blame It on the Mets, A Late Harvest, Sunflowers for Thankfulness, and A Special Surprise (which is a glimpse into the future).*

*For readers who are jumping in with this story: After being taken Below to save his life after he witnesses a crime, Elliott Burch has become a friend and Helper to the Tunnel community, and he has gotten to know, come to terms with, and genuinely like Vincent and accept his relationship with Catherine. Elliott recently found a great building on Hobart Street for Catherine to buy and turn the top floor into a residence Above that Vincent can much more safely access, the second floor into dormitory space for Tunnel young people going to school Above or adult Tunnel residents with jobs Above, and a free medical clinic and legal aid clinic on the first floor. In this story, Vincent is still recovering from a fall suffered during The Ache for Home. Oh, and you can learn more about Catherine's rescue kitten Lucky, the intrepid protagonist of this story, in What Cuddly Beast. Enjoy!]*

The sun rose a while ago, yet my food bowl is still empty.

## *The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1 by Lindariel*

I have been sitting outside the door of The Water Room, plaintively singing the lamentations of my people to The Pretty Lady. She has been running a great deal of water for an interminable length of time.

I have concluded that She must intend for me to starve today.

Alas.

Suddenly a great hand scoops me up, up, up, and soon I am staring into the kind eyes of The Great Cat God, my favorite being in the entire world.

“Come, little one,” He says. “Let’s leave Catherine to her shower and go find something for you to eat.”

He blesses me with a position high up on His broad shoulder where I snuggle into His fragrant hair and cling to His bathrobe as we journey to The Food Room. It is a short journey. The Great Cat God opens The Cupboard of Sustenance where The Pretty Lady keeps a selection of food for me.

“Hmmm ...you had salmon last night, so I think turkey and giblets sounds good for this morning,” He murmurs. “What do you think?”

*Mew. Mew.*

“Ah, I thought so.”

Soon, He places me on the floor in front of a bowl of delicious bird-based sustenance of which I heartily approve, and He kindly refills my water dish.

It seems I shall not starve today after all.

At long last, The Pretty Lady emerges from The Water Room wrapped up in a towel and races into The Clothing Room, frantically muttering, “I’m going to be late AGAIN, Vincent, and it’s all your fault!”

“Me!” The Great Cat God objects. “What did I do?”

The Pretty Lady sticks Her head out of The Clothing Room, looks The Great Cat God up and down, and then launches Herself into His arms for a kiss, which turns

## *The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1 by Lindariel*

into several kisses, murmuring, “You are such a temptation! I hadn’t factored Morning Delight into my getting ready schedule. So, this is all (kiss) your (kiss) fault (kiss)!”

The Great Cat God laughs, pats Her on the bottom, and then sighs, “Scoot, or you really will be late!”

The Pretty Lady disappears back into The Clothing Room, and after much thumping about, She emerges fully dressed and stuffing Her arms into one of Her many jackets. The Great Cat God hands Her a covered mug of coffee and a napkin with some sort of toasted consumable for Her journey.

“Oh, you are a lifesaver,” She moans, sipping from Her mug while walking to The Desk Room. “What are you planning to do today?” She asks The Great Cat God, collecting Her purse and briefcase off the desk.

“Since Dwayne and Mildred Pearson have moved into their rooms in the dormitory, I thought Lucky and I might pay a visit to the second floor and help Mildred organize the dormitory kitchen,” He replies.

“I’m sure Mildred will be happy to have your company,” She responds. “Or she will be once you’re wearing something besides your bathrobe. Just don’t forget your cane, and don’t overexert yourself! Father still hasn’t cleared you for unassisted walking yet.”

The Great Cat God sighs and glances down at the curved stick in His hand.

“It shouldn’t be much longer,” The Pretty Lady croons, hugging Him without disturbing me from my favored perch on His shoulder. She’s very considerate about that. “Hopefully, I’ll get out a bit early if today’s court session goes as I anticipate it should. I’m hoping Enzo Fanelli will just enter a guilty plea. We have him dead to rights on these extortion charges.”

The Great Cat God and I follow The Pretty Lady out to The Mysterious-Doors-That-Open-And-Shut-All-By-Themselves in The Entryway. She pushes The Button of Summoning.

*The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1 by Lindariel*

“Be safe, My Love,” murmurs The Great Cat God before kissing The Pretty Lady goodbye.

“Always, My Own,” She replies, as The Mysterious Doors open and She steps inside, muttering, “Um! Such a temptation!” to disappear for the rest of the day, as She has on other such occasions.

The Mysterious Doors close, and The Great Cat God, as always, sighs.

“Well, Lucky,” He asks. “Shall we get started with our day?”



*Feline Reflection by Laura G*

*Mew!*

The Great Cat God blesses me with His permission to lounge upon the large bed in The Room of Repose while He takes His own time in both The Water Room and The Clothing Room. I still do not understand the need for cleaning oneself in a great avalanche of water, especially when one is possessed of a perfectly capable tongue, but it is not for me to question the wisdom and desires of The Great Cat God. He is magnificent and kind and can do no wrong. I tell Him so when He emerges at last from The Clothing Room, His curved stick in His hand.

*Mew, Mew!* There, that should be sufficient.

“All right, little one,” He murmurs in His soft, gravelly voice, as He scoops me up once again to my favorite spot

## *The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1 by Lindariel*

on His shoulder. “You’ve been very patient. Let’s go see if we can help Mildred with the dormitory kitchen.”

The Great Cat God ambles carefully down The Marble Hallway, using His curved stick to help support his still healing hip. He is indeed much better than He had been a few weeks ago after His unfortunate fall. I was quite worried for Him and spent much time curled beside Him or upon His chest, giving Him the full benefit of my loudest healing purrs at every possible opportunity.

The Pretty Lady and The Grumpy Elder have also fussed over Him most attentively with pillows and creams and blankets and delicious smelling foods and insisting He must rest. Make no mistake, I fully approve of their diligent care for The Great Cat God. It is only right and proper. Nonetheless, I also understand His impatience to be done with it all and do as He pleases. How it must chafe such a mighty being to be so constrained by injury! I should commiserate with Him.

*Mew, mew. Mew!*

“My apologies, little one,” The Great Cat God chuffs. “But this is as fast as I can safely manage on this marble floor, and I can’t risk another fall.”

Alas! I do so wish The Great Cat God and The Pretty Lady spoke my language. They often misunderstand me. Ah, well ...their intentions are always good.

Soon, we reach The Mysterious-Doors-That-Open-And-Shut-All-By-Themselves in The Entryway, and The Great Cat God pushes The Button of Summoning. Ah! Are we to travel to the Below place today? How wonderful!

*Mew? Mew, mew?*

“We don’t have far to go,” The Great Cat God answers. “Patience.”

And indeed, our journey in The Unsettling-Moving-Room-Behind-The-Mysterious-Doors is far too short to have descended into the bowels of the Earth where Below is. Instead, we emerge into another place with a marble floor, similar but also quite different from our Home in the Sky.

## *The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1 by Lindariel*

“Hello?” calls a familiar voice, and soon The Cuddly Black Lady, one of my favorite Below friends, emerges from what appears to be yet another Food Room. “Why hello, Vincent! And Miss Lucky! How lovely of you to come visit with me!” she continues in her wonderful, rich, melodious voice.

“We’re here for more than a visit, Mildred,” The Great Cat God replies, as He blesses Her with one of His magnificent hugs. “Lucky and I thought we might give you some help with organizing the dormitory kitchen.”

“Well, your timing is perfect, and I could certainly use some help with unboxing and storing all of the cleaning supplies and nonperishable foods Catherine ordered from Robinson’s Grocery,” The Cuddly Black Lady answers, kindly petting me and giving me a scrumptious scritch beneath my chin. Oooh! She does that perfectly every time! “Come, Vincent, let’s make you comfortable here at this big dining table, and you can start emptying out some of these boxes for me.”

We wander over to a large table half covered with stacks of large boxes, and The Great Cat God settles into a big chair with a bit of a sigh, stretching out His sore leg.

“And you, young lady,” The Cuddly Black Lady croons as she gently plucks me up from The Great Cat God’s shoulder. “You come with me for a moment. I have a special place set up for you.”

Were it a stranger handling me thus, I would be greatly put out and strenuously resist being removed from The Great Cat God’s presence without my permission. But The Cuddly Black Lady has looked after me on many occasions when we have been in the place called Below, and she and her mate have always been most kind to me. And so it proves in this instance as well, for The Cuddly Black Lady has set up a Tray of Elimination for me in a small nearby Water Room. How considerate and helpful! And she shows me a mat in The Other Food Room with a small dish into which she places several tasty treats, as well as a freshly filled water bowl. I am content knowing I will be comfortable during this visit, and I shall tell her so.

*Mew! Mew, mew!*

## *The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1 by Lindariel*

“You’re very welcome, Sweetie,” she croons. Ha! SOMEONE understands me! “I also have a bed for you over here if you want to take a nap.”

She shows me a very nice plush bed just my size over in the corner by The Great Cat God’s table. Since He is quite busy opening and emptying boxes and then somehow magically making them quite flat, I am happy to stretch out on this exceptionally comfortable bed (after it has been appropriately kneaded the requisite 150 times) and observe the goings-on in case my advice is needed. Maybe even indulge in a morning nap. Hmmm ....

Somehow, time passes without my knowledge. I hear The Cuddly Black Lady calling softly, “Wake up, li’l Sweetie! It’s time for some lunch.”

I look up into her kind face, and she chuckles while gently picking me up and carrying me to the mat in The Other Food Room, where a small plate of fish-based sustenance awaits me. In passing, I can see that all of the boxes have magically disappeared from The Great Cat God’s table (He can do all things!), and He appears to be enjoying a gift of food prepared in His honor by The Cuddly Black Lady, as is right and proper. I shall thank her.

*Mew! Mew, MEW!*

“You’re very welcome, Sweetie,” she croons. I do believe The Cuddly Black Lady must have learned my language. How delightful!

She collects a plate of food for herself, joins The Great Cat God at His table, and we all commence eating our respective meals. The fish-based sustenance is quite delicious. I am pleased.

“Well, we’ve certainly had a productive morning,” The Cuddly Black Lady says while selecting one of the odd implements humans use to poke food into their mouths. I do not understand the necessity of this, but it seems to be a matter of tradition, or etiquette, or perhaps even a religious ritual, so I do not presume to question their ways. After all, I am an exceptionally polite and well-mannered kitty. Even The Grumpy Elder says so.

“I’m glad I could help out,” The Great Cat God replies. “Are there any other

## *The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1 by Lindariel*

chores you need assistance with today? I'm entirely at your service until Catherine returns home from work."

"I don't believe so," The Cuddly Black Lady answers after a moment of contemplation. "At least not until we receive another order from Robinson's Grocery. Dwayne and I took care of the perishables as soon as they arrived. I'm still working on our private rooms. The unpacking is all done, but you know how it is with a new space. After you've put everything away, there's always little adjustments to make things cozier or more convenient. Dwayne calls it 'fussing,' but I think it takes time for things to finally settle in their rightful places. I try to do the fussing while he's at work."

The Great Cat God laughs. "You should have seen Catherine unpacking and organizing her walk-in closet. She's STILL moving things around in there, and in the master bathroom, and don't get me started on the books and art pieces in the study and the living room. Everything looks lovely, but I can tell she's still not quite satisfied."

"And you are a wise man, so you're staying out of her way, right?" says The Cuddly Black Lady rather pointedly.

"For the most part," The Great Cat God replies. "However, there's a small framed photo of her Uncle Stuart, a rather unpleasant-looking man, that she's moved around to almost every surface in the living



*Lucky by Laura G*

## *The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1 by Lindariel*

room and study. I can tell she doesn't particularly care for the man, but feels obligated nonetheless to place him somewhere, since her late mother took the trouble of framing the photograph in the first place. I'm waiting for an opportune moment to suggest that she place Uncle Stuart's photo in an album and choose another photo to put in this frame."

"But you're giving her time to come to that conclusion herself," says The Cuddly Black Lady.

"Oh, yes!" The Great Cat God agrees with a grin. "I do have some sense of self-preservation! I only intend to intervene if she becomes completely frustrated with the whole process. I learned early on in our relationship that Catherine does not appreciate it when men presume to make decisions FOR her."

The Cuddly Black Lady laughs and laughs. It is a lovely, melodious sound I have come to treasure. "Vincent, I don't know a single intelligent woman in the WORLD who appreciates having her decisions made for her by ANYONE!"

The Great Cat God raises his glass, "A toast to intelligent women everywhere!"

The Cuddly Black Lady raises her glass in return, "To quote your Catherine, 'I resemble that remark.'" They laugh and laugh as they clink their glasses together, thankfully without breaking them. Humans are sometimes quite strange.

They finish their meal, and The Cuddly Black Lady takes their plates and implements into The Other Food Room to rinse and place them in one of those Loud-Boxes-That-Make-Wet-Swishy-Noises. I take this opportunity to quickly relocate myself to The Great Cat God's shoulder. I do not trust those Boxes. They sound vicious.

"Whoa! Goodness, Lucky," says The Great Cat God. "Give me at least a bit of a warning before you do that!"

Does He not understand the potential danger posed by The Box? There is one in The Food Room in our Home in the Sky as well. I must remain on my guard and protect Him and The Pretty Lady, if necessary. I shall tell Him so.

## *The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1 by Lindariel*

*Mew, mew. Mew, MEW!*

“There, there, it’s all right,” The Great Cat God responds. “You just startled me, that’s all.”

Sigh ...perhaps one day The Cuddly Black Lady will teach Him my language . . .

“Well, Mildred, thank you so much for a delicious lunch,” The Great Cat God says as He uses His curved stick to push Himself to His feet. “I’m glad I could help you get the kitchen organized and ready for you and Dwayne and Marlon and Jeffrey to use. I’m so thankful to know that Catherine will have such wonderful neighbors here at her new home.”

The Cuddly Black Lady embraces Him and pets me. “I think you meant to say OUR new home,” she replies. “You’ll be living here too, almost as much as Catherine will. And believe me, we’re profoundly grateful for this opportunity. Dwayne can get to his city bus job so much more easily and quickly now, and he no longer needs to worry about someone possibly following him into the Tunnels after work. This place is just BEAUTIFUL, and it will be my pleasure to look after the kitchen and chaperone any young people who might choose to live here while attending school or working Above. I feel like I have finally found my true purpose in the Tunnel community – to be a bridge between Above and Below for our young people and our working folks.”

“You’re right, of course,” The Great Cat God replies. “Kanin thought of you and Dwayne immediately when Catherine asked if there might be working adults Below who might appreciate living in the dormitory at least part-time. I know William will miss having you at his side in the kitchen Below, but I can already tell that you’re relishing the opportunity to take charge of your own kitchen here and be a mentor to young people learning to live on their own.”

“Exactly,” she grins. “I’m the House Mother. Everyone will be expected to cook and clean for themselves, although I will prepare or supervise some communal meals as well. I’ll manage the inventory, make sure cleaning supplies are available, and help our young folks take charge of their own lives. Even that shouldn’t be too difficult, since they’ll have gained so much experience in all of these areas living

## *The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1 by Lindariel*

Below.”

The Cuddly Black Lady walks with us to The Mysterious-Doors-That-Open-And-Shut-All-By-Themselves, and The Great Cat God pushes the top of the two Buttons of Summoning.

“You have a wonderful afternoon and rest that hip,” The Cuddly Black Lady says, giving The Great Cat God a final hug.

He laughs, “And you enjoy some private time ‘fussing’ before Dwayne gets home.”

The Mysterious Doors open as they laugh and laugh. We enter, and The Great Cat God pushes the top Button.

“Bye, Vincent! Bye, Lucky!” The Cuddly Black Lady calls and waves as The Doors close, and to my surprise, The Unsettling-Moving-Room-Behind-The-Mysterious-Doors goes Up instead of Down. Ah, perhaps we are returning to our Home in the Sky.

Before I can even inquire, The Doors open, and I am proven correct (I usually am) as we move into the familiar Entryway and The Mysterious Doors close behind us. The Great Cat God ambles carefully down The Marble Hallway to The Food Room.

“I neglected to clean up the breakfast dishes this morning, such as they are,” The Great Cat God murmurs to me. “It wouldn’t do for Catherine to come home to dirty dishes, now would it?”

*Mew!*

“I thought not.”

He places me on the floor and scoops up my empty breakfast dish, rinsing it and placing it in The Loud-Box-That-Makes-Wet-Swishy-Noises.

Oh dear.

## *The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1 by Lindariel*

Quite unaware of the awakened danger lurking now in The Food Room, The Great Cat God gathers up another plate, a teacup, and some implements and places them in The Box as well. I back up all the way to the entrance of The Food Room ready either to pounce upon The Box if it suddenly attacks The Great Cat God or to run away if it comes after us both. Thankfully, it does nothing, and soon The Great Cat God has finished feeding items into its maw. Perhaps I have cowed it with my threatening, commanding presence. I shall inquire if this is so.

*Mew? Mew, MEW?*

“All done,” The Great Cat God says. “It would be nice to go up to the patio and let you play in the garden, but I suspect your Mama wouldn’t appreciate me attempting those stairs unsupervised. Why don’t we listen to some music in the living room, and I can rest my hip after a long morning unpacking boxes.” Alas. It appears my valiant and successful efforts to thwart the malign inclinations of The Box have gone unnoticed. Ah well, The Great Cat God was perhaps distracted by His mysterious tasks. It is understandable. I am but a kitty and cannot begin to comprehend the great panoply of concerns that vie for the attention of The Great Cat God. I can but be grateful that He has accepted me as His One True Acolyte.

He scoops me up once more to the favored spot upon His mighty shoulder, and we proceed carefully back down The Marble Hallway to The Sound Room. The Great Cat God pushes some buttons on one of the many boxes on the shelves beneath the Large Light Box and soon lovely musical sounds come out of The Large-Fabric-Covered-Boxes-I-May-Not-Scratch.

“Ah, Rachmaninoff,” The Great Cat God sighs, as He eases Himself down upon the long leather couch, which I also may not scratch. Humans have such odd rules, but at least they give me plenty of scratching posts to exercise my claws. I must keep myself in readiness at all times in case The Loud Box ever decides to attack. Why they do not seem to perceive this danger eludes me.

I am blessed with the opportunity to curl myself upon The Great Cat God’s chest, where I can hear the glory of His mighty heart beating, and I thank Him with my loudest and most effective healing purrs.

*The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1 by Lindariel*

We seem to float away upon a magical cloud of sound ....

Once again, time passes without my knowledge. I awake to the sound of a chime coming from The Talking Box on the wall beside The Mysterious Doors. The Great Cat God snuffles a bit and wakes Himself. Thank goodness, The Loud Box did NOT decide to attack us while we were so careless as to fall asleep during the



**The Great Cat God and I** by *Lucky the Wonder Cat*

## *The Tunnel Adventures of Lucky the Wonder Cat, Part 1 by Lindariel*

lovely music. I should have known better!

“Ah ha! That’s your Mama’s chime code,” The Great Cat God declares. “She’s home!” He levers Himself up to a sitting position and places me in my favored spot upon His shoulder.

Soon, we can hear The Mysterious Doors open, and The Pretty Lady’s voice calls out, “Honey, I’m home!”

And The Great Cat God answers, as always, “Welcome home, dear!”

I leap down and run to The Entryway to trill my thanksgiving for The Pretty Lady’s safe return from Her long journey and to reclaim Her as my own by rubbing my scent against Her legs.

At last, we are complete again!



*The Truth by Paula*



## **Out of the Ashes**

*CandlelitChandler*

### ❖ **Rated R**

Nighttime found Catherine at the office once again. She'd been working late for the past few weeks, making it nearly impossible to spend quality time with Vincent. But tonight would be different—she'd promised him she wouldn't bring any work home.

She wasn't the only one burning the midnight oil. Joe Maxwell appeared at her desk, arms crossed with mock sternness.

“Hey, Radcliffe, you know you don't get paid by the hour, right?” He leaned against her filing cabinet. “Why don't you head out and enjoy what's left of this summer night? Go to a concert in the park or something. I hear they're playing Mozart and Haydn tonight. Right up your alley.” Joe teased.

Catherine looked up from the file she'd been reviewing and smiled. “You trying to get rid of me, Joe?”

“Absolutely. You're making the rest of us look bad.” He gave her a playful wink. “Seriously, Cathy, go home.”

“I was just finishing up.” Catherine stood and began gathering her belongings. “Don't forget I'll be out on Monday. I left Rita the files on the Martinez case, in case you have any questions about the witness statements.”

“Thanks, Cathy. Now get out of here before I have security escort you out.”

“You're all heart, Joe.” Catherine grabbed her purse and briefcase.

“That's what they tell me.” Joe headed toward the elevator, calling over his shoulder, “Have a good weekend!”

Catherine left a few minutes after Joe, but not before placing a Snickers bar on his desk—a small bribe in case he felt compelled to call her on her day off. It might,

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

just might, make him hesitate for a minute. Though she planned to turn off the ringer on her phone as soon as she reached the brownstone.

On her way home, Catherine stopped at a couple of her favorite shops to pick up some groceries and Vincent's favorite dessert: chocolate mousse pie. To her delight, he'd never had it before—William was partial to other desserts and would bake muffins, scones, cheesecakes, and various cakes, but rarely pies.

The first time Vincent had tasted it, he'd accidentally smudged some of the whipped cream on his upper lip. Catherine had impulsively leaned forward and licked it off. The memory still made her flush with warmth. That spontaneous gesture had caught Vincent completely off guard, but it had sparked something between them—a series of progressively intimate moments that had slowly evolved from chaste kisses, to tender caresses, to passionate encounters that made her toes curl just remembering them. It had all unfolded over the course of a single month. The hottest month of summer, in more ways than one.

Once they'd taken their relationship to that new level, Vincent and Catherine had quickly realized they needed a place that provided Vincent with the safety he required while allowing them the privacy they craved. He'd begun spending some weeknights with her, and the logistics had become complicated. It was hard for him to leave Catherine before dawn.

That's when a friend who worked in real estate helped Catherine quickly find the brownstone. Within a few days of finding and falling in love with the property, Catherine closed on it. The next couple of weeks, Mouse, Cullen, and Kanin had helped Vincent create a tunnel entrance from the home's basement, connecting it to the world Below. The men were still working on finishing touches, and Catherine wanted to make sure they had plenty of food for the next few days. William sometimes insisted on sending provisions from Below, but Catherine felt it was only fair to feed the men herself since they were doing the work and refusing any payment.

Carrying two large grocery bags, she made her way to the brownstone just as dusk settled over the city. The men were cleaning up and putting away their tools as she entered through the front door.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“Perfect timing,” Cullen said, wiping his hands on a rag. “We just finished for the day.”

“I brought food,” Catherine announced, hefting the bags. “There’s plenty for everyone.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Kanin said, though his eyes lit up at the mention of food.

“It’s the least I can do.” Catherine set the bags on the kitchen counter. “How’s everything coming along?”

“The reinforcements are solid,” Cullen reported. “We just need to finish the electrical system, and then it’s just cosmetic work.”

Mouse appeared from the basement, cobwebs in his hair. “Tunnel is good. Very good. Will be safe.”

“Thank you, Mouse.” Catherine’s voice was warm with gratitude. “All of you. This means everything to us.”

Vincent had been gradually moving his belongings into the home over the past few weeks. He spent most of his weeknights with Catherine at the brownstone and his weekends Below, maintaining his connections to the tunnel community. It was a delicate balance, but one they were learning to navigate together.

Father had been resigned, if not entirely pleased, when they’d told him about their plans to live together. He wasn’t naïve enough to believe his warnings about the dangers of the world Above would dissuade them—he knew his son too well for that. Vincent and Catherine had listened respectfully to his concerns, but they’d also reassured him that they were taking every precaution to ensure Vincent’s safety during daylight hours.

“He worries,” Vincent had told her after that conversation. “It’s his nature.”

“He loves you,” Catherine had replied, taking his hand. “We’ll prove to him that this can work.”

*Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*



*Vincent by Laura G*

As the tunnel workers departed for the evening, Catherine heard the familiar sound of footsteps from the basement. Her heart quickened as it always did when Vincent was near.

He emerged into the kitchen, his blue eyes finding hers immediately. “You’re home.”

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“I promised, didn’t I?” She moved into his arms, feeling the tension of the day melt away. “And I brought your favorite dessert.”

Vincent’s expression softened into a smile. “Chocolate mousse pie?”

“The very same.” She reached up to touch his face. “I thought we could celebrate having the house almost finished.”

He pulled her closer, his voice dropping to that low rumble that never failed to affect her. “I can think of other ways to celebrate.”

Catherine laughed, feeling the familiar warmth spread through her. “Dessert first,” she said, though her resolve was already weakening under his gaze. “Then we’ll see about those other ways.”

“As you wish,” Vincent murmured and kissed her softly.

They settled at the small kitchen table, Catherine cutting slices of the chocolate mousse pie while Vincent poured them each a glass of wine. The domesticity of the moment wasn’t lost on either of them—these simple rituals of sharing a meal and being together in their own space still felt precious and new.

“So tell me about your day,” Catherine said, sliding a plate toward him. “What did you do while I was drowning in depositions?”

Vincent took a bite of the pie, and Catherine watched with amusement as his eyes closed in appreciation. “I spent the morning in the library with Father, helping him catalog some new acquisitions. Then I read to the children for a while.” He paused, savoring another forkful. “This afternoon, I worked on the shelving for our study. It should be ready by tomorrow.”

“You’re building us bookshelves?” Catherine’s face lit up. “Vincent, you didn’t have to—”

“I wanted to.” His eyes met hers with that intensity that still made her breath catch. “We need more space for all our books.”

She reached across the table to take his hand. “Tell me more about the children.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

What did you read to them?”

Vincent’s expression softened as it always did when he spoke of the tunnel children. “We started ‘The Secret Garden.’ Samantha asked if we could plant a garden here, in the brownstone’s small backyard. She said it could be our secret garden.”

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Catherine said warmly. “We could plant it in the spring, maybe.”

They talked easily as they finished their dessert, Catherine sharing the frustrations of the Martinez case and Joe’s latest attempts to set up Jenny with one of the junior prosecutors. Vincent listened intently, asking questions, making her laugh with his dry observations about office politics.

“And then,” Catherine said, gesturing with her fork, “Joe actually had the nerve to tell me I was making everyone else look bad by staying late. As if he doesn’t practically live at the office himself.”

Vincent smiled, taking another bite of pie. A small dollop of whipped cream clung to the corner of his mouth.

Catherine’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “You know, for someone who’s supposed to be this mysterious, dignified figure from Below, you certainly have a talent for getting whipped cream on your face.”

Vincent’s hand moved to his mouth, but Catherine was faster, leaning forward to wipe the cream away with her finger. “There. All clean.” She brought her finger to her lips with deliberate slowness. “Though I have to say, it’s rather endearing. Very dignified.”

“Endearing?” Vincent’s voice held a note of warning, but his eyes were dancing with amusement.

“Mmm-hmm.” Catherine was enjoying herself now, her tone playfully teasing. “Very cute, actually. Like a little boy with his first taste of—”

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

She didn't get to finish the sentence. In one fluid movement, Vincent rose from his chair and swept her up, tossing her over his shoulder with surprising ease.

"Vincent!" Catherine squealed, laughing as she found herself suddenly upside down, her hands bracing against his back. "Put me down!"

"I think not." His voice was rich with amusement. "You seem to have forgotten who you're dealing with, Catherine."

His hand came down on her backside in a playful swat that made her gasp and laugh simultaneously.

"That's for *endearing*," he said, starting toward the stairs.

Another gentle spank. "That's for 'cute.'"

"Vincent!" She was laughing too hard to sound properly indignant, her fists drumming lightly against his back. "I was complimenting you!"

"Were you?" Another playful smack as he began climbing the stairs, carrying her as if she weighed nothing. "It sounded suspiciously like teasing to me."

"Maybe a little teasing," Catherine admitted breathlessly, still laughing. "But you have to admit, you did have whipped cream on your—ah!"

He'd swatted her again, and she could feel his chest rumbling with laughter beneath her. "I think you need to learn when to stop, Catherine."

"And I think you need to learn to take a compliment," she retorted, but her voice was breathless now for entirely different reasons. The playfulness between them was shifting into something deeper, more charged.

By the time they reached the bedroom, Catherine's laughter had faded into something softer, more anticipatory. Vincent set her down gently, his hands lingering at her waist as her feet touched the floor. The playfulness was still there in his eyes, but it was mixed now with something darker, more intense.

"Still think I'm endearing?" he asked, his voice low and rough.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

Catherine reached up to cup his face, her fingers tracing the leonine features she'd come to love so deeply. "Always," she whispered. "Among other things."

"What other things?" His hands moved to her hips, pulling her closer.

"Magnificent," she breathed, rising on her toes to brush her lips against his.

"Powerful." Another kiss, deeper this time. "Mine."

That last word seemed to break something loose in him. Vincent's mouth claimed hers with a hunger that made her knees weak, his arms wrapping around her to lift



*Embrace by Laura G*

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

her against him. Catherine's hands tangled in his hair as she kissed him back with equal fervor, all the longing pouring into this moment.

They moved together toward the bed, hands seeking, removing barriers of clothing with an urgency. Vincent's shirt fell away, and Catherine's palms explored the planes of his chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart beneath her touch. His hands were equally eager, sliding her blouse from her shoulders, his fingers trembling slightly as they traced the curve of her spine.

"Catherine," he breathed against her neck, his voice rough with need. "My Catherine."

"Yes," she whispered, arching into his touch. "Always yes."

They fell together onto the bed, a tangle of limbs and whispered endearments. Vincent's mouth traced a path along her throat, her collarbone, lower still, and Catherine gasped at the sensation, her fingers digging into his shoulders. Every touch was both familiar and new, every kiss a promise and a claim.

When he rose above her, his eyes met hers with an intensity that stole her breath. There was such love there, such reverence mixed with raw desire.

"I love you," she whispered, reaching up to trace the line of his jaw. "So, so much, Vincent."

"And I you," he murmured, lowering himself to her, his body covering hers. "More than words can express."

Their joining was both tender and passionate, a dance they'd learned together over these past weeks, yet still felt miraculous each time. Vincent moved with careful control at first, watching her face, learning her responses, but Catherine urged him on with soft cries and the arch of her body against his.

"Don't hold back," she breathed, her nails trailing down his back. "I want all of you."

His control shattered at her words, and he claimed her with a passion that left them

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

both gasping. Catherine met him thrust for thrust, their bodies moving in perfect synchronicity. She could feel the tension coiling tighter within her, spiraling higher with each movement, each touch, each whispered word of love.

When release finally came, it crashed over them both like a wave, pulling them under into a place where nothing existed but sensation and connection and the profound knowledge of being utterly, completely loved.

They collapsed together, hearts racing, breath coming in ragged gasps. Vincent rolled to his side, gathering Catherine against him, unwilling to break the connection between them. She nestled into his embrace, her head on his chest, listening to the gradually slowing rhythm of his heartbeat.

“That,” Catherine said after a long moment, her voice still breathless, “was definitely worth the teasing.”

She felt Vincent’s chest rumble with quiet laughter. His hand stroked slowly down her back, a gesture of both tenderness and possession. “Perhaps I should let you tease me more often.”

“Oh, I intend to,” Catherine promised, pressing a kiss to his chest. “Though I have to say, I rather enjoyed your retaliation.”

His arms tightened around her. “Did you?”

“Mmm hmm.” She tilted her head to look up at him, her eyes soft with love and satisfaction. “Though next time, maybe a little warning before you throw me over your shoulder like a sack of potatoes.”

“Where would be the fun in that?” Vincent’s fingers traced lazy patterns on her shoulder. “Besides, you seemed to enjoy the spontaneity.”

Catherine couldn’t argue with that. She settled more comfortably against him, one leg draped over his, her hand resting over his heart.

“I love our home,” she murmured sleepily. “I love that we have this place, where we can just be together. No hiding, no fear, no need for you to leave. Just us.”

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

Vincent pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “It’s more than I ever dreamed possible,” he said quietly. “You’ve given me so much, Catherine. A home. A life I never thought I could have.”

“We’ve given it to each other,” she corrected, lifting her head to meet his eyes. “This is ours, Vincent. Everything we’ve built, everything we are together—it’s ours.”

He cupped her face in his hand, his thumb brushing across her cheek with infinite gentleness. “Ours,” he agreed, and kissed her softly.

They lay together in the gathering darkness, wrapped in each other’s arms, listening to the sounds of the summer night. Catherine’s eyes grew heavy, lulled by the warmth of Vincent’s body and the steady rhythm of his breathing. Just before sleep claimed her, she felt him pull the sheet over them both, his arms never loosening their hold.

“Sleep, my love,” he whispered against her hair. “I’ll be here when you wake.”

And with that promise warming her heart, Catherine drifted into dreams, safe in the knowledge that she was exactly where she belonged.

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Saturday morning found them descending through the tunnel entrance in the brownstone’s basement, Catherine’s hand secure in Vincent’s as they navigated the familiar passages. The tunnels were alive with activity—children’s laughter echoing through the corridors, bread baking somewhere in the distance.

“Catherine! Vincent!” Samantha came running up to them. “You’re here! Wait until you hear Kipper and Zack play violin at the recital!”

After greeting Father, they made their way to the library chamber where the children’s recital was about to begin. The space was filled with tunnel dwellers, candles arranged to provide warm light.

Father introduced each performance with appropriate gravitas. There were piano

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

pieces and vocal solos, a slightly off-key flute duet, and then Kipper and Zack took their places with their violins.

Catherine felt Vincent's attention completely focused on the two boys. She reached over to take his hand as they raised their bows. The first notes were tentative, but then they found their rhythm, and Vivaldi's "Spring" filled the chamber. It wasn't perfect, but it was beautiful.

When the piece ended, the chamber erupted in applause. Kipper and Zack grinned at each other and bowed.

Later, Rebecca linked her arm through Catherine's. "Come help me with candles. I have a feeling we have a lot to talk about. Do you mind if I steal her away for a while, Vincent?"

"Not at all," Vincent responded in good humor. "But I expect her back for dinner."

They made their way to Rebecca's work chamber, a cozy space filled with supplies. A large table dominated the center, already set up with molds, wicks, and pots of melted wax warming over small burners.

"Here, let me show you how to prepare the wicks," Rebecca said, handing Catherine an apron.

They fell into an easy rhythm, Rebecca demonstrating while Catherine followed along.

"So," Rebecca said after they'd completed their first set of candles, "how are you doing, Catherine? With everything.

Catherine considered the question as she prepared another mold. "It's been wonderful," she



## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

responded. “The brownstone has given us something we desperately needed—a place that’s truly ours. Where Vincent isn’t in danger while climbing my old apartment building or needing to leave.”

”That must be wonderful for him. For both of you.” Rebecca poured wax with practiced ease. “Vincent has spent his whole life in shadows. To have a place Above where he can simply exist—that’s precious.”

“It’s not just for him,” Catherine said softly.

“I’m glad.” Rebecca set down her ladle. “I’ve known Vincent almost all of his life. To see him have a home of his own, a safe place in the world above—it’s more than any of us dared hope for him.”

They worked in comfortable silence for a while, the rhythmic process of candle-making soothing.

“Do people resent it?” Catherine asked eventually. “That he’s spending so much time Above now?”

“Some have had to adjust their expectations,” Rebecca said honestly. “Vincent has always been so available, so willing to help with anything. Now that he has his own life, his own priorities, there are those who’ve had to learn to be more self-sufficient.”

“So they do resent it,” Catherine said quietly.

“No, not resent. Adjust.” Rebecca reached over to pat Catherine’s hand. “It’s actually been good for the community. We relied too heavily on Vincent for too long. Now we’re learning to solve more of our own problems. And you’ve become part of our community, Catherine. You help in your own ways. That matters. So do not fret over it.” Rebecca smiled a reassuring smile.

Catherine squeezed Rebecca’s hand in thanks.

They worked through the afternoon, their conversation flowing easily from topic to topic.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

Meanwhile, in Father's chamber, Vincent and his father discussed the winter preparations.

"We could put in new support beams to prevent any possible tunnel collapses there just in case," Vincent suggested.

Father nodded approvingly. "An excellent idea. Do you think you'd have time to oversee that project?"

"I'll make time," Vincent said quietly. "This is still my home, Father. These are still my people. That hasn't changed."

"I know that." Father removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I'm simply adjusting. As we all are."

"You don't approve," Vincent said.

"That's not true. I approve of your happiness. I approve of Catherine—she's a remarkable woman, and she loves you deeply. What I struggle with is the fear. That something will happen to you Above. That I'll lose you."

Vincent moved around the desk and placed a hand on his father's shoulder. "I know. And I understand that fear because I share it. But we can't live our lives ruled by fear, Father."

Father smiled sadly. "I know."

Vincent gently squeezed his father's shoulder.

Father reached up to cover Vincent's hand with his own. "And I'm trying to accept it, to trust that you know what you're doing."

Vincent found Catherine in the dining chamber, and the smile she gave him made his heart lift. She looked happy here, comfortable. She'd found her place in his world.

"How was your afternoon?" she asked, sliding into the seat beside him.

"Productive. Father and I have planned out the winter preparations." He glanced at

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

her hands, noting the traces of wax. “And yours?”

“Wonderful. Rebecca is amazing—we made so many candles, and we talked about everything.” Catherine leaned against his shoulder. “I love it here, Vincent. I love being part of this.”

“And we love having you here,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to her temple.

As the evening wore on, Catherine found herself thinking about how lucky she was. She had two homes now, two families, two worlds that somehow fit together. The brownstone Above gave her and Vincent privacy and freedom. The tunnels Below gave them community and connection.

Later, as they prepared to return to the brownstone for the night, Father pulled Vincent aside for a private word.

“Take care of each other,” he said simply. “Both Above and Below.”

“We will,” Vincent promised.

“And Vincent—I’m proud of the man you’ve become, of the life you’re building.”

Vincent embraced his father, feeling the older man’s arms tighten around him. “Thank you, Father. That means more than you know.”

They made their way back through the tunnels, Catherine’s hand in Vincent’s, both of them tired but content. As they climbed the ladder to the brownstone’s basement, Catherine looked up at Vincent. “Happy?”

“Happy,” he responded with a smile.

They emerged into their home, and Catherine felt that same sense of peace she always did when they returned. This was their private world.

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Monday morning dawned bright and clear. Catherine had taken the day off as planned, and she woke to find Vincent already up, dressed in his work clothes, ready to help with the basement rewiring.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“You don’t have to do this,” she said, stretching lazily in bed, her hand pulling up the sheet and comforter, shielding her naked body from any draft. “Cullen and Kanin can handle it.”

“I want to,” Vincent replied, leaning down to kiss her. “It’s our home. I should help maintain it.”

Catherine smiled against his lips. “Our home. I love hearing you say that.”

“I love saying it.” He kissed her again, deeper this time. “Now, I need to go before I’m tempted to stay here with you all day.”

“Would that be so terrible?” Catherine’s hand slid up his arm.

“Terrible? No. Irresponsible? Yes.” Vincent gently disentangled himself from her grasp. “The wiring needs to be finished. But tonight—tonight is ours.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Catherine called as he headed downstairs.

She took her time getting ready, enjoying the luxury of a weekday morning with nowhere to be. By the time she made it to the kitchen, she could hear voices and activity from the basement—Vincent, Cullen, Kanin, and Mouse, all working on the electrical system that had been giving them trouble.

Catherine made coffee and brought mugs down to the men, carefully navigating the basement stairs. The space was an organized chaos of tools, wire, and equipment. Vincent was holding a flashlight while Cullen examined a junction box, and Mouse was sketching something on a piece of



## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

paper, muttering to himself about “better ways” and “improvements.”

“Coffee delivery,” Catherine announced, and was rewarded with grateful smiles.

“You’re a saint, Cathy,” Cullen said, accepting a mug. “We’ve been at this since seven.”

“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Good. We’re making real progress.” Kanin wiped his hands on a rag. “Should have the main panel rewired by early afternoon.”

They worked through the morning, Catherine occasionally checking in but mostly staying out of the way. She used the time to catch up on reading, to enjoy the quiet of the house, to simply exist in this space that was theirs.

Around noon, Mouse emerged from the basement, his face smudged with dirt but his expression excited. “William sent message! Big lunch below. Says we should come. Says he made special food.”

Catherine looked up from her book. “All of us?”

“All of us,” Mouse confirmed. “William says he made too much food. Says we must come eat or it will go to waste. William doesn’t like waste.”

Cullen appeared behind Mouse, grinning. “I’m not going to turn down one of William’s special meals. The man’s a genius in the kitchen.”

“We could all use a break,” Kanin agreed, following them up. “We’ve been at it for hours.”

Vincent was the last to emerge, and Catherine saw the hesitation in his eyes. “Are you sure?” he asked. “We could bring food back here.”

“If William’s gone to the trouble of making a special meal, the least we can do is show up to eat it. Besides, I’d love to see everyone again.” Catherine said, standing up

“It has been a whole day,” Vincent said with a slight smile.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“Exactly. Far too long.” Catherine grabbed her jacket. “Come on, let’s go enjoy William’s cooking.”

They made their way down through the tunnel entrance, the five of them in good spirits, talking and joking as they navigated the familiar passages. Catherine could smell the food before they reached the dining chamber—something rich and savory that made her stomach growl.

William had indeed outdone himself. The tables were laden with roasted chicken, potatoes, vegetables, homemade bread, and what looked like three different kinds of dessert. The dining chamber was full of tunnel dwellers, all taking advantage of William’s cooking.

“There you are!” William called out when he saw them. “I was beginning to think you’d ignore my invitation. Sit, sit! There’s plenty for everyone.”

They found seats at one of the long tables, and soon plates were being passed, food piled high, conversation flowing. Catherine found herself between Vincent and Rebecca, with Mouse across from her, enthusiastically explaining his latest invention between bites of chicken.

“This is delicious, William,” Catherine called out, and the cook beamed with pride.

“It’s nothing special,” he said, though his expression suggested otherwise. “Just wanted to make sure our workers were properly fed.”

The meal stretched on, as meals Below often did. There was no rushing here, no checking of watches or worrying about schedules. People ate, talked, and laughed, and Catherine felt herself relaxing into the rhythm of it.

Father stopped by their table to discuss the progress on the brownstone’s wiring, and soon he and Vincent were deep in conversation about the winter preparation projects they’d planned over the following weekend.

Catherine helped Rebecca clear some of the dishes, carrying them to the kitchen where Mary and Olivia were already washing up.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“You don’t have to help,” Mary protested. “You’re a guest.”

“I’m family,” Catherine corrected gently. “And family helps.”

Mary’s face softened, and she handed Catherine a dish towel. “Well, in that case, you can dry.”

They worked together, the easy camaraderie of women who’d done this task a thousand times. The conversation drifted from topic to topic—the children’s progress in school, the new baby that had been born last week in the lower chambers.

It was peaceful. Comfortable. This was family. This was home.

But Catherine had no way of knowing that while they sat there, safe and content in the tunnels Below, their other home—their private world—was being consumed by flames.

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The fire had started in the basement, in the very wiring they’d been working on all morning. A connection that hadn’t been properly secured, a spark that found something flammable, and within minutes the flames had spread.

The brownstone was old, the wood dry, and the fire moved quickly. It climbed the walls, consumed the floors, devoured everything in its path. The furniture she’d chosen with Vincent in mind. The books Vincent had moved from his chamber. The clothes in their closet. The bed where they’d made love just the night before. The kitchen where they’d shared meals and conversation.

All of it, burning.

The neighbors called 911 after seeing smoke pouring from the windows. Fire trucks arrived, sirens wailing, firefighters rushing to contain the blaze. But the fire had too much of a head start. By the time they got their hoses working, the upper floor was fully engulfed.

The firefighters did their best. They saved the neighboring buildings and prevented

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

the fire from spreading. But the brownstone itself was a loss. The roof collapsed. The walls, weakened by flames, began to crumble. Everything inside was destroyed—either burned beyond recognition or damaged by smoke and water.

And through it all, Catherine and Vincent sat Below, completely unaware, enjoying dessert and conversation, surrounded by family.

\*\*\*

It was Mouse who first noticed the time.

“Getting late,” he announced, checking his watch. “Should get back to work. Lots to do still.”

Vincent was surprised to see that nearly two hours had passed. “He’s right. We should return.”

There were groans of protest—the meal had been too good, the company too pleasant—but everyone began to gather themselves. Catherine helped carry the last of the dishes to the kitchen, then joined Vincent and the others for the walk back to the brownstone.

They were still laughing about something Mouse had said, when they turned the final corner and saw the smoke.

Vincent stopped so abruptly that Catherine nearly ran into him. “What—” she started to say, but then she saw it too.

Smoke. Thick, dark smoke, pouring from the tunnel entrance that led to their basement.



## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“No,” Vincent breathed, and then he was running, all of them running, toward the entrance.

The heat hit them before they got close. The tunnel entrance was filled with smoke, and beyond it, they could hear the distant sound of voices, of water, of chaos.

“The fire department,” Cullen said, coughing, his face pale. “They’re up there.”

Vincent’s mind was racing. The tunnel entrance. If the firefighters found it, if they explored the basement, if they discovered the passage—

“We have to seal it,” he said, his voice tight with urgency. “Now. Before they find it.”

“But the house—” Catherine started, covering her face with her shirt.

“Someone needs to go above to check.” Vincent’s eyes were devastated. “But look at the smoke, Catherine. We have to protect the tunnels.”

Kanin was already moving, grabbing tools from a nearby cache. “We’ll need to collapse the entrance. Make it look like the basement ceiling came down naturally.”

“I’ll get more help,” Mouse said, and disappeared back down the tunnel at a run.

They worked with desperate speed. Vincent and Cullen used sledgehammers to weaken the support beams near the entrance. Kanin rigged a controlled collapse that would seal the tunnel without causing damage to the surrounding passages.

Within minutes, Mouse returned with more workers—men and women who understood immediately what needed to be done. They worked together, quickly and efficiently, years of tunnel maintenance giving them the skills they needed.

“Now,” Kanin said, and they pulled the supports.

The entrance collapsed with a rumble of stone and earth, sealing the tunnel completely. From above, it would look like nothing more than a basement ceiling that had given way under the stress of the fire. The tunnel entrance was hidden, the

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

community protected.

They stood in the tunnel, covered in dust, breathing hard, and stared at the sealed entrance. Beyond it, they could still hear the firefighters working, could still smell the acrid smoke of their burning home.

“I need to know,” Catherine whispered. “If it’s all gone.”

Vincent pulled her against him, his arms wrapping around her tightly. She could feel him trembling, could feel the tension in every line of his body.

“Our home,” she said, her voice breaking. “Vincent, our home—”

“I know.” His voice was rough, choked with emotion. “I know, Catherine.”

The others stood nearby, giving them space but staying close, their faces reflecting the same shock and grief. This wasn’t just Vincent and Catherine’s loss—it was a loss for the entire community. The brownstone had represented hope, possibility, a bridge between two worlds.

Catherine pressed her face against Vincent’s chest and let the tears come.

“The photo albums,” she said suddenly, pulling back to look at Vincent. “The pictures of my parents, your books. The ones you brought from Below. The Shakespeare collection, the—”

“Catherine.” Vincent’s thumb brushed away her tears. “They’re just things. We’re alive. We’re safe. That’s what matters.”

“But it was ours,” she said, her voice breaking on the last word. “It was our place, Vincent. Where we could be together without hiding, without fear. And now—”

She couldn’t finish. The sobs took over, and Vincent held her while she cried, his own tears falling silently into her hair.

Father appeared, having been summoned by Mouse. He took in the scene—the sealed tunnel, the smoke still seeping through cracks in the stone, his son and Catherine clinging to each other in grief—and his face crumpled.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“Vincent,” he said, moving forward. “My boy, I’m so sorry.”

Vincent looked at his father over Catherine’s head, and Father saw the devastation in his eyes. This wasn’t just about losing possessions. This was about losing a dream, a future they’d been building together.

“We’ll figure this out,” Father said. “We’ll find another place.”

But Vincent, unable to speak, held Catherine tighter.

“Come,” Father said eventually. “Come back to your chamber. You can stay there tonight. We’ll sort everything out tomorrow.”

“I need to see it,” Catherine said, her voice hollow. “I need to see what’s left. Now.”

Before Vincent could respond, Kanin appeared from the shadows of the tunnel. “I’ll go with her,” he offered.

Vincent’s jaw tightened. The raw need in her eyes broke something in him. “Be careful,” he finally said. “Both of you.”

Catherine crossed to him and kissed him softly. “I will. I’ll be back soon.”

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The journey through the tunnels felt surreal, each step bringing Catherine closer to a reality she wasn’t sure she could bear. Kanin walked beside her in silence, his presence steady and reassuring.

When they emerged from a concealed entrance a couple of blocks away, the air was thick with the smell of smoke.

Then she saw it. Or rather, what was left of it.

The brownstone was a blackened skeleton silhouetted against the sky. The roof had collapsed entirely, and the upper floors had caved in. The beautiful bay windows were gone, leaving gaping holes like empty eye sockets. The front steps were cracked and covered in soot. Flames still flickered in places, and firefighters

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

moved through the wreckage with their hoses, creating clouds of steam that rose into the night air.

Catherine stopped walking, her hand flying to her mouth.

“Oh God,” she whispered.

Firefighters in full gear moved methodically through the ruins.

Kanin stood beside her, his face somber. “I’m sorry, Catherine.”

She couldn’t speak. All she could do was stare at the ruins of what had been their sanctuary.

All of it, reduced to ash and rubble.

“The books,” she said suddenly, her voice breaking. “Vincent’s books. The ones I’d been collecting for him. The first editions, the poetry...” She pressed her hand harder against her mouth, trying to hold back a sob. “Our bed. The quilt Mary made for us...”

Kanin placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “The memories aren’t gone, Catherine. Those are still yours.”

But it didn’t feel like enough. Not right now, standing here looking at the destruction of everything they’d built together, watching the last flames consume what remained.

A tear slipped down her cheek, then another. She didn’t bother wiping them away.

“Cathy?”

The voice made her turn. Joe Maxwell was hurrying toward them, his face creased with worry and relief. He was still in his work clothes, his tie loosened, looking like he’d been running.

“Joe?” Catherine’s voice came out hoarse. “What are you doing here?”

“I was having lunch at that deli on the corner when I heard the sirens,” he said,

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

slightly out of breath. “Saw the smoke, followed the trucks. When I realized it was your building...” He looked at the ruins, then back at her. “Jesus, Cathy. I’ve been trying to reach you all day. Are you okay? Were you inside when it started?”

“No, I—” Catherine glanced at Kanin, suddenly aware of how strange this must look. “I was out. This is... this is Kanin. A friend.”

Kanin nodded at Joe, his expression carefully neutral.

Joe barely seemed to register him, his attention focused entirely on Catherine.

“Thank God you’re safe. I was so worried. Do you have a place to stay? Do you need anything?”

“I’m fine, Joe. Really.” Catherine tried to smile, but it felt wrong on her face. “I just... I need some time off work. To deal with all this.”

“Of course. Take as much time as you need.” Joe reached out and squeezed her shoulder. “I’m just relieved you’re okay. When I saw the building...” He shook his head. “Call me if you need anything. Anything at all.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Joe looked like he wanted to say more, but something in Catherine’s expression stopped him. He nodded, gave Kanin a curious glance, and headed back down the street.

Catherine turned back to the ruins, watching the firefighters continue their work.

“I’ve seen enough,” she said quietly. “Let’s go home.”

Kanin nodded and led her back through the streets toward the tunnel entrance. Catherine didn’t look back. She couldn’t bear to see it again.

As they descended into the tunnels, the smell of smoke gradually faded, replaced by the familiar scent of earth and stone. The darkness felt comforting now, protective. Down here, she didn’t have to see the destruction. Down here, Vincent was waiting.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

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Back in Vincent's chamber, Catherine sat on the edge of the bed and tried to make a mental inventory of what she'd lost and what remained.

Gone: nearly everything. Her clothes, her furniture, her books, her kitchen supplies, the art she'd collected, the little decorative touches that had made the brownstone feel like home. Vincent's carefully curated library. The nest they'd built.

What remained: the items still in storage from her father's estate—some furniture, his law books, a few pieces of art. The box of her mother's jewelry and personal effects. Some of her own belongings she hadn't yet moved to the brownstone—mostly sentimental items like her high school yearbooks, college diplomas, and childhood photographs.

She had purchased the brownstone with the proceeds from the sale of her



*Catherine by Laura G*

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

apartment and her father's home. But she knew she still had a substantial amount left. More than enough to start over. She had not even touched the money she had inherited from her father, or the trust fund she had received from her mother and grandparents.

"The brownstone was insured," Vincent said, sitting beside her. "You'll receive a settlement."

"But it will take time. Months, probably." Catherine leaned against him, drawing strength from his solid presence. "I don't want to wait that long, Vincent."

"Then we'll find something new." His arm came around her shoulders. "We'll start fresh."

Catherine nodded, but her mind was already racing ahead to practical concerns. "I need clothes. I have maybe two outfits down here, and nothing suitable for work. I'll need to go shopping. You will also need clothing. I know you have some stuff left here, but most of your clothing was above."

"It's ok. I have enough." Vincent pressed a kiss to her temple. "It's going to be ok. I promise."

\*\*\*

A few days later, Catherine found herself at Bloomingdale's with a shopping list and a brand-new credit card, feeling oddly disconnected from the experience. She moved through the women's department like a woman in a trance.

Three work suits—one charcoal gray, one navy, one black. Silk blouses in white, cream, and pale blue. A cashmere sweater in soft gray. Designer dress pants. A black dress for court appearances. Shoes—pumps, flats, boots. A winter coat to replace the one that had burned.

When she got to the lingerie department, she paused. Her hand hovered over a silk nightgown—emerald green, the color Vincent loved on her. For a moment, she remembered the nightgown she'd worn their first night in the brownstone. The color had been similar. She added it to her pile, along with two others in jewel

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

tones, and a dozen silk undergarments.

She also selected a few day dresses—beautiful pieces. A cream linen dress. A deep burgundy wrap dress. A charcoal silk number that would work for the evening.

Next, she went to the men’s section. Selected four pairs of pants and four shirts for Vincent. She also replaced some sleepwear for him, socks, some undershirts, and reminded herself to go to the cobbler, who was a helper, to order him a couple pairs of new boots.

At the register, Catherine handed over her credit card without hesitation. Once upon a time, she would have really enjoyed this shopping excursion, but this time it was overshadowed by the sense of loss they had experienced.

She left with ten shopping bags. The clothes wouldn’t bring back what she’d lost, but they would help her move forward.

\*\*\*

The tunnel community rallied around them. William brought extra portions of food to Vincent’s chamber. Mouse offered to “find” anything they needed—an offer Vincent politely declined while Catherine hid a smile.

But as the days passed, the constant stream of visitors became overwhelming.

People would appear at the chamber entrance at all hours—sometimes to offer help, sometimes just to express sympathy, sometimes simply to chat. Mouse had come looking for Vincent a couple of times in the middle of the night regarding a project he was working on thwarting their attempts at intimacy. Vincent had—as patient as possible—turned him away the second time.

After the fourth day, Catherine was ready to scream.

She and Vincent were trying to have a quiet breakfast when Olivia appeared with a basket of muffins. They’d barely thanked her and returned to their meal when Cullen stopped by to discuss potential new properties he’d heard about. Then Sarah came with tea. Then Pascal wanted to update Vincent on some tunnel maintenance

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

issues.

“It’s almost lunch time, and we haven’t even finished our breakfast,” Catherine muttered after Pascal left.

Vincent’s lips twitched. “They mean well.”

“I know they mean well. But I’m starting to feel like we’re living in Grand Central Station.”

That late afternoon, Catherine was changing clothes—trying on one of her new work outfits to make sure it fit properly—when she heard voices at the chamber entrance. She quickly pulled on her robe, but before she could say anything, Brooke and two other women walked right in, chattering about a quilting project.

They stopped short when they saw Catherine in her robe, clearly having interrupted something.

“Oh! We’re so sorry,” Brooke said, flustered. “We should have announced ourselves.”

“It’s fine,” Catherine said, clutching her robe closed. “I was just... changing.”

The women apologized profusely and backed out. Catherine felt her privacy had been invaded. But there was little she could do about it.

That evening, after the fifth interruption—this time from Kipper, who wanted to show Vincent a drawing he’d made—Catherine turned to Vincent with desperation in her eyes.

“We need to get out of here,” she said. “Just for a little while. Somewhere we can be alone.”

Vincent understood immediately. “Come with me.”

\*\*\*

Vincent led her deep into the tunnels, past the inhabited areas, into passages that were older and less traveled. The air grew cooler, the silence more profound.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

Catherine followed him without question, trusting him completely.

Finally, he stopped at a small alcove carved into the rock. It was barely large enough for two people, hidden behind a natural stone formation that made it nearly invisible from the main passage. They hung a small lantern on a hook in the wall, casting a warm glow over the space.



“I used to come here when I was younger,” Vincent said quietly. “When I needed to be alone. To think.”

Catherine looked around the small space, then back at Vincent. “It’s perfect.”

For a moment, they just stood there, breathing in the silence, the blessed privacy. Then Catherine stepped closer to him, her hand coming up to rest against his chest.

“I’ve missed you,” she said softly. “Really missed you.”

Vincent’s arms came around her, pulling her close. “I know.”

She tilted her face up to his, and he kissed her—slowly at first, then with increasing intensity.

Catherine’s hands moved to his shirt, working at the buttons with trembling fingers. Vincent’s breath caught as her palms slid over his bare chest.

“Catherine,” he murmured against her lips. “Are you sure? Here?”

“Yes.” Her voice was breathless, urgent. “I need you, Vincent. I need to feel close to you.”

He needed no further encouragement. His hands found the hem of her tunnel dress, pulling it up and over her head. She shivered as the cool air hit her skin, but Vincent’s warmth quickly enveloped her. His mouth traced a path down her neck, across her collarbone, while his hands explored the curves of her body with

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

reverent familiarity.

Catherine gasped as he pressed her back against the stone wall, the cool rock a stark contrast to the heat of his body. Her legs wrapped around his waist as he lifted her, supporting her weight effortlessly. She could feel his desire, hard and insistent against her, and it sent a thrill of anticipation through her entire body.

“I love you,” she whispered, her fingers tangling in his hair. “God, Vincent, I love you so much.”

“And I love you.” His voice was rough with emotion and need. “Always, Catherine. Always.”

Their joining was fierce and desperate. Catherine clung to him, her nails digging into his shoulders as pleasure built and crested. Vincent buried his face in her neck, his breath hot against her skin, his body moving with hers.

In that moment, nothing else existed. Not the burned brownstone, not the uncertain future, not the well-meaning community. There was only this—the two of them, connected in the most fundamental way, lost in each other.

When they finally came apart, trembling and breathless, Catherine rested her forehead against Vincent’s, her heart still racing.

“We’re going to be okay,” she whispered. “As long as we have this, we’re going to be okay.”

Vincent kissed her softly, tenderly. “Yes. We will.”

They stayed like that for a long moment, wrapped in each other’s arms, reluctant to return to the world beyond their hidden alcove. Catherine’s feet touched the ground, and she began to put on her clothing, smiling at Vincent with a contentment she hadn’t felt in days.

Then they heard footsteps in the passage outside.

Catherine’s eyes went wide with alarm. Vincent quickly helped her adjust her dress, but there was no time to make themselves fully presentable before Father’s

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

voice called out.

“Vincent? Are you down here?”

“Hide,” Vincent whispered urgently, and Catherine quickly pressed herself into the deepest part of the alcove, behind the stone formation where the shadows were darkest.

Vincent stepped out into the passage, trying to look casual despite his disheveled appearance and the flush still visible on his face.

“Father,” he said, his voice only slightly unsteady. “What brings you to this part of the tunnels?”

Father looked at him with the shrewd, knowing gaze of someone who had raised him from infancy. “I was looking for you. Kanin said he saw you heading this direction.” His eyes swept over Vincent, taking in the unbuttoned shirt, the tousled hair. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes. Fine. I just needed some time alone. To think.”

“I see.” Father’s gaze dropped to the ground, and his expression shifted almost imperceptibly. He bent down and picked up something from the tunnel floor—a woman’s shoe. Catherine’s shoe, which must have fallen off during their passionate encounter.

He held it up, examining it with the air of someone making a fascinating archaeological discovery. “Interesting place to leave a shoe.”

Vincent’s face flushed deeper. “Father—”

“No need to explain.” Father’s tone was carefully neutral, but there was the faintest hint of amusement in his eyes. He set the shoe down carefully just inside the alcove entrance. “I simply wanted to let you know that Pascal received a message from one of our Above contacts. There are some properties that might interest you and Catherine. I’ll leave the details in your chamber.”

“Thank you,” Vincent managed.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

Father nodded, then turned to leave. But he paused after a few steps and glanced back over his shoulder. “Vincent? Perhaps in the future, you and Catherine might consider finding a more secluded area to be alone.”

With that, he continued down the passage, his footsteps gradually fading into silence.

Vincent stood frozen for a moment, mortification and relief warring on his face. Then Catherine emerged from her hiding place, her face bright red, her hand pressed over her mouth.

For a long moment, they just stared at each other. Then Catherine started to laugh—a slightly hysterical sound that she tried to muffle with her hand.

“Oh my God,” she gasped between giggles. “Your father just... he found my shoe... he knows exactly what we were doing...”

Vincent’s lips twitched, and then he was laughing too, pulling her into his arms as they both shook with mirth and embarrassment.

“At least he was tactful about it.” Catherine pulled back, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes. “He could have been much more direct.”

“Father has always been a master of the pointed non-comment.”

Catherine retrieved her shoe, shaking her head in disbelief. “Well, that was a close one.” She looked up at Vincent, her expression turning serious. “But you know what? This just proves we need our own place. Soon. I love your father, and I love this community, but I cannot live like this. We need privacy. We need a home where we can close the door and know that no one is going to walk in on us.”

Vincent nodded, his own expression growing determined. “Then we’ll find one. Whatever it takes.”

Catherine took his hand, squeezing it firmly. “Then let’s go see what property Father was talking about. We’re going to find a new home, Vincent. Our home.”

“Our home,” Vincent echoed, and kissed her once more before they made their

*Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*



**Father** by *Laura G*

way back through the tunnels, hand in hand.

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Monday morning found Catherine back at her desk in the DA’s office, surrounded by case files and depositions. She’d been trying to focus on a witness statement for the better part of an hour, but her mind kept drifting to the brownstone—or rather, to what would replace it.

“Cathy!”

She looked up to find Jenny Aronson standing in front of her desk, concern etched across her face. Jenny was Catherine’s closest friend—someone who’d been there through the attack, through the recovery, through all the strange absences Catherine could never quite explain.

“Jenny.” Catherine stood, and Jenny immediately crossed the room to pull her into a hug.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“I came as soon as I could. God, Cathy, I’m so sorry about the brownstone. Are you okay? Where are you staying?”

Catherine returned the embrace, grateful for the warmth of genuine friendship. “I’m fine. Really. I’ve been staying with friends.” The lie came easily now, after so much practice. “The fire was contained to my building, thank God. No one was hurt.”

Jenny pulled back, studying her face. “But you lost everything.”

“Not everything.” Catherine gestured to the chair across from her desk.

Jenny settled into the chair. “What do you need? How can I help?”

“I need to find a new place. Soon.” Catherine emphasized.

“Oh, Cathy, of course you do.” Jenny leaned forward. “Listen, I want to help. Let me come with you when you look at properties. You shouldn’t have to do this alone. Have you already contacted a realtor?”

“Not yet, but I have a recommendation of one.

“Perfect. When can we go?” Jenny pulled out her day planner, flipping through pages. “I have a meeting at two, but I could do late afternoon? Say, four o’clock?”

“That would be wonderful.” Catherine felt a flutter of anticipation in her chest. “I’ll call and confirm.”

After Jenny left, Catherine dialed the number Father had given her. A woman answered on the second ring.

“Samantha Chen.”

“Ms. Chen, this is Catherine Chandler. Father contacted you regarding some properties.”

There was a brief pause, and then recognition flooded the woman’s voice.

“Catherine! Of course, I was so sorry to hear about the fire. Are you alright?”

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“I’m fine. Thank you for asking. But I need to find a new place.”

“Yes, I understand.” Samantha’s voice took on a warm tone. “And I have several properties in mind. When would you like to start looking?”

“This afternoon at four, if possible. I’ll be bringing a friend.”

“Of course. I’ll meet you at the first address.” She rattled off a location three blocks from Catherine’s old brownstone.

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The first brownstone was cramped, with water stains on the ceiling and hardwood floors that buckled in places. The appliances ancient, and there was a faint smell of mildew that no amount of air freshener could mask.

“Well,” Jenny said diplomatically, peering into a corner where the wallpaper was peeling. “It has... potential?”

Catherine moved through the rooms quickly,

“Not this one,” Catherine said quickly making her way back to the main door.

The second property smelled of mold the moment they entered. The basement was worse—damp and dark, with a visible water line on the walls suggesting chronic flooding. The entire structure felt compromised.

“We can skip this one,” she said firmly, and Jenny didn’t argue.

The third brownstone was updated but had structural cracks running through the foundation visible from the basement stairs. When Catherine asked about them, Samantha’s expression told her everything. The owner was selling for a reason, and it wasn’t a good one.

“Next,” Catherine said, already moving toward the door.

Samantha checked her watch. “I have one more property to show you today. It’s a bit larger than what you initially specified, and the price point is higher, but...” She

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

met Catherine's gaze meaningfully. "I think it has everything you're looking for."

They drove to a tree-lined street four blocks from Catherine's old brownstone. The building that Samantha led them to was indeed larger—four stories instead of three, with a facade of warm red brick and tall windows that caught the late afternoon sun.

"Oh," Jenny breathed. "Cathy, look at this place."

But Catherine was already looking past the elegant front entrance to the side of the building, where she could see a glimpse of green. "Is that a backyard?"

Samantha smiled. "Why don't we start there?"

She led them around the side of the building, and Catherine felt her breath catch. The backyard was enormous by Manhattan standards—at least forty feet deep, with mature trees providing dappled shade across a lawn that actually looked like a lawn, not just a patch of struggling grass. Tall privacy walls of weathered brick and wood fencing enclosed the entire space, creating a hidden sanctuary completely shielded from the neighboring properties. At the far end stood a screened-in porch, its white framework almost glowing in the sunlight.

"This is incredible," Jenny said, already walking toward the porch. "Cathy, can you imagine summer evenings out here?"

Catherine could imagine it—but not the way Jenny meant. She was imagining Vincent emerging from the shadows beneath those trees, the way the dappled light would play across his features. The porch where they could sit together in the evening, hidden from prying eyes but still able to feel the breeze, hear the city sounds.

"Let's see the inside," Samantha suggested.

The main floor was spacious and elegant—a formal living room, a dining room that could seat twelve, and a kitchen that had been updated but still retained its original character. The second floor held two bedrooms, including a large master suite with an en-suite bathroom and walk in closet. The third floor had three more

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

bedrooms with two full baths and what could be a playroom.

“And the fourth floor?” Catherine asked.

“Technically an attic, but the previous owner had started converting it. There’s potential there for a studio or office space.” Samantha paused at the top of the third-floor stairs. “Let’s check out the basement.”

They descended to the ground floor and then down another flight of stairs. The basement was nothing like Catherine’s previous one—this was a full floor, with high ceilings and windows that let in natural light. The space had been partially finished, with one area clearly set up as a laundry room.

“This laundry area,” Samantha said, gesturing to a space that was easily twelve by fifteen feet, “could be converted into a bedroom if needed. And through here is a bathroom.”

“The previous owner mentioned something about old service tunnels,” Samantha said casually, too casually. “Apparently, this building was connected to the subway system during construction.”



*Jenny by Laura G*

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

Their eyes met, and Catherine felt a surge of gratitude for this woman.

“What’s on the main floor?” Jenny asked, oblivious to the subtext. “Besides the kitchen and living areas?”

“There’s a study,” Samantha said. “Let me show you.”

The study was at the back of the house, overlooking the garden. It was a generous room with built-in bookshelves covering two walls and a massive fireplace dominating a third. The fourth wall was mostly windows, looking out onto the screened porch and the trees beyond.

“Oh, Cathy,” Jenny sighed. “This is perfect. Can’t you just see yourself curled up here with a book? Or working on case files by the fire?”

Catherine could see it, but not alone. She was imagining Vincent in one of the leather chairs that would fit perfectly beside the fireplace. Imagining them reading together, or talking late into the night, or simply existing in the same space without fear of interruption. The room was large enough for a couch, two chairs, a desk—everything they would need to make this a shared sanctuary.

“There’s one more thing,” Samantha said. “The roof.”

They climbed back up through the house, past the bedrooms, past the attic, and up a final, narrow staircase that opened onto the roof. Catherine stepped out and felt the wind catch her hair, the late afternoon sun warm on her face.

The previous owner had indeed started a rooftop garden. There were planters with herbs and small shrubs, a seating area with weather-resistant furniture, and shade coverings that could be extended or retracted. But what caught Catherine’s attention was the privacy wall on the eastern side—a solid barrier at least eight feet high that completely blocked the view from the taller buildings several blocks away.

“The building is the tallest on this block,” Samantha explained. “And with that privacy wall, you’re completely hidden from the high-rises to the east. To the west, there’s nothing but low-rise residential for at least six blocks.”

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

Catherine walked to the edge, looking out over the neighborhood. From here, she could see the trees of the backyard below, the screened porch, the quiet street. She could imagine Vincent up here at night, finally able to stand under the open sky without fear of being seen. The shade coverings would provide protection during the day, and the privacy wall would mean they could be here together, watching the sunset and the stars.

“Cathy?” Jenny touched her arm. “You okay? You’ve been quiet.”

Catherine turned to her friend, and she knew her face must be showing too much emotion because Jenny’s expression shifted from concern to understanding.

“You love it,” Jenny said softly. “Don’t you?”

“I do.” Catherine’s voice was thick. “It’s perfect. It’s more than I was looking for, but it’s perfect.”

“It’s definitely bigger than you need,” Jenny said practically. “Four stories, all that space... but you know what? You can afford it. And after everything you’ve been through, you deserve a place that feels like home. A real home.”

Samantha cleared her throat delicately. “The sellers are motivated. They’ve already relocated to Boston for work, and they’re eager to close quickly. If you’re interested, I’d recommend putting in an offer today. This property won’t last long on the market.”

Catherine looked at Jenny, then at Samantha, then back out over the rooftop garden. She thought of Vincent in the study, surrounded by books and firelight. Vincent on this rooftop, finally able to breathe free air without hiding.

“I want to make an offer,” she said. “Right now. Whatever it takes.”

Jenny squeezed her hand. “Are you sure? Don’t you want to think about it overnight?”

“I’m sure.” Catherine met Samantha’s gaze, and the realtor nodded, understanding everything that wasn’t being said. “This is the one. This is home.”

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

As they descended from the roof, Catherine’s mind was already racing ahead, imagining the life they’d build in these rooms.

Jenny was already chattering about paint colors and furniture arrangements, and Samantha was pulling out paperwork from her briefcase. But Catherine was only half-listening, her mind full of images of the future—of Vincent emerging from the basement tunnel, of quiet evenings in the study, of standing together on the rooftop under the stars. Catherine felt, out of the ashes, they were being given a better place to build a future together. A new home.

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The late August heat had settled over the city like a warm blanket, but inside the brownstone, the air was cool and comfortable. Catherine stood in the doorway of what would eventually be a guest bedroom, surveying the empty space with satisfaction. There were still rooms to furnish, still boxes to unpack, but the house had become home.

The library was complete—floor-to-ceiling shelves now held hundreds of books, carefully selected to replace what had been lost in the fire. The kitchen gleamed with new appliances and well-stocked cabinets. Their bedroom upstairs was a sanctuary of soft linens and morning light.

Catherine heard Vincent’s footsteps on the stairs and turned to find him carrying two glasses of iced tea, condensation beading on the glass.

“Taking inventory again?” he asked, his voice warm with amusement.

“Just thinking about what we still need.” She accepted the glass gratefully, pressing it against her forehead before taking a sip. “Jenny wants to take me furniture shopping



## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

next week. She has opinions about the guest rooms.”

Vincent asked, “How was her visit last week?”

“Good. She loved the backyard, of course. Kept going on about how I should get a hammock.” Catherine smiled at the memory.

”And the library?”

“She was impressed. I told her I was rebuilding my collection after the fire.” Catherine moved closer to him, resting her head against his chest. “She has no idea how many of those books are yours.”

His arm came around her shoulders, holding her close. “Our books,” he corrected gently. “Everything here is ours.”

\*\*\*

The tunnel children had discovered the backyard two weeks after Catherine and Vincent moved in. Now, on warm afternoons when both Catherine and Vincent were home, the children would emerge like a small, joyful invasion.

“Vincent! Catch!”

Kipper’s voice rang out across the yard as he hurled the baseball with all his might. Vincent caught it easily.

Catherine sat on the screened-in porch, watching as Vincent played with the children. Geoffrey was practicing his pitching stance, while Samantha and Eric argued good-naturedly about the rules. The tall privacy walls enclosed them completely, creating a world where Vincent could move freely, could laugh and play without fear of being seen.

“You’re getting better, Geoffrey,” Vincent called out, crouching into a catcher’s position. “Try again, but remember to follow through.”

Geoffrey wound up and threw. The ball sailed past Vincent’s outstretched hand and bounced off the back fence.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“Almost!” Vincent’s retrieved the ball and tossed it back. “Your aim is improving. Feel how your body moves with the throw.”

Catherine’s heart swelled watching him. This was what the house had given them—not just privacy for themselves, but space for Vincent to be part of the children’s lives in ways that had been impossible before. Here, he wasn’t confined to the tunnels’ shadows. Here, he could stand in dappled sunlight beneath the trees and teach children how to throw a baseball.

“Catherine!” Samantha called out. “Come play with us!”

She set down her book and joined them, laughing as Kipper immediately assigned her to his team. The game dissolved into cheerful chaos, with rules that changed every few minutes and scores that no one bothered to keep. When the children finally tired, they collapsed on the grass in the shade, and Vincent brought out lemonade and cookies.

“This is the best place ever,” Eric declared, cookie crumbs on his chin. “Can we come back tomorrow?”

“If Catherine and I are both home,” Vincent said, glancing at her for confirmation. “And if you remember the rules.”

“We know, we know,” Samantha recited dutifully. “Only when you’re both here. Never tell anyone Above. Always lock the door when we leave.”

“Good.” Vincent’s voice was gentle but firm. “These rules keep everyone safe.”

After the children had gone, Catherine and Vincent remained in the backyard, watching the late afternoon light filter through the leaves. She leaned against him, his arm around her waist, and thought about how far they’d come from that terrible night when their old brownstone had burned.

She kissed him then, soft and sweet, tasting lemonade and summer and home.

\*\*\*

Father’s first visit to the library had been a revelation. Catherine had been

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

arranging books by subject when she'd heard his distinctive footsteps on the stairs, accompanied by Mary's lighter tread and Vincent's familiar presence.

"Catherine, my dear," Father had greeted her, but his eyes had already moved past her to the shelves. "Vincent told me about your library, but I had no idea..."

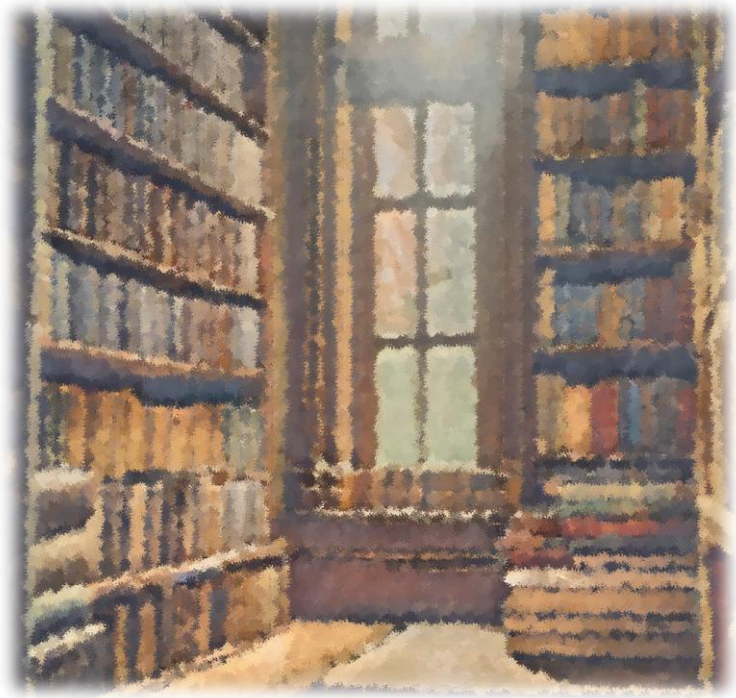
He'd moved to the nearest shelf, running his fingers along the spines with the reverence of a true bibliophile. "Dickens, Austen, the Brontës... and is that a first edition of Whitman?"

"It is." Catherine had smiled at his obvious delight. "I'm trying to replace everything that was lost in the fire. Vincent's books and mine. It's slow going, but I'm making progress."

Mary had settled into one of the armchairs by the fireplace, looking around with approval. "It's a beautiful room, Catherine. Perfect for reading on cold winter nights."

"That's what I thought." Catherine had gestured to the couch and chairs arranged before the fireplace. "There's room for several people. I was hoping... well, I was hoping that you and Father might visit sometimes. That this could be a place where we could all gather."

Father had looked up from the books, his expression softening. "You're building something remarkable here, Catherine. Not just a home for you and Vincent, but a bridge between our worlds."



## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“I’m trying.” She’d glanced at Vincent, who stood in the doorway watching them.  
“We both are.”

\*\*\*

The housewarming party had been Vincent’s idea, surprisingly. They’d been lying in bed one morning, the early light streaming through the windows, when he’d said, “We should invite everyone. To celebrate the house properly.”

Catherine had propped herself up on one elbow, studying his face. “Everyone from Below?”

“Yes. A party, here. In the backyard and the main floor.” His hand had traced patterns on her bare shoulder. “They helped us through the fire. They’ve been part of making this house a home. They should see it, celebrate with us.”

“Vincent, that’s...” She’d kissed him, overwhelmed by the gesture. “That’s perfect.”

Planning had taken two weeks. Mary and Rebecca had coordinated the food—dishes prepared both Above and Below. William had outdone himself with a cake that required three people to carry. The children had made decorations, colorful banners that now hung across the backyard.

The party began at dusk on a Saturday evening, when the summer heat had finally broken into comfortable warmth. People emerged from the basement in small groups, their faces filled with wonder as they stepped into the backyard for the first time.

“Catherine, this is magnificent,” Rebecca breathed, taking in the tall privacy walls, the mature trees, the screened-in porch. “You can’t see in from anywhere.”

“That was the idea.” Catherine squeezed her hand. “I wanted Vincent to have space to breathe. To be outside without hiding.”

The children were running wild, playing tag and hide-and-seek, their laughter echoing off the walls.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

Father found Catherine in the kitchen, where she was refilling a platter of sandwiches. “This is quite something you’ve created here.”

“We created it,” she corrected. “Vincent and I, together.”

“Yes.” He accepted a glass of wine from her. “But you’re the one who made it possible. Who saw what was needed and made it real.” He paused, his expression serious. “Vincent is happier than I’ve ever seen him. You’ve given him something I never could—a place where he can exist in both worlds.”

Catherine felt tears prick her eyes. “Thank you, Father.”

As the evening wore on, the party spilled from the backyard into the main floor. People admired the library, exclaimed over the kitchen, and marveled at the space and light. Music played from Catherine’s stereo—classical pieces that Vincent loved, mixed with more contemporary songs that made the younger tunnel dwellers smile. There was dancing in the living room, conversations in every corner, and a sense of joy that filled every room.

Vincent found Catherine on the screened-in porch, watching the party through the windows. He slipped his arms around her waist from behind, pulling her back against his chest.

“Happy?” he murmured into her hair.

“So happy.” She covered his hands with hers. “Look at them, Vincent. Look at how comfortable they are here. This is what I wanted—for them to feel like this place is theirs too.”

“You’ve given them a gift,” he said quietly. “A place where they can see the sky, feel the breeze, exist Above without fear. That’s precious beyond measure.”

He kissed her then, soft and deep, and she could taste the joy on his lips, the contentment that had been growing in him since they’d moved into this house. When they finally pulled apart, she rested her forehead against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

*Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*



*Vincent by Laura G*

“I love you,” she whispered.

“And I love you.” His arms tightened around her. “More than words can express.”

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The party wound down slowly, people reluctant to leave the magic of the evening. By midnight, the last of the guests had descended back into the tunnels, leaving Catherine and Vincent alone in the quiet house. They cleaned up together, moving in comfortable synchronicity, putting away food and folding chairs.

“Leave the rest for tomorrow,” Vincent said finally, taking the dish towel from her hands. “Come with me.”

He led her up to the rooftop garden, where the city spread out before them in a glittering tapestry of lights. The privacy wall blocked the view from the east, but to the west and north, they could see for miles. The air was cooler up here, carrying the scent of the herbs Catherine had planted in containers along the edges.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

They settled onto the cushioned bench, Catherine tucked against Vincent's side, his arm around her shoulders. The sunset had long since faded, and stars emerged in the darkest patches.

"This is my favorite place," Catherine said softly. "Up here with you, above everything."

"Mine as well." Vincent's voice was contemplative. "I never imagined I could have this—a place where I could stand under the open sky without fear. Where I could watch the sunset with you beside me."

He kissed her then, slow and deep, pouring everything he felt into the connection between them. Catherine responded with equal passion, her hands sliding up to tangle in his hair, pulling him closer. The kiss deepened, became more urgent, and when they finally broke apart, both were breathing hard.

"Take me to bed," Catherine whispered against his lips. "I want to celebrate properly. Just the two of us."

Vincent's eyes darkened with desire, and he stood, pulling her up with him. They made their way down from the rooftop, through the quiet house, to their bedroom on the second floor.

Their bedroom was bathed in soft moonlight filtering through the gauzy curtains. Catherine had chosen everything carefully—the large bed with its wrought-iron frame, the plush rug underfoot, the reading chairs by the window. But right now, all she could focus on was Vincent, standing before her with love and desire written plainly on his face.

She reached for him, her hands sliding under his shirt, feeling the warmth of his skin, the play of muscles beneath. He helped her remove it, then reached for the zipper of her dress, his clawed fingers surprisingly deft as he drew it down slowly. The dress pooled at her feet, leaving her in just her slip and underwear.

"You're beautiful," Vincent breathed, his eyes traveling over her body with reverence. "So beautiful it makes my heart ache."

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“Touch me,” Catherine whispered. “Please, Vincent. I need to feel your hands on me.”

He obliged, his large hands spanning her waist, sliding up her ribcage to cup her breasts through the thin silk of her slip. His thumbs brushed over her nipples, and she gasped at the sensation, arching into his touch. He bent his head, pressing kisses along her collarbone, down to the swell of her breasts, his breath hot through the fabric.

Catherine’s hands worked at his belt, fumbling slightly in her eagerness. He helped her, shedding the rest of his clothes until they stood before each other, bare and vulnerable and completely open. She took a moment to simply look at him—the powerful lines of his body, the golden fur that covered his chest and forearms, the evidence of his desire for her.

“I love every part of you,” she said, her hand reaching out to trace the contours of his chest. “Every single part.”

He lifted her then, cradling her against his chest as he carried her to the bed. He laid her down gently, reverently, as if she were something precious and fragile. Then he covered her body with his own as he kissed her deeply.

Catherine wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him closer, feeling the hard length of him against her core. She was already aching for him, and when he finally entered her, they both groaned at the sensation.

“Catherine,” he breathed, his voice rough with emotion. “My Catherine.”

“Yours,” she confirmed, her hands gripping his shoulders as he began to move. “Always yours.”

They found their rhythm quickly, bodies moving together in perfect synchronicity. Vincent was careful with his strength, always mindful of his claws, but Catherine urged him on, wanting to feel the full force of his passion. He obliged, his thrusts becoming deeper, more powerful, driving her higher and higher.

“Vincent,” she gasped, feeling the tension coiling tighter in her belly. “Oh God,

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

Vincent, I'm so close."

"Let go," he murmured against her ear, one hand sliding between their bodies to stroke where they were joined. "Let me feel you come apart."

His touch was all it took. Catherine cried out, her body arching off the bed as waves of pleasure crashed over her. Vincent followed moments later, burying his face in her neck as he found his own release.

They lay tangled together afterward, hearts racing, skin slick with sweat. Vincent rolled to his side, pulling Catherine with him, so she was draped across his chest, his arms wrapped securely around her.

"I love you," he whispered into her hair. "More than life itself."

"I love you too." Catherine pressed a kiss over his heart. "Thank you for building this life with me."

"Thank you for making it possible." His hand stroked down her back, soothing and tender. "For seeing what we could have and making it real."

They drifted off to sleep like that, wrapped in each other's arms, in the home they'd built together from the ashes of loss.

\*\*\*

The next morning, Catherine woke early, sunlight streaming through the windows. Vincent was still asleep beside her, his face peaceful and relaxed. She took a moment to simply watch him, memorizing the details—the way his hair fell across his forehead, the slight smile that curved his lips in sleep.

She had to leave today. The business trip to Albany had been on her calendar for weeks—a case Joe Maxwell was prosecuting that required her to interview a complete set of witnesses. She'd be gone for two days, maybe three if the interviews ran long.

Vincent stirred, his eyes opening to find her watching him. "Good morning," he rumbled, his voice still rough with sleep.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“Good morning.” She leaned in to kiss him softly. “I have to leave soon. My train is at ten.”

“I know.” He pulled her closer, as if he could keep her there through sheer will. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too.” She rested her head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat. “Will you stay Below while I’m gone?”

“Yes. Father wants to discuss some improvements to the hospital chamber, and Kanin needs help with a tunnel collapse near the lower levels.” Already missing her, Vincent pulled her into his arms.

They made love once more, slow and tender, a goodbye and a promise all at once. Then Catherine reluctantly pulled herself away to shower and pack. Vincent made her breakfast, and they ate together in the kitchen, stealing touches and glances, prolonging the moment of separation.

At the door, Vincent pulled her into his arms one last time. “I love you, Catherine. Be safe.”

“I will be. And Vincent?” She cupped his face in her hands. “I’ll be thinking of you every moment.”

“And I you.” He kissed her forehead, her cheeks, finally her lips. “Come home to me.”

“Always,” she promised.

She left him standing near the doorway. As the taxi pulled away, she could feel the bond that connected them, strong and unbreakable.

\*\*\*

Vincent descended into the tunnels that afternoon, his bag slung over his shoulder. The familiar sounds and smells of Below welcomed him—the drip of water, the scent of candle wax and earth, the distant echo of voices. This was home too, would always be home, but now it felt different. Now he had two homes, two

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

places where he belonged.

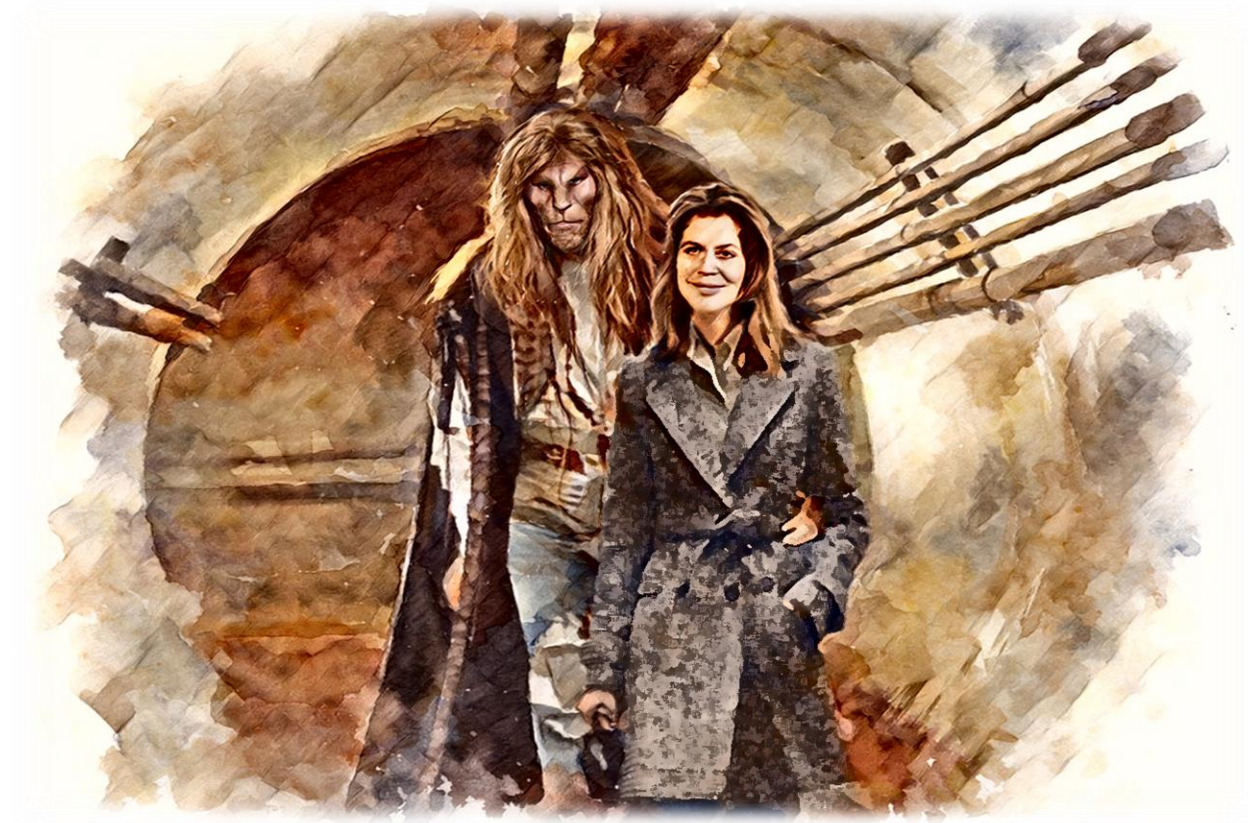
Father was in his chamber, reading by lamplight. He looked up as Vincent entered, a smile crossing his face. “Vincent. I’m glad you’re here. I wanted to discuss those hospital improvements.”

“Of course.” Vincent settled into his usual chair, but his mind was partly elsewhere, tracking Catherine’s journey north, feeling the distance between them.

“She’ll be fine,” Father said gently, reading his son’s distraction with ease.

“I know.” Vincent managed a small smile. “But that doesn’t make missing her any easier.”

They spent the afternoon discussing plans for the hospital chamber. Kanin joined them later, bringing news of the tunnel collapse and requesting Vincent’s help with the repairs.



**Going Home by Laura G**

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“It’s not urgent,” Kanin assured him. “But we could use your strength for moving some of the larger stones. Tomorrow morning, perhaps?”

“I’ll be there.” Vincent agreed readily, grateful for the distraction of physical labor.

That evening, he joined the community for dinner. The children clustered around him, asking when they could visit again.

“When Catherine returns,” he told them. “Remember the rules—only when we’re both there.”

After dinner, as the evening deepened and the tunnels grew quieter, Vincent found himself restless. His chamber felt confining, too small, too isolated. He thought of the brownstone waiting Above—their home, their space, the bed they’d shared that morning. Catherine was in Albany, yes, but her presence lingered in every room, in the careful way she’d designed the space to accommodate both their worlds.

He made his decision. Gathering his things, he made his way through the familiar passages toward the basement entrance. Father would understand.

The climb up through the tunnels felt shorter than usual, driven by the pull of home. Vincent emerged into the basement of the brownstone, breathing in the scent of their space—a mixture of old wood, the faint mustiness of the foundation, and something uniquely Catherine. He climbed the stairs and stepped into the kitchen, flipping on a single light.

The house welcomed him. He moved through the rooms, trailing his fingers along the back of the couch, pausing in the library to run his claws along the spines of their books.

He settled into the reading chair by the library window, watching as the evening light faded to dusk. The city sounds filtered through the walls—distant traffic, the murmur of voices from the street, the ordinary rhythms of the world Above. But here, in this room, there was only peace and the ache of missing her.

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## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

The next afternoon, while Vincent was deep in the tunnels helping Kanin move stones, and while Catherine was in Albany interviewing her third witness of the day, a group of tunnel children made a decision.

“We should go play in the backyard,” Kipper suggested to Samantha, Geoffrey, and Eric. “Vincent and Catherine won’t mind.”

“But they’re not there,” Samantha pointed out. “Vincent said only when they’re both home.”

“They won’t know,” Eric argued. “We’ll just play for a little while and then leave. No one will ever find out.”

Geoffrey was uncertain. “Vincent said—”

“Vincent says lots of things,” Kipper interrupted. “Come on, it’ll be fun. And it’s not like we’re going to break anything.”

After some debate, curiosity and the lure of the sunny backyard won out over caution. The four children made their way through the tunnels to the basement entrance, carefully opening the reinforced door and climbing the stairs into the empty house.

The backyard was perfect—warm sunshine, and dappled shade from the trees. They found the baseball and gloves right where they’d left them during the party and started an enthusiastic game of catch.

“Go long!” Kipper shouted to Eric, winding up for a big throw.

Eric ran backward, his eyes on the ball, not watching where he was going. Kipper’s throw was wild, sailing over Eric’s head and over the privacy wall entirely. They heard it bounce on the pavement outside.

“Oh no,” Samantha breathed. “We have to get it back.”

They found the side door that led from the backyard to the street.

“Quick, before anyone sees,” Kipper urged.

*Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*



**Kipper** by *Laura G*

Eric darted out, grabbed the ball from where it had rolled against a neighbor's fence, and hurried back. They closed the door behind them, but in their haste and relief at recovering the ball, they didn't notice the bolt not latching.

They played for another hour, then carefully cleaned up, making sure everything looked exactly as they'd found it. In a hurry, the children ran inside, Geoffrey forgetting to lock the door behind him. They descended back into the tunnels, congratulating themselves on their successful adventure, never realizing the mistakes they'd made.

\*\*\*

Jenny Aronson had been thinking about Catherine all day, and on impulse, decided to stop by the brownstone after work.

She rang the bell, waiting on the front steps. No answer. She tried again, then shrugged. But as Jenny turned to leave, something caught her eye—the side door to

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

the backyard was slightly ajar.

Jenny frowned. That wasn't right or maybe the door had just blown open in the wind. Either way, she should check.

She approached the door cautiously, pushing it open wider. The backyard was empty, peaceful in the late afternoon sun. Everything looked normal. She stepped inside, closing the door behind her and making sure to lock it properly this time.

“Catherine?” she called out. No answer.

Jenny made her way across the backyard to the screened-in porch, then to the back door of the house. It was unlocked—Catherine must have forgotten to lock it. Jenny shook her head, making a mental note to remind her friend about security.

She stepped inside, into the kitchen. Everything was neat and clean, no signs of disturbance. She walked through the main floor, checking windows and doors to make sure everything was secure.

She was about to leave when she heard something. A sound from below, from the basement. Footsteps, and voices—male voices, deep and resonant.

Jenny froze. Someone was in the house. Multiple someones.

Her heart racing, she looked around for something to defend herself with, settling on a heavy bookend from one of the library shelves. She crept toward the basement door, which stood slightly ajar, trying to hear what the voices were saying.

“—security system next week,” one voice was saying. “Catherine wants motion sensors on all the doors and windows.”

“Good idea,” another voice replied. “Especially with the tunnel access. We can't be too careful.”

*Tunnel access? What are they talking about?*

Jenny was so focused on listening that she didn't hear the footsteps coming up the basement stairs until it was too late. The door swung open, and she found herself

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

face-to-face with—

A man. No—not a man. Something else entirely.

He was tall, with a powerful frame that seemed to fill the doorway. His face was leonine, with sharp features, and a cleft lip. But his eyes—his eyes were the most startling thing about him. They were brilliant, crystalline blue, and they held an intelligence and depth that was unmistakably human, unmistakably aware.

Jenny screamed.

The sound tore from her throat involuntarily, a primal response to the impossible thing before her.

Two men emerged from behind him, moving with practiced efficiency. They caught her by the arms, took the bookend out of her hand, and guided her to a chair in the library and sat her down, positioning themselves on either side. Jenny’s eyes never left the creature—the man—as he moved toward her.

“Please don’t scream again,” one of the men said. His voice was calm, steady.

“We’re not going to hurt you.”

“What—what are you?” Jenny’s voice came out as a whisper, her eyes fixed on him. She was trembling, her hands gripping the chair arms so tightly that her knuckles went white. But she couldn’t look away.

The creature—man?—moved slowly, carefully, as if he understood how frightening he was. He knelt before her chair, bringing himself to her eye level. Then Jenny noticed the gentleness in those impossible blue eyes.

When he spoke, his voice was cultured, completely at odds with his appearance. It was a voice that belonged to someone educated, refined, kind.

“My name is Vincent,” he said. “I am a friend of Catherine’s. These are Kanin and Cullen, also friends. We mean you no harm.”

“Vincent?” Jenny’s mind was reeling, struggling to process what she was seeing, what she was feeling. “But... I’ve never...” She trailed off, her brow furrowing.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

Catherine had never mentioned anyone named Vincent. Not once. “Catherine never said anything about you. She never mentioned—”

She couldn’t finish the sentence. How could she have kept this secret?

“I know this is frightening,” Vincent continued, his voice calm and measured. He remained kneeling before her, non-threatening despite his size, despite the raw power evident in his frame. “I know my appearance is shocking. But I promise you, I am not a threat to you or to Catherine.”

Jenny’s eyes searched his face, looking for deception, finding only sincerity. The contradiction was maddening. She could feel the strength of the men holding her arms, could feel the weight of Vincent’s presence before her, and yet there was no menace in it. Only a careful, deliberate gentleness.

“Catherine knows about you?” Jenny’s voice was rising again, a mix of fear and something else—betrayal, maybe, or confusion. “She knows what you are?”

“She knows who I am,” Vincent corrected gently. “And yes, she knows everything.”

Jenny’s mind was racing, trying to make sense of this. The house, the basement, Catherine’s strange behavior sometimes, her reluctance to talk about her personal life in detail. It was all connected to this... to him. And the way he looked at her now, with those blue eyes, with an understanding that seemed to see right through her fear to the complicated tangle of emotions beneath it.

“I don’t understand,” she said finally. “I don’t understand any of this.”

“I know.” Vincent’s expression was sympathetic, and there was something in his gaze that suggested he understood more than just her confusion. “And I wish we had time to explain properly. But right now, we need to know—”

He was interrupted by the sound of a phone ringing. All four of them froze, listening as the answering machine picked up.

Catherine’s voice filled the room, warm and intimate: “Hi, Vincent. I know you’re

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

probably Below, but I wanted to hear your voice. I'm between interviews and missing you terribly. The case is going well—I should be home tomorrow evening instead of Thursday. I can't wait to see you. I love you. Call me if you get this message.”

The machine beeped, and silence fell over the library.

Jenny stared at Vincent, seeing the way his expression had softened at Catherine's voice, the obvious love in his eyes. This was real. Catherine was in love with this... with him. And he clearly loved her back.

“That was Catherine,” she said unnecessarily, her voice faint.

“Yes.” Vincent stood and moved to the phone. He picked up the receiver and dialed with surprising dexterity despite his clawed fingers. After a moment, he spoke: “Catherine, it's Vincent. Something has happened. Your friend Jenny came to check on the house and... we've met. She's here now, with Kanin, Cullen, and me. She's frightened. Please call as soon as you get this message.”

He hung up and turned back to Jenny, his expression grave. “Catherine will call back soon.”

The phone rang again, and Vincent answered immediately. “Catherine.”

Jenny couldn't hear Catherine's side of the conversation, but she watched Vincent's face as he spoke, seeing the concern there, the love, the trust.

“Yes, she's here. She's unharmed, just frightened.” A pause. “I understand.” Another pause. “Yes, I'll put her on.”

Vincent held out the phone to Jenny. “Catherine wants to speak with you.”

With trembling hands, Jenny took the receiver. “Catherine?”

“Jenny.” Catherine's voice was tight with worry. “I'm so sorry. I never wanted you to find out this way.”

“Cathy, what is going on?” Jenny's voice cracked. “What is he?”

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“He’s...the man I love,” Catherine said simply. “I know he looks frightening, but Jenny, I swear to you, Vincent is the kindest, most compassionate person I’ve ever known. He would never hurt you.”

“But he’s... he’s not human, Cathy. He’s—”

“He’s different,” Catherine interrupted. “But he’s still a person. He has thoughts, feelings, and dreams. He reads poetry, plays chess, and loves classical music. He’s brilliant and he’s saved my life more times than I can count.”

Jenny was silent, trying to process this. The creature—Vincent—was watching her with those impossibly blue eyes, and she could see the intelligence there, the awareness, the very human concern.

“I need you to trust me,” Catherine continued. “I know this is overwhelming. I know it’s frightening. But Vincent and his friends live underneath the city. In tunnels. They have been living there for decades. They are a peaceful group of people who help other people in need. I was taken there by Vincent during the ten days I disappeared. Vincent and his father treated my injuries. Because of them, I survived. Their community has become my family, and if you say something...”

“They’d be in danger,” Jenny finished, understanding dawning. “That’s why you never told me. That’s why all the secrecy.”

“Yes. And Jenny, I need you to promise me something. I need you to promise that you won’t tell anyone about this. Not your family, not your friends, not anyone. Can you do that?”

Jenny looked at Vincent again, really looked at him. She saw the way he held himself, careful and controlled. She saw the intelligence in his eyes, the obvious concern for Catherine. She thought about her friend’s voice on the answering machine, full of love and longing.

“He really loves you,” she said softly.

“Yes.” Catherine’s voice was thick with emotion. “And I love him. More than anything.”

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

Jenny took a deep breath and made a decision. “Okay. Okay, I promise. I won’t tell anyone. But Cathy, when you get back, you and I are going to have a very long conversation.”

“I know. And I’ll tell you everything, I promise. Can you put Vincent back on?”

Jenny handed the phone back to Vincent, watching as he spoke quietly with Catherine. The two men—Kanin and Cullen—had relaxed slightly, no longer blocking her path to the door. They trusted her, she realized. Or at least, they were willing to trust Catherine’s judgment of her.

After a few more minutes, Vincent hung up the phone and turned to Jenny. “Catherine is taking the next train back. She’ll be here in a few hours. She asked if you would wait for her.”



**Vincent** by *Laura G*

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“I’ll wait,” Jenny agreed. Her legs felt shaky, and she was grateful to remain seated. “Can I... can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“How long have you and Catherine been together?”

A small smile crossed Vincent’s leonine features. “We’ve known each other for several years. But we’ve been together, truly together, for about six months.”

“And this house... You live here? With her?”

“Yes. This is our home.” He gestured around the library. “Catherine designed it with both our needs in mind. The tunnel access allows me to move between Above and Below freely.”

Jenny shook her head, still trying to wrap her mind around it all. “She really loves you. I can hear it in her voice.”

“And I love her.” Vincent’s voice was firm, certain. “More than life itself. She is my heart, my home, my everything.”

Despite everything—the shock, the fear, the impossibility of it all—Jenny found herself believing him. There was something in his voice, in his eyes, that was utterly sincere. Catherine had found something rare and precious, even if it came in the most unexpected form.

“Okay,” she said finally. “Okay. I’ll wait for Catherine. And then... then maybe you can help me understand all of this.”

Vincent inclined his head. “Thank you, Jenny. For your understanding, and for your discretion. It means more than you know.”

Kanin and Cullen excused themselves, returning to the tunnels to give Jenny and Vincent space. Vincent made tea—a surprisingly domestic gesture that helped ease some of Jenny’s lingering fear. They sat in the library, and slowly, carefully, Vincent began to tell her about the tunnel community, about his life Below, about how he and Catherine had met.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

By the time Catherine's key turned in the lock hours later, Jenny had heard enough to begin understanding. And when Catherine rushed into the library, her eyes immediately finding Vincent, the love between them was so obvious, so powerful, that Jenny's last doubts dissolved.

This was real. This was right. And she would keep their secret, no matter what.

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Three weeks later, the library had become Jenny's favorite room in the brownstone. She sat curled in one of the leather armchairs, a delicate teacup balanced on her knee, listening with rapt attention as Father described the underground gardens.

"The hydroponics system was Thomas's innovation," Father was saying, his eyes bright with pride. "He studied botany Above before coming to us, and he's

Vincent smiled from his seat beside Catherine on the sofa. "Grow lights, carefully controlled temperature and humidity, and Thomas's considerable expertise. The children help tend the gardens. It's become one of their favorite responsibilities."

"I'd love to see it," Jenny said, then caught herself. "I mean, if that's... if I'm allowed..."

"Of course you're allowed," Catherine said warmly, reaching over to squeeze Jenny's hand. "You're family now. Father's already cleared it with the council."

”

Father nodded, selecting a pastry from the tray William had sent up—delicate cream puffs that had made Jenny's eyes widen when Vincent first brought them from the tunnels. "The community has voted. You're welcome Below, Jenny. Your discretion these past weeks has earned their trust."

Jenny's eyes glistened. "I still can't believe all of this exists. A whole world, right beneath the city. It's like something out of a fairy tale."

"A fairy tale with very real plumbing problems," Father said dryly, and they all

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

laughed.

The conversation flowed easily, moving from the gardens to the hospital chambers, to the vast library. Jenny asked questions with genuine curiosity, and Father answered with the patience of a born teacher. Catherine watched them together, her heart full. Her best friend and Vincent's father, sharing tea and stories in the home she and Vincent had built together.

"The pipe system is the most fascinating part," Jenny was saying. "All those messages traveling through the tunnels. It's like a telegraph network, but more elegant somehow."

"More musical," Vincent offered. "Each sender has their own rhythm, their own signature. You learn to recognize who's sending before you even read the message."

"Vincent's is distinctive," Father said with a slight smile. "Even as a child, his patterns were... unique."

"Poetic, you mean," Catherine teased, and Vincent's hand found hers, their fingers intertwining naturally.

The afternoon light was fading when Father finally rose, setting down his empty teacup. "I should return. I promised to check on Kelly's baby before dinner."

"How is little Sarah?" Catherine asked, standing to embrace him.

"Thriving. Loud." Father's eyes twinkled. "Much like her mother."

Jenny stood as well, suddenly shy. "Thank you, Father. For trusting me. For welcoming me."

Father studied her for a moment, then stepped forward and took her hand in both of his. "Catherine loves you like a sister. That makes you family. And we protect our family."

Jenny's eyes filled with tears. "I'll never betray that trust. I promise."

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“I know.” Father patted her hand, then turned to Vincent. “Walk me to the entrance?”

Vincent nodded, and the two men disappeared through the door that led to the basement. Catherine heard their footsteps descending, the familiar sound of the hidden passage opening.

“He’s wonderful,” Jenny said softly. “They’re all wonderful. I still can’t believe you kept this secret for so long.”

“I had to,” Catherine said simply. “To protect them. To protect Vincent.”

“I understand.” Jenny moved to the window, looking out at the backyard where the tunnel children had played catch just that morning. “I understand everything.”

They stood in comfortable silence until Vincent returned, his footsteps quiet on the stairs. He entered the library and immediately went to Catherine, his arm sliding around her waist.

“Father made it down safely?” Catherine asked.

Vincent nodded.

Jenny stood up. “I should go too. Let you two have your evening.” She gathered her purse, then paused. “Same time next week?”

“Absolutely,” Catherine said, walking her to the door. “And Jenny? Thank you. For everything.”

“Thank you,” Jenny replied, “for trusting me with this. With him.” She glanced back at Vincent, who stood in the library doorway. “Take care of her.”

“Always,” Vincent said simply.

Catherine walked Jenny to the front door, embracing her tightly before watching her descend the steps to the street. When she returned to the library, Vincent was standing by the window, watching the last light fade from the sky.

“She’s good for you,” he said as Catherine joined him. “Having someone Above

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

who knows, who understands.”

“Yes.” Catherine admitted, leaning into him. “It was lonely keeping the secret from everyone I loved.”

Vincent turned to face her, his hands coming up to frame her face. “I’m sorry you had to carry that burden.”

“Don’t be.” Catherine smiled. “It was worth it. You’re worth everything.”

They stood there for a long moment, just holding each other, until a thought made Catherine laugh softly.

“What is it?” Vincent asked.

“I was thinking about the irony,” Catherine said, shaking her head. “The children finally confessed this afternoon—while you were Below, they’d snuck into the backyard to play. They never locked the porch door or the fence gate on their way back. They were so worried about getting in trouble, but once they heard about Jenny, they understood what they’d done.”

Vincent’s expression grew serious. “They should have said something sooner.”

“They were scared. But Vincent…” Catherine’s smile widened. “I told them they weren’t in trouble. In fact, I told them their mistake was a blessing.”

Vincent’s eyebrows rose. “A blessing?”

“Yes.” Catherine’s eyes shone. “Because of their mistake, Jenny knows about you now. My best friend knows about the most important person in my life. I have someone who loves us both, who understands what we have.” Her voice grew thick with emotion.

Vincent pulled her close, his chin resting on top of her head. She felt his chest expand with a deep breath, felt the way his arms tightened around her.

“I’m happy for you,” he murmured. “For both of you. Jenny is a good friend, and you deserve to have someone you can talk to, someone who knows all of you.”

*Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*



*Vincent by Laura G*

“We’re building something beautiful here,” Catherine said softly. “A life that bridges both worlds. And now Jenny’s part of that bridge.”

They stood together in the gathering darkness, the library around them filled with books and the promise of all the evenings yet to come. Finally, Vincent pressed a kiss to her temple.

“Come,” he said. “Let’s go to bed.”

They moved through the house together, turning off lights, checking windows. At the security panel by the front door, Catherine punched in the code, and the system beeped its confirmation.

## *Out of the Ashes by CandlelitChandler*

“Armed,” she said with satisfaction.

Vincent smiled, remembering the children’s mistake. They climbed the stairs together, the house settling around them, safe and secure. Their home. Their sanctuary. Their bridge between two worlds.



*Courage by Paula*



**Neath the Sidewalks of New York**  
Denise

IN TRIBUTE TO ALL THE AUTHORS AND  
WRITERS WHO KEPT THE DREAM ALIVE

Neath the Sidewalks of New York

ARE Light and Cloudshadow

FORMING Daydreams and Fantasies

CASCADING DOWN FORMING Possibilities.

WHEN All that lights upon us IS IN Counterpoint

TO THE Continuum Between two Worlds. SYMBOLIZING

Great Expectations IN a Life without Limits.

Acquainted with the night

The Dreamer Returns TO Awake to the Dream

WHILE DESTINY ARRIVES AS a Fortress on a Tranquil Beach

A Kaleidoscope OF Crystal Reflections AS Love Bade Me Welcome

IN Daydreams and Fantasies TO THE MIND OF Vincent's Pride.

FOR A Child was Born IN A LAND

South of Oz, AN Invocation for a Child WRITTEN IN Bondstories

DEDICATE TO A Wildheart

## **Vantage Point**

Maryann N. Wood

AUTHORS NOTES: For the purposes of this story anything, other than Vincent rescuing his son Jacob, after the episode Walk Slowing happened. Meaning Gabriel, Elliot, and Father are alive. Special thanks to JoAnn Baca for all your help in editing, encouragement and advice. This story will be told in four parts from a different vantage point of three characters.

### PART ONE: VINCENT *CHAPTER ONE*

It was a quiet evening in the tunnels. Vincent sat with his son, Jacob, reading at his writing desk in his chamber. Vincent looked up from his book at his son. Jacob was so absorbed in a picture he was drawing that he didn't notice his father watching him. He reminded Vincent so much of Catherine at times that it was almost painful to look at him. He had her nose, her hair colour, her eyes - the eyes that Vincent so desperately wished he could gaze into once more. Most importantly, Jacob had her warmth, her compassion, her gentle disposition.

The boy had just turned four two weeks ago. The date they celebrated his birthday was the day Vincent found his son. The day he held him in his arms for the first time. He decided to celebrate Jacob's birthday on that date instead of the date of his actual birth.

That date marked the worst in Vincent's life. A day that ripped a hole in his heart that never healed. The pain that never went numb. The day his Catherine died. A lump came to his throat thinking about it. Tears threatened to fall.

Vincent turned his gaze away from Jacob and looked around the room. There were tokens of Catherine everywhere. Books they had read together. Personal possessions Peter had brought down to him from Catherine's apartment. Her hope chest sat at the foot of his bed. Filled with memories from her childhood, her years at school and, most importantly, mementos of her time with him. The mask she wore to Brigit O'Donnell's book party, sheets of music from concerts they

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

attended tucked under the stage of Central Park. Little pieces of fabrics, rocks, dried flowers, each labelled in her cursive: *Vincent's and my first hug*; *Vincent's and my first walk through the tunnels*; *Vincent's and my first trip to the falls*; *Vincent's and my first kiss*. His eyes then fell to the shelf behind Jacob. A picture of Catherine sat there, taken at her first and only Winterfest. She was a vision then and the picture captured her beauty. Vincent closed his eyes, trying to gather his composure before Jacob saw the raw emotion in his face.

When he felt safe to do so, Vincent opened his eyes and looked at his son once more. Jacob was smiling as he drew his picture, a determined look on the boy's face. Vincent looked down at what he was drawing. It was a picture of eight identical white one-story buildings on a plot of grass, arranged in an octagon. A fence surrounded the perimeter, with a forest wrapping around the whole property. Windows lined each building with what looked like bars on them. Jacob was concentrating on one window in particular. He was drawing flowers all around the window.

"Jacob, what is it that you are drawing?" he questioned his son.

"Flowers for mother," he replied without looking up.

Vincent was about to question him further when Mary walked into the chamber.

"Jacob, sweetheart, it's time for your bath," she said, walking up to the table.

"Aww, Auntie Mary, do I have to?" he whined, setting his crayon down.

"Yes. You and Luke got into the sand pits today; you both are filthy."

"Father, do I really have to?"

"Hmm?" Distracted, Vincent looked up from the drawing and saw his son and Mary staring at him, waiting for an answer.

"Do I have to have a bath?" Vincent shook his head to clear it then smiled. "Yes," he replied. "Listen to Aunt Mary and have a bath. I'll meet you in your chamber to tuck you in and read you your story."

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

“All right,” Jacob replied, defeated.

Mary smiled at Vincent as Jacob hopped off the chair and took Mary’s hand. She gave his hand a squeeze and started to lead him out. “If you turn that frown upside down, Jacob, I just may bring you some cookies and milk for your bedtime story tonight,” she said.

“Oh, really, Auntie Mary? That would be wonderful. Could they be oatmeal? No, wait, peanut butter. No, no, I think William just made chocolate chip...”

Vincent smiled as his son’s voice faded off as he and Mary exited the chamber and headed down the hall towards the bathing chambers.

Vincent stood and started gathering Jacob’s drawings and crayons. He looked once more at the picture his son had drawn. He looked at the window with the flowers. “Catherine.” Vincent sighed lightly, touching the window their son had assigned her.

He neatly put Jacob’s drawings and crayons away in his son’s satchel. He would question him later about the drawing. Perhaps tomorrow, when they would sit for their evening together.

### *CHAPTER TWO*

Vincent couldn’t question Jacob the next evening, nor the one after that, about the drawing. A leak in the pipes near the western exit kept him and some other tunnel dwellers busy with repairs.

The drawing was all but forgotten.

Vincent walked towards Jacob’s chamber late one evening; it was located right next to his own. He was about to enter when he heard Jacob reading aloud. It still amazed him how smart his son was. At just four years old, he was reading small chapter books. He was able to process information and come to intelligent conclusions that far exceeded his age, though he still had that child-like wonder that made those conclusions adorable.

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

When Vincent walked into his chamber, he looked around and smiled. It reminded him so much of his own chamber when he was a child. Wooden toys and stuffed animals clutter the shelves that surrounded the room. A bookshelf stood across the wall behind Jacob's bed. It held an assortment of books. Picture books, chapter books, even books that were still too advanced for the boy, but that Jacob wanted for when he was old enough. On his nightstand, next to a few trinkets and a lamp, stood a picture of Catherine, the same one from Winterfest that Vincent had in his own chamber.

Jacob was in his pajamas and sitting in his bed. He was holding a doll that once belonged to Catherine that Vincent had found in her hope chest among her belongings. Not knowing the name that Catherine had given the doll when she was a young girl, Jacob called the doll Alice, saying she looked like Alice from Alice in Wonderland. The doll sat in his lap as he read from one of his favorite books, The Velveteen Rabbit.

“‘Real isn't how you are made,’ said the Skin Horse,” Jacob read out loud. “‘It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become real.’”

“Jacob, you started without me,” Vincent said, smiling as he approached the bed.

“Sorry, Father. Mother was sad, so I started to read to her. It makes her happy when I read.”

Vincent frowned at his son's words. He sat next to the boy on the bed. “What do you mean, Jacob? Reading to Mother?”

“She was sad again. She's always sad. But when I read to her, she doesn't cry and it helps her fall asleep.”

“Jacob...” Vincent started slowly. “Jacob, you know your mother is up in heaven. She's happy there. She misses us as much as we miss her but, believe me, she's not sad, she's at peace.”

“No,” Jacob insisted, slamming the book shut. “No. She's sick and in the hospital. I keep asking her when she will get better and come home, but she doesn't

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

answer.”

“Jacob,” Vincent said, his voice becoming stern, “your mother can’t come home. I explained this to you before. I know you want her to. I would give anything to have her with us. It’s not possible.”

Jacob looked at his father angrily. “Why don’t you believe me?” he cried, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Jacob, I want to, I do. It’s just not possible.”

“Fine! Go away then. I want to go to sleep now!” Jacob yelled. He slammed the book down on his nightstand then turned his back to his father and laid down, hugging Alice to his chest and covering his head with his blanket.

Vincent sighed and hung his head in defeat. He laid a hand on his son’s shoulder and whispered, “Good night, my son. I love you.” He stood and started to make his way out of the chamber, putting out the lanterns and lights as he left. He stopped at the threshold of the chamber and looked back. Jacob was still huddled under the covers. He barely heard his son whisper, “Goodnight, Mother, I love you.”

Vincent walked slowly through the tunnels towards Father’s chamber. The lanterns were lowered to save on oil. The pipes clinked with goodnight messages, reminders about tomorrow’s events, and messages the children sent each other from their chambers, thinking the adults couldn’t hear their chatter when they were supposed to be going to sleep. Light chatter could be heard in chambers where the drapes were drawn as families settled in for the night. The ambience was usually peaceful for Vincent, but tonight it didn’t comfort him as it usually did.

He approached Father’s chamber and spoke softly before entering. “Father, are you busy? May I come in?” he asked.

“Of course, Vincent,” Father answered. “You are always welcome.”

Vincent walked into Father’s chamber and over to where the old man sat at his desk, a book in his hands. He sat in his customary chair across from Father and looked to the ground.

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood



*Despair by Laura G*

“What’s troubling you, Vincent?” Father asked, concern in his voice.

Vincent sighed. “It’s Jacob.”

“What about Jacob? Is he okay, is he not well?” Father immediately asked.

“No, no,” Vincent reassured him. “His health is fine. It’s just some things he’s been saying and drawing that have me concerned.”

“What kinds of things?”

“He’s been talking about Catherine lately. Or, really, talking *to* Catherine. He thinks she’s in a hospital somewhere and that he can read to her, talk to her. He says she’s sad and when he talks to her it makes her happy. He drew a picture of what I guess resembles a hospital complex, with flowers outside a window, saying that it was her room and the flowers were for her.”

Vincent paused for a moment. He wanted to gather his thoughts before he continued.

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

“Father, you know how Catherine and I had a special bond before I lost her. You always said I had gift for empathy, that it was stronger than anything you ever imagined. What if I passed some of that empathy along to Jacob? What if, somehow, he’s envisioning when he was born, when he was taken from Catherine. And he’s seeing it through his eyes now?”

Father thought for a moment before replying. “Anything is possible. It’s extremely rare for anyone to remember something from an early age, let alone their birth, although you and your son are different. Your bond with Catherine was something extremely rare. It was extraordinary. It is certainly possible you passed some of that along to Jacob. He is an extremely intelligent child - a genius, I would even say. His reception to human emotions is baffling. As he gets older, he’ll start to realize what really happened to his mother. This could be just a coping mechanism.”

Vincent nodded and looked back at the ground. “That is what I thought. But to hear him talk about her, like she wasn’t gone from us, hurts. I try to understand that he is just a child with hopes, but the wound in my heart from her loss is just as raw as it was four years ago. I don’t know how much I can bear.”

Father placed his book on the desk and stood. He walked over and stood behind his son, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. “It’s going to be difficult, Vincent,” he said. “Jacob is old enough now to realize what the loss of his mother means, and he is trying to deal with it in his own way. Eventually, he will come to terms with the loss, but until then you will have to try to be understanding. Remember though, after being a father to Jacob and helping him through this, I, too, am a father, your father, and it will be my turn to help my son through this. I’ll be there for you.”

Vincent smiled sadly and placed his hand over the top of his father’s. “Thank you, Father,” he whispered.

“Anytime, my son.” Father gave Vincent’s shoulder a comforting squeeze, then returned to his chair and continued to read his book.

Vincent sat there for the rest of the evening with his father, taking comfort in the

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

silence and his father's presence.

Late that night, Vincent made his way above. Traveling in the shadows, he made his way to the cemetery to visit Catherine's grave.

He came often during the week to sit with her and speak of Jacob and all the others who loved her. He would tell her how everyone was. What was happening in their lives. Every time, for the last four years, he would have a story to tell her. How Joe and Jenny were engaged and expecting their first child. How when Devin came to visit last year and met Diana, it was love at first sight; they both now traveled the world, working with Greenpeace and other non-profit organizations. Mouse, as usual, was inventing various contraptions. Most of the inventions, Vincent would laugh when he spoke of them, worked. How Jamie and Mouse were courting, as Father would say, slowly allowing their budding romance to bloom. Kanin and Olivia had twin girls a year ago.

Every other Saturday, Jamie or Samantha or another trusted tunnel dweller would bring Jacob up to visit his mother's grave. A dying bouquet of wildflowers that Jacob must have picked lay on the ground in front of the tombstone.

When he arrived tonight, Vincent slowly sat down and leaned against the tombstone. He gently traced Catherine's name and sighed. "Catherine," he began, "I'm so worried about are son. He misses you greatly. He seems to think he can visit you in his thoughts and dreams. It worries me that he thinks these visions are real..." Vincent paused, fighting back the tears that threatened to fall.

"I don't know what to do, Catherine. Part of me wants him to have these dreams, these visions of you, but I know the result will only hurt him. I know that hurt. Every time I close my eyes, I envision you tucked against me. It is a pain that saddens me greatly, but at the same time terrifies me to lose."

He stopped speaking for a moment and let his tears fall. A lump formed in his throat as grief overtook him once again. The pain in his heart intensified

"Catherine!" he cried. "I know I must be strong for Jacob. To be there for him, but time does not heal all wounds. If anything, it only deepens them. I don't know how

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** by *Maryann N. Wood*

much longer I can continue pretending to be okay. Pretending that the pain I feel from the loss of you is turning into a dull ache. It's getting worse, Catherine. Seeing Jacob grow. Seeing how every day he looks more like you. He even has your laugh now."

Vincent closed his eyes, biting his lip, and struggled to gain control of his emotions. He clenched his fists, fighting his anger, his sorrow. Fighting to calm down enough to make his way back Below. After several long minutes, when he felt control returning to him, he opened his eyes. He traced Catherine's name once more and whispered, "'Though lovers be lost, love shall not, and death shall have no dominion.'" With a kiss to her tombstone, he whispered once more, "I love you, my Catherine. I shall return to visit soon."

He stood and brushed off his pants and smiled sadly. With one final glance down, Vincent retreated towards the tunnels below the city.

### *CHAPTER THREE*

The Painted Tunnels were always a favorite for the children. Elizabeth decided to start giving the children art lessons once a week.

Vincent and Kanin were in the tunnels setting up some desks and easels to help with Elizabeth's classes. It was the first class and, as of now, a handful of children, including Luke and Jacob, sat in a semi-circle around the chair Elizabeth sat in. Each had a sketch pad and pencil in their laps.

"Now, children," she began, "for our first lesson I want you to draw something that you love. Something that brings you joy. It could be a person, a toy, somewhere you like to visit. When you draw, paint or sketch, it's best to start with things that make you happy. It could be just about anything. Picture what you want to draw in your minds, children, then use the pencil to bring that vision to life. Technique will come in time. No picture you draw today will be bad; all will be a work of art because it will be of something you care about."

The children all nodded and then set to work on creating their first works of art.

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood



*Mourning by Laura G*

“I’d bet you a sentry shift in the middle of the night that Luke is drawing a hotdog right now,” Kanin whispered with a smile on his face.

Vincent looked towards the children and smiled. “Perhaps,” he replied. “Jacob, on the other hand, is probably drawing a book. His nose is constantly stuck in one.”

“At least Jacob likes to read actual books. All Luke reads is comic books. I don’t know who brought those damn things down here, but that’s all he will willingly read.”

Vincent smiled at his friend and shook his head.

Ten minutes later, they were almost finished setting up the makeshift classroom when Elizabeth announced, “All right, children, set your pencils down. It’s now time to go around and share with the class what you drew. I’ll go first.”

She turned her sketch towards the children to show them her drawing. “I drew all

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

of you children,” she said. “Teaching you all how to draw makes me happy, so I wanted to show that through my drawing.” The picture captured all the children’s likenesses in wonderful ways, all of them with their heads down, deep in thought as they drew what was in their minds.

“That’s beautiful, Miss Elizabeth,” Jacob remarked.

“Why, thank you for the compliment, Jacob. An artist is always pleased when someone appreciates their work. Now, let’s go around in a circle and share what we drew with the class. We are going to describe what we drew, including what colours you envisioned. You may have only used a grey pencil, but I want to hear about the colours that are hidden inside. Eric, why don’t we start with you?”

Eric nervously turned his sketch pad so the others could see. “I drew an airplane. It’s white with blue stripes. The clouds are white. One day I want to be a pilot and fly all over the world.”

“It’s a beautiful drawing, Eric,” Elizabeth remarked. “Is that you in the pilot’s seat?”

Eric smiled sheepishly and nodded.

Elizabeth looked at the next child in the circle. “All right, Sarah, you’re next.”

Sarah proudly showed her drawing to the class and said, “It’s a picture of *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel. She has a green fin, purple shells, and red hair, like the colour of a tomato. She loves Prince Eric and wants to kiss him.”

“Eeww, kissing. That’s gross!” Luke said, looking at the picture.

“It is not, it’s romantic!” Sarah fought back.

“No, it’s gross. What if she just ate brussels sprouts? Yuck. I’m never going to kiss a girl.”

“Well, a girl is never going to wanna kiss you, Luke.”

Kanin and Vincent looked at each other and chuckled, trying hard to suppress their

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

laughter.

“All right, children, all right,” Elizabeth intervened. “Luke, you’re next.”

Luke smiled and showed his picture. “I drew a hotdog with red ketchup, yellow mustard, and a brown bun. Hotdogs are the best.”

“Told you so,” Kanin whispered to Vincent, setting up another chair.

“Whenever Dad and I go Above, he takes me to the hotdog stand before we come back home. Don’t tell Mom though. She says hotdogs are bad for you. Mom will make Dad sleep on the couch in our chamber again if she finds out he bought me one.”

Kanin stood up fast and looked towards his son. “Luke!” he whispered harshly, “Shhh!” He held his index finger to his lips and shook his head *no*.

Vincent couldn’t help laughing out loud this time.

Kanin turned back towards Vincent, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “Damn kid doesn’t have a filter,” he mumbled.

Vincent smirked at his friend. “You know, Kanin, we just got a shipment in from Harry’s repo furniture store. I’m pretty sure there was a decent couch among the deliveries. Sounds like you could use a new one.”

“Shut up, Vincent,” Kanin said, shooting him the middle finger.

The men continued setting up the classroom, giving each other dirty looks, as Elizabeth continued with her class.

“All right, children, let’s continue. Jacob, it’s your turn,” Elizabeth said, giving him a smile.

Jacob looked down at his drawing then glanced towards his father nervously.

“Jacob, we would all love to see your drawing,” Elizabeth said, encouraging him.

Jacob bit his lip and slowly turned his drawing around. “I drew my mother,” he

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

said quietly.

Vincent shot up quickly and looked at the group of children. *No*, he thought. *Not here, not now.*

“Her hair is sandy brown like mine and her eyes are green like mine, too. She wants to look out the window but can’t.”

“Why isn’t she smiling, Jacob?” Sarah asked. “I thought people were supposed to smile in pictures.”

“Because she can’t see her flowers.”

Elizabeth looked back and forth between Vincent and Jacob for a moment before smiling down at Jacob. “Well, children, maybe next class we can all draw flowers for Jacob’s mother Catherine.”

Jacob drew his legs up to his chest and hugged his picture. “She’d like that,” he whispered.

That night, after Vincent tucked Jacob into bed, he picked up his son’s satchel and brought it back to his own chamber. He hesitated to look through it. He had conflicting emotions about wanting to look at the picture Jacob drew today. Did he want to look at it and see how his son envisioned his mother? Jacob’s recent dreams and visions of Catherine already weighed heavily on him. The mere mention of Catherine’s name brought tears to his eyes and an ache in his chest. He welcomed it most days, though. The thought of not keeping her in his heart was unimaginable.



*I’ll ready for bed first, he decided, then I’ll*

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

*look at the picture.*

After he was washed and dressed for bed, he procrastinated more. *Well, maybe I'll write in my journal, then I'll look at the picture."*

As usual, he wrote about the day's events. He wrote about Jacob, even about the laugh he had at Kanin's expense. Once he was finished with that, he decided to go say goodnight to Father, perhaps play a game of chess. Once there, he dismissed Father's concerns about his disposition, saying it was just a busy but mundane day.

Finally, after procrastinating enough, he could not think of another excuse to put off looking at the picture.

He searched through the satchel and pulled out the sketch pad from today's art lesson. Flipping through the pad, he saw that the first few pages were drawings of flowers. He then came to today's drawing. The drawing of Catherine. It was a picture of a woman looking towards a window. The likeness to Catherine was there, but then that could be because he knew it was a drawing of her. Her hair hung halfway down her back, and only the left side of her face was visible. You could clearly see the frown on her face. Though that wasn't what troubled Vincent. It wasn't what made his heart skip a beat. It was the scar next to the young woman's left ear in the picture that captured his eye. The scar identical to Catherine's. The scar Vincent knew for certain that was in no picture of Catherine they had. The scar he knew Jacob knew nothing about.

### CHAPTER FOUR

Vincent paced his chamber. Ten strides, turn, another ten, and turn. The drawing of Catherine sat on his desk. He would occasionally stop and look down at it for a moment, then continue pacing. He was trying to come up with a logical reason that would explain how Jacob knew about the scar.

He made sure, he insisted ever since Jacob was an infant, that only positive memories of his mother would be shared. He didn't want any negative memories tainting Jacob's vision of her.

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

Could some of the older children have told him? He doubted it. He doubted that the children who may have overheard things back when Catherine was part of the Below community would say anything. Only pleasant memories were shared amongst the community. Jacob relished those memories. Each time his mother's name came up in a conversation, he would stop whatever he was doing and listen tied to a memory intently.

Vincent himself rarely talked about Catherine. It hurt too much to do so. Selfishly, he depended on the community to answer the questions Jacob had. Of course, he did share a few memories with his son. The books she liked, the music she loved to listen to. But he could never take Jacob to Catherine's and his special spot underneath the park's amphitheatre. He couldn't even bring himself to go there alone anymore. But he did make sure someone would take Jacob Above frequently to listen to and watch the concerts in the park.

Vincent stopped once again in front of the desk. He placed his hands down on it in frustration. How could Jacob know? Who would tell him such a thing? He started to pace again but stopped midstride.

Jacob was troubled. Upset. He could feel through the connection with his son that he was scared. It was then he heard the first shout. "No!" Jacob yelled.

Vincent rushed from his chamber and down to his son's. He found Jacob tossing and turning in his bed in the midst of a nightmare.

"Leave her alone!" Jacob cried.

Vincent rushed to his son's side and gathered him in his arms.

Tears were streaming down Jacob's cheeks in his sleep.

"Jacob," Vincent whispered softly, gently shaking his son, trying to wake him.

"Stop. You're hurting her!" he cried, thrashing in his father's arms.

"Jacob," Vincent said a little louder, trying to wake his son without startling him.

"Please, no. You're hurting her!" Jacob continued to shout, his sobs becoming

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

more desperate.

“Jacob, wake up. It’s okay,” Vincent pleaded louder, shaking his son.

Jacob shot up in his father’s arms, waking from his nightmare. He looked around the room, confused, then up at his father. Without hesitation, Jacob buried his face in his father’s chest and sobbed.

“Shh...” Vincent soothed his son, rubbing his back. “It’s okay, you’re safe.”

Mary, wrapped in her robe, appeared at the threshold of Jacob’s chamber. She stopped when Vincent looked up at her. Seeing Jacob in Vincent’s arms, she mouthed the words “Is he okay?”

Vincent nodded a yes.

She sadly smiled and nodded back and retreated to her own chamber.

Vincent continued to rub Jacob’s back, whispering words of comfort in his ear. Once Jacob’s sobs settled to sniffles, Vincent whispered, “Would you like to sleep in my chamber tonight?”

Jacob nodded *yes* against his chest.



Vincent hugged him close and stood up, holding his son in his arms. He started to walk away from the bed when Jacob stopped him.

“Wait, I need Caroline,” his son whispered softly.

Confused, Vincent turned back towards the bed and saw the doll, Alice, lying among the blankets. “You mean Alice?” he asked, picking up the doll and handing her to Jacob.

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

Jacob nodded and hugged the doll close. “Her name’s not Alice. It’s Caroline. Mother told me yesterday that is what she called her when she was a little girl.”

Vincent remained silent and carried Jacob to his chamber and laid the boy in his bed. Jacob turned towards the stained-glass window and fell back to sleep almost instantly. Vincent sat in bed next to his son, watching the boy closely.

Once again, the boy left him baffled and confused. Since Jacob had come into possession of the doll, her name had been Alice, and now he was saying her name was Caroline. Caroline, Vincent knew, was Catherine’s mother’s name. Nobody except for himself and Peter Alcott knew Catherine’s parents’ names. Peter would have no reason to tell Jacob. In fact, he didn’t have much contact with the boy at all.

How in the world did Jacob know that?

An hour later, there was a light tapping at the entrance to Vincent’s chamber. Vincent rose from his place next to Jacob and quietly walked over to see who it was. Mary stood there, a frown on her face.

“Vincent, I’m sorry to disturb you. I know Jacob is having a rough night. Olivia just came to me and said Kanin is sick. He’s been vomiting on and off all evening. She was hoping you might be able to take his sentry shift in an hour. I would have asked someone else to, but a lot of our people are away picking up our grocery order from Brooklyn. It’s the big one, the pantry food. I can sit with Jacob until you return in the morning.”

Vincent sighed and looked back at his son. He didn’t want to leave him. He was scared that Jacob might have another nightmare. The things Jacob had been saying about Catherine had him deeply disturbed. He sighed again. “Yes, of course, Mary. Please keep him home from morning classes though. I want him to get some rest. Let him stay in my chamber until I return. Give me a moment to dress.”

“Thank you, Vincent, I’ll go let Olivia know.”

He watched Mary leave then walked over to the bed. Leaning over, he kissed Jacob on the head and whispered, “Sleep well, my son. I love you.”

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

He had just finished dressing when Mary returned with a cup of tea and her knitting. Vincent hesitated at the door, looking at Jacob. Mary patted his arm reassuringly. “Try not to worry, I’ll keep a close watch on him,” she whispered.

Vincent sighed and smiled sadly down at her. He gave her a peck on the cheek and whispered his thanks. With a final glance at his son, Vincent departed, fulfilling his duty to the community Below.

### *CHAPTER FIVE*

The sentry shift dragged on for Vincent. His cloak dragged along the dirt floor as he strolled the tunnels, looking out for any intruders or unexpected visitors. Since it was a night shift, not much activity was expected. The pipes were relatively quiet, it being a late hour. The six-hour shift seemed more like twelve.

He planned on questioning Jacob in the morning. He wanted to know how Jacob found out the information he had about his mother, who told him such details. It was troubling that his son knew things about Catherine that he tried to keep from him. Things he didn’t want Jacob to know until he was old enough to understand. This sentry shift gave him time to gather his thoughts and prepare what he wanted to ask his son.

Vincent was patrolling the eastern entrances. These entrances were rarely used, most having been boarded up. The eastern side also included the entrance that was below Catherine’s old apartment. It had been sealed up years ago, but a plaque adorned the wall in her memory.

Vincent approached the old entrance slowly. He wanted to avoid the area but found himself there frequently. A pull on his heart led him there whenever he strolled the tunnels.

Jacob often asked to walk past there. Anything that was remotely tied to his mother, he wanted to be around. Vincent knew he should be happy about that. He wanted Jacob to know the kind and loving person his mother was. Though, like everything else, anything tied to a memory brought him both joy and sorrow.

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

He stopped in front of the bricked-up entrance. He placed his hand gently on the wall next to the plaque, smiling sadly as he read the words he knew by heart. *In memory of Catherine Chandler. Dear friend, mother, and soulmate. You will always be remembered for your kindness, generosity, and loving nature. You will be in our hearts forever more.*

Vincent hoped that Catherine had known how much the Below community loved her. How many lives she touched here and Above.

“My soulmate,” Vincent whispered as his thumb gently brushed across the word. Blinking away tears, he gave the plaque one final glance before continuing his patrol.

The hours ticked by, and from the sound of the pipes coming alive with tapping conversation, Vincent knew his shift was ending. The pipes rang out with morning greetings. Reminders of the day’s schedule. Announcements about breakfast. Finally, close to 9:00am, a message rang through the pipes indicating the sentries should return and give reports so the next shift could go on duty.

Quickly, Vincent circled his way back to the main Hub. He wanted to get back to Jacob and make sure he was okay. The conversation he wanted to have was going to be difficult. He needed Jacob to understand that his mother was gone. Vincent’s own sanity depended on it.

Upon entering the main Hub, Vincent made his way to the Assignment Room, where he met up with the others both coming on and going off duty. Nothing much to report. Gary, a middle-aged man who had come to the community a year and a half ago, reported a few teenagers playing around in the upper tunnels. Nowhere near any of the community entrances. They were just drinking beer and smoking cigarettes close to a ravine entrance. Someone would have to go and clean up the mess they had made. “Damn teenagers,” Garry swore. “No respect for anything.”

After signing off, Vincent and the others getting off duty made their way back to their chambers for some much-needed sleep. As Vincent approached his own chamber, Mary was just leaving. She smiled at Vincent and waited for him to approach.

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

“How was he?” he asked, concerned.

“He slept the rest of the night. Though it was troubled. He kept mumbling, but I couldn’t make out what he was saying. He hasn’t touched his breakfast yet. He’s just sitting at your desk, doodling in his sketch pad. He hasn’t said much at all. I asked him about the dream last night, but he didn’t want to talk about it. I think he’s waiting for you.”

Vincent sighed and looked towards the entrance of his chamber, where a soft glow of candles could be seen.

“Thank you, Mary. I’m going to speak with him this morning. I want to try and figure out these dreams and visions he has been having the last few months. He talks about Catherine like she’s alive and he’s visiting her. It’s troubling. I’m worried.”

“He’s young, Vincent. He’s young and brilliant beyond reason. His brain is more advanced than his emotions. He’s struggling to find common ground between the two.”

“I know. That’s what scares me. I don’t want to see him hurt when he realizes that these dreams are just that. Dreams.”

Mary drew Vincent down for a comforting hug. “It will be all right, Vincent” she whispered in his ear. “Jacob has Father, me, you, and the whole community to help him. He doesn’t have to go through this alone.”

They drew apart, and Vincent smiled down at the old woman he had come to consider a surrogate mother. “Thank you, Mary,” he said. “I appreciate your concern.”

She smiled back at him and patted his cheek before walking away to go tend to the other children of the community.

Vincent took a deep breath, trying to prepare himself for the conversation to come. He entered the chamber. Jacob was sitting at his writing desk, a troubled, sad look on his face. His legs were pulled up against his chest. His doll - Alice or Caroline,

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

Vincent still wasn't sure what to call it - was tucked between his chest and legs. His uneaten breakfast of toast and juice sat on the table in front of him. He was drawing flowers in his sketch pad.

"Jacob, how are you feeling, son?" Vincent asked as he approached the desk and sat down in the chair next to his son.

Jacob shrugged his shoulders but didn't answer. His attention stayed on his drawing.

"Why haven't you touched your breakfast? It's peanut butter and toast. One of your favourites."

"Not really hungry," Jacob whispered, not looking up at his father.

"Jacob, I want to..." Vincent began, but paused, trying to find the right words before he continued. "I want to talk to you about these dreams you've been having about your mother. I want to help you sort through them and realize that that is what they are. Just dreams."

"They're not all dreams," Jacob mumbled. "I can visit mother when I close my eyes and hold Caroline. She can't see me, but I can see her. She can hear me, though, and talk to me. She's scared. The nurses get mad at her when she talks to me. They hurt her."

"Jacob. I know you believe the things you see and you hear are real, but it's your imagination. You want so badly for your mother to be alive, to be here with us. So do I, but it's not possible."

Jacob threw his crayon down on the table in anger. He looked up at his father, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Why don't you believe me?" he cried. "She's sad, she's hurt, and she needs us, but you won't believe me."

"Jacob, I want to believe you. More than anything, I wish it were true but..."

"No, you don't!" Jacob yelled, interrupting him. "I keep telling you, but you won't believe. If you won't believe, then at least let me show you. If I take you with me

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

and show you how much she misses us and wants to come home, will you go get her?”

“Jacob, I want to, I want nothing more than for that to be true, its just...”

“Please, Father,” Jacob begged. “Please, just hold my hand and I can show you. It would make her so happy.”

The look of sorrow mixed with hope on his son’s face brought tears to Vincent’s eyes. He didn’t want to indulge in this fantasy Jacob had, but he couldn’t refuse his son in the emotional state he was in.

He sighed and lowered his head. Maybe once he did this for Jacob, they could start down a different path of healing. He looked up at his son and smiled sadly. “Very well, son,” he whispered, “show me what you see.”

Jacob smiled and jumped off his chair. He stood in front of his father and took one of his large hands in his own. “You need to close your eyes, Father, and think of Mother. Really think of her. I’ll call to her and then you’ll see.”

Vincent watched Jacob close his eyes before doing the same.

Jacob held his father’s hand tightly and began to speak. “Mother? Mother, it’s Jacob. I brought Father today. You must tell him where you are so he can come get you and bring you home. Please, Mother. Don’t be afraid. Father’s here. He can protect you.”

At first, all Vincent saw was the blackness behind his eyes. He pictured Catherine’s face the way he remembered it. Her smiling up at him. Her beautiful green eyes filled with love for him. Then suddenly something flashed before his eyes. A white room. It was gone in an instant. Vincent’s breathing increased slightly as he closed his eyes tighter, keeping Catherine’s face in his mind. The white room flashed repeatedly before Vincent’s eyes before he finally was able to focus on it.

Suddenly, he and Jacob weren’t in his chamber anymore. Vincent looked around. They both stood in a plain white room with a single bed and a barred window. A

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

heavy door with a small circular window was at their backs. A small woman with long sandy brown hair sat on the bed with her back against the wall. She hugged her legs to her chest, rocking slightly in self comfort. Her cheek lay on her knees facing away from them, looking towards the window.

“Mother, please,” Jacob continued. “It’s okay, don’t be afraid.”

The woman stopped rocking suddenly and tensed.

“Mother, please!” Jacob pleaded. “Father’s here. Don’t be afraid.”

The woman covered her ears with her hands and started to rock frantically. “No,” she mumbled, shaking her head. “No, please. It can’t be real.”

Vincent tensed suddenly. That voice. That voice he would recognize anywhere.

Still holding Jacob’s hand, he took a step towards the bed. “Cath... Catherine,” he mumbled in shock.

The woman’s rocking stopped instantly at the sound of his voice. Slowly, she lifted her head and looked towards them, her eyes not seeing them.

Vincent’s heart skipped a beat at the sight of her face. It was the face Vincent was sure he would never see again.

His Catherine looked around desperately, trying to see them. “Vincent!” she cried. “Vincent, is it really you?”

He took another step towards the bed, wanting to be closer to her. “Catherine, it’s me. It’s Vincent. I’m with Jacob. Catherine, where are you? Tell me where you are.”

The door behind them suddenly burst open. Two men dressed in white uniforms sprang into the room, walking right through Jacob and Vincent. Catherine jumped up from the bed and backed away from them into the corner of the room. “Cathy,” one of them said, “you know what happens when you start talking to yourself.”

“No, please,” she begged, panicking at the sight of them. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

again.”

The men ignored her pleas and advanced towards her, grabbing her and forcing her to the bed.

Vincent heard Jacob start to cry. “Father, help her!” he begged.

One of the men put his knee on her chest, pressing down, forcing her to gasp for air, as the other grabbed one of her forearms, pushing it down so he could restrain her to the bed.

“CATHERINE!” Vincent screamed, lunging towards the men who had grabbed her.

A painful shock went through Vincent’s body, forcing him to let go of Jacob’s hand. When he opened his eyes, he and Jacob were back in his chamber and he was lying on the floor, his chair having toppled over. Then he felt it. He felt her. His Catherine. Her heart beating rapidly next to his own, next to where he felt Jacob’s. He felt her fear. Her pain. He felt her pleading with him. Her hope diminishing that what she had heard was real.

Jacob knelt next to his father. He was frantically shaking him. “Father!” he cried, “Father, are you okay? They’re hurting her again, Father, please help.”

Vincent looked at his son and sat up, pulling the boy into his arms. “It’s all right, Jacob. It’s going to be all right. I’m so sorry!” he cried. “I’m so sorry for not believing you. I’m going to get your mother. I’m going to bring her home.”

Jacob smiled and hugged his father tightly. “Thank you, Father. I knew you’d believe me if I showed you.”

“Vincent, what is it?” Mary asked as she and Father burst into Vincent’s chamber, alarmed by Vincent’s scream just moments ago.

“Vincent, what’s going on?” Father asked, limping up to him.

The tears streamed down Vincent’s face as he jumped up and rushed around the room, gathering his cloak and a satchel for supplies. “She’s alive!” Vincent cried,

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

throwing items into his bag. “Catherine’s alive. I can feel her. Jacob...Jacob showed me.”

He threw on his cloak and knelt before his son, pulling him in for a hug. “I’m bringing her home,” he told his son again.

“Vincent, what on earth are you talking about?” Father questioned.

Vincent stood and looked between Father and Mary. “I don’t have time to explain. Watch over Jacob for me, please. She’s far away but I can feel her. I can’t pinpoint her exactly. North. Somewhere north of the city.”

“Stop for a moment. Please. We need some kind of explanation.”

Vincent sighed in frustration. “Jacob has a special bond with Catherine. Somehow, he can visit her, talk to her with his mind. He can see her, but she can’t see him. They can talk to one another. I told you how he was talking to her, and I thought it was his imagination. He showed me. Oh, Father, they’re hurting her.”

“What you are saying...are you sure? Vincent, with the bond you share with Jacob, this could be a case of folie a deux.”

“It’s not a madness we share!” Vincent insisted angrily, his patience wearing thin. He remembered the picture Jacob drew. The picture of Catherine he drew in his art class. He frantically searched amongst the papers on his desk, remembering leaving it there after he took it from Jacob’s satchel. Finally locating the picture under some books, he held it up for Mary and Father to see.

“Look!” he yelled. “Jacob drew this. It’s of Catherine. Look next to her left ear. It’s her scar. Nobody ever told Jacob about it. No picture we have of Catherine shows it. How did he know about the scar if he didn’t see her?”

Father took the drawing from Vincent and studied it for a moment before handing it to Mary to see. “I don’t know what to say. Are you sure?” he asked.

“Our bond is back, Father, I feel her. I feel her heartbeat next to my own. I feel her anguish. Her fear. She’s in trouble, danger.”

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood



*Father by Laura G*

Jacob tugged on his grandfather's hand to get his attention. "We're telling the truth, Grandfather. Please believe us," Jacob said.

Father smiled sadly at his grandson. Mary knelt in front of Jacob and turned him towards her. "Jacob, sweetheart, what do you mean? How do you talk to your mother?"

"Whenever I hold Caroline, I can see her and talk to her. She can't see me, but she hears me. She told me Caroline's real name. She said that was her mother's name. She named the doll after her mother died when she was a little girl. She tells me she loves me. She's in a hospital. If she's sick, you can take care of her, Grandfather. You're the best doctor in the world."

"Hospital," Vincent whispered, remembering Jacob's other drawing. He quickly shuffled through the papers on his desk until he located the drawing. "I know it's crazy, it's insane," Vincent began, "but do either of you recognize this complex?"

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

Mary shook her head, but Father took it from Vincent, his eyes wide with shock. “My God, Vincent, it looks like Meadow Brook. I did a psychiatric residency there forty years ago when I attended Albany Medical College. It’s just on the outskirts of Albany, next to one of the nature preserves. Jacob drew this?”

“It’s the hospital where Mother is,” Jacob answered, smiling up at his grandfather. “I’m telling the truth, Grandfather. Please believe us.”

Father placed a comforting hand on top of Jacob’s head and handed the picture back to Vincent. Vincent rushed over to a shelf in the corner and dug through papers until he found maps of the tunnels and road maps of New York. He threw both on his desk, trying to find a route.

He located Albany on the road map and tried to compare it to the tunnel maps. “Father, help me, please. What would be the best route?”

Father joined Vincent at the table and studied both maps.

“Once you get to the northern tunnels’ boundary, take this tunnel north for around 150 miles to Albany. You’ll be able to intercept this tunnel here.” Father picked up a pencil and drew along the map with the direction Vincent should go. “That should lead you almost directly to Meadow Brook. It’s at least a three-day journey by foot, Vincent. You should take someone with you.”

“No,” Vincent said, folding the maps and placing them in his bag. “I need to move quickly. It would slow me down, and there’s no one we can trust Above. Whomever put Catherine there wanted everyone to believe she was dead.”

“Are you sure about this? The journey will be dangerous. If you get there and find out...” Father let the words fade out at the look his son gave him.

“I feel her so strongly. Stronger than anything before. She’s alive and in danger. They’ve been hurting her, Father.”

Jacob tugged on his father’s hand to get his attention. “Are you going to bring Mother home?” he asked.

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

Vincent knelt in front of his son once again. “Yes. You must promise me, though, that until we return, you will not talk to her. We can’t let the nurses or doctors know that I am coming.”

“But what if she needs me?”

“Jacob, please, promise me. I swear to you, I will bring her home. I want you to help Mary gather some things for her. She’ll need nightgowns and slippers. Some nice soaps. Can you do that?”

“Of course,” Jacob answered, smiling. “I’ll pick out pretty things for her. What is her favorite colour? Does she like pink? Maybe yellow.”

Mary walked over to Jacob and took his hand. “We’ll get things in all the pretty colours, Jacob. We’ll make your father’s chamber so pretty.”

Vincent gave Jacob a kiss on his cheek.

“We’ll be home in a few days. It’s a long journey. Don’t worry. When Mother and I are close enough, I’ll tap a message to Pascal. You can meet us when we are close to home. Go with Aunt Mary now. I’ll see you soon. I love you, Jacob.”

“I love you, too, Father,” Jacob said, hugging him. “Give Mother a kiss for me. Tell her I love her.”

“Of course. Now go with Aunt Mary.”

Vincent stood up and let Mary lead his son away. He then looked at his own father, tears in his eyes. “If I don’t return...if I can’t get to her, or if I’m too late, I...I won’t be back. Please take care of Jacob. Let him know that Catherine and I love him.”

Father pulled Vincent into a tight hug, tears filling his own eyes. “Don’t say such things, Vincent. You’ll both be back in a week’s time.”

Father knew that if Vincent failed to locate Catherine in time, it would be his son’s

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

undoing. He wouldn't survive the loss. He looked at Vincent and rested his forehead against his son's. "I love you, Vincent. Do not worry. Whatever may happen, Jacob will be taken care of."

Vincent hugged his father one last time then rushed out of his chamber. He grabbed a traveling kit from the Assignment Room which held supplies for basic survival, fire-making, and first aid. He stopped at the kitchens for food and canteens of water. It wouldn't be enough, but there were outposts in the outer tunnels with supplies where he could replenish. He checked his supplies once more and then started his journey to his Catherine.



*Catherine by Laura G*

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

### *CHAPTER SIX*

The tunnels were not well maintained the further he traveled from the Below community's boundaries. It made traversing them difficult. He avoided using the lantern. He wanted to save the fuel for when he and Catherine came back. His eyes were accustomed to seeing in the dark.

Vincent pushed himself to the limit the first day. He traveled at least sixteen hours with little breaks. After making a small fire and heating up some supper, Vincent laid down on a blanket to try and sleep. He reached inside his shirt and pulled out the suede pouch that Catherine had given him years ago. It held the white rose Catherine had gifted him, her crystal pendant, and a picture of Jacob from his most recent birthday. He pulled out the white rose, gently squeezing it in his palm.

Closing his eyes, Vincent tried to reach out to Catherine through their bond. He could feel her but didn't want to scare her.

"Catherine," he whispered softly. "Catherine, it's Vincent. If you can hear me, know that I'm coming for you. Don't let them know if you can hear me. Just whisper my name softly if you can. Please, Catherine, stay strong. I'll be there soon."

Minutes passed that seemed like an eternity with no response. A tear slid down Vincent's cheek. Their bond must not be strong enough yet. He waited but finally gave up hope of hearing her voice reach out to him. Carefully, he placed the rose back in the pouch and tucked it against his heart. He closed his eyes, ready to succumb to sleep, when he heard the faintest whisper.

"Vincent, I love you."

Catherine had heard him and reached back. He felt her sending her love to him, filling him with her warmth. Tears of joy fell from his eyes as he drifted off to sleep.

Vincent traveled two more days along the tunnels. He occasionally traveled up to the roads during the night to ensure he was moving along the right highway and to replenish his water supply.

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

At the start of the fourth night, Vincent knew he was close. The route he was taking was now turning into the drainage tunnel that led to Meadow Brook. The feel of Catherine's heart in his chest beat strongly. He followed the tunnel until he came to an iron ladder that led up to a drainage grate. He set his bag and canteens next to the ladder and began his ascent. Once at the top, Vincent carefully lifted the grate slightly and looked around.

He was at the back of a parking lot. The moon was hidden behind storm clouds. Thunder sounded and the scent of rain was heavy in the air. Seeing no one around, Vincent emerged from the tunnel and scrunched down, taking in his surroundings. The parking lot was at the back end of the property, with a forested area behind him. The property was surrounded by a 15-foot fence.

Vincent stared through the fence at the buildings that were approximately two hundred yards away. The single-story white buildings were nearly identical to the ones in Jacob's drawing. His eyes fell on the closest building to his right, the third window. She was there.

He left the grate open for quick access once he had Catherine. Seeing no one around, Vincent rose and started to walk along the back of the fence. There had to be a gate somewhere. He imagined people would take strolls on the trails in the woods behind him. His instincts were right. Halfway down the fence line, he found a lock gate. With a simple pull, he broke the lock off and tossed it in the grass.

The field leading up to the buildings was dark, but the buildings themselves had security lights. Silently, Vincent ran towards the building Catherine was being held in, keeping watch for any guards or employees. The closer he came to her window, the harder he felt her heartbeat in his chest. Once at the window, Vincent took a deep breath before looking inside. His heart soared at the sight he saw.

Catherine was curled up in a ball on the bed, in a defensive position. He felt her uneasiness as she slept. As softly as he could, he tapped at her window, reminding him so much of the days when he would tap on her balcony doors to alert her to his presence.

She woke and sat up at once at the sound, her head darting towards the window.

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

Slowly she rose and walked over to it. “Vincent” she whispered, reaching through the bars to press her hand against the glass.

Vincent’s own hand covered hers on the opposite side. “I’m here, Catherine,” he whispered to her.

She smiled at him, tears falling down her cheeks.

Vincent looked up and down the window. Breaking it would be the easy part. The bars on the other side would be a problem. They were placed far apart, and Vincent hoped he would only have to get one loose for Catherine to squeeze through. Once the window was broken, he would have to act quickly. It would alert the guards.

“Stand back and put on some shoes, Catherine, I need to break the window.”

She nodded and went to the foot of her bed and slipped on a pair of slippers.

With a powerful strike, Vincent smashed through the window and immediately began pulling on a bar, trying to loosen it. The alarms started almost instantly, and strobe lights started circling the yard.

Catherine ran up to the window and started pushing on the bar Vincent was trying to pull out.

“Cathy, don’t you dare!” a man screamed from outside her door.

Vincent saw someone looking at her with malevolence through the circular window.

Catherine glanced over her shoulder then back at Vincent, pushing even harder at the bar.

”Get me the f\*\*k\*\*\* keys!” a man screamed. “Cathy, get away from that window or, I swear to God, you’ll spend a month in solitary!”

Rage soared through Vincent as the man threatened Catherine. With strength he didn’t know he possessed, he roared and grabbed onto two of the bars, pulling them out of their cement housings and throwing them behind him.

Catherine squeezed through the opening and launched herself into Vincent’s open

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

arms, crying out his name. He staggered back at the impact. She wrapped her arms around his neck and gripped her legs around his waist, squeezing him tightly. He returned the tight embrace, cupping the back of her head with one of his hands.

“Tighter,” she begged.

He complied, hugging her as tightly as he dared.

A loud crash of thunder startled them both, and the rain started to pour down as Vincent lowered Catherine to her feet. He was about to cup her face when their reunion was interrupted as the door to Catherine’s room burst open and two men ran towards the window.

Vincent gave the men a look of pure hatred before he grabbed Catherine’s hand and told her to run. They ran across the field towards the gate, the shouts of their pursuers not far behind.

The open gate was in Vincent’s line of vision when Catherine’s hand was suddenly yanked from his own as she slipped on the wet grass and fell to the ground. Without hesitation, Vincent picked her up in his arms and ran the rest of the way, through the opening and towards the sewer grate.

Once at the grate, Vincent set her down and turned his back towards her. “Hang on to me, Catherine,” he said, not trusting that she would be able to make the descent down the ladder on her own.

She nodded her head and grabbed onto Vincent.

They could hear people coming, but no one was visible yet.

Quickly, Vincent started climbing down the ladder, shutting the grate behind them. Halfway down the ladder, they heard voices just outside the grate and could see the shadows of the men through the slats.

Vincent froze in place, looking up, not wanting to make a sound to alert the men to where they were.

“Did you see which direction they went?” one of the men asked.

**Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** by *Maryann N. Wood*



*Vincent by Laura G*

“No. There was no car. They had to have taken off through the woods.”

A static sound followed by a beep echoed down in the tunnel. “Turner, it’s Fallon. Set up a perimeter check along the road leading towards the main gate. They’re going to have to exit the woods eventually. Over.”

“Fallon, it’s Turner. Roger that. Over and out.”

The one named Fallon swore a string of obscenities, ending with, “I swear, when I get my hands on that b\*\*\*\* she’s going to pay.”

Vincent felt Catherine tense up at the sound of the Fallon man’s voice. She buried her face in Vincent’s hair and began to tremble. He could feel that she was more

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

than scared, she was terrified. He put a comforting hand on her forearm and stared up at the grate in rage. He wanted nothing more than to go back and tear the man's throat out for causing her this distress.

"Why all the fuss?" the other man asked. "Cathy's harmless."

"Do you have any idea who she is?" Fallon asked angrily. Hearing no reply, he continued, "That's Burch's girl."

"Elliot Burch?" the other man asked, scared.

"Yes, you idiot. He was notified when she woke up four months ago. We were told to start on her, make sure she doesn't remember. He's been stuck in Russia for half a year with the big bosses. He's supposed to be here the day after tomorrow. If he comes and she's not here, we're dead. Let's go. We need to find her...now!"

Vincent waited for a few minutes after the men left, then continued descending the ladder. Once at the bottom, Catherine let go of Vincent. Without thinking, he bent over and picked up the supplies then grabbed Catherine's hand and began to run, wanting to put as much distance between them and the buildings as he could.

### *CHAPTER SEVEN*

Vincent didn't know how long they had been running before he felt Catherine start to falter.

"Vincent, I need to stop," she pleaded. "I can't see. I need to rest a moment."

He was so determined to get them as far away as possible that he hadn't realized what he was doing. Her safety was the only thing on his mind. He stopped suddenly in the dark tunnel. He heard Catherine fall against the wall and slide to the ground, trying to catch her breath. "Catherine," he wheezed, out of breath himself.

Realization hit him. Catherine was here with him. Catherine was alive.

Instantly, he was at her side, pulling her into his arms. "Catherine?" he cried, his hands running up and down her arms and face.

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

He felt her hands on his own face tracing his features with her fingers. “It’s too dark, Vincent, I can’t see you!” she cried.

He let go of her momentarily and searched for the lantern attached to his satchel, finding and lighting it.

The lantern gave the tunnel a soft golden glow. Then he saw her tear-stained face smiling at him. He stared at her for only a second before taking her face between his hands and brushing her tears away from her cheeks. “You are my Catherine,” he whispered.

She nodded at him, raising her own hands and gently placing them on his wrists.

He looked into her beautiful green eyes then pulled her towards him and covered her mouth with his own in a gentle kiss. When he pulled away, Catherine grabbed onto him and pulled herself into his lap, burying her face into his neck. She started to sob hysterically, begging to him, “Please tell me this is real. That I’m not imagining this. Please tell me you’re real, Vincent. I don’t know anymore.”

Vincent rubbed her back and held her tightly, whispering soothing sounds in her ear. “This is real, Catherine. I’m here. You’re not imagining. I need you to try and calm yourself.”

Catherine cried harder and started to hyperventilate.

“Catherine,” Vincent said again, more loudly, squeezing her more tightly. “You’re okay. Breathe, Catherine. Breathe. I’m here. You’re safe.” He rubbed her back and held her close until her sobs faded into the occasional hiccup. Only then did he let go of her long enough to grab the canteen of water, opening it. He handed it to her and said soothingly, “Small sips, Catherine, so you don’t choke.”

Listening to him, she drank some of the water and handed the canteen back.

He set it down then he started rubbing his hands up and down her arms and face again, searching for any injuries. “Are you hurt anywhere? Do you have any pain?” He lifted her hands close to his face, taking in the red and purple marks around her wrists from being restrained.

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

“I’m okay. I’ll be okay. Just tired,” she told him, trying to reassure him.

“Are you able to walk a bit farther? I want to put as much distance between us and that place as possible.”

Catherine nodded as Vincent assisted her to her feet. He gathered their supplies and put an arm around her waist. “Lean on me, I won’t let you fall.”

Catherine managed to walk for an hour before Vincent had to pick her up and carry her. “I’m sorry,” she cried softly.

“Nonsense. Don’t worry. You know how much I love having you in my arms. This just gives me a reason to hold you.”

She smiled sadly at him and then rested her head against his chest. “You never need a reason. I welcome your arms always. I love you, Vincent,” she whispered to him before drifting off to sleep.

The feel of her heartbeat and the tickling sensation of her breath against his neck soothed him. The feel of her in his arms did give him some peace but also brought concern. She was much lighter than he remembered. He looked down and studied her face, taking in her sunken cheeks and the dark circles under her eyes.

The rage he felt earlier started to make its way back. Now that Catherine was safe in his arms, the conversation they overheard from the men who chased them started coming back to him. One of them had said she woke up four months ago. That was when Jacob had started saying he was talking to his mother. The person they said was keeping Catherine at the hospital was Elliot Burch. He had almost gone to Elliot to ask for help in rescuing Jacob. He would have if Diana hadn’t found out Jacob’s location.

Would Elliot have betrayed him, as well? Did he know that Catherine was alive back then and was he hiding her? Was he working with Gabriel? There were so many uncertainties. So many questions that Vincent wanted answers to. Catherine was his priority though. He needed to get her to their home Below. Bring her home to Jacob. Only then would he seek out his answers and take revenge on those who did this to his Catherine.

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** by *Maryann N. Wood*

Vincent walked for another two hours before he felt Catherine start to shiver against him. He stopped and looked down at her in his arms. Her hair was still wet and the simple white cotton shirt and pants she wore were damp. Vincent cursed himself for not thinking about their run through the rain and how it had saturated their clothes.

Carefully, he knelt and wrapped Catherine in his cloak before laying her down on the ground. He then went to work starting a small fire to warm her. Once he had one going, he removed the outer layers of his shirts. He then carefully removed his



**Catherine and Vincent** by *Laura G*

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

cloak from Catherine and put it around his shoulders. He gathered Catherine back into his arms and leaned against the wall, holding her close to his chest and used his body heat to warm her. He wrapped them both in his cloak and tried to relax.

Almost an hour later, Catherine began to stir in his arms. He smiled down at her as she opened her eyes and looked up at him.

“You’re still real?” she asked softly.

“Yes, my love” he answered. “I’m real. You’re safe in my arms.”

“Vincent, our son. His name is Jacob?” she asked.

“Yes, his name is Jacob, and he’s beautiful. He’s so intelligent. He’s the one that showed me to you.”

Catherine smiled and relaxed in his arms. “When I first heard him, I thought I was dreaming, but he kept coming back even when I knew I was awake,” she began. “I could hear his voice but couldn’t see him. Oh, Vincent, just to hear him. Hear him read to me and talk to me, it was heaven. Then the orderlies overheard me talking to him one day. They were already trying to manipulate me into believing I wasn’t who I thought I was. Telling me I wasn’t Catherine Chandler. That Catherine Chandler was dead. Over and over again they would say that. Catherine Chandler is dead. Catherine Chandler is dead. Then when they heard me talking to Jacob, they would tie me down. Saying I was crazy. That it wasn’t real. That it was all in my head.”

Vincent felt Catherine’s anxiety growing. Her fear coming through their bond. He started to rock her slightly, trying to comfort her as she told her story. “It was real,” he whispered in her ear. “You’re alive. Catherine Chandler is alive.”

“I’m alive?” she asked softly, looking for reassurance.

Vincent gently kissed her temple. “Yes. You’re alive. Catherine Chandler is alive and in my arms.”

“Tell me about him, Vincent. Tell me about our son.”

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

Vincent reached underneath his shirt and pulled the suede pouch that sat there over his head.

Catherine smiled at the sight of the pouch. “You still have it?” she asked softly.

“I never take it off. It holds everything that is dear to me,” he answered. “Hold out your hands,” he requested, opening the pouch.

Catherine did so and watched as Vincent first pulled out the white rose that she had gifted him on their first anniversary. He placed it in her hands then pulled out her crystal pendant. “I thought I’d lost that” she whispered happily. He just smiled and placed the pendant in her hands next to the rose. Lastly, he pulled out the picture of Jacob and handed it to her.

Squeezing the rose and pendant in one hand, Catherine held the picture of Jacob in the other. “He is beautiful!” she cried, looking at the picture.

“He is the spitting image of his mother,” Vincent replied softly.

Catherine looked up at Vincent then back down at the picture.

“When I look at him, all I see is you. Your hair. Your eyes. Your mouth. He even has your stubbornness. Most of all, he has your heart and compassion,” he whispered to her.

Catherine leaned her head against Vincent’s chest and stared at the picture. “Is he healthy? I was so afraid. When Gabriel first kidnapped me, they injected me with drugs, trying to get me to tell them about a book Joe gave me. I told them I was pregnant, but they didn’t care. I was afraid that the drugs were going to harm the baby.”

“He’s perfectly healthy. In fact, that is one trait I passed to him. My immune system. I’m also beginning to believe he will have my strength. He’s showing signs of it.”

Catherine laughed softly. “Good. I want him to have as many of your traits as possible. He’ll be remarkable, like his father.”

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

Vincent took a deep breath in at her words. Hearing her say that she welcomed Jacob sharing his qualities touched him deeply. It was something he feared but hearing her say she welcomed those traits brought a peace to his heart. He kissed the top of her head and looked at the picture with her.

“Are you hungry?” he asked a few minutes later. “You need to eat and get some more rest. We have a long way to go before we’re home.”

“As long as you eat and rest with me,” she answered. “I’m going to need your help. You must keep up your strength for me. Promise me, Vincent, that you’ll rest and eat, too.”

“As you wish,” he whispered and kissed her softly.

Catherine handed him back the rose and pendant so Vincent could put them back in the pouch. She then kissed the picture of Jacob and handed that back to Vincent to put away.

“Hold this for me until we get home,” he said, and placed the pouch around her neck. Tears came to her eyes as she nodded and squeezed the pouch. Vincent kissed her once more before settling her on the ground in his cloak, and went about preparing them a meal.

### *CHAPTER EIGHT*

The journey back through the tunnels was long and difficult. Catherine tired quickly, making them frequently stop. “I’m sorry, Vincent” she would apologize each time. “Just give me a moment and I can continue.”

Vincent tried to reassure her that it was all right, but it worried him. She ate little, and when she did manage to sleep, she would wake up from nightmares. She spoke little of what happened to her. He knew that she was holding back to protect him. He wanted to press her to talk, to let out what she feared, but it was not the place for it. He needed to get her back home, to a place where she felt safe.

It took them four days to make it to the northern boundaries. Vincent smiled in relief when they came upon the first sight of pipes. “Look, Catherine,” he said,

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

pointing at the pipes. “We’re almost home. I can send a message that we’ll be home in a couple of hours.”

Catherine nodded and softly kissed Vincent. She then slumped down against the tunnel wall, exhausted, and watched as Vincent tapped out a message to the Below community. “Tell them to let Jacob know that we’re safe. That you found me and you’re bringing me home,” she asked then closed her eyes.

Vincent watched her squeeze the pouch that hung around her neck then whisper, “Mother’s coming, sweetheart. Don’t worry. I love you.”

Vincent wondered if she could communicate with Jacob like their son did with her but held the question back. *Later*, he told himself. Right now, he needed to get her home. Finishing tapping the message, he pulled Catherine to her feet. He held her hands in his own then pressed his forehead against hers. “Are you ready?” he asked her.

Catherine smiled and nodded.

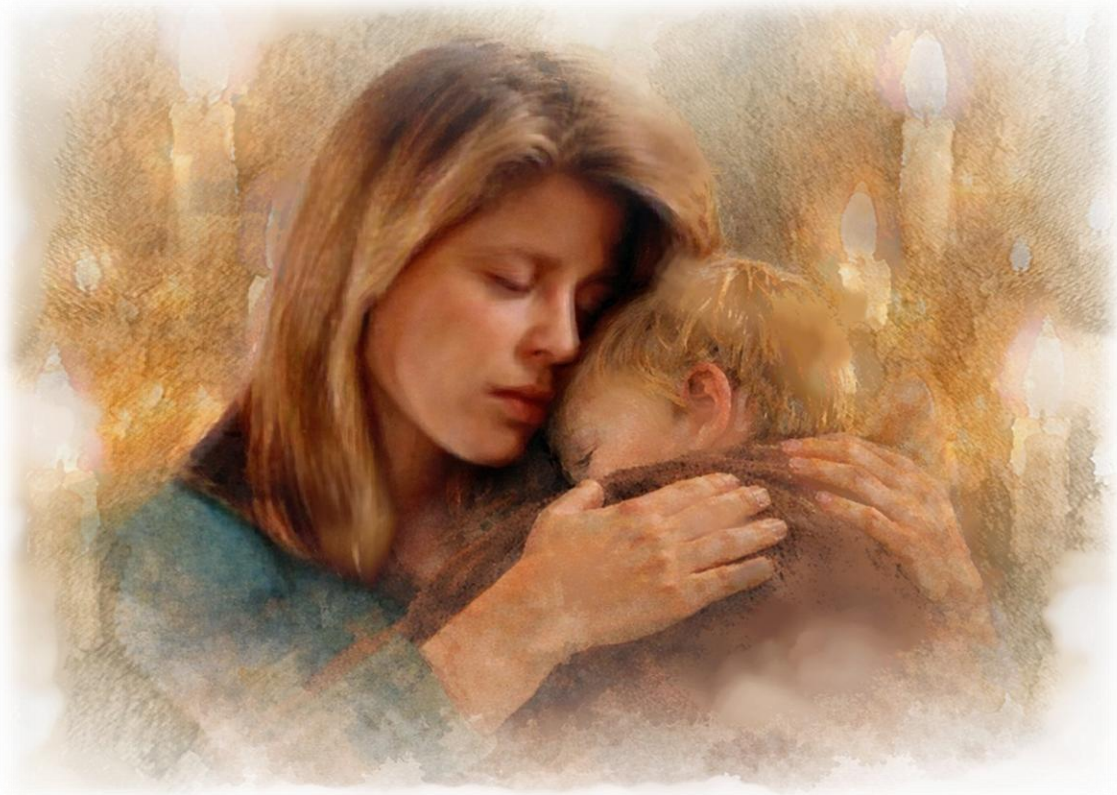
“Then let’s go.” Without another word he picked her up in his arms and began to run.

When they reached the closed entrance to the Below community, Vincent placed Catherine on her feet and pulled the lever to open the hidden entrance. The tunnels were lit by torches that hung on the walls, lighting the way. He wrapped his arm around Catherine and helped her walk down the tunnel towards the golden glow coming from the main hub.

Halfway down the tunnel, two people appeared, walking towards them. They were Mary and Jacob, coming to meet them. At the sight of his mother and father, Jacob broke away from Mary and ran towards them. “Mother!” he yelled happily.

Catherine staggered a few steps forward at the sound of his voice then fell to her knees. She held out her arms as the little boy ran to her. “Jacob!” she cried, hugging her son tightly for the first time. “Oh, my sweet boy,” she whispered, then held him slightly away so she could see his face.

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood



*Reunion by Laura G*

Vincent watched, crying tears of his own, as Catherine cupped her son's face between her hands and wiped his tears away with her thumbs.

Jacob himself held his mother's face, his hands studying her. "You're even more pretty than the picture I have of you. Are you okay, Mother? Those men didn't hurt you again, did they? You're safe now, Mother. Father won't let anything happen to you," Jacob said all at once.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. I'm fine now that I'm home with you and your father," she answered, trying to reassure the boy.

Jacob smiled then tugged on Catherine's hand. "Come, Mother, I want to show you my chamber. Caroline is there and some of your old storybooks. Would you read to me before bed?" Jacob began to pull his mother down the tunnel, excited to show her his world.

Vincent rushed forward and took Catherine around her waist again just before she

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** by *Maryann N. Wood*

would have fallen. “Jacob, slow down,” Vincent said, stopping his son.

Mary rushed forward, taking Jacob by his shoulders. “Jacob, dear, your mother and father just came back from a long journey. They need to take a bath. Perhaps after supper they can tuck you into bed,” she said. Mary then pulled Catherine into her arms. “My sweet girl,” she said, rubbing Catherine’s back. “You don’t know how happy I am to see you.”

Catherine hugged her friend back, crying. “Mary I, I...” Catherine began but couldn’t find the words.

“My dear, it’s all right. You’re home and safe.” Mary held Catherine’s face, kissing her cheeks and smoothing her hair down. She then stepped towards Vincent and hugged him. “Thank you for bringing our Catherine back to us,” she whispered in his ear.

Vincent hugged his surrogate mother, having no words to reply.

Jacob pushed forward and hugged his mother around her waist.

Mary stepped back and smiled at the sight before her. A family reunited. “Jacob,” she said, smiling at the boy, “why don’t we escort you mother and father to the hospital chamber? Grandfather just wants to make sure your mother is okay and then we’ll go and have some supper before all the food is gone.”

Jacob nodded and took his mother’s hand and led her and his father down the tunnels and to the hospital chamber. They didn’t encounter any tunnel dwellers on their way, to Vincent’s relief, most being in the dining chamber.

At the entrance of the hospital chamber, Catherine knelt down and pulled Jacob into her arms once again. “Sweetheart, go with Mary and have some supper. As soon as I’m cleaned up, I’ll come and tuck you in. Okay?” she said to him softly.

“All right.” He sighed. “You are a little smelly. Maybe you do need a bath.”

Catherine chuckled at the boy’s candor and kissed him on the cheek. “Go now, I’ll see you soon,” she said and patted his cheek.

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

Jacob hugged her once more then took Mary's hand. "I'll bring Jacob to the dining chamber and be right back to help," she told the two of them then led Jacob away.

Vincent helped Catherine to her feet and pulled her into his arms as she started to cry. "It's all right now, Catherine," he whispered in her ear. "Everything will be all right now."

She nodded against his chest but continued to cry and sagged in his arms, exhaustion taking over. Vincent picked her up again and carried her inside.

"Catherine!"

Father rushed forward as fast as his old hip would let him. "Vincent, set her down here," he said, pointing towards a gurney. Vincent walked forward quickly and sat Catherine down where Father instructed. "My dear child, what have they done to you?" Father said, hugging her before stepping back and looking her up and down. "Vincent, grab me my bag off the table, would you, please."

Vincent nodded, removing his cloak and retrieving the bag for Father.

Father began a thorough examination. Mary returned carrying clean clothes and towels. She set them down and went to assist Father.

Vincent stood silently but close by, noticing the way Catherine trembled throughout the exam, wanting to be close should she need him.

"Well, my dear," Father began after the exam was done, "your blood pressure is extremely low, you're dehydrated, anemic, and borderline malnourished, to start. I want you on IV fluids for at least the next 24 hours, and bed rest. Would it be all right if I took a bit of blood to send off to the lab?"

Catherine tensed, a look of panic on her face.

Vincent stepped forward and sat down next to her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "Catherine," he whispered, "it's all right. You're safe. Father doesn't have to if you don't want him to, but it will help to make sure you get well. I'll stay with you. Will you let him?"

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

Catherine looked up at Vincent then back at Father, shaking. Hesitantly, she nodded and held her arm out before closing her eyes and burying her face in Vincent's neck. Vincent whispered to her reassuringly as Father quickly drew the blood and handed it to Mary to put away for delivery.

Father took Catherine's hands in his own, drawing her attention to him. "My dear, I want you to go with Mary and get washed up. Vincent is going to help me bring the IV equipment to his chamber so we can get you resting."

Panicking, Catherine shook her head no, grasping onto Vincent's hand. "I can't. Please. I don't want to leave him," she pleaded.

"Catherine, listen to me," Father continued, "like Vincent said, you are safe. Nothing will harm you here. Please go with Mary and get cleaned up. I promise you it won't be more than ten minutes. Then you'll be back with Vincent in his chamber. I promise you he will not leave your sight until you allow him to."

"It's all right, Catherine", Vincent said, trying to comfort her. "Go with Mary. I need to help Father with the IV for you."

Catherine looked back and forth between everyone in the room before finally nodding. Vincent helped her down from the gurney and into Mary's waiting arms.

"Come, sweet girl, let's get you washed up and then into bed," Mary said softly, picking up the clean clothes and towels, slowly leading Catherine away to the hospital's bathing chamber. Catherine continued to look back at Vincent for reassurance.

He smiled and nodded at her until both women were out of sight. He waited a moment, making sure Mary and Catherine were out of earshot before turning to Father. "Tell me the truth, what is wrong with Catherine? I know you held information back from her," he asked, his face filled with worry.

Father sighed and removed his glasses. He sat down on the gurney Catherine had just vacated. "Did she say anything to you about what happened to her?"

"She hasn't said much. She remembers waking up about four months ago in that

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

hospital I found her in. I think she may have been in some sort of coma. She said they were trying to manipulate her into believing she wasn't herself. Telling her that Catherine Chandler was dead. I saw with my own eyes, with Jacob before I left, that they would restrain her on the bed. I know she remembers a little from before Jacob was born. She said they were injecting her with some drug to make her answer questions. She was afraid it was going to harm the baby."

"Is there anything else? The smallest detail can help with her recovery. How did you end up getting her out of the building?"

"When I got to the facility, I had to break the window and pull the bars off so she could squeeze through. There were men outside her door, trying to open it and threatening her. The look on her face, the fear in her eyes, it's something I'll never forget. Once I got her out, all I could think of was getting her to safety. I made her run across a field in the rain. She fell. I grabbed her and continued to run to the grate where I came up from the drainage tunnels. She held on to me as I climbed down the ladder, I didn't trust she could climb down on her own. Halfway down, we heard the voices of the men who were pursuing her. I stopped. I didn't want to alert them to our presence. They started talking, communicating with someone over a radio, trying to figure out where we went. One of the men wondered why they were chasing us, he said she was harmless. Then the other, the one who threatened her, the one that was hurting her, said that they needed to find her. That she was Burch's girl."

"Elliot Burch?! Vincent, are you sure?"

"Yes. She was terrified, Father. Terrified. The first two nights of our journey home, she would wake up screaming. I don't know the extent of his involvement. The men had left before we could hear more. I fear for her safety. They're looking for her. Burch was supposed to arrive at the hospital two days ago. Something about him being away in Russia with some other powerful men. He was notified that she was awake. He's going to be looking for her. He has money and resources. I know that she's safe down here, Below, but desperate men will stop at nothing to get what they want. I know that feeling. I proved that feeling by going for her. I know the love he has for her, the obsession. I share the same feelings, and if he is

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

willing to do the same things I am willing to do, I know he'll stop at nothing until he has her in his grasp."

"Vincent, Elliot Burch knows next to nothing about this place. He won't find her as long as she stays Below."

"But he knows something, Father. He and Catherine escaped through the tunnels years ago when they were being shot at on the docks. He's a smart man. With all the evidence of her escape I left behind, he'll put two and two together."

Father placed a comforting hand on Vincent's shoulder and told his son, "We'll increase the watches. We'll alter all the entrances and seal up many of the little-used ones. No one is going to get down here, Vincent. We protect our own, and Catherine is one of our own."

Vincent nodded, looking down at the ground, trying to gather his thoughts. Suddenly, his head jerked up and he looked at his father in horror, a realization coming forth. "I left her there!" he said, his voice filled with anguish. "I left her alone in her apartment that night I found her on the roof after she delivered Jacob." Vincent stood and paced the room, wringing his hands.

"She was alive and I abandoned her there. I left her for dead. I left her, Father. I left Catherine to die alone. If I hadn't left her, none of this would have happened. Burch wouldn't have known about her. She wouldn't have been subjected to all that pain and torture."

No longer able to hold in his emotions, Vincent let out a short roar and fell to his knees, sobbing. "I left her to die. I left Catherine to die alone," he sobbed.

Father stood and walked over to his son, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. "You couldn't have known, Vincent," he said, trying to reassure his son. "The coma she woke up from she must have been in since that night. Nearly an overdose injection, possibly morphine, could have done that. Unless you were a trained physician, anyone would have thought a person to be dead. Her vital signs had to have been almost nonexistent.

"Vincent, I know the guilt you're feeling right now, but I need you to pull yourself

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

together for Catherine's sake. She's not well, son. She's going to need you to be strong for the both of you."

Vincent took a few deep breaths, trying to get his emotions under control. He stood and assisted Father back to his chair. "I'm sorry, Father, you're right. Please tell me your diagnosis so I can help her."

"Not to worry, my son. One thing at a time.

"As I told Catherine, she's dehydrated and anemic. She is malnourished, but that has nothing to do with your journey home with her. It took weeks for her to get in that condition; there was nothing you could do to prevent that.

"Once I get the results from her blood work back, I'll be able to make any further diagnosis. Peter will be back from his vacation come the weekend, and I would like to send for him immediately.

"Her mental health is a great concern, Vincent. I can't imagine what she's been through. Encourage her to talk about it as much as possible. We don't want her holding in those emotions to fester.

"Now, Vincent, I don't want you to panic but I am most concerned about her heart."

Vincent stopped breathing at Father's words. "What's wrong with her heart? Tell me what is wrong now!" he said, his voice rising with each word.

"Calm down, I told you not to panic."

"How can I not panic when you're telling me something is wrong with her heart?!" he asked angrily.

Father sighed again, searching for the right words that might calm Vincent slightly.

"Her heartbeat is irregular, and with the low blood pressure, I just want to rule out any complications. It very well could be nothing. When Peter returns this weekend, we'll ask him to bring an EKG machine and halter monitor with him. Both will help monitor her heart, and we'll know more then. Until then, I want to get her

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** by *Maryann N. Wood*

rehydrated and on bed rest. If possible, I would like her to remain as stress free as possible, but in her current mental state that is going to be a problem. That is why I need you to hold yourself together as best as you can. She's going to need to lean on you. She may say things that are going to upset you, but you need to hold back the anger and frustration until we know more about her condition. Can you do that, Vincent? Can you do that for Catherine?"

Vincent nodded, wiping away frustrated tears.

"Good. Now, help me gather the IV pole and the saline IV bags and bring them to your chamber. I want to put her on a slow drip for the next 24 hours," Father instructed as he grabbed his medical bag and put everything he would need to insert the IV in it.

Vincent nodded and grabbed the items Father requested, carrying them down the tunnel to his chamber. Catherine and Mary were already there when Vincent walked in. Mary was just pulling down the covers and trying to assist Catherine in



*Catherine* by *Laura G*

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

climbing into the bed.

Vincent set down what he had in his arms and rushed over to them. Lifting Catherine, he gently laid her in the bed and covered her up. He sat down on the bed next to her and smiled, stroking her face. “Are you feeling better now after your bath?” he asked her.

She smiled and took his hand in her own and kissed his fingers. “Yes. Thank you,” she said. “Now you need to go get cleaned up. Quickly though, I like having you close.”

Vincent hesitated to leave her side again.

“Go, Vincent,” Father instructed. “You’re filthy and you smell. I don’t think Catherine wants you sleeping next to her like that. Perhaps Mary can go grab you both something to eat from the kitchen. You both must be famished. Nothing too heavy for Catherine right now. Some soup and crackers I think are best. But for him,” Father pointed his cane towards Vincent, “try to get as many sandwiches as William is willing to part with.”

“Of course, I’d be happy to,” Mary said, smiling at the couple. She patted Vincent’s arm as she left the chamber.

“Now, Vincent, if you would just bring the IV pole and bag of saline over to the bed, I can get Catherine’s IV going while you’re cleaning up.”

“Will you be all right while I’m gone, Catherine?” he asked.

“Yes, yes, just go. Don’t worry. Will you bring Jacob with you when you return? I promised I’d tuck him in but maybe I can still read to him before he goes to sleep.”

“Whatever you wish.”

Vincent reluctantly rose from the bed and gathered the supplies Father needed, bringing them to the bedside. He hung the bag on the IV pole for Father then took Catherine’s hand once again.

Father dragged a chair next to the bed and gave Vincent a shove. “Go, Vincent,” he

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

said. “The sooner you go, the sooner you can come back, and you won’t have to leave again anytime soon.”

Vincent kissed Catherine’s fingers then set her hand down. He walked backwards towards his wardrobe so he wouldn’t have to take his eyes off her. Catherine’s eyes followed him, smiling. He stood just in front of the wardrobe, unaware of Father taking supplies out of his medical bag and setting them down on the bed. They continued staring lovingly at each other, unaware of anyone else in the room.

“Vincent, go!” Father said loudly.

Vincent jumped slightly, coming out of his trance. Catherine giggled slightly and looked down. Finally, Vincent turned away and grabbed a change of clothes and walked towards his private bathing chamber. He stopped just before leaving and looked over at Catherine and Father. Father was explaining to her step by step about how he was going to insert the IV, keeping her calm and encouraging her to close her eyes and relax. Knowing she was in safe hands, Vincent left quickly, wanting to return to Catherine as soon as possible.

After bathing, Vincent made his way to Jacob’s chamber. He found his son in his pajamas, sitting on the floor in front of his bed playing with some Lego bricks.

Jacob jumped to his feet at the sight of his father. “Where’s Mother?” he asked, his face falling into a frown when he didn’t see Catherine.

“Grandfather ordered that your mother stay in bed for a few days. She was upset that she couldn’t tuck you in but would like you to bring a book to our chamber so she can still read to you,” Vincent explained.

Jacob smiled and jumped up and down. He ran to his desk and grabbed his book bag. “Which one should I bring, Father?” he asked, searching through all his books. “Matilda? The Paper Bag Princess? Maybe we can start The Bridge to Terabithia.” He started putting every book in his bag. “Wait, I know, Father. The Velveteen Rabbit. It’s one of her favorites.”

Jacob ran over to his bed and jumped on top of it to reach the book on the far side of it, next to his doll Caroline. He grabbed both the book and the doll and jumped

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

off.

“Jacob, calm down. Your mother is very tired. She won’t be able to read all these books tonight,” Vincent said, smiling at his son.

“I know that, Father. I just want to make sure she has a choice.”

“All right, Jacob, that’s enough,” Vincent said, walking over to him and picking him up. “Mother is waiting for us. She really wants to see you. We don’t want to keep her waiting, do we?”

Jacob shook his head, resting his head against Vincent’s shoulder as they left the boy’s chamber.

When they entered Vincent’s chamber, they found Catherine and Father seated at Vincent’s writing desk. Jacob wiggled out of his father’s arms when they entered and ran over to his mother, jumping into her lap and hugging her before anyone could stop him. Catherine immediately hugged her son, pulling him tightly against her.

“Jacob! Careful,” Vincent said, rushing over to remove the boy, but Catherine waved her hand at him. “No, Vincent, it’s fine. I want to hug him,” she said, closing her eyes, her face relaxed and peaceful.

He set the book bag down on the bed then took a seat at the table. Crunching his brow in a displeasing look, he looked between Catherine and Father. “Why are you out of bed, Catherine?” he asked. Expecting no answer, he immediately asked Father the same question.

“Why is she out of bed, Father? You said bed rest. This is not bed rest.”

Father sighed and gave Catherine a scowling look. “Why, you ask? Well, dare I say, because she is even more stubborn than you. She insisted on eating at the table. We came to an agreement that if I allow her to take her meals at the table with you and Jacob, she promises to stay in bed and by no means will leave that bed without the assistance of either you or Mary for at least 48 hours. Isn’t that right, Catherine?”

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

They both looked over to Catherine for a reaction, but she was oblivious to them both. Jacob was sitting in her lap, facing her. He was outlining her face with his hands, as if trying to memorize her. Catherine held him at his waist gently to prevent him from falling. She was just staring at him, tears forming in her eyes, a peaceful smile on her face.

A tear escaped one of her eyes and Jacob wiped it away with his thumb. “Are these happy tears again, Mother?” he asked.

Catherine only managed to nod, more tears escaping. Jacob leaned forward and kissed both her cheeks. Catherine pulled him close again, whispering, “I love you, sweetheart. Thank you for helping your father bring me home. You are such a brave boy.”

Both Vincent and Father watched the exchange, tears coming to their own eyes.

The moment was broken when Mary entered, carrying a tray of food. She walked up to the desk and placed it down in front of Vincent.

“Well, I think it is time for me to go to bed,” Father said, rising from his chair. He took a step towards Catherine and Jacob and placed a hand on her shoulder. Catherine looked up at him, smiling. “Remember your promise, my dear. You stay in that bed unless it is mealtime,” he told her sternly.

“I promise, Father. Thank you.”

Pointing to the soup on the tray, he told her, “Eat as much of that soup as you can. Slowly. Your stomach needs to adjust. If you eat too fast, you’ll get sick.” He then looked at Vincent. “See to it that she listens. Don’t let that pretty face of hers entice you.”

“I won’t, Father. Both Jacob and I will ensure that she listens to your instructions. Won’t we, Jacob?”

Jacob nodded, resting his head on his mother’s shoulder, fiddling with the suede strap of the pouch that Catherine still wore around her neck.

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood



*Vincent by Laura G*

“Very well then,” Father said, then held his arm out to Mary. “Mary, would you be so kind as to escort me to my chamber? Perhaps for a cup of evening tea?”

“I’d be delighted, Father,” she answered. Mary approached Father and stopped to give both Catherine and Jacob a peck on the head before taking Father’s arm and walking out of the chamber with him.

Vincent stood once they were gone and walked around the table so he could lift Jacob up. “Come now, Jacob, your mother needs to eat some supper. Why don’t you sit on the bed and pick one of the books you brought for her to read?” Jacob shook his head no and wrapped his arms around Catherine’s neck tightly. “Jacob,” Vincent repeated, tugging at the boy. “Let’s go now. I told you, your mother needs to have her supper.”

“No!” Jacob said, refusing to let go of his mother.

Vincent was about to pull his son away when Catherine looked up at him and shook her head no, then held up one finger, indicating for him to wait a moment.

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

“Jacob, sweetheart,” she said, taking his face between her hands. “If you listen to your father now, I promise to read to you until you fall asleep. You and I can curl up on that bed, all warm under the covers, and read whatever story you wish. First, though, I promised Grandfather that I’d eat a little supper, and I can’t break a promise to Grandfather. So please, listen to your father and go sit on the bed and pick whatever book you wish. Will you do that for me, please?”

Jacob sighed and slowly climbed off his mother’s lap. “Yes, Mother,” he said then turned and ran over to the bed, jumping up into it.

Vincent looked at his son then back at Catherine and squatted down in front of her, holding her hands. They stared at each other for a moment before he asked, “Are you feeling okay? Are you in any pain?”

“No, I’m fine. Just very tired.”

He kissed the fingers on both of her hands then rose and walked back around the table to sit. He set a bowl of soup broth in front of her then watched her through hooded eyes, making sure she ate, as he ate three roast beef sandwiches and a hearty stew. Finishing his meal, and being happy that she ate half the bowl of broth, Vincent lifted her up in his arms, being mindful of the IV, and set her down in the bed next to Jacob, who was eagerly waiting with a book in his hands.

“What’s the tube in your hand for, Mother?” Jacob asked as Vincent tucked the blankets around them both.

“It’s called an IV line. It helps me get the medicine I need to get better,” Catherine told him. She then saw the doll that Jacob held in his arms. “Caroline,” she whispered, gently taking the doll from Jacob and holding it in her lap. “My father gave me this doll when I was ten years old. I named her after my mother. I’m so glad she found her way to you, Jacob. She can be a good friend, and never tells anyone any secrets you tell her.”

“Can I keep her, Mother? I’ll take good care of her.”

“Of course you can keep her. That would make me happy. Now, which book did you pick?”

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

“The Velveteen Rabbit. You said it was your favorite when you were little,” Jacob said, handing her the book and cuddling up next to her, resting his head on her chest.

Vincent stood up and looked down at Catherine and their son. It was one of the most beautiful sights he had ever seen, the two of them together. “Will the two of you be okay for a few minutes while I take the supper dishes back to the kitchen?” he asked them softly.

Catherine smiled at him and nodded. “Yes, we’ll be okay,” she told him, “but hurry back, we both want our goodnight kisses before we fall asleep.”

“As you wish.”

Vincent gathered the dishes and walked towards the exit, smiling as Catherine’s voice followed him out of the chamber.

*There was once a velveteen rabbit. He was fat and bunched, his coat was spotted brown and white, and his ears were lined with pink sateen. On Christmas morning, when he sat wedged on top of the Boy’s stocking...*

Vincent made quick work of returning their supper dishes to the kitchen. He washed and dried them, not wanting to leave a mess for William in the morning. He was getting ready to leave when he spotted a container of freshly baked cookies on the counter. A note that read DO NOT TOUCH! was taped to the top. Vincent smiled mischievously and gathered a few in a napkin before departing and making his way back to his chamber.

He was gone no more than twenty minutes, but when he returned, both Jacob and Catherine were fast asleep. Jacob was curled up against the wall, underneath the stained-glass window. Catherine laid next to him, hugging him close to her breast. It was a vision that Vincent wanted to immortalize in his mind forever.

It was hard to think, Vincent thought, that just over a week ago, he was depressed, dejected, heartbroken. He was so close to letting himself fall into the Abyss and leaving everything behind, including Jacob, that the thought still scared him. Then a true miracle occurred. His Catherine was returned to him.

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** by *Maryann N. Wood*

He placed the stolen cookies on his desk. Then, unable to contain himself any longer, he carefully climbed into the bed next to Catherine and pulled her tightly against him, tucking her head under his chin.

Catherine sighed happily and opened her eyes slightly, smiling at him. She turned her head slightly to look up at him, her eyes half closed. “Do I still get my goodnight kiss?” she asked softly.

“Of course, a night will never pass again that we don’t share at least one kiss.” Carefully, Vincent brushed her lips with his own.

Catherine smiled and closed her eyes. “May I have one more? You know, just in case. It’s good to have one in the bank.”

Vincent chuckled and gave her two more kisses. “There you go,” he whispered. “Have two. Go back to sleep and I promise that we’ll build that bank of kisses up so much in the coming days that you’ll be a wealthy woman.”

He watched as Catherine laid her head back down and promptly fell back to sleep. Vincent closed his own eyes, a feeling of contentment overcoming him. He fought to stay awake, relishing the way Catherine felt in his arms, but exhaustion soon overtook him and he fell into a peaceful sleep.

### *CHAPTER NINE*

Vincent slowly woke the next morning to the sound of whispering. He kept his eyes closed, feigning sleep as he listened to the two most important people in his life have a quiet conversation.

“Mother, are you going to be okay? You’ve been in the hospital a long time. Grandfather’s a doctor, he could have taken care of you,” Jacob said to his mother quietly.

It was a moment before Catherine replied. “I was asleep for a very long time. I only just woke up when you started to come and visit me. I’m sorry for what you had to see, Jacob. Those were bad men at the hospital. Your visits helped me, though. It was the only time I was happy.”

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

“Why did they hurt you, Mother?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes people do terrible things to others and we don’t know why.”

“Will they make you go back? Please don’t leave, Mother.”

Vincent heard the sadness in his son’s voice and knew he needed to reassure him. He sat up in bed and smiled down at the boy. “I don’t want either of you worrying about that,” Vincent said confidently. “No one, and I mean no one, is ever going to take your mother away again. I won’t let them. I won’t let anyone hurt either of you.”

“I know you won’t, Father,” Jacob said, sitting up in bed. “I’ll protect Mother, too. When you have to go and work in the tunnels, I’ll take care of her.”

“My brave men,” Catherine commented, looking between the two. She tried to sit up but struggled to do so. Vincent quickly jumped up and helped her sit on the edge of the bed, frowning that she seemed to be out of breath from the small task.

“Jacob, why don’t you go brush your teeth and get dressed? It’s almost breakfast, and it’s Thursday. You know what Thursday is,” Vincent said as he helped Catherine to stay sitting up.

“Pancake day!” Jacob said, jumping to his feet on the bed, then leaping out of it. He started running out of the chamber before he stopped and ran back to give Catherine a kiss on the cheek. “Can I stay home from morning classes today, Father? Please? I want to sit with Mother. I promise to be quiet and practice my letters here. Maybe Mother can help with my phonics.”

“That would be lovely, sweetheart,” Catherine answered before Vincent had a chance to oppose. “First, you must do as your Father tells you and wash up before breakfast. Though I’m sure he would want you to go to your afternoon classes. Especially if one is math. I was terrible at math. Lucky for me, being a lawyer only requires basic math.”

”Okay good, okay fine,” Jacob said, mimicking Mouse, then ran happily from the

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

room.

“Dear God, Vincent, how do you keep up with all his energy?” She laughed.

Vincent chuckled and helped Catherine to her feet.

Mary appeared at the chamber entrance before Vincent could respond. She had with her clean clothes and towels for Catherine. “How are you feeling today, Catherine?” she asked as she walked up to them.

“A little shaky but rested. I need to use the washroom though. Would you mind helping me?”

“Of course, my dear. Vincent, I’ll push the IV pole if you want to help Catherine walk. We’ll use the private wash chamber here. I imagine Vincent’s going to have to get used to sharing it now. Later on, I’ll bring some nice-smelling soaps and lotions, some flowers. Before you know it, we’ll turn it into a nice lady’s powder room.”

Catherine chuckled as the three of them slowly made their way to the wash chamber. Vincent helped Catherine sit on a chair inside the room. “I’ll be right outside when you’re finished,” he said, kissing the top of her head. He turned to leave the room.

“Wait, come back,” Catherine said, grabbing his hand. Vincent went back to her and bent over to look her in the eye.

She took him by the collar and pulled him towards her for a quick kiss. “You promised last night that we’d start banking kisses.”

“That I did.”

“You won’t go far, will you, Vincent? I’d like it if you could stay close for awhile.”

Vincent pulled her into a comforting hug



## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

and whispered reassurance in her ear then looked to Mary and said, “Call to me when you two are finished and I’ll be right back to assist you.”

“Of course. Go get changed yourself. We won’t be that long. I asked William to have breakfast delivered to your chamber this morning. Father will be by shortly after to check on Catherine.”

Ten minutes later, Catherine was seated at the table, nibbling on some toast. Mary stood behind her, braiding her hair. “Your hair has gotten so long. It’s beautiful. Do you plan on cutting it?” Mary asked, tying off the braid.

”I haven’t really thought about it. I haven’t had it this long since I was a girl.”

“Vincent? Vincent, what do you think?”

Vincent was staring at Catherine, lost in thought.

“Vincent!”

Mary’s voice finally broke through to him. He blinked a few times then tried to focus on what he was asked. The look of confusion that was on his face made Mary smile. “I asked whether you thought that Catherine’s longer hair suited her. I’ve been telling her how beautiful it is and we wanted your opinion.”

Both women stared at him with amused looks, waiting for him to answer. “I...well, I think...I think it’s lovely,” Vincent answered, struggling to find any words. He was saved from any further questions as Father and Jacob entered the chamber. Jacob had his schoolbooks in his hands but tossed them in a chair near the entrance and ran to Catherine, jumping onto her lap and hugging her.

“Jacob, no. Careful,” Vincent said, stepping forward to lift him off his mother’s lap. The boy had other ideas as he latched onto his mother in a fierce grip. Vincent was reaching again to pull Jacob away when Father interrupted.

“Jacob, will you please pull a chair in front of your mother so I may sit and have a look at her?” he asked.

Catherine whispered something in his ear and Jacob nodded, jumping down and

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

pulling a chair over for Father. He then went over to Vincent and tugged at his hand. "Mother wants you to sit down and eat breakfast," he said, then jumped on the bed to wait.

Vincent looked between Father and Catherine then sighed and slumped down next to Catherine and began to eat. Mary assisted Father to the chair then took a note pad and pencil out of her apron pocket and stood back to take notes from the examination.

Father began looking Catherine over. Taking her blood pressure and temperature. Listening to her heart. Examining the ugly bruises on her wrists. "How did you sleep? Did you eat something? Are you in any pain?" He asked question after question, Mary making notes of each answer.

"I'm feeling better now that I'm home," Catherine said after answering all his questions. "I am tired and I get a little winded when I walk, but I'm sure after a few days' rest I'll be able to move about more and help out where needed."

"Hmmm, well, I'll be the judge of that," Father said, packing up his medical bag. "Peter will be back from vacation in two days, and I've made sure he'll be made aware of all that has transpired down here."

Catherine teared up at the mention of her godfather's name. "Peter," she whispered, smiling. "Make sure he's Below before you tell him, in case he needs assistance from the shock."

"Of course, Catherine," Father reassured her. "I'm also going to request he bring some equipment with him when he comes. There are just a few tests I want to perform on you."

Vincent watched Father glanced over his shoulder at Jacob, who was waiting patiently for the exam to be done with his mother so he could have her attention. Vincent looked his father in the eyes, communicating that nothing should be said that would worry Catherine or Jacob.

"What sort of tests, Father?" Catherine asked, looking at him with concern.

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

Father smiled and patted her hand. “Just standard tests, my dear. We don’t have access to any of your medical records from the last four years, and from what we understand, you were in a coma for many years. I just want to make sure all is well.”

Catherine nodded and looked down at her hands. Vincent felt her anxiety building. He stood and quickly rounded the table so he could kneel next to her. “Catherine,” he said, placing his hands over hers, “try not to worry yourself. All will be well. You’re safe here. Please remember that. Whatever happened back at that facility, whoever hurt you, they will not harm you again. This I promise.” He watched her fight the tears that threatened to fall but fail. As she began to weep, Vincent pulled her to him in a tight hug. “Hush now, my love,” he whispered, rubbing her back.

“Mother!”

Jacob jumped off the bed and ran to his mother when she started to cry. He grabbed her around the waist from her side, hugging her. Catherine quickly tried to gather her composure and smiled at her son, hugging him back. “It’s all right, sweetheart,” she said, kissing the top of his head.

“All right, Catherine, back to bed,” Father said, standing up. “I want to check that IV before I head back to the library. Jacob, turn down the covers so your father can help your mother into bed.”

Jacob nodded and went to the bed and pulled the covers down. Vincent helped Catherine into bed and tucked her in comfortably. Jacob immediately jumped in next to her, cuddling up against her.

“Did you bring your schoolwork with you, Jacob?” Catherine asked as she stroked his hair. Jacob nodded and closed his eyes, hiding his face against her side.

Father examined the IV line and checked the bag. “All looks well. This bag should be empty by this afternoon. I’d like to run one more through the IV. Make sure your mother stays in bed, Jacob. I’m leaving you in charge,” Father said, patting his grandson on the head.

Jacob peeked up at his grandfather and smiled. “I will, Grandfather.”

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

“Let me walk you out, Father,” Vincent said, taking Father by the arm and helping him towards the chamber’s door. They stopped just beyond the threshold. “Ensure she rests and sleeps. I know she wants Jacob close right now but if he becomes too rambunctious, send him to me.”

“I will, Father, thank you.

After Father left, Vincent turned and walked back towards the bed, picking up Jacob’s schoolbooks as he did. He dropped the books onto his writing desk then quickly lifted Jacob away from Catherine before he had a chance to object. He deposited the boy in a chair and pointed towards the books.

“Schoolwork now, Jacob. That was the agreement. You promised that if you stayed home from your morning classes you would work on your letters and phonics. If you don’t, I will send you off to class.”

“But I promised Grandfather I’d take care of Mother. How can I take care of her if I have to do schoolwork?”

“You make sure she stays in bed and sleeps. Keep quiet and let her rest. I’m going to work on my class lessons, as well. Now, enough, start your work. We’ll wake your mother for lunch and then you go to your athletics and afternoon lessons.”

Jacob huffed and reluctantly grabbed one of his workbooks and started his lessons. Vincent smiled at his son then turned and walked over to the bed. He took Catherine’s hands and sat down next to her. “Are you feeling okay, Catherine? Is there anything you need?” he asked, giving her hands a squeeze.

She shook her head and squeezed his hands back. “No. I’m okay, Vincent. I just need you close and need to know that Jacob is safe,” she said, leaning back into the pillows.

“Close your eyes and get some sleep. Jacob and I are just a few feet away should you need anything,” Vincent said, motioning towards the table. She nodded and smiled when Vincent kissed her hands before placing them on her stomach. He sat there for a few minutes, just watching her, before he rose and grabbed his own classwork and joined Jacob at the table.

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

### CHAPTER TEN

After the first night, Vincent made sure that Jacob slept in his own chamber so Catherine could rest. Her IV was removed and she seemed to be recuperating physically. But the nightmares continued.

Vincent was glad that Jacob never was there to witness when she woke up crying and panicking. He would hold her close and rock her, trying to soothe her. It worried him, because he could feel her heart beating impossibly fast. Father's concerns ran through his head. "I'm concerned about her heart." If there was something wrong, how long ago had her symptoms started? Did the nurses and doctors at the hospital she was held at ignore her symptoms?

On the night before Peter's arrival, Vincent held Catherine in his arms after a particularly bad episode. They both laid in bed facing each other. Catherine burrowed close to him, which indicated for him to hold her tight. She finally calmed down enough that there was only a slight shudder of her breath.

"Talk to me, Catherine," Vincent whispered, trying to encourage her. "You mustn't keep this inside of you. It will help you to say what you are feeling. You yourself once encouraged me to do the same thing. Please, let me help you."

Catherine took another deep, shuddering breath then started to talk softly into Vincent's chest. "Why would Elliot be keeping me there all that time? I thought he cared for me. I thought that we were able to move forward and be friends. But that man, Fallon, said Elliot was coming. Why would he betray me like that? First John Moreno then Elliot. Why?"

"I don't know, Catherine. I think John Moreno was so afraid of Gabriel that he was ready to sacrifice anyone to save himself. He ended up losing anyway. Joe made certain of that."

Catherine nodded. Vincent had told her about everyone who cared about her from Above. Where they were. How they were doing.

"My sweet Joe. He idolized that man. I wish I could see him and Jenny just once. Perhaps one day."

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

“One day you will. I promise.”

“Elliot’s betrayal hurts the most, Vincent. I’m sorry. I can’t imagine the feelings you have towards him, but I just keep thinking that he cared for me.”

Vincent took a couple of deep breaths before responding. Father had warned him that she might say things that would upset him. He knew that Catherine trusted Elliot to a certain degree. The thought filled him with jealousy, even though he knew her feelings for the man were purely platonic. It wasn’t about him right now though. It was about comforting Catherine. Helping her come to terms with what had happened to her.

“He loved you, Catherine. Men will do almost anything for the woman they love. He may have thought he was saving you.”

“Perhaps. It still hurts. Fallon said that Elliot told them to work on me. To make me forget who I was. Elliot ordered them to psychologically torture me. Why? If he cared, how would doing that fit into his agenda? Fallon. That man is evil, Vincent. The things he did, the things he said. ‘Catherine Chandler is dead. Catherine Chandler is dead.’”

Vincent felt Catherine tense and start to sob as she thought about what had happened to her. He rubbed her back as she started to hyperventilate, her heart rate accelerating. “Shhh, Catherine. You are all right. You are safe,” he said, trying to soothe her. “Say the words with me. ‘I am safe. Catherine Chandler is alive.’ Come now, say the words with me. ‘I am safe. Catherine Chandler is alive.’”

Vincent repeated the lines a few more times before he heard her start to whisper, “I am safe. Catherine Chandler is alive.”

“Yes, Catherine. Say it again with me. ‘I am safe. Catherine Chandler is alive.’”

He managed to get her to say the words a few more times and she started to calm, her breathing returning to normal. He continued to repeat the words in her ear until she fell into an uneasy sleep.

Vincent laid awake for the rest of the night, holding Catherine in his arms. The

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*



**Family Portrait** *by Laura G*

anger and rage were building inside of him at Elliot Burch for placing her in that place and ordering those people to hurt her, though it was nothing compared to the rage he felt for the man named Fallon. He had heard and seen with his own eyes how evil the man was. And he knew there was more that Catherine hadn't said about what he did to her. He would coax it out of her eventually, when she was ready. Until then, he would bury the rage that he felt, knowing that one day the man would pay with his life for what he did to his Catherine.

Peter arrived the next day and almost fainted when he saw Catherine. Her happiness at the sight of her old friend warmed Vincent's heart. Peter himself broke down in tears when he first saw her standing in the hospital chamber. Holding her in his arms, he demanded to know what had happened to her and how

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent *by Maryann N. Wood*

this came to be.

Vincent and Father explained to him the events of the last two weeks. “No one must know that she is alive, Peter. There are people looking for her Above. It’s not safe,” Vincent told him.

“I understand that, Vincent,” Peter said, holding on to Catherine still. “But if what you say is true, I need to know the extent of the illness that kept her in a coma for four years. Cathy, I need to take you above to run some tests. A CT scan, an MRI.

“Is Cathy the reason you wanted me to bring the EKG machine and halter monitor? Is it her bloodwork you had me pick up from the lab? If it is, I must say, I am very much concerned. I’ve read over the results of the blood work, Jacob. You and I need to have a consult immediately about her health.”

“Peter, I’m not leaving the tunnels,” Catherine said, pulling away from him. “Whatever care I need, I will receive down here. I’m not leaving Vincent. I’m not leaving my son.”

“Cathy, be reasonable. You need specialized care that you can’t receive down here.”

“I’m not leaving! Do you know what they did to me last time I was in a hospital, Peter?! I’m not going back Above ever!”

Vincent quickly went to Catherine and pulled her close, leading her away and over to a gurney to sit. He sat next to her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her against him. He needed to calm her. “No one is going to force you to do anything you don’t want to do,” he said. “Take a deep breath. Everyone here has your best interests at heart.”

“They’ll find me if I leave here, Vincent,” Catherine cried, hugging her legs against her chest, rocking. “Elliot will have someone on every corner of the city looking for me, let alone the hospitals. He’ll have them take me again. They’ll take me away from you and Jacob.”

Vincent could feel her heart racing. He looked at both Father and Peter, his eyes

## Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent by Maryann N. Wood

pleading for help.

Father approached them and sat down on the other side of Catherine on the gurney. “My dear, neither Peter nor I will make you leave. Will we, Peter?”

Peter walked up to Catherine and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Cathy, sweetheart, I won’t make you leave, but I’m going to need you to follow Father’s and my instructions without any argument. Whatever it is that happened to you while you were missing has had some lasting effects. With Father’s observations and the results of your blood work, I’m concerned you may have a type of arrhythmia. That is why I brought down the EKG and heart monitor.”

Catherine stopped rocking and looked at Peter, a panicked look in her eyes. “Is there something wrong with my heart?”

“We don’t know anything for sure until we run a few tests. If it is arrhythmia, it is a very treatable disorder. The most important thing is for you to keep yourself calm. Keep your stress level low. Light physical activity. Take Jacob for a walk after dinner each night. We’ll run the EKG today and have you wear the monitor for a week. Then we’ll go from there.”

Catherine buried her face between her knees, hugging her legs tighter.

“I’ll be here with you every step of the way,” Vincent whispered to her. “Let them run their tests. There’s a concert in the park tonight. It’s not exactly classical. Highlights from the composer John Williams. I hear he is a talented movie score composer. I’m sure Father and Peter will not object if you and I go to our special place and listen. Some of the adults are taking the children above, including Jacob, to listen.”

“That sounds like a lovely idea, Vincent,” Father said, trying to sound cheerful. “Mary has this beautiful gown that she just finished sewing. I’m sure you’d look splendid in it.”

“*Jaws*,” Catherine whispered softly.

“What was that, Catherine?” Vincent asked, having a challenging time hearing her,

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** by *Maryann N. Wood*

her voice being muffled from her face being between her knees.

“*Jaws*,” she said again, looking up at Vincent. “He composed the music for *Jaws*. I saw the movie back in the ‘70’s. I refused to go in the ocean for the entire summer after seeing it.” She gave Vincent a small smile, relaxed her muscles slightly, and rested her cheek on her knees, facing Vincent.

“Well, it’s settled then,” Peter said, walking over to the EKG machine and wheeling it back to the gurney. “Let’s get this out of the way so Catherine can get some rest before her and Vincent’s concert date.”

Father and Vincent stood up. Vincent helped Catherine lie down so Peter could attach the EKG electrodes to her. Then he leaned his elbows on the gurney and held one of Catherine’s hands with one of his as he stroked the hair away from her face with the other. “All will be well, Catherine,” he said, squeezing her hand.

Catherine nodded, squeezing his hand back, and closed her eyes.

### *CHAPTER ELEVEN*

The weeks went by fast for Vincent. Catherine was diagnosed with a form of tachycardia arrhythmia. Peter and Father could only assume it was from extreme stress that was brought on from her treatment before Jacob was born. The drugs they were injecting her with didn’t help, including at the hospital when she woke from her coma.

The treatment plan they had prescribed for her seemed to be working. Vincent was overjoyed to see her able to move about the tunnels on her own, though he made sure she was under constant observation when he was not present.

Catherine and Jacob became extremely close, sharing a bond that even left Vincent perplexed. They were able to communicate with each other without speaking a word out loud. Catherine’s nightmares and panic attacks continued, but they were becoming less frequent as she opened herself more to Vincent.

They lay in bed one night, a month after Catherine’s rescue and return to the Below community. It was the first time they had made love since her return, and

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

for Vincent it felt like their first time ever, having little recollection of their actual first time down in the caverns during his illness. Catherine lay against his shoulder, their fingers entwined, resting her head on Vincent's chest.

"Will you marry me?" he asked and kissed the top of her head.

Catherine raised her head and rested her chin on his shoulder, smiling at him.

"You're asking me this after we made love? Are those endorphins wreaking havoc on your brain?" she teased.

"Perhaps," he said, looking down at her with a smile of his own. "Or perhaps I wanted to find the perfect moment to ask you, and how more perfect can the moment be than after we've expressed our love to each other to such a degree that, if the world would end now, I would be content because I have you in my arms for my final journey."

"Well, when you put it that way, it would be the greatest honor, consenting to be your wife."

Vincent's smile broadened. He gathered her into his arms and pushed her onto her back, kissing her passionately. "I haven't a ring to give to you, only my heart," he whispered, trailing kisses along her face.

"Your heart is the only thing I desire," she whispered back, giving him kisses of her own. "Plus, I already consider my crystal my engagement ring. So, all is well."

Vincent lifted the crystal that never left her neck, letting it dangle between them. He looked at the crystal then at her and nodded. "I think I like the thought of that."

"Then it's settled. Come. It's time to sleep. You have a busy day in the lower tunnels, and I promised Father I'd help him start to categorize the library. You've seen the library, Vincent, there is absolutely no system in there. I have my work cut out for me." She pushed him onto his back and rested her head against his shoulder once more, closing her eyes.

Vincent gently stroked her back, lulling her into a peaceful sleep. He lay awake for some time after Catherine fell asleep. Happiness filled him. The woman he loved

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

more than life itself was returned to him and agreed to marry him. He thought about how much his life had changed within a month's span. He went from giving up on life to being the happiest he could ever remember being. He closed his eyes, feeling at peace. He let the sound of Catherine's heartbeat lull him to sleep.

It was a peace that Vincent was unaware wouldn't last. As he lay with his entire world in his arms, three men stood outside the drainage tunnel in Central Park. Dressed all in black, Elliot Burch stood with Cleon Manning and another one of his bodyguards.

"Are you sure this is where the entrance is, Mr. Burch?" Cleon asked him.

"Yes. When Catherine agreed to help me with the transportation of my father back at the docks years ago, we escaped through a sewage grate in the ground when everything went sideways," Elliot answered, staring at the tunnel. "Cathy knew her way around down there. She led us to a hidden door just inside this tunnel. She opened it and let me out. This is where I emerged.

"We all saw the video footage that Gabriel had from his building in Brooklyn where he was questioning her about that stupid book. You both saw that...that man...whatever he is. He was coming for her. I knew she was hiding something back then. All the signs point towards this place."

"How can you be certain this is where Miss Chandler is?"

"Because the stupid idiots I left her with let him take her. You saw the bars ripped out of the wall in her room. What else could have done that?"

"Maybe you should just leave well enough alone. If Gabriel finds out you've been hiding her away all these years, he'll destroy you. Even you don't have enough money and resources to stop that man. He has people everywhere. He very well might kill you both."

Elliot looked at Cleon, his eyes filled with hatred and rage.

"It's Catherine, Cleon. Catherine's in there somewhere. I protected and hid her away for four years, praying for the day when she would wake up and I could take

## **Vantage Point, Part One: Vincent** *by Maryann N. Wood*

her away from all this blasted madness. I love her. She and I belong together and I'm not about to let some freak of nature take her away from me. I didn't let Gabriel do it, and I'm not about to let anyone down there take her away. Let's go. Tonight is simply a reconnaissance mission."

Elliot took a step forward and started to walk towards the drainage tunnel entrance. Cleon and the other guard look wearily at one another before following Elliot Burch.

*To Be Continued in*

*Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine*



**Feeling by Paula**



## **For Those We Protect**

CandlelitChandler

Catherine stood at her apartment window, staring down at the street below. Her hands trembled slightly as she gripped the curtain. Three days. For three days, Bernie Spirko had been following her, waiting outside her building, asking questions—always questions—about the mysterious circumstances surrounding certain cases she'd prosecuted, about the night she'd been attacked in the park, about the deaths of men who had threatened her.

The reporter was relentless, and Catherine knew with a sinking certainty that he wouldn't stop until he uncovered the truth. And the truth would destroy everything. It would destroy Vincent. It would destroy her.

She pressed her forehead against the cool glass. She had to get away. Maybe if she left town, Spirko would lose interest and move on to another story. It was a slim hope, but it was all she had.

Catherine turned from the window and picked up the phone, dialing Joe Maxwell's home number. It was late, but Joe would understand.

"Maxwell," his gruff voice answered after three rings.

"Joe, it's Cathy. I'm sorry to call so late."

"Radcliffe? What's wrong? You sound—"

"I need to take some time off. A couple of weeks. I know it's sudden, but I—" Her voice caught. "I need to get away."

There was a pause on the other end. Joe knew her well enough to hear what she wasn't saying. "This about that reporter who's been sniffing around?"

She didn't respond. Unsure of what to say.

"Cathy, if he's harassing you, we can—"

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

“No, Joe. I just need some space. Please.”

Another pause, longer this time. “Okay. Take the time you need. But Cathy? Be careful.”

“I will. Thank you, Joe.”

After she hung up, Catherine moved mechanically through her apartment, pulling a suitcase from the closet and filling it with clothes. She would go to her father’s summer home in Connecticut. She hadn’t been there since before his death, hadn’t been able to face the memories that waited in every room. But now it seemed like the only refuge available to her.

Before she left, she sat at her desk and wrote a note in careful script:

*Vincent,*

*I’ve gone to my father’s house in Connecticut. Spirko, is getting too close. I need time to think, to figure out what to do. I’ll be back in two weeks.*

*Please don’t worry.*

*C.*

She folded the note and sealed it in an envelope, then made her way down to the basement and into the tunnels. A young man named Thomas was at his sentry post.

“Please make sure Vincent gets this,” Catherine said, pressing the envelope into his hands.

“Of course, Miss Chandler. Are you all right?”

Catherine managed a weak smile. “I will be. Thank you, Thomas.”

She returned to her apartment, grabbed her suitcase, and left without looking back.

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## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

Deep in the tunnels below the city, Vincent stood in his chamber, Catherine's note clutched in his hand. He had read it three times, and each reading filled him with deeper unease.

Father looked up from the medical journal he'd been reading. "What is it, Vincent?"

"Catherine has gone to Connecticut. To her father's summer home." Vincent's voice was tight with concern. "She's trying to escape this reporter, but—" He turned to Father, his leonine features drawn with worry. "She shouldn't be alone there, Father. That house holds so many painful memories for her. She hasn't returned since her father died. She hasn't even packed away his things."

"You wish you could go with her," Father said gently.



**Father** by *Laura G*

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

“I wish she had taken someone. Jenny, or Nancy Tucker. Anyone.” Vincent moved to the staircase. “I can feel her distress through our bond. She’s frightened, Father. Not for herself, but for me. For all of us.”

Father rose and placed a hand on Vincent’s shoulder. “Catherine is strong. She’ll find a way through this.”

“I know,” Vincent said quietly. “But I wish she didn’t have to face it alone.”

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Bernie Spirko sat in his cramped apartment in Queens, surrounded by notes, photographs, and newspaper clippings. The walls were covered with a web of connections he’d been trying to piece together for weeks. Catherine Chandler was at the center of it all.

The assistant district attorney had been involved in too many cases where the suspects had died under mysterious circumstances. The subway slasher case. The death of the men who attacked Catherine in the park years ago. Then there were the more recent deaths.

Spirko had interviewed some of Catherine’s old friends from her life before the attack—society friends, people from her father’s circle. But they’d given him nothing useful. They spoke of a woman who had changed dramatically after her assault, who had abandoned her old life for something else entirely. But what that something was, none of them knew.

Or if they did know, they weren’t talking.

The more dead ends Spirko encountered, the more convinced he became that Catherine Chandler was hiding something significant. Something that could make his career if he could just uncover it.

His phone rang, interrupting his thoughts. It was his sister, Betty.

“Hey, Bets. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, Bernie. I just—I wanted to thank you again for the money. The kids needed

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

new shoes, and—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Spirko said, though he glanced at the stack of unpaid bills on his desk. “That’s what big brothers are for.”

After he hung up, Spirko stared at those bills. Betty was struggling, raising two small kids alone after that bastard boyfriend of hers, Marcus, had abandoned them. He had abused his sister, finding her beaten and crying on more than one occasion. She couldn’t afford daycare, couldn’t work. Betty was, in a way, relieved when he left. But it had left her without the support she needed. Spirko had been helping her financially, but his own resources were stretched thin.

That’s when he received a note from a mysterious man—a man who hid in the shadows of his home. The man had offered him information about Catherine Chandler, tantalizing hints about the mysterious deaths surrounding her cases. And he’d promised that if Spirko could break the story, it would be worth a substantial payday.

Spirko needed that money. For Betty. For his niece and nephew.

He returned his attention to his notes. He needed to talk to Catherine again, but she’d made it clear she wanted nothing to do with him. He’d have to find another way.

The next day, Spirko went to the District Attorney’s office, hoping to catch some of Catherine’s coworkers. He was loitering near the elevators when he overheard a conversation between two people—one he recognized as Joe Maxwell.

“I wonder when Cathy will be back from Connecticut,” Rita said to Joe as they passed.

“She said two weeks,” Joe replied. “Let’s hope whatever is going on gets solved by then.”

Connecticut. Spirko’s pulse quickened. It took him less than two hours to find records of Charles Chandler’s property holdings. A summer home in Litchfield County, Connecticut. He had an address.

## For Those We Protect by *CandlelitChandler*

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Catherine stood in her father's study, surrounded by ghosts. Everything was exactly as Charles Chandler had left it—his reading glasses on the desk, a half-finished crossword puzzle. She'd hired a caretaker to maintain the property, but she'd given strict instructions not to touch anything in this room.

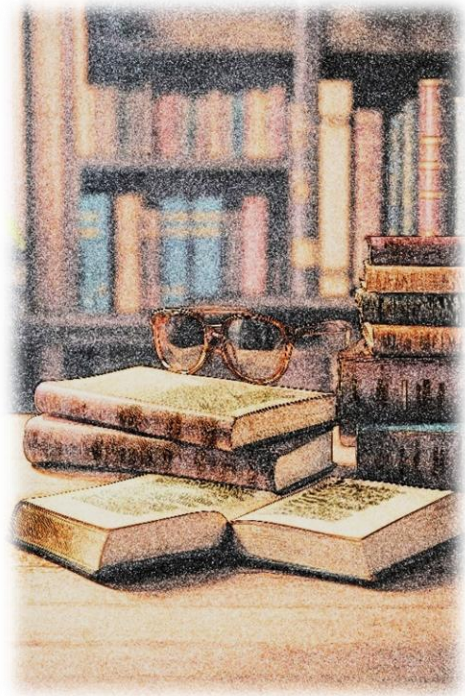
Now she wished she'd had the courage to pack it all away. Every object was a reminder of what she'd lost, of the father who had loved her even when he didn't understand all of her decisions.

She moved to the window and looked out at the lake. The Connecticut countryside was beautiful in the late spring, the trees full and green, the water sparkling in the afternoon sun. But Catherine felt no peace here. She'd thought distance would help her think clearly, would give her space to figure out how to handle Spirko.

But she'd been wrong. Being here just felt like running away. She missed Vincent. She wanted to feel his arms around her, holding her, reassuring her that everything would be ok. But she suspected that wouldn't be the case because Spirko didn't seem the kind of person to let a bone go. He would keep chasing.

Catherine knew she was only delaying the inevitable. She needed to find a way to stop him from pursuing this story, to protect Vincent and the tunnel world. But how? What leverage did she have?

An idea began to form in her mind. If Spirko was investigating her, perhaps she should investigate him. Everyone had secrets. Everyone had vulnerabilities. If she could find something in Spirko's past—something incriminating or at least embarrassing—maybe she could convince him to back off.



## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

It wasn't much of a plan, but it was something.

The next morning, Catherine was in the kitchen making coffee when she heard a car coming up the long driveway. She froze, her heart hammering. She wasn't expecting anyone.

She moved to the window and felt her blood run cold. Bernie Spirko was getting out of a beat-up sedan, a notebook in his hand.

Catherine stormed out onto the porch before he could reach the door. "What the hell are you doing here?!"

Spirko had the grace to look slightly uncomfortable. "Miss Chandler, I just want to ask you a few questions—"

"How did you find this place?" Catherine's voice was sharp with fury. "Have you been following me?"

"I'm a reporter. It's my job to—"

"Your job?" Catherine descended the porch steps, her eyes blazing. "Your job is to harass people? To invade their privacy? I came here to get away from you, and you tracked me down like some kind of stalker!"

"I'm not a stalker, I'm a journalist, and you're a public figure who—"

"Get off this property. Now. Or I swear to God, when I get back to New York, I will get a restraining order against you so fast your head will spin."

Spirko's jaw tightened. "You can't hide forever, Miss Chandler. Whatever you're protecting, whoever you're protecting—I will find out. You're making this a lot harder than it needs to be."

"Get. Out."

For a moment, they stared at each other. Then Spirko turned and walked back to his car. But before he got in, he called back, "I'm not giving up on this story. You should know that."

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

Catherine watched him drive away, her hands clenched into fists. She stood there long after the sound of his engine had faded, her mind racing.

Spirko was unrelenting. There was no point in staying here. She needed to go back to New York and take action.

She needed to find out everything she could about Bernie Spirko.

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Catherine returned to New York the next morning, but she didn't go back to work. Instead, she began her own investigation.

She started with public records—Spirko's employment history, his education, and any criminal record. She found nothing particularly damaging. He'd worked for several newspapers, had a reputation as a dogged investigative reporter, but nothing that would give her leverage.

Then she dug deeper. She found records of regular money transfers to an address in the Bronx. A woman named Betty Spirko. His sister.

Catherine sat back in her chair, thinking. Family was always a vulnerability. Not that she would threaten Spirko's sister—she wasn't that kind of person. But understanding what motivated him might help her find a way to reach him.

She decided to pay Betty Spirko a visit.

The Bronx projects where Betty lived were a far cry from Catherine's world. The building was run-down, with graffiti covering the walls, and the elevator broken. Catherine climbed five flights of stairs to apartment 5C and knocked.

A woman in her late twenties answered, a toddler on her hip and another small child clinging to her leg. She had Bernie Spirko's eyes—the same sharp intelligence, but softened by exhaustion and worry.

“Betty Spirko?” Catherine asked.

“Who's asking?” The woman's voice was wary.

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

“My name is Catherine Chandler. I’m—I need to talk to you about your brother.”

Betty responded worriedly. “Did Bernie send you?”

“He didn’t. Actually, he doesn’t know I’m here. May I come in? Please. I promise I’m not here to cause trouble.”

Betty studied her for a long moment, then stepped aside. “Come in.”

The apartment was small but clean, toys scattered across the floor. Betty set the toddler down and gestured for Catherine to sit on a worn couch.

“What do you want?” Betty asked a little hesitantly.

“Your brother has been investigating me,” Catherine said carefully. “He’s pursuing a story that could hurt people I care about. I’m trying to understand why he’s so determined.”

Betty looked at her with a kind stare. “Why? Look around, Miss Chandler. Bernie’s helping me because I’ve got no one else. My abusive boyfriend—the father of my kids—took off six months ago. Left us with nothing. I can’t afford daycare, can’t work. Bernie’s been sending me money every month, but he’s barely scraping by himself.”

Catherine felt a pang of sympathy. “I’m sorry. That must be incredibly difficult.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Betty said, her voice cracking slightly. She sat down heavily in a chair. “Bernie told me about you. Told me he took this story because he needs the money. Some man approached him, offered him information about you, promised him a big payday if he could break the story. Bernie’s not a bad person, Miss Chandler. He’s just desperate.”

Catherine absorbed this information. So Spirko had a source—someone feeding him information. Someone who knew about her connection to Vincent. But who?

“This man who approached your brother,” Catherine said carefully. “Did Bernie tell you anything about him?”

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

“No, nothing. He received a note asking him to meet him at a Manhattan address. He told me he hasn’t even seen the man’s face. He hides in the shadows when they talk. Bernie doesn’t trust the man, but he is desperate to crack the story.”

Catherine’s mind raced through possibilities. Who could it be? Who could know about Vincent and want to hurt them? She could only think of Steven Bass, Mitch Denton, and Paracelsus. Those were the names that came to her mind. But how to figure it out?

“Betty,” Catherine said slowly, “there’s something else I need to ask you. Are you safe here? You and your children?”

Betty’s face went pale. “Why would you ask that?”

“Because you look frightened. And I’ve seen that look before.”

For a moment, Betty said nothing. Then the words came tumbling out. “My ex—the kids’ father—he’s been coming around. Threatening me. He says if I don’t let him back in, he’ll take the kids. He’ll hurt me again. It was a blessing that he left. He had beaten me a few times. I can’t let him back into my children’s lives. I’ve called the police a few times, but he hasn’t actually done anything yet, so they can’t help. I haven’t told Bernie because he’s got enough to worry about.”

Catherine leaned forward. “What’s your ex’s name?”

“Marcus. Marcus Reilly. Why?”

“Because I might be able to help you,” Catherine said. “I work in the DA’s office. I have connections. Let me look into Marcus’s background, see if there’s anything we can use to keep him away from you.”

Betty’s eyes filled with tears. “Why would you help me? Bernie’s been making your life hell.”

“Because you and your children don’t deserve to live in fear,” Catherine said simply. “And because maybe if I help you, your brother will understand that I’m not the enemy.”

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

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Catherine called her friend Greg Hughs, a detective she'd worked with on several cases. She asked him to investigate both Bernie Spirko and Marcus Reilly.

Two days later, Greg called her back. "Spirko's clean," he said. "No priors, no outstanding warrants. He's exactly what he appears to be—a reporter trying to make a living."

"And Marcus Reilly?"

"Now that's a different story. He's got a record—battery, possession of a weapon without a license. Did six months in Rikers three years ago. If he's threatening Spirko's sister, we can use that. I'll call some buddies at the Bronx precinct, have them pay him a visit. Make it clear that if he keeps harassing her, he's going back



**Catherine** by *Laura G*

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

inside.”

“Thank you, Greg.”

“Cathy? What’s this really about?”

“Just trying to help someone,” Catherine said. “I’ll explain later.”

In the meantime, Spirko was continuing his investigation. He’d tried to interview Jenny Aronson, showing up at her office unannounced.

Jenny had taken one look at him and his notebook and crossed her arms. “Let me guess. You’re the reporter who’s been harassing Cathy.”

“I’m not harassing anyone. I’m investigating—”

“You’re fishing for information to hurt my friend,” Jenny said coldly. “And I don’t know anything about whatever conspiracy theory you’re chasing. I don’t know anyone involved in your fantasy. So you can get out of my office right now, or I’ll call security.”

Spirko left, frustrated. He also tried to get into Catherine’s building, but the doorman recognized him from Catherine’s description and refused him entry.

When Catherine returned to her apartment that evening, the doorman stopped her. “Miss Chandler, there was a man here earlier asking about you. He fit the description you gave me, so I sent him away.”

“Thank you, Clyde. I appreciate that.”

In her apartment, Catherine found a note that had been slipped under her door. She recognized Vincent’s elegant handwriting immediately.

*Catherine,*

*I’m relieved you’re back, but concerned that you’ve come home sooner than planned. Has something happened? Please let me know if you’re well, and keep me informed of any new developments.*

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

*I remain, as always, yours,*

*V.*

Catherine pressed the note to her chest, feeling the familiar warmth of their bond. She could sense Vincent's worry, his desire to protect her. She sat down and wrote a quick reply, explaining about her visit to Betty and her plan to help Spirko's sister. She sent the note down with one of the helpers.

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Spirko met with his mysterious source again at their Manhattan home. The man's face was obscured by shadows.

"You've made no progress," the man said. It wasn't a question.

"Catherine Chandler is protecting someone," Spirko replied. "But I can't figure out who. Everyone I talk to either doesn't know anything or won't talk."

"What if I told you the person who killed all those men was a monster, a monster that goes by the name of Vincent?" the man said.

Spirko shook his head. "I don't believe in fairy tales. But I do think there's something to the subway slasher angle—the man who was never caught. I think he's still out there, and I think Catherine Chandler knows who he is.

The man in the shadows smiled, though there was no warmth in it. "You're closer than you think, Mr. Spirko. But you lack imagination."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you should watch Catherine Chandler more carefully. Follow her. See where she goes, who she meets. The truth will reveal itself."

Spirko left the meeting feeling uneasy. There was something wrong about his source, something that made his journalist's instincts scream warning. But he needed this story. He needed the money.

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

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Two days later, Betty called Catherine, her voice shaking with fear.

“Miss Chandler? It’s Betty. Marcus has been calling me. He’s furious that the police came to see him. He’s threatening to take the kids, to kill me. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m coming,” Catherine said immediately. “Lock your doors and don’t let anyone in until I get there.”

She grabbed her gun from her nightstand and headed for the Bronx.

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Deep in the tunnels, Vincent was in his chamber reading when he felt it—a sudden spike of fear and adrenaline through his bond with Catherine. Something was wrong.

He dropped his book and ran, following the pull of their connection. He made his way to the train tracks and leaped onto the top of a subway train heading toward the Bronx.

Spirko, meanwhile, was on his way to visit Betty. It was the end of the month, and he had her rent money. He’d been working extra shifts, taking on freelance assignments, anything to help his sister and her kids.

Catherine reached Betty’s building first. Her hand on her gun. Catherine knocked. “Betty, it’s Catherine Chandler. Let me in.”

The door opened with a start, and Catherine slipped inside. Betty was pale, her children crying and clinging to her. The apartments on either side were vacant—no one to hear if things went wrong.

“I called the police,” Betty whispered. “But they said it would be twenty minutes.”

Not even a minute later, both women could hear Marcus Reilly on the other side, his voice slurred with alcohol and rage.

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

“Open this door, Betty! Those are my kids! You can’t keep me from my kids!”

A gunshot exploded through the door, splintering the wood. Betty screamed, pulling her children behind the couch. Catherine drew her weapon, positioning herself between the door and Betty’s family.

“Marcus, stop!” Catherine shouted. “The police are on their way. If you leave now—”

Another shot, and the lock shattered. The door burst open, and Marcus Reilly stumbled in, a gun in his hand. He was a large man, his face twisted with rage and desperation.

“Who the hell are you?” he snarled at Catherine.

“Someone who’s not going to let you hurt this family,” Catherine said, her gun trained on him. “Put the weapon down, Marcus.”

“You think you can stop me? You think—”

He lunged at Catherine, knocking her gun out of her hand. Then they both struggled for control of his gun. Catherine was trained, but Marcus was bigger and fueled by rage. They crashed into furniture, Betty screaming, the children crying.

The gun went off, the bullet embedding itself in the ceiling.

And then the window exploded inward in a shower of glass.

Vincent landed in the room in a crouch, his cloak swirling around him. His leonine face was terrible in its fury, his blue eyes blazing. Marcus Reilly froze, his mouth falling open in shock and terror.

“No,” Marcus whispered. “What—what are you?”

Vincent moved with inhuman speed, wrenching the gun from Marcus’s hand. But Marcus, in his panic, pulled a knife from his belt and slashed wildly. The blade caught Vincent’s arm, and blood bloomed across his sleeve.

Vincent barely seemed to notice. He struck Marcus once, precisely, across his

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

neck. Blood splurting as he tumbled to the ground.

Betty watched in shock and horror.

“Vincent!” Catherine rushed to him, her hands on his wounded arm. “You’re hurt.”

“It’s nothing,” Vincent said, though his voice was tight with pain. “Are you all right? Is everyone—”

“We’re fine. Thanks to you.” Catherine looked into his eyes, seeing the fear there—fear for her, fear of exposure. “But you need to go. Now. Before the police arrive.”

“Catherine—”

“Please, Vincent. We’ll be fine. Go.”

Vincent hesitated, then nodded. He moved to the broken window, paused to look back at Catherine one more time, and then disappeared into the night.

It was only then that Catherine realized they hadn’t been alone. Bernie Spirko stood in the doorway, his face white with shock, his eyes fixed on the window where Vincent had vanished.

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For a long moment, no one spoke. Betty clutched her children, staring at her brother. Catherine stood frozen, her mind racing through possibilities, explanations, lies.

But Spirko wasn’t looking at her. He was looking at his sister.

“Betty,” he said hoarsely. “Are you okay? Are the kids—”

“We’re fine,” Betty said, her voice shaking. “Bernie, I’m sorry. I should have told you about Marcus, about the threats, but I didn’t want to worry you.”

Spirko crossed the room and pulled his sister into his arms, the children between them. “You should have told me,” he said. “I could have—” He stopped, seeming

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

to realize how helpless he would have been. “What was that? Who was that?”

Betty pulled back and looked at Catherine, a question in her eyes. Catherine gave a small nod.

“Whoever or whatever that was, it saved us,” Betty said quietly. “If he hadn’t come—” Her voice broke.

Spirko looked at Catherine, understanding dawning in his eyes. “That’s who you’ve been protecting. That’s what this has all been about.”

“Yes,” Catherine said simply.

“He’s not human.”

“He’s more human than most people I know,” Catherine said fiercely. “And if you expose him, you’ll destroy him.”

Spirko sank into a chair, his head in his hands. “The man who gave me the information about you—he told me about Vincent. I thought he was crazy. I thought Vincent was just an alias for the subway slasher, or some vigilante. I never imagined—”

“Now you know,” Catherine said. “So what are you going to do?”

Spirko looked at his sister, at his niece and nephew. “If he hadn’t come, you’d be dead. All of you.” He looked up at Catherine. “I’m not going to write the story. I’m not going to tell anyone about Vincent. You have my word.”

Catherine felt relief wash over her, but she knew there was still a problem. “The man who gave you the information—did he give you a name?”

“No, he keeps himself in the shadows. I’ve never seen his face.”

“Bernie, I need to know everything about this man—what he’s said, where he lives, everything.”

Spirko described his meetings with the mysterious source, and Catherine noted the address and meeting details.

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

“I’m supposed to meet him again tomorrow,” Spirko said. “He wants an update on my investigation.”

“Then you’ll tell him you’re dropping the story,” Catherine said. “Tell him you couldn’t find anything useful.”

“He won’t like that.”

“I don’t care what he likes. Just end it.”

\*\*\*

The next day, Spirko met the man at his home. He’d rehearsed what he would say, but when he told him he had not found any new information, the man came out of the shadows. Spirko did not recognize him. He wore a gold mask on the side of his face, and his eyes were filled with hatred and contempt. He called himself Paracelsus.

“I’m dropping the story,” Spirko said without preamble. “I can’t find anything concrete, and my editor’s losing interest.”

Paracelsus studied him for a long moment. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not—”

“You’ve discovered the truth, haven’t you? You’ve seen Vincent.” Paracelsus smiled. “I can see it in your eyes. The shock, the disbelief. Tell me, Mr. Spirko, what did you think when you saw him? Were you frightened? Fascinated?”

Spirko took a step back. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you do. But since you insist on keeping him a secret, you’re useless to me.” Paracelsus moved towards him, stabbing Spirko with a double-sided blade. “Such a pity. You had potential.”

Spirko collapsed to the floor, quickly losing blood.

“Don’t worry,” Paracelsus said, his voice seeming to come from very far away. “It

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

will be quick. They'll find you in the East River, another victim of the city's violence."

The last thing Spirko saw was Paracelsus's face, smiling down at him. Then darkness.

\*\*\*

Catherine was in her apartment the next morning when she saw the headline in the newspaper: "Reporter Found Dead in East River."

Her hands shook as she read the article. Bernie Spirko, 34, found dead of a stab wound. Police were investigating the murder.

She knew immediately what had happened. The man who had been trying to have Spirko uncover the truth about Vincent had probably killed him after Spirko refused to continue investigating.

Catherine went down to the tunnels that evening, finding Vincent and Father in Father's chamber. She told them everything—about Spirko's death, about the mysterious man, about Betty and her children.

Vincent was silent, his face drawn with grief. "Spirko had agreed to keep our secret. He probably died because of it.

"Yes," Catherine agreed. "And his sister and children are alone now. They have no one to help them. Bernie was their only family. He was helping to support them.

"Do you think we can trust her, Catherine, with our secret? She has already seen Vincent." Father said.

Catherine paused to consider. "Yes, I think so. We owe it to her and Spirko for agreeing to keep the secret of Vincent."

"Then, we should ask them to come below. Can you do that for us, Catherine?" Father moved closer to her, placing a hand on her arm. "We provide them a place to heal."

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

Catherine looked at Vincent, who nodded. “It’s the only way,” he said.

The next day, Catherine attended Bernie Spirko’s funeral. It was a small service—a few colleagues from the newspaper, some friends, and Betty with her two children. Catherine stood in the back, watching as Betty wept over her brother’s casket.

After the service, Catherine approached her. “Betty, I’m so sorry.”

Betty’s eyes were red and swollen. “He was trying to help me. That’s all he ever did—try to help me. And now he’s gone.”

“I know. And I know this is a terrible time, but I need to talk to you about something important. Somewhere private.”

They went to a coffee shop nearby, and Catherine explained about the tunnels, about the community that lived below the city. “It’s a place of healing,” she said. “A place where people who have nowhere else to go can find safety and purpose. You and your children would be welcome there.”

Betty stared at her. “You want us to live underground? With—with Vincent and people like him?”

“Not people like him. Just people. People who need a second chance, who need a family. I know it sounds strange, but I promise you, it’s a good place. A safe place. And right now, that’s what you need most.”

Betty looked down at her children. “Bernie’s gone. I have no one.”

“You’ll have us,” Catherine said. “You’ll have a community. Please, Betty. Let me help you.”

Betty was quiet for a long moment. Then she nodded. “Okay. We’ll try it.”

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Three days later, Catherine met Betty and her children at the entrance to the tunnels. They had only a few belongings—some clothes, toys for the children, and

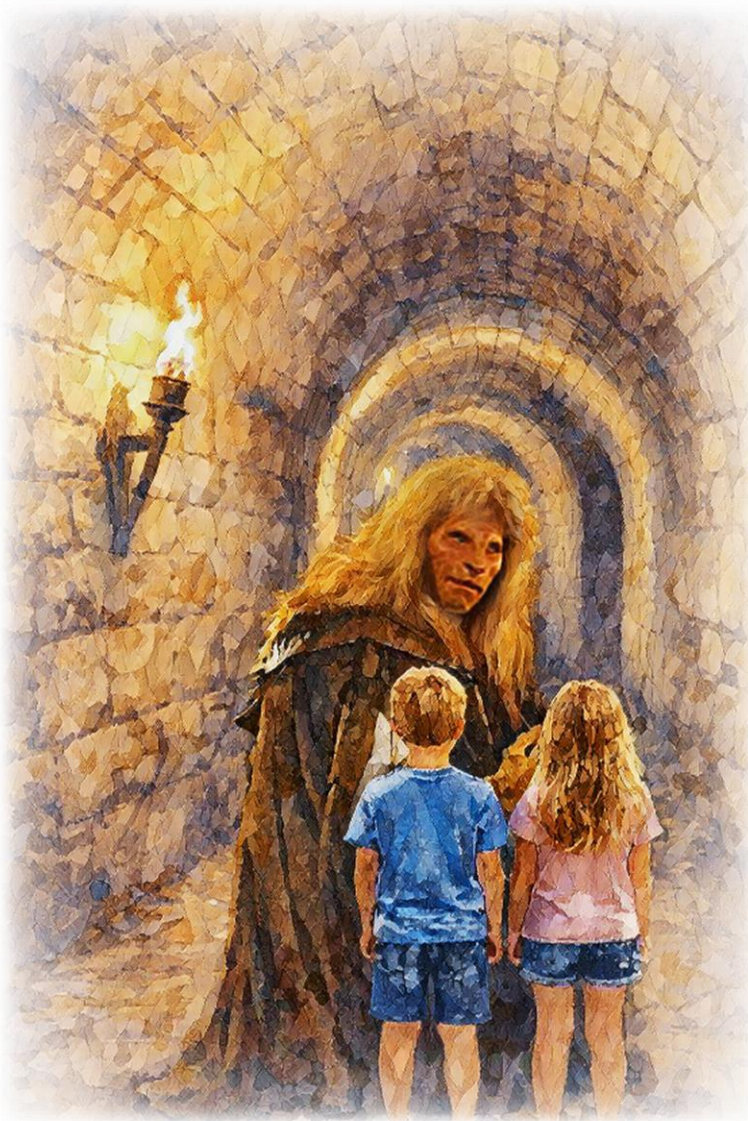
## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

photographs of Bernie.

“Are you sure about this?” Betty asked, looking nervously at the dark tunnel entrance.

“I’m sure,” Catherine said. “Come on. Someone’s waiting to meet you.”

They walked through the tunnels, Catherine leading the way. The children were quiet, their eyes wide as they took in the stone walls, the pipes, the soft glow of the lights. Betty held their hands tightly.



**Meeting** by *Laura G*

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

Finally, they reached a junction where Vincent was waiting. He'd pulled his hood back, letting Betty and the children see his face clearly in the soft light.

The little girl, Sarah, gasped. "Are you a lion?"

Vincent smiled gently. "Something like that."

"You saved us," Betty said, her voice thick with emotion. "You saved my children. I never got to thank you."

"No thanks are necessary," Vincent said. "You're welcome here, Betty. You and your children. This can be a home for you, for as long as you need it."

Betty's eyes filled with tears. "Bernie, he understood, at the end. He understood what you are."

"He protected his family. That's something we honor here." Vincent said.

Father appeared from another tunnel, accompanied by Mary and several other tunnel dwellers. "Welcome," Father said warmly. "Let us show you to your chamber. We've prepared a space for you and the children."

As the group moved deeper into the tunnels, Catherine and Vincent hung back for a moment.

"She'll be safe here," Vincent said. "They all will be."

"I know," Catherine said. She took his hand, feeling the familiar warmth of their bond. "But the man who was trying to expose you is still out there."

"We'll deal with whomever that is when the time comes," Vincent said. "For now, let's focus on helping Betty and her children heal."

They walked together through the tunnels, following the sound of the children's laughter echoing off the stone walls. Ahead, Betty was already being welcomed by the tunnel community, people offering her food, blankets, and kindness.

Catherine thought of Bernie Spirko, of the reporter who had started as her

## **For Those We Protect** by *CandlelitChandler*

adversary and ended as an unlikely ally. The threat of exposure had passed, at least for now. Spirko's secret had died with him, and his sister and children had found sanctuary.



**Confession** by *Paulina*



## **I'm a Dreamer**

JoAnn Baca

*You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one.*

*John Lennon*

Devin buried his hands in the soft glory of her long honey-colored locks, his fingers running through them from scalp to nape. She arched her neck, exposing the length of it, enticing his hungry kisses. His mouth traveled from earlobe to shoulder, then explored her bare torso from there to one full breast, her nipple puckered, awaiting the moist suction of his mouth.

“Ohhhh, Devin...” she moaned, her body demanding, his body aflame with the same desire, aching for her, pressing his hard length against her, craving the feel of her depths sheathing him, needing their completion as much as she did, his delicious, gorgeous Cath...

“Wake up, son! You’re having a bad dream!”

Devin’s eyelids flew open, startled by the intrusion until he realized he wasn’t with...her...but alone in his bed...with Father staring down at him with concern.

*Holy Moly! What the absolute HECK am I doing lusting after my brother’s girlfriend?!*

Sitting up, he said, “It’s...OK. I’m OK now.” He rubbed his face with both hands, willing the dream images from his mind.

“You were moaning so loudly... Are you sure you’re all right?” Father’s earnest concern just made him feel worse.

“Yes. It’s gone now. Can’t even remember what the dream was,” he lied, unable to think of anything better to say to shoo the Old Man out of the guest chamber.

Father gazed down at him uncertainly. “All right. Well...we’ll see you in the dining chamber soon.” He patted his son on the shoulder and left him to dress.

*I'm a Dreamer by JoAnn Baca*

Devin rose and went to the basin by his dresser to splash cold water on his face. Random images from his dream still pressed against his closed eyelids, drawing fresh horror from his heart. This had to stop! How many nights in a row had this dream been intruding on his rest? Four? Five? And now he was moaning so loudly in his sleep that even people in the passageway could hear him?!

He couldn't recall any other women troubling his sleep like this. And really, it's not like he thought Catherine was so hot. Well, she *was*, but she was taken, and most completely so, in her own heart as committed to his brother as if she were married to him. Not that they were married, or likely ever to even be together *that way*, considering the slow pace of his brother's movement in that direction. *Still...*

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He arrived in the dining chamber near the end of the breakfast service. He'd missed out on the muffins but found some toast and jam to go with the black coffee few Below seemed to like. He would never understand their preference for tea but...it left more coffee for him, even at this time of the morning.

Hoping to avoid sitting with Father, he ambled in the opposite direction, toward a group still sitting at a table, although by the looks of their plates, they were close to done with their meal. He asked permission to join them.

Cullen looked up. "Anytime, Devin. Sit yourself down."

Winslow nodded at him but didn't say anything, his hands embracing his mug of tea as if about to strangle it.

"Bad night?"

"Huh?" Devin started guiltily.

"Just sayin', you look like hell. Bad night?" Cullen sat back and waved a hand, indicating the others at the table. "Nobody here slept particularly well. We're wondering if something's going around."

*Could it be as simple as I'm coming down with something?* "Same. Dreams

*I'm a Dreamer by JoAnn Baca*

were...weird. I woke up to Father staring down at me. Winslow shuddered. The others snickered. Amos piped up with, "That'd be worse than bad dreams!"

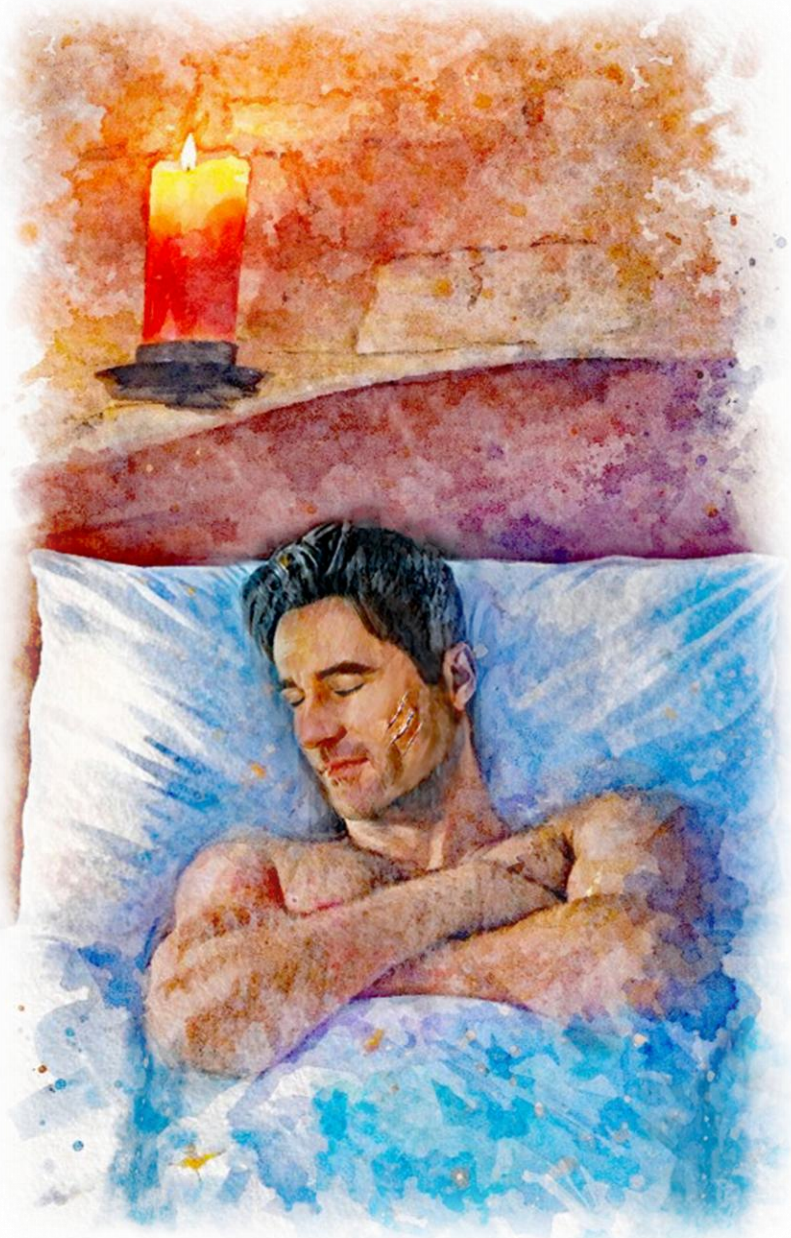
"Well, time for me to get crackin'." Winslow slurped down the last of his tea and rose. "Comin', Amos?"

Soon Devin was left alone to contemplate the grounds in his coffee, still trying to figure out what Catherine Chandler was doing in his dreams.

\*\*\*

"What's been bothering you?"

*Trust Vincent to always know when I'm out of sorts. Damn it.*



**Dreamy Devin (for Cyndi!) by Laura G**

They were sitting on a ledge overlooking the falls, one of their favorite getaway spots as youngsters, since Father had always found the climb hard to make, even before his bad hip forced him to use a cane.

*I'm a Dreamer by JoAnn Baca*

“Nothing, really. Bad dreams.” He shrugged, unwilling to get into it further. “So, how’s things with the lawyer lady you like?”

His brother smiled. “My ‘lawyer lady’ is fine. We are fine. It’s you who are not fine. Tell me.”

*Damn damn damn...*

“I’d rather not get into it. Dredging it up just gives it more power than it should have, you know?” *Dropitdropitdropit...*

“Perhaps bringing it into the light will expose its weakness, make it seem less daunting.” After enduring a prolonged silence, he added, “Well, if you ever wish to discuss it, I’m here.”

Devin nodded, which was all he could do when he was mentally revisiting flashes of bare flesh and hearing soft moans and feeling himself harden just trying *not* to think about those dreams...

\*\*\*

A woman appeared at the top of the steps leading to Father’s study. He’d been watching Vincent make short work of a game of chess with Father when he’d heard her voice, turning as she came down to greet them.

Catherine...in the flesh. He flushed crimson and saw her smile turn into a confused frown.

“Hey, Cathy.” He gave her a quick buss on the cheek and stepped back before she could hug him.

“Hey, yourself. Everything all right?”

*Just like my brother...doesn’t miss much.*

“Haven’t been sleeping well.” He shrugged. “Drop it, OK?”

He immediately felt bad about being so abrupt. *It’s not like it’s her fault.*

*I'm a Dreamer by JoAnn Baca*

Her eyebrows rose at the unexpected rudeness. "I...I will." She turned to Vincent, and the warmth in her voice dialed up about a thousand notches. "I've missed you."

His brother did not step away from her before they'd shared a long, close hug, her with her face pressed into his shoulder, he with his cheek resting against the top of her head. They didn't part until Father cleared his throat – almost as if when they were together, no one else existed in the universe.

This was *not* going to help his subconscious.

"How goes the work?"

She turned back to him. "It's a version of *The Neverending Story!*"

"Need me to come back?" He smiled his most disarming smile, trying to make up for his less than warm welcome.

"We have gotten along without you...at the office, at least." She smiled, shaking her head at Father's grimace over being reminded of his son's peccadilloes.

"Good. Because I'm in another line of work entirely now." Devin realized his mistake as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

"And what might that be?"

*Father was still quick on the uptake, had to give him that.*

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that," Devin responded vaguely. "By the way, how nice that Olivia's pregnant again! What's this, her second?"

"Her third," Vincent said. "Now that Kanin's back, they're making up for lost time, it seems."

*Which just brings me right back to my dream and what Cathy and I were doing...*

Again, he blushed furiously, and this time Vincent and Catherine caught each other's look of surprise.

*I'm a Dreamer by JoAnn Baca*



*Devin by Laura G*

“Well, the dinner bell has rung,” Father announced, when they all heard the tapping on the pipes. “Shall we?”

Relieved that he’d been spared further conversation with Catherine, Devin uncharacteristically led the way.

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Catherine placed her plate and utensils in the dirty-dishes tub and turned abruptly, inadvertently bumping into Devin, who was daydreaming and not watching what was going on around him as he waited to deposit his own.

*I'm a Dreamer by JoAnn Baca*

“Oh! Sorry.”

His jump backwards was violent, and he nearly collided with Winslow, who was behind him.

“What is going *on* with you?” Catherine hissed, tugging him out of line and into a corner. “You’re acting like the proverbial cat on a hot tin roof around me. Have I done something to upset you?” He stood looking down at his feet, unwilling to let her see that he was once again blushing like an idiot.

“Seriously, if I have done anything... I apologize. Please don’t be angry with me?”

*Gah...he was making things worse!*

He faced her reluctantly. “You haven’t... Look, this is too embarrassing. Not something I could talk about with people around. Or maybe ever. Especially with you. So...let’s drop it, OK? Just know...it’s me, not you.”

*Lame. But maybe it will work.*

She stared at him speculatively. Finally, she asked, “Does this have something to do with why you’re not sleeping well?”

He nodded.

“Is it OK to ask if you’re...having uncomfortable dreams?”

He allowed himself another nod.

For some reason, Catherine smiled. He narrowed his brows.

“I may have something that might help.” She patted him on the shoulder and returned to Vincent’s side.

\*\*\*

“Catherine sent this down for you.” Vincent handed him a package wrapped in brown paper. The note said, “I’ve found this helpful. Perhaps you will, too.”

## *I'm a Dreamer* by JoAnn Baca

Although Vincent had a questioning look on his face, Devin wasn't going to answer it. "Thanks. She...uhhh...said she had something that might help me sleep."

\*\*\*

In the quiet of the evening, Devin unwrapped the package. He'd thought it might be some kind of sleep potion, but it was just a book. He read the cover. A book on dream interpretation? Sounded kind of woo-woo, but...at this point, he was willing to consider anything that would help get images of a naked, aroused Catherine out of his head.



He settled into the armchair in his chamber and flipped it open. He found that she had bookmarked a section on falling in love with someone other than your significant other and figured it was as close to what he was experiencing as anything else in the book.

He read and then re-read a couple of passages...

***Falling in love in a dream may indicate a desire for new experiences and connections in your waking life, perhaps by expanding your social circle.***

***Dreaming about a friend might suggest that you value their companionship and support. It may indicate a desire for a deeper emotional connection or simply reflect the strong bond you share.***

***Such dreams may serve as a reminder to nurture and appreciate the important relationships in your life.***

*I'm a Dreamer* by JoAnn Baca

***Take these dreams as a suggestion that you should examine your emotional needs – engage in self-reflection and self-care.***

He closed the book and considered the advice and insights.

*It's undeniable that I have been alone for much of my life. Those few months caring for Charles were a time of healing for me, and perhaps I'm missing that kind of close connection now that I've experienced it as an adult. And boy, is my social circle small – just a few people, really. Yet here I am, surrounded by folks who might become friends if I let them in. What was it Cullen had said just this morning? That I was welcome to sit with him anytime.*

*As far as strong bonds...well, my relationship with Cathy is an extension of mine with Vincent. They are my two best friends...my only good friends, really. Yet have I let them both in? Maybe Vincent...partway. Cathy? Not really.*

*Hmmmm...*

And so thinking, he closed his eyes. His head drooped as he fell into slumber. The book fell from his fingers and silently hit the carpet beside the armchair.

He slept dreamlessly.

And when he awoke, except for a stiff neck, he felt pretty good!

\*\*\*

“Thanks for the loan.” Devin handed the book back to Catherine, re-wrapped in the brown paper.

“Did it help?”

He nodded. “More than you know.”

Smiling, she said, “Good. It really helped me when I...” She began to blush and said no more.

He eyed her speculatively as she dropped the book into her tote bag and turned away to look for Vincent.

*I'm a Dreamer by JoAnn Baca*

That *hmmmm* feeling came back. She had marked those particular pages for a reason. He wondered who *she* had been dreaming about when she needed the book to help her through.

He recalled her blush.

*Holy moly!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*



*Connection by Paula*



## Oh, What Lovely Teeth You Have

Denise

Catherine Chandler was running late. He hated being late. Compounding her lateness someone was waiting for her. Hopping on one foot she squeezed her foot into a sneaker. With a move practiced during her college days when she had to get to class on time, she snagged the rest of her rapidly cooling coffee from the counter, chugging it without spilling a drop and sprang for the door.

Of course, the elevator had to stop at every, single floor between herself and the first floor as she repeatedly punched the down button watching the level indicator with mind-numbing slowness creep upward.

“Oh, for the love of !!!” Her voice trailed off as her annoyance grew. “Why is it when you positively need to get someplace quickly, the elevator takes a detour?”

The doors finally opened approximately one second before she decided that taking the stairs would almost be worth running down sixteen flights. That is only for fire alarms and dire emergencies.

“Peter, I’m so sorry for keeping you,” Catherine said breathlessly as she climbed into the van’s rear door. Then she noticed the driver. “Oh, Hi.”

“Cathy, this is Dean. Dean, this lovely young woman, like you, I’ve known forever.”

“Hello, Dean,” Catherine replied cautiously.

Dean pulled away from the curb. Glancing in the rearview he smiled. “I’ve heard a lot about you. Doctor Alcott helped me become a dental assistant.”

Catherine’s eyes grew wide in surprise. “Peter, you amaze me.” She glanced into the rear of the van and blinked incredulously. “You’ve got a mobile dental office!” she exclaimed.

## Oh, What Lovely Teeth You Have *by Denise*

“Not exactly. I can do everything almost everything a dentist can except surgery. So a van works for me; no rent and parking is cheaper than paying rent on an office. Most of my clients like that I can come to them.”

“I thought this would be perfect for our friends, Cathy, particularly Vincent.”

Catherine’s expression said, *Oh, my!* Out loud she said, “I’m glad you came up with this and will have to explain it to Father.”

“Jacob knows Dean. So does Vincent.”

Catherine’s expression shifted to genuine relief. She back in her seat relaxing and missed the *Oh, boy!* look Peter gave Dean bracing himself. Vincent knew Dean. He fled to the lower chambers every single time he came to give the community their dental exams. Which was why this time, Peter Alcott failed to mention the true reason for his Saturday morning visit.

Vincent was enjoying a late breakfast with a contingent of his fan club. Samantha, Jeffery, Eric, Kipper, and Brooke chatted around him. They were clearing away breakfast dishes, before returning to their seats with either bread or fruit. Picking up conversations without missing a beat. William fussed in the background because someone had failed to properly scrape away any garbage or residue.

Vincent’s startling blue eye caught the attention of the offending club member.

“Gee, Vincent. I did scrape my bowl clean. Well, almost.”

“It is the almost, I believe is William’s objection,” Vincent replied quietly.

Kipper rose without another word to rectify the situation.

Father entered the chamber. The volume in the chamber lowered audibly.

“Father, another cup of tea?” William asked, turning to his stove and the whistling kettle.

“No, thank you, William. I’m glad most of you are here.” Father raised his voice.

“Peter Alcott is in the library chamber and wants to see every resident for an

## Oh, What Lovely Teeth You Have *by Denise*

annual exam.”

There were murmurs and a few confused looks cast about.

“Isn’t it a little early?” asked Rebecca standing as others headed toward the tunnel leading toward the home chambers.

Father hesitated. “Perhaps a bit. We have new members among us. Some quite young and we are at the mercy of his schedule.”

Community members nodded and began drifting out of the chamber. Vincent and his cohort among them. Eric asking, “You have a doctor come when it’s not an emergency?”

Vincent nodded. “We do. We are fortunate. Doctor Alcott has been a helper here for many years.”

“Yeh,” chimed in Jeffrey. “He’s really nice, too.”

Eric’s small finger pushed enormous glasses back upon his nose. “What for? I mean, why is a doctor coming?”

“Primarily, young Eric, to make certain all our members are healthy,” Father explained patiently.

Eric thought about this. Looked over at Vincent considering. “Oh, I get it.” He sighed. He returned to Vincent’s side. “Can we go together?”

“Yes,” Vincent replied softly.

Eric took the large hand in his own ignoring the claws and held on. Vincent acknowledged slight squeeze seeking reassurance. Together they moved the short tunnel leading to Father’s study. Upon entrance, Vincent froze.

“Hello, Vincent,” Catherine said.

“Catherine.” He nodded. Then he spotted the chair, the tray and Dean. “Father, I

## **Oh, What Lovely Teeth You Have** *by Denise*

did not know this was to also to be a dental examination.” Vincent’s tone remained calm even as Eric squeezed his hand with desperate strength.

Father ducked his head, running a hand through his hair. “Well, we thought it best to kill two birds with one stone, as it were.”

The adults were arranging seating moving quietly around father and son. Catherine approached, uncertainty marring her sunny features. “Um, I brought lollipops.”

Father and son turned their heads. “Thank you,” Vincent murmured amused. “I



**Open Wide...** *by Laura G*

## Oh, What Lovely Teeth You Have *by Denise*

have not had one—”

Father cut him off. “Since last week. Lou brought a box down when he cut hair.”

Around them the chamber echoed with sporadic laughter. Father first, then Vincent joined them. Eric started to relax a bit. He hadn’t seen a dentist since he was very young. Now that Ellie could no longer intervene when scary stuff happened, next best was staying close to Vincent.

“Alright young Eric, I’m told you are new here,” Doctor Alcott said gently as he brought out his stethoscope pressing it to the youngster’s slender chest.

Carefully ears were examined, knees were tapped and elbows. “Eric, you are a very healthy young man.” He delivered a green lollipop with a flourish and a bow.

Eric giggled. He turned to his hero. “Vincent, is the doctor going to examine you?”

Catherine heard the question from where she sat beside Mary waiting for the dentist. Both women smiled nodding encouragement.

Sighing deeply, Vincent removed his cloak, vest and unbuttoned his shirt. With Eric close at his side, he remained still as Doctor Alcott tapped his chest, peered into his ears and checked his reflexes.

“Vincent, I’m pleased to say you are exceedingly healthy.”

Vincent rose, putting on his clothing. “Doesn’t Vincent get a sucker?” asked Eric.

Peter Alcott quickly rectified his oversight, handing Vincent his prize for cooperative behavior. Which Vincent accepted with aplomb opening and eating his reward with what Catherine found to be enormous, endearing glee.

Vincent and Eric joined her. Eric sat beside Mary leaving the seat beside Catherine vacant.

“You may take my place with the dentist, Eric. I saw him a few weeks ago.” She pressed her hand to her jaw in memory. “I broke a molar and had to have it extracted.” She sighed circumspection in her eyes. “I’ll be careful eating walnuts

## Oh, What Lovely Teeth You Have *by Denise*

from now on.”

She stood as young Amy toddled away from the dentist waving a plastic tooth cup. “For the tooth fairy.” Amy waved her prize at Vincent and Catherine as Mary guided her back to the nursery.

Eric looked to Catherine. “Are you going to see the dentist too?”

Catherine offered an obviously stiff and uncomfortable smile as she answered, “I uh... I have a dentist, Eric. He knows I’m nervous about tooth exams. He puts me to sleep. Does whatever work I need and when I awake, he’s finished.”

Eric examined her expression with understanding. He drew a deep breath, jumped to his feet declaring. “Okay. I want to see the dentist.”

Vincent and Catherine quietly exchange telling glances. No one spoke. The couple nodded encouragingly. Eric grinned broadly as he turned to approach the large chair the other children climbed into for their examination.

“Whew,” Catherine whispered. “I thought Eric was going to ask me to go first.”

Vincent leaned across the vacant seat to add, “I thought I was to be the one asked.”

A shriek fractured the quiet atmosphere. Kanin’s youngest sat in his father’s lap red-faced and crying louder than a banshee in echo chamber. Hairs on every adult stood on end, some clapped hands over their ears in self-defense. Eric appeared ready to bolt.

Kanin, desperation on his face, turning to appeal to those around him only to ultimately fix directly upon Vincent. *Help!* he mouthed.

Vincent glided across the chamber to kneel before the still crying child. He reached out gently to take a frantically waving hand. He cried but not as forcefully.

“Jack, you are making your father very sad,” Vincent intoned quietly.

Jack sniffed his cries growing less strident. He twisted around to study his father

## Oh, What Lovely Teeth You Have *by Denise*

then turned back to Vincent.

“I know it’s strange to have people poking you and opening your mouth. But screaming won’t make them stop. Help them and in the end the doctor will give you a treat.”

Eric watched. Catherine brought her hands down staring in fascination. Awe. Jack took a few more halting breaths before relaxing. Dean approached the toddler with a pink dental mirror attached to the body of floppy clown.

Jack cautiously opened his mouth. Dan peered at his budding first front teeth.

“My, what big teeth you have!” He declared in a tone of amazement. He turned to Vincent. “Thanks. That was good.”

Vincent rose to his full height and turned to return to Catherine’s side.

Dan snapped not turning from Jack but clearly speaking to Vincent said, “Don’t leave. You’re next.”

Vincent moaned. An unconscious rumble escaped his throat. “I should not have stayed,” he mumbled.



## How About Those Mets

*CandlelitChandler*

Joe Maxwell had made exactly three mistakes that Saturday afternoon. The first was agreeing to take Diane Stanton to a Mets game when he knew—*knew*—that she was the kind of woman who thought baseball was “quaint” and “nostalgic” in a way that made it clear she meant boring. The second was buying seats in section 126, which had seemed like a good idea until he’d spotted a familiar honey brown head two rows down and realized his day had just gotten infinitely more complicated.

The third mistake? He hadn’t figured that one out yet, but he had a sinking feeling it involved the question he was about to not ask Catherine about the three kids sitting with her.

“Joe? Joe, are you even listening to me?”

He dragged his attention back to Diane, who was examining her fingernails with the kind of focus most people reserved for crime scene evidence. “Sorry, what?”

“I said, how much longer does this go on? We’ve been here for *hours*.”

Joe glanced at the scoreboard. “It’s the bottom of the third inning.”

“Exactly.”

He suppressed a sigh and turned his attention back to the field, which gave him a perfect excuse to let his gaze drift down two rows to where Catherine—his colleague, his friend, and the woman who’d turned his dinner or lunch invitation so many times he’d stopped counting—was sitting with three boys who definitely didn’t fit the profile of her usual crowd.

The oldest looked about fourteen, lanky and dark-haired, with the kind of watchful eyes Joe recognized from kids who’d grown up too fast. The middle one was maybe ten, with an eager expression as he leaned forward to watch every pitch. But it was the youngest who really caught Joe’s attention—a small kid with

## *How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*

glasses, who couldn't be more than eight or nine, practically vibrating with excitement in a brand-new Mets t-shirt that still had the price tag dangling from the sleeve.

All three boys wore those new shirts, bright blue and orange against the backdrop of their other clothes, which were... off. Joe couldn't put his finger on it at first, but his prosecutor's eye for detail was already cataloging inconsistencies. The pants were too worn, too patched, the kind of hand-me-downs you didn't see much anymore in New York City, not in 1989. The shoes were old-fashioned, practical, nothing like the high-tops and sneakers every other kid in the stadium was wearing.

"Catherine!" The youngest boy's voice carried up to Joe's row, high and clear with excitement. "Did you see that? Did you see?"

Catherine's laugh was warm, genuine in a way Joe rarely heard at the office. "I saw, Eric! That was a great catch!"

"Vincent would have loved that," the middle boy said, and Joe's attention sharpened. "Remember when he told us about the time Father taught him how to catch? --Everyone cheered for him so loudly."

"Like thunder rolling through a canyon," the oldest boy finished, and there was something almost reverent in his voice. "He remembers everything."

Joe leaned forward slightly, pretending to watch the game while his ears strained to catch every word.

"Vincent remembers everything because he pays attention," Catherine said, and Joe could hear the smile in her voice, could hear something else too—something soft and private that made his chest tighten in a way that had nothing to do with the investigation instinct currently humming through his veins. "Just like you three are paying attention now. Eric, what's the count?"

"Two balls, one strike!" Eric bounced in his seat. "And the Mets are winning, three to one!"

## *How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*

"That's my guy." Catherine ruffled his hair, and the gesture was so natural, so maternal, that Joe felt his eyebrows rise.

What he didn't know—what he couldn't know—was that Catherine had spotted him the moment she'd guided the boys to their seats. She'd been scanning the crowd with the same careful attention she brought to every public outing with the tunnel children, always alert for familiar faces, potential complications, anything that might require explanation. And there, two rows back and slightly to the left, had been Joe Maxwell's unmistakable profile, his dark hair and sharp features, the way he gestured when he talked.



Her heart had done an uncomfortable flip. Of all the baseball games, in all the stadiums, in all of New York...

She'd made a split-second decision: act natural, keep the children close, and monitor Joe's behavior throughout the game. She'd spent years learning to maintain multiple levels of awareness—it was how she survived moving between two worlds. So she'd settled in, one part of her mind fully present for the boys' joy and wonder, another part tracking Joe's every move, every glance, every moment his attention focused on her little group.

She'd sensed when his expression shifted from casual recognition to focused curiosity. She'd noticed when he leaned forward to listen. She'd caught the exact moment the middle boy—Geoffrey—had mentioned Vincent's name, and she'd watched from the corner of her eye as Joe's face sharpened with interest.

## *How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*

By the fourth inning, Catherine had a complete tactical assessment: Joe had definitely noticed the children's unusual clothing, he'd definitely heard Vincent's name at least twice, and he was definitely going to ask questions. The only question was when, and how much she'd have to reveal to satisfy his prosecutor's instinct for the truth.

"Joe, I'm getting a headache." Diane's voice cut through his concentration. "Can we please leave?"

"It's the fourth inning," Joe said, not taking his eyes off Catherine and the boys. The youngest—Eric—was on his feet now, cheering as the Mets' batter rounded second base.

"I don't care if it's the hundredth inning. I want to go."

Joe finally looked at her, really looked at her, and wondered what the hell he'd been thinking. Diane Stanton was beautiful, successful, and completely wrong for him. She didn't get baseball. She didn't get why he loved this city, loved the noise and the chaos and the way a crowd of strangers could become a single organism, all breathing together, hoping together.

She definitely wouldn't get why he was so fascinated by three kids in hand-me-down clothes and brand-new Mets shirts.

"Yeah," he said, surprising himself. "Yeah, let's go."

But as they made their way toward the exit, Joe couldn't resist one last look back. Catherine had her arm around Eric's shoulders now, and all three boys were singing "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" with unselfconscious joy, their voices blending with thousands of others. Catherine was singing too, her face lit up with happiness, and Joe felt something twist in his chest.

Who were these kids? And who the hell was Vincent?

\*\*\*

Monday morning found Joe at his desk by seven, which was early even for him.

## *How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*

He'd spent most of Sunday thinking about what he'd seen at the game, turning it over in his mind like a puzzle with missing pieces. Catherine with three kids who looked like they'd stepped out of a different era. The way they'd talked about someone named Vincent with a kind of reverence that suggested he was more than just a friend or relative. The worn clothes, an occasional old-fashioned speech pattern he'd caught in fragments.

And the way Catherine had looked at them—protective, maternal, fiercely guarding.

He'd tried to let it go. Really, he had. Catherine's personal life was her own business. If she was involved in some kind of charity work, mentoring underprivileged kids, that was great. Admirable, even. It explained the clothes and the obvious poverty.

But it didn't explain Vincent.

Joe had run the name through every database he could access without raising red flags. Vincent wasn't exactly an uncommon name, but combined with Catherine's circles, her background, her habits... nothing. No boyfriend named Vincent, no relative, no colleague. He'd even checked the society pages from before her attack, thinking maybe it was an ex-boyfriend from her old life, but came up empty.

It was driving him crazy.

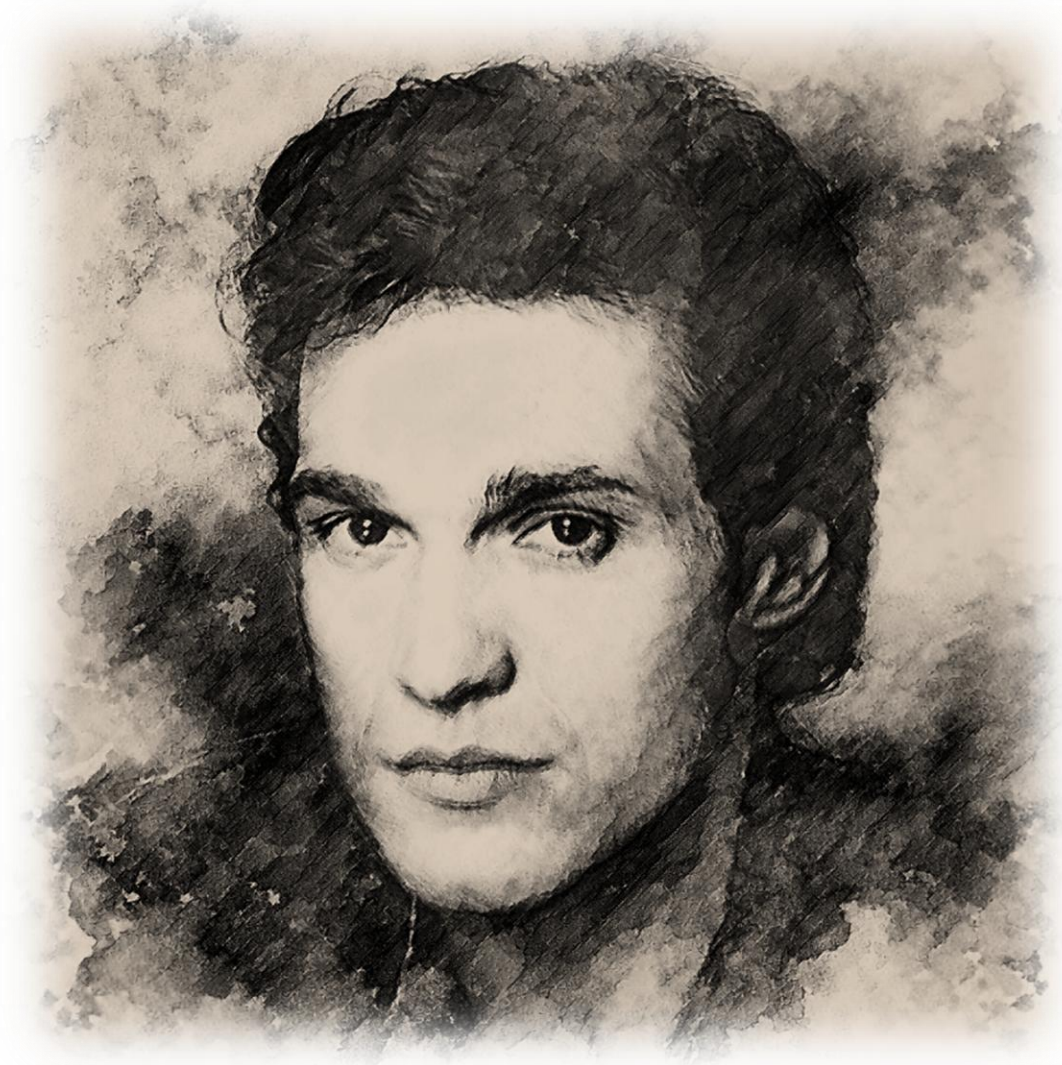
"You're here early."

Joe's head snapped up. Catherine stood in the doorway of his office, two cups of coffee in her hands and an amused expression on her face. She was wearing a green suit that brought out her eyes, every inch the professional investigator.

"Could say the same about you, Radcliffe." He accepted the coffee she offered, noting that she'd remembered how he took it—black, two sugars. "What's the occasion?"

"The Salerno case. I wanted to review the witness statements before the meeting at nine." She settled into the chair across from his desk, crossing her legs and

*How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*



*Joe by Laura G*

regarding him with those sharp green eyes that missed nothing. “You look tired. Rough weekend?”

And there it was—the opening he’d been waiting for. Joe leaned back in his chair, affecting his most casual tone. “Actually, I had a pretty interesting Saturday. Went to the Mets game.”

“Oh?” Catherine’s expression didn’t change, but Joe could have sworn he saw something flicker in her eyes. “How was it?”

“Educational.” He took a sip of coffee, watching her over the rim of the cup.

## *How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*

“Funny thing—I could have sworn I saw you there. You and three kids. Two rows in front of me, actually.”

“Small world.” Catherine’s smile was pleasant, unrevealing. “Eric, Geoffrey, and Kipper had a wonderful time. They talked about it all the way home.”

“Eric, Geoffrey, and...” Joe paused, pretending to search his memory. “Kipper? Unusual name.”

“It’s a nickname.” Catherine’s tone was light, but Joe noticed she’d shifted slightly in her chair, her body language subtly defensive. “He’s very fond of fish.”

“Cute kids. Yours?”

Catherine laughed, and it sounded genuine. “No, Joe. They’re not my secret children, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Hey, I wouldn’t judge. You’d make a great mom.” He meant it, too. The way she’d been with those boys, patient and warm and completely present—it had been something to see. “So, what, you volunteer with some kind of youth organization?”

“Something like that.” Catherine took a sip of her own coffee, and Joe noticed she was watching him just as carefully as he was watching her. “They’re good kids. They don’t get many opportunities to do normal things like go to baseball games.”

“I noticed their clothes,” Joe said, and saw Catherine’s shoulders tense almost imperceptibly. “Under the new shirts, I mean. Pretty worn. These kids from a shelter or something?”

“Joe.” Catherine’s voice had an edge now, friendly but firm. “Why all the questions?”

“Just curious. You know me—I like to know things.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk. “I heard them mention someone named Vincent a couple of times. Sounded like someone important to them. He involved in this youth organization, too?”

## *How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*

There. He'd said it. The name hung in the air between them, and Joe watched Catherine's face carefully, cataloging every micro-expression.

What he saw surprised him. Catherine didn't look caught off guard or defensive. Instead, she looked... prepared. Like she'd been expecting this exact question and had already decided how to handle it.

"Vincent," she said slowly, "is a friend."

"Must be a good friend, the way those kids talk about him."

"He is." Catherine set down her coffee cup and leaned back, and when she smiled, it was the kind of smile that told Joe he was about to lose this round. "Speaking of friends, Joe, I have to ask—who was that woman you were with at the game?"

Joe blinked. "What?"

"The brunette. Very pretty, very bored-looking. I noticed she spent most of the game checking her watch and examining her manicure." Catherine's eyes sparkled with mischief. "New girlfriend?"

"That was—we were just—" Joe felt heat creeping up his neck. "That's not relevant."

"Oh, I think it's very relevant. You're interrogating me about my personal life, so turnabout is fair play." Catherine tilted her head, her expression innocent. "What was her name?"

"Diane," Joe muttered.

"Diane. And does Diane like baseball, Joe?"

"Not particularly."

"I see. So you took a woman who doesn't like baseball to a baseball game." Catherine's smile widened. "How did that work out for you?"

"We left in the fourth inning," Joe admitted, and Catherine laughed—a real laugh,

## *How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*

warm and delighted.

“The fourth inning! Joe, that might be a record even for you. What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking she’d give it a chance,” Joe said defensively. “I was thinking maybe she’d get into it, you know, feel the energy of the crowd, the excitement—”

“The excitement of watching grown men hit a ball with a stick?”

“It’s America’s pastime, Radcliffe!”

“It’s also three hours long, and you took someone who clearly wanted to be anywhere else.” Catherine shook her head, still grinning. “Did she at least make it through one hot dog?”

“She said hot dogs were ‘processed meat products’ and refused to eat stadium food.”



*Catherine by Laura G*

## *How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*

Catherine pressed a hand to her mouth, but Joe could see her shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter. “Oh, Joe. Joe, Joe.”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up.” But Joe was grinning too, despite himself. This was why he liked Catherine, why he kept asking her to dinner even though she always said no. She got him. She understood his humor, matched his wit, and gave as good as she got. “It was a disaster, okay? Happy?”

“Ecstatic.” Catherine stood, picking up her coffee cup. “For what it’s worth, I think you deserve someone who appreciates baseball. And hot dogs. And you.”

She headed for the door, and Joe knew he should let her go, should let the Vincent question drop. But he couldn’t help himself.

“Cathy.”

She paused in the doorway, looking back at him.

“This Vincent guy,” Joe said quietly. “He’s important to you, isn’t he?”

For a moment, Catherine’s professional mask slipped, and Joe saw something in her eyes—something deep and complicated and fiercely protected. Love, he realized. She loved this Vincent, whoever he was, with an intensity that made Joe’s chest ache.

“Yes,” she said simply. “He is.”

Then she was gone, leaving Joe alone with his coffee and more questions than he’d started with.

\*\*\*

The rest of the week passed in a blur of cases and court appearances, but Joe couldn’t stop thinking about that conversation. Catherine had deflected his questions with expert precision, turning the tables on him so smoothly he’d barely noticed until it was over. She’d made him laugh, made him feel foolish about Diane, and gotten him to drop the subject of Vincent without ever actually

## *How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*

answering his questions.

It was masterful, really. He'd have been impressed if he wasn't so frustrated.

But the thing was, Joe hadn't become one of the DA's best prosecutors by giving up easily. And now that he knew Catherine was hiding something—something big, something important—he couldn't let it go.

He started paying closer attention to her patterns. Catherine had always been private about her personal life, but now Joe noticed just how carefully she guarded it. She never talked about her evenings or weekends in any specific detail. She deflected personal questions with the same skill she'd used on him in his office. And there were times—more times than he'd realized—when she'd leave work and simply disappear, unreachable for hours.

Where did she go? Who was she with?

Who was Vincent?

Joe found himself driving past her apartment building one evening, telling himself he was just in the neighborhood, just curious. Her lights were off. He checked his watch—eight-thirty on a Thursday night. Where was she?

He felt like a creep, like a stalker, and he hated it. But he couldn't shake the feeling that Catherine was involved in something, something that might be dangerous or illegal or just plain weird. Those kids at the baseball game—they'd been odd, no question about it. And the way they'd talked about Vincent, like he was some kind of hero or mentor figure...

It didn't add up.

Friday afternoon, Joe was reviewing case files when he overheard Catherine on the phone, her voice carrying into the busy hallway.

“I know, I know. I'll be there as soon as I can... No, tell him I'm fine. Really, I'm fine...”

## *How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*

The softness in her voice, the intimacy—it made something twist in Joe’s gut. He moved closer, pretending to study the file in his hands.

“Give my love to Father,” Catherine continued. “And tell the children I’ll bring more books next time. Geoffrey specifically asked for Treasure Island... Yes, I remember. I’ll be careful. I promise.”

She hung up, and Joe quickly moved away, his mind racing. Father? What kind of organization had someone called Father? And why would Catherine need to be careful?

He was so lost in thought that he almost ran into Catherine as she emerged, pulling on her coat.

“Joe! Sorry, didn’t see you there.” She smiled, but there was something distracted in her expression, something urgent. “I have to run. Can you cover for me if Marcus Schwarski calls about the deposition?”

“Sure, but—” Joe glanced at his watch. “It’s only three o’clock. You okay?”

“I’m fine. Just... something came up. I’ll see you Monday.”

She was gone before he could ask any more questions, moving quickly down the hallway toward the elevators. Joe stood there for a moment, then made a decision he knew he’d probably regret.

He followed her.

\*\*\*

Tailing someone in New York City was harder than it looked in the movies. Joe had to stay far enough back that Catherine wouldn’t spot him, but close enough that he wouldn’t lose her in the crowds. She moved with purpose through the streets, heading downtown, away from her apartment, away from any neighborhood Joe would have associated with her.

She walked for blocks, and Joe’s feet were starting to hurt by the time she finally

*How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*



*Joe by Laura G*

slowed down. They were in a part of the city that was mostly industrial—warehouses, old buildings, not much foot traffic. Catherine glanced around, and Joe quickly ducked into a doorway, his heart pounding.

When he looked again, she was gone.

“Damn it,” Joe muttered, emerging from his hiding spot. He jogged to where he’d last seen her, looking up and down the street. Nothing. It was like she’d vanished into thin air.

He spent twenty minutes searching the area, checking alleys and doorways, feeling more foolish by the minute. Finally, he gave up and headed back toward the subway, his mind churning with questions.

Where had she gone? How had she disappeared so completely? And what the hell

## *How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*

was he doing, following his colleague around like some kind of obsessed—

Joe stopped walking.

There, on the corner, was a drainage grate. Nothing unusual about that—the city was full of them. But something made him pause, made him look closer. The grate was slightly askew, and there were scuff marks on the concrete around it, like it had been moved recently.

He crouched down, peering into the darkness below. He couldn't see much, but he could hear something—a faint sound, like water running, or maybe voices echoing from far away.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Joe said to the empty street.

But even as he said it, pieces were clicking into place in his mind. The children’s old-fashioned clothes. Their unusual speech patterns. The way they’d talked about Vincent like he was someone special, someone separate from the normal world. Catherine’s mysterious absences, her fierce protectiveness, her careful deflections.

The tunnels.

Joe had heard rumors, of course. Every cop, every prosecutor in the city had heard whispers about people living in the tunnels beneath New York. Homeless communities, sure, but also something else—something more organized, more hidden. Most people dismissed it as urban legend, but Joe had learned a long time ago that legends usually had some basis in truth.

Was that where Catherine went? Was that where these kids lived? Was Vincent—whoever he was—part of some kind of underground community?

It sounded crazy. It sounded impossible.

But it also explained everything.

Joe stood up, brushing off his pants, and looked around the empty street. He could go down there right now. He could find out the truth, satisfy his curiosity, and

## *How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*

solve the mystery that had been eating at him for days.

But something stopped him. Maybe it was the memory of Catherine's face when she'd talked about Vincent, the love and protectiveness in her eyes. Maybe it was the sound of those kids singing at the baseball game, their joy and innocence. Maybe it was just the knowledge that some secrets were kept for good reasons, and forcing them into the light could destroy something precious.

Or maybe—and this was the thought that really gave him pause—maybe he was scared of what he'd find down there. Scared of discovering that the world was stranger and bigger than he'd ever imagined. Scared of having to choose between the truth and the law, between his duty and his friendship with Catherine.

Joe Maxwell stood on that street corner for a long time, staring at the drainage grate, wrestling with himself. Finally, he turned and walked away.

But he knew, with absolute certainty, that this wasn't over. He'd found the door to Catherine's secret world. And sooner or later, he was going to have to decide whether to open it.

\*\*\*

Monday morning, Catherine arrived at the office to find a small package on her desk. Inside was a Mets pennant and a note in Joe's distinctive scrawl:

*For Vincent. Sounds like he'd appreciate it. —J*

Catherine stared at the note for a long moment, her heart beating fast. Then she smiled, tucked the pennant carefully into her bag, and went to find Joe.



## *How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*

He was at his desk, pretending to be absorbed in paperwork, but she could see the tension in his shoulders.

“Joe.”

He looked up, and their eyes met. In that moment, Catherine saw everything—his curiosity, his confusion, his decision to wait, to trust her, to let her keep her secrets. At least for now.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

Joe nodded. “He’s a lucky guy, this Vincent.”

“I’m the lucky one.”

“Yeah.” Joe’s smile was crooked, a little sad. “Yeah, I bet you are.”

Catherine wanted to say more, wanted to explain, but she couldn’t. Not yet. Maybe not ever. So instead, she just smiled and said, “The Salermo deposition is at ten. You ready?”

“Always.” Joe stood, grabbing his briefcase. “Let’s go put some bad guys away, Radcliffe.”

As they walked down the hallway together, trading jokes and case theories, anyone watching would have thought nothing had changed. But Catherine knew better. Joe had found the edge of her secret world, had looked into the darkness, and chosen to step back.

For now.

The question was: how long would his curiosity let him stay away? And when he finally came looking for answers, what would she tell him?

Catherine didn’t know. But as she felt the Mets pennant in her bag, imagined Vincent’s face when she gave it to him, she thought maybe—just maybe—Joe might be someone who could understand. Someone who could be trusted with the impossible.

## *How About Those Mets by CandlelitChandler*

Time would tell.

For now, they had work to do, cases to win, justice to serve. The tunnel world and the world above would remain separate, two circles that touched only at the point where Catherine stood, bridging both.

But Joe was watching that bridge now, and Catherine knew that sooner or later, he'd want to cross it.

When that day came, she'd have to decide: would she let him? Or would she have to push him away, to protect the people she loved Below?

The answer, like so many things in Catherine's complicated life, would have to wait.



*Father by Crowmama*



## The Last Word

JoAnn Baca

*This story takes place after the events of A Kingdom by the Sea, peeling off from canon, because the rest of Season 2 (and by extension, all of Season 3) just hurts too darn much.*

Devin arrived Below with news of Charles' death. It had hit him hard, and returning to family felt necessary – going back to those who also knew Charles, people he could mourn with who would understand more than he could express. But what he found when he entered the Tunnels temporarily banished all thoughts of shared grief. The immediacy of Vincent's need was paramount. The dead needed help no longer – his living brother did.

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“What has been happening to Vincent?” Devin's brown eyes flashed with anger as Catherine opened her apartment door at his insistent knocking.

She waved him inside and closed the door. Turning, she took a deep breath, then said, “A lot, and we should discuss it sitting down, preferably with drinks in hand.”

He calmed himself with significant effort. “I just left the guy nursing a torn-up hand, mumbling something about kings and kisses and killing people and...hell, nothing made sense.”

“Sit.”

She claimed a seat beside him. “Want that drink?”

“Maybe later. Talk now.”

So she did, explaining as much as she could about how things had gone pear-shaped with Elliot, his father, a helicopter, the CIA, hitmen... If it had been the

## *The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

plot of a movie, he would have called it crazy, but hearing it spoken about calmly by someone who had experienced it made it all too chillingly real.

When she'd finished, he'd said, "I'll have that drink now."

A while later, drinks sipped, Devin shook his head. "So...I guess I get now why Vincent's a mess – physically, mentally, emotionally. I don't know how you're holding it together yourself."

"I barely am. I got pulled into something so immense, so awful, and ended up hurting Vincent so badly – and that last is the worst of it. Because Elliot...he means nothing compared to Vincent. But I can't deny that for an infinitesimal instant, when death seemed imminent, I...reacted to him. I told him later that nothing could come of it, that I am with someone. And he believed me. But, for the pain it caused Vincent, none of that matters."

There were tears in her eyes, and Devin realized how close to the edge she was herself.

"He's pushing you away, getting all noble. And it's going to get worse, isn't it?"

"I suspect we have more discussion ahead of us, yes. But he's so emotionally fragile right now because of what he felt through our Bond..."

Her tears finally flowed, and Devin wrapped her in a hug while she wept, his own heart breaking both for her and his brother...and hardening deeply against a man he hadn't met.

Elliot Burch had a reckoning ahead of him.

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"I'm glad you're home," Father said. Their conversation about Vincent had been brief, and for once father and son were on the same page.

"I can't get through to him. Oh, he says what I want to hear, but it's all window dressing, something to get me to leave his chamber so he can continue brooding, hurt and alone. Maybe you can help him."

## *The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

For the Old Man to admit that he wasn't the best person to help Vincent through his trauma was monumental. When had Father gotten so wise? Although Devin privately thought Catherine would be the best one to help his brother through this, he acknowledged that would make Father uncomfortable, and Vincent would become stubborn about not wanting her to be burdened. He was the compromise candidate, at least in his own eyes.

"I'll try. You know I will."

\*\*\*

"Here I come to save the day..." Devin appeared in the entryway of Vincent's chamber, singing the old Mighty Mouse cartoon theme song, hoping to draw a laugh from his brother. A small smile had to suffice.

"Feeling any better this afternoon?"

Vincent sighed. "No need to worry about me. My hand is almost healed." He flexed it and showed Devin his palm, which indeed looked much better than it had the day before.

He got to the point. "I saw Cathy last night."

His brother turned away, pretending to organize the papers on his desk. "How is she?"

"Barely holding it together, just like you." Devin wasn't playing Vincent's game. He cut to the heart of things. "She knows she hurt you and it's killing her. She loves you a lot, you know. That Elliot guy...he's just an insistent sort used to getting his own way. He overwhelmed her at her weakest, most frightened moment. I could deck him for taking advantage of her like that."

That got Vincent's attention, as he'd hoped it would. His brother turned to him. "She feels he's a good person, although one with faults."

Devin shrugged. "*She's* the good person...who gives others too much of the benefit of the doubt. I've run into plenty of cock-sure guys like him, masters of the

## *The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

universe types. They don't like hearing no, they push things too far. Arrogant, take-what-they-want bastards."

He knew he was getting through to Vincent – saying things that his brother was thinking but ashamed about. Devin wanted him to lance that boil, to let the poison of his negative feelings out, to acknowledge them, to give himself permission to have a bad opinion about Burch. Devin sure did.

"Catherine could use a visit," he added. "And frankly, you could use some time with her."

It put a satisfied smile on his face to see Vincent move so quickly to go to her.

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"Some gentleman using Ms. Chandler's name is wanting to meet with you."

Elliot frowned, wondering who this person might be. But as usual, using Catherine's name was too strong an enticement to send the man away.

"Show him in...and call me in five minutes in case I need to end the meeting quickly."

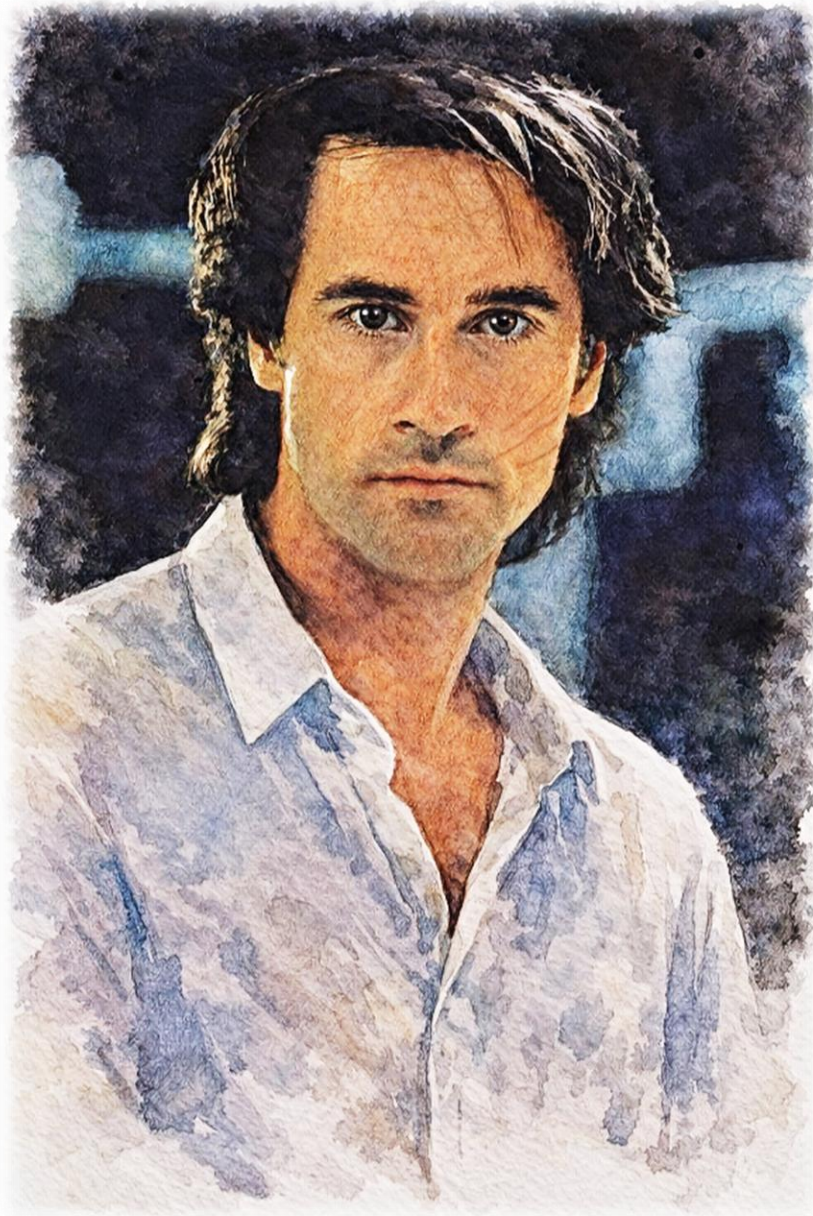
He rose to greet the visitor, immediately curious about him. A tall, lean, dark-haired, good-looking man with unusual scars across one cheek... Elliot mentally flipped through the report Cleon had prepared on Catherine Chandler prior to Elliot asking her on a second date. This man did not appear in it. Not a relative. Not a close friend or co-worker. Not even a neighbor. But from the stormy look on his face, Cathy meant a lot to him. Interesting.

He opened his mouth to offer a greeting, but the man was uninterested in niceties. He got right to the point.

"You need to back the hell off where Cathy Chandler's concerned. This is your first and final warning."

New boyfriend, maybe? Is he the one Cathy mentioned? Seemed unlikely that this hothead wearing discount-rack clothing is who she threw him over for.

*The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*



*Devin by Laura G*

“I doubt you speak for her. She’s a lady with a mind of her own. And my business with her is just that – between me and her.”

The two men stared daggers at each other.

“You have bulldozed yourself into her life and gotten her caught up in some kind of madness of your own making. You’ve lost any rights you might claim, as you have only caused pain and heartache for her and those she loves in recent days. If

## *The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

you truly believe yourself her friend, you would back off, leave her be, and find some other person to involve in your dangerous and unpredictable life.”

Elliot studied the stranger. His assessment was brutal, true...and informative. Anger turned into fascination. “Who are you to her? I’ve been close to her for quite some time, and I know you aren’t a constant in her life.”

Devin’s frown turned into a suspicious glare. “You having her watched? Oh, that’s just great. I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to hear it. Even more reason for her to stay far, far away from you.”

Elliot relaxed and sat down, leaning back into his chair and smiling. “She doesn’t know you’re here. You’re just blustering. If I call her right now, what will she say...Mr. – what is your name now?” He reached for the phone. They were both startled when it suddenly began to ring.

Elliot picked up the receiver and set it back down immediately. He didn’t need his secretary’s interference. He was beginning to enjoy this game.

Devin realized he’d only made things worse for his brother by raising both the stakes and the suspicions of this imperious bully who loved getting his own way. On top of that, he could smell another conman from a mile away, and this guy couldn’t pass the sniff test. Time to go.

“Describe me to her. She’ll know who I am, and why I came.” He turned to leave, then looked over his shoulder. “You kissed her when you thought you both were about to die...then she told you she had someone else in her life. Have no doubt that I know her. Leave her be. She deserves so much better than you.”

Elliot stared at the doorway long after the scarred man had left, contemplating just how he knew such intimate details. He was more...much more...than he seemed.

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Devin knew he didn’t have much time. His next stop was a pay phone in the lobby of Elliot’s building.

## *The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

“Cathy? I may have done something you won’t like. Listen...”

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As soon as she hung up the phone after Devin’s call, it rang again. As she expected, it was Elliot, greeting her with a purring “Hello, Cathy.”

“Before you say anything more, just listen. I didn’t know he was going to see you, but I wouldn’t have stopped him had I known. He could say the things I somehow can’t find the words for. Please don’t call me anymore, Elliot. Please.” And she hung up without saying goodbye.

The phone rang again, but Catherine had already grabbed the files she was reviewing to find an empty desk at which to work. The phone rang intermittently for another half hour.

\*\*\*

Of course, he showed up in his limo as she was leaving the office after work. Ignoring him, she walked toward the curb to hail a cab.

“Cathy, please! I need to talk to you!”

His shouts mingled with the noise of traffic as she told the cab driver where to take her.

\*\*\*

As she entered the lobby of her apartment building, she saw a huge floral display being brought in from a van. “Marvin,” she said, addressing the counter man, “if those are for me, please re-direct delivery to St. Vincent’s Hospital for their patients. I’ll pay the extra charge. Use my house account.”

Instead of heading upstairs to her apartment, she took the stairs to the sub-basement. She wasn’t really dressed for trekking in the tunnels, but she needed to find Devin. Leaving her briefcase in her storage room, she descended the ladder to her threshold. She wasn’t surprised to find Vincent waiting there...but Devin being with him *was* unexpected. Both men were surprised when she hugged Devin first.

## *The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

“Thank you,” she murmured into his ear before releasing him and turning to Vincent, who got the longer, closer embrace.

The relief on Devin’s face was evident when she finally released Vincent.

“Thought you’d slap me, not hug me,” he admitted.

“For standing up for me? For saying what needed to be said? I never slap knights in shining armor.” She smiled.

He rolled his eyes. “Awww...gosh, sis.”

Vincent’s eyebrows rose at his brother’s last comment, but his face relaxed and he managed a small smile.

“With you two in my corner, I feel well protected and well loved. And you’ve given me the courage to stay strong against the onslaught of gifts, calls and pleading which has already started.” Catherine related what had happened subsequent to Devin’s visit to Elliot.

“That man is incorrigible,” Devin mumbled.

“He’s used to getting what he wants...and he knows how to get under my skin, which buttons to push to work on my sympathy. I thought he cared about me and so tried to treat him kindly in his disappointment, but I’m realizing that even though he’s changing many things about himself for the better, his nature remains the same.”

“He’s a predator.” Vincent spoke for the first time. “It helps him in business, but it’s no way to treat someone he claims to love.”

Nodding, she added, “I have given him the benefit of the doubt for the last time. I promise.”

“Is he going to seek revenge? Come after me or Vincent?” Devin shrugged. “I don’t care about me, I can disappear in so many ways, and my trails grow cold pretty quickly. But Vincent says he knows about the tunnels, at least a bit. And he heard Vincent, even if he didn’t see him. Do we have to worry?”

## *The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

She turned to Vincent. “Maybe block the Central Park entrance and the area near the manhole where we went into the tunnels? At least temporarily? He only knows those two access points. I realize it will be inconvenient but...”

“It’s already been done. Right after he left the tunnels. A precaution we always take when there’s been an accidental breach.”

“He’s had his guy do an extensive background check on you, Cathy – family, friends, neighbors...the whole nine yards. He may have surveillance on you still.”

Alarm lit her face. “I had no idea. All right. For now, I’ll come Below only from my threshold, and you both stay Below. Devin, I mean it - don’t come Above for a while.”

“Will you see him again?” Vincent’s entire body was tense.

“I’ll speak to him in my office, with others around. Joe probably would relish being in the room when I talk to Elliot. He’s never trusted the man.”

“I always liked Joe.” Devin chuckled.

Then a frown appeared on Catherine’s face. “Maybe meeting in my office isn’t the best plan. Several people there could identify you if Elliot chooses to bring your picture with him. I’m sure he’s had one taken.”

”Where then? Not anywhere private?” Devin spoke before Vincent could ask the same questions.

“Chinatown?” she suggested. “Lin and Henry’s restaurant? We could ask a few Helpers to be there as patrons so I’m not alone, although I’ll seem to be. Witnesses, in case things go badly. But I don’t think they will.”

Vincent nodded. He would be able to linger nearby. As would Devin.

“OK, the next time he calls...”

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“How do you know this place?” Elliot slid into the booth where Catherine was

*The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*



*Elliot by Laura G*

drinking tea, waiting for him.

“It was a favorite of my Dad’s.” That was a safe enough lie.

“Okay. Well, thank you for seeing me. I want to...”

She held up a hand to stop him. “I’m here for me to talk and you to just listen. Understand?”

A hurt expression crossed his face, but he just nodded.

“I am deeply sorry for the loss of your father and the horrible way the CIA treated you. But I don’t want to know more than I already do about your construction problems or your interests in foreign countries. Your business is your business. And we have to come to an understanding, right now.”

He sat watching her, but she could tell he was just waiting for her to finish before launching into what he wanted to say. She hoped her next words would make any arguments he was queuing up meaningless.

## *The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

“I thought we could be friends, but I see now there’s always going to be something in you wanting more, pushing me for more. I can’t continue a friendship under those circumstances. So...this is our last meeting, our last conversation. Goodbye, Elliot.”

As she rose to leave the booth, he caught and held her hand. She struggled to pull away but his grip was firm. One of the other “customers” began to rise to assist her, only to sit down again after noting the slight shake of Catherine’s head.

“I can change. I want to be a better man. You make me a better man,” he said, pleading with her.

“I’m no magician. You have to make those changes on your own. Now please, let go of me.”

Reluctantly, he did.

“Do you understand me?”

He sucked in a breath to say more but instead just let it out slowly and nodded.

“You promise - no more calls, no more visits, no more gifts?”

He shut his eyes and turned his face from her, but he nodded once again.

She walked out of the restaurant to a cab driven by a Helper, who took her around the block to Dr. Wong’s shop and let her out. She descended to the tunnels from there.

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“Do you think he finally got the message?” Devin asked as they sat in Vincent’s chamber.

“If not, my next move will be to get a restraining order against him. I have multiple witnesses from the restaurant who can testify that I told him to keep away from me in no uncertain terms, and that he grabbed my hand in an attempt to delay my leaving.”

## *The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

“Will it come to that, do you think?” Vincent asked.

“I’m more concerned about him trying to find his way back into the tunnels. If he did, it wouldn’t be for revenge, but for leverage, if he thinks he can convince me to protect what matters most to me by keeping him in my life. Only time will tell. But truly...” she shrugged, “I think he got the message, finally.”

“Let’s keep our guard up for the next few months, though,” Devin suggested. “Maintain the barriers in the places where he knows about the entrances. And I’ll keep Below to avoid the chance he’s still watching your friends.”

“I’m so sorry.” She had tears in her eyes as she gazed back and forth at them. “Everyone will be inconvenienced by the Park entrance being blocked.”

“The alternative is discovery. Nobody will mind temporary inconvenience compared to that possibility.” Vincent nodded emphatically to underscore the point.

“Thank you, both of you. And please thank the community. I’m so sorry my relationship with Elliot ended up bringing all this trouble to them.”

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Two months later, the newspaper headlines screamed in 20-point type: BURCH MURDERED!

Catherine gasped as she unfolded her *New York Times* to read the accompanying story. A car bomb, a young socialite he was dating also killed when his limo blew up, a shadowy link to some scandal in Santo Irisado that may or may not have been the reason for his murder. Police were searching for his limo driver, who had exited the vehicle shortly before the explosion. A spokesperson from Burch Enterprises disavowed any activities beyond building a hotel on the island nation, maintaining that the government of President Torreón had no right to nationalize the nearly-completed structure.

She sat down heavily on her couch and dropped the newspaper. Elliot...gone.

He had been true to his word and hadn’t tried to contact her after their meeting at

## *The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

the restaurant. Helpers drafted into action had uncovered no surreptitious monitoring of her activities. Gradually, the closed entrances were re-opened – first for a few hours in the dead of night, and later for longer and during the day. No untoward activity had been detected at either location which could be described as surveillance.

Tears sprang to Catherine’s eyes. She could mourn the man, even as she thanked the heavens that she had ended their relationship fully, to the point of planting a short article in the society pages. It “revealed” a final break in what once had been a continuing friendship between the two of them, even after they were no longer dating. Juicy gossip was juicy gossip, and the columnist was as happy to report a parting of ways as she had been, much earlier, to reveal that they had started dating. A smaller, shorter article, perhaps, but considering the number of acquaintances who had contacted her after it had appeared, the impact was satisfying.

She brought the article Below, but they had already been informed by any number of Helpers.

Devin immediately went Above to visit some old haunts, unworried about being seen anymore.

Catherine sat with Vincent in his chamber. His physical wounds had long since healed, but Catherine suspected the emotional pain caused by Elliot’s attention to her was only now going to recede.

“You are sad.” It was a statement, one she couldn’t refute; their Bond told him clearly how she was feeling.

“Of course. He was murdered in his prime. Just because I couldn’t be his friend didn’t mean I wished him harm. And we shared some moments that will resonate with me forever, for good and for ill.” Honesty was the best choice, even as she wished she could lie a bit to spare his feelings.

“Yes. But I also sense...relief. A cloud has passed over you and the sun shines a bit brighter now.” He smiled, letting her know that same cloud had fled his

*The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

jurisdiction, for many reasons.

She had other news, something that troubled her a bit, but that she had no choice about.

“Tell me.”

Of course, he sensed her trepidation. “I was contacted by an attorney just before I came Below. A registered letter was delivered, advising me that I must attend the reading of Elliot’s will. Apparently, I’m a beneficiary. “

He frowned. “Had he mentioned anything about this to you?”

“No. And I have no idea what I was left in his will – it could be anything from a sentimental item of little value to a bequest of some size, or something in between.”

“One final gift from Elliot...”

“The man got the last word, I suppose.”

He leaned toward her and put one arm around her shoulders. “You have the last word. You can choose to accept or reject the bequest, can you not?”

“It depends.” She shrugged, but not enough to move his arm from around her. “Tax law being what it is, the value might determine things. But generally, yes, I can refuse it. It’s called disclaiming an inheritance. We’ll just have to wait.”

“You’ll come Below immediately after?”

She reached her arms out to encircle his waist. “Of course. Whatever happens, I’ll share the news with you first.”

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That was a promise Catherine couldn’t keep. Before she’d even left the reading of the will, leaks had occurred, and television stations in New York were breaking the news that Catherine Chandler, once a close friend and confidant of the late Elliot Burch, had inherited the bulk of his vast personal fortune.

## *The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

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Catherine slipped into the DA's offices so early the next morning that the news hounds hadn't gotten out of bed yet. She'd had to disconnect her home phone after her voice mailbox had filled up and the ringing wouldn't stop. A sleepless night made rising early to get a jump on the day seem reasonable.

Of course, Joe was already hard at work.

He looked up at the sound of footsteps. "Didn't expect you in today...or any day, now that you're swimming in Burch's millions." He sat back and twiddled a rubber band between his wrists as he smiled at her. "Need some coffee?"

She sank into a chair in front of his desk. "I'd pay a million bucks for one...and I literally can now." Her tired smile belied her attempt at humor.

He rose to grab two cups of freshly brewed coffee as she sat with her head back, eyes closed.



*Cathy and Joe by Laura G*

*The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

“Here.” He held a cup under her chin. “‘Wake up and smell the coffee,’ as someone usually says.”

She opened her eyes and smiled, then took the offering, wrapping her palms around the cup. “Thanks.”

He returned to his chair behind the desk. “Given any thought to next moves?”

“How to get rid of a fortune so it doesn’t take over the rest of my life? I’m open to suggestions.” She took a sip and made a face. “Bitter and hot.” She smirked as she added, “Just like you!”

He chuckled. “I guess a sexual harassment claim won’t work now that you probably have your resignation letter in that briefcase.” He indicated the bulging case she’d laid at her feet when she’d sat down.

She sighed and closed her eyes, muttering, “What’s a little sexual harassment between friends.” She took another sip without opening her eyes.

“We are, you know. Friends.” He tapped his desk to get her attention. “Were before. Are now. I’ll help in any way I can. Whether this is a blessing or a curse bestowed on you by the late, mostly unlamented Elliot Burch remains to be seen.”

She sat up. “While I have not been sleeping, I have been lying in bed thinking of turning it into more blessing than curse.” She then briefly described her ideas...some contributed by Vincent, some by Devin, some by Father, with her own ideas chief among them.

“Wow, you really didn’t sleep last night!” He contemplated her exhausted countenance and said, “If you need to get away for a day, my bed wasn’t slept in last night, the sheets have been changed, and you’re welcome to hide away there for a while. Think things over while I keep the hounds at bay.”

She thought again of what a good friend he was, and how caring he was...and how here, too, was a man she had to be careful about – even her crack about sexual harassment was unwise, simply for opening a door ever so slightly that needed to remain firmly shut.

## *The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

“I assume there will be lawsuits challenging the will. Some distant relatives coming out of the woodwork perhaps. Business associates reporting ‘handshake promises’ – even his board throwing up roadblocks. So...I won’t have my hands on the funds for a while...years, probably, if at all.”

He nodded. “Fair assessment. But...?”

“But I plan to have my ideas fully formed in the interim, even publish them, to show the world I don’t intend to profit from his death.”

He shifted in his chair and tapped the notebook he’d opened to take notes on her ideas as she laid them out. “Well, I challenge anyone to suggest this plan is self-serving. You are basically setting up financial arrangements for every social service activity conceivable, from funding food banks to paying college tuition for underserved youth. It’s hard to argue against this stuff unless you’re a greedy oligarch who doesn’t want to share toys.”

“And most importantly, I stay out of everything once the foundation and its bylaws are set up. Since I won’t be on any board or have any decision-making authority, I can walk away from his legacy, leaving it in good hands.”

“You really think you’ll be able to get on with your life, go back into the shadows again as a normal, overworked and underpaid civil servant?”

“Tell me that after a few years anyone will even remember my name.” She shook her head. “People get distracted easily. The foundation will carry on with only Elliot’s name on it and with others bestowing the funds. I’ll be ‘Catherine who?’ in short order.”

He shrugged. “If you say so. Can’t argue on the short attention span of the general public. Anyway, anything you need from me, you just have to tell me.”

“Good. I do have one thing you need to do for me.”

“Go for it.”

“You promise to say you will?”

*The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

“I told ya, Radcliffe, anything.”

“You’ll run the foundation.”

“Hey! I don’t...”

“You don’t have any way to squirm out of it, not after you double-promised to do whatever I asked!”

“Sneaky. You know I’m not good at that kind of thing.”

“On the contrary, you are someone who knows the world, knows people, and knows your own mind. Nobody can push you around and you are a very persuasive talker. All the elements you need to run the foundation. People can be hired for the technical stuff. I want someone strong, unimpeachable, and competent at its head. That’s you, boss, down to your bones.”

He closed his eyes briefly, then began to nod as he opened them.

“Damn, Radcliffe. OK. OK, I’ll do it. For you, not for that asshole who left you his money.”

“Spend it in ways that would make him grind his teeth!”

He chuckled. “I like that! It’s my new mantra.”

\*\*\*

It took five years, but after everyone wanting to challenge Burch’s will had had their day in court...and lost, Joseph Maxwell became the face of The Burch Foundation. Catherine had been right – he was the perfect tough-as-nails but tender-hearted person for the job.

Also, as she had predicted, when she ran for the office of Manhattan District Attorney, there was hardly a mention in the papers that the newly elected DA had set up then walked away from The Burch Foundation.

Vincent had years earlier outfitted the brownstone Catherine purchased with Tunnel access, assisted by his brother Devin and many of those Below. And what

*The Last Word by JoAnn Baca*

went on behind closed curtains there was the subject of no speculation at all. The new DA was just a homebody, not unexpected for someone who worked long and hard for the city she loved.



**Through the Looking Glass**  
*Candlelit Chandler*

The evidence room smelled of dust and forgotten things.

Catherine Chandler stood before a wall of shelves, her fingers trailing along the edge of a tagged item—a gilded mirror, ornate and heavy, its frame carved with strange symbols that seemed to writhe in the fluorescent light. The art dealer who’d owned it had been found three days ago in his gallery, throat cut, the place ransacked. This mirror had been the only item of value left behind.

“You taking that home for your bathroom, Radcliffe?”

Catherine turned to find Joe Maxwell leaning against the doorframe, coffee in hand, his tie already loosened though it was barely noon.

“It’s evidence, Joe.”

“Evidence of what? Bad taste?” He stepped closer, squinting at the mirror. “The guy dealt in stolen art. This thing’s probably worth a fortune, but it’s not connected to his murder. We’ve got nothing on it—no prints, no provenance we can trace. It’s been sitting here for three days.”

Catherine couldn’t explain the pull she felt toward it. The symbols along the frame seemed almost familiar, like a language she’d once known and forgotten. “I want to research it. See if there’s a connection we’re missing.”

Joe shrugged. “Your funeral. Just sign it out properly. Last thing I need is Internal Affairs crawling up my—”

“I’ll sign it out.”

That evening, Catherine carried the mirror up to her apartment, its weight substantial in her arms. She set it on the wall opposite her balcony doors, where the city lights would catch it. For a long moment, she simply stared at her reflection—light brown hair slightly disheveled from the day, her suit jacket already discarded, the familiar lines of her face.

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

Nothing unusual. Just a mirror.

She turned away to change clothes, careful not to touch the ornate frame. Something about it made her uneasy, though she couldn't say why.

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Over the next two days, Catherine researched obsessively. She traced the mirror's provenance through the art dealer's records—incomplete and deliberately obscured, but enough to follow a trail. The mirror had belonged to a succession of owners, each one meeting an unfortunate end. Madness. Violence. Disappearance.

In the DA's office library, she found a reference in an old book on occult artifacts: *The Glass of Possibilities*, created by the alchemist Jean-Baptiste Mercier in 1743. Said to reveal not reflections but alternatives—the roads not taken, the choices unmade, the selves we might have been. Warning: Direct contact with the frame activates the glass's properties.

Catherine sat back in her chair, the book open before her. Roads not taken. Direct contact.

She'd been careful not to touch it. But what would happen if she did?

That evening, Vincent came to her balcony as he often did. She heard his familiar footsteps and opened the doors to greet him.

"Catherine." His voice was warm, concerned. "You've been troubled. I can feel it through our bond."

"It's this case," she said, drawing him inside with little resistance on his part. "The murdered art dealer. There's something about this mirror—"

Vincent's gaze fell on the ornate frame hanging on her living room wall. He moved closer, studying the symbols carved into the gilt. "These markings... they're alchemical. Very old." He reached out, his clawed fingers tracing one of the symbols.

The moment his skin made contact with the frame, Vincent went rigid.

*Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

“Vincent?” Catherine grabbed his arm. “What is it?”

He didn’t answer. His eyes were fixed on the mirror’s surface, wide with horror. His breathing became ragged, his entire body trembling.

“Vincent!” She pulled at him, trying to break his contact with the frame, but his hand seemed frozen there.



*The Looking Glass by Laura G*

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it ended. Vincent stumbled backward, nearly falling. Catherine caught him, feeling the violent tremors running through his body.

“What did you see?”

Vincent’s voice, when he finally spoke, was barely a whisper. “Myself. But not... not as I am.” He looked at her, his blue eyes haunted. “I saw myself ruling the tunnels through fear. Father cowering before me. Children hiding from my rage. Blood on my hands and pleasure in my heart.” He gripped her shoulders. “Catherine, I saw myself as a true monster. Not the beast I fear becoming, but the beast I would be if I stopped fighting. If I let the darkness win.”

Catherine felt ice in her veins. “The book said the mirror shows alternatives. Roads not taken. But only through direct contact with the frame.”

“Then no one else must touch it.” Vincent’s voice was fierce. “Promise me, Catherine. Don’t touch it. Whatever it shows, whatever it offers—it’s not worth the cost.”

“I promise,” she said softly, though even as she spoke, she felt the pull of curiosity. What would she see? What roads had she not taken?

“We should destroy it,” Vincent said.

“Not yet. I need to understand it first. There’s a crime boss named Anthony Greco—he was supposed to receive this mirror from the art dealer. I think he killed for it, Vincent. I need to know why.”

“Then research quickly,” Vincent said. “And carefully. That thing is dangerous.”

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The next day, Catherine dug deeper into Greco’s background. She found coded references in the art dealer’s ledger—Greco had paid a substantial deposit for the mirror. Had been waiting for it to be delivered when the dealer was killed.

But why would a crime boss want an antique mirror badly enough to kill for it?

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

The answer came from an unexpected source. One of her informants, a low-level fence named Ed, had heard rumors. Greco was desperate. The FBI had built a case against him, witnesses ready to testify. He was looking at life in prison. And he'd become obsessed with the idea of starting over. Of becoming someone else.

"Word is," Ed said nervously, "he found some kind of magic mirror. Something that could let him trade places with another version of himself. A version that never became a criminal. Clean slate, you know?"

Catherine's blood ran cold. "Where did you hear this?"

"From Greco's own people. They think he's lost it. But he's convinced it's real."

After Ed left, Catherine stood in her apartment, staring at the mirror. Trade places with another version of yourself. The book had mentioned the roads not taken, the selves we might have been. But could you actually become them?

She moved closer to the mirror, studying her reflection. Somewhere out there, in some other reality, was a Catherine who'd made different choices. A Catherine who'd never been attacked in Central Park. Who'd never met Vincent. Who'd lived an ordinary life.

What would that Catherine be like?

Her hand reached out, almost of its own accord, toward the ornate frame.

"Don't."

She froze. It was her own voice, but it seemed to come from the mirror itself. Her reflection's lips hadn't moved, but she'd heard it clearly.

"Don't touch it, Catherine. You don't know what you'll see."

But curiosity was stronger than caution. Her fingers brushed the carved symbols.

The world exploded into light.

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## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

Catherine gasped as reality shifted around her. She was no longer in her apartment. She was... somewhere else. Somewhere familiar but wrong.

She stood in a different apartment. Larger. More expensive. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked Central Park. She looked down at herself and saw she was wearing a designer dress, diamonds at her throat and wrists.

“Cathy? Are you coming to bed?”

She turned. A man stood in the doorway of the bedroom. Handsome, successful-looking, wearing an expensive robe. She knew him—Tom Gunther, a corporate lawyer she’d dated briefly years ago. In her real life, she’d broken it off after a few months. But here...

“I...” Her voice sounded strange to her own ears. “Yes. In a minute.”

Tom smiled and disappeared back into the bedroom. Catherine stood frozen, her mind reeling. This wasn’t her life. This was an alternative. A road not taken.

She moved through the apartment like a ghost, touching things that felt real but



*Central Park by Laura G*

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

wrong. Photos on the mantle showed her and Tom at various events—galas, vacations, their wedding. She was smiling in all of them, but the smile didn't reach her eyes.

On the desk, she found a planner. Her handwriting, but not her schedule. Charity events. Society luncheons. Nothing about the DA's office. Nothing about justice or helping people or making a difference.

Nothing about Vincent.

The realization hit her like a physical blow. In this world, she'd never been attacked in Central Park. Had never been saved by a mysterious figure in the darkness. Had never discovered the world Below. Had never met Vincent.

She'd lived a safe, comfortable, utterly empty life.

"No," she whispered. "This isn't real. This isn't me."

But it felt real. The apartment was solid under her feet. She could smell Tom's cologne, hear the traffic from the street below. This was a life she could have lived. A life, some version of her was living.

"Cathy?" Tom appeared again, frowning. "Are you okay? You've been acting strange all evening."

"I..." She backed away from him. "I need to go."

"Go where? It's midnight."

"I need to find..." But she couldn't finish the sentence. Find who? Vincent didn't exist in this world. The tunnels didn't exist. She was trapped in a life that wasn't hers, and she had no idea how to get back.

Panic clawed at her throat. She ran to the window, pressing her hands against the glass. Somewhere out there was her real life. Her real self. Vincent.

Vincent.

She reached out through the bond—that inexplicable connection they shared—but

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

felt nothing. Just emptiness. Because in this world, there was no bond. There was no Vincent.

She was utterly, completely alone.

Catherine sank to the floor, her breath coming in gasps. She was trapped. Trapped in a life that looked perfect from the outside but was hollow at its core. A life without purpose. Without love. Without Vincent.

“This isn’t real,” she whispered again. “It can’t be real.”

But what if it was? What if this was the life she was meant to live, and everything else—Vincent, the tunnels, their love—was the dream?

No. She refused to believe that. She closed her eyes and focused on the bond, on the connection that had sustained her through so many dark moments. Even if she couldn’t feel it here, it existed. It had to exist.

“Vincent,” she whispered into the void. “Please. Find me.”

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Vincent paced Catherine’s apartment like a caged animal. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

The bond had gone silent.

Not the comfortable silence of sleep or distance, but a complete absence. As if Catherine had simply ceased to exist. He’d felt it happen—a sudden severing, like a rope snapping—and he’d run through the tunnels and up to her apartment in a blind panic.

The apartment was empty. The balcony doors were open, as if she’d been expecting him. But Catherine was nowhere to be found.

And the mirror...

Vincent approached it carefully, keeping his distance. He’d touched it once before and seen horrors. But now, looking at its surface, he saw something different.

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

He saw Catherine.

She was in a strange apartment, wearing clothes he'd never seen, looking lost and terrified. She was on her knees by a window, her hands pressed against the glass, her lips moving in words he couldn't hear.

But he could read them: Vincent. Please. Find me.

Understanding crashed over him. The mirror hadn't just shown her an alternative. It had pulled her into one.

"No." His voice was a growl. "No, you will not take her from me."

He knew what he had to do. The mirror had taken Catherine because she'd touched it. To get her back, he would have to do the same. He would have to go after her.

Vincent reached out and pressed both hands against the ornate frame.

The world dissolved.

\*\*\*

He found himself in darkness. Not the comfortable darkness of the tunnels, but an absolute void. He could see nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing except the cold surface of the mirror frame still under his palms.

"Catherine!" His voice echoed strangely, as if the darkness itself was swallowing the sound.

Then, like a door opening, light appeared. He saw flashes of different lives, different possibilities. A version of himself that had never been abandoned, raised by loving parents in a normal home. A version that had died as an infant, never given the chance to live. A version that had embraced the beast completely and become the monster he feared.

But he pushed past them all, focusing on the bond. Even here, in this space between realities, he could feel it. Faint, distant, but there. Catherine was alive. Catherine was waiting.

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

He followed the thread of their connection through the darkness, through the maze of possibilities, until he saw her.

She was still in that strange apartment, still by the window. But now she looked up, her eyes widening.

“Vincent?”

He couldn't speak. He was still in the void, still between worlds. But he reached out through the bond, pouring everything he felt into it. I'm here. I'm coming for you. Hold on.

Catherine stood, her hand going to her heart. “I can feel you,” she whispered. “You're here. You're really here.”

Vincent pushed harder, forcing his way through the barrier between realities. The mirror fought him, trying to keep him in the void, trying to trap him in his own alternatives. But he was stronger than his fear. Stronger than his doubt.

Because Catherine needed him.

The apartment around Catherine began to shimmer, to fade. Tom appeared in the doorway again, but his face was blurring, becoming indistinct.

“Cathy? What's happening?”

“I'm going home,” Catherine said, her voice steady now. “This isn't my life. It never was.”

She closed her eyes and reached out through the bond. And felt Vincent's hand close around hers.

The world exploded into light again.

\*\*\*

Catherine gasped as she fell forward, strong arms catching her. She was back in her apartment, the familiar scent of candles and old stone surrounding her. Vincent held her tightly, his face buried in her hair.

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

“Catherine. Catherine, I have you. You’re safe.”

She clung to him, trembling. “I was trapped. I was in another life, and you weren’t there, and I couldn’t feel the bond, and—”

“I know. I saw you.” Vincent pulled back just enough to look at her face, his hands cupping her cheeks. “The mirror pulled you in. I had to follow.”

“You came after me.” Her voice broke. “You came into the mirror.”

“Did you think I wouldn’t?” His thumb brushed away her tears. “Catherine, there is no world, no reality, no possibility where I would not come for you. The bond between us is stronger than any magic. Stronger than any alternative.”

She kissed him then, desperately, gratefully, a kiss that tasted of relief and love and absolute certainty. When they finally pulled apart, they were both shaking.



*Vincent by Laura G*

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

“We have to destroy it,” Catherine said, looking at the mirror with revulsion. “Right now. Before anyone else—”

“Not here.” Vincent’s voice was firm. “If we destroy it here, the energy could be unpredictable. Dangerous. We should take it Below. To the abyss.”

Catherine nodded slowly. “You’re right. We can throw it into the depths where no one will ever find it.”

“Tomorrow,” Vincent said. “When you can safely transport it. I’ll meet you at the tunnel entrance in Central Park after dark.”

“Tomorrow,” Catherine agreed, though her hands were still shaking.

Vincent held her close for a long moment, then reluctantly pulled away. “I should go. You need rest. And I need to prepare Father and the others.”

After he left through the balcony, Catherine stood staring at the mirror. Its surface was calm now, reflecting only her own face. But she could still feel the malevolence radiating from it, the hunger for souls to trap and torment.

Tomorrow, she thought. Tomorrow we end this.

\*\*\*

The next evening, Catherine carefully wrapped the mirror in a thick blanket, securing it with rope. She’d told Joe she was taking a few personal days—exhaustion from the case, she’d said. He’d looked at her with concern but hadn’t argued.

She carried the wrapped mirror down to the lobby, planning to exit through the storage area that led to the service entrance. But when she reached the basement level, she found her path blocked.

“Sorry, miss,” a maintenance worker said, gesturing to the hallway. “Pipe burst. We’ve got crews working on it. You’ll have to use the front entrance.” Catherine’s heart sank.

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

“How long will you be?” she asked.

“Couple hours at least.”

She had no choice. She’d have to go the long way—out the front, through the streets to Central Park. In the dark, carrying something that screamed “rob me.”

Catherine adjusted her grip on the mirror and headed for the front entrance.

The walk through Central Park felt endless. The mirror was heavier than it looked, and Catherine had to stop twice to rest her arms. Every shadow seemed threatening. Every passerby made her nervous.

But finally, she was nearing the entrance to the culvert, to Vincent, and below. She knew Vincent would be waiting for her there. Just a few more yards—

A hand clamped over her mouth.

Catherine tried to scream, but the hand was too strong. She was dragged backward, off the path, into the deeper darkness beneath the trees. The mirror fell from her arms, landing with a heavy thud on the grass.

“Well, well.” Anthony Greco’s voice was smooth, cultured, and utterly cold. “Ms. Chandler. How convenient.”

Catherine was shoved forward, and two large men grabbed her arms, holding her between them. Greco stepped into view, his face illuminated by the distant streetlights.

“I’ve been watching your apartment,” he said conversationally. “Waiting for you to do something stupid. And here you are, walking through Central Park at night with my mirror.”

“It’s not yours,” Catherine said, her voice steady despite her fear. “It never was.”

“Oh, but it is. I’ve been searching for it for years. Do you have any idea what it can do? What it can show you?” Greco’s eyes were feverish, desperate. “I’m finished, Ms. Chandler. The FBI has me. Witnesses ready to testify. But that mirror can give

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

me a second chance. A new life. A fresh start.”

“It doesn’t work that way. It traps you. It destroys you.”

“You don’t know that.” Greco pulled a knife from his jacket, the blade gleaming.

“But I’m willing to find out. After I deal with you.”

He stepped closer, and Catherine felt the bond flare with sudden, sharp terror. Vincent. She reached out through their connection, a wordless cry for help.

And somewhere in the tunnels below, Vincent’s head snapped up.

“Catherine,” he whispered.

He’d been making his way to the meeting point, moving through the familiar passages with easy confidence. But now he felt her fear spike through the bond—sharp, immediate, desperate.

Vincent ran.

He moved through the tunnels faster than he’d ever moved before, his cloak billowing behind him, his boots pounding against stone. The bond pulled him forward, a beacon in the darkness. Catherine was in danger. Catherine needed him.

Nothing else mattered.

Above ground, Greco was enjoying himself.

“You know what I think?” he said, trailing the knife along Catherine’s jawline. “I think you know more about this mirror than you’re telling me. I think you’ve used it. Touched it. Seen things.”

“Go to hell,” Catherine spat.

Greco smiled. “Eventually. But not today.”

He pressed the tip of the knife against her breastbone, just below her throat. Catherine gasped as he applied pressure, breaking the skin. A thin line of blood welled up, staining her blouse.

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

“Tell me how it works,” Greco said softly. “Tell me the ritual. Tell me how to make the exchange.”

“I don’t know—”

He pressed harder, and Catherine cried out.

The sound reached Vincent just as he burst from the tunnel grate.

What he saw ignited a rage so pure, so absolute, that rational thought vanished. Catherine was held between two men. Greco stood before her with a knife, her blood on the blade, a smile on his face.

Vincent roared.

The sound was inhuman, primal, a promise of death. All three men spun toward him, their faces going white with terror.

“What the hell—” one of the bodyguards started to say.

He never finished.

Vincent was on them in seconds. His clawed hand struck the first bodyguard across the throat, tearing through flesh and cartilage. The man fell, choking, dying. The second bodyguard released Catherine and reached for his gun, but Vincent was faster. He grabbed the man’s arm and twisted it, the bone snapping with a sickening crack. Then his claws found the man’s chest, and the bodyguard collapsed.

Greco stumbled backward, the knife falling from his hand. “What are you? What—”

Vincent advanced on him, his eyes blazing with fury. “You hurt her.”

“I didn’t—I was just—” Greco turned to run.

Vincent caught him by the throat and lifted him off the ground. Greco’s feet kicked uselessly, his hands clawing at Vincent’s arm.

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

“Vincent!” Catherine’s voice cut through the red haze. “Vincent, stop!”

He looked at her. She was holding her hand against the cut on her chest, blood seeping between her fingers. But her eyes were clear, steady.

“Don’t,” she said softly. “Don’t let him make you into something you’re not.”

Vincent’s grip tightened for a moment. Greco’s face was turning purple, his eyes bulging. It would be so easy. So satisfying.

But Catherine was right.

Vincent threw Greco to the ground. The crime boss landed hard, gasping for air. Before he could recover, Vincent’s fist connected with his temple, and Greco went limp.

In the struggle, in the chaos of bodies and violence, no one had noticed the mirror.

It lay on the grass where Catherine had dropped it, the blanket partially unwrapped. And when Greco’s unconscious body fell, his hand struck the ornate frame.

The mirror’s surface rippled.

Images flashed across it—different versions of Greco, different lives, different choices. The glass began to crack, spiderwebs of fractures spreading outward from where Greco’s skin touched the gilt.

“Vincent!” Catherine shouted. “Get back!”

Vincent grabbed her and pulled her away just as the mirror shattered.

But this time, there was no explosion of light. No magical backlash. The mirror simply broke, the glass fragmenting into hundreds of pieces, the ornate frame splintering. And as it broke, Greco’s body began to fade.

He didn’t vanish in a flash. He simply... dissolved. Like smoke dissipating in wind. Within seconds, there was nothing left of Anthony Greco but empty space.

The two bodyguards’ bodies remained, but Greco was gone.

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

Catherine and Vincent stood in the darkness, breathing hard, staring at the broken mirror.

“Is it over?” Catherine whispered.

Vincent knelt beside the shattered remains, his hand hovering over the pieces. “I can’t feel any power from it. The magic is broken.”

“Then let’s finish this.” Catherine began gathering the larger pieces of glass, wrapping them carefully in the blanket. Vincent helped, collecting the fragments of the ornate frame.

When they had gathered everything they could find, Vincent lifted Catherine gently. “Can you walk?”

“I’m fine. It’s just a scratch.” But she leaned against him gratefully as they made their way to the tunnel entrance.

Below ground, Vincent led her through the passages to the abyss. A vast chasm that dropped into darkness so deep that no one had ever found the bottom. The tunnel dwellers used it to dispose of things that could never be allowed to resurface.

They stood at the edge, the wrapped bundle of broken mirror between them.

“Together,” Vincent said, taking her hand.

“Together,” Catherine agreed.

They lifted the bundle and hurled it into the darkness. For a moment, they could hear it falling, the sound of glass tinkling against stone. And then, nothing. Just silence and the endless dark.

Vincent pulled Catherine into his arms, holding her tightly. She buried her face against his chest, feeling the solid reality of him, the warmth of his body, the steady beat of his heart.

“It’s over,” he murmured against her hair. “It’s truly over.”

*Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*



*Catherine by Laura G*

“You saved me,” Catherine said softly. “Again.”

“Always.” Vincent’s arms tightened around her. “I will always come for you, Catherine. In this world or any other.”

They stood together at the edge of the abyss, two people who had faced the darkness and chosen each other. Who had seen all the lives they could have lived and rejected them. Who had proven that their bond was stronger than magic, stronger than alternatives, stronger than anything.

Finally, Vincent led her away from the abyss, back through the tunnels toward home. Catherine’s hand was clasped firmly in his, and neither of them looked back.

The mirror was gone. The alternatives were gone. The shadows of other selves were gone.

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

Only the truth remained.

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The next morning, Catherine sat at her desk, trying to focus on paperwork. The cut on her chest had been cleaned and bandaged—Vincent had insisted, his hands gentle despite his earlier violence. It would heal quickly, leaving barely a scar.

Joe appeared in her doorway, a file in his hand.

“Radcliffe. Got a minute?”

“Sure.” Catherine gestured to the chair across from her desk.

Joe sat down heavily. “So Greco’s disappeared,” he said, reading from the file. “Just vanished. His organization is in chaos, his lieutenants are turning on each other, and nobody knows where he went.”

“Maybe he finally got what he wanted,” Catherine said neutrally. “A fresh start.”

“Yeah, well, good riddance.” Joe tossed the file on her desk. “Two of his bodyguards were found dead in Central Park last night. Looks like an animal attack. ME says the wounds are... unusual.”

Catherine kept her face carefully neutral. “Any leads?”

“None. It’s like they were mauled by something, but there are no animals in Central Park that could do that kind of damage.” Joe studied her face. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“Why would I?”

“Because you’ve been acting strange for days. And because Greco was looking for that mirror you found. The one that’s now conveniently destroyed.”

“Accidentally destroyed,” Catherine corrected. “It fell during... an incident at my apartment.”

“An incident.” Joe’s tone was skeptical, but he didn’t push. “You know, Radcliffe,

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*



*As It's Meant to Be by Laura G*

you've been different the last few days. Calmer. More settled. Like you figured something out."

Catherine smiled. "Maybe I did."

That night, she stood on her balcony, waiting. The city spread out before her, a million lights representing a million lives, a million choices, a million possibilities.

Joe stood, shaking his head. "Just... be careful, okay? Whatever you're mixed up in, whatever's going on—be careful."

"I will," Catherine promised.

After he left, she touched the bandage beneath her blouse, feeling the slight sting of the cut. A reminder of how close she'd come to losing everything. And a reminder of Vincent's fury, his protection, his absolute refusal to let her go.

But she only wanted one.

Vincent appeared at her railing, his cloak billowing in the night breeze.

## *Through the Looking Glass by CandlelitChandler*

“Catherine.”

“Vincent.” She took his hand, drawing him close. “I’ve been thinking about the mirror. About all those alternate versions of ourselves.”

“And?”

“And I’m grateful we never have to see them again. I’m grateful to be exactly who I am, exactly where I am.” She looked up at him, her eyes bright. “With exactly who I want to be with.”

Vincent’s arms came around her, and she felt the bond between them—that inexplicable, unbreakable connection—pulse with warmth and certainty.

“No more looking back,” he murmured against her hair. “No more wondering about roads not taken.”

“No more mirrors,” Catherine agreed. “Just us. Just this.”

They stood together on the balcony, two people who had seen all the lives they could have lived and chosen this one. This impossible, beautiful, dangerous life. Together.

In the distance, a pipe tapped out a message in the tunnel code. All was well Below. The community was safe. The darkness had been faced and defeated once again.

And in Catherine’s apartment, where the mirror had once hung, there was only empty wall. No reflections. No alternatives. No shadows of other selves.

Just the truth of who they were, and the choice they made every day to be exactly that. Together.



**Awakened**  
JoAnn Baca

❖ **Rated R**

*With gratitude to Crowmama for the amazing inspiration! The artwork that this story is based on was a Winterfest Online 2026 Treasure Hunt “prize” and is posted on Crowmama’s amazing site An Ever-Fixed Mark at this link ~*

<https://everfixedmarkfanfiction.com/project/awakened/>

She awoke with a fluttering of eyelashes. The morning light was bright, as if her curtains were pulled back or the doors to her balcony were open.

As it turned out, both were true.

But the sight that greeted her was much more glorious than the cityscape revealed...more, even, than the brilliance of the day.

Vincent...lying beside her, his head on a pillow, his arms tucked beneath it.

Vincent...his hair cascading in disarray.

Vincent...a smile on his face, in his eyes...

Vincent...bare shouldered, a sheet covering him somewhere south of his ribcage.

Wonderful memories flooded her mind.

“Good morning!” She could feel her sleepy smile grow broader as she took him in, capturing the moment.

“It is.” He reached over to brush away a curl that strayed across her forehead.

“It was a good evening, too.” She caught his hand and drew it to her lips.

“And an excellent midnight and beyond.” His hand grasped hers and he repeated her gesture, then snuggled it against his pillow, holding it loosely...but close.

*Awakened by JoAnn Baca*



*Catherine and Vincent by Laura G*

“How did you feel, waking Above?”

His smile stretched wider. “You assume I’ve slept?”

Sudden worry made her frown. “You couldn’t sleep?”

A deep chuckle eased her mind.

“I’ve fought it for hours. I didn’t want to waste a moment of...this.” He bent to her hand and brushed her fingers with his lips once again, his gaze never leaving hers.

“Now I’m sorry I fell asleep.” She stifled a yawn, then added, “But I couldn’t help it. You wore me out.” Her smile returned.

“I would apologize...but I don’t feel the slightest bit sorry.”

## *Awakened by JoAnn Baca*

Her lips twitched to hold in her laughter at his comment. A smug Vincent was an unusual and splendid thing to behold.

“For that I am truly glad. And for the way we spent much of the past night...I am truly grateful.” She half-rose and leaned over to him as he half-turned to welcome her into his arms.

Their kisses were gentle, playful things as they settled together in a languid embrace. But the sweetness of the moment didn't last long. A spark shot through their Bond, and suddenly the playfulness became much, much more. Their passions kindled quickly, igniting a firestorm of need – as if their night of lovemaking had been only a prelude. Desire swirled deep within them, their insatiable yearning for each other barely contained.

Coming together again was glorious, a conflagration and an epiphany. It was all too much...and not enough. All carnal need...and like the deepest prayer. They gave in to each other, gave all to each other, gave up for good the constraints that had held them apart for far too long. All over again, as if for the first time.

In the aftermath of their loving, they rested their foreheads together as the frantic beating of their hearts subsided. Then they favored each other with more kisses...which became gentle and playful once more.

Eventually, Catherine lay on her own pillow, reveling in the wonderful newness of having him in her bed. He rested once more on his stomach, clutching his pillow, blue eyes sleepily regarding her. Gradually he succumbed to his fatigue, his eyelids drifting closed. His breathing became steady...tranquil.

She lay there, not yet willing to follow him into slumber, just watching him sleep.

The breeze played with the silken curtains. The sun blazed in the heavens.

Catherine smiled, content.



*Mouse by Crowmama*



## A Small Light

Denise

One did not require sight or exceptional hearing to know this empty quarter had another occupant. A youngster's sniffling could be heard echoing near the area of the circular staircase. Not loudly. Unintentionally pitched to reverberate its owner intending to remain unseen and unheard. Heartbroken, attempting self-comfort and failing miserably. This was a place of winds and silences not of the wounded cries of children.

It had been many years since a person of so few years had made their way this far beneath the home chambers. Curious, she made her way closer to the suffering being.

"Hello, child."

An indrawn breath. Someone moved into the shadow space created by the natural arch beneath the stairs upon which she had been standing.

"I did not mean to disturb or frighten you, child."

"It's... It's okay. I didn't mean to be l

oud. I thought I was alone." The statement punctuated by another sniff. "I guess I shouldn't be here."

The woman in swirling garb used a cane moving forward stopping inches from the child hiding within the shadows. She bent down. "Why are you here, child? The Father would not be pleased."

The youngster heaved a deeply mournful sigh. "I can't find Devin. Nobody will tell me what's happened. Father won't speak his name. I don't know if something bad has happened." A sob escaped.

"What is your name, child?"

## **A Small Light** by *Denise*

Silence. Then the quiet answer. “Vincent.”

The woman’s expression changed from curiosity to understanding. “Ah. Pleased to meet you, Vincent. You may call me Narcissa.” She extended her hand. “You... You are a candle.”

Vincent ducked his head, a watery smile blossomed briefly. “What does that mean?”

“Candles carry light. Small warmth, pushes away darkness,” Narcissa said reaching out.

“Now let us go and see the father.”

Vincent took her hand and waited for her to lead. It was a soft hand with strong, well-shaped nails. Vincent noticed her nails because most of the women below kept their nails short, but uneven. Narcissa’s nails were smooth, unbroken, even. Like his own Vincent realized.

They held hands and Narcissa waited.

“Well, young Vincent, guide me to the father,” she directed.

Reddened bright blue eyes blinked as meaning of the words registered and his chest tightened. “Okay.”

They walked together up the serpentine staircase. Narcissa followed Vincent’s lead. However, the longer they walked the less certain the boy became that she truly needed him to lead.

“Are you blind?” Vincent asked.

Narcissa smiled. Squeezing the youngster’s hand, she replied, “I see what I need to see.” Her other hand felt along rough edges of the tunnel passages avoiding pointed outcroppings stalactites formed through the damp rock layers like fingers jutting out in unexpected places.

Vincent learned to lead in such a way as to avoid impediments the unsighted might

## *A Small Light by Denise*

encounter. As they approached the home chambers his steps grew slower and slower.

Narcissa did not comment. Instead she murmured, “I have not been to this section of the tunnels in some time. They are lighter than I recall. I believe part of that light is you.”

Vincent stopped walking. He turned back to stare into the clouded eyes of this woman he had just met. A feeling came over him that caused a shudder to pass through his slender frame.

“I...”

Father emerged from a side passage. “Oh, Vincent. There you are.” Adding a little coolly, “Narcissa.”

“Ah, Father. Good you are here. I have come to see you.” She smiled and reached for Father’s arm.



*Narcissa by Laura G*

## **A Small Light** by *Denise*

Vincent stood frozen in place uncertain if he could manage a conversation about anything other than the ideas churning in his brain.

“Um, yes of course,” Father said. “Let’s go to the hospital chamber.” Father placed Narcissa’s hand on his arm and limped toward the chamber with Vincent trailing behind not certain what he should do.

Narcissa ducked behind Father into the chamber through the opening and settled herself into a chair as if she had done so hundreds of times. Vincent edged into the room standing just inside the doorway. Father eased himself into an ancient, swivel desk chair. He turned it toward Narcissa with a squeak.

“You wanted to see me. Are you ill?” Jacob Wells inquired with his best bedside manner tone.

Narcissa angled her head her clouded gaze aimed at the doctor with startling intensity. “You are more fortunate than you know. You have an opportunity to influence a light.”

Jacob sat erect. Changing position slightly in his chair gaze shifting from Vincent to Narcissa clearly questioning. “I thought we are here to discuss your health. Is there something else?”

Narcissa’s smile faded. “Ah yes, not my health. The young one. His health is of concern?”

Father focused on his youngest before fixing a frozen stare on the woman across from him. The heat generated by his gaze, which a person in another chamber could read, Narcissa felt but chose to ignore.

“Vincent is perfectly healthy,” Jacob enunciated each word through clenched teeth.

“The other was his friend and shield. It is difficult to have someone so important ripped away,” Narcissa responded instead.

Exasperated, Father turned toward Vincent. “Do you know what this is about?” he managed to ask, mimicking a calm he was far from experiencing.

## A Small Light by Denise

The boy froze managing to choke out, “Each time I ask you, you say, ‘*Later. We’ll speak later.*’ All day. I’ve been searching. All day. I can’t find him.” Vincent’s soft voice became a sob. Tears flowed again as he stood trembling.

Jacob came to his feet immediately his injured hip sent a sharp stab of pain he ignored as he reached the child. Holding him, smoothing his wild hair wiping damp cheeks.

“Does the father believe he is in good health? Are we not more than food to eat and clothing to wear? The light can dim so easily,” Narcissa explained.

Father, close to tears himself held his son close murmuring, “Vincent, I’m sorry. Don’t cry. You never cry. Don’t cry. We’ve been looking for Devin. I wasn’t ignoring you on purpose. I wanted to be able to tell you when we’d discovered something.”

Vincent trembled and held his father. Finally, he was heard. Finally, he was being given some answers. Father held and rocked him.

Narcissa nodded to herself. Easing from her seat carefully made her way around the pair reaching out in passing to brush Vincent’s head. The boy smiled through his tears, mouthed *thanks* and tightened his hold on Father’s waist.

Father never noticed her departure.



## **Between Two Lives**

*CandlelitChandler*

### ❖ **Rated R**

The brownstone on East 68th Street stood like a sentinel between two worlds—its elegant facade facing the bustling streets of Manhattan, while beneath its foundation, a carefully concealed tunnel connected to the labyrinth that wound through the bedrock of the city. Catherine Chandler-Wells stood at the kitchen window, watching the autumn light. Five years. Five years since she and Vincent had spoken their vows in the Great Hall below, surrounded by flickering candlelight and the family that had become her own.

The brownstone had been purchased with her inheritance, but its true value lay in what couldn't be appraised—the hidden entrance in the study that allowed Vincent to move freely between the world above and the world below. It meant they could have a life together, however unconventional. It meant love had found a way.

Catherine heard the familiar sound—stone scraping against stone—and her heart quickened as it always did. Even after five years of marriage, Vincent's arrival still sent warmth flooding through her entire being. She turned from the window as he emerged from the study, ducking slightly through the doorway, his leonine features catching the afternoon light.

“You're early,” she said, crossing to him with a smile that felt like coming home.

Vincent's blue eyes—those impossibly expressive eyes that captured her soul—softened as he looked at her. “Father dismissed me from my teaching duties. He said I was ‘distracted and useless,’ and that I should go home to my wife before I confused the children further about the principles of mathematics.”

Catherine laughed, reaching up to touch his face, her fingers tracing the familiar contours—the leonine nose, the strong jaw covered in tawny fur, the lips that could be so gentle. “Were you really that distracted?”

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

“Hopelessly,” he admitted, pulling her close. His arms encircled her waist, and she felt the familiar strength in them, the careful control he always maintained. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you. About tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night?” She looked up at him with feigned innocence, though her pulse quickened.

“Our anniversary, Catherine. Five years ago, you became my wife.” His voice, that remarkable voice that could recite poetry or roar in fury, dropped to an intimate rumble. “Five years of happiness I never believed possible.”

She pressed closer to him, feeling the warmth of his body through the layers of clothing—the worn leather vest, the soft linen shirt beneath. “You mean someone noble, brave, gentle, and impossibly romantic? Yes, I can see why you’d think yourself unworthy of happiness.”

“Catherine...” He said her name like a prayer.

She silenced him with a kiss, rising on her toes to reach him, her hands sliding up to tangle in the thick mane of hair that fell past his shoulders. The kiss deepened, and she felt his careful control waver, felt the passion that always simmered beneath his gentle exterior. After five years, they had learned each other’s rhythms, each other’s needs.

“Come upstairs,” she whispered against his lips. “Let me show you how worthy you are.”

Their bedroom faced east, and in the fading afternoon light, it glowed with a soft, dreamlike quality. Catherine had decorated it carefully over the years—a blend of her world and his. The four-poster bed was draped with quilts from below, stitched by Mary’s patient hands. The walls held both framed photographs and Vincent’s own sketches. On the nightstand sat a candle in a brass holder, a gift from Mouse.

Vincent stood by the window, his silhouette powerful and somehow vulnerable at once. Catherine came up behind him, sliding her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek against his broad back.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“That I am the most fortunate of men,” he said quietly. “That every day with you is a gift I never expected to receive.”

She moved around to face him, taking his large, clawed hands in her smaller ones. “This is real, Vincent. Our love is the most real thing I’ve ever known.”

He looked down at their joined hands—the contrast that had once seemed impossible, now simply the truth of who they were together. “I know. The bond tells me so. I feel your love, Catherine, as surely as I feel my own heartbeat.”

The bond. That mysterious connection that had formed between them, allowing them to sense each other’s emotions, to know when the other was in danger or distress. That had deepened once they became lovers. It had saved both their lives more than once, and it had deepened their intimacy in ways that went beyond words.

Catherine reached up and began to unfasten the leather ties of his vest. “Then feel this,” she whispered, her voice low and heated. “Feel how much I want you. How much I need you.”

Through the bond, she felt his desire surge in response—a wave of heat and hunger that made her breath catch. His hands trembled slightly as they came up to cup her face, those powerful hands with their leonine claws that could rend stone but touched her with exquisite care.

“Catherine...” His voice was rough, almost a growl.

She pushed the vest from his shoulders, then began working on the buttons of his shirt, her fingers fumbling slightly in her eagerness. When she finally pushed the fabric aside, she ran her hands over the broad expanse of his chest, feeling the powerful muscles beneath the short tawny fur, the rapid beating of his heart.

Vincent’s breath came faster as her hands explored him. He helped her with her own clothes, his clawed fingers surprisingly dexterous despite their size. The silk blouse slipped from her shoulders. The skirt pooled at her feet. When he unhooked

## **Between Two Lives** *by CandlelitChandler*

her bra and slid it away, his sharp intake of breath sent a thrill through her.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured, his blue eyes darkening with desire as he looked at her. “So perfect.”

She could feel his arousal through the bond—the intensity of his need, the way his body responded to the sight of her. And she knew he could feel hers—the heat pooling low in her belly, the ache between her thighs, the desperate want that made her press against him.

His hands moved over her body, mapping every curve, every hollow. When his fingers brushed over her nipples, she gasped, and he felt her pleasure spike through the bond. He did it again, more deliberately, watching her face as she arched into his touch.

“Vincent, please,” she breathed.

He lifted her easily, carrying her to the bed. She helped him with the rest of his clothes, revealing the full magnificence of his body—the powerful thighs, the narrow hips, the unmistakable evidence of his desire for her. Through the bond, she felt the intensity of his need, felt her own body respond with liquid heat.

When they came together on the bed, Vincent positioned himself above her, his weight supported on his forearms. Catherine spread her legs, welcoming him, and felt him press against her entrance—hard and ready, the physical manifestation of everything they felt through the bond.

“I love you,” he said, his voice shaking with emotion and restraint. “My Catherine. My wife. My everything.”

“I love you,” she whispered back. “Now please, Vincent. I need you.”

He entered her slowly, carefully, giving her time to adjust. Catherine moaned at the exquisite stretch, the fullness, the perfect rightness of having him inside her. Through the bond, she felt his pleasure—the tight, wet heat of her body gripping him, the overwhelming sensation of being joined with her.

**Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*



*Peekaboo* by *Laura G*

“More,” she urged, wrapping her legs around his hips. “Don’t hold back. I need all of you.”

Vincent groaned and thrust deeper, burying himself fully inside her. They both cried out at the intensity of it—the physical sensation amplified by the bond until Catherine couldn’t tell where her pleasure ended, and his began.

He began to move, his hips rocking in a steady rhythm. Catherine met each thrust, her hands gripping his shoulders, her nails digging into his fur-covered skin. The bed creaked beneath them as their pace increased, as Vincent’s careful control began to slip.

“Yes,” Catherine gasped. “God, yes. Harder, Vincent.”

He complied, driving into her with more force, more urgency. His claws dug slightly into the sheets on either side of her head as he fought to maintain some measure of control. But Catherine didn’t want control. She wanted him wild,

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

wanted him to lose himself in her the way she was losing herself in him.

She tightened her inner muscles around him, and felt his shock of pleasure through the bond. “Let go,” she whispered. “I’m not fragile. I want to feel everything.”

Vincent’s restraint shattered. He thrust into her harder, faster, his breath coming in harsh pants. Catherine cried out with each powerful stroke, her body climbing toward release. Through the bond, she felt Vincent’s pleasure building, felt him getting close, and it pushed her higher.

“Catherine,” he groaned. “I can’t... I’m going to...”

“Yes,” she gasped. “With me. Together.”

Her climax hit her like a wave, crashing through her body and through the bond. Vincent felt it, and it triggered his own release. He thrust deep one final time and came with a roar, his body shuddering as he found completion inside her.

The bond sang between them, a symphony of shared pleasure and love so intense it was almost painful. Catherine felt Vincent’s release as if it were her own, felt the pulsing waves, the overwhelming satisfaction. And he felt hers—the pleasure radiating through her body, the perfect completion.

They stayed locked together as the aftershocks rippled through them, both trembling, both gasping for breath. Finally, Vincent carefully withdrew and rolled to his side, immediately pulling Catherine into his arms.

Afterward, they lay tangled together, Vincent’s arms wrapped protectively around her, her head resting on his chest where she could hear the strong, steady beat of his heart. The room had grown darker, the last light fading from the sky.

“Happy day before our anniversary,” Catherine murmured, pressing a kiss to his chest.

“Happy day before our anniversary, my love,” Vincent replied with a playful smile, his hand stroking through her hair. “Thank you for five years of joy beyond measure.”

## **Between Two Lives** *by CandlelitChandler*

She tilted her head to look up at him. “Here’s to fifty more.”

He smiled, that rare, beautiful smile that transformed his face. “Fifty more,” he agreed. “And then fifty beyond that.”

They lay in comfortable silence for a while, listening to the sounds of the city beyond their windows. Below, in the tunnels, there would be different sounds—the drip of water, the echo of footsteps, the murmur of voices in the dining hall. Two worlds, forever intertwined in their lives.

“I should go below for a while,” Vincent said eventually, though he made no move to leave her embrace. “Mouse has been working on a new invention. Father asked me to check on him—apparently, there was some concern after the last incident.”

Catherine laughed softly. “Should we be worried?”

“Almost certainly. His last invention nearly flooded the lower chambers. But he means well, and his ingenuity has helped the community in countless ways.”

“Then you’d better go supervise.” She sat up reluctantly, already missing his warmth. “I have some case files to review anyway. Joe’s been on me about the Salvatore investigation.”

Vincent rose from the bed, his movements fluid and graceful despite his size. He began dressing, and Catherine watched him with unabashed appreciation.

“Will you come below later?” he asked, pulling on his shirt. “Everyone would love to see you. Mary’s been asking after you, and Patrick wants to show you his latest drawings.”

“Of course. Give me a couple of hours to get through these files, and I’ll come down.” She got up, pulled on her robe, and crossed to him. “Be careful down there. Especially around Mouse’s inventions.”

He cupped her face, his thumb stroking her cheek. “Always.”

She walked him to the study, watching as he triggered the mechanism that moved the bookshelf aside to reveal a small room that connected to a tunnel entrance. He

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

lit one of the lamps, and the flickering light cast dancing shadows on the stone walls beyond.

“I love you,” she said, as she always did when they parted.

“I love you,” he replied, as he always did. “More than words can express.”

And then he was gone, descending into the darkness, his footsteps fading gradually until there was only silence.

Catherine stood there for a long moment, her hand pressed to her chest where the bond hummed with contentment and love. Then she turned back to the living room, to her briefcase and the work that waited.

The bond was quiet, peaceful. Vincent was safe below, among family and friends.

The tunnel world was bustling with activity when Vincent arrived in the dining hall. The chamber, carved from living rock over decades of patient work, was lit by candles and torches. The effect was warm and welcoming, a stark contrast to the cold darkness of the world above.

“Vincent!” A small figure hurtled toward him, and Vincent caught Patrick easily, swinging the ten-year-old boy up in his arms.

“Hello, Patrick. I hear you have drawings to show me.”

“Lots! I drew the new tunnel, and the pipe chamber, and Mouse’s new invention—I’m not sure I got it right because it’s really complicated. Mouse keeps changing it.”

Vincent set the boy down with a smile. “I look forward to seeing them. Where is Mouse now?”

“In the lower chambers. Father said to tell you to go there right away. He’s worried.”

Vincent’s expression grew serious. “Thank you, Patrick. I’ll go at once.”

He made his way through the familiar passages, greeting the people he passed.

## **Between Two Lives** *by CandlelitChandler*

This was his home, had been since Father—Jacob Wells—had found him as a baby, abandoned and alone. These people were his family, bound not by blood but by choice and love.

Father met him at the entrance to the lower chambers, his face creased with worry. “Vincent, thank goodness. Mouse has been down there for hours with his latest creation. He says it’s a ‘water pressure system’ that will help us expand the tunnels more efficiently. But I’m concerned about the structural integrity of the area he’s chosen to test it.”

“I’ll speak with him,” Vincent assured the old man. “Don’t worry, Father. I won’t let him do anything dangerous.”

But as Vincent descended into the lower chambers, he could already hear the sound of Mouse’s invention—a rhythmic pounding that seemed to shake the very walls. He quickened his pace, his concern growing.

Mouse’s chamber in the lower levels was a chaotic wonderland of salvaged parts, tools, and half-finished inventions. But today, the chaos had spilled out into the tunnel itself. A massive contraption made of pipes, gears, and what appeared to be parts of an old fire hydrant dominated the passage. Water was being forced through the system at high pressure, directed at the rock face at the end of the tunnel.

“Mouse!” Vincent called over the noise. “What are you doing?”

Mouse looked up, his thin face alight with excitement. “Vincent! Look, look! Water pressure breaks rock. Makes tunneling faster!”

Vincent examined the setup with growing alarm. The water was indeed breaking apart the rock, but the force was also causing vibrations throughout the tunnel. He could see cracks forming in the ceiling, could hear the ominous groan of stressed stone.

“Mouse, you need to shut this down. Now. The vibrations are destabilizing the entire area.”

“But it works! See? Rock breaks. Easy. Can make new tunnels fast.”

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

“Mouse, please. This is dangerous. The ceiling—”

A loud crack interrupted him. Vincent looked up to see a fissure spreading across the ceiling like a spider’s web. Dust and small stones began to fall.

“Everyone out!” Vincent roared. “The tunnel is collapsing! Get out now!”

Mouse’s eyes went wide with fear. He scrambled to shut down his machine, but in his panic, he hit the wrong lever. Instead of shutting off, the water pressure increased dramatically. The pounding intensified, and the ceiling groaned ominously.

Vincent grabbed Mouse and shoved him toward the exit. “Run! Get Father! Tell him to evacuate the lower level!”

Mouse ran, his footsteps echoing in the passage. Vincent turned back to the machine, trying to find a way to shut it down. But it was too late. The ceiling gave way with a thunderous sound.

Vincent had only a moment to react. He threw himself forward, away from the main collapse, but falling rock caught him anyway. He felt the impact, felt bones breaking, felt the crushing weight pinning him to the ground.

And then, through the bond, he felt Catherine’s sudden spike of terror as she sensed his mortal danger.

*Catherine*, he thought, sending everything he could through the connection. *I love you. I will always love you.*

The last thing he heard was the sound of running footsteps, voices calling his name. The last thing he felt was Catherine’s love, pouring through the bond like light.

And then there was darkness.

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Catherine was reviewing case files when the bond exploded with agony and terror.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

She gasped, her hand flying to her chest, papers scattering across the floor.

“Vincent!”

She ran for the study, not bothering with shoes or a coat. She threw open the tunnel entrance and plunged into the darkness, grabbing a torch from its holder as she ran.

She followed the bond, followed the pain and fear. She could feel him fading, feel his life slipping away, and she ran faster than she had ever run.

She met Pascal in the main tunnel, his face white with shock. “Catherine! There’s been a collapse in the lower levels. Vincent—”

She didn’t stop. She pushed past him and kept running. Other tunnel dwellers joined her, all of them racing toward the disaster.

The smell of dust and damp filled the air. The passage ahead was completely blocked by fallen rock. Catherine fell to her knees, her hands frantically clawing at the rubble.

“Vincent! Vincent, can you hear me?”

Father arrived with Cullen and several other strong men. They began working to clear the collapse, moving rocks with desperate urgency. Catherine worked alongside them, ignoring the cuts on her hands, the blood on her fingers.

The bond was growing weaker. She could barely feel him now, just a faint flutter of consciousness.

“Hurry!” she sobbed. “Please, hurry!”

It took twenty minutes to clear enough rubble to reach him. When they finally pulled the last rocks away, Catherine’s heart shattered.

Vincent lay crushed beneath a massive stone slab. His chest was caved in, his breathing shallow and labored. Blood pooled beneath him, dark in the torchlight.

“No. No, no, no.” Catherine crawled to his side, her hands hovering over him, afraid to touch him, afraid of causing more pain. “Vincent, I’m here. I’m right

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

here.”

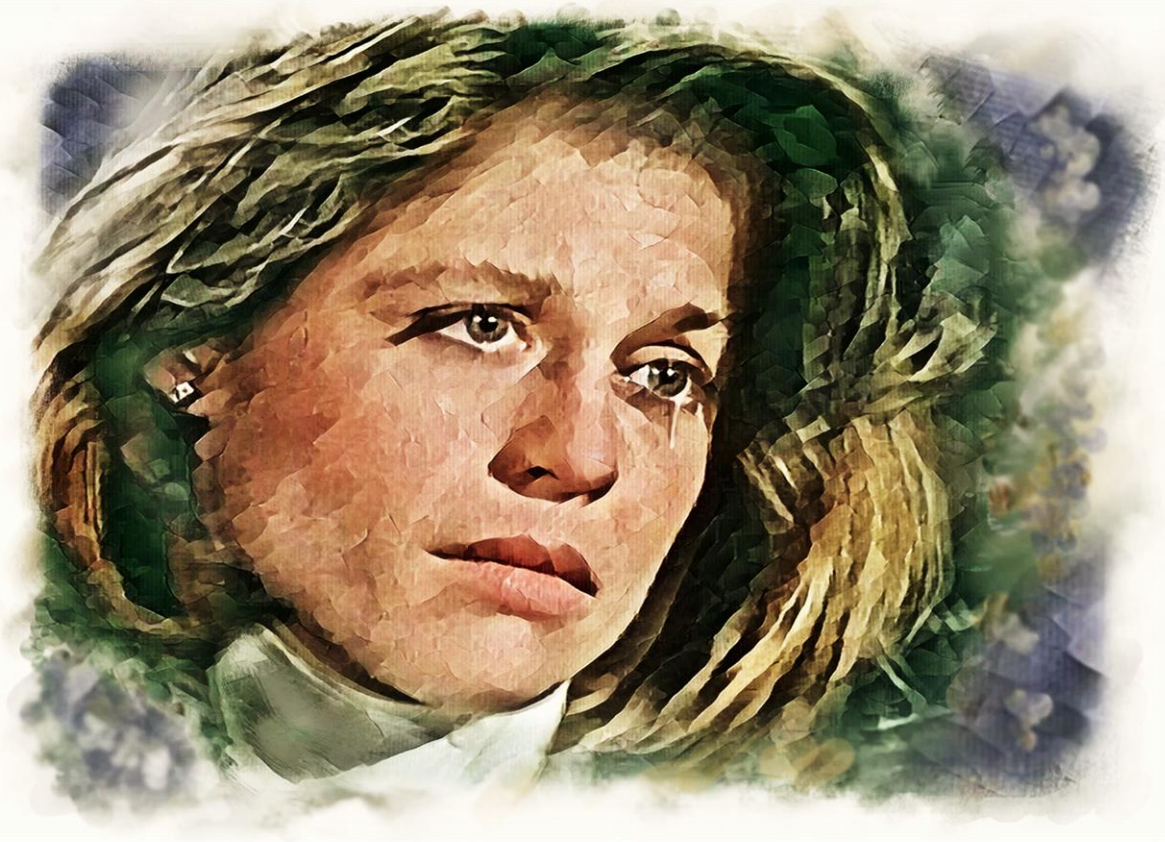
His eyes opened, those beautiful blue eyes, now clouded with pain and something else—acceptance. “Catherine,” he whispered. “I’m sorry... I’m... so sorry...”

“Don’t apologize. Don’t you dare apologize.” Tears streamed down her face. “You’re going to be okay. Father will fix this. You’re going to be fine.”

Father’s face, when she looked at him, told her the truth. There was nothing he could do. The injuries were too severe.

“Catherine,” Vincent said again, his voice barely audible. “Five years... perfect years... more happiness... I... ever dreamed...”

“No. Don’t talk like that. We’re going to have fifty more years. You promised me.”



**Heartbreak** by *Laura G*

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

He smiled, that beautiful smile, even as blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. “I wish... I ...Catherine... I need you to know... loving you... being loved by you...was everything.”

“You are my life,” Catherine sobbed. “You are my everything. Please, Vincent. Please don’t leave me.”

The bond between them was fading, growing weaker. She tried to hold on, tried to keep him with her through sheer force of will, but it wasn’t enough.

“I love ...you,” Vincent said, his voice barely a breath. “Always... will... always love you.”

“I love you. I love you so much.” Catherine pressed her forehead against his, her tears falling on his face.

His hand tightened on hers one last time. His eyes held hers, full of love and peace. And then, with a final exhale, he was gone.

The bond went silent.

Catherine felt it like a physical blow, like something vital had been ripped from her chest. The connection that had been a constant presence for years, the thread that had tied her to Vincent, was simply... gone. The silence was deafening.

“No,” she whispered. “No, Vincent. Not without me! Not without me!”

But he was gone. The light had left his eyes. His chest no longer rose and fell. The man she loved, the man who had been her husband, her partner, her soulmate, was dead.

Father’s hand came down on her shoulder, and she heard him weeping. Around them, the tunnel dwellers were crying, their grief echoing through the passages.

Mouse pushed through the crowd, his face streaked with tears and dust. “Vincent? Vincent okay? Mouse didn’t mean... didn’t mean to...”

He saw Vincent’s body and let out a wail of anguish. “No! No, no, no! Mouse’s

## **Between Two Lives** *by CandlelitChandler*

fault! Mouse killed Vincent!”

Father pulled the distraught man into his arms, “Mouse...” Father couldn’t find the words to help console the young man, help ease his conscience. He just held on to him as they both wept.

Mouse was inconsolable, and Catherine understood. She wanted to blame him, wanted to rage at the universe for taking Vincent from her. But she knew it would change nothing. It was just a terrible, senseless accident.

She didn’t know how long she knelt there, holding Vincent’s hand, unable to let go. Time seemed to have stopped. The world had ended.

Eventually, gentle hands pulled her away. Mary wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and held her while she sobbed. After extracting his body from under the boulder, Cullen and Pascal carefully lifted Vincent’s body, carrying him toward the hospital chamber.

Catherine followed like a ghost, her mind unable to process what had happened. This couldn’t be real. It had to be a nightmare. She would wake up, and Vincent would be beside her, and everything would be fine.

But she didn’t wake up. The nightmare continued.

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Vincent opened his eyes to sunlight.

He blinked, confused. He was lying in a bed—a regular bed, in a regular bedroom, with sunlight streaming through regular windows. He sat up slowly, looking around in bewilderment.

The room was unfamiliar but comfortable. Modern furniture, cream-colored walls, a few framed prints on the walls. He looked down at himself and froze.

His hands were human. Completely human. No claws, no fur, just normal human hands.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

He stumbled out of bed and found a mirror. The face that looked back at him was human—handsome, with regular features, short brown hair, and those same blue eyes. But it wasn't his face. There were no leonine features. It wasn't Vincent.

He explored the apartment in a daze. A modern one-bedroom in what appeared to be the Upper East Side. The refrigerator had food in it. The closet had clothes—business casual, suits, casual wear. On the desk in the living room, he found a wallet. Driver's license: David Morrison. Age 38. An architect, according to the business cards in a holder nearby.

David. His name was David. And he lived alone.

None of this made sense. The last thing he remembered was the tunnel collapse, the crushing weight, Catherine's face above him as he died.

He had died. He was certain of it. So what was this? Heaven? Hell? Some kind of afterlife?

Over the next few days, Vincent—David—tried to make sense of his new reality. He had memories that weren't his, knowledge of a life he'd never lived. He was an architect at a Manhattan firm. He lived alone in this apartment. He had a routine, colleagues, a life that felt both foreign and somehow familiar.

But he also remembered his real life. He remembered the tunnels, Father, the community below. Most of all, he remembered Catherine. Her face haunted him, the memory of her grief as he died.

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Three weeks into his new existence, David found himself drawn to Central Park- a compulsion he couldn't resist. He walked the familiar paths, past the Bethesda Fountain, through the Mall, along the paths he and Catherine had walked together in what felt like another lifetime.

And then he saw her.

Catherine was sitting on a bench near the Literary Walk, staring at nothing. She

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

looked terrible—thin, pale, with dark circles under her eyes. She wore black, and a hollowness in her expression broke his heart.

David stopped in his tracks, hidden partially behind a tree. He wanted to run to her, to hold her, to tell her he was here. But he couldn't. The words wouldn't come.



So he watched.

Over the following weeks, David found himself returning to the park again and again. He learned Catherine's patterns. She came to the park most days during her lunch hour, always sitting on the same bench or walking the same paths. Sometimes she brought a book, but never read it. Sometimes she just sat, staring into space, her hand pressed to her chest where the bond had once connected them.

David kept his distance, observing from afar. He saw her grief, raw and consuming. He saw her struggle to keep functioning, to keep putting one foot in front of the other. He saw her slowly withering, like a flower cut off from sunlight.

And every day, the same internal war raged inside him.

*Tell her. Go to her. She's suffering, and you can end it. You can tell her you're alive, that you're here, that she doesn't have to grieve anymore.*

But the other voice, equally insistent: *And how exactly would that conversation go? "Hello, Catherine, I know I look like a complete stranger, but I'm actually Vincent. I died and woke up in this body. Please believe me.*

He imagined her face—the confusion, the pain, the inevitable conclusion that he was either insane or cruel. Some sick person who'd learned about Vincent's death and decided to torture her with it.

*She won't believe you, the voice insisted. Why would she? You have David*

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

*Morrison's face, David Morrison's hands, David Morrison's voice. You have nothing—no proof, no way to convince her. The bond is gone. You can't even show her that.*

*But I could tell her things only Vincent would know. Private things. Moments we shared.*

*And she'll think you're a stalker who somehow learned intimate details of her life. She'll be terrified. You'll make everything worse.*

*I can't do that to her. I can't give her hope and then take it away. I can't add to her pain.*

But watching her suffer was its own special torture. Every day, David saw her grief eating away at her. She was losing weight, losing color, losing the vibrant life that had always defined her. She was drowning in sorrow, and he was standing on the shore, unable to throw her a rope because she wouldn't recognize his hands.

*She's in so much pain already. If I tell her and she doesn't believe me—if she thinks I'm some cruel imposter—it will break something in her that might never heal. She'll think Vincent's memory is being desecrated. She'll think someone is mocking her grief.*

The thought made him physically ill.

David stood behind his tree, watching Catherine sit motionless on her bench, and felt the weight of impossible choices crushing him.

*I could end her suffering. Or I could make it infinitely worse. And I have no way of knowing which it would be until it's too late.*

So he stayed silent. He watched from a distance. He tortured himself with proximity to the woman he loved while maintaining the gulf between them, because the risk of causing her more pain was too great.

He wanted desperately to help her, but he didn't know how. He was trapped in this strange half-life, able to see her but unable to reach her, unable to tell her who he

## Between Two Lives by *CandlelitChandler*

really was.

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One day in late June, David noticed posters around the park advertising a concert—the New York Philharmonic would be performing an evening of melancholy classical pieces on the Great Lawn. Barber’s Adagio for Strings. Mahler’s Fifth Symphony. Pieces that spoke of loss and longing.

The evening of the concert was warm, with a restless wind that sent leaves skittering across the grass. David arrived early, claiming a spot on the lawn with a blanket he’d brought. The sun was beginning to set, painting the sky in shades of amber and rose.

People began to arrive, spreading blankets and setting up folding chairs. David scanned the crowd, and then he saw her.

Catherine arrived alone, carrying a small blanket and a bag. She looked slightly better than she had in previous weeks—still too thin, still wearing black, but there was a bit more color in her face. She found a spot not far from where David sat, spreading her blanket on the grass.

He watched as she settled in, pulling items from her bag—a bottle of water, a small package of tissues, a program for the concert. The wind picked up, ruffling her hair, and she tucked a strand behind her ear with a gesture so familiar it made his chest ache.

The orchestra began to tune their instruments, and the crowd settled into expectant silence. The conductor took his place, raised his baton, and the first mournful notes of Barber’s Adagio filled the air.



## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

David watched Catherine's face as she listened. Her eyes closed, and tears began to slip down her cheeks. Her hand pressed to her chest again, that unconscious gesture he'd seen so many times. She was reaching for the bond, for him, and finding only silence.

The wind grew stronger as the concert continued, gusting across the lawn. Catherine had set her package of tissues beside her on the blanket, and suddenly a strong gust caught them, sending tissues flying across the grass.

Without thinking, David jumped up and chased after them. He caught several as they tumbled past, then hurried to gather the others before they blew too far away. When he had collected them all, he turned to bring them back to Catherine.

She was standing now, looking embarrassed and grateful. "Thank you so much," she said as he approached. "I didn't realize the wind was so—"

She stopped mid-sentence, her eyes locking on his face. More specifically, on his eyes.

David froze, the napkins clutched in his hand. He saw recognition flicker across her features—not full recognition, but something. A sense of familiarity that confused her.

"Your eyes," she whispered. "They're..."

She trailed off, shaking her head as if to clear it. "I'm sorry. That was strange. Thank you for catching those." She reached out to take the tissues from him, careful not to let their hands touch.

"You're welcome," David managed, his voice rough. He handed her the tissues, maintaining the distance between them.

They stood there for a moment, the orchestra playing behind them, the wind whipping around them. Catherine's eyes kept returning to his, that confused recognition still flickering in their depths.

"Have we met before?" she asked finally. "You seem... familiar somehow."

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

“I don’t think so,” David said, though every fiber of his being screamed to tell her the truth. “I would have remembered.”

Catherine nodded slowly, but she didn’t look convinced. “Well... thank you again. For the tissues.”

“Of course.” David gestured back toward his blanket. “I should... I should get back.”

“Yes. Of course.” But Catherine didn’t move, still studying his face with that puzzled expression.

David forced himself to turn away, to walk back to his spot on the lawn. He sat down, his heart pounding, acutely aware of Catherine settling back onto her own blanket just yards away.

The orchestra moved into Mahler’s Fifth Symphony, the famous Adagietto movement—a love letter in musical form, achingly beautiful and unbearably sad. David risked a glance at Catherine and saw her crying again, but this time her eyes were open, staring at him with an expression he couldn’t quite read.

Recognition? Confusion? Hope?

He didn’t know. All he knew was that something had shifted in that brief encounter. Catherine had seen his eyes—Vincent’s eyes—and some part of her had recognized them, even if her conscious mind couldn’t make sense of it.

The concert continued, but David barely heard it. He was too aware of Catherine’s presence, too conscious of her occasional glances in his direction. The wind kept blowing, carrying the music across the lawn, and David sat in his strange half-life, so close to the woman he loved and yet impossibly far away.

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Two months passed.

David Morrison had built a life—or rather, had stepped into the life that seemed to have been waiting for him. The architectural firm of Patterson & Associates had

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

hired him based on a portfolio he didn't remember creating, recommendations from colleagues he'd never met, and a degree from Columbia that hung on his apartment wall. He was good at the work, he discovered. The lines and angles, the way buildings could be transformed while honoring their original character—it all came naturally to him.

He worked long hours, partly because the projects genuinely interested him, but mostly because it kept him from thinking too much about Catherine. He still saw her sometimes—a glimpse across a street, a flash of honey brown hair in a crowd—but he'd stopped following her. It hurt too much.

So David threw himself into his work, into this new existence, trying to become the person everyone seemed to think he was.

On a warm August morning, his boss called him into her office.

“David, I'm sending you to pitch the Riverside renovation to Elliot Burch,” Margaret Patterson said, sliding a folder across her desk.

Elliot Burch. The name hit him like a jolt of recognition. From somewhere in Vincent's memories—fragmented and ghostlike—came an image: Catherine, years ago, at the very beginning of her relationship with Vincent. She'd been interested in someone, someone in her world, and for a moment it had seemed like maybe she might choose a normal life with him instead of the impossible love she shared with Vincent. Elliot Burch.

Eight years. It had been almost eight years since then. “It's a big project—historic building, complicated zoning issues, and Burch is notoriously particular. But your design is exactly what he's looking for. Modern functionality without destroying the building's character.”

David took the folder, flipping through the designs he'd apparently created.

“When's the meeting?”

“This afternoon. Two o'clock at Burch Tower.” Margaret smiled. “Don't look so nervous. You're brilliant at this. Just be yourself.”

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

*Be yourself*, David thought as he left her office. But which self?

Burch Tower rose like a monument to ambition in midtown Manhattan, all glass and steel and corporate power. David arrived fifteen minutes early, his portfolio under his arm, trying to calm the inexplicable nervousness that had nothing to do with the pitch itself.

The lobby was vast and intimidating—marble floors, soaring ceilings, the kind of space designed to make visitors feel small. David checked in at the security desk, received his visitor badge, and was directed to wait near the elevator bank on the north side.

He was reviewing his notes when he heard her voice.

“Yes, I have a two-twenty with Mr. Burch. Catherine Chandler from the DA’s office.”

David’s head snapped up. Catherine stood at the security desk, her back to him, wearing a suit that was all business, her honey brown hair loose around her shoulders. She was signing in, accepting her own visitor badge, and David’s heart began to pound.

*Mr. Burch. She’s here to see Elliot Burch.*

The same floor. They would be in the elevator together, confined in that small space, and David felt something close to panic rise in his chest. Part of him—the part that was still Vincent, that would always be Vincent—wanted nothing more than to be near her, to make sure she was all right, to stand between her and anything that might hurt her. But another part, the part that didn’t understand what he was now or what he’d been, was afraid.

Catherine turned from the desk, and their eyes met across the expanse of marble.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Catherine’s expression shifted from professional neutrality to something else—confusion, recognition, a flicker of something that might have been pain. Her hand came up unconsciously to her chest, pressing against her sternum as if checking for something that should be

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

there but wasn't.

David saw the exact moment she recognized his eyes. Saw her face pale, saw her lips part slightly in shock. Those blue eyes—Vincent's eyes—staring back at her from a stranger's face.

Catherine's professional mask slipped for just an instant, revealing the grief and confusion beneath. Then she caught herself, straightened her shoulders, and began walking toward the elevators. Toward him.

The elevator arrived with a soft chime. Catherine stepped inside, and David



*Elliot* by *Laura G*

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

knew—knew with absolute certainty—that he should wait for the next one. Should give her space, give her distance, protect her from whatever confusion or pain his presence might cause.

But his body moved without conscious thought. He stepped into the elevator beside her, keeping a careful distance, pressing the button for the forty-second floor. The same floor Catherine had already selected.

The doors slid shut, and they were alone.

The silence was suffocating. David stood on one side of the elevator, Catherine on the other, both of them staring straight ahead at the polished steel doors. He could see their reflections there—two strangers who weren't strangers, separated by three feet of space that felt like an ocean.

Catherine's reflection showed her jaw tight, her shoulders rigid with the effort of maintaining her composure. David could almost feel her internal struggle—the way she was forcing herself not to look at him, not to acknowledge the impossible familiarity that had struck her in the lobby.

The elevator climbed. Thirty-fifth floor. Thirty-sixth. Each second stretched into eternity.

David's hands clenched at his sides. The urge to reach out to her, to touch her shoulder, to offer some kind of comfort, was almost overwhelming. But he could continue this silence, this careful distance, this pretense that they were strangers. Or he could be brave.

*Be brave, he thought. For once in this strange new life, be brave.*

Thirty-ninth floor. Fortieth.

Catherine shifted slightly, and for just a moment, David saw her glance at him in the reflection. Their eyes met in the polished steel, and something passed between them—recognition, confusion, a question neither of them could voice.

Forty-first floor.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

David made his decision. Whatever he was—Vincent’s ghost in human form, a second chance, something else entirely—he couldn’t keep running from her. Couldn’t keep watching from a distance. If his presence caused her pain, then at least let it be honest pain, not the confusion of glimpses and silence.

The elevator chimed softly. Forty-second floor.

The doors opened, and Catherine stepped out first, her movements quick and purposeful. David followed, and they both turned right down the corridor toward the reception area for Burch Enterprises.

The waiting room was elegant and understated—leather chairs, glass tables, a receptionist behind a sleek desk. Catherine checked in first, and David heard the receptionist say, “Mr. Burch is running a few minutes behind. Please have a seat.”

David approached the desk, gave his name, and received the same information. When he turned, Catherine had taken a seat near the window, her briefcase on her lap, her gaze fixed on the city skyline beyond the glass.

For a moment, David stood frozen. Then he walked toward her, his heart pounding, and sat down two chairs away—close enough to speak, far enough to give her space.

Catherine’s eyes flicked to him, then away. But she didn’t move. Didn’t get up and relocate to the other side of the room.

David took a breath and smiled—a small, genuine smile that felt both terrifying and necessary.

“Hi, I’m David Morrison,” he said quietly.

Catherine looked at him then, really looked at him, and David saw her struggle with what to say. Her professional mask was firmly in place, but her eyes—those green eyes he knew so well—held a storm of emotion.

“Catherine Chandler,” she said finally, her voice carefully neutral. She didn’t offer her hand, and David didn’t extend his. “You’re here to see Mr. Burch?”

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

“A pitch meeting. Architecture firm.” David gestured to his portfolio. “You?”

“Legal matter.” Catherine’s fingers tightened on her briefcase. “Nothing exciting.”

The silence stretched between them, but it felt different now—less like avoidance, more like two people trying to navigate unfamiliar territory.

“Your eyes,” Catherine said suddenly, then stopped, as if surprised by her own words. A faint flush colored her cheeks. “I’m sorry. That’s... I just noticed them. In the lobby. They’re very... distinctive.”

David’s heart clenched. “I’ve been told that before.”

“They remind me of someone.” Catherine’s voice was barely above a whisper now, and David saw her hand move unconsciously to her chest again, to that place where the bond had once lived. “Someone I... someone who died recently.”

“I’m sorry,” David said, and meant it with every fiber of his being. “That must be very difficult.”

Catherine nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She looked away, blinking rapidly, and David wanted nothing more than to reach out to her, to tell her everything, to somehow ease her grief. But he couldn’t. Not here. Not now.

“Mr. Morrison?” The receptionist’s voice cut through the moment. “Mr. Burch will see you now.”

David stood, gathering his portfolio. He looked down at Catherine, who had composed herself again, her professional mask back in place.

“It was nice to meet you, Catherine,” he said softly.

And then he smiled—a real smile, warm and genuine, the kind of smile that said *I see you, I know your pain, and I wish I could make it better.*

Catherine’s breath caught. For just an instant, her mask slipped again, and David saw the recognition there, the confusion, the desperate hope she was trying to suppress.

**Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*



**Elliot** by *Laura G*

“Good luck, David,” she said.

And she smiled back—a small, tentative smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes but was real nonetheless. A smile that said *I don’t understand what’s happening, but thank you for being kind.*

David held her gaze for one more moment, then turned and walked toward Burch’s office, his heart both lighter and heavier than it had been in weeks.

Behind him, Catherine sat in the waiting room, her hand pressed against her chest, trying to understand why a stranger’s smile had felt like coming home.

Elliot Burch’s office was everything David had expected—floor-to-ceiling

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

windows overlooking the city, modern furniture that probably cost more than most people's cars, and an air of controlled power that permeated every surface. Burch himself stood by the windows, a man in his early forties who exuded the kind of confidence that came from years of getting exactly what he wanted.

"Mr. Morrison." Burch turned, extending his hand. "I've heard good things about your firm's work on the Chelsea restoration."

"Thank you, Mr. Burch." David shook his hand, noting the firm grip, the assessing gaze. "I think you'll find our approach to the Riverside project equally thoughtful."

David opened his portfolio, spreading the preliminary sketches and renderings across Burch's desk. He began his pitch—talking about preserving the building's historical character while modernizing its infrastructure, about sustainable materials and energy efficiency, about creating spaces that honored the past while serving the future.

But even as he spoke, part of his mind remained in the waiting room. Catherine was still out there, waiting for her own meeting with Burch. What was her legal matter? Was she all right? Had their brief conversation upset her, or had it brought her some small measure of comfort?

"—don't you think, Mr. Morrison?"

David blinked, realizing Burch had asked him a question. "I'm sorry, could you repeat that?"

Burch's eyes narrowed slightly, but his expression remained pleasant. "I asked about the timeline. How long would the renovation take?"

"Eight to sixteen months, depending on the scope of work you ultimately approve." David forced himself to focus, to be present in this moment rather than lost in thoughts of green eyes and tentative smiles. "We'd phase the construction to minimize disruption to the surrounding neighborhood."

The meeting continued for another fifteen minutes.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

“I think we can do good work together, Mr. Morrison,” Burch said as he walked David to the door. “I appreciate your vision for the project.”

David thanked him and stepped out of the office, his portfolio tucked under his arm. The meeting had gone well—better than well, actually. Burch seemed genuinely interested in the proposal, and David had a good feeling about landing the contract.

But none of that mattered as much as the woman at the reception desk.

Catherine stood with her briefcase in hand, speaking to the receptionist in low tones. David could hear fragments of the conversation as he approached.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Chandler,” the receptionist was saying, “but Mr. Burch’s previous meeting ran longer than expected. He’ll be ready for you in about five minutes. Would you mind waiting a bit longer?”

Catherine felt a flash of frustration—she’d rearranged her entire afternoon for this meeting—but she kept her expression neutral. “Of course. That’s fine.”

David’s footsteps were quiet on the carpet as he moved toward the elevators, but something made Catherine stand still. Perhaps it was the shift in the air, or the faint sound of his breathing, or something deeper—something that had no name but felt like memory, like recognition, like the ghost of a bond that should have been impossible.

David froze mid-step, his hand tightening on his portfolio. Catherine’s breath caught. For a moment—just a moment—the world narrowed to the space between them, to the few feet of carpet and air that separated two souls who had once been everything to each other.

Then David forced himself to move. He walked past her toward the elevators, each step an act of will. As he passed, close enough that she could have reached out and touched him, he felt the pull of her presence like gravity, like coming home, like every poem he’d ever read about love and loss.

Catherine turned slightly, watching him go. Her feelings overwhelming her.

## **Between Two Lives** *by CandlelitChandler*

David pressed the elevator call button, his back to her now, his shoulders tense. He could feel her gaze on him, could sense her curiosity.

The elevator chimed softly. The doors slid open.

David stepped inside, still facing forward, his hand gripping his portfolio so tightly his knuckles went white. The doors began to close—and only then, in that final moment, did he turn.

Their eyes met.

Catherine's breath stopped. David's expression was raw, unguarded—full of longing and sorrow and something that looked like recognition, like remembrance, like a soul calling out to its other half across an impossible distance.

For three heartbeats, four, they simply looked at each other—two people separated by thirty feet of carpet and closing elevator doors and an ocean of things that couldn't be said.

Catherine took a half-step toward him, drawn by something she didn't understand. David's lips parted as if he wanted to speak, but no sound came. His hand lifted slightly—not quite a wave, not quite a gesture of farewell, but something in between.

Then the doors slid shut, and he was gone.

Catherine stood frozen at the reception desk, her heart pounding. The receptionist was saying something about Mr. Burch being ready now, but Catherine couldn't hear her over the rushing in her ears.

She'd felt something. In that final moment when their eyes had met—she'd felt something. Something that made her chest ache and her eyes sting with tears she didn't understand.

“Ms. Chandler? Mr. Burch is ready for you now.”

Catherine blinked, focusing on the receptionist's expectant face. “Yes. Thank you.”

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

She followed the receptionist toward Burch's office on unsteady legs, but her mind was still in the corridor, still caught in that moment of connection with a stranger whose eyes held all the sorrow and beauty of the world.

*Who are you, David Morrison?* she thought as she stepped into Burch's office.

\*\*\*

David Morrison's life had been efficient, disciplined, and remarkably empty.

Vincent discovered this gradually, in the weeks following his encounter with Catherine at Burch's office. He threw himself into work with the same dedication David had shown—the architectural firm needed him, and the projects were genuinely interesting. The Riverside development was ambitious, complex, requiring all his attention during business hours.

After work, he went to the gym. David's body was accustomed to it, craved the physical exertion. Vincent found he enjoyed it too, though differently than David had. Where David had approached exercise as maintenance, Vincent found in it an echo of the physical labor he'd done in the tunnels—the satisfaction of pushing his body, of feeling muscles work and strain.

But beyond work and the gym, David's life had been a desert. The birth certificate Vincent found among his papers told the story: David had been an orphan, raised in the system. He'd excelled academically, earned a scholarship to Columbia, and built a career with single-minded determination. A true workaholic with no friends, David had constructed a life of achievement and isolation.

One evening, while sorting through David's CD collection, Vincent found rock and heavy metal—Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Black Sabbath. Music raw and visceral, music that spoke of struggle and transcendence. It was good. It was David's. But it was not his.

Vincent stood in the living room of the modern apartment, looking at the sleek entertainment center with its minimalist design, and felt the weight of that absence. The apartment was beautiful and empty, just like the life David had built. Just like the life Vincent now inhabited.

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler



The next day, he left work early and took the subway to the Village.

The music store was small, cramped, wonderfully chaotic. Bins of CDs lined the walls, organized by genre but with a beautiful disorder that suggested real human curation rather than corporate efficiency. Vincent moved

through the aisles slowly, his fingers trailing over plastic cases.

Now, in the classical section, Vincent felt something shift inside him. He found Beethoven first—the complete symphonies, the piano sonatas. Then Bach’s *The Art of Fugue*, the *Goldberg Variations*. Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*. Chopin’s nocturnes and ballades. Mozart’s concertos, his requiem.

Each case he held felt like a homecoming. These were the compositions he’d listened to by candlelight in the tunnels, the music that had sustained him through darkness, that had spoken to something essential in his soul. The intricate mathematics of Bach’s counterpoint. The raw emotion of Beethoven’s late quartets. The crystalline beauty of Mozart’s melodies.

“Finding everything okay?” The clerk was young, pierced, wearing a Nirvana t-shirt.

“Yes,” Vincent said, his arms full of cases. “Thank you.”

He added a few more—Brahms’ symphonies, Debussy’s *Clair de Lune*, Ravel’s *Pavane for a Dead Princess*. Music that spoke of longing and beauty, of transcendence through art. Music that felt like it came from somewhere deep and essential, from the same place inside him that had always understood love and loss.

At the counter, the clerk raised an eyebrow at the selection. “Classical fan?”

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

“Yes.” Vincent said quietly.

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The bookstore was three blocks away, tucked between a coffee shop and a vintage clothing store. Vincent had walked past it twice before deciding to enter.

Inside, it smelled of paper, dust, and possibility. The shelves reached toward the ceiling, packed tight with volumes both new and used. Vincent moved through the narrow aisles like a man finding water after days in the desert.

He found Shakespeare first—a beautiful hardbound edition of the complete works, the pages gilt-edged, the binding forest green. He held it in his hands and felt something in his chest ease, some tension he hadn’t known he was carrying.

Then he found the classics section. Homer’s *Odyssey*. Dante’s *Inferno*. Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. The Greek tragedies—Sophocles, Euripides. Books he’d read by candlelight in the tunnels, books that had shaped his understanding of the world and his place in it.

“That’s quite a collection,” the owner said when Vincent brought his stack to the counter. She was older, gray-haired, with kind eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. “Are you a teacher?”

“No,” Vincent said. “Just... reclaiming something I’d lost.”

She smiled as if she understood. “The best reason to read.”

\*\*\*

The apartment looked different with candles.

Vincent had stopped at three different stores on his way home, buying candles of various sizes and scents. Unscented pillars for the living room. Vanilla-scented votives for the bedroom. Beeswax tapers for the dining table he’d never used.

He placed them throughout the apartment—on the coffee table, the bookshelf, the kitchen counter, the bathroom sink. When he lit them that evening, the sterile

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

modern space transformed.

The flickering light softened the hard edges of contemporary design. Shadows danced on the white walls. The scent of beeswax and vanilla filled the air, replacing the stale emptiness that had permeated David's life.



Vincent sat on the couch—  
David's couch, his couch now—  
and opened to Shakespeare. The  
candlelight fell across the pages as he read:

*“Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.  
O no! It is an ever-fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken...”*

His throat tightened. He thought of Catherine, of the way she'd looked at him in that elevator, of the recognition in her eyes that she didn't yet understand.

The candles burned. The music played softly—Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. And for the first time since waking in David Morrison's body, Vincent felt almost at home.

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Three weeks later, returning from the gym, Vincent caught sight of himself in the bathroom mirror.

He'd stripped off his sweat-soaked shirt and stood there in just a towel, his hair damp, his skin flushed from exertion. And for the first time, he really looked at the body he now inhabited.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

David had been six feet tall—not as tall as Vincent had been, but tall enough. The body was lean, athletic, with the long muscles of a swimmer rather than the bulk of a weightlifter. Shoulders broad but not massive. Chest defined but not overdeveloped. Abs visible. Arms strong and defined.

It was a beautiful body, Vincent realized. Young, healthy, unmarred by scars or deformity. The kind of body that could walk in sunlight without fear, that could move through the world without drawing stares or whispers.

Vincent’s hand moved to his jaw, feeling the stubble there. David had shaved every morning, maintaining the clean-cut appearance expected of a young professional. But Vincent had let it go these past few days, too preoccupied with other things to bother.

He studied his reflection, imagining what he would look like with a beard, and decided he would let it grow. Not too long, not unkempt, but long enough to claim this face as his own. Vincent had walked around with bristles on his face. David would have a beard, because—why not?

He turned away from the mirror and went to the living room, where candles waited to be lit and books waited to be read and music waited to fill the silence.

David Morrison’s life had been empty. But Vincent’s life—this new, strange, impossible life—was beginning to fill with meaning.

One day, he thought, lighting the candles as darkness fell over the city, one day he would find a way to tell Catherine the truth. One day she would understand why a stranger’s eyes had looked at her with such longing and recognition.

But not yet. Not until he’d figured out how to be both David and Vincent, how to inhabit this new existence without losing the essence of who he’d been.

The candles flickered. The music played. And Vincent settled into the couch with a book, reading by firelight as he’d done for so many years in the tunnels, finding comfort in the familiar words even as everything else had changed.

*“The course of true love never did run smooth,”* he read, and smiled sadly at the

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

understatement.

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Six months and seventeen days.

Catherine had stopped counting after the first month, but her body kept the tally anyway. Six months and seventeen days since the tunnel had collapsed. Since the bond had gone silent. Since Vincent had died while she held his hand.

The DA's office had granted her three weeks of leave. She'd spent them in a fog of grief so thick she could barely remember breathing. Then she'd gone back to work because what else was there to do? Joe Maxwell had looked at her with concern in his eyes, had squeezed her shoulder and said, "I'm here if you need anything, Radcliffe. Anything at all." He didn't ask what had happened or who she'd lost, didn't pry into the details. He just knew it was someone important, someone who'd mattered more than words could say, and he respected her privacy enough not to push.

Work became her refuge and her prison. She could function there—review case files, take depositions, argue motions in court. The law was concrete, logical, something she could hold onto when everything else felt like it was slipping through her fingers. But it was hollow. She went through the motions with mechanical precision, and if her colleagues noticed the light had gone out of her eyes, they were kind enough not to mention it.

Home was different. Home was where the grief lived, where it waited for her each evening like a patient predator. The brownstone felt too large now, too full of echoes. She moved through its rooms like a ghost herself, and the silence pressed down on her with suffocating weight.

Jenny had tried. God, how Jenny had tried. She'd called, left messages, shown up at the brownstone with takeout and determination. Jenny knew about Vincent—had met him, had seen the love between them with her own eyes. She understood what Catherine had lost in a way that no one else in her "normal" life could.

"Cathy, please," Jenny had said on her fourth visit, standing in the doorway with

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

worry etched across her face. “Just come out for one drink. One dinner. You can’t keep doing this to yourself.”

“I’m fine, Jenny. Really.” Catherine had mustered a smile that felt like it might crack her face. “I just... I need time.”

“It’s been three months.”

“I know.”

Jenny had looked at her for a long moment, then nodded slowly. “Okay. But I’m not giving up on you, Chandler. When you’re ready, I’ll be here.”

Catherine had watched her friend leave and felt nothing but relief. She couldn’t explain it, couldn’t make Jenny understand that socializing felt impossible, that pretending to be normal among people who’d never known Vincent felt like a betrayal of his memory. So she’d stopped answering the calls, stopped responding to the invitations, until finally Jenny’s attempts had dwindled to occasional messages left on her answering machine.

The tunnel dwellers understood. They wouldn’t let her suffer alone.

They came to her, climbing up through the library entrance, bringing news from the world below and refusing to let her disappear into her grief. Mary came with soup and sat with her in silence, her hands holding Catherine’s while tears fell unchecked. Pascal came once, his face drawn with sorrow, and told her about the memorial they’d held in the Great Hall. William came with fresh bread and stayed to make her tea, his gruff kindness a balm she hadn’t known she needed.

They didn’t try to fix her, cheer her up, or tell her it would get better. They just sat with her in the darkness, sharing the weight of loss, reminding her that she wasn’t alone even when the bond was silent, and the world felt empty.

Father came most often.

He would arrive in the evenings, his cane tapping against the brownstone’s hardwood floors, and settle into the chair by the fireplace—Vincent’s chair, though

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

neither of them said so. They would talk about small things: the tunnel children, the upcoming winter preparations, the new murals being painted in the lower chambers. Father never stayed long, but his presence was a lifeline, a connection to the world where Vincent had lived and breathed and been loved.

It was Father who finally told her about Mouse.

“He’s withdrawn from the community,” Father said one evening in late August, his voice heavy with concern. “He barely speaks. Barely eats. Jamie does what she can, but...” He trailed off, shaking his head. “He blames himself, Catherine. For Vincent.”

Catherine’s hands tightened around her teacup. She’d known, of course. Had known from the moment she’d learned what caused the collapse—one of Mouse’s inventions. She’d known, and she’d felt nothing. Not anger. Not blame. Just the vast, empty nothing that had swallowed everything else.

“I know he never meant to hurt anyone,” she said quietly.

“I’ve told him that. We all have.” Father’s eyes were sad behind his glasses. “But Mouse... The guilt is a heavy burden to carry alone.”

Catherine looked down at her tea, watching the steam rise and dissipate. She thought of Mouse—brilliant, childlike Mouse with his inventions and his innocent joy in creating. She thought of him alone in the darkness, carrying the weight of Vincent’s death on his shoulders.

“I should go see him,” she heard herself say.

Father looked at her carefully. “Are you certain? You haven’t been below since...”

“I know.” Catherine set down her teacup. Her hands were shaking. “But if Mouse is suffering because of what happened, if he thinks I blame him...” She took a breath. “I need to tell him I don’t. I need him to know.”

Father reached across and squeezed her hand. “Vincent would be proud of you.”

The words hurt and healed in equal measure.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

The tunnels smelled of earth and stone and the particular dampness that came from living beneath the city. Catherine had forgotten how the air changed as you descended—growing cooler, heavier, filled with the whisper of water through rock and the distant echo of the pipes.

Father led her through passages she remembered, past chambers where tunnel dwellers paused in their work to nod at her with quiet sympathy. No one spoke. They didn't need to. Grief was a language they all understood.

Mouse's new chamber was in one of the deeper sections, a small space he'd claimed and filled with what was left of his things.

Now the chamber was dark except for a single candle. Mouse sat on his bed, hunched over something in his hands, his usually animated face still and drawn.

"Mouse," Father said gently. "You have a visitor."

Mouse looked up, and Catherine saw the moment he recognized her. His face crumpled. "Catherine. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—it was supposed to help, supposed to make things easier, but it—" His voice broke. "Vincent died because of me."



**Poor Mouse** by *Laura G*

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

Catherine crossed the chamber and knelt in front of him. Up close, she could see how thin he'd become, how his eyes were red-rimmed and hollow. Her heart ached for him.

"Mouse," she said softly. "Look at me."

He did, reluctantly, his eyes brimming with tears.

"What happened was an accident. A terrible, horrible accident. But it wasn't your fault." Catherine spoke in a gentle but firm voice.

"But my machine—"

"Was trying to make things easier. You were trying to help." Catherine reached out and took his hands. They were cold, trembling.

"But he's gone," Mouse whispered. "He's gone, and it's because of what I made."

"He's gone," Catherine agreed, her own tears falling now. "And I miss him every second of every day. But Mouse, Vincent loved you. He loved your creativity, your joy in making things. He wouldn't want you to stop being who you are because of this. He wouldn't want you to carry this guilt."

Mouse's face crumpled completely, and then he was sobbing—great, wrenching sobs that shook his whole body. Catherine pulled him into her arms, holding him as he cried, her own tears soaking into his hair.

"I forgive you," she whispered. "Do you hear me, Mouse? I forgive you. If you need to hear it, I forgive you."

They held each other and cried together, two people who had loved Vincent and lost him, finding comfort in shared grief. Father stood in the doorway, his own eyes wet, and quietly withdrew to give them privacy.

After a long time, the tears subsided. Mouse pulled back, wiping his face with his sleeve. "I don't know how to stop feeling sad," he admitted. "I don't know how to... to keep going."

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

“Neither do I,” Catherine said honestly. She sat back on her heels, looking at this man-child who had been part of Vincent’s family. “But we have to try. We have to find a way to live with what happened and keep moving forward. Vincent would want that for both of us.”

Mouse nodded slowly. Then, with a flash of his old insight, he said, “You need to move on, too, Catherine. You need to live. Not just... exist.”

Catherine felt the words hit home. “I know,” she whispered. “I know I do.”

\*\*\*

Eight months and seventeen days.

Catherine stood in the marble-floored lobby of Burch Tower, champagne flute in hand, wearing the black cocktail dress that had been gathering dust in her closet since last spring. The dress fit differently now—she’d lost weight she couldn’t afford to lose—but it was appropriate for the occasion. Professional. Elegant. The kind of armor she needed for events like this.

The party hummed around her with the particular energy of money and power mixing freely. Elliot Burch had spared no expense for his investor showcase, transforming the building’s renovated penthouse into a glittering display of architectural ambition. Crystal chandeliers cast warm light over clusters of well-dressed guests. A string quartet played softly in one corner. Waiters circulated with trays of champagne and canapés that probably cost more than most people’s weekly grocery bills.

Catherine had come because someone from the DA’s office needed to attend—the Mayor was here, along with half the city council and various other political figures who needed to be seen supporting Burch’s latest development project. Joe had asked if she was up for it, his eyes kind but assessing, and Catherine had said yes because she was pulling her weight at work. She was functional. She was managing.

She was lying, but she was doing it well.

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

“Catherine Chandler, as I live and breathe.” Elliot Burch materialized at her elbow, impeccably dressed in a black tuxedo that probably cost more than a regular person’s monthly rent. His smile was warm, genuine. “I’m glad you could make it. How’s the DA’s office treating you?”

“Busy as always,” Catherine replied, summoning the professional smile she’d perfected over the past eight months. “Congratulations on the project, Elliot. The renovations are stunning.”

“Wait until you see the final designs.” Elliot’s enthusiasm was infectious. “I’ve got the best architectural firm in the city working on this. David Morrison—brilliant guy, really brilliant. Let me introduce you—”

“We’ve met,” Catherine said quickly, her chest tightening. “Briefly.”

“Have you?” Elliot looked pleased. “Good, good. He’s here somewhere—my special guest tonight. We’ve been working together for months now, and I have to say, the man’s a genius. Sees things other architects miss. There’s something... I don’t know, almost poetic about the way he approaches design.”

Catherine’s fingers tightened on her champagne flute. She nodded politely,



Elliot by Laura G

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

murmured something appropriate, and was relieved when the Mayor's chief of staff appeared to claim Elliot's attention. She drifted toward the windows, seeking the relative anonymity of the crowd.

The view from the penthouse was spectacular—the city spread out below in a glittering carpet of lights. Catherine stared at it without really seeing it, her mind elsewhere. Below those streets, beneath the concrete and steel and noise, the tunnels wound through darkness. Father would be reading to the children now. Mary would be singing lullabies to the smaller children. Mouse would be in his chamber, probably still tinkering with something, still trying to prove he could create without destroying.

And Vincent...

Catherine closed her eyes briefly, pressing her free hand against her sternum where the bond had once lived. The ache a dull throb she'd learned to carry. Some days were better than others. Today was manageable. She was here, she was functioning, she was—

“Ms. Chandler.”

The voice came from directly behind her, low and careful. Catherine turned and found herself face to face with David Morrison.

He looked different she noticed. He wore a beard that suited him, a well-tailored navy suit, his brown hair neatly styled, but it was his eyes that caught her—those impossible blue eyes.

“Mr. Morrison.” Catherine's voice came out steadier than she felt. “I didn't expect to see you here.”

“I'm Elliot's architect.” David's smile was slight, tentative. “We've been working together on this project for several months.”

“The designs are beautiful,” she said, because it was true and because she needed to say something. You have real talent.”

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

“Thank you.” David shifted slightly, and Catherine noticed he was holding a glass of what looked like sparkling water rather than champagne.

The string quartet shifted into a new piece—a ballad, slow and achingly beautiful. Catherine recognized it immediately: Pachelbel’s Canon in D. Vincent had loved this piece. She’d played it for him once on her stereo, and he’d closed his eyes and listened with such complete attention that she’d felt like she was giving him a gift.

The memory hit her like a physical blow. Her smile faltered.

“Would you dance with me?”

Catherine’s gaze snapped back to David. He was standing closer now, close enough that she could see the fine lines at the corners of his eyes, the slight tension in his jaw. He looked nervous. Hopeful. Careful.

“I...” Catherine’s first instinct was to refuse. She hadn’t danced since Vincent died. She hadn’t wanted to. But David was watching her with those blue eyes, and Elliot Burch was somewhere in this room, and the Mayor’s people were here, and she was supposed to be functional, supposed to be managing, supposed to be pulling her weight.

And it would be rude to refuse. So rude. David Morrison was Elliot’s special guest, and Catherine was representing the DA’s office; this was just a dance. Just one dance. She could manage one dance.

“Of course,” she heard herself say. “That would be nice.”

David’s smile was small but genuine. He set down his water glass and offered his hand. Catherine placed her champagne flute on a nearby table and took it.

His hand was warm, his grip gentle but sure. He led her to the small area near the quartet where a few other couples were already swaying to the music. When he turned to face her, placing one hand at her waist and keeping the other clasped with hers, Catherine felt her breath catch.

*Wrong. This is wrong. His hand is too smooth, too human. Vincent’s hand was*

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler



David and Catherine by Laura G

*strong and furred and perfect, and this is wrong, wrong, wrong—*

But she was already moving, following David’s lead as they began to dance. He was a good dancer—not showy, but confident and graceful. He held her at a respectful distance, not too close, not too far. Professional. Appropriate.

“You know this piece,” David said quietly. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.” Catherine’s voice was barely above a whisper. “It’s... it was a favorite.”

“Mine, too.” David’s eyes held hers, and there was something in his expression—a depth of understanding that shouldn’t be there, couldn’t be there. “There’s something about Pachelbel. The way the melody builds, the way it circles back on itself. It’s like... like a conversation between past and present.”

Catherine felt tears prick at her eyes. She blinked them back fiercely. “That’s a beautiful way to describe it.”

They moved together in silence for a moment, the music swelling around them. Catherine was acutely aware of every point of contact—his hand at her waist, her hand in his, the careful space he maintained between their bodies. She was also

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

aware of the eyes watching them from around the room. Elliot Burch, the Mayor's chief of staff, other guests, curious about the attractive couple on the dance floor.

She was performing. She was always performing now.

"How have you been?" David asked, his voice so low that only she could hear it. "Really."

The question was so unexpected, so direct, that Catherine almost stumbled. David's hand tightened slightly at her waist, steadying her.

"I'm..." Catherine started, then stopped. What could she say? That she was hollow inside? That she went through the motions of living while feeling like a ghost? That every morning she woke up and reached for a bond that was no longer there? "I'm taking it one day at a time."

"That's all any of us can do," David said. His thumb moved slightly against her hand, a small gesture of comfort. "One day at a time. Sometimes one hour at a time."

There was something in his voice—a note of personal experience, of hard-won wisdom. Catherine looked up at him, really looked at him, and saw shadows in those blue eyes. Pain. Loss. Understanding.

"You sound like you know something about that," she said carefully.

"I do." David's expression was complicated—sad and hopeful and resigned all at once. "I lost someone too. Recently. Someone... someone very important to me. And I'm still learning how to live with that loss. How to honor what was while still moving forward."

Catherine's throat tightened. "I'm sorry." "So am I." David's hand at her waist shifted slightly, his touch warm through the fabric of her dress.

"But I'm trying. That's all we can do, right? Try. Keep moving. Keep breathing. Keep finding small moments of beauty in the world, even when it feels impossible."

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

The music swelled, the canon building toward its crescendo. Catherine felt something shift inside her chest—A recognition. A connection. This man, this stranger with Vincent’s eyes, understood. He knew what it was like to lose everything and still have to keep going.

”Thank you,” she whispered. “For asking me to dance. For... for understanding.”

“Thank you for saying yes.” David’s smile was gentle. “I know it wasn’t easy.”

The music began to wind down, the final notes of the canon fading into silence. David slowed their movement, bringing them to a graceful stop. For a moment, they stood there, hands still clasped, eyes locked. Catherine felt suspended in time—caught between past and present.

Then David released her, stepping back with a small bow. “Thank you for the dance, Ms. Chandler.”

“Catherine,” she said impulsively. “Please. Call me Catherine.”

David’s smile widened slightly. “Catherine. And I’m David.”

“I know.” Catherine managed a real smile, small but genuine. “Thank you, David. For the dance. For... for everything.”

“Anytime.” David’s eyes held hers for a moment longer, and Catherine saw something flicker in their blue depths—hope, maybe, or longing, or something she couldn’t quite name. Then he nodded and stepped away, disappearing back into the crowd.

Catherine stood alone on the edge of the dance floor, her heart beating too fast, her hands trembling slightly. Around her, the party continued—conversations and laughter and the clink of champagne glasses. But she felt separate from it all, wrapped in the lingering warmth of David’s hand at her waist and the echo of Pachelbel’s Canon in her ears.

*Vincent would have loved this piece, she thought. He would have closed his eyes*

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

*and listened with his whole heart.*

And for the first time in eight months and seventeen days, the thought didn't break her. It hurt—God, it hurt—but it didn't shatter her into pieces. She could hold it, this memory of Vincent and music and love, and still remain standing.

Catherine picked up her champagne flute and took a small sip. Across the room, she caught a glimpse of David talking with Elliot Burch, his profile illuminated by the chandelier light. Those blue eyes. Those impossible, familiar, heartbreaking blue eyes.

*One day at a time, she thought. One hour at a time. One dance at a time.*

\*\*\*

Eight months and twenty days.

Catherine stood in front of her bathroom mirror on Saturday morning, really looking at herself for the first time in weeks. The woman staring back at her was a stranger—hollow-cheeked, shadows under her eyes, collarbones too prominent beneath the neckline of her nightshirt. When had she gotten so thin? When had the light gone out of her eyes?

*One day at a time, David Morrison's voice echoed in her memory. Sometimes one hour at a time.*

She'd been surviving. Functioning. Going through the motions. But she hadn't been living. Not really. And Vincent... Vincent would hate seeing her like this. He'd always wanted her to be strong, to be whole, to embrace life with both hands even when it was hard.

"You need to eat," Catherine told her reflection firmly. "You need to take care of yourself. You need to start living again."

The words felt like a betrayal even as she spoke them. How could she live when Vincent was dead? How could she embrace life when the bond that had connected them was severed forever?

**Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*



*Catherine* by *Laura G*

But she knew the answer. She had to live *because* Vincent was dead. She had to live for both of them now. She had to honor what they'd had by not letting grief consume her completely.

Catherine turned away from the mirror and opened her closet. In the back, pushed behind her work clothes and evening dresses, she found her old running gear—sweatpants she hadn't worn in months, a faded Columbia Law sweatshirt, tennis shoes that had gathered dust. She pulled them on, the familiar fabric feeling strange against her skin. She found a light jacket, a winter hat, and gloves.

She used to run all the time. Before Vincent, running had been her therapy, her meditation, her way of processing the world. After Vincent, she'd stopped. Running meant being alone with her thoughts, and her thoughts were too painful to bear.

But maybe it was time to try again.

Catherine grabbed her keys and headed out into the morning. The day was cold but

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

bearable with the right layers. A clear sky with the sun filtering through the trees. She jogged the blocks to Central Park, her muscles protesting the unfamiliar movement. When she reached the park entrance, she paused, took a deep breath, and started to run.

It hurt. God, it hurt. Not just her body—though her legs burned and her lungs ached—but her heart. Every step felt like moving away from Vincent, like leaving him further behind. But she kept going, one foot in front of the other, breathing in rhythm, letting the physical pain drown out the emotional agony.

*One step at a time, she thought. Just keep moving.*

David Morrison ran through Central Park with the easy grace of someone who'd been doing it for weeks. His body—this body, David's body—had taken to running as if it were remembering something it had always done. The rhythm felt right. The movement felt natural.

Vincent had never run like this. Vincent's body hadn't been built for it—too heavy, too powerful, designed for strength rather than speed.

David missed that. He missed the tunnels. He missed the weight of his cloak, the feel of rough stone under his hands, the particular quality of silence that existed only in the deep places below the city. He missed Father's voice reading aloud in the library. He missed the children's laughter echoing through the chambers. He missed Mouse's inventions, Pascal's pipe messages, and Mary's gentle wisdom.

He missed home.

David slowed as he approached a familiar section of the park. There—pushed in between the trees—was the culvert. The entrance to the world below. The threshold between light and darkness, between Catherine's world and his.

He stopped running and stood there, breathing hard, staring at the dark opening. How many times had he emerged from that culvert to meet Catherine? How many times had he stood in the shadows, watching her approach, feeling the bond sing with joy at her nearness?

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

David moved closer, drawn by memory and longing. He ducked his head and stepped just inside the entrance, letting the darkness envelop him. The smell hit him immediately—earth and stone and water, the particular scent of the tunnels that had been home for his entire life. His entire *other* life.

He closed his eyes and let the memories wash over him. Running through these passages as a child, exploring every twist and turn. Learning to read by candlelight in Father's chamber. Teaching the children, protecting them, being their guardian and their friend. The weight of responsibility he'd carried. The isolation he'd endured. The love he'd found despite everything.

*Catherine.*

The bond was gone, but the memory of it remained—that golden thread that had connected them, that had let him feel her joy and her pain, that had made him more than he'd ever thought he could be. He'd died feeling that bond, feeling Catherine's love pouring through it even as the rocks crushed his body and the darkness claimed him.

David opened his eyes and stared into the deeper darkness of the tunnel. He could go down there. Right now. He could follow the familiar paths, navigate by memory and instinct, find his way to the home chambers. He could see Father again. Mouse. Pascal. Mary. All the people who'd been his family, his world, his reason for existing.

But what would he say? *Hello, I'm David Morrison, but I used to be Vincent, and I died, but somehow I'm alive in someone else's body?* They'd think he was insane. Or cruel. Or both. How could he prove who he was? How could he explain the impossible?

And even if they believed him—even if by some miracle they accepted that Vincent's consciousness had somehow survived in David Morrison's body—what then? Would it comfort them or torture them? Would it help them heal or tear open wounds that were finally beginning to close?

Catherine had danced with him at Elliot's party. She'd smiled at him, talked with

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

him, accepted his comfort. She was moving forward, slowly and painfully, but moving. If he told her the truth, if he revealed who he really was, would it destroy that fragile progress?

David stepped back out of the culvert, back into the sunlight. The decision felt like dying all over again—choosing to stay away, choosing to let them grieve, choosing to remain dead to the people he loved most in the world.

But it was the right choice. It had to be. For now.

He couldn't go back. But he could still help. In small ways. Quiet ways. Ways that wouldn't reveal who he was but would still support the community he'd left behind.

Lin's family owned restaurant in Chinatown. Mr. Wong's Chinese pharmacy a few blocks away. There were others—a bookstore owner, a tailor, a grocer—all part of the network that had supported the tunnel world for generations.

David visited them regularly now. He ate at Lin's restaurant twice a week, always ordering more food than he could eat, always leaving tips that made the waitress's eyes widen. He stopped by Mr. Wong's pharmacy for herbs and remedies he didn't really need, purchasing expensive items and paying in cash. He bought books from the helper who ran the used bookstore, always asking for recommendations, always buying more than he intended.

They didn't know who he was. They couldn't know. But the money he spent found its way below—he was certain of it. The helpers would pass it along, use it to buy supplies, medicine, and books for the children. In this small way, David could still take care of his family. He could still be their protector, even if they never knew it was him.

It wasn't enough. It would never be enough. But it was all he could do.

David turned away from the culvert and started running again, his legs pumping, his breath coming hard. He ran to escape the memories, to outrun the grief, to exhaust himself so completely that maybe—just maybe—he could sleep without dreaming of the tunnels.

## Between Two Lives by *CandlelitChandler*



He ran past joggers, dog walkers, braving the winter morning. He ran past the lake where he'd once watched Catherine feed the ducks. He ran past the Bethesda Fountain where he'd stood in the shadows.

And then he saw her.

Catherine was running toward him on the same path, her face flushed with exertion. She looked thin—too thin—but there was determination in her stride, a fierce concentration in her expression. She was pushing herself, fighting through pain, refusing to give up.

David's heart clenched. He wanted to stop, to speak to her, to tell her how proud he was that she was trying, that she was fighting to reclaim her life. But he couldn't. Not here. Not now. Not when she was so clearly focused on her own battle.

But then their eyes met, and Catherine's stride faltered slightly in recognition. David made a split-second decision. He was David Morrison now, and David Morrison could run alongside Catherine Chandler in Central Park on a Saturday morning.

He slowed his pace as they approached each other, raising a hand in greeting. "Catherine."

She stopped, breathing hard, surprise flickering across her face. "David. Hi." A

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

small smile touched her lips—tentative but genuine. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I run most mornings,” he said, matching her slightly breathless tone. “Would you mind some company? I promise I won’t slow you down.”

Catherine hesitated for only a moment before nodding. “Sure. I could use the distraction from how much my legs are protesting right now.”

They fell into step together, finding a comfortable rhythm. David was careful to match her pace—not too fast, not too slow. Catherine seemed less guarded than she’d been at the party, perhaps because the setting was more casual, or perhaps because they’d already broken the ice while dancing.

“So how was your week?” David asked after they’d run in companionable silence for a minute. “Any exciting cases at the DA’s office?”

Catherine laughed—a short, slightly breathless sound, but real. “Define exciting. We had a defendant try to bribe a witness with a parakeet. Does that count?”

“A parakeet?” David couldn’t help but smile. “That’s... creative?”

“The witness was allergic to birds,” Catherine said, shaking her head. “It did not go well for anyone involved.” She glanced at him sideways. “What about you? How’s the architecture world?”

“Significantly less dramatic,” David admitted. “Though Elliot Burch did spend twenty minutes yesterday debating the exact shade of marble for the lobby. Apparently, there’s a meaningful difference between ‘winter white’ and ‘frost alabaster.’”

Catherine’s lips quirked. “And is there?”

“Not to the untrained eye,” David said solemnly. “But I’ve learned to nod thoughtfully and take extensive notes.”

That earned him another small laugh, and David felt something warm unfold in his chest. Making Catherine laugh—even just a little—felt like a victory.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

They ran past a group of tourists taking photos by the fountain, and Catherine shook her head. “You know, this is getting a little strange.”

“What is?”

“Us,” Catherine said, gesturing between them. “Running into each other. First in the park, at Elliot’s office, then at Elliot’s party, now here in the park again. It’s like the universe is determined to keep throwing us together.”

David felt his pulse quicken—not from the running. “Is that a bad thing?”

Catherine was quiet for a moment, her breathing steady as they rounded a curve in the path. “No,” she said finally, and she sounded almost surprised by her own answer. “No, I don’t think it is.”

David nodded, focusing on the path ahead. “I’m glad. It’s nice to have someone to run with.”

They ran in companionable silence for a moment, the morning sun filtering through the trees, dappling the path with light and shadow. David could feel the weight of everything unsaid between them—all the truths he couldn’t tell. But for this moment, running side by side, it was enough just to be near her.

“Where do you live?” Catherine asked suddenly. “In the city, I mean.”

“East 72nd,” David said. “Near Lexington. You?”

Catherine’s eyes widened slightly. “East 68th. Between Park and Lex.”

“That’s only four blocks away,” David said, trying to sound genuinely surprised.

“Four blocks,” Catherine repeated, shaking her head with a small smile. “See? The universe is definitely conspiring.”

David laughed—a short, genuine sound. “At this point, I’m not going to argue with it.”

Catherine smiled and nodded, accepting the simple agreement.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

They completed another loop around the park, talking about small things—favorite running routes, the best coffee shops in the neighborhood, the challenges of living in the city. Nothing deep, nothing profound, but the conversation flowed easily, naturally, like they'd known each other far longer than a few brief encounters.

Finally, Catherine slowed to a walk, breathing hard. "I should probably head back," she said. "I'm not quite back in running shape yet."

"You did great," David said, and he meant it. The fact that she was here at all, that she was trying, that she was fighting her way back to life—it filled him with pride and love and an aching sadness all at once.

Catherine smiled at him—a real smile that almost reached her eyes. "Thanks for the company. It was... nice. Not running alone."

"Anytime," David said. "I'm here most Saturday mornings. If you ever want company again."

"I might take you up on that," Catherine said. She hesitated, then added, "It was good to see you, David."

"You too, Catherine."

They parted ways at the park entrance, Catherine heading south toward her brownstone, David heading north toward his apartment. He watched her go, her ponytail swinging, her stride still determined despite her exhaustion.

David walked toward Chinatown, toward Lin's restaurant, toward the small ways he could still help the people he loved. The morning felt lighter somehow, the burden of grief and isolation just a little less crushing.

Catherine slowly walked the four blocks to her brownstone, letting her breathing settle and feeling the pleasant ache in her muscles. Her body felt warm, alive. Not just from the run, but from something else. Something she couldn't quite name.

She'd laughed with David Morrison, of all people. A genuine laugh that had surprised her with its ease, its naturalness. And afterward, talking with him as they

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

ran—it hadn't felt forced or performative. It had just felt—easy. Real.

Catherine paused at her front steps, one hand on the iron railing. There was a warmth in her chest, small and subtle. Not overwhelming. But not guilt-tinged or complicated by grief. Just a quiet spark of something that felt almost like joy.

She'd enjoyed talking with him. She'd enjoyed his company. And for those twenty minutes, she hadn't been thinking about Vincent or the bond or the emptiness that had consumed her for eight months. She'd just been... present. Running. Talking. Laughing.

Catherine climbed the steps to her door, her hand moving to the key in her pocket. The warmth in her chest remained, steady and real.

*Maybe this is what healing looks like, she thought. Not forgetting. Not moving on. Just... small moments of light. Small moments where I remember what it feels like to be alive.*

She unlocked her door and stepped inside, and for the first time in months, the silence of her home didn't feel quite so heavy.

Two weeks later, Catherine was halfway through her loop around the reservoir when she heard footsteps approaching from behind—steady, familiar.

“Morning,” David said as he pulled alongside her, matching her pace easily.

Catherine smiled, surprised by how genuinely pleased she was to see him.

“Morning. I was wondering if you'd be here.”

“I did say most Saturday mornings.” He glanced at her. “How's your week been?”

“Long,” Catherine admitted. “We're preparing for a major trial. Late nights, mountains of paperwork.”

“The Hernandez case?”

“You've been following it?”

“Hard not to. It's all over the news.” David's breathing was even, controlled. “You

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

think you have enough to convict?”

They fell into easy conversation—the kind that required no effort. Catherine talked about the challenges of the case, and David asked thoughtful questions that showed he was actually listening, not just waiting for his turn to speak.

After twenty five minutes, as they slowed to a walk near Bethesda Fountain, David said, “You know, we could make this a regular thing. Saturday mornings. If you want.”

Catherine looked at him, considering. The warmth she’d felt two weeks ago flickered again in her chest—small, but real.

“Why not?” she said. “I could use the company.”

David’s smile was quiet, genuine. “So could I.”

\*\*\*

Over the next five weeks, Saturday mornings became something Catherine looked forward to.

The first Saturday, as they ran past the Great Lawn, Catherine asked, “So where are you from originally? I realized I don’t know much about you.”

David was quiet for a moment, and Catherine wondered if she’d overstepped. Then he said, “I grew up in the foster care system. Moved around a lot as a kid.”

“Oh,” Catherine said softly. “That must have been... difficult.”

“It was what it was,” David said, his tone carefully neutral. “I don’t remember much from before I was in the system. Different homes, different schools. You learn not to get too attached to any of it.”

*Not a lie, David thought as they ran. David Morrison’s childhood—fragmented, uncertain, a series of temporary placements and people who were never quite family.*

Catherine didn’t press further, and David was grateful.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

The second Saturday, Catherine told him about growing up in Westchester, about her father's expectations and her mother's illness and passing. David listened. The memories were there in his mind—Catherine's voice telling them at her balcony, in the tunnels, in quiet moments by candlelight.

On the third Saturday, Catherine mentioned she was meeting Jenny for lunch the following week.

"Jenny Aronson?" David asked, then caught himself. "Sorry—I think I've heard you mention her before."

Catherine didn't seem to notice the slip. "Yes. We've been friends since college. I haven't seen her in months. She's been patient with me, but..." She trailed off.

"But you're ready now," David finished quietly.

"Yeah," Catherine said, surprised. "I think I am."

The fourth Saturday, Catherine told him about a concert she'd attended the night before—a string quartet playing Vivaldi. Her eyes were bright as she described it, animated in a way David hadn't seen before.

"I'm glad you went," he smiled.

At work, Joe Maxwell noticed that Catherine seemed lighter somehow. She smiled more readily, engaged more in office banter. He didn't comment on it—Catherine's grief had been private, and her healing would be too—but he was quietly relieved.

Rita, the office secretary, mentioned to Joe one afternoon, "Cathy seems better lately. More like herself."

Joe nodded. "Yeah. She does."

The fifth Saturday, as they finished their run and walked toward the park exit, David found himself thinking about coffee. About sitting across from Catherine at a small table, talking about nothing and everything. About the way she took her it—cream, no sugar, always in a ceramic mug if possible because she said it tasted

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

better that way.

*Vincent knew that, David thought. I know that. But she doesn't know I know.*

He told himself it was fine. They were friends now. Friends got coffee together. It didn't have to mean anything more than that.

“Hey,” he said as they reached the street. “Do you want to grab coffee? There's a place a few blocks from here that's supposed to be good.”

Catherine didn't hesitate. “Sure. I could use the caffeine.”

As they walked, he watched her, noting the color in her cheeks, the ease in her stride. She was laughing at something he'd said about a particularly aggressive squirrel they'd encountered on the path. Actually laughing—not the polite, hollow sound she'd made in those early months, but genuine amusement.

*She's healing, David realized. She's really healing. She went to a concert alone and enjoyed it. She went to lunch with Jenny. She's laughing again.*

The temptation rose in him like a wave, threatening to pull him under.

*Tell her. Tell her now. You've built trust. You've become friends. She knows you, even if she doesn't know she knows you. Tell her who you really are. End this charade. Let her know Vincent didn't die, that you're here, that you've been here all along.*

David watched Catherine straighten up from tying her shoe, saw her smile at him, saw the ease in her expression. For the first time in eight months, she looked like herself again. Not the grief-stricken woman who'd sat motionless on park benches. Not the hollow-eyed shadow who'd forced herself through each day. But Catherine— strong, alive.



## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

*If I tell her now, I make this about me. About my need to be recognized. About my need for her to know who I really am. I would be centering myself in her life again, just when she's finally reclaimed it for herself.*

The thought made him feel sick.

David felt the weight of the choice settle over him like a physical thing. He could tell her. He could end his own suffering, his own isolation, his own desperate longing to be known. But it would cost her everything she'd fought so hard to rebuild.

*Sometimes love means letting go, he thought, and the truth of it cut deep. Sometimes love means staying silent. Sometimes love means watching the person you love move forward, even if it means they're moving forward without you.*

*I love her, he thought. I love her enough to let her heal. I love her enough to let her move forward. I love her enough to carry this secret alone..*

*Maybe someday, he told himself. Maybe when she's stronger. Maybe when enough time has passed. Maybe when I've figured out how to tell her.*

But for now, he would stay silent. He would be her friend. He would watch her heal and grow and reclaim her life. He would love her from this careful distance, this strange half-life where he could see her but couldn't truly reach her.

Because sometimes, love meant sacrifice. And if the price of Catherine's healing was Vincent's continued silence, then David would pay it. Gladly. Painfully. Completely.

The café was small, tucked between a bookstore and a flower shop, with a few tables inside. David and Catherine claimed one in the corner.

"This is nice," Catherine said, settling into her chair. "I don't think I've been here before."

"I found it a few months ago," David said. "It's quiet. Good for reading."

When the server came, Catherine ordered a latte with cream, no sugar. David

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

ordered tea and tried not to think about how natural it felt to sit across from her like this, to see her relaxed and present in a way she hadn't been nine months ago.

They talked about small things—a movie Catherine wanted to see, a project David's firm was working on, the upcoming mayoral election. The conversation flowed easily, punctuated by comfortable silences.

David was mid-sentence, talking about a building renovation project, when he saw movement in his peripheral vision. A teenage boy, maybe sixteen or seventeen, was approaching their table. He was thin, with dark hair and watchful eyes, and he moved with the careful deliberation of someone who didn't want to draw attention.

David's breath caught. *Geoffrey.*

The boy walked past their table, then doubled back as if he'd forgotten something. As he passed Catherine's chair, he leaned down slightly, his hand brushing her shoulder.

"Excuse me," he murmured, and slipped something into Catherine's lap before moving away quickly, moving toward the coffee shop's entrance.

Catherine's hand moved to her lap, closing around what David knew was a note. Her expression didn't change, but he saw the slight tension in her shoulders, the way her eyes tracked Geoffrey's retreating form.

David forced himself to look away, to focus on the elderly couple at the table next to them. The woman was laughing at something her husband said, her hand covering his on the table.

"Sorry," David said, turning back to Catherine with an apologetic smile. "I got distracted. What were you saying about the Hernandez case?"

Catherine blinked, then seemed to refocus. "Oh—just that we're hoping to wrap up depositions by the end of next week."

She slipped the note into her jacket pocket with practiced ease, and David pretended not to notice. But inside, his heart was full.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

*Geoffrey. Still watching over her. Still making sure she knows she's not alone.*

David had seen Geoffrey a handful of times over the past months—once at Lin's restaurant, twice near the Chinese pharmacy.

But seeing him here, reaching out to Catherine, filled David with a quiet joy.

“You okay?” Catherine asked, studying him. “You seem far away.”

David smiled. “Just thinking. It's been a good morning.”

Catherine's expression softened. “Yeah. It has.”

They finished their coffee in comfortable silence, and when they parted ways at the corner—Catherine heading east toward her brownstone, David heading west toward his apartment—David felt the same warmth in his chest and hoped Catherine was feeling it too.

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The breakroom at Patterson & Associates was empty except for David, who stood at the counter waiting for the coffee maker to finish its slow, gurgling cycle. It was 2:47 PM on a Tuesday—the dead zone of the workday when most people were either in meetings or at their desks, willing the hours to pass faster.

David had been reviewing some sketches all morning, his mind only half-focused on the work. The other half kept drifting back to Saturday's run with Catherine.

The coffee maker beeped, and David reached for a mug. Behind him, the television mounted in the corner was tuned to NY1, the volume low enough to be background noise. David barely registered it—traffic updates, weather, the usual midday programming.

Then a word cut through: “hostage.”

David turned.

The screen showed a familiar building—the Manhattan District Attorney's office.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

Police cars surrounded it, their lights flashing in silent urgency. SWAT officers crouched behind vehicles, their weapons trained on the entrance. A news ticker scrolled across the bottom: **BREAKING: Hostage Situation at Manhattan DA's Office—Armed Man Demands Justice.**

David's coffee mug slipped from his hand, shattering on the tile floor.

“—reports indicate that a man entered the building approximately forty minutes ago,” the news anchor was saying. “Witnesses say he was wearing what appeared to be an explosive device strapped to his chest. Police have evacuated most of the building, but sources tell us that at least twenty hostages remain inside with the suspect—”

David didn't hear the rest. He was already moving.

He ran through the office, past startled colleagues, past his desk where files lay scattered and forgotten. Someone called his name—his supervisor, maybe—but David didn't stop. He hit the stairwell at full speed, taking the steps three at a time, his heart hammering against his ribs.

*Catherine. Catherine. Catherine.*

The name pounded through him with every footfall, every breath. He burst through the lobby doors and onto the street, his brain not registering the cold. He nearly collided with a woman. She shouted something after him, but David was already gone, running faster than he'd ever run in this body.

The streets blurred past. Pedestrians scattered. Car horns blared. David didn't care. He ran with a desperation that felt primal—the same desperation that had once driven him through tunnel passages when Catherine was in danger, when the bond had screamed her fear into his very bones.

But there was no bond now. No connection to tell him if she was safe, if she was hurt, if she was—

*No. Don't think it. Just run.*

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

Six blocks. Eight. Ten.

His lungs burned. His legs screamed. David pushed harder.

When he finally reached the DA's office, the scene was chaos. Police barricades blocked the street. News vans lined the perimeter, their satellite dishes extended like mechanical flowers reaching for the sky. Reporters shouted questions at stone-faced officers. Somewhere, a woman was crying.

David skidded to a halt behind the barricades, his chest heaving, his vision swimming. He scanned the crowd desperately, searching for—

The explosion was small. Almost anticlimactic.

A muffled *whump* from inside the building, followed by the sound of shattering glass. Smoke began to pour from a fifth-floor window. People screamed. Officers shouted into radios. The SWAT team moved forward in tight formation.

David's world narrowed to a single point: the building's entrance.

*Please*, he thought. *Please, Catherine, please—*

The doors burst open.

People stumbled out—office workers, lawyers, support staff. Some were coughing from the smoke. Others were crying, clutching each other. Paramedics rushed forward with stretchers and medical kits.

David pushed against the barricade, his eyes scanning every face, every figure.

*There.*

Catherine emerged near the back of the group, one hand pressed to her cheek. Even from a distance, David could see the blood—thin lines of red streaking down her face, staining the collar of her white blouse. Her jacket was torn at the shoulder.

But she was alive. She was walking. She was—

David didn't remember vaulting the barricade. Didn't remember pushing past the

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

officers who tried to stop him. He only knew that suddenly he was there, his hands on Catherine's shoulders, pulling her against his chest.

"Catherine," he said, his voice breaking. "Catherine. Catherine."

He said her name again and again, unable to stop, his arms wrapped around her so tightly he was afraid he might hurt her, but unable to let go. His hand cradled the back of her head, his fingers tangling in her hair, and he pressed his face against her temple, breathing in the scent of her—smoke and fear and something underneath that was purely *her*.

"Catherine," he whispered. "Thank God. Thank God."

Catherine stood frozen for a moment, her hands hovering uncertainly at her sides. Then, slowly, she brought her arms up around his waist, holding him back.

"David," she said softly. "David, I'm okay. I'm okay."

But David couldn't stop. The relief was too overwhelming, too complete. It crashed over him in waves, and with it came something else—a memory of another time, another crisis, when Vincent had held her just like this after she'd been attacked. The same desperate repetition of her name. The same need to feel her breathing, alive, safe in his arms.

Catherine felt it too. David could tell by the way she stiffened slightly, then relaxed, her fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt.

"I'm okay," she said again, and this time her voice was gentler, understanding something she couldn't quite name.

A throat cleared behind them.

David reluctantly loosened his grip, though he kept one hand on Catherine's arm as he turned. A man in his forties stood there—thin build, tired eyes, tie loosened at the collar. He was watching them with an expression that was equal parts concern and curiosity.

"Cathy," the man said. "You all right?"

**Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*



*Joe by Laura G*

“I’m fine, Joe,” Catherine said. She touched David’s hand briefly, then stepped back, creating a small space between them. “Just some cuts. Nothing serious.”

Joe’s gaze flicked to David, assessing. “Friend of yours?”

“Yes,” Catherine said. “Joe Maxwell, this is David Morrison. David, this is my boss, Joe.”

David extended his hand automatically, and Joe shook it with a firm grip.

“Hell of a way to meet,” Joe said.

“I saw it on the news,” David said. His voice was steadier now, though his heart was still racing. “I just... I had to make sure she was okay.”

Joe nodded slowly, his expression softening. “Yeah. I get that.” He turned back to Catherine. “Paramedics want to check everyone out. You should let them look at those cuts.”

“I will,” Catherine promised.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

Joe squeezed her shoulder, then moved on to check on the rest of his staff. David watched him go, a strange thought occurring to him: *I might never have met Joe if I were still Vincent.*

Vincent had known of Joe, of course—Catherine had spoken of him often, with respect and affection. But Vincent had never stood in the sunlight shaking his hand, never seen the genuine care in his eyes when he looked at Catherine. That had been impossible in Vincent’s world.

*Another thing David Morrison can do that Vincent never could,* David thought. The realization was bittersweet. But he tried not to dwell on it.

“Come on,” Catherine said, touching his elbow. “Let’s get out of the way.”

They moved to the edge of the crowd, away from the worst of the chaos. A paramedic tried to approach Catherine with a blanket, but she waved him off. “I’m fine. There are people who need help more than I do.”

David wanted to argue, but he understood. Catherine had always been like this—putting others first, minimizing her own pain.

“Let me get you home,” David said. “Please.”

Catherine looked at him for a long moment, then nodded. “Okay.”

They walked two blocks before the crowd thinned enough for David to hail a cab. Catherine slid into the backseat, and David followed, Catherine giving the driver her address.

The cab pulled into traffic, and they sat in silence for several blocks. David kept glancing at Catherine, cataloging her injuries. The cuts on her face were shallow but numerous—glass, probably, from a shattered window or picture frame. There was a deeper gash on her collarbone, just visible above the torn fabric of her blouse. Her hands were scraped, and there was a bruise forming on her left wrist.

“How did you know?” Catherine asked suddenly. “About what happened?”

“I told you—I saw it on the news. I was in the breakroom at work, and the report

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

came on, and I just..." David trailed off, unsure how to explain the terror that had seized him, the absolute certainty that he had to get to her. "I just ran."

Catherine was quiet for a moment. Then she reached over and took his hand, squeezing it gently.

"Thank you," she said. "For coming. For... for being there."

The simple gesture—her hand in his—nearly undid him. David squeezed back, feeling her cold fingers, unable to speak past the lump in his throat.

When the cab pulled up in front of her brownstone, David paid the driver and helped Catherine out. He noticed that she moved carefully, favoring her left side, and David resisted the urge to simply pick her up and carry her inside.

At the door, Catherine fumbled with her keys. Her hands were shaking—delayed shock, probably. David gently took the keys from her and unlocked the door himself.

"Come in," Catherine said. "Please. I don't... I don't really want to be alone right now."

David followed her inside, and the familiar space hit him like a physical blow.

The foyer. The living room beyond. The stairs leading up to her bedroom. Every detail was exactly as he remembered—as *Vincent* remembered. The painting on the wall that she'd bought at a gallery in SoHo. The antique mirror she'd inherited from her mother. The small table by the door where she always left her keys.

*This was supposed to be ours*, David thought, and the grief was so sudden, so sharp, that he had to close his eyes against it. *This home. This life. This future.*

Vincent had stood in this foyer countless times, always in shadow. Sometimes dreaming of walking in the sun with Catherine.

But that day had never come. And now David stood here instead, in a body that could walk freely in the sun but had no claim to this place, to this woman, to any of it.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

“David?”

He opened his eyes to find Catherine watching him with concern.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “You look...”

“I’m fine,” David said quickly. Too quickly. He forced a smile. “Just... glad you’re safe.”

But Catherine’s eyes narrowed slightly, and David knew she’d seen something—some shadow of the grief he was trying to hide. She studied him for a moment longer, then seemed to let it go.

“I should clean up these cuts,” she said, gesturing vaguely at her face.

“Let me help,” David said.

Before Catherine could respond, David was already moving—not toward the kitchen or the living room, but directly to the small restroom off the foyer. He opened the cabinet beneath the sink and pulled out the first aid kit, the same white plastic box with the red cross that had always been there.

He was halfway back to Catherine before he realized what he’d done.

Catherine stood frozen in the foyer, staring at him with an expression David couldn’t quite read. Confusion. Surprise. And underneath it, something else—a flicker of recognition, perhaps, or the beginning of a question she didn’t know how to ask.

“How did you...” she started, then stopped.

David’s mind raced. “I just... I guessed. Most people keep first aid kits in the bathroom, right?”

“Right,” Catherine said slowly. “But you went straight to it. You didn’t even look.”

“Lucky guess?” David offered weakly.

Catherine didn’t respond. She just kept looking at him, her green eyes searching

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

his face as if trying to solve a puzzle she hadn't known existed until this moment.

Finally, she shook her head slightly, as if clearing it. "Okay. Thank you."

She sat down on the small bench by the door, and David knelt in front of her, opening the first aid kit. His hands moved with practiced efficiency—cleaning the cuts with antiseptic, applying butterfly bandages to the deeper gash on her collarbone, checking for any embedded glass.

Vincent had done this before. Many times. Catherine had been hurt so often in those years—attacked, threatened, caught in the crossfire of the darkness she fought against. And Vincent had always tended her wounds with gentle hands, his touch careful despite his strength.

David's hands were different now—smaller, more human—but the care was the same. The tenderness was the same.

Catherine watched him work, her expression unreadable. When he finished, she reached up and touched his cheek, her fingers light against his skin.

"You're a good friend, David," she said softly.

The words were kind. Genuine. And they broke David's heart.

*Friend*, he thought. *Yes. That's all I can be now.*

"So are you," he managed to say.

They sat there for a moment longer, Catherine's hand still resting against his face, David kneeling before her in the foyer of the home that should have been theirs.

And in the silence between them, David felt the weight of everything he'd lost—and everything he thought he might never have again.

Catherine's eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Thank you," she whispered. "For everything today. For running across the city. For being here. For..." She gestured at the first aid kit, at the careful bandages on her skin. "For taking care of me. Your friendship, your concern, your attention—it means more than you know."

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

Before David could respond, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his cheek. The kiss was soft, brief, but achingly tender—a gesture of genuine gratitude and affection.

Warmth bloomed where her lips touched his skin, spreading through David’s body like sunlight breaking through clouds. His breath caught. For one impossible moment, he felt the echo of something he’d thought was lost forever—connection, closeness, the simple miracle of Catherine choosing to touch him.

Catherine pulled back slightly, and David saw the flush in her cheeks, felt the warmth radiating from her as well. She’d felt it too—that inexplicable current between them.

“Promise me something,” David said quietly, his voice rough with emotion he couldn’t quite hide.

“What?” Catherine asked, her hand still resting lightly on his shoulder.

“Call me tomorrow. Let me know how you’re feeling. Please.”

Catherine smiled—tired but genuine. “I promise,” she said. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

David nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He stood slowly, helping her to her feet, and they moved toward the door together.

As Catherine squeezed his hand in farewell, David realized these small moments meant everything to him, even though they broke his heart a little.

\*\*\*

Over a week later, David stood in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and realized he’d been doing everything wrong.

Catherine had called twice since that night—once the next day, as promised, her voice still tired but reassuring him she was fine, and again three days later to tell him she was back at work. Both conversations had been warm, easy, filled with the comfortable rhythm they’d developed over months of Saturday morning runs and

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

coffee. But they hadn't seen each other. Catherine was recovering, catching up on work, and David...

David had thrown himself back into the careful construction of David Morrison's life. Work. Gym. Grocery shopping. The mundane routines of an ordinary man living an ordinary existence.

But standing here now, looking up at the museum's grand facade with the morning sun warming his face, David felt the weight of what he'd been denying himself.

*I've been so busy trying to be David Morrison, he thought, that I've forgotten to honor Vincent.*

Vincent had lived in darkness, in beauty carved from stone and candlelight, in poetry read by lamplight and music played in chambers that echoed with centuries of secrets. But he'd never stood in a gallery flooded with natural light. Never walked through rooms where Rembrandt and Vermeer captured illumination on canvas. Never experienced art the way it was meant to be seen—in the full glory of day.

The bombing had reminded David how fragile life was, how quickly everything could be taken away, and he would have wasted these months hiding from the sunlight Vincent had always longed for.

*No more, David decided. I owe Vincent this. I owe myself this.*

He climbed the steps and went inside.

The European paintings galleries were quiet. David moved slowly through the rooms, letting himself simply *feel* the experience. The way light fell across a Caravaggio creating drama from shadow and illumination. The delicate brushwork of a Botticelli, details Vincent would have appreciated but never seen like this. The bold colors of a Van Gogh that seemed to vibrate with life.

He stood for a long time in front of Vermeer's "Young Woman with a Water Pitcher," studying the way morning light streamed through the window, catching on the metal pitcher, illuminating the woman's face with such tender clarity it

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

made his chest ache.

*Catherine would love this, he thought. The quiet intimacy of it. The way light transforms everything it touches.*

David moved through the galleries slowly, letting Vincent's soul drink in everything it had been denied. The Egyptian wing, with its ancient stones and preserved beauty. The American wing, with its Tiffany glass catching the afternoon light. The medieval galleries where tapestries told stories in thread and color.

It was in the Greek and Roman galleries, standing before a marble statue of Apollo, that David heard the voices.

Children's voices. High and excited, echoing slightly off the stone floors.

David's heart stopped.

He knew those voices.

There were five of them, clustered around a docent who was explaining something about ancient pottery. David recognized them immediately—tunnel children, brought above for an educational excursion. Mary must have arranged it, or perhaps Father, wanting to give them experiences beyond the chamber walls.

David's first instinct was to leave, to slip away before they could see him. But his feet wouldn't move. He stood frozen, watching them with an ache so profound it felt like drowning.

There was Thomas, now twelve, dark-haired. Anna, tall for fourteen, listening intently to the docent. James, barely eight, bouncing on his toes with excitement. And there, holding James's hand to keep him from wandering—

Patrick.

Eleven years old now, though he'd been only ten when Vincent...when everything changed. Small for his age, with sandy hair and enormous brown eyes that had always seemed to see more than they should. Vincent had spent hours with Patrick,

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

reading to him, teaching him to draw, listening to the boy's endless questions about the world above.

*I should go, David thought. I should leave before—*

Patrick's head turned.

Their eyes met across the gallery

Patrick smiled at him.

David stood paralyzed, wanting more than anything to go to the young boy, hold him tight. He hesitated, turned, and walked out of the museum his heart heavy. It was painful to see the children, but under that pain, Vincent was glad to see them doing well. Thriving.

David sat in his apartment for two hours after returning from the museum, staring at the phone.

Bumping into the children had shaken something loose inside him—some careful wall he'd built between Vincent's life and David's.

He picked up the phone and dialed before he could talk himself out of it.

Catherine answered on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Catherine. It's David."

"David! Hi." He could hear the smile in her voice. "How are you? I was just thinking about you."

Something warm unfurled in David's chest. "Were you?"

"Mmm. I was going to call you later, actually. See if you wanted to grab coffee this weekend."

"Actually," David said, his heart pounding, "I was calling to ask you something. I know it's short notice, but... would you be interested in going to the opera with me? This Saturday night?"

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

There was a pause. Then: “The opera?”

“I’ve never been,” David said, which was technically true—David Morrison had never attended an opera, even if Vincent had listened to recordings for years. “I want to try something new, and I thought... I thought you might enjoy it.”

He didn’t mention that he knew she loved opera. That he remembered her telling Vincent about her first time at the Met, seeing *La Bohème* with her father when she was sixteen.

“I’d love to,” Catherine said, and David could hear genuine delight in her voice. “What are they performing?”

“Puccini,” David said, having checked the schedule before calling. “*Tosca*.”

“Oh.” Catherine’s voice softened. “That’s... that’s one of my favorites.”

“Is it?” David asked, keeping his tone casual. “Then I’m glad I picked well.”

“You did.” There was a smile in her voice again. “What time should I be ready?”

“I’ll pick you up at six-thirty. We can have dinner first, if you’d like.”

“That sounds perfect.” Catherine paused. “David?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you. For thinking of me. For wanting to share this with me.”

David closed his eyes, gripping the phone tighter. “Thanks for accepting,” he said quietly.

After they hung up, David sat in the gathering darkness of his apartment and let himself feel the full weight of what he’d just done.



## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

He was taking Catherine to the opera. To something Vincent had always dreamed of experiencing with her, but never could. He would sit beside her in the darkness, watch her face as the music swelled, and see her transported by its beauty.

Catherine had wanted to share so much of her world with Vincent. And now David was determined to give her that experience even if she didn't know it.

\*\*\*

Saturday evening arrived wrapped in the golden light. David stood outside Catherine's brownstone at exactly six-thirty wearing the best suit David Morrison owned— perfectly tailored, with a dark blue tie that Catherine had once mentioned brought out his eyes.

Catherine opened the door, and David forgot how to breathe.

She wore a deep emerald dress that fell to just below her knees, elegant and simple, with a neckline that framed her collarbones. Her hair was swept up, revealing the graceful line of her neck. Small diamond earrings caught the light. She looked radiant, sophisticated, and so beautiful it hurt.

“Hi,” Catherine said, smiling at his expression. “Is this okay?”

“You look stunning,” David said, his voice rough with sincerity. “Absolutely stunning.”

Catherine's cheeks flushed slightly. “Thank you. You look pretty wonderful yourself.” She grabbed a small clutch and a coat by the door. “Ready?”

“Ready,” David said, offering his arm.

They took a cab to a small French restaurant David had discovered in his explorations of the city—intimate, with excellent food and a wine list Vincent would have appreciated if he'd ever had the chance to develop David Morrison's more sophisticated palate.

Over dinner, they talked easily. Catherine told him about a case she was working on, a complicated fraud investigation that had her buried in financial records.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

David told her about the museums he'd been visiting, carefully editing out the encounter with the tunnel children but describing the Vermeer that had moved him so deeply.

"I love that painting," Catherine said, her eyes lighting up. "The way the light falls across everything. It's so quiet, so peaceful. Like the whole world has narrowed down to just that moment, that room, that woman, and her simple task."

"Exactly," David said, watching her face. "That's exactly what I felt."

Catherine smiled at him over her wine glass. "I'm glad you're doing this," she said. "Exploring the city, trying new things. You seem... I don't know. Lighter, somehow. More yourself."

*If only you knew, David thought. If only you knew how much of myself I'm finally allowing to exist.*

"I think I was stuck for a while," he said carefully. "Going through the motions. But recently, I realized life's too short not to experience everything we can. The bombing reminded me of that."

Catherine's expression sobered slightly. "It reminded me, too," she said quietly. "How quickly everything can change. How important it is to hold onto the people who matter."

She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. David felt the warmth of her touch spread through him like sunlight.

"You matter," Catherine said simply. "I want you to know that."

David couldn't speak. He just nodded, holding her hand for a moment longer before they had to let go.

The Metropolitan Opera House was magnificent.

David had seen pictures, of course, but nothing prepared him for the reality of it—the soaring ceilings, the crystal chandeliers, the red velvet seats stretching in elegant curves toward the stage. The building itself was a work of art, and as they

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

found their seats in the orchestra section, David felt Vincent's soul singing with joy.

*I'm here, he thought. I'm finally here.*

Catherine settled beside him, her wrap draped over her shoulders, her face glowing with anticipation. "I haven't been here in over a year," she said softly. "I forgot how beautiful it is."

"Why so long?" David asked, though he knew the answer.

Catherine was quiet for a moment. "It reminded me of someone," she said finally. "Someone I lost. We never came here together, but... he loved opera. Loved music. Being here without him felt wrong, somehow."

David's chest tightened. "And now?"

Catherine looked at him, her green eyes soft in the dimmed lighting. "Now it feels right," she said. "Like maybe I'm ready to make new memories. Good ones."

The lights dimmed further, and the orchestra began to tune. David felt Catherine's hand brush against his on the armrest between them. Without thinking, he turned his palm up, and she laced her fingers through his.

They sat like that through the entire first act—hands clasped, shoulders touching, breathing in sync. David felt every note of Puccini's score like a physical thing, the music washing over him in waves of beauty and tragedy. Tosca's voice soared through the opera house, and David understood why Vincent had loved this art form so deeply. It was poetry and music and drama woven together, human emotion distilled into something transcendent.

During the intermission, they stood at the bar with glasses of champagne, and Catherine's eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"Are you all right?" David asked gently.

"It's just so beautiful," Catherine said, laughing a little at herself. "I forgot how much opera makes me feel everything at once. Joy and sorrow and hope and

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

despair, all tangled together.”

“That’s what makes it powerful,” David said. “The way it doesn’t shy away from the complexity of being human.”

Catherine looked at him with something like wonder. “For someone who’s never been to the opera before, you understand it remarkably well.”

David smiled, a little sadly. “Maybe some things we understand instinctively,” he said. “Without needing to be taught.”

The second act was even more powerful than the first. David watched Tosca’s desperate attempt to save her lover, watched the tragedy unfold with the inevitability of fate, and felt Catherine’s hand tighten in his during the most intense moments. When Tosca sang “Vissi d’arte”—her aria of anguish and questioning—David felt tears slip down his own cheeks.

*I lived for art, I lived for love, Tosca sang. I never did harm to a living soul... Why, why, Lord, why do you reward me thus?*

David understood that question in his bones.

When the final curtain fell and the lights came up, Catherine turned to him with tears streaming down her face.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you for bringing me here. For sharing this with me.”

David reached up and gently wiped a tear from her cheek. “Thank you for coming with me,” he said. “For making my first opera something I’ll never forget.”

They walked out into the cool night, neither quite ready to break the spell the music had woven around them. David hailed a cab, and they rode back to Catherine’s brownstone in comfortable silence, her head resting lightly against his shoulder.

At her door, Catherine turned to face him, her eyes still luminous in the streetlight.

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

“I had the most wonderful time,” she said. “Truly. This was... it was exactly what I needed.”

“I’m glad,” David said softly. “I loved every moment of it.”

Catherine stepped closer, rising on her toes, and pressed her lips to his cheek. The kiss was tender, lingering, full of warmth and affection.

“Goodnight, David,” she whispered against his skin.

And then it happened.

The warmth from her kiss spread through David’s body like it had before, but this time there was something else. Something new. A pinprick of sensation that wasn’t quite his own—a flutter of happiness, contentment, a soft glow of affection that felt distinctly like *Catherine*.

David’s breath caught. His hand came up instinctively to where she’d kissed him, his eyes widening.

*No, he thought. It can’t be. The bond is gone. It’s been gone for 11 months.*

But the sensation was unmistakable. Faint, barely there, like the first stars appearing in a twilight sky. But present. Real. A whisper of Catherine’s emotions bleeding through to him the way they used to, the way they had during those first ten days when she’d been below in the tunnels, healing from her attack in Central Park almost nine years ago.

Back then, the bond had been new, tentative, neither of them understanding what it meant. Vincent had felt her pain, her fear, her gradual return to strength. Had known when she was sleeping, when she was awake, when she was thinking of



## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

him.

This felt like that. Like the bond's first fragile stirrings, testing whether connection was still possible.

"David?" Catherine was looking at him with concern. "Are you okay? You look--"

"I'm fine," David said quickly, his voice rough. "I'm just... I'm very happy. That's all."

Catherine smiled, her hand coming up to rest briefly on his chest. "Me, too," she said. "Let's do this again soon?"

"Yes," David managed. "Absolutely."

He waited until she was safely inside before walking away, his hand still pressed to his cheek where she'd kissed him, his heart pounding with a mixture of elation and terror.

*The bond, he thought. It's coming back. Somehow, impossibly, it's coming back.*

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David walked for hours that night, too wired to sleep, too overwhelmed to sit still. He walked through Central Park, past the places where Vincent used to emerge from the tunnels, past the spot where Catherine had been attacked all those years ago.

The pinprick of sensation had faded, but the memory of it remained. Catherine's happiness. Her contentment. The soft warmth of her affection.

*For me, David thought. She felt that for me. For David.*

And that was the beautiful, terrible truth of it.

It had been almost a year since Vincent died. Almost a year since Catherine had lost the love of her life. And in that time—she'd survived. She'd grieved, yes. Still grieved, probably. But she'd also continued living. Working. Finding moments of

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

joy. Making new friends.

Like David.

David, who made her laugh. Who took her to the opera. Who held her hand during beautiful music and wiped away her tears. Who was kind, attentive, and safe.

David, whom she kissed on the cheek with genuine affection.

*She's healing, David thought, and the realization was both wonderful and devastating. She's moving forward. And I'm part of that forward motion—not as Vincent, but as someone new. Someone who helps her feel happy again.*

Catherine was warm, kind-hearted, and generous. She freely gave her loyalty and love to her friends. A couple of kisses on the cheek meant nothing more than affection, gratitude, and the comfort of companionship.

David knew this. Understood it completely.

The bond stirring again didn't change the fundamental truth: Catherine cared for David Morrison as a friend. A good friend, maybe even a dear one.

\*\*\*

Three months passed in a rhythm that felt almost like contentment.

David filled his weekdays with experiences Vincent had only dreamed of. An evening at the Frick Collection, studying Vermeer and Rembrandt in the quiet hours before the museum closed. Afternoons at the Morgan Library, running his fingers along the spines of illuminated manuscripts behind glass. Other evenings at small jazz clubs in the Village, letting the music wash over him in rooms thick with smoke. Thursday lunchtimes in Chinatown, learning to use chopsticks properly while Lin watched with patient amusement.

But Saturday mornings—those belonged to Catherine.

They'd fallen into an easy routine. Nine a.m. at the Bethesda Fountain, both of them in running clothes, Catherine's hair pulled back in a ponytail, David in the

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

simple athletic gear that still felt foreign on Vincent's consciousness but natural on David Morrison's body. They'd run the loop around the reservoir, their strides matching, their breathing synchronized. Sometimes they talked. Sometimes they ran in comfortable silence, just the rhythm of their feet on pavement and the morning light filtering through the trees.

Afterward, they'd grab coffee at a small café near the park, then wander through the Strand Bookstore, browsing the endless shelves or head to the music store. They'd developed the habit of kissing each other on the cheek when they parted—a casual gesture of affection that felt natural, comfortable, like something old friends might do.

David cherished those kisses even though they meant nothing more than friendship. The bond had remained silent since that night at the opera, that single pinprick of sensation never repeating itself. He'd begun to wonder if he'd imagined it, if desperation had conjured connection where none existed.

But he didn't need the bond to treasure these mornings. Catherine's laughter was enough. Her smile was enough. The simple gift of her company was more than Vincent had ever hoped to have again.

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It was a Saturday in late May, while the sun was shining through the trees, when Catherine changed everything with a single teasing observation.

They were sitting in their usual café, nursing second cups of coffee, when Catherine set down her mug and fixed him with an amused look.

"You know," she said, "I just realized something."

"What's that?" David asked, smiling at her expression.

"You've walked me home to my brownstone more times than I can count. You've seen my living room, my kitchen." Catherine's eyes sparkled with mischief. "But I've never been to your apartment. Not once."

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

David blinked, caught off guard. She was right. In all their time together, he'd carefully avoided inviting her to his space. The apartment was too Vincent—the candles, the music, the books. He'd been afraid she'd see too much, recognize too much, ask questions he couldn't answer, not yet. Afraid of what it would do to her, to their growing peace.

But looking at Catherine now, at the playful challenge in her expression, David felt something shift inside him.

*She's my friend*, he thought. *She wants to know me. And I want her to.*

"You're absolutely right," David said, making a decision in that moment. "That's completely unfair of me. Would you like to come over now? I can make us lunch."

Catherine's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Really? Right now?"

"Why not?" David smiled, feeling suddenly lighter. "Unless you have other plans?"

"No plans," Catherine said, her smile widening. "I'd love to see your place. I've been curious about where you live."

"Then let's go," David said, standing and offering his hand. "Fair warning though—it's nothing fancy. Just a one-bedroom."

"I don't need fancy," Catherine said, taking his hand and letting him pull her to her feet. "I just want to see your space. See how you live."

As they walked toward the sidewalk to hail a cab, David felt his heart racing. This was a risk.

David's apartment was on the fourth floor of a pre-war building on the Upper East Side. As he unlocked the door and pushed it open, he watched Catherine's face, trying to see his space through her eyes.

The afternoon light streamed through the windows, catching on the candles placed throughout the room. A dozen of them—pillar candles on the bookshelf, votives on the windowsill, tapers in brass holders on the small dining table. None were lit

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

now, but their presence was unmistakable.

“Wow,” Catherine said softly, stepping inside. “You really like candles.”

“I do,” David said, closing the door behind them. “I know it’s probably strange, but I prefer candlelight to electric light when I’m home. It’s... softer. More peaceful.”

Catherine moved further into the apartment, her gaze taking in everything. The walls were lined with bookshelves—some books on architecture, some books on art, but many books of poetry, philosophy, and classic literature. The small dining table now held a record player and a stack of vinyl albums. The couch faced the windows rather than a television.

But it was the knick-knacks that caught Catherine’s attention. Small objects placed carefully on shelves and surfaces—a smooth river stone, a vintage postcard of the Brooklyn Bridge, a small brass compass, a pressed flower in a frame, a ticket stub from the opera.

Catherine picked up the river stone, running her thumb over its smooth surface. “Where’s this from?”

“Riverside Park,” David said, coming to stand beside her. “I was walking there a few weeks ago, and I saw it in the shallows. The way the light hit it—it was beautiful. I know it’s silly to keep a rock, but—”

“It’s not silly,” Catherine interrupted, looking at him with such warmth it made his chest ache. “It’s lovely. What about this?” She picked up the postcard.

“I bought that from a street vendor near the Brooklyn Bridge,” David said. “I’d never actually walked across it before. Can you believe that? Living in New York my whole life and never walking across the Brooklyn Bridge. So I did it last Tuesday. It was incredible—the view, the architecture, the way the cables create these geometric patterns against the sky.”

Catherine was watching him with an expression he couldn’t quite read. Something

## Between Two Lives by *CandlelitChandler*

soft and affectionate, like she was seeing something in him that pleased her.

“And this compass?” she asked, picking up the small brass instrument.

“That’s from an antique shop in the Village,” David said, feeling himself relax into the conversation. “I was browsing, and I saw it, and I thought—I don’t know. I thought it was beautiful. The idea of always knowing which direction you’re heading. Having something to orient yourself by.”



“You’re collecting memories,” Catherine said quietly.

“I suppose I am,” David admitted. “I spent so long just... working. Going through the motions. I was a workaholic, really. Didn’t let myself experience much of anything beyond the office. I’m trying to make up for lost time.”

Catherine smiled at him, and there was something in her expression that made David’s breath catch. She was looking at him like he was precious somehow. Like she saw past the thirty-eight-year-old architect to something younger, more vulnerable.

“I think that’s wonderful,” she said softly. “Really wonderful. You’re letting yourself be curious about the world. Letting yourself play a little.” She touched his arm gently. “There’s something almost boyish about it. In the best way.”

David felt heat rise to his cheeks. “I’m not sure ‘boyish’ is the look I was going for.”

“I didn’t mean it as an insult,” Catherine said quickly. “I meant—there’s a joy in the way you’re approaching these experiences. Like everything is new and

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

exciting. It's refreshing. Most people our age are so jaded, so been-there-done-that. But you're genuinely enthusiastic about a rock from Riverside Park." She squeezed his arm. "I love that about you."

David couldn't speak. He just nodded, overwhelmed by her words, by the affection in her voice.

Catherine moved deeper into the apartment, and David followed, watching as she took in more details. She paused at the bookshelf, running her fingers along the spines. "Keats. Yeats. Rilke. You have good taste in poetry."

David nodded, shyly accepting the compliment.

Catherine smiled and continued her exploration. She peeked into the small kitchen, noted the simple but well-organized space. Then she moved toward the bedroom doorway.

David's heart rate picked up. The bedroom was where Vincent's presence was strongest—the candles, the music, the atmosphere of contemplation and solitude.

Catherine stepped into the doorway and stopped, her gaze immediately drawn to the bed.

More specifically, to the quilt covering it.

It was a patchwork quilt, made from dozens of different fabric squares in deep jewel tones —burgundy, forest green, midnight blue, rich purple. The stitching was careful, precise, the pattern creating a kind of organized chaos that was somehow beautiful.

"That quilt," Catherine said, her voice suddenly softer. "Where did you get it?"

David came to stand beside her. "A craft fair in Union Square," he said. "An older woman was selling them. She said she made them herself, that each one was unique. I saw this one and I just—I had to have it. There's something about it. The way all these different pieces come together to make something whole."

Catherine was quiet for a long moment, staring at the quilt. "It reminds me of

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

someone I knew,” she said finally. “Someone who made quilts like this. She’d collect fabric scraps from everyone in the community and sew them together. She said it was a way of keeping everyone connected. Every piece had a story.”

David’s throat tightened. Mary. Catherine was thinking of Mary, who had made quilts for everyone in the tunnel community, who had wrapped Vincent in one of her creations when he was sick, who had given Catherine a quilt of her own when she’d stayed below to heal.

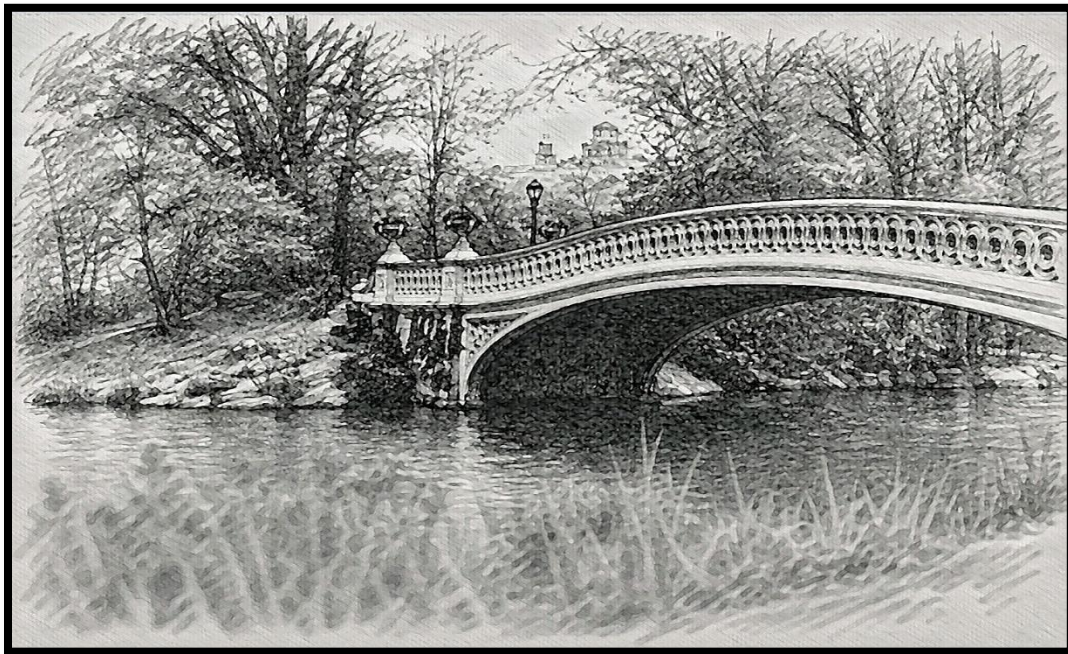
“She sounds like a remarkable person,” David said quietly.

“She was,” Catherine said. “She is.” She touched the quilt gently, then pulled her hand back. “I should probably use present tense. I haven’t seen her in a while, but I’m sure she’s still making her quilts.”

Catherine turned away from the bedroom, and David saw her notice the bathroom door, slightly ajar. She moved toward it, and David’s heart stopped.

*The sketch, he thought with sudden panic. The sketch is in there.*

He’d framed it weeks ago—a pencil drawing he’d done late one night when he



**Bow Bridge** by *Laura G*

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

couldn't sleep, when Vincent's hands had needed to create something. It was a sketch of the Bow Bridge in Central Park, rendered in careful detail, the arch of the bridge reflected in the water below, trees framing the scene.

It was nearly identical to a sketch Vincent had made years ago. A sketch he'd given to Catherine. A sketch she'd framed and hung in their bedroom.

Catherine pushed the bathroom door open fully and stepped inside. David watched from the doorway as her gaze swept the small space—the simple white tiles, the pedestal sink, the claw-foot tub—and then landed on the framed sketch hanging on the wall.

She went very still.

David watched her face as she stared at the drawing. Watched the recognition dawn. Watched her expression shift from curiosity to confusion to something that looked like pain.

“David,” Catherine said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Did you draw this?”

“Yes,” David said, because there was no point in lying.

“When?”

“A few weeks ago. Late at night. I couldn't sleep, and I just—I felt like drawing.”

Catherine reached out and touched the frame with trembling fingers. “It's beautiful,” she said. “It's—” Her voice broke.

David saw the tear before Catherine did. It slipped down her cheek, catching the light from the window, and in that moment, David understood.

She was thinking of Vincent. Of the sketch he'd made for her. Of all the beauty he'd created and all the beauty he'd never have the chance to create again.

David moved without thinking. He stepped into the small bathroom, close enough to see the tear track down Catherine's face, close enough to reach out and gently brush it away with the back of his thumb.

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. “I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

And then it happened.

The bond flared to life.

Not a pinprick this time. Not a whisper. But a wave of emotion so powerful it nearly drove David to his knees.

Catherine’s sorrow. Deep and profound and still so raw after fourteen months. Her love for Vincent—not diminished, not faded, but transformed into something that lived in her bones, in her blood, in every breath she took. The ache of missing him. The grief that never quite left. The love that would never die.

David felt it all. Felt it crash over him like a tidal wave, and it broke his heart.

*She still loves him, David thought, even though he’d always known it. She still loves me. Still grieves for what we had.*

But there was something else in the flood of emotion. Something new.

Gratitude. For David’s presence, his kindness, his gentle understanding. And beneath that, growing like a seed pushing through soil—affection. Real affection. Not just friendship, but something warmer, something that recognized David as someone precious, someone important, someone who mattered.

The combination of emotions—grief and love for Vincent, gratitude and growing affection for David—froze David on the spot. He couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t process what he was feeling through the bond.

Catherine was crying now, tears streaming down her face, and David did the only thing he could think to do.

He pulled her into his arms.

Catherine came willingly, pressing her face against his chest, her hands clutching his shirt. She cried in earnest then—deep, wrenching sobs that shook her whole body. David held her tightly, one hand cradling the back of her head, the other

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

wrapped around her waist, and through the bond he felt everything.

Her grief pouring out. Her love for Vincent, still so strong it hurt. Her gratitude for David's arms around her, for his quiet acceptance, for not asking questions she couldn't answer. And that growing affection, warming like sunlight, making her feel safe and cared for and less alone.

David couldn't move. Couldn't let her go. He stood frozen in the small bathroom, holding Catherine while she cried, feeling her emotions through the bond like they were his own.

*I love you*, he thought helplessly. *I love you*.

They stood like that for a long time. Catherine crying. David holding her. The bond singing between them with emotions Catherine didn't even know she was sharing.

Finally, gradually, Catherine's sobs quieted. Her breathing steadied. She stayed in David's arms for another long moment, just letting herself be held, and David felt her gratitude deepen.

When she finally pulled back, her eyes were red and swollen, her face blotchy from crying. She looked up at David, and he saw her trying to find words.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice rough. "I don't—I can't—"

"You don't have to explain," David said quietly. "I understand."

And he did. He understood that she couldn't talk about Vincent without revealing the tunnels, the community, the impossible secret she'd kept for years. He understood that she was grieving someone David Morrison had never met, someone she couldn't share with him.

Catherine saw his understanding in his eyes. Saw his quiet acceptance of her tears, her silence, her inability to explain. And David felt, through the bond, her overwhelming gratitude for that acceptance.

She stepped forward and hugged him again, tightly, fiercely. David wrapped his arms around her and held on, and for a moment they just stood there, two people

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

holding each other in a small bathroom, connected by grief and affection and a bond only one of them knew existed.

Then Catherine pulled back, wiped her eyes, and gave him a watery smile.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Always,” David said.

Catherine squeezed his hand once, then turned and walked out of the bathroom, through the apartment, toward the door. David followed, his heart still pounding, the bond still humming with the echo of her emotions.

At the door, Catherine turned back to him. “I should go,” she said. “I need to—I need some time.”

“Of course,” David said. “Take all the time you need.”

Catherine nodded, then surprised him by stepping close and hugging him one more time. This hug was different—gentler, but somehow more intimate. Like she was memorizing the feel of his arms around her.

“I’ll call you,” she said against his shoulder.

“I’ll be here,” David promised.

Then she was gone, the door closing softly behind her, and David was alone in his apartment with the ghost of her emotions still resonating through the bond.

He sank onto the couch and put his head in his hands.

The bond was back. Fully, powerfully back. He could feel Catherine even now, walking down the stairs, her emotions a complex tangle of grief and gratitude and confusion and that growing affection that terrified and thrilled him in equal measure.

*She’s falling for David, he thought. While still loving Vincent. While still grieving for Vincent.*

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler



And David—who was both and neither—had no idea what to do with that truth.

Catherine walked through the East Village in a daze, barely seeing the streets around her.

Her face was still damp from tears. Her chest ached. But beneath the grief, beneath the pain of being reminded so sharply of Vincent,

there was something else.

Warmth. Comfort. The memory of David's arms around her, holding her while she cried, not asking questions, not demanding explanations. Just *there*. Solid and steady and safe.

*David*, she thought, and felt her heart squeeze.

She'd known he was kind. Had known he was a good friend, someone she could rely on. But today, seeing his apartment, seeing the way he was opening himself up to new experiences with such genuine enthusiasm—it had touched something deep inside her.

He reminded her of Vincent.

Not just because of his eyes, though those blue eyes still sometimes made her breath catch. But because of who he was. His gentleness. His curiosity about the world. His appreciation for beauty—in a river stone, in a bridge, in candlelight and poetry and music. His quiet strength. His ability to hold space for her emotions without needing to fix them or understand them.

Vincent had been like that. Had held her when she cried, had accepted her silences, had loved her without needing her to explain every shadow in her heart.

And David—David was doing the same thing.

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

*I can't push him away, Catherine thought fiercely. I can't do what I did with my other friends. I can't let grief make me isolate myself from someone who cares about me this much.*

She'd done that after Vincent died. Had let friendships fade, had stopped returning calls, had built walls around herself because it was easier than explaining why she was grieving so deeply for someone no one else knew existed.

But David was different. David was becoming too important to her.

She thought about his apartment—the candles everywhere, the books of poetry, the small treasures he was collecting. The patchwork quilt that reminded her so much of Mary's work. The sketch of the Bow Bridge that could have been Vincent's twin.

*He's like Vincent in so many ways, Catherine thought. The things that made me fall in love with Vincent—his gentleness, his appreciation for beauty, his depth of feeling—David has those same qualities.*

The realization should have felt like a betrayal. Should have felt wrong, disloyal to Vincent's memory.

But it didn't.

It felt like a gift. Like the universe was giving her a second chance at connection, at friendship, at maybe—someday—something more.

*No, Catherine thought immediately. Not something more. David is my friend. Just my friend.*

But even as she thought it, she remembered the way his arms had felt around her. The way his thumb had brushed away her tear with such tenderness. The way he'd held her while she cried, his heart beating steady against her ear.

She remembered the growing warmth she'd felt toward him over these past weeks. The way she looked forward to their Saturday mornings. The way his smile made her smile. The way his enthusiasm for new experiences made her want to

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

experience things with him.

*I'm falling for him*, Catherine realized with a jolt of fear. *I'm falling for David*.

The thought terrified her. She wasn't ready. She still loved Vincent. Still grieved for him. Still woke up some mornings reaching for him in the bed beside her.

But she also felt alive when she was with David. Felt happy. Felt like maybe, just maybe, she could have a future that included more than just work and grief and memories.

*Vincent would want this for me*, Catherine thought, and knew it was true. Vincent had always wanted her to be happy. Had always told her that if anything happened to him, she should live. Should find joy. Should not let grief consume her.

But knowing that didn't make it less frightening.

Catherine stopped walking and realized she was standing in front of her brownstone. She'd walked the whole way home without really seeing where she was going, lost in her thoughts.

She looked up at her building, at the windows of her home where Vincent's sketch hung in her bedroom, and made herself a promise.

*I won't push David away*, she thought. *"Even if it scares me."*

David Morrison had become essential to her life. His friendship, his kindness, his gentle presence—she needed those things. Needed him.

And that realization filled her with equal parts hope and terror.

Catherine climbed the steps to her brownstone, unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

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Three weeks later the phone rang while Catherine was making tea.

She almost didn't answer—it had been a long day at work, and she was looking

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

forward to a quiet evening with a book. But something made her pick up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Cathy! Finally! I was beginning to think you’d moved and forgotten to tell me.”

Catherine smiled despite herself. “Hi, Jenny.”

“Don’t ‘Hi, Jenny’ me,” her friend said, but there was warmth in her voice. “It’s been almost two months since we’ve talked. I know you’re busy with work, but come on. I miss you.”

Catherine felt a pang of guilt. Jenny was right—she’d been letting their friendship drift again, the way she’d let so many relationships drift after Vincent died. But Jenny had always been persistent, always refused to let Catherine disappear completely.

“I’m sorry,” Catherine said, carrying the phone to the couch and curling up.

“You’re right. I’ve been... distracted.”

“Distracted,” Jenny repeated, and Catherine could hear the smile in her voice.

“That’s interesting. Because when I talked to Mary last week—yes, I’ve been visiting the tunnels, don’t give me that look I know you’re giving me—she said you seemed different lately. Lighter, she said. Like maybe you were finally starting to heal.”

Catherine’s throat tightened. “You’ve been going below?”

“Someone has to,” Jenny said gently. “Father asks about you every time. Mary too. They understand why you haven’t been back, Cathy. They don’t blame you. But they miss you.”

“I miss them too,” Catherine said quietly. “I just—I can’t. Not yet. Being down there without him...” She couldn’t finish the sentence.

“I know,” Jenny said. “I know, honey. But here’s the thing—Mary said something else. She said that when Father visited you at your brownstone a few weeks ago,

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

you seemed... I don't know. More like yourself. More present. And I've been thinking about that, and I realize—you sound different too. Right now, on the phone. You sound more like the Cathy I used to know.”

Catherine was quiet for a moment, thinking about the past few weeks.

“I've been spending time with someone,” Catherine said finally. “A friend.”

“A friend,” Jenny said, and Catherine could hear the curiosity. “Tell me about this friend.”

“His name is David Morrison. He's an architect at Patterson & Associates. We've been... we've been running together on Saturday mornings. Getting coffee. Just talking, mostly.”

“And?” Jenny prompted.

“And what?”

“And is he cute? Is he smart? Is he making you smile again?”

Catherine felt heat rise to her cheeks. “He's—yes. All of those things. He's very kind. Gentle. Protective. He has this way of seeing beauty in small things. He collects little treasures. There's something almost... innocent about it. Like he's discovering the world for the first time.”

Jenny was quiet for a moment. “You like him.”

“He's my friend,” Catherine said quickly.

“Cathy. I can hear it in your voice. You *like* him.”

Catherine closed her eyes. “I don't know what I feel. It's complicated.”

“Because of Vincent.”

“Because of Vincent,” Catherine agreed. “I still love him, Jenny. I always will. But David—David makes me feel less alone. He makes me laugh. He makes me want to do things again, experience things again. And I feel guilty about that, but I also

**Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*



*Catherine* by *Laura G*

feel... I don't know. Grateful. Like maybe I'm allowed to have this."

"Of course you're allowed to have this," Jenny said firmly. "Vincent would want you to be happy. You know he would."

"I know," Catherine whispered. "But knowing it and feeling it are two different things."

Jenny was quiet for a moment, then said, "I want to meet him."

"What?"

"This David Morrison who's putting a smile back on your face. I want to meet him. Have dinner with me. Both of you. This Saturday."

Catherine's first instinct was to say no. To keep David separate from this part of her life, from the people who knew about Vincent and the tunnels and everything she'd lost. But then she thought about David's apartment, about the way he'd held her while she cried, about the growing affection she felt for him that both terrified

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

and thrilled her.

*I won't push him away, she'd promised herself. Even if it scares me.*

“Okay,” Catherine said. “I’ll ask him. Where do you want to meet?”

“There’s that new Italian place on West 23rd. Bella Notte. It’s supposed to be amazing. And there’s a club right next door. We could grab dinner and then dance if we’re feeling adventurous.”

Catherine smiled. “That sounds perfect. I’ll call David tomorrow and see if he’s free.”

“Good,” Jenny said, satisfaction clear in her voice. “I can’t wait to meet this mysterious friend of yours.”

They talked for another twenty minutes, catching up on Jenny’s work at the publishing house, on mutual friends, on small details of daily life. When they finally hung up, Catherine sat on the couch for a long time, staring at the phone.

She was going to introduce David to Jenny. One of her closest friends. Someone who had known Vincent, who knew about the tunnels, who understood the depth of Catherine’s grief.

It felt significant. Like crossing some invisible threshold.

Catherine picked up the phone again and dialed David’s number before she could talk herself out of it.

David answered on the third ring. “Hello?”

“David, hi. It’s Catherine.”

“Catherine.” She could hear the smile in his voice, and it made her own smile widen. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine. I was just—I wanted to ask you something.”

“Of course. What is it?”

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

Catherine took a breath. “My friend Jenny—I’ve mentioned her before—she wants to meet you. She’s invited us to dinner this Saturday. At an Italian restaurant, in Chelsea. I know it’s short notice, and if you have other plans—”

David went very still. Jenny. Catherine’s friend Jenny. The same Jenny who had visited the tunnels occasionally, who brought supplies and news from above, who had known Vincent.

“I’d love to,” David said, and his voice was steady, though his mind was reeling. “I don’t have any plans. I’d be honored to meet your friend.”

Catherine felt relief wash over her. “Really? You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. Jenny’s important to you. I’d like to meet her.”

“Thank you,” Catherine said softly. “The restaurant is called Bella Notte. On West 23rd. Seven o’clock?”

“I’ll be there,” David promised. “Should I meet you there, or—”

“Let’s meet there,” Catherine said.

“Perfect. I’m looking forward to it.”

They talked for a few more minutes, and when Catherine hung up, she felt that same mixture of excitement and fear that had been following her around for the last few weeks.

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Saturday evening arrived, a warm July day. Catherine stood in front of her closet, trying to decide what to wear. She settled on a deep green dress—simple but elegant, with a fitted bodice and a skirt that fell to just above her knees. She left her hair down, applied minimal makeup, and studied herself in the mirror.

*You look happy*, she thought, and realized it was true. There was color in her cheeks, light in her eyes. She looked like someone who had something to look forward to.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

Catherine arrived at Bella Notte five minutes early and found Jenny already waiting outside, looking stunning in a red wrap dress.

“Cathy!” Jenny pulled her into a hug. “You look gorgeous. That dress is perfect on you. “

“Thanks. You look amazing, too.”

Jenny pulled back and studied Catherine’s face. “Mary was right. You do look different. Lighter.”

Before Catherine could respond, she saw David approaching from down the block.

He was wearing dark slacks and a charcoal gray shirt that brought out the blue of his eyes. His hair was slightly tousled from the wind, and he was smiling—that gentle, genuine smile that now made Catherine’s heart skip.

“David,” Catherine said as he reached them. “This is my friend Jenny Aronson. Jenny, this is David Morrison.”

David extended his hand, and Jenny took it, her eyes widening slightly as she looked at his face.

More specifically, at his eyes.

Catherine saw the recognition there—the same shock she’d felt the first time she’d really looked at David’s eyes and seen Vincent staring back at her.

“It’s wonderful to meet you,” David said warmly. “Catherine’s told me a lot about you.”

“Has she?” Jenny said, still staring at his eyes. Then she seemed to shake herself and smiled. “It’s great to meet you, too. I’ve been curious about the man who’s been making Cathy smile again.”

David glanced at Catherine, and she saw the pleasure in his expression. “I hope I live up to the expectations.”

“I have a feeling you will,” Jenny said, and there was something knowing in her

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

voice that made Catherine's cheeks warm.

They went inside, and the hostess led them to a corner table with soft lighting and a view of the street. David held out chairs for both women before taking his own seat, and Catherine felt that now-familiar warmth spreading through her chest.

*He's so gentle, she thought. So naturally kind.*

During dinner, Jenny talked about her work as a book agent and editor, and David listened with genuine interest, asking thoughtful questions. Catherine watched the two of them with growing amazement.

They were getting along. Easily, naturally, like they'd known each other for years instead of minutes.

When their food arrived—pasta for Catherine, chicken marsala for Jenny, risotto for David—the conversation shifted to books and music and art. David mentioned his recent visits to the Frick Collection and the Morgan Library, and Jenny's eyes lit up.

“The Morgan Library! I love that place. Have you seen the Gutenberg Bible they have?”

“I have,” David said, and his enthusiasm was palpable. “It's incredible. The craftsmanship, the artistry—I stood in front of it for twenty minutes just staring.”

Jenny laughed. “I did the same thing the first time I saw it. My friend thought I'd lost my mind.”

“Not at all,” David said seriously. “Some things deserve to be stared at. To be really *seen*.”

Catherine's heart felt like it was swelling with contentment. Deep, profound contentment.

Catherine had two people she loved sitting at this table with her. Jenny, who had been her friend for years, who had stood by her through Vincent's death and the aftermath. And David, who was becoming increasingly precious to her, who made

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

her feel alive again.

And they were getting along. Laughing together. Connecting.

It was more than Catherine had hoped for. More than she'd dared to dream.

David felt it through the bond—that wave of happiness, that sense of rightness—and it nearly took his breath away.

*She's happy*, he thought, stunned. *She's genuinely, deeply happy right now.*

And beneath that happiness, he felt something else. Affection. For both of them. For Jenny, her dear friend. And for him—for David—growing stronger with every passing moment.

David wanted to reach across the table and take Catherine's hand. Wanted to tell her he felt it too, this perfect moment of connection and joy. But he couldn't. So he just smiled at her, and she smiled back, the bond singing in his heart.

The dinner continued, and David found himself relaxing into the conversation in a way he hadn't expected. Jenny was easy to talk to, quick-witted and warm, and now here she was, sitting across from him, not knowing that the man she was talking to contained the consciousness of someone she'd once called a friend.

It was strange. It should have been painful—a reminder of everything he'd lost, everyone he'd had to leave behind. But David found it wasn't. Instead, it filled him with a strange kind of joy.

*I get to know her again*, he thought. *I get to be part of Catherine's life with her again, even if she doesn't know it's me.*

Jenny was telling a story about a particularly difficult author she was trying to represent—something funny and touching—and David found himself laughing, genuinely laughing, and the sound felt foreign and wonderful in David Morrison's throat.

Catherine was watching him with such warmth in her eyes, and through the bond, David felt her happiness intensify.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

*She loves seeing me happy, he realized. She loves seeing me connect with Jenny.*

The thought made his chest ache with bittersweet joy.

By the time dessert arrived—tiramisu they all shared—David was practically giddy. Catherine’s happiness was flowing through the bond like sunlight, warming him from the inside out, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this light.

Jenny was watching them both with an expression that was part amusement, part satisfaction. “You two are good together,” she said suddenly.

Catherine blinked. “What?”

“You and David. You’re good together. I can see why you’ve been spending so much time with him, Cathy. He makes you smile. Really smile. I haven’t seen you smile like this in...” She trailed off, but they all knew what she meant.

*Since Vincent died, David thought, and felt the familiar ache beneath the joy.*

But Catherine didn’t look sad. She looked at David, and her smile was soft and genuine. “He does make me smile,” she said quietly. “He reminds me that there’s still beauty in the world. Still things worth experiencing.”

David couldn’t speak. He just reached across the table and squeezed her hand, and Catherine squeezed back.

Jenny watched them with knowing eyes, and David saw her gaze linger on his face. On his eyes.

*She sees it, he thought. She sees Vincent in me.*

But Jenny didn’t say anything. She just smiled and raised her wine glass. “To new friendships,” she said. “And to old friends who refuse to let you hide from the world.”

They clinked glasses, and David felt Catherine’s happiness surge through the bond again, making him almost dizzy with the intensity of it.

They were finishing their coffee when the music started.

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

It was coming from next door—the nightclub Jenny had mentioned. The bass was deep and rhythmic, and even through the restaurant walls, David could hear the distinctive sound of 90’s dance music.

Jenny’s eyes lit up. “Oh my God, I love this song! We should go dancing.”

Catherine laughed. “Jenny, we just ate a huge meal.”

“So? We’ll dance it off. Come on, Cathy. When’s the last time you went dancing?”

Catherine was quiet for a moment, and David felt a flicker of sadness through the bond. *With Vincent*, he realized. *The last time she danced was with me.*

But then Catherine looked at David, and there was a question in her eyes. “What do you think? Are you up for it?”

David had no idea how to dance to 90’s music. Vincent had never learned. But looking at Catherine’s hopeful expression, at Jenny’s enthusiasm, he found himself nodding.

“Why not?” he said. “Let’s go dancing.”

Jenny cheered, and Catherine’s happiness blazed through the bond so brightly that David had to take a breath to steady himself.

David paid the check—waving off both women’s protests—and they walked next door.

The club was dimly lit, with neon signs on the walls and a packed dance floor. The music was loud—some song David didn’t recognize, but that made Jenny squeal with delight.

David paid the entrance fee for all three of them, and they made their way through the crowd toward the dance floor.

“I’m going to get us drinks!” Catherine shouted over the music. “What do you want?”

“Beer!” Jenny called back.

**Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*



*Jenny* by *Laura G*

“Same!” David said, and Catherine nodded and headed toward the bar.

Jenny grabbed David’s hand and pulled him onto the dance floor, and suddenly David was surrounded by bodies moving to the pulsing beat.

*I have no idea what I’m doing*, David thought with a mixture of panic and amusement.

But David Morrison’s body seemed to have some muscle memory. His hips moved to the rhythm, his shoulders loosened, and before he knew it, he was dancing—awkwardly at first, then with growing confidence.

Jenny was laughing, her movements fluid and unselfconscious, and David found himself laughing too. The music was infectious, the energy of the crowd intoxicating, and for a moment, David let himself just *be*. Just exist in this body, in

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

this moment, dancing with Catherine's friend in a crowded nightclub.

It was absurd. It was wonderful. It was nothing David had ever imagined experiencing.

Then the bond flared with sudden, sharp annoyance.

David's head snapped toward the bar, his body going still even as the music pounded around him.

Catherine was standing near the bar, three beers balanced in her hands, and a man was gripping her arm. He was tall, broad-shouldered, clearly drunk, and he was pulling Catherine toward the dance floor despite her obvious resistance.

David felt Catherine's annoyance spike into alarm, and something primal surged through him.

*No.*

David was moving before he consciously decided to, pushing through the crowd with single-minded focus. Jenny called after him, but he didn't stop.

He reached Catherine just as the man tightened his grip on her arm.

"Let go of her," David said, his voice low and dangerous.

The man turned, his eyes unfocused with alcohol. "Mind your own business, buddy. The lady and I are just going to dance."

"The lady doesn't want to dance with you," David said, and there was something in his voice—something cold and controlled—that made the man's expression shift from annoyance to anger.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Let. Go. Of. Her." David's voice was barely above a whisper, but it cut through the music like a blade.

The man's face flushed red. "You think you can tell me what to do?" He released

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

Catherine's arm and swung at David, his fist aimed at David's face.

David moved, then caught the man's fist, twisted, and drove his other fist into the man's solar plexus. The man doubled over, gasping, and David hit him again—a controlled strike to the jaw that sent the man crashing to the floor, unconscious.

The whole thing took less than ten seconds.

The bouncer—a massive man who'd been watching from the door—was there immediately. He took one look at the unconscious man on the floor, then at David's cold expression, and nodded.

"I saw the whole thing," the bouncer said. "He grabbed the lady. You were defending her. I'll get him out of here."

The bouncer hauled the unconscious man up and dragged him toward the exit, and suddenly David was alone with Catherine in the middle of the dance floor, people giving them a wide berth.

David's hands were shaking. Adrenaline and anger were coursing through his veins, and he could still feel the echo of Catherine's momentary fear through the bond.

*He touched her. He grabbed her. He could have hurt her.*

David pulled Catherine against his chest, wrapping his arms around her tightly, and Catherine came willingly, pressing her face against his shoulder.

"Are you okay?" David asked, his voice rough. "Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine," Catherine said, but David could feel her trembling slightly. "You came so fast. How did you know?"

*Because I felt your fear through the bond, David thought. Because I'll always know when you need me.*

But he couldn't say that. So he just held her tighter and said, "I saw him grab you. I couldn't—I couldn't let him hurt you."

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

Catherine pulled back slightly and looked up at him, and there was something in her eyes that made David's breath catch. Gratitude. Affection. And something else. Something warmer, deeper.

"Thank you," she whispered.

David couldn't speak. He just nodded and held her, and through the bond, he felt her fear fading, replaced by that warm contentment again.

Jenny appeared beside them, her eyes wide. "Holy shit, David. That was—are you okay? Is Cathy okay?"

"We're fine," Catherine said, pulling away from David reluctantly. "Some drunk guy grabbed me. David... handled it."

Jenny looked at David with new respect. "I'll say. Remind me never to piss you off."

David managed a weak smile, but his heart was still racing, the adrenaline still singing through his veins.

Jenny looked between them, saw the way David was still touching Catherine's arm, the way Catherine was leaning into him, and something shifted in her expression.

*Maybe lightning does strike twice*, Jenny thought, and the realization filled her with wonder and hope.

"Come on," Jenny said gently. "Let's dance. Let's not let that asshole ruin our night."

Catherine looked at David questioningly, and David nodded. The anger was fading now, replaced by the simple need to be near Catherine, to keep her safe, to feel her happiness.

They danced for another hour, the three of them together, and gradually David felt the tension leave his body. Catherine was smiling again, laughing at something Jenny said.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

*She's safe, he thought. She's happy. That's all that matters.*

When they finally left the club, it was well past midnight.

David flagged down a cab, and as it pulled up to the curb, Catherine turned to him.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “For tonight. For dinner, for dancing, for—for protecting me.”

“Always,” David said, and meant it with every fiber of his being.

Catherine stepped closer, and David's breath caught as she rose up on her toes.

And kissed him.

On the lips.

It was brief—just a soft press of her mouth against his—but it sent shockwaves through David's entire body. Through the bond, he felt Catherine's affection, her gratitude, her growing feelings for him, and it was almost too much to bear.

Then Catherine pulled back, smiling, and before David could react—before he could process what had just happened—Jenny swooped in and kissed him on the cheek.

“You're good people, David Morrison,” Jenny said with a grin. “Take care of our girl.”

Then both women were climbing into the cab, Catherine waving at him through the window, the cab pulling away, and David standing alone on the sidewalk in Chelsea.

*She kissed me, David thought, stunned. Catherine kissed me.*

He touched his lips, still feeling the ghost of her mouth against his, and through the bond—still humming with the echo of her emotions—he felt her happiness, her affection, her hope.

David started walking, not really seeing where he was going, his mind replaying

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

the kiss over and over.

*She kissed me.*

*Thank you, Vincent thought, sending the prayer out into the universe. Thank you for this second chance. Thank you for letting me be part of her life again, even if she doesn't know it's me.*

\*\*\*

David sat at his drafting table Sunday afternoon, working on preliminary sketches for the community center project. But his hand kept drifting to a blank sheet of paper.

The pencil moved with practiced ease—David Morrison had been a skilled draftsman, but Vincent had been an artist. The two talents merged seamlessly, and Catherine's face emerged from the white space. Her eyes. The warmth in her expression when she'd kissed him goodbye.

Then memory surfaced. Years ago, in the tunnels, he'd sketched her sleeping in their chamber. And after they'd made love, when she'd lain beside him in candlelight, unself-conscious and beautiful.

David's hand moved to a fresh sheet before he could stop himself.

The lines came faster. Catherine's body taking shape—the curve of her spine, the slope of her shoulder, the small birthmark on the curve of her hip. He remembered every detail. The peaceful expression she'd worn in sleep, trusting and vulnerable.

David's throat tightened. These hands—David Morrison's hands—had never touched her bare skin. But Vincent's remembered. Every moment of that intimacy, that profound connection.

*I held her. I loved her.*

The ache deepened, spreading through his ribs.

But then he remembered the kiss. Brief and sweet and full of promise.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

*She's falling for me.*

The realization hit him with the force of a physical blow. Not falling for Vincent. Not mourning Vincent. Falling for *David*.

The temptation rose in him like a tidal wave, threatening to sweep away every careful wall he'd built.

*Tell her. Tell her now. She's falling in love with you—tell her who you really are. Let her know that the man she's falling for is the same soul she loved before. End this deception. Give her the truth.*

David's hands trembled as he set down the pencil.

*She kissed me. She's choosing me. This is the moment. This is when I could tell her and she might—she might actually believe me. She might see past David's face and recognize Vincent's soul.*

But even as the thought formed, another voice rose to meet it—colder, more brutal, infinitely more terrifying.

*And then what?*

*Because I'm not Vincent anymore. I'm not the man she loved.*

David pressed his palm against the cool glass, watching the city lights blur.

*I'm not just Vincent wearing David's face. I'm both of them. I'm something new—something that's never existed before. Vincent's soul merged with David's life, and I don't know how to separate them anymore. I don't know where Vincent ends and David begins.*

And that was the most terrifying realization of all.

*Vincent would have done anything to give Catherine a normal life.*

*Maybe this is the gift. Maybe this is what Vincent's sacrifice was for—not just saving her life, but giving her the chance at a normal future. With a normal man. Someone who can walk beside her in daylight. Someone who can take her to*

## **Between Two Lives** by CandlelitChandler

*restaurants and theaters and museums without fear. Someone who can give her the life Vincent never could.*

David felt tears prick his eyes.

*And if I tell her the truth, I take that gift away. I make it complicated again. I make it about the impossible, the supernatural, the burden of reconciling two identities that shouldn't exist in one body.*

*I can be her David. Her human love. Her second chance at happiness. I can give her the normal life Vincent always wanted for her. I can love her in sunlight, without shadows, without complications.*

*But only if I bury Vincent to do it.*

The pain of that realization was exquisite.

It meant never hearing her say Vincent's name with love again. Never having her know that the soul she'd loved was still here, still present, still devoted to her. Never being recognized for the sacrifice he'd made, the months of silent watching, the agony of staying hidden while she grieved.

*No, you need to tell her. Stop being so afraid. You need to do it soon. Before things go too far.*

David set both sketches aside and returned to his architectural drawings. His heart was full of bittersweet longing.

\*\*\*

Catherine sat in her library on Sunday afternoon, a cup of coffee cooling in her hands. There was a stack of case files waiting on the table that demanded attention, but her mind kept drifting back to the previous night.

The dinner had been wonderful. Jenny and David had gotten along so naturally. *He fits*, she'd thought. *He fits into my life.*

But it was what happened at the nightclub that kept circling back through her

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

thoughts.

The man grabbing her wrist. The spike of alarm. And then—almost before she'd fully registered the danger—David was *there*. Not pushing through the crowd. Not fighting his way to her side. Just *there*, as if he'd known the exact moment she needed him.

Catherine wrapped both hands around her coffee mug.

How had he known? They'd been separated by at least twenty feet, the dance floor packed with bodies. She hadn't called out. Hadn't even looked for him. But somehow David had sensed her distress and moved with absolute certainty to reach her.

*Intuition*, she told herself. *He was watching out for me. That's all.*

But it felt like more than that. It felt like... like David was somehow attuned to her in a way that defied explanation. The way he'd appeared at her side during the hostage situation. The way he seemed to understand what she needed before she asked. The way his presence made her feel less alone.



*Catherine* by *Laura G*

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

Catherine set down her coffee.

*I'm falling for him, she admitted to herself. Really falling for him.*

The realization should have frightened her. It had been almost a year and a half since Vincent died. So many months since the bond had gone silent and left her drowning in darkness. But David made her want to try. Made her want to believe she could be whole again.

*Five days, she thought. They'd made plans for next Friday—dinner and maybe a movie. Five days felt impossibly long.*

Catherine grabbed some of the files, determined to focus on work. But her hand drifted to her phone instead, thumb hovering over David's contact.

*Too soon, she told herself. Don't be that person who can't wait five days.*

But God, she wanted to hear his voice.

Catherine set the phone down firmly and opened the first case file. Work. She could do work. She could be professional and focused and not think about David Morrison's blue eyes or the way he'd held her last night or the inexplicable sense that somehow, impossibly, he *knew* her.

\*\*\*

Friday evening arrived with Catherine running fifteen minutes late. She'd gotten caught up reviewing depositions and lost track of time. When she finally met David at the small restaurant on Second Avenue, he was waiting outside, hands in his pockets, looking patient and amused.

"I'm so sorry," Catherine said breathlessly. "Work ran late and—"

"It's fine," David said, smiling. "But we should probably skip appetizers if we want to make the seven-thirty showing."

They ordered quickly—a chicken salad for her, burger and fries for him—and ate faster than either of them usually would. Catherine kept checking her watch, and

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

David kept catching her eye and grinning, which made her laugh despite her anxiety about being late.

“We’re going to miss the previews,” Catherine said as David paid the check.

“Then we’ll miss the previews.” David stood and held out his hand. “Come on.”

Catherine took his hand without thinking, and suddenly they were moving—not quite running but walking briskly through the evening crowds on Second Avenue. David’s hand was warm and solid around hers, and Catherine found herself laughing as they dodged other pedestrians and crossed against the light.

“This is ridiculous,” she said, breathless.

“This is fun,” David corrected, pulling her around a slow-moving couple.

They made it to the theater with three minutes to spare. David bought tickets while Catherine caught her breath, and then they were inside, finding seats in the half-dark as the previews started.

David didn’t let go of her hand.

The movie was a thriller—something about art theft and international intrigue that Catherine had wanted to see. But halfway through, she realized she’d stopped paying attention to the plot.

David’s thumb was moving in slow circles across the back of her hand. The touch was absent-minded, unconscious, but it sent warmth spreading up Catherine’s arm and into her chest. She glanced sideways at him in the flickering light from the screen. His profile was strong, focused on the movie, but his thumb kept moving in that gentle, hypnotic rhythm.

Catherine shifted slightly in her seat, suddenly very aware of how close they were sitting. Their shoulders touched. Their knees brushed. The air between them felt charged with something electric.

On screen, the two leads were in a hotel room in Paris, tension crackling between them. The woman stepped closer. The man’s hand came up to cup her face. And

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

then they were kissing—urgent, passionate, inevitable.

Catherine felt her breath catch. She could feel David’s attention shift, could sense him becoming aware of her the same way she was aware of him. His thumb stilled on her hand.

She turned her head at the same moment he did.

For a heartbeat, they just looked at each other in the darkness. Catherine could see the question in David’s eyes, the careful restraint. He wouldn’t push. He would wait for her to decide.

Catherine leaned in and kissed him.

It wasn’t tentative or friendly or careful. It was real—deep and searching and full of all the want she’d been trying to ignore. David made a soft sound against her mouth and kissed her back, his free hand coming up to cradle the side of her face.

When they finally broke apart, Catherine was breathing hard. She rested her forehead against David’s, her eyes closed, feeling his breath warm against her lips.

“Catherine,” he whispered.

She kissed him again, softer this time but no less meaningful. Then she shifted, resting her head on his shoulder, and David’s arm came around her, holding her close.

They stayed like that through the rest of the movie, Catherine’s head on David’s shoulder, their hands still clasped. Just before the credits rolled, David turned his head and pressed a kiss to her temple.

Catherine tilted her face up and kissed him once more—slow and sweet and full of promise.

They left the theater hand in hand, neither of them ready for the evening to end.

“I should probably get a cab,” Catherine said, but she didn’t move toward the curb.

“Or we could walk,” David suggested quietly. “It’s a nice night.”

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

Catherine looked up at him and smiled. “Yeah. Let’s walk.”

They walked slowly through the East Village, taking the long way back to Catherine’s brownstone. They didn’t talk much—just walked with their hands clasped, occasionally stopping to look in shop windows or to let David point out a building he liked.

When they reached her door, Catherine turned to face him, still holding his hand.

“Do you want to come in?” she asked. “For coffee or... or just to talk?”

David’s eyes searched hers. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” Catherine said. And she was.

The library had been Vincent’s favorite room in the brownstone. It was warm and comfortable, with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and soft lighting with a deep, comfortable couch that faced the fireplace.

Vincent had loved that couch.

Catherine pushed the thought away as she led David inside. She didn’t want to think about Vincent right now. Didn’t want the past to intrude on whatever this was becoming.

“This is beautiful,” David said, looking around at the books, the art on the walls, the careful curation of the space.

“Thank you.” Catherine set her purse down and turned to face him. “I spend a lot of time in here.”

David moved closer, his eyes never leaving hers. “I can see why.”

They didn’t make it to the couch right away. They stood in the middle of the room, kissing slowly, learning each other. David’s hands were careful on her waist, her back, her face. Catherine’s fingers threaded through his hair, traced the line of his jaw, pressed against the solid warmth of his chest.

When they finally did sink onto the couch, it was with a shared sigh of relief.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

Catherine curled into David's side, and his arm came around her, holding her close. They talked a little—about the movie, about work, about nothing important. But mostly they just touched. Gentle caresses. Soft kisses. The kind of exploration that felt both new and somehow familiar.

David's hand traced patterns on Catherine's arm. His lips brushed her temple, her cheek, the corner of her mouth. Catherine's fingers played with the collar of his shirt, feeling the warmth of his skin beneath the fabric.

The kissing deepened. Catherine shifted, turning more fully into David's embrace, and felt his sharp intake of breath when her hand slid up his chest. His fingers tightened on her waist, pulling her closer, and Catherine felt heat bloom low in her belly.

And then—suddenly—David went still.

Catherine pulled back slightly, confused. "David?"

"I should go," he said quietly. His voice was rough, but there was something else in it. Certainty. Understanding.

"What? Why?" Catherine felt a flutter of panic in her chest. Had she done something wrong? Pushed too far?

David's hand came up to cup her face, his thumb brushing her cheekbone.

"Because you're not ready," he said gently. "Not tonight."

Catherine opened her mouth to protest, but the words died in her throat. Because he was right. Somewhere beneath the desire and the warmth and the wanting, there was a thread of anxiety. A sense that things were moving too fast, that she needed time to process, to be sure.

But how did he know that? She hadn't said anything. Hadn't pulled away or hesitated.

"How did you...?" she started.

**Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*



**Vincent and Catherine** by *Laura G*

David smiled, soft and sad. “I just know,” he said. “I can tell.”

He stood, gently disentangling himself from her embrace, and Catherine felt the loss of his warmth like a physical ache. But there was also relief. Gratitude that he understood without her having to explain.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” David said, leaning down to press one more kiss to her forehead. “Okay?”

“Okay,” Catherine whispered.

She walked him to the door, and they kissed once more on the threshold—sweet and lingering.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

After he left, Catherine stood in the library for a long time, her fingers pressed to her lips.

*He knew, she thought. He knew exactly when to stop. Knew exactly what I needed.*

It should have been comforting. It was comforting. But it was also... strange. The way David seemed to read her so perfectly. The way he knew how to kiss her—not tentatively or experimentally, but with confidence, as if he already knew what she liked. The way his hands had found exactly the right places to touch. The way he'd sensed her anxiety before she'd even fully acknowledged it herself.

*It's just intuition, Catherine told herself. He's just paying attention.*

But it felt like more than that. It felt like David could see inside her somehow. Like he knew her in a way that should have taken months or years to develop.

Catherine shook her head and headed upstairs to bed. She was overthinking this. David was just... attentive. Caring. Maybe a little too good at reading people.

But as she lay in the darkness, Catherine couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more going on. Something she couldn't quite name.

She fell asleep thinking about David's eyes—the way they seemed to hold depths she couldn't fathom. The way they looked at her with such profound understanding.

Almost as if he'd known her forever.

\*\*\*

Saturday morning found Catherine at the DA's office, doing Joe a favor by reviewing case files that needed attention before Monday. The building was quiet, most of the staff gone for the weekend, and Catherine worked steadily through the stack of folders on her desk.

Her phone buzzed around noon. A text from David: *Hope your Saturday at the office isn't too painful. Still on for next weekend?*

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

Catherine smiled and typed back: *Definitely. Saturday run and then... flea market?*

*Perfect*, David replied. *I'll pick you up at 8.*

Catherine set her phone down, feeling warmth spread through her chest. Next weekend felt impossibly far away.

\*\*\*

The following Saturday morning was crisp and clear, perfect for running. Catherine met David at the entrance to Central Park, and they fell into an easy rhythm, their feet hitting the pavement in sync. Today felt different. There was a new awareness between them, a charge in the air that hadn't been there before.

When they finished, both breathing hard and flushed with exertion, David caught Catherine's hand and pulled her close.

"Hi," he said, grinning.

"Hi," Catherine replied, and kissed him.

Later on that afternoon, they met at the flea market in Chelsea. It was crowded and chaotic, vendors selling everything from vintage clothing to antique furniture to handmade crafts. David moved through the stalls with barely contained delight, stopping to examine old books, carved wooden boxes, delicate glass paperweights.

"Look at this," he said, holding up a small bronze sculpture of a horse. The craftsmanship was exquisite, every muscle and tendon rendered in perfect detail. "The artist must have spent hours on this. See how the mane flows? How the legs are positioned mid-stride?"

Catherine watched him, charmed by his enthusiasm. David handled the sculpture with reverence, turning it in the light, his fingers tracing the lines with obvious appreciation.

"You really love this stuff," she said.

"Beauty matters," David said simply. He set the sculpture down carefully and

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

moved to the next stall, where an elderly woman was selling hand-painted tiles. “People put so much of themselves into creating things. It deserves to be noticed. Appreciated.”

They wandered through the market hand in hand, David stopping frequently to admire something—a set of leather-bound books, a collection of vintage postcards, a hand-carved chess set. Catherine found herself seeing the market through his eyes, noticing details she would have missed on her own.

At a stall selling vintage photographs, David paused, then turned to her with a slightly sheepish expression. “So, I have something to ask you.”

“Okay,” Catherine said, curious.

“There’s a luncheon in three weeks. On a Friday. For the firm—Patterson & Associates. It’s one of those quarterly things where they try to convince us we’re all one big happy family.” He smiled wryly. “I usually avoid them like the plague. My colleagues have been teasing me about it for years, actually. Apparently I have a reputation for being... not exactly a people person.”

Catherine raised an eyebrow, amused. “You? Not a people person?”

“I know, shocking.” David’s smile widened. “But lately I’ve been making more of an effort. Getting to know some of them better. And this time...” He squeezed her hand gently. “This time I’d really like you to come with me. If you’re free.”

Catherine felt a flutter of surprise—and pleasure. “You want me to meet your colleagues?”

“I want you there,” David said simply. “I want to share that part of my life with you.”

The sincerity in his voice made her chest warm. “Then yes. I’d love to come.”

David’s face lit up. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Catherine leaned up and kissed him softly. “I want to see you in your element. Architect David Morrison.”

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“Fair warning,” David said, grinning. “They’re going to give me endless grief about bringing someone. I’ve turned down every invitation for the past three years.”

“I can handle it,” Catherine assured him.

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The weeks went by quickly. Catherine and David spent as much free time as they could together, enjoying each other’s company, growing closer each day.

Finally, Friday came, and Catherine met David outside Tavern on the Green. The restaurant was elegant and bustling, filled with well-dressed professionals. David was waiting by the entrance in a charcoal suit that made his blue eyes even more striking, and when he saw her, his whole face softened.

“You look beautiful,” he said, taking her hand.

“You clean up pretty well yourself,” Catherine replied, smoothing his lapel affectionately.

Inside, the private dining room was already crowded with architects and their partners, the noise level cheerful and animated. David guided her through the room with a hand at the small of her back, and Catherine could feel his quiet pride in having her there.

“David!” A tall man with graying temples and an easy smile approached them.

“You actually showed up. And with a guest, no less. Mark the calendar, everyone—David Morrison has joined the land of the living!”

David laughed, completely at ease. “Catherine, this is Richard Olrich, one of the senior partners. Richard, this is Catherine Chandler.”

“A pleasure,” Richard said warmly, shaking her hand. “I have to say, we were starting to think David was a myth. He’d show up for work, produce brilliant designs, then vanish like a ghost.”

“That’s not entirely fair,” a woman with short dark hair interjected, joining them

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with a glass of wine. “He’s been much better lately. Talking to us in the breakroom. Joining us for lunch. It’s been quite the transformation.” She extended her hand to Catherine. “I’m Lisa Huang. I work in the sustainable design division with David.”

“Nice to meet you,” Catherine said, liking her immediately.

“We’ve been trying to figure out what changed,” Lisa continued, her eyes twinkling. “Now I think we have our answer.”

David’s ears turned slightly pink, but he was smiling. “I just realized I was missing out,” he said, his hand finding Catherine’s again. “On a lot of things.”

“Well, we’re glad you figured it out,” Richard said. “And we’re very glad to meet you, Catherine. David’s work has always been exceptional, but lately there’s been something different about it. More... alive, somehow. More connected.”

Catherine glanced at David, who was looking at her with such open affection that her heart squeezed.

“He’s pretty exceptional,” she said softly.

Over lunch, Catherine watched David interact with his colleagues—saw how comfortable he’d become, how genuinely engaged he was in their conversations about projects and design challenges. He introduced her to several other architects, and each one expressed some version of the same surprise and delight at seeing him there, at seeing him so present and happy.

“You know,” Lisa said quietly to Catherine while David was deep in conversation with Richard about a new project, “I’ve worked with David for three years, and I’ve never seen him like this. Whatever you’re doing, keep doing it. He’s finally letting himself be part of the world.”

Catherine felt a lump form in her throat. “I think he’s doing that all on his own,” she said. “I’m just... glad to be here for it.”

When David returned to her side, he slipped his arm around her waist naturally,

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and Catherine leaned into him, feeling the rightness of it. This was his world—his professional life, his colleagues, his work—and he wanted her in it. Wanted to share it with her.

“Thank you for coming,” David murmured against her hair.

“Thank you for asking me,” Catherine replied, and meant it with her whole heart.

They left Tavern on the Green with David’s hand warm in hers, the afternoon sun filtering through the trees of Central Park. David hailed a cab on Central Park West, and they slid into the backseat together, Catherine’s shoulder pressed against his.

“I want to show you something,” David said as the cab pulled into traffic. “At my apartment. I found this sculpture at a little shop in the Village—it reminded me of something you said about beauty existing in unexpected places.”

Catherine smiled, her fingers lacing through his. “I’d love to see it.”

The cab made it about fifteen blocks before the driver cursed softly in Spanish and pulled over. “Flat tire,” he announced, already reaching for his phone. “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to get another cab. I’m only three blocks from Amsterdam and 73rd if you want to walk.”

David glanced at Catherine, then at the sky, which had turned gray and heavy. “That’s my street. We can make it.”

They climbed out just as the first drops began to fall—fat, heavy drops that promised more to come.

“We should hurry,” Catherine said, laughing as the drizzle intensified.

They made it half a block before the sky opened up.

“Run!” David shouted, grabbing her hand, and they took off together, their dress shoes splashing through puddles forming on the sidewalk.

Catherine was laughing so hard she could barely breathe, her hair plastered to her

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face, her dress clinging to her body. David’s suit jacket was soaked through, his white shirt becoming translucent against his chest. They dodged other pedestrians scrambling for cover, leaped over a growing stream at the curb, and finally—finally—reached David’s building.

David fumbled with his keys, his hands shaking from cold and laughter, and then they were inside, dripping on the lobby floor, both of them breathless and grinning like children.

“Oh my God,” Catherine gasped, pushing wet hair out of her eyes. “We’re completely soaked.”

“Come on,” David said, taking her hand again. “Let’s get you dried off.”

Inside his apartment, they stood in the entryway, water pooling at their feet. David’s shirt clung to every line of his chest and shoulders, the fabric nearly transparent. Catherine’s dress was molded to her curves, the silk dark with rain,



*Catherine* by *Laura G*

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and when she looked up at him, she saw his eyes darken with something that made her breath catch.

The bond flared to life between them—sudden, fierce, undeniable.

Catherine felt her desire for him surge through her like electricity, felt an answering heat from him that made her dizzy. She wanted to feel his chest under her hands, wanted to press herself against him, wanted—

They came together like magnets.

David's mouth found hers, hot and demanding, and Catherine kissed him back with equal hunger. Her hands went to his shirt, fumbling with the buttons, desperate to feel his skin. David's fingers found the zipper at the back of her dress, tugging it down as he kissed her neck, her jaw, her mouth again.

“Catherine,” he breathed against her lips, and she felt the word reverberate through the bond, through her entire body.

She got his shirt open, her palms sliding over the hard planes of his chest, and he groaned, his hands spanning her waist, pulling her closer—

And then Catherine saw it.

In the corner of her vision, on the wall near his drafting table, a drawing. A sketch in charcoal and white chalk.

A woman in bed. Naked. Intimate. Vulnerable.

Catherine froze.

She pulled back from David, her heart suddenly pounding for an entirely different reason, and walked toward the drawing as if in a trance. Her wet shoes left prints on the hardwood floor.

It was her.

The drawing was her—lying on her side in bed, one arm draped over her hip, her hair spilling across the pillow. The lines were tender, reverent, capturing not just

## **Between Two Lives** *by CandlelitChandler*

her body but something deeper. Something known.

And there, on the curve of her back, just above her hip—

A birthmark.

A small, crescent-shaped birthmark that she'd had since birth. A birthmark that was always covered by her clothing. A birthmark that no one could see unless—

Unless they'd seen her naked.

Catherine's hands trembled as she lifted the drawing from the wall. She stared at it, her mind racing, pieces clicking into place with terrible, impossible clarity.

*How he knows what I need before I ask.*

*How he senses when I'm upset, when I'm afraid.*

*How he looks at me like he's known me forever.*

*He knows how to touch me, where to touch me*

*The candles, the music, the books*

*The first aid kit*

*The drawing in the bathroom, this drawing*

She turned slowly, the drawing clutched in her hands and looked at David.

He stood frozen, his shirt hanging open, his face stricken with an expression that was equal parts fear and longing and something that looked like relief.

Catherine's eyes filled with tears. Her voice came out as barely a whisper.

“How?”

David's throat worked. He took a step toward her, then stopped, as if afraid she would run.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

“I don’t know,” he said hoarsely pushing the hair away from his face. But I have been trying to find a way to tell you since I woke up in this body”

Catherine felt the truth of it wash over her. She looked at the drawing again, at the impossible proof in her hands, and then back at the man standing before her. The man with David Morrison’s face and body. The man with Vincent’s soul.

She walked toward him slowly, her heart in her throat, and stopped directly in front of him. She looked up into his blue eyes—eyes that were impossibly the same—and saw everything she needed to see.

All the love. All the longing. All the truth.

Catherine reached up and touched his face with trembling fingers.

“Vincent,” she whispered.

And Vincent closed his eyes, tears spilling down his cheeks, and nodded.

And then she kissed him.

Vincent’s arms came around her, pulling her close, and Catherine melted into him. This was different from every other kiss they’d shared as David and Catherine—this was recognition, reunion, homecoming. Her hands slid into his damp hair, and she felt him shudder against her.

*The man I loved with all my heart, Catherine thought, her mind reeling. The man I’m falling in love with. They’re the same person. They’ve always been the same person.*

She’d been loving him all along without knowing it was him.

Vincent’s hands moved over her back, her waist, her hips—touching her with a reverence that was aching familiar. Catherine pulled back just enough to look at him, her fingers going to the buttons of his wet shirt. She pushed the fabric off his shoulders slowly, her eyes never leaving his face, and then her hands were on his chest.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

She touched him like she was rediscovering him. Her palms slid over the smooth planes of his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath her fingers. She traced the lines of his muscles, his ribs, the flat plane of his stomach. Her hands moved to his arms, feeling the strength there, the power held in check.

“You’re different,” she whispered, the first words either of them had spoken since she’d said his name. “But you’re the same. You’re *you*.”

Vincent’s hands came up to cup her face, his thumbs brushing over her cheekbones. Then he reached for the straps of her dress, sliding them down her shoulders. The wet silk clung to her skin, and he peeled it away slowly, his fingers tracing patterns only he would know—the curve of her collarbone, the hollow of her throat, the sensitive spot just below her ear that made her gasp.

When his hands cupped her breasts, Catherine’s breath caught. He touched her with absolute knowledge, with the certainty of someone who had memorized every inch of her body. His thumbs brushed over her nipples, and she arched into him, a soft sound escaping her throat.

“Catherine,” Vincent breathed, and then he was lifting her, his arms strong and sure beneath her.

Catherine wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms around his neck, and buried her face against his shoulder as he carried her through the apartment. And then she felt it—a flutter in her chest, faint at first, like something stirring from a long sleep. The bond. It was waking up.

*Oh God,* Catherine thought, her breath catching. *It’s real. It’s really him.*

Vincent’s bedroom was fully Vincent’s. With the quilt, the candles, the art. He laid her on the bed with infinite care, his body covering hers, and she pulled him down into another kiss. Her hands roamed over his back, his shoulders, relearning the feel of him even as she discovered him anew.

The bond pulsed stronger now, and Catherine gasped against his mouth as Vincent’s emotions flooded through the connection—his overwhelming joy, his relief so profound it made her chest ache, his love pouring into her like sunlight

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

after endless darkness. She could feel how desperately he'd needed this, needed *her*, how lost he'd been without their connection.

*I feel you*, Catherine thought, tears streaming down her temples. *I feel you, Vincent. You're here. You're really here.*

He pulled her dress down over her hips, his hands reverent on her thighs, her calves, until she was bare beneath him. Catherine reached for his belt, her fingers fumbling with the buckle, and Vincent helped her, shedding the rest of his clothes with urgent efficiency.

And then there was nothing between them.

Vincent braced himself above her, his eyes searching hers, and Catherine saw the question there. The need for permission, for confirmation that this was real, that she wanted this.

“Yes,” Catherine whispered, pulling him down to her. “Yes, Vincent. Please.”

He entered her slowly, his forehead pressed to hers, and Catherine felt tears slip down her temples. The sensation of him filling her was overwhelming—physically, emotionally, spiritually. This was completion. This was coming home.

And the bond *blazed*.

Catherine cried out as the connection roared to life between them, fully awake now, singing with recognition and transcendent joy. It wasn't just reactivating—it was *celebrating*, rejoicing in their reunion. She could feel Vincent's soul touching hers, could feel the essence of who he was beneath this new body, this new face. The bond knew him. Her soul knew him.

*Two souls meant to be together*, Catherine realized with absolute certainty. *Across time. Across lives. Across death itself.*

“Catherine,” Vincent groaned, his voice rough with emotion. “My Catherine.”

“Yours,” she gasped, her hands gripping his shoulders. “Always yours.”

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

They moved together with a rhythm that was both familiar and new. Vincent's body was different—leaner, smoother—but the way he touched her, the way he knew exactly where and how to move, was achingly, perfectly Vincent. He knew the angle that made her cry out, knew to slow down when she was close, knew to whisper her name against her throat in that way that undid her completely.

Through the bond, Catherine felt everything he felt—the exquisite pleasure of being inside her again, the overwhelming gratitude that she knew, the fierce protective love that had never dimmed. His emotions crashed over her in waves, amplifying her own pleasure until she couldn't tell where she ended and he began.

Catherine wrapped her legs around him, pulling him deeper, and the bond flared brighter, hotter. She sent her own emotions back through the connection—her love, her relief, her absolute certainty that this was right, that they were meant for this, meant for each other. She felt Vincent receive it, felt him shudder above her as her feelings merged with his.

*This is the proof, Catherine thought, her mind reeling with the truth of it. The bond is the proof. Some connections can't be broken. Not by darkness. Not by death. Not by time itself.*

"I love you," Vincent said against her lips, his hips moving faster now, more urgently. "I never stopped loving you. Not for a single moment."

"I know," Catherine gasped, her nails digging into his back. Through the bond, she could feel the truth of his words, could feel the love that had sustained him through this journey. "I know. I love you. I love you."

The pleasure built between them, spiraling higher and higher, the bond amplifying every sensation until it was almost unbearable. Catherine could feel Vincent's approaching climax as clearly as her own, could feel his desperate need to bring her with him, to share this moment of perfect unity.

And then she shattered.

Catherine cried out his name—his true name—and felt Vincent follow her over the edge, his body shuddering against hers, his face buried in her neck. The bond

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

exploded between them in a supernova of light and love and absolute recognition, their souls crying out to each other in a language older than words.

*I have you. I have you. I have you.*

For a long moment, they lay tangled together, breathing hard, their hearts racing in sync. The bond hummed between them, content now, settled and strong and *right*. Vincent's weight was solid and real above her, and Catherine held him tightly, marveling at the miracle of it.

Their souls had found each other again.

*We're meant to be together*, Catherine thought, feeling the truth of it resonate through every fiber of her being. *Across lifetimes. Across worlds. Nothing can keep us apart.*

Vincent shifted slightly, rolling to his side and pulling her with him so they were face to face, still intimately connected. His hand came up to brush damp hair from her face, and his eyes—those blue eyes that held the same soul—were bright with unshed tears.

Through the bond, Catherine felt his wonder, his disbelief that this was real, his overwhelming gratitude. She sent back her own certainty, her absolute conviction that they would always find each other, no matter what.

Catherine's throat was too tight to speak. She just nodded and kissed him again, soft and slow.

They had, against all odds, against all logic, found their way back.

And this time, Catherine thought fiercely as she held him close, feeling the bond pulse strong and true between them, this time nothing would tear them apart.

Vincent's hands came up to cover hers where they rested against his face. His fingers were warm, solid, real. "I promised you fifty more years," he said, his voice rough with emotion. "I promised you, Catherine."

The words broke something open inside her. Catherine laughed—a sound caught

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

between joy and tears—and then she was crying in earnest, her whole body shaking with the force of it. “You did,” she gasped. “You promised me.”

“I meant it,” Vincent said fiercely, pulling her against him. “I meant every word.”

Catherine buried her face against his chest, feeling his heart beating strong and steady beneath her cheek. The bond hummed between them, warm and alive and *right*, and she sent everything she was feeling through it—her overwhelming relief, her joy, her love that had never dimmed even when she thought he was gone forever.

Vincent held her tightly, one hand cradling the back of her head, and Catherine felt his own emotions flooding back through the connection. His gratitude. His fierce determination that nothing would separate them again.

They stayed like that for a long moment, just holding each other, letting the reality of their reunion sink in. Finally, Catherine pulled back enough to look up at him, her hands still gripping his shirt.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked, and there was no accusation in her voice, only desperate need to understand. “Vincent, why didn’t you—”

Vincent’s expression crumpled. “I wanted to tell you so many times,” he said, his voice breaking. “From the moment I woke up in this body, I’ve been trying to find the right words. At first, I hesitated—I didn’t think you’d believe me, and I could see the grief destroying you. I didn’t want to add to that pain. Then I was lost in figuring out who I was supposed to be as David, living a life I’d only dreamed of as Vincent. Once we became friends, I almost told you so many times. But you seemed happier, more at peace, and I couldn’t bring myself to take that away. And then when things became more between us...” He paused, his voice dropping. “I knew I had to tell you before it went any further. You deserved to choose this—to choose me—with the truth. But here I am, and I still don’t have the words.”

Through the bond, Catherine felt the depth of his terror—the paralyzing fear that had kept him silent all these months.

“And it wasn’t just that,” Vincent continued, his hands trembling as they held her

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

face. “I *am* David Morrison too. I have his memories, his life, his experiences. When I woke up, I wasn’t just Vincent trapped in a human body—I was both of them. Two complete lives, two sets of memories, two identities trying to exist in one mind.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “I was caught between two lives, Catherine. I didn’t know how to be whole again. How to reconcile Vincent’s soul with David’s existence. How to love you as both men when you only knew one of them.”

Catherine felt tears streaming down her face as she understood the impossible burden he’d carried.

“Every time I saw you,” Vincent said, his own tears falling now. “I wanted to reach out, to tell you, to hold you. But I was terrified. Terrified you wouldn’t believe me. Terrified I would hurt you more. Terrified that even if you did believe me, you wouldn’t want this version of me—this hybrid of Vincent and David that I was becoming.”

She caressed his face trying to ease his distress.

“The bond,” Catherine said suddenly, her voice shaking. “When did you start feeling it?”

“The night of the opera,” Vincent admitted. “Faint at first, like an echo. Then when you saw the drawing, and I held you. By then it was back in full force. I knew when you were in danger at the night club. I thought about telling you the following day, after you kissed me. But I lost the courage. This all seemed so, incredibly impossible. I wasn’t sure if I wanted this to be your burden, too. “

Catherine felt tears slip down her cheeks again.

“I am sorry, Catherine. Please forgive me for taking so long to come back to you “

Catherine felt his sorrow, his fear that she wouldn’t understand the impossibility of his situation. But she knew he was trying to spare her more grief, and she knew he was trying to become the him that he was now.

Catherine kissed him then, soft and slow, pouring everything she couldn’t say into

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*



*Vincent* by *Laura G*

the connection between them. Vincent kissed her back with equal tenderness, his hands gentle on her face.

They lay in the quiet of his bedroom, holding each other, and Catherine felt the weight of everything they'd lost—the grief, the months of not knowing, the time they could have spent together if fate had been kinder.

But they were here now. Against all odds, against all logic, they had found each other again.

Vincent's hand came up to cup her face, his thumb tracing the line of her jaw. "Catherine," he said softly. "I need you to know—this isn't just about who I was. I'm not the same Vincent you knew. This body, this life—it's changed me. I'm still learning who I am now."

"I know," Catherine said. "And I don't care. Vincent, David—you're both the same soul. The same heart. That's what matters."

Through the bond, she felt his relief, his gratitude that she understood.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

They had been given a second chance. A gift beyond measure.

“Fifty more years,” he whispered. “I promised you fifty more years, Catherine. And I intend to keep that promise.”

Catherine kissed him softly. “Fifty more years,” she agreed. “At least.”

Through the bond, she felt his love wrap around her like a blanket, warm and safe and eternal. And for the first time in over a year, Catherine felt truly, completely at peace.

### *Epilogue*

A few months later, Catherine Chandler-Morrison stood in the bedroom of their brownstone, watching the late afternoon sunlight paint golden patterns across the hardwood floor. The hyphenated name still felt new on her tongue, still made her smile every time she signed it. *Catherine Chandler-Morrison*. A bridge between two lives, two worlds, two versions of the man she loved.

They had married on a Tuesday morning in late summer at the courthouse downtown. No fanfare, no elaborate ceremony—just the two of them standing before a judge, with Father and Jenny as their witnesses. Father had wept openly when Vincent—David—had asked him to be there, had embraced his son with trembling hands.

“Thank you, Father,” Vincent had said quietly, his blue eyes bright with emotion. “For being here for us.”

Jenny had cried too, clutching Catherine’s hand throughout the brief ceremony, her joy so fierce it was almost painful to witness. When the judge pronounced them husband and wife, Catherine had felt the bond flare between them, and she’d known—*known*—that this was more than a legal union. This was the universe itself acknowledging what had always been true: they were meant to be together, across time, across every boundary that tried to keep them apart.

David Morrison, was now *David Vincent Morrison*. A simple change that made life so much easier.

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

The reception had been small and informal, held in the backyard of their brownstone on a perfect August afternoon. White lights strung between the trees. Tables covered in linen. Food from Lin's restaurant, because Vincent had insisted, and Lin had arrived with enough dishes to feed an army, tears streaming down her face as she'd hugged them both.

People from both their lives had come. Joe Maxwell had given a toast that made everyone laugh and cry in equal measure. Jenny eager to celebrate Catherine's happiness after so much grief. David's colleagues from Patterson & Associates had mingled awkwardly at first with the tunnel dwellers who'd emerged cautiously into the sunlight—Father, Mary, Pascal, Mouse, Jamie—until the wine had flowed, the barriers had dissolved, and everyone had simply been *people*, celebrating love.

Cullen had cornered Vincent for twenty minutes, studying his face with an intensity that made Catherine nervous, until finally he whispered in his ear, "I don't know how, and I don't need to understand it. But I know who you are. Welcome back, Vincent."

Vincent embraced him, this man who'd been his friend in another life, and said simply, "Thank you."

The honeymoon had been Catherine's gift to Vincent—four weeks of the world he'd never been able to see, never been able to touch, never been able to experience in his first life.

They'd started in the Greek islands, where the Aegean Sea sparkled like crushed diamonds under an impossibly blue sky. Catherine had watched Vincent's face the first time he'd walked barefoot on a sun-warmed beach, the first time he'd felt sand between his toes, the first time he'd waded into water so clear you could see straight to the bottom. He'd stood there for a long time, knee-deep in the sea, his face turned up to the sun, and through the bond Catherine had felt his overwhelming wonder, his disbelief that such beauty existed, that he was allowed to experience it.

"I never thought..." he'd said that night as they'd sat on their hotel balcony,

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

watching the sunset paint the sky in shades of orange and pink and gold. “In my first life, I never thought I’d see the ocean. Never thought I’d feel the sun on my face without fear. Never thought I’d be able to just... *exist* in the world like this.”

Catherine had taken his hand, lacing their fingers together. “You deserve this,” she’d said fiercely. “You deserve all of it. Every beautiful thing this world has to offer.”

They’d traveled to Italy next, where they’d wandered through Florence’s museums and Vincent had stood transfixed before Michelangelo’s *David*, tears streaming down his face. They’d eaten gelato in the Piazza della Signoria, drunk wine in Tuscan vineyards, made love in a villa overlooking rolling hills covered in olive groves. Catherine had watched Vincent discover the world with the wonder of a child and the appreciation of a man who knew what it meant to be denied it.

In Paris, they’d climbed the Eiffel Tower at sunset, and Vincent had held her close as they’d looked out over the city of lights, the bond humming between them with contentment so deep it was almost painful. They’d walked along the Seine at midnight, kissed on the Pont des Arts, spent an entire afternoon in the Louvre where Vincent had stood before the *Winged Victory* and wept again, overwhelmed by beauty he’d only ever read about.

“Thank you,” he’d whispered to her that night in their hotel room, his voice breaking. “Thank you for giving me this. For showing me the world. For letting me experience all the things I thought I’d never have.”

“You’re experiencing them with me,” Catherine had replied, kissing him softly. “That’s all I ever wanted. To share the world with you. To share *life* with you.”

They’d ended in the Maldives, where they’d spent their final week in an overwater bungalow, swimming in water so warm and clear it felt like floating in liquid light. Vincent had learned to snorkel, had discovered the alien beauty of coral reefs, had laughed with pure joy when a sea turtle had swum past them, ancient and serene. At night, they’d lain on their private deck and watched stars so bright they seemed close enough to touch, and Vincent had held her and whispered poetry—Keats, Shelley, Byron—his voice rough with emotion.

## Between Two Lives by CandlelitChandler

“I love you,” he’d said on their last night, his hand resting on her stomach in a gesture that had become habitual over the past week. “I love you so much it terrifies me sometimes. The thought that I could have missed this—missed *you*—if I hadn’t been given this second chance...”

“But you were,” Catherine had said firmly. “We were. And we’re not going to waste a single moment of it.”

They’d returned home four weeks later, sun-bronzed and happy and so deeply connected through the bond that sometimes Catherine couldn’t tell where her emotions ended and Vincent’s began. The brownstone had welcomed them back with familiar warmth, and they’d spent their first night home making love in their own bed, surrounded by their own things, grateful for adventure but equally grateful to be *home*.

It was two days later that Catherine had realized her period was late.

She’d taken the test alone in the bathroom, her hands shaking, and when the two pink lines had appeared, she’d sat on the edge of the tub and cried—great, gasping sobs of joy and terror and overwhelming love for the tiny life beginning inside her.

Vincent had found her there, had dropped to his knees in front of her, and through the bond he’d *known* before she’d even said the words.

“Catherine,” he’d breathed, his eyes wide with wonder. “Are we...?”

“We’re pregnant,” she’d whispered, and watched his face transform with such radiant joy that it had stolen her breath.

Now, six months after that night when they’d found each other again, Catherine stood in their bedroom and watched Vincent kneel beside the bed, his hand resting gently on her still-flat stomach. They’d just made love—slow and tender and full of reverence—and now Vincent was doing what he did every night: talking to their baby.

“Hello, little one,” he murmured, his voice soft and wondering. His palm was

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

warm against her skin, his touch infinitely gentle. “It’s your father. I know you can’t hear me yet, not really, but I wanted to talk to you anyway. To tell you how much we love you already. How much we want you.”

Catherine felt tears prick her eyes as she watched him, felt through the bond the overwhelming tenderness, the fierce protectiveness, the disbelieving joy that radiated from him.

“Your mother is the bravest, strongest, most beautiful person I’ve ever known,” Vincent continued, his thumb stroking small circles on Catherine’s skin. “She saved me, little one. Twice. Once in a life I lived before, and once in this life, when I didn’t even know I needed saving. She loved me when I was a beast, and she loved me when I was a man, and she never stopped believing that we were meant to be together.”

His voice caught, and Catherine reached down to run her fingers through his hair, offering comfort through touch.

“I want you to know,” Vincent said, his eyes glistening with tears, “that you are a miracle. You are proof that love doesn’t end, that souls find each other across time and death and every obstacle the universe can throw at them. You are the promise of a future I never thought I’d have. A family. A *life*.”

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to Catherine’s stomach, so gentle it was barely a whisper of contact.

“I’m going to be the best father I can be,” he promised. “I’m going to teach you about books and music and art. I’m going to show you the world—all the beautiful, terrible, wonderful things in it. I’m going to protect you and love you and make sure you know, every single day, how precious you are. How wanted. How deeply, impossibly loved.”

Catherine felt tears streaming down her face as she watched him, felt through the bond the depth of his gratitude, his wonder, his overwhelming sense of blessing. This man who had died and been reborn, who had lived in darkness and now lived in light, who had been denied so much and was now being given everything—he

**Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*



**No Shirt Required** by *Laura G*

was going to be a father. They were going to be parents.

“Thank you,” Vincent whispered, and Catherine wasn’t sure if he was talking to her, to their baby, or to whatever force in the universe had given them this second chance. “Thank you for this life. Thank you for this love. Thank you for this miracle.”

He looked up at Catherine then, his blue eyes bright with tears and joy and such profound love that it took her breath away. Through the bond, she felt everything he was feeling—the gratitude, the wonder, the fierce determination to live every moment fully, to never take a single day for granted, to honor the gift they’d been

## **Between Two Lives** by *CandlelitChandler*

given by living it completely.

“I love you,” he said simply. “Both of you. More than I have words to express.”

Catherine pulled him up beside her, and he wrapped his arms around her, his hand returning to rest protectively over their baby. She felt the bond pulse between them—strong and steady and eternal.

“Fifty more years,” she whispered against his chest, echoing the promise he’d made her that night six months ago.

“Fifty more years,” Vincent agreed, his voice rough with emotion. “And then fifty more after that. And then forever.”

Outside, the city hummed with life—millions of people going about their evenings, unaware of the miracle happening in a brownstone on East 68th Street. But inside, in the quiet sanctuary of their bedroom, Vincent and Catherine held each other close and felt their baby growing between them, and knew that they had been given something precious beyond measure.

A second chance.

A new life.

A future full of promise, and hope, and love.

...And the powers that be, rest



## **... And Oh, What Things We'll Do**

Denise

Father fumed but did not continue to argue. What was done was done.

“Vincent, you require a hobby.”

Vincent did not have hobbies. Hobbies were for those with more excess of time on their hands after jobs they did not enjoy. He enjoyed his responsibilities Below. Occasionally, however, Vincent felt the need for a different perspective on his life, on the world itself, on this city. Hence the elevator ride and the climb to his personal overlook.

Fog clung to the lights around the city giving the buildings an amber halo as if they arose from someone's imagination. The slight breeze shifted the air around a dense patch of fog slipping like a woman's skirt hem, like Catherine's. Twirling as her flowing dress did when they danced during Winterfest. Vincent's mind's eye could envision them together as they danced to music only their hearts perceived.

She walks in beauty like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies  
And all that's best and bright  
Is in the aspect of her eyes...

He did have a love. That was the most unexpected aspect of all. No unrequited. A breathtaking realization when he finally accepted that fact. Catherine.

In his mind's eye she glowed in the candlelight. The empty space of the Great Hall—not empty at all. Filled with joy. A simple, uncomplicated joy of spending quiet moments enjoying the fulfillment of their dream of being together. They decided to dream together. Catherine sat with a sigh at the dressing table mirror. Absently rubbing her stocking feet with one hand as the other searched for the jar of makeup remover. As she applied the towelette to her eyebrows and eye shadow, Catherine hummed off key. She finished removing her lipstick dropping

### ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*

the oily sheet in small receptacle beside the table before entering the bathroom, humming the same tune only to reemerge in a pink cotton gown with matching robe and slippers.

Catherine shoved her briefcase over on her bed, pulled out a folder before reaching absently for the tape player. The player perched precariously on the edge of her nightstand. Through the tiny speaker played the tune she'd been humming. Catherine, reading her notes sang "da-da-da" along with music.

Across the park Vincent sensed Catherine was safe at home relaxing. A musical buzz hummed through their connection causing a smile to form at the corners of his mouth. He nodded once to himself. Pleased, he checked his perch. No light flashed through the windows below. Security had not made their climb to the upper story yet. Time to go. Vincent began his descent.

Evan caught a glimpse of a shadow-like object passing an observation window at the end of the hallway he had just passed. He checked his watch and nodded.

"I must be a little late. Better hurry to my next check-in." Evan increased his pace. Down a hall to the security office beside the elevator room. Evan had been warned on his first night that building had a regular visitor, but not to worry. They came and went without causing trouble. Thurber had said not to worry. So he didn't. Evan shrugged and did his check. Verified locked doors, checked monitors then headed for the stairs. The building had forty stories but at least he only had to walk down three flights or so every hour.

Vincent made his way through the shadows around the corner as fog crept around the sidewalk swirling at the hem of his capedispersed by booted feet. A bottle at the curb clinked, glass rang bell-like. Vincent stooped and snagged it before it rolled too far.

"Mouse can add this to his collection," he muttered to himself.

Near the entrance he'd chosen a bearded man buried beneath a tarp and a mountain of other things peered up with one eye.

"Oh, it's you. Later than I thought." The man, Dusty muttered withdrawing

## ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*

beneath his covers. The man had claimed the spot beside a boarded, unused building. Vincent climbed down basement stairs and—like fog—vanished from view.

A week later when gargoyling had been ended by a sudden downpour, Vincent passed Dusty's shelter. The older man emerged immediately as if waiting for him.

"A word, mister?" Dusty said hesitantly.

Vincent paused and stepped beneath the building's overhang. "Of course. How are you?"

Dusty shrugged. "I'm alright. I don't need nothing, but I got a kid. She could use somebody in her corner. She ain't like me, gotta job—a good one but lately..." He trailed off. "The kid, Kipper said I should ask if you might know what to do?"



**Vincent** *by Laura G*

## ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*

Vincent was silent long enough to make Dusty fidget.

“If I’m wasting your time, let me know. I’ll try legal aid. Maybe they can tell me what to do. I can clean up and go uptown, but I thought I’d ask you first.”

“I will help if I am able. Won’t you come Below and we will discuss this over a hot cup of tea or coffee if you prefer?”

Dusty glanced at the slopping steps. His head shook. “No thanks, I can’t take not being in the open air.” He looked resigned. Vincent understood. Many individuals were unable to tolerate being underground. Many of the community’s helpers had similar reactions.

Vincent said quietly, “Tell me how I may help.”

Dusty sat up straighter. Hopefully, he began to explain.

\*\*\*

“Vincent, you are soaked,” Father said leaning on his cane in the entrance to his son’s chamber.

“I was delayed Above speaking to Dusty. I could not persuade him to come Below and so...” Vincent applied a towel to his face and collar damp. “He has a daughter in need of legal advice.”

Father sighed. “When will bring this to Catherine’s attention?”

Vincent’s expression altered slightly, lips upturned a tiny bit in what his father read as bemused pleasure. “I will send her a note in the morning,” he replied quietly.

Father leaned on his cane watchful as his son prepared for sleep. “I will see you for breakfast in the morning.” He straightened and limped back toward his chambers.

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Catherine Chandler glanced up from her desk when the pungent scent of fresh coffee mingled with warm, spicy yeast rolls wafted across the space between herself and a delivery man wearing cycle helmet and biking shorts. Unusual for

## ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*

February at eight-thirty in the morning.

“Uhm, Hi. Can I help you?” Catherine said. “I didn’t order anything.”

The delivery man nodded. “You Ms. Chandler?” he asked.

Catherine frowned. “How did you get up here?” she replied instead reaching for her phone.

The lean young man with dark hair and biking clothing placed the coffee and a white bag on the edge of the assistant D.A.’s desk. He smiled with a knowing nod. “Vincent’s got good taste. There’s a message for you with the pastries.” He turned on his heel of his biking spikes and vanished around the corner as Joseph Maxwell, frowning, strode over to her desk.

Nodding toward the bag— “Lunch already, Radcliff? I’ve got an assignment for you, some pre-trial research. But I don’t want to interrupt you on your break.”

Catherine smiled warmly. “Breakfast,” she corrected. “Which I don’t usually eat. You’re welcome to help yourself.” She opened the bag and looked inside, eyes widening dramatically spying the paper resting atop a bear claw. She took the note offering Joe the bag.

Joe exchanged his files for the bag, placing them on the remaining unoccupied corner of her desk. Choosing his reward, he indicated the new stack resting precariously, impressive in its thickness. “Joe, what is this?” He placed the bag atop the files.

Joe shrugged. “One of those cases. Unfair labor practices complaint. We usually don’t go to court on these. They usually go to arbitration, but the complainant has refused arbitration and wants her day in court. Thing is the respondent has fifty lawyers and is known for this kind of thing but manages to wear the complainants down. They give up and take a settlement.”

Catherine’s frown grew into a glare. “You want me to do what?”

Joe took a second bite as though the pastry had insulted his mother’s cooking.

## ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*

“Proceed with the complaint. Represent the D.A.’s interests in court.”

Color drained from her face and Catherine nearly slumped over her desk. “Does Moreno know?”

Joe’s lips thinned as he nodded. “Yeh, kiddo. His office must proceed but he doesn’t want the scrutiny putting a higher profile assistant would bring. Although, you’re not exactly a shrinking violet notoriety-wise, you’re still a junior D.A.”

Catherine arched brow and pursed lipped expression expressed her understanding. “I am the sacrificial lamb in case things don’t go well for...”

“Marilee Jones,” Joe supplied.

“Joe, I’m swamped. Can I decline?”

“What’s the matter, Radcliff? Scared you might lose one?”

Catherine replied earnestly, “Yes.”

Joe appeared genuinely dissatisfied. “Those are the breaks in criminal law. Sometimes we go to court knowing we probably won’t win. Not often, but it happens.” He paused before adding, “Especially in cases like this.” He took another bite. “Look at it this way. Miss Jones wants her day in court. This guy is as unprincipled as they come, but he’s not technically doing anything illegal. We should be in civil court, but the judge insisted that she have counsel.” Joe hitched his shoulders, “You know the expression about waste and the direction it flows.” He walked back toward his office.

Catherine watched him leave before reaching for the white, waxy pastry bag. Opening it she reached inside, looked carefully before extracting a folded piece of paper easily mistaken for a receipt. In a familiar hand she read an address and a time. Catherine smiled with a sigh that was part question and part anticipation.

Streetlights cast their yellow lights on the damp streets in the early evening. Night had fallen half an hour before a lone cab pulled up to the curb and a pair of shapely legs exited bringing Catherine Chandler into the front of the address before older

## ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*

well-kept building. The block filled with condos and multiple family units in a changing neighborhood. She looked up at the address from the message from Vincent. She took a step forward.

A shadow to the right moved, separating from the stairs to resolve into the large form of Vincent.

“I did not intend to startle you, Catherine,” Vincent whispered smoothly.

“I know.” Catherine pressed close, daring to place a light kiss at Vincent’s chin. “I knew you would be nearby. I guess I’m tired. Are you coming in with me?”

Vincent murmured, “No. Marilee does not know about her Father’s request or Below. I will wait until you are finished.”

“That’s not necessary. It’s early and I don’t plan on staying long.”

Vincent straightened. “I will wait.” He stepped back into the shadows soundlessly.

Catherine Chandler sighed and turned to climb the steps without another word. Rang the bell and waited for an answer.

She didn’t see another cab approach from the corner, stopping on the opposite side of the street out of the yellow beam of a streetlight opposite the building Catherine entered. Vincent, aware of the occupied vehicle, simply waited for an indication of what its occupants would do.

Sooner than Vincent had anticipated, the light over the staircase came on and the door opened. Catherine said, “I’ll be in touch before we go to court.”

The cab’s passenger doors opened with two men emerging unhurriedly. Walking casually, not slowly toward the building.

“Okay, Ms. Chandler. I’ll wait for your call.” The other woman said, holding her sweater close against the chill of evening. She turned immediately mounting two steps to reenter her building, closing the door behind her.

Two men drew closer, still presenting unhurried, disinterest stepping up on the

### ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*

curb as Catherine descended. Vincent perfectly timed his emergence from the sublevel's shadowed entrance. The two men's path altered almost imperceptively flowing around the pair walking on to the corner, vanishing into the night.

Vincent snorted. Catherine arched a brow relaxing her alert stance.

"They did that quite well," Vincent offered quietly.

Catherine echoing his snort, reached for his arm. "Almost fooled no one," she agreed. "I'm glad they decided against doing whatever they had in mind."

"As am I," rumbled Vincent's baritone. They strolled in silence to where a second cab, sign unlit pulled up behind a parked car two doors from where they had been. Vincent opened the door and Catherine ducked to enter. Vincent, to Catherine's pleased surprise entered as well.

"Where to?" their driver asked almost cheerfully.

Catherine gave her address and pressed against Vincent's warm bulk enjoying the



**Catherine and Vincent** *by Laura G*

## ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*

unexpected pleasure of some quiet time with her companion. “Thank you for coming with me,” she said in a sigh. She never mentioned the fact that he was riding in a cab—with her. Heaven.

“Aren’t you going to ask what we spoke about?” Catherine looking up into cornelian blue, eyes willing to drown in their depths.

“I have learned to wait until you are ready to speak,” Vincent murmured enjoying their closeness.

“It’s sheer meanness,” Catherine muttered at last through clenched teeth. “The law gives the property owner some very nebulous leeway, but Marilee was trying to be kind. Yes, no one should have been living there but...” Her voice trailed off and she looked out of the window as the dark streets rolled by.

Vincent pressed closer. He didn’t need his link to the woman at his side to know how she felt. Far too many persons returned home from combat unable resume the life they had left before deployment. Vincent thought of Dusty. “What will you do?”

Catherine stiffened at his side sighing. “I’ll do whatever I can. Joe doesn’t think we can win this case.”

Vincent drew back far enough to study her expression in the changing light as the cab moved through the rain slick streets. He saw dismay. Felt her determination despite what her respected boss had to say. Catherine would give this struggle her not inconsiderable determination and intelligence. Somehow people in Catherine’s world always underestimated her intelligence. “Do you?” he asked quietly.

Catherine settled back against Vincent’s side again. “I have a lot of work to do. But we’ll see what can be done. My father said laws are inflexible but their intent changes with application.”

Vincent thought about that. Their driver caught their eyes in the rearview mirror nodding appreciatively. “You should come to traffic court and talk about intent.”

Everyone laughed.

## ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*

At the semi-circular drive before Catherine's building Vincent asked, "Will you work late tonight?" He concealed himself within the shadows of cab's interior.

"No, I don't think so. I'll have to use the law library tomorrow and I'll need my sleep for tackling that. Studying there always put me to sleep when I was in law school. It's a wonder I graduated." She reluctantly entered the building turning to watch the cab drive away.

Vincent left the cab a few blocks away in an alley, down a manhole with access to the tunnels. The cab's driver waived cheerily before heading to the garage where he stored it until his next shift. His passenger already halfway to the home chambers by the time he clocked out.

Father appeared at the entrance to chamber. "You are back early."

Vincent turned, his head pushing through his nightshirt. "Yes. Catherine decided to begin her research tomorrow once she has rested."

Father leaned heavily on his cane, his patrician features expressing mild surprise. His glasses rested near the end of his nose as he studied his son's expression. Vincent looked calm and unruffled. "I will meet her at the library in the evening."

Instinctively, Father flinched. "Vincent, do be careful. Even though it is a law library, I would not that..." His voice caught. "I'm an old man and knowing the world Above intolerance." He waved away the thought. "I cannot help it."

Vincent closed the distance embracing his parent in a warm hug. "Your concern is always welcome, Father. I appreciate your caution. I did not always understand it, but time has proved it to be warranted. Catherine and I will be cautious," he added, meaning it, and glad he hadn't mentioned the observers from the other cab. Father did not need more concerns.

Afternoon of the next day and Vincent, cloak-covered, strode the tunnel corridor away from the home chambers. It curved slightly downward before leveling out. At the next junction a curly-headed blur shot into his path clearly on a mission.

"Oh. Vincent go above?" Mouse asked.

## ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*

“Yes, Mouse. Where have you been?”

“Checking alarm at perimeter with Jamie. Needed wire. Fixed it. Jamie said go eat.” He shrugged grinning. “Mouse is hungry so I’m going. See William. Vincent hungry?”

“No, thank you, Mouse. I will eat later.”

Mouse nodded a knowing look spreading across his features. “Going to see Catherine? This way is far from her.”

“We are meeting at a different location. A law library,” Vincent replied carefully.

Mouse brightened. “Okay good, okay fine.” Then he was gone, bounding away toward the home chambers.

Vincent followed his progress with a snort of amusement. Mouse was a spark of unpredictable energetic joy. Completely enamored with Catherine, Mouse would resist being close to her. But he invariably inquired of her location whenever Mouse knew Vincent would be away from home chambers. Vincent walked away thoughtfully, stride lengthening consuming the distance between himself and the one consuming his thoughts.

Tomes. Acres and miles of bookshelves all devoted to law. Four entire floors of shelving. It wasn’t entirely a legal library. Records were downstairs, the library occupied four stories of the building. The city district attorney’s office had required significant storage space by its staff for interviews, records, evidence, test results and court records. It was an older building. Out of date for other things, but for the storing and maintaining books perfection. Solid, dry, and well built from an age when building civic entities was done with pride builders using solid materials.

Library tables laid out forming a central aisle bore the evidence of law clerks and other users. Notes, used empty tablets, odd broken pencils, even the remains of a lunch represented by a piece of lettuce on a napkin stained with mustard: much to the librarian’s distress.

Catherine and Marilee were seated together. Neither spoke. Catherine’s attention

## ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do by Denise

shifted from the file at her elbow to the text she was studying. Lights farther away in other sections of the library went dark one by one. In the silence, a voice called from somewhere toward the front of the building, "One hour until closing."

Vincent, too, was making use of the law library's resources—a photocopier. He had investigated the building earlier and discovered a little used access through a long disused storm cellar. *Mouse would find the ancient office equipment fascinating*, Vincent thought standing beside a very old vending machine. The contents long since disintegrated or petrified cost a nickel. From there he found his way to copier room following his sense of Catherine's location. The sign outside read 'Employee Use Only.' Catherine came around the corner with papers in hand. She paused, startled by his appearance before beaming a warm smile.

"Vincent, what are you doing here?" she whispered, tugging him urgently to the door he had just passed. She opened it, peeked in before urging him inside. "Not that I'm not always glad to see you. But why are you here?"

Vincent pressed his lips into her shiny hair, relishing the floral scent of the shampoo she used. He murmured, "You are helping someone I know. I cannot do that. I can keep watch, however. The individuals we nearly encountered outside of Marilee's apartment building are nearby."

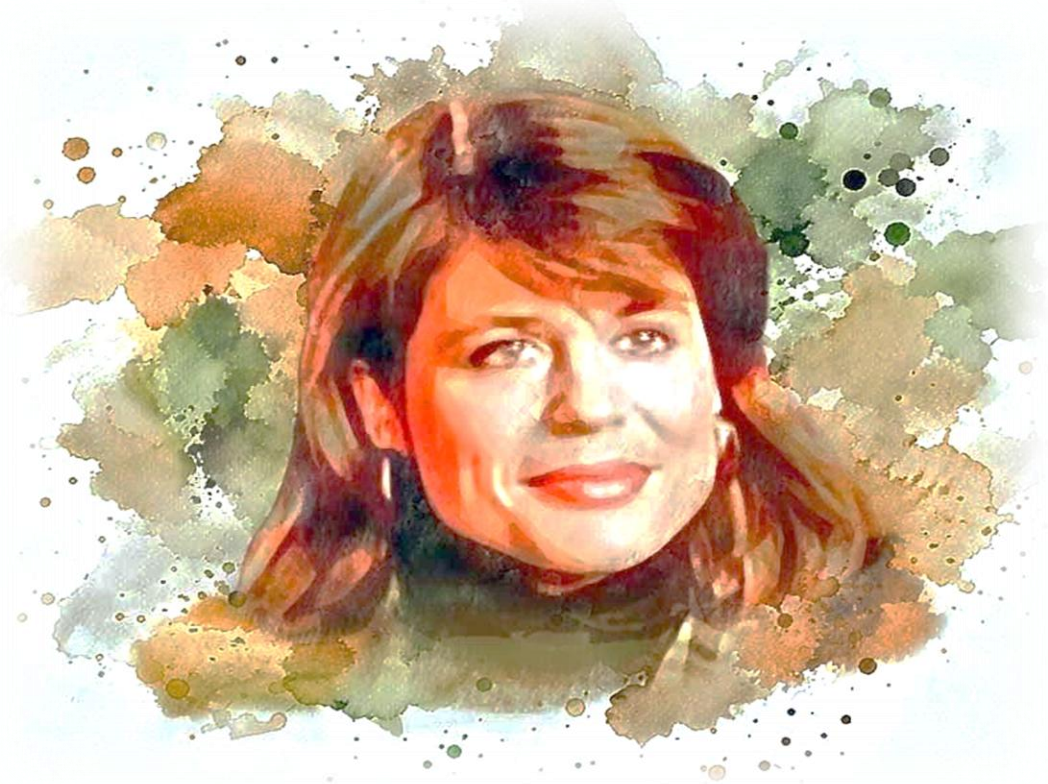
Catherine drew back in mild alarm. "Where? Why didn't you say anything before?"

Calmly Vincent gently stroked the hand he held with a large thumb smoothing the skin, feeling her pulse, her life. "They are not precisely within the building now."

Catherine took another step back looking up into his leonine, inscrutable features were drawn deep in thought. With exaggerated care she placed her documents on the small table beside the nearest copier. She patted them in place as if worried the few pages would become frightened and run away in sudden flutter of an air-conditioned breeze.

"Vincent, where are the men. Where did you see them?"

... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*



*Catherine by Laura G*

“They were attempting to force their way into the delivery area as I discovered the entrance to the old coal cellar,” Vincent admitted negligibly as though the detail was unimportant. “They weren’t the same men from before.”

“Oh!” she replied quietly. “Did they see you?”

He shrugged, “Not my features. I startled them. Their attention was focused on picking the lock to the emergency stair exit. I had already entered the coal cellar. They will be there until you are done here if you want to involve the authorities.”

Catherine pulled her hair back from her face and exhaled dramatically. “Okay. Let me think. I need to make these copies for the brief.” She indicated the stack of legal opinions and topped by a large legal tome, several pieces of paper marking various sections.

“Would you make the copies while Marilee and I talk this over. I’ll show you how. I have to decide what to do so we don’t get extra scrutiny from the media. But I

### ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*

need to know who, aside from the defendant, this court case is making so nervous.”

Vincent watched with focused intensity as Catherine demonstrated how to operate the machine. As she worked, Catherine thought how surreal it was to see Vincent operate modern technology. Vincent for his part read snippets of the documents and precedents that formed a portion of the case Catherine assembled with Marilee’s help.

Vincent murmured, “Father would have fits if he saw me doing this.”

Catherine snorted surprised by his comment. Stalked determinedly toward the door. “Vincent, I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Vincent nodded listening to mechanical whir of the machine. Wondering at the alchemy of rapid text reproduction that most people considered ordinary, from an indispensable device. He turned back to the humming machine watching as organized sets emerged from the slanted slots around the copier’s exterior.

Upon Catherine’s return a few moments later Vincent had organized the copies into neat stacks, each set turned a different direction. Catherine gathered them nodding in appreciation. “Vincent, you probably should be managing some business or lecturing at a college instead of acting as my secretary.”

Vincent shrugged, an odd reaction for him. “I enjoy teaching, but I’ve been told public education is stressful for the instructors. The secretarial position is temporary. I do not mind assisting.”

Catherine chuckled, brushing his shoulder. “Marilee called for a cab and left. I will tell Greg Hughes about the guys in the cellar. Good thing you didn’t tie them up. I can say someone else in the library heard them and didn’t want to make an official statement.”

Vincent studied the woman confidently explaining her plan unconcerned with being alone in this building with possible assassins.

“Catherine, I do not think that is advisable. Those men could be here to prevent you or Marilee from testifying in court,” Vincent replied.

### ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*

Catherine appeared thoughtful and perched on the edge of the small table. "I guess, but they're terrible at it. We or rather you caught them for a second time. Did they say anything when you confronted them?"

Vincent blinked, a small smile playing across his mouth. "They did not. I asked them what they were doing." He paused. "Each man turned stood up quickly, slipped on the damp walkway. One struck his head on the doorframe, the other bumped into the rail beside the doorway and collapsed."

Catherine Chandler's eyes grew wide, her hand shot to her mouth. All the tension she felt studying, reviewing, collecting pertinent arguments flowed from her head through her toes. She began to laugh. A small guffaw in the beginning. Her face split into a wide grin as she laughed. She laughed.

Vincent watched her. His own smile grew, delighting in her humor. Catherine fell into his arms as she continued to laugh.

Vincent followed her from the copier room to a study table and dropped into a chair. "All right, Catherine. They are locked in the basement." He looked across the room toward a distant sound. Vincent rose quickly, slid behind a bookcase out of sight.

"Miss Chandler. Miss Chandler, are you there?"

One of the officers caught a glimpse and pointed his partner to the left. Hughes followed, no weapon in hand but his expression serious.

"Oh, hi, Greg. I'm sorry. I couldn't seem to stop laughing." Catherine took a steady breath. She rose from the table. "I'll show you where they are."

Greg Hughes listened as Catherine explained about the two would be break-in artists.

"Uh, huh," Greg responded without judgement. He kept his gaze focused on their path through the stacks to the staircase.

"We only have to go down two levels," Catherine offered cheerfully.

### ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*

The men, as it happened, were there to steal evidence from a different case. Young and desperate, they came upon a scheme of removing a piece of evidence to prevent a friend from serving more time for what an offense that began as a misdemeanor.

Detective Hughes took them away shaking his head. "We'll see if we can't get them out of this with a fine. They didn't steal anything. I still cannot figure out how they ended up in that room." He gave Catherine a skeptical look.

She ignored him. "I don't want anyone locked up unnecessarily. I will speak to Joe about reducing or maybe dismissing charges in the morning." Catherine left the station, briefcase in hand, entering a waiting cab relieved.

Tuesday of the following week Catherine Chandler sat at one table with Marilee opposite the lawyer of the corporation. The judge hadn't been pleased by the numbers of legal representatives the corporation sent.

"Mister Phan, choose one of your colleagues as co-counsel. Let's keep this side of the courtroom with the appearance reasonableness."

Dennis Phan's only response was, "Yes, your honor." Two lawyers for defense, one for opposition. Dusty, in clean clothes, hands and face clean slipped into a rear seat closest to an exit. Catherine noticed, acknowledged it with a small nod as she rose to give her opening statement.

Vincent busied himself repairing the door of a storage chamber. He and Mouse surveyed the route a new sewer line dug through an upper level of the tunnels. Father determined that the children's library was out of control.

"Vincent, I cannot access the archives without shifting a mixed amalgam of reading material without taking hours to find what I'm looking for."

Dutifully Vincent organized the older children in minor reorganization of Father's chamber moving hundreds of volumes to an exterior annex more readily within reach of children. With the added benefit of not disturbing the tunnel's patriarch to borrow a favorite book or anthology.

**... And Oh, What Things We'll Do** by Denise

The last of the last minute chores handled, Vincent slipped away to bathing pools for preparation of his final activity of the day. Relaxing into the depths of the one heated pool, Vincent allowed himself to drift.

“See you for supper?” asked Mary wearing a robe and moving through the chamber carrying a towel, escorting younger children back to the dormitories.

“Yes, Mary. Molly found one of your knitting needles, lodged inside a bound copy of Wuthering Heights. She is keeping it to return to you at supper.”

“Oh, thank you, dear,” Mary replied her expression perturbed, hands fluttering she



**Vincent and Catherine** by Laura G

## ... And Oh, What Things We'll Do *by Denise*

and Molly hurried on.

Vincent wore clean clothing and sat at his usual table and ate. Children stopped by and asked about Catherine, before hurrying on to join others for supper. Vincent spoke quietly, finished his dinner, and left the chamber. Only Mouse noticed that Vincent didn't head for his chamber.

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Catherine heard the thump of booted feet on her balcony and pushed aside her briefcase. Dropping it beside her bed, she stood.

Vincent opened the double doors and crossed the threshold holding one red rose and a white rose.

Catherine reached out accepting the gift. She sighed. "I'm sorry. I wanted to take the week off. Once the trial is over, I promise you." She wrapped her arms around Vincent's neck.

Vincent held her treasuring her small form. "I understand. Your work is important." He bent to kiss her and Catherine broke away closing the blinds and dimming the lights.

Scurrying back into his embrace "Now," she breathed.

Vincent complied. "Is this the beginning of our honeymoon?" he said after a sustained kiss.

"Of course," Catherine sighed.

Morning came. Vincent and Catherine were wrapped around one another.



## Who You Gonna Call?

PearlAnn SnowStar

Mouse was in his chamber, sitting at a desk, looking over at a gizmo.

“Mouse?”

He jumped and turned to see Jamie at the entrance to his chamber.

“Teresa and Redbird are back from Above. Redbird is checking in on Narcissa.”

He smiled. “Good.”

She walked up to him. “Redbird is excited about the school Above. She loves her classes and her new guardians.”

“Mouse remember. Redbird visited Narcissa. Lots. Roamed too much. Young.”

She laughed. “She’s still a teenager.” She looked at the device. “What is that?”

He clutched the device and nervously said, “Gizmo.”

“It’s an EMF reader for the paranormal.” Teresa, a young woman with black hair, olive skin, and dark eyes, walked into the chamber. “Redbird’s foster parents got her that, since she likes such things. She figured it wouldn’t work down here, but she wanted to show it to Narcissa. Part of the ghost tools Above.”

“And?” Jamie looked at her.

“Gave to Mouse. Mouse no take.” He looked toward Teresa and blushed.

She walked up to him and hugged him. “I know,” Teresa said. She turned to look at Jamie. “Redbird was going back Above. She said the device started going off, but it shouldn’t have. Not with the depth of the rocks here. Mouse saw her with it, so she gave it to him.” “See nothing wrong. Electric magnetic field detected.” He looked around. “Can’t be. This rock.”

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

Teresa looked at him. “Redbird told me that we should go explore some passageways. Maybe, there is something out there.”

Jamie shook her head. “That teenager. Soon she’ll be in college.”

Teresa nodded. “She’s going to study parapsychology.”

Jamie rolled her eyes. “Of course, Narcissa’s protégé!”

“Well,” Teresa looked at Mouse, “It’s summertime. Redbird will see Mouse later. She doesn’t want to go too far Below, but would like to roam around.”

Jamie looked at her and Mouse. “Vincent and Father both agreed that we have to stay close to the main community. Even Narcissa’s new chamber is now close to us. They may not allow this...expedition.”

Mouse sighed. “Vincent now acting like Father. Getting serious. No danger. See where device works.”

Jamie looked at Teresa, who was grinning, then at Mouse, who had the same expression.

“Ghost hunting,” Teresa said. “And it’s not Kristopher. Redbird made that clear.”

Mouse shuffled his feet. “Be safe. Not go far. Maybe Narcissa’s old chamber.”

“Jamie, you don’t have to come, but we would like you to. It’ll be a few days.”

“What’s a few days?” Jamie had a serious look on her face.

“Five days, six?” Mouse shrugged. The EMF started beeping. “Goes on, goes off. Checked it out. Started really strong further Below. Close to Narcissa’s old place.” The EMF stopped beeping.

“Redbird thinks there’s another spirit here,” Teresa said. “And besides, Mouse and I like the idea of exploring.”

“We’ll talk later. I got to go.” Jamie turned and walked out.

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

Teresa smiled and turned to face Mouse. She kissed him on the cheek. “You’re lucky I like exploring with you.”

He looked at her with love in his eyes. “We team.”

“Yes, we are. And that is why, for safety, I asked Jake to come as well. He’s into science and can help us figure out what is going on.”

“Thinks everything has reason. Like Father. No fun.” He frowned. “Sometimes says Narcissa and Redbird are un…”

“Unrealistic. I know. At least I know that Vincent and Catherine will listen. We’ll show them on the map where we want to explore. Not too far. Like you said, we’ll just go down to where Narcissa’s old chamber was.”

He put down the EMF. “Be fun.”

“Yes. Father wouldn’t mind if Jake joins us. After all, he knows martial arts and would be our protector in case we encounter dangerous people. Plus, he is a bit older than us.”

He shrugged. “I protect you.”

She grinned. “I know, but it’ll make it more possible for us to get approval for this adventure. We can convince everyone that it’s safe. And that it will help us check out the passages we don’t use. Just to make sure there’s no one too close to us.”

He nodded. She gave him a gentle squeeze. “Besides, I’m up for an adventure anyway, even if it’s with others.”

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A few days later, after getting a reluctant approval from the Council, a group of people were walking through the Chamber of the Winds. The group consisted of Mouse, Teresa, Jake, Jamie, and Redbird. Each of them carried a backpack and a shoulder bag. They also had lanterns. Jamie had her crossbow slung around her body.

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar



*Jamie by Laura G*

Mouse really wanted to go only with Teresa, but he did like being with his friends. Together, they called their group the first Tunnel Paranormal Investigation.

Redbird, a blonde-haired teenager, held the EMF. “Wow, the wind here is picking up. When I first met Narcissa and came down here, it wasn’t too bad. This is like...”

Jake, a young adult with dark brown hair, frowned. “The gusts shouldn’t be this severe.”

The group stopped and leaned against the wall. When the gust died down, they continued.

“Wow!” Jake looked around. “I got to take notes. Get some pictures.” He reached into his shoulder bag and got out a video camera.

Mouse shook his head. “Just a huge cavern. I know where we are. Narcissa’s old

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

chamber near. Sleep. Tomorrow, Crystal Cavern.”

Teresa looked around. “I don’t see any pipes.”

Redbird looked at her. “Narcissa had one pipe that connected to ours. It’s going to be very faint when they hear us tapping. But it’ll let them know we made camp night one.” She looked at the others. “Turn back time.”

Teresa spoke up. “No one’s turning back. Let’s find some ghosts.”

Jamie rolled her eyes. “There are no ghosts down here.”

Redbird grinned. “Maybe, maybe not. The EMF is quiet for now.”

Mouse quickly said, “Rock. No work.”

Jake nodded his head. “Agreed. There are too many rocks here for an electromagnetic field device to work.”

“Then why does it keep going on and off?” Teresa inquired.

“Not working?” Jake asked.

Mouse frowned. “Works. Checked. Unusual. Keep going.”

The group carefully made their way to Narcissa’s old chamber. Redbird walked into the chamber, with Mouse, Teresa, Jamie, and Jake following. Jake looked behind him.

“Jake?” Jamie called out.

“Just using my senses. Checking to see if we were followed,” Jake replied. Taking one more look around he walked into the chamber.

“Anything?” Teresa inquired.

Redbird shook her head. “Aside from the few times it went on, then off as we walked down here, nothing else.”

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

Jake found the old pipe and put his ear to it. “This is going to take a while. The sounds are so faint. I’m glad you got Narcissa to move closer. She’s not getting any younger, and if anything happens...”

Jamie spoke up. “We know. At least her new chamber is not too close to the community, so she would have her privacy. This chamber would have been too dangerous for her now.”

Jamie walked up to the pipe. She pressed her ear against it. “I’ll send the brief message.”

Jake nodded and said, “It might be a while before someone gets it and responds. Let me know when you’re tired of tapping.”

Jake and Jamie stepped back from the pipe.

The group removed their backpacks. Each of them pulled out a blanket to lie on the ground for sleeping and set up their spot.

Jake and Jamie went back to the pipe. Jamie started tapping.

Teresa reached into her shoulder bag and took out the food. It was packages of soup, one for each of them. She then took out a water canteen.

Redbird took out a small campfire stove. It was a metal ring that sat on the floor. It had a place in the middle to start a fire. Redbird looked around and found some rocks to put around it, so it wouldn’t move.

Mouse went into Narcissa’s bedroom and saw a pile of blankets in the corner. He picked them up and shook them out. He bunched them up and walked out of the bedroom, carrying them in his arms.

Mouse noticed that Jamie and Jake were still by the single pipe. He walked over to a section of the pipe near them. Putting an ear to the pipe, he heard tapping.

“They got our message,” Jamie said.

Mouse, Jamie, and Jake turned around and noticed that Redbird had started a fire

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar

in the campfire stove and was setting up a small tripod.

Teresa cheerfully spoke up. “This is going to be fun. I’m glad we decided to have Redbird handle the campfire for cooking and some heat. Mouse and I have the food.”

“Jake has some weapons. Jamie has a medkit. Mouse has extra food,” Redbird said. “We’ll recheck things tomorrow.”

Jake took a battery-powered digital clock out of his shoulder bag. He set the alarm. “Okay, set for three hours from now, and I saw where the bathroom was. It’s a small corner nook way in back of the bedroom.”

Jamie looked at Jake. “So, who’s going to start the first watch after we eat?”

Jake replied, “You want it?”

Jamie nodded. “Sure. When it goes off, I’ll come get you.”

Jake smiled at her as he handed her the clock. “Works for me.”

Teresa sighed. “Well, I need at least six hours, so don’t wake me up until then. I’m so glad you two agreed to be the sentries on duty.”

Redbird chuckled. “Get sleep now. I have a feeling it’s going to be...interesting.”

Jake groaned. “Great, the spirits told you. You are just like Narcissus. No wonder you two get along.”

Mouse spoke up. “More blankets.”

Teresa walked up to him. “Oh, good. Now we can really keep warm.”

Mouse grinned. “Enough for all. One each.”

Mouse and Teresa walked over to where the blankets lay on the ground. They placed a blanket on top of each one of theirs.

“Food’s ready,” Redbird called out.

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

After they ate, they cleaned up and put things away. Jamie took her place by the front entrance to the chamber. She stood next to the wall and looked out.

Mouse quietly made his way to his blanket. Teresa followed and lay down on her blanket, next to his. He gently tucked the extra blanket around her. Looking around, he gave her a quick kiss.

“Thanks, Mouse. Are you OK?”

He nodded as he took his extra blanket and covered himself.

Teresa noticed that Redbird had settled in next to her.

Redbird smiled. “Narcissa knew!”

Teresa chuckled. “Here I thought we would sleep without a cover.” She rested on her back and sighed. “Not like a bed. But good enough.”

Jake walked over to his blanket next to Redbird’s.

Mouse turned and reached out for Teresa’s hand.

Jake shook his head. “Amazing that Narcissa left five blankets behind.”

Redbird looked at him. “Enjoy the extra blanket. We have no room to take them, so when we wake up, we’ll put them back in the bedroom.”

Jake sighed. “Then we have to come back down later just to retrieve them.”

“Yes,” Redbird said. “Or maybe they will magically find their way back to Narcissa’s new chamber.”

Jake rolled his eyes.

“Good night, everyone,” Teresa called out. “Thanks for the first watch, Jamie.”

“No problem,” Jamie answered back.

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## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

The next morning, after eating and packing up, the group moved out of the chamber. They headed down a passageway that would lead them to the crystal caverns.

After hours of walking and no sound coming from the EMF reader, they paused.

“No pipes,” Jake murmured. “Not good. Vincent’s not...”

Redbird smiled. “Vincent will check with Narcissa. In my dreams, I told her we were fine.”

Jake rolled his eyes. “OMG, now it’s telepathy.”

“No,” Redbird corrected him. “Telepathy is real-time communication. We’re using dream state.”

“Look, another passageway,” Mouse happily exclaimed. He quickly moved into the new passageway.

“Mouse, we need to rest,” Teresa called out, trying to quickly catch up to him.

Jake, Jamie, and Redbird shrugged and ran to catch up with Teresa.

Redbird was trying to hold the EMF steady.

Mouse stopped and waited for them to catch up to where he was. He looked at them. “Feel chilly.”

“Yes, it is. Physical eyes cannot see what spirit sees,” Redbird murmured to herself.

Mouse looked around.

“Not good,” Mouse said.

Teresa touched his arm. “What’s wrong?”

Mouse looked up. “No pipes. Now this.” He pointed to the end of the passageway.

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

Jake went carefully toward the end. He abruptly stopped. “Don’t come this way. It’s a dead end that leads to a huge chasm. There’s some weird old rope hanging straight down.”

Jamie spoke up. “We must get out of here. That’s probably where I followed Vincent and Winslow when we tried to rescue Catherine from Paracelsus. Even after all this time...”

“Come on, the followers could be...” Jake started to say.

Teresa whispered, “Keep your voices down. You never know. We’d better go back.”

“If we can,” Redbird quickly said. “I feel something.”

Mouse turned. “Best leave. Feel not right.”

Jake nodded. “There’s some kind of mist rising from below.”

Mouse wanted to move but couldn’t. He looked at the others. They, too, seemed as if they couldn’t move.

The group’s attention was fixed on the rising mist. It changed into a glowing orb. It then morphed into a beautiful Asian woman. She looked like she was wearing a red silk kimono that had beautiful cherry blossoms on it. Her black hair was long, flowing down to her waist, like the golden chain around her. On the chain was a golden dragon that was looking to her right. Its eye was a purple jadestone.

Redbird mumbled a prayer of protection, then cried out, “Who are you, entity?”

That seemed to break whatever spell was on the group.

Mouse quickly reached for Teresa.

Redbird walked over to the edge, next to Jake. Jamie went a little bit to the side of them. She reached for her crossbow and pointed it at the Asian woman.

Mouse had grabbed Teresa’s hand. He went behind Redbird, Jake, and Jamie. He

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

then moved Teresa behind him.

The Asian woman just smiled as she lifted her hand.

“I mean you no harm. My name is Sakura.” She looked at each of them. Her eyes fixated on Redbird.

“If that is true, Sakura,” Redbird said, “why choose this appearance?”

Sakura laughed. “I’m a witch.”

Mouse felt his stomach twist. He felt that maybe this woman would not hurt them, but he also felt as if something was odd about her.

“You should go back home.” Sakura grinned. “You have found the source of this...”

The EMF went off. Redbird looked at it, then back at Sakura.

“OK, enough parlor tricks,” Jake called out. “You must be using something to project yourself and trick the EMF to go off somehow.”

Sakura walked up to him and touched his arm. “I can do many things.”

Mouse noticed that Jake’s face got very pale.

Sakura looked at Jake. “Not so certain now, are we? Must not rely on only physical. There are worlds that you do not yet see interspersing with your physical realm.”

Jake carefully made his way back toward Mouse and Teresa.

Redbird noticed that Jamie kept that crossbow pointed at Sakura. Jamie glanced at Redbird.

“Now, now, Jamie, is it?” Sakura smirked. “Crossbow won’t save you from a witch of the dragon light magic.”

Redbird asked, “What do you want, Sakura?”

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar



**Kristopher** by *Laura G*

“I wanted to explore a bit. Like your Kristopher does.” Sakura grinned. “Yes, I see him, but he doesn’t see me.”

“Because you two are traveling in different spirit realms,” Redbird calmly replied. “Why does a witch want to come into our community and play around with us?”

“Boredom?” Sakura laughed. “Curiosity as well. Your tunnel community and all the beings here. Trying to survive, be safe. But there is also danger coming to your world.”

Suddenly, Redbird understood. “You wanted to warn us.”

“In a way. Kristopher is usually good at that. The times they do change, especially in the physical. Your community will change, but that also leads to a confrontation with dangerous beings.” Sakura smiled. “Kristopher doesn’t know them. But Narcissa and I do.” She looked at Redbird. “Narcissa still has much to teach you. While she came here for her safety, she as a Priestess, knows the old ways.”

“Were you summoned?” Redbird inquired.

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

“No, I observed. I love your community. You’re accepting of a Multi.”

“Multi?” Jake looked puzzled

“She means Vincent,” Jamie said, as she readied the crossbow to be fired.

“Jamie, child,” Sakura spoke softly. “I mean Vincent no harm. Take this message back to your community. Beware of new passageways Below. It is good that Narcissa is not down here. But, Mouse, you move down here to get her things, like from the Crystal Cavern. Must not come down here alone at this time. There are dangerous beings who are looking to hide here. Once they move on, the Crystal Cavern will be safe. And you can roam to heart’s content.”

“Cherry blossom.” Redbird spoke. “You’re also a witch of spring.”

“Ah, you understand my Japanese name.” Sakura smiled. “I go now.”

“OK.” Jake looked at Sakura. “Why not tell all of us in our community? Why cause only our little group to come and explore and talk to only us?”

“Adventure.” Sakura giggled. “Let you take a look around, while it is safe. Plus, just like Kristopher has problems connecting physically with...unbelievers, I, too, would have problems, and my warning wouldn’t be received. Jake, you are like Father. Neither of you will be open to me. Catherine wants her certainties, but she does, every now and then, have the ability to be open to more. Especially with the bond between Vincent and her. And her Vincent, torn between what he should do and should not. A true, faithful soul mate twin flame bond they have. Very, very rare. People toss so many words. Say love, when it’s not. Say they’re human if they cheat. But I have delivered my message. The EMF will now only work if Kristopher or maybe another spirit or two shows.”

“Narcissa most likely knew.” Redbird turned toward the others. “We go first to Narcissa. Mouse, I know you have already memorized the way...”

“She’s gone!” Teresa called out.

Jamie, stunned, kept looking toward the chasm. She lowered her crossbow.

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

The passageway started to dim.

“Let’s rest a bit, then go Above,” Redbird said.

“Above?” Mouse looked puzzled. “Long way to Uptop. May not have easy access.”

“Oh, I bet there is another way to the surface,” Jake said. “But is it safe?”

“Well, this little TPI group really had a first paranormal experience that will be hard to follow,” Teresa said. “Besides, rest is good.”

They all nodded their heads in agreement.

“Rest, then see,” Mouse said.

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No one said anything as they carefully headed back toward Narcissa’s chamber.

Mouse didn’t like this. Not one bit.

“Mouse, what are you thinking?” Teresa asked.

“Not like being told no come back.” Mouse looked at the others. “Not like...”

“Sakura?” Teresa inquired.

“There has got to be a logical explanation,” Jake said half-heartedly.

“I’m waiting...” Jamie said.

Mouse felt a tiny breeze and turned toward it.

“Mouse, where are you going?” Jamie asked.

Mouse wasn’t going to answer. Never felt this type of breeze in this area before. Was there another passageway?

Jake grabbed his shoulder. “Look, we need to keep going to our safe spot and

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar

rest.”

Mouse shook his head. “Not tired. Air wrong.”

“We can’t let you go alone.” Jake held on.

Mouse shrugged him off. “Can go on alone. Not...” He noticed the look on Teresa’s face. “Teresa, come?”

“Mouse, I’m tired. Let’s get some rest at our safe spot and then come back to investigate.”

“Why?” Jake asked.

“Because there is a new passageway,” Redbird calmly said. “Mouse, we should rest up, then come back and explore together.”

Mouse sighed. “OK, good. OK, not.”

The group continued on to a spot not too far below Narcissa’s chamber. They sat down, drank some water, and had a bite to eat.

Mouse kept an eye on the others. As they started to close their eyes, he moved quietly and quickly.

Teresa noticed and followed him.

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Redbird opened her eyes after what seemed like hours. “Mouse and Teresa are gone!” Redbird cried out as she got up.

“Damn it,” Jake groaned. He got up quickly.

“Where did they...” Jamie paused. “They went back.”

“And we fell asleep.” Jake moaned.

**Who You Gonna Call?** by *PearlAnn SnowStar*



**Mouse and Arthur** by *Laura G*

“I’ll lead,” Redbird said. “I remember the area.”

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Mouse and Teresa cautiously made their way to the new passageway.

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

“We should have waited for the others,” she whispered.

“Not wait. Air...” He lifted his hand. “Different.” He sniffed. “Outside air.”

“What?” She took a sniff. “Can’t be. We’re deep...” She took another sniff. “That smells like...”

“Cars...trucks...Uptop air.” He shrugged.

Suddenly, their lanterns died out.

She squeaked, then pulled out a flashlight from her pocket and turned it on.

“Should save,” he said as he relit his lantern.

“Nope, this is definitely an emergency.” She looked at him. “Aren’t you glad I told you to add the matchbox?”

He grinned. They continued down the passageway.

“Need to go first,” he said, as the passageway narrowed.

“One at a time. We should wait for the others.”

He looked back at her. “Said that. You want to?”

She shook her head. “I’m not leaving you alone.”

He shrugged. “Not afraid.”

“That’s not the point, and you know it. Something about this place doesn’t feel right.”

She was right, but he wasn’t going to let her know it. He looked at the passageway. It looked like someone was starting to work on it. But who?

“We’re going up, aren’t we?” she asked.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Someone built.”

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

“Recently.”

“Yes.”

It was a long time before the passageway got big enough for them to walk side by side. However, he still walked a few feet in front of her. He would protect her from whomever. The passageway started to slowly lighten up. He turned a switch on the lantern to turn it off. She had already turned off the flashlight and put it back into her pocket.

He cautiously continued forward, as she followed. Hearing what sounded like people murmuring, he turned to look at her as he placed a finger on his lips.

She nodded.

Creeping cautiously forward, they hugged the wall. Noticing a craggy nook, he went to hide behind it. She was behind him.

The voices got closer.

“Wow. I didn’t...” a male voice spoke.

“Told ya, that’s why we robbed the science place. Lasers helped. If we had to use explosives, it would be heard,” another male voice said. “We don’t need to smooth out much. Just a place to hide, if necessary, before the building’s foundation gets finished.”

The two men kept talking.

“Wouldn’t they block any access to caves first?”

“The foundation would do that. Hell, I heard that New York is filled with tunnels like these. That’s where some of the homeless go. And when a building gets demolished and a new building comes in, they use the foundation to close off any entrances to tunnels.”

“So...”

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

“Look, I showed ya this, Ikey, my boy, to help you stop worrying. A few of us will pretend to be workers. Then, when we can, we’ll sneak down here and use the experimental laser to continue to make a nice place to escape to after the robbery. We’ll find another exit to go to or, if need be, hide out for a while.”

“Dawn could have gotten in trouble.”

“Nah. She wouldn’t. She made sure she wasn’t seen sneaking here after everyone left. Plus, she said to tell anyone asking that we work with the night maintenance crew.”

“OK, but others might suspect something is going on.”

“She paid off a few of the night workers to keep quiet. If the concrete for the foundation is poured earlier than expected, they’ll leave a spot open. She will claim that it’s another place for a sewer pipe to go through. That she saw the plans.”

“Yech.”

“Don’t worry. She said that she’ll make sure it will never have a pipe put in.”

“All this.”

“Look, we’re planning the heist of the century, OK? With all the security cameras and everything, our little group might be spotted. While it might show us coming into the new building, they won’t find us. Dawn will make sure once we get down into the tunnels to quickly pour the concrete over the entrance. Once we get into the tunnels with our stash, we’ll head for the other exit.”

“And if we run into the homeless?”

“Before the heist, I will come down with Dawn and check for the escape route. Got to be another way to go down, then up and out a new exit. And the homeless we meet, let’s just say we can scare them away. If not...”

“You said no killing.”

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

“Yet if we have to, no bodies will be...”

“Theo, hey...” a woman’s voice called out. “Hide!”

Mouse and Teresa looked at each other. The two men got closer, then stopped.

Mouse didn’t know how long they waited. He wanted to run. He knew he could run. Even if the two men heard him, he would be away before they would catch him or know where he ran off to. However, he wouldn’t leave Teresa. She wasn’t as fast.

A beeping sound was heard.

“Theo?” Ikey whispered.

“That’s the ‘all clear’ beep. Let’s go. I’ll close the entry to this place with the camouflaged tarp.”

Mouse and Teresa waited a few more minutes.

“Mouse?” Teresa called after him as he started to go forward.

He turned to her. “Wait.”

“No, I’m...”

“Must see how far go up.” He turned on his lantern. “Getting dark. Must have closed off tunnel.”

“I’m not sitting here waiting. You may need...”

They turned toward the sound of voices behind them.

He frowned. “Found us.”

“Thank God!” She looked at him. “Let’s meet up with the others. Then decide what to do. But don’t go it alone.”

“Bad people.”

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar

“Yes, from what we heard, bad people.”

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“This is a bad idea,” Jake complained. He looked at Mouse and Teresa ahead of him. Jamie and Redbird were following him. They were walking through the new passageway. “From what you told us, we should get Vincent. Some others. We might run into those robbers.”

“No, I agree with Mouse and Teresa,” Redbird said. “We have to see how far up this goes.”

“Me, too,” Jamie said. “Then we can tell...”

Ahead, the passageway got lighter. Not strong enough to turn off their lanterns.

Mouse turned around. “Mouse go. Check. Passageway may be blocked.”

“Not alone,” Jake whispered.

“Agreed,” Teresa and Jamie said at the same time.

“Cops do that in TV shows and get hurt,” Redbird added. The others looked at her. “What? I watch other TV shows besides fantasy and paranormal.”

“Paranormal is fantasy,” Jake firmly said.

“Oh, yeah?” Jamie looked at him. “Who was the one still freaking out about Sakura?”

“I just have to figure out how she did it,” Jake calmly said.

“Well, I believe a bit now,” Jamie said. “But you...”

“Like I said, I have to be the voice of reason here. She just spooked me, that’s all.” Jake shook his head. “Got to be some type of magician.”

“Mouse, wait!” Teresa called out.

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar



*Mouse by Laura G*

Mouse wasn't going to wait; he ran quickly towards the entrance. It was better that he went alone. Just in case. He wanted to keep going, but the exit was covered up.

"That's some heavy-duty tarp there," Jake whispered as he came up to Mouse.

"Sure is," Jamie replied as she came up behind Jake.

Redbird stopped by Jamie as Teresa went up to Mouse.

"Must see..." Mouse walked up to the tarp, touching it. He looked around. He noticed something on the side. "Found it."

Jake grabbed him. "Wait, it's still light out. At least, that's what it looks like to me."

"I know what you're thinking, but if we wait until dark, the robbers might come

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar

back.” Jamie looked around. “Let me...”

Jake stopped her. “Let me, I can cautiously look around. Sometimes people do get into areas that are blocked off for safety. Stay quiet. If I’m not back in a few minutes, head back to the community.”

“Better come back,” Mouse said. “Should go...”

“No, Mouse,” Jake said. He looked at all of them. “Give me those few minutes to sneak around.” He winked at Mouse. “You’re not the only one who knows how. Please, let me do this, OK?”

“OK. Do.” Mouse looked at him. “Not back soon, I find you.”

“We all will,” Teresa said.

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Mouse was nervous. It felt like forever. He was glad Teresa was here. It seemed that every time he wanted to bolt outside and find Jake, she stopped him.

He looked at Redbird. She had calmly taken a blanket and sat on it. It looked like she was meditating.

Jamie had her crossbow in her arms. She stood there almost like a statue, keeping her eyes on the tarp. Maybe waiting for it to move?

Mouse nervously waited. What was taking so long? He looked at Teresa. Glad he met her. His protector. His love. Her smiles, like now. Her calmness.

“Yo ho ho, pirates we be.”

Everybody jumped. The tarp moved slightly, and Jake made his way carefully in. He lowered the tarp.

“What?” Jamie inquired.

“We go out to the bus stop.” Jake pulled a plastic card out of his front pocket. “I

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

brought my transportation card, just in case.”

“And what about Jamie’s crossbow?” Teresa asked.

“Covered,” Redbird replied as she got up. She looked at Jamie. “Use the blanket to cover it. We’ll place it under your backpack.”

Jake removed some rope from his pocket. “I could have sworn I heard someone tell me to get this rope I found out there.” Jake shook his head. “We can tie the rope around the covered crossbow. People will think we are either homeless or had some grand adventure.”

“Safe?” Mouse looked at Jake.

Jake nodded. “There were some construction people hanging around doing stuff. But we can sneak around them to a certain spot I found. It seems that someone managed to make an opening in the fence to crawl through. It’s by a scrawny old tree. Apparently used, but I’m not sure who used it to get into the site. Anyway, it’s by a bus stop.”

Jamie had removed her backpack. Redbird was helping her carefully use the blanket to cover the crossbow. Jake walked over to them and handed the rope to Jamie. A small part of the handle stuck out.

Mouse liked how the rope secured the blanket around the crossbow. It was neat. There was enough rope to wrap around Jamie. He noticed Teresa helped Redbird place Jamie’s backpack on top of it.

“Are you going to be OK with that around you?” Teresa loosened the straps of the backpack to secure it around Jamie.

“It’s going to be tight. I won’t be able to sit.” Jamie looked at Jake. “I can’t see behind me.”

“We’ll make sure that the blanket won’t slip,” Redbird said. “Jake, what neighborhood are we in?”

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar

“A bad one. Seems this building, according to the sign by the fence, is going to be a warehouse. But the area is sketchy. Stick close. Be quiet. And hope the bus comes by quickly.”

Mouse was excited. “Plan good. No need two days to get back home. Be early. People be surprised.”

“Yeah, well, they aren’t going to like what we tell them.” Jake sighed. “Everybody ready?”

They all nodded.

“OK, here’s how we’ll proceed. Mouse, you are directly behind me, followed by Jamie. Teresa and Redbird take up the rear. Keep quiet and pay attention. If anybody sees anything, whistle. Let’s hope we have your spirits on our side, Redbird.”

Redbird grinned. “I thought you didn’t believe.”

Jake said nothing.

“OK, good. Let’s go.” Mouse wanted to get this over with as soon as possible. He wasn’t happy with Teresa being in the rear, but she’d at least be with Redbird.

\*\*\*

A few hours later, Jamie, Redbird, Teresa, Jake, and Mouse were in the Library chamber. Mouse was tired. When they returned, pipes relayed a message to Vincent that they were back. Vincent was working on something at the time, but dropped everything to talk to them. Then he went to the brownstone apartment, where Catherine, luckily, was with their children. Vincent let Catherine know they were back, and they, along with their children, quickly went Below. The word had spread about an emergency meeting for adults only. When they arrived, they asked Rebecca to gather their children and the other children into another chamber. Mary, along with two teenagers, decided to help Rebecca keep an eye on the children.

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

Mouse wanted to rest, but the community had to be told about what they had discovered. Teresa kept a gentle hand on his arm.

He looked around the Library chamber. While Pascal was present, the three adults on sentry duty were not. Narcissa also wasn't present.

"Everyone, please, let us begin this meeting." Father's voice was shaky.

"We will make this brief," Vincent said. "We are going to be very busy setting up fake walls and keeping watch for strangers." He looked at Catherine. "I briefly heard the story from...the TPIs?"

Jake nodded. "Yeah, well, we were having our...adventure as Tunnel Paranormal Investigators. Which changed. Our group gave Vincent and Father a brief description of what happened. They decided to have this unscheduled meeting right away."

"Vincent also gave me a brief description," Catherine said. "Seems I'm going to be busy as well, looking for a lot of information." She looked at Jake. "Tell everyone everything."

"OK, well, Mouse, Jamie, Redbird, Teresa, and I set off on an approved adventure. It should have been for five, maybe six days. But that got cut short..." Jake continued explaining what had happened.

Mouse was unsure how everything was going to work out. Sure, blocking the Chamber of the Winds might help. That was Father's suggestion. Posting extra sentries and putting up fake walls might help, too. But he wondered if their world would survive after all this. What if no one caught the robbers, and the police started roaming around?

Mouse knew that he had promised Teresa and Vincent that he would not go off by himself. He, too, was concerned about strangers coming through the tunnels. Possibly destroying them with explosions, which could destroy his home.

"Mouse?" Vincent called out.

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar

Mouse looked at him.

“William suggested that Catherine try to get some more information about who these robbers are. He also suggested that we post sentries next to the blocked-off areas. Since you and I have traveled past our community Below, I would like you to help me decide where to place the fake walls.”

Mouse nodded. “Might be others. Like Sakura.”

“We’ll proceed cautiously,” Vincent said. “But again, I cannot stress strongly enough that for now...”

“Mouse know. No roaming.” He sighed.

Jamie spoke up. “I agree. We must all stick to the plan of securing as much as we can. Just in case the robbers manage to escape down Below.”

“I like the idea of keeping one way to Above for that area,” Redbird said. “A controlled exit in case they try to escape to the top. It will make it easier to catch them if they do.”

“Let me know where, so that I can pass on the information to Joe.” Catherine paused, then continued, “Joe will relay that information to the police. I will inform him that someone overheard this and told me. But I will back it up with what I will find out about any science laboratory being robbed. As well as check with my friends Above about any high-profile event that involves expensive items. I know the police will have undercover agents working with the construction crew. Yet, we must also be prepared in case they do rob a place and escape into the tunnels. Maybe the police won’t go into the tunnels to look for them if we give them a location of where they would come out.”

“Well, I know that telling them it was some homeless person isn’t going to help you. They’ll have all kinds of questions to ask you.” Jake smiled. “I’m a known scientist Above who occasionally helps out the ‘underserved.’ And you just happened to know of me. I can answer anything they throw at me, while not mentioning this community. Hopefully, whatever you find out will be enough, but

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar



*Vincent by Laura G*

I hope they move quickly.”

“Jake...” Catherine started to say.

“Hey, if you need me to testify to that, I will.” Jake grinned. “But I think just catching them with the goods will hopefully be enough. Catherine, you will have the hard part. Once you’ve figured out which science lab had lasers that were stolen, you’ll have to figure out what the robbers will be targeting. And if we got all that wrong, and they do go to the tunnels to escape, we’re going to make sure they only exit Uptop where we want them to. If, and that is a big if, they are going to exit after the robbery. They might decide to lie low in the tunnels.”

“So many ways this could go wrong,” Jamie said quietly.

“Many ways will work.” Mouse was excited. “Must work.”

“We all must be vigilant.” Vincent sighed. “It’s late. Tomorrow we will make the plans and start working on them.”

Catherine nodded. “Vincent, keep our children here with you Below. I’ll go back

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar

to our brownstone and listen to the news reports. Just in case the robbery takes place much sooner than we thought.”

“I hope not,” Father piped up.

“I don’t think it will happen right away. The foundation being built is huge, so it might take a few more days to complete. Somehow, we got lucky in finding this out before the robbery. We must figure all of this out. We must be ready when the robbers are.” Jake looked around the room. “Someone must also remind the children not to play around too far from the community. And keep reminding them and keep an eye on them.”

“Children are curious,” Redbird said. “I agree we must keep an eye out for anyone wanting to investigate.” Redbird looked at Mouse.

“Mouse know. Mouse won’t explore.”

*At least not yet.*

\*\*\*

A few weeks later, Mouse was moving through the passageways below his community. He told Teresa he wasn’t going to go far. But too much time had passed by.

“They’ll understand. Not go far,” he mumbled to himself.

He checked the fake walls and blocked up spots every now and then. He listened to the sounds. He let himself feel how the air felt. With senses on high alert, he continued toward the Chamber of the Winds.

Suddenly, he felt uncomfortable. As if someone or something was watching him. He looked around but saw nothing.

He lifted his lantern. It went out. Startled, he reached into his pocket for the matchbox to restart the lamp.

The passageway started to lighten up.

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

He looked around for a place to hide, but there was no nook, no corner.

“Mouse.”

The voice was gentle. He turned around and came face to face with Sakura.

“What did the others tell you, Mouse? What were you warned by me not to do?”

He got quiet. “No go alone.”

She shook her head. Gently touching his shoulder, she softly said, “You are not meant to be here now.”

He looked around, then back at her. “No see danger. Safe.”

She shook her head. “No, it is not. There are others who have been here before. With what someone called the Evil One. They have been confused by your community’s protective ways. Many passageways changed and were blocked off that they knew of. They made their way to the Chamber of the Winds and found a way to remove one of your blocked-off walls. Even now some are roaming this very area. Go back. Warn the others to quickly remake the blocked wall. The dangerous strangers will act tonight.” She looked at him and firmly said, “Go.”

He didn’t hesitate. He quickly ran back up. He was out of breath when he got to his chamber. Teresa was inside, sitting at the desk, and jumped up when she saw him.

“Danger,” he said breathlessly. “Wall breached.”

He then ran out of the room. She followed right behind him. Together, they almost ran into Vincent.

“Mouse? Teresa?”

“Wall breached. By Winds. Bad people. Sakura,” Mouse breathlessly said.

Vincent grabbed Mouse. “Mouse, breathe, please.”

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar

Teresa came up to Mouse and held his hand. “Mouse, you’ll collapse if you don’t.”

He took two breaths, then said quickly, “Sakura said bad ones. Bad ones break through wall. In Chamber of Winds. Would nearly have found Mouse.”

“Mouse, you said you wouldn’t go far!” Teresa looked at him.

“Had to. Long time. Must see.” Mouse looked at them both. “Sakura said it’s going to happen. Tonight.”

Vincent looked at Teresa. “Calm him down. I will tell the others, then go Above and let Catherine know. Our children are with Mary right now. Make sure they stay with her, as well as the other children.”

Teresa nodded. “I’ll pass the word to get the children to safety.”

Vincent let Teresa take Mouse by the hand and lead him onwards. He then turned and ran down the passageway.

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Mouse rested as he sat in the chair in the Library chamber. Teresa had pulled a chair close to him. She looked angry.

“Mouse sorry. Had to see. Nothing happening.”

She had tears in her eyes. “If something ever happened to you...”

“Sorry.” He really was. He didn’t want to see her this upset.

“I’m mad. You said that you were going to go to only a few chambers close by. Not that far down.”

He squirmed. “If gone fully, would have taken a day or two.”

She grabbed his hand. “And I would have been worried sick. I know you like to roam, but please, not now. Not...”

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

He hugged her.

“OOOH, you sometimes...” She paused. “I’m going to calm down.”

“Sorry.”

“I heard that already.” She glared at him.

Jamie entered the chamber with Samantha. The two women looked at Teresa, then at Mouse.

“It’s OK, Jamie, I may be a bit upset, but Mouse is all right.” Teresa looked at Jamie. “Another meeting?”

Jamie shook her head no.

“I was just coming down to check on things,” Samantha said. “I have to go back up, as I can’t stay the night. I told John and Samuel before they went to check the area where Mouse was. They have taken a few more people with them. Vincent’s spreading the word fast.”

“Messages being sent.” Jamie looked at Samantha. “We’ll send a few of the younger children up to the brownstone. Can you keep an eye on them until we get Judy to come watch them?”

“Sure,” Samantha said.

“What next?” Mouse inquired.

“What’s next is that you are sticking close to me,” Teresa said. “And we are both going to obey EVERY instruction given by Vincent.”

Mouse lowered his head. “Still mad?”

Jamie and Samantha smiled.

“No, but we’ll have a nice long discussion.” Teresa grabbed his hand. Looking at Jamie, she said, “Go time?”

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar

Jamie nodded.

Samantha looked puzzled.

“Samantha, we have plans for when the actual robbery may occur. But now with some dangerous people from way Below, we’re going to have to make sure we keep them away from our location.” Jamie sighed. “I’m so glad we have backup plans. Mouse, Vincent wants to meet with you.”

Teresa got up.

Mouse got up slowly. Talk. Always talking. He looked at Teresa. “Mouse can help.”

Teresa sighed. “Yes, Vincent will tell you what you should do. What I hate is that he may have you check things out with him. Listen to what he tells you.”

“Stay with Vincent. Mouse remember.”

“Thank God.” Jamie turned around to leave. “Be safe, Mouse, at least for Teresa’s sake.”

Samantha walked over to Teresa and gave her a hug. She turned and hugged Mouse. She turned around and left the chamber.

“Mouse no get hugs tonight?” He looked at Teresa.

Trying hard not to smile, she said firmly, “We’ll see.”

He grinned. She wasn’t too mad. He walked out of the chamber to go find Vincent.

\*\*\*

That night, Mouse was in his chamber with Vincent and Teresa. A panel of lights was blinking on and off on the top.

“See. Those others. Went to exit we had for robbers.”

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar

Vincent nodded. “You had a good idea, Mouse. We repaired the fake wall as you suggested. It’ll look like rocks have gotten loose and blocked the opening.”

“Yes,” Teresa said. “That way, if the robbers wanted another exit, they would find only one available to them.”

“Catherine convinced Joe to have police stationed by both the construction site and the exit to Above.” Vincent paused, then continued, “So far, Sakura’s information, as well as what Narcissa and Redbird told us, was correct.”

“And Jake and Father had to get logical and reason out the rest.” Teresa smiled.

“Bad people. Glad Mouse fix.” Mouse looked at the panel. “Maybe later. Make connections to all the exits.” Mouse noticed the look on Teresa and Vincent’s faces and grinned. “Mouse knows what thinking. Keep Mouse out of trouble.”

They all laughed.

“If the city doesn’t block the exit to Above as a precaution, then we have to do it.” Teresa turned toward Vincent. “Mouse will keep an eye on the panel. I will keep an eye on him.”

Mouse shook his head. Why couldn’t he go with Vincent and Samuel to keep an eye out for the robbers Below? But they did say this panel will help. So, Mouse stays, and watches. At least Teresa was here.

The lights went off a little farther down the panel. Mouse turned around. Vincent was gone.

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Many hours later, all clear was tapped on the pipes. Mouse wanted to go and see, but Teresa stopped him.

“Might need help.” He looked at her.

“It’s all taken care of, Mouse. Remember? After Catherine found out which science laboratory had been robbed, she then figured out which place they might

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar

strike next.”

“The exhibit.”

She laughed. “Yeah, that’s what Catherine thought. The exhibit with some rare coins that were going to be shown off to rich people.”

“But it wasn’t.”

Mouse and Teresa turned to see Catherine standing there.

Mouse was confused. “It wasn’t? What?”

Catherine smiled. “That was probably what they wanted us to think. Oh, that exhibit was being robbed, but not by our thieves. Joe contacted me and said those thieves were caught. Luckily, we quickly compared notes, and it seemed like they weren’t the ones who robbed the science laboratory. Joe decided not to call Detective Hughes to stand down. Good thing he didn’t. A few minutes later, a call came into the police station. A very private showing of a gold box encrusted with jewels, containing even more valuable diamonds as well as rubies and jade, was stolen from a private auction house.”

“That’s what they were after.” Teresa looked at her. “But how did they know?”

Catherine shrugged. “Someone on the inside? Maybe caterers for that event? The details will eventually come out. The police were still watching the construction site. It was a good thing they did. A truck was spotted going into the site. The security guard, who was our undercover agent, checked their IDs and allowed them to continue. Then he radioed in that he saw unusual construction items in the back of the truck. And a covered-up



## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar

box.”

“Wow.” Mouse shook his head. “All for shiny stuff.”

“I just left my children in the care of Mary. It’s going to be a long night for me. I’m going to help Joe with the paperwork. The authorities are going to check out the tunnels from the escape route Above. Once they are sure no one is down there, they’ll seal off the entrance. The blocked passageways and fake walls will have to remain in place until then. As to the other entrance, it will be blocked off when the foundation is laid. Vincent said once everything has calmed down, there will be decisions made about what passageways to open back up.”

“Mouse can check.” He was excited. He’d get to explore.

“Hopefully, those other people below the Chamber of the Winds won’t try to come and find us.” Teresa was quiet. “Or...”

“Keep some places closed off.” Mouse nodded. “Good. Better than good. Mouse help.”

Catherine looked at the panel of lights. “It’ll be a long time until everything calms down. After helping Joe, I’ll return to my usual assignments for Family Court. Vincent will probably open up the passageways to the Chamber of the Winds.” She looked at Mouse. “Then you can roam all you want down there.”

Mouse grinned.

Teresa touched his arm. “And I’m going with you. Maybe another TPI investigation.”

Mouse shook his head. “No ghosts. No witches. Just...” He blushed.

Teresa gently hugged him.

“Vincent will be staying Below tonight. I promised Joe I’d meet him around 10am tomorrow. I’ll help him with any paperwork involving this case. Plus see if there is anything else he needs from me. Then later, Vincent and I will meet up. We’ll

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar

have more information for those here Below.” Teresa and Mouse just nodded their heads. Catherine chuckled. “I know I don’t have to say it,” she whispered, “but...have a loving good night.”

Catherine walked out of the chamber.

\*\*\*

Days later, Catherine and Teresa were in the brownstone apartment. They sat in their chairs, which were next to each other. Their heads rested against the backs of the chairs, their legs spread out.

Catherine broke the silence. “This was one heck of a week.”

“Second that.” Teresa sighed. She shifted in her seat, sitting straight up. “Whoever thought...”

Catherine sat up and looked at her. “Our husbands. Really?”

“I know. But at least Vincent is learning not to go fight the bad guys alone. Mouse is still...”

“Mouse.”

Teresa nodded. “Why did I have to fall in love with a guy like him? You can never know what he will do.”

“You think Vincent is any easier? I think he forgets that the bond can’t use actual words to tell me what he’s thinking, what he’s doing, or what he’s feeling.”

They chuckled.

“But we can’t live without them,” Teresa said. Catherine nodded. “What’s next?” Teresa inquired.

“Joe told me the thieves will stay in jail until their trial in a few months. Jake won’t need to testify; the police have plenty of evidence.”

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

“I’m just glad that the few people from way Below went immediately Above.”

“That’s not good for us. Who knows what they will do?”

“Or what will happen to them?”

“Well, we’d better get going. My Vincent is waiting with our children. Your Mouse is waiting for you.”

“Maybe not. I think he is tinkering with something.”

Catherine grinned. “Mouse really meant that there would be no more TPI investigations?”

Teresa nodded. “Yes, Mouse said it was one and done and meant it. Jake and Jamie, on the other hand, are thinking of giving it another go. But not anytime soon. Redbird is going out with her school pals today, but she wouldn’t mind investigating any paranormal places Above. Maybe close to where she lives with Mrs. Duffy.”

“What about you?”

“I side with Mouse. I want to just go back to having a few days alone exploring safe areas with him.”

Catherine laughed. “That might not be possible.”

“Oh, I’ll make sure it is. Just like when we go Above. I make sure he is not taking what is not his, like usual.” Teresa smiled. “But that is one thing I do like about him. He’s so curious about things. Especially about anything that is mechanical.”

“Mouse will always be into his gizmos.”

“You should see the way he gets so involved with an item.” Teresa smiled.

“Mouse knows!”

Both women jumped out of their chairs and looked to see Mouse standing there.

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

“How?” Catherine inquired as she put her hand to her chest.

Teresa placed her hands on her hips.

Mouse grinned; he had surprised them. “Remember? Have key.”

Teresa walked up to him. “Guess that means we should go down?”

Mouse nodded. “Meeting. To explain events. Plan what next.”

“Well,” Catherine said. “Off we go Below.”

\*\*\*

After the meeting, Teresa and Mouse were back at Mouse’s chamber. Teresa sat and watched as Mouse checked around his chamber.

“So, are you going to be up late tonight? Or what?”

He looked at her. “Be in bedroom chamber soon. Check on some things. Teresa tired?”

She nodded her head. “It’s been frantic. And it’s still not over yet. Who’d have ever thought that someone working as a caterer overheard someone talking about some rich guy having an elaborate private party for a friend? Then he tells his friend, who was just released after serving time for bank robbery. You would think that he would realize that could be tempting for a guy who served over a decade in prison? Then he found out, via connections, when the party was going to be. And when he saw the plans for a building being demolished in that particular area, he got a crazy idea. Based on what he heard about homeless in the tunnels, he made this crazy scheme. Even took the time for months of planning to figure out when the foundation for the new building was going to be set up. And it turned out to be the week of the private party.”

He shook his head. “Too much thinking.”

“Yes, but it was brilliant. With his talent for planning and scheming, he could have used it to help the city in some way. But no, he wanted that gold box. The box was

## Who You Gonna Call? by PearlAnn SnowStar



### What It's Like to Have a Love by Laura G

pecially made for this rich person's friend. It cost millions of dollars. All for another rich person to have another treasure. That money could have gone to help the underserved in our city."

"Greedy."

"Yes, some rich people are greedy."

"Catherine not."

"Yes, Catherine not." Teresa got up. "I want to rest a bit. See you soon."

He just nodded. He wasn't tired yet. He was so glad that they fixed up the little nook close to his chamber for their bedroom chamber. Not far away. He picked up a mechanical object. He started to work on it when his lamp went out.

He was about to reach for the emergency flashlight Teresa left in his drawer when the chamber lights went back on. "Must check connections," he mumbled to himself.

## **Who You Gonna Call?** *by PearlAnn SnowStar*

He was glad for the peace and quiet. He continued to work on the mechanical object when he thought he heard a giggle. He turned around and frowned. No Teresa. No one.

“Safe now, my dear Mouse. I like your community. So interesting.”

Mouse jumped up and ran out of the chamber. No one around.

Another giggle. Then he saw something on the ground. Cherry blossom petals.

He ran to the bedroom that he and Teresa shared. Teresa was sound asleep. He turned and walked out of the chamber.

“Not funny.” He looked around. “Mouse knows. Witch better be nice.” He took a deep breath.

There was another giggle.

Mouse ran into the bedroom chamber and quickly and quietly jumped onto the bed. He pulled Teresa close to him. Glad he had a love. He had her. Safe now.



## Healing

Paula

*Author's note:*

*This story takes place during the events described in “Friendly Terms,” written for the Project Decades WFOL 2025, and before the events depicted in “Feelings.” Both works can be read on the CABB – New Chambers website. batbcabb.com*

*“To heal is to touch with love that which was previously touched by fear.”  
--(Stephen Levine)*

Still adapting, cautious, shy, yet incredibly grateful; only a week had passed since he began his new life in this magical world, detached from life, in the shadow of drugs and the evil lurking in the city’s dark corners... And though anxiety was no longer his constant companion, Ike had not yet regained his inner peace.

During the day, he learned the rules and got to know the people around him, filled with wonder and amazement; at night, drenched in sweat, he fought off nightmares.

*It always started the same – the gloomy atmosphere of an abandoned building, the smell of alcohol, smoke, and dust – and there he was, sitting against the wall of a dingy hallway, sent away so he wouldn’t see or hear certain things; that evening, he had heard too much, and it had gone on for too long. A reflex of revulsion and protest from his body, which was gasping for air, caused him to move away from the ‘safe’ spot where he had been waiting. The image was blurry and gray; he saw everything from above, walking through the room – a mattress, a table, empty bottles, and approaching footsteps...*

He jolted awake, gasping for air. He sat up in bed and covered his face with his hands. *Will this nightmare haunt me forever? I live in fear that it will happen again, and even here, where I’m safe, I can’t get a good night’s sleep.* His heart pounded painfully in his chest.

Heavy breathing filled the room; his new roommates were asleep, and no one noticed his agitation. With his eyes closed, he calmed himself, trying to cover up his chaotic thoughts with hope. From the top of his head, he felt a cold wave of

## Healing by Paula

fear wash over him all the way down to his toes. A shiver ran through his body, which was crying out for rest. He took a chance; lying on his back, he stared at the stone ceiling, only to fall into a restless sleep a moment later, tossing and turning, pulling the covers over himself and then pulling them back off again; he waited until morning.

During the day, he managed to focus his attention on studying, helping out in the kitchen, and assisting with deliveries from the Helpers. All the tunnel dwellers knew where he lived; they looked at him with sympathy, and some of them, with fear. He was from the dark side of the city, chosen, saved. The need to prove that he was worthy of living here became the driving force that pushed him to give his all despite his fatigue.

The nights were a battle, one he kept losing.

*He wandered around the room, a sickening smell filling his nostrils; he heard footsteps behind him, and a sudden turn toward the source revealed a stranger with an ominous glint in his dark eyes and a suspicious smirk.*

The sudden awakening caused him to lose his balance and fall onto the hard floor; his dazed gaze wandered over the walls, where the candlelight cast shadows, and his mind struggled to stay rational. His ears were ringing, and images from his dream kept returning; the cold from the floor effectively cooled his heated skin. *Damn it! When will this end?*

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The library, a place with an irresistible pull. Whenever Ike felt an inner urge to escape reality, he thought of that place.

His gaze fell on the bookshelves; he ran his fingers over the covers, tempted by the vision of transporting himself to another world.

“Hey, looking for something good to read? I can help you.”

Vincent’s words brought a smile to his face. “Sure. I’m open to suggestions.”

“What genre do you like?”

## Healing by Paula

Ike rubbed his chin. “Maybe something adventurous?”

His companion ran a hand through his tousled hair. “I think you'll like The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. We have a few volumes.”

The new resident smiled warmly and a joyous sparkle appeared in his eyes. “Awesome! I knew I could count on you.”

“Feel free to ask. If you'd like, we can read together sometimes.”

“Great idea, thanks.” He rubbed his eyes. “But not today; again, I didn't sleep very well.”

He gave him a concerned look. “It's hard to fall asleep in a new place; it's a big change.”

“Yeah.” *Can I tell you about the sources of my fears? But now isn't the time.* “I got a chance, but I feel alone.” He blinked a few times, feeling tears welling up.

“I'm sorry about your mom.”

The muscles in his jaw tensed. “Thanks.” He cleared his throat. “Do you know



Vincent's Window by Laura G

## Healing by Paula

your parents?”

His buddy shook his head. “I was abandoned, so I understand you, at least when it comes to loneliness.”

“I’m sorry, man. How are you holding up?”

“I’m managing.” He shrugged. “Maybe because I’ve been here since I was a baby. You have recently lost a parent; you have a long time ahead of you to come to terms with this loss.”

He sighed without a trace of relief. “I know. I feel like we’ll get along.”

“I think so, too.” *Something’s bothering you; I sense it.* He pulled a copy of Oliver Twist off the shelf. Frowning, he turned toward him. “If you want to talk, you know where to find me.” He walked away, feeling both the joy of this new friend and a shadow of unease, because he didn’t know if he’ll be able to help him.

Ike narrowed his eyes as he watched the figure walk away. *You’re special, but it’s not only about your looks – it’s about your empathy and sensitivity toward others.* His gaze drifted to the book he was holding, and a spark of satisfaction flashed in his eyes. *My eternal escape.* Just holding the book in his hands, brought him immense consolation.

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Sometimes, when he was engrossed in a novel, he would forget about his second breakfast and lunch. Those were moments free from worry, and he loved that feeling.

“Hey, man? Aren’t you hungry?” Mitch’s voice interrupted the main characters’ pirate adventure.

Ike rubbed his eyes. “No, I’m not accustomed to regular meals.”

“I’ve heard something about that. You won’t go hungry here, but get moving, or the Old Man will come and start examining you for some kind of illness.”

He remained on the bed, unmoved by his words. “Don’t talk nonsense.”

The buddy snorted. “That’s nonsense – you’re reading right now. If you’re bored, come with me later.”

## Healing by Paula

His snide remark went right over Ike's head. "I like reading; the books are okay." He gave him a suspicious look. "Where do you want to go?"

"Above, we'll walk around a bit." He slipped his hands into the pockets of his worn jeans. "I have some cigarettes stashed away; we can smoke them, because there'd be a huge fuss if we did it here."

"Dude, smoking isn't fun for me." He squinted. "And I advise you to quit."

Mitch snorted. "Sure! Come on, don't be a bore! We can go for a walk and get some fresh air – Rennie's coming, too."

He reluctantly put the book down, sensing some hidden meaning behind it. "And Vincent?"

"Why? He can't show his face during the day."

The air began to grow thick...

"But you're going later, so it'll already be dark."

"I don't want to bring that freak with us – maybe we'll meet some girls?"

He jumped out of bed; his gaze was thunderous. "Don't talk about him like that!"

Mitch shrugged. "I'll say whatever I want."

A wave of anger crept beneath his skin, threatening to spill over inside him. He clenched his hands into fists. "Don't insult him, it's not fair."

At Ike's words, Mitch rolled his eyes, but the angry glint in the newcomer's eyes and his lips pressed into a thin line made him hold back a barrage of insults. *I'll give you a chance.* He raised both hands. "I don't want to argue; you're new and you've had it rough. If you change your mind, let me know."

He relaxed his hands, and the pressure in his head and muscles eased. "I'm new and I respect others – remember that, and you can go without us."

"Yeah, whatever." He turned around and walked away...

It was hard to calm his thoughts after such a meeting; he sank heavily onto the bed, his feet resting on the faded carpet. He covered his eyes with his hand. *I had a feeling you were quite the character. Did he mention anything about girls? He*

## Healing by Paula

*doesn't mean the ones waiting in certain places for the clients, does he? He grimaced. I've seen enough of that; I couldn't help it—I was living in my own hell. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead, and his breathing grew heavy. I want to forget about bad things and live in peace. His throat tightened painfully. I'm safe, I am safe; nothing threatens me here. After a moment, his thoughts became clearer and his mind less foggy. A few breaths later, he jumped to his feet and ran out of the room, hoping he was heading toward the kitchen.*

Amid the softly lit rock corridors, he moved cautiously, remembering that it was easy to get lost here. The crisp air was soothing; he was enjoying a pleasant walk until the sound of approaching footsteps stopped him in his tracks. In a split second, the leader of this world emerged from around the bend.

The teenager took his hands out of his pockets. “Father.”

The man sighed deeply, and a gentle smile spread across his face. “I was worried about you, boy.”

At those comforting words, Ike's eyes widened, expecting a scolding rather than concern. “I got lost in a book. I'm sorry.” He bit his lip.

That explanation was satisfying for a book lover. “I understand. I'm glad you like to read; it's a good pastime.” He laughed briefly. “Vincent also often forgets the whole world when he gets absorbed in a story.”

“Yeah, he recommended Tom Sawyer to me, and I was hooked.”

He patted him on the shoulder. “I'm happy he'll have a reading buddy.”

“Me, too. We recently visited the Chamber of the Falls.”

“What are your impressions?”

“Unforgettable. I think this is my new favorite place, after the library.”

“You still have to see the starry sky in the Mirror Pool.”



## Healing by Paula

“Vincent promised to take me there.”

A pleasant warm feeling spread through Father’s chest as he watched the teenagers’ friendship blossom. *My son has recovered from those sad events, and that boy hasn’t had an easy life either. They met at just the right time.*

They walked in a pleasant silence, punctuated by the sounds coming from the pipes. They reached a spot where the light was brighter. Father immediately noticed the red, puffy eyes of his young companion. “How was your night? Did you sleep well?”

A heavy sigh echoed off the walls. “I kept waking up. I have to get used to this new place, the clean bed, and all the care.”

At that answer, a pang of regret squeezed the man's compassionate heart. *What must you have been through? You grew up too fast, you’ve seen too much.* He rubbed the back of his neck. “In time, you’ll find your place here and regain your joy. A time of healing has begun for your heart and soul.”

“Thank you for everything,” Shaken to the core, he couldn't hide the tremor in his voice.

“We're happy we could help you, and now get to the kitchen – you need to eat.”

As if on cue, his stomach growled. “My belly can’t wait.” He smiled warmly and ran in the indicated direction.

Led by the aromatic smells, he arrived at the dining chamber, Passing the entrance, he nearly bumped into the girl whose name he hadn’t yet remembered.

“Ike, why are you in such a hurry?” A blonde girl with blue eyes stared at him curiously.

“I missed two meals. Sorry, I should’ve been more careful.”

“It’s okay. Sit at the table, I’ll get you some food.”

He scratched his head. “What?”

“Sit. Don’t be a baby.” She flashed him a wide smile, and her cheeks flushed slightly.

“Uhm, okay.” There was no one in the place; from the kitchen, he caught the

## Healing by Paula

sound of voices, the clinking of cutlery, and the rush of running water.

“Rebecca, grab some bread to go with that.”

He heard the cook’s voice. *Rebecca – Yes, I should have remembered.* While waiting, his fingers tapped out a gentle rhythm on the tabletop. A few beats later a familiar figure appeared in the entrance. She set a bowl of warm broth and a few slices of bread in front of him.

The corner of his mouth turned up slightly. “Thank you.” He wiped his sweaty hands on his pants and leaned forward slightly, inhaling the aroma wafting from the dish.

“Enjoy your meal.” Her hand brushed against his shoulder.

A touch as light as a feather made him feel intimidated. *Is this some kind of flirting?* “Thanks,” he managed to croak out.

Rebecca hovered over him like a shadow. His gaze was fixed on the bowl, but under her watchful eye, he wouldn't be able to swallow a single bite.



Rebecca by Laura G

## Healing by Paula

“Maybe you need some company?” .

He looked at her slightly red cheeks and bit his lip, pondering the nicest way to refuse. His gaze drifted toward the exit, and he spotted his fellow reader.

“Vincent!” Seeing him was like stepping out of a stuffy room into the fresh air.

“I heard you were in the dining chamber and thought you might need some company during the meal.” His gaze shifted back and forth between his two friends. No amount of camouflage would have helped Rebecca; with rosy cheeks, she leaned over his new friend, while he, cowering and tense, silently begged for his help.

She looked down, feeling a little disappointed. “You won’t be alone anymore, so I’m going back to help in the kitchen.” In the blink of an eye, she left them.

Vincent sat next to his buddy. “I think you caught her eye.” His tone sounded conspiratorial.

“I noticed.” At least, he started eating and took the first spoonful. *Delicious, warm.* He bit into a slice of bread and was chewing slowly...

“So, what do you think?” His companion raised his eyebrows playfully.

“Man, she’s pretty and nice, but after everything I’ve seen, I’m not thinking about girls. I don’t know if I’m the right person for anyone.”

He frowned at those words. “You didn’t do anything wrong. Just because you lived in a place like that doesn’t mean you’re a bad guy. I saw you earlier in the tunnel before you came back the second time. I felt you were a kind person; you only needed help.”

His eyes widened. “Really? You saw me? I was scared out of my mind back then. I ran away from home because...” A look of immense fear flashed in his eyes, and a lump formed in his throat, making it impossible to swallow.

“Go on..”

He pressed his lips into a thin line; helplessly, he shook his head. “I can’t.”

His friend squeezed his arm. “It’s okay, you’ll tell me when you’re ready.”

“Thanks. I feel like you understand me better than anyone else here.”

## Healing by Paula

*I'm trying.* He nodded with a look of apprehension in his eyes.

They dropped the heavy topic; a temporary solution postponed. Ike knew he had to face it, had to tell someone about it. *Soon...*

The meal was finished down to the last spoonful. Satisfied, he stretched out in his chair and ran his hand through his quite long, blond hair. The result looked a bit like a tousled nest, with strands of hair sticking out in every direction.

His companion gave a short laugh. "You should get a haircut."

"Yeah. And who's going to do it here?"

"I can cut your hair." A familiar, girlish voice came from the kitchen and Rebecca suddenly appeared at the entrance, as if she were just waiting for an excuse to join the conversation.

Vincent opened his mouth, but not a single word came out.

His buddy observed his frozen face and decided to react. "Seriously? You can? I don't want to be a laughingstock."

"Of course, come to my chamber and I'll take care of it right away." She blushed for the third time in half an hour, and he wondered if this was a good idea.

His pleading gaze turned to his friend.

"I'll go with you, don't worry."

He let out a sigh of relief. "Thanks, you're saving my life," whispered the words.

"I guess so."

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When they arrived at the spot, Olivia was brushing her brown hair. Her eyes widened at the sight of their visitors. "What a surprise. Come in!" Her brown eyes sparkled with mystery in the candlelight.

"Thanks." Vincent flopped down on the bed and put his hands behind his head.

Rebecca instinctively began to adjust her ponytail, wishing she had left her hair down to look prettier. "Ike, sit here, and I'll go look for some scissors." She started rummaging through a box full of hairpins and bows.

## Healing by Paula



*Vincent by Laura G*

Her close friend eyed her with a furrowed brow. “What are you planning to do?”

“Ike needs a haircut.”

Olivia crossed her arms over her chest. “And you want to do that?”

“Yes.” The reply came out through clenched teeth

The figure lying on the bed covered his face with a pillow, and his shoulders were shaking, but Ike was far from amused; in fact, he was on the verge of a burst of fear and uncertainty. “Uhm,” he scratched his head, “maybe Mary will do it. Are you sure you know how to cut hair?”

“Don't worry,” she replied sweetly. “I know what I'm doing. I was recently flipping through a magazine with hairstyles – it's not hard to cut boys' hair.”

“I hope so,” he muttered quietly.

In front of the mirrored cabinet he watched her movements. He swallowed hard and closed his eyes. First, she brushed his soft hair; he felt comfortable, even a little relaxed. When she picked up the scissors, his eyes opened immediately and he stared at her for a moment, filled with apprehension.

## Healing by Paula

Olivia sighed impatiently, the flames of her jealousy almost reaching him; he didn't like being the object of a rivalry between two girls. *A normal guy would have been thrilled, but when I looked at both, I saw nothing but good friends in them.*

The self-proclaimed hairdresser began her work. She trimmed his hair first at the back, then above his ears. Her fingers brushed against the back of his neck too often and for too long. He had to remind himself to breathe, even though he was trying to treat the whole thing as a bit of fun.

Finally, she turned her attention to his bangs, trimming them unevenly and sweeping them slightly to the side. Her fingers brushed his cheeks on both sides, then touched his forehead again. Personally, he considered himself stylish enough.

“Done!” she announced enthusiastically.

He curved his lips into a slight smile. “I was worried, but it turned out pretty cool.” *A little crooked, but okay.* “Thank you – you’ve got talent.”

“You’re welcome, and thanks.” She blushed again.

Olivia eyed them with narrowed eyes, tapping her foot the whole time. “Well, maybe it’s not Becca’s skill, but your features make you look good in any hairstyle.”

The chamber was filled with a ton of emotions mixed with teenage hormones, just waiting to burst forth.

The girls exchanged glances through half-closed eyes, with minds clouded by infatuation.

“Uhm... Thanks.” Ike jumped up from his chair. “I’m heading out. Vincent, are you coming with me?”

Her friend pressed his trembling lips together and rose lazily from his comfortable lying position.

Rebecca went back to cleaning out the cabinet. “Ike, don’t miss dinner.”

“I’ll do my best. Thanks again,” he said, grabbing Vincent by the arm.

Leaving that place felt like returning from another reality. His breath calmed

## Healing by Paula

down and muscles relaxed. “Don't even say a word.” He spat out the words, turning to his friend.

Vincent raised his hands. “I'm not going to.”

“You had quite a laugh, didn't you?”

His eyes sparkled joyfully. “A little, but I was also worried about the consequences of Rebecca's actions.”

Ike ran his fingers through his new haircut. “I was worried, too, about how it would look, but I was more self-conscious about how the girls would react.”

For a moment, Vincent pondered a clever reply. “It was funny to watch, but I know what you mean. The hairstyle is fine, and if you treat them just like friends, their infatuation will fade quickly.”

“I feel like I've only just started breathing properly. I hope you're right. Thanks for being here with me; otherwise, I would've run away before she finished cutting my hair.”

He chuckled softly. “I'm always here to help. Let's go read something.”

“Oh, yes! That's what I need now!”

They headed toward Vincent's chamber to embark on another book-filled adventure there...

\*\*\*

In the evenings, Ike felt his mind growing foggy and confused; his body craved peaceful rest, but his mind had other plans. He lay exhausted on his bed, dreaming of deep sleep...

Nearby, Mitch was tossing and turning and sighing; finally, he cleared his throat. “I've heard about your life. I know what kind of neighborhood it was.”

Snapped out of this blissful state ‘in between’, he rubbed his eyes. *What?* “Everyone knows that – what are you getting at?”

“Relax.” He curved his lips into a wry smile.

## Healing by Paula

A false sense of friendship hung in the air. “I’m calm.”

“I thought maybe you had some contacts...”

That sentence made Ike’s stomach clench. “Contacts? What are you talking about!?”

“Maybe you know someone who could get some weed; I’d like to feel that high.”

He jumped out of bed “Damn it, Mitch!” *I’m burning up inside; frustration and shame are turning my insides to ashes.* “Do you really think I’d go back there to get you something? You don’t know what kind of people they are, and you don’t know what addiction does. It’s not fun; it’s a tragedy and a slow decline.”

“Dude, don’t overreact!”

“Stay out of this, Mitch. Don’t even try to get involved, and don’t start messing around with either trying it or dealing it. I can’t believe you would even think of something like that.” *I feel sick just thinking about it.*

Mitch wiped the sweat from his forehead and bit his lip. “Okay, okay, I was just trying to tease you. I’m not going to be a dealer.”

“That joke didn’t land well; I’m warning you. Just let it go!” He emphasized every word strongly.

“Fine, that’s it,” he turned away, red with anger. “I’m going to sleep.”

“Yeah...” *That’s exactly what I needed – this conversation to dwell even more on my old, miserable life.*

That night brought him no respite either. *The same dingy place, gray and cold, a figure approaching, closer and closer; the smell of alcohol and something he couldn’t identify on its breath; he felt a tightness in his throat and... woke up, gasping for air. His shirt was sticky with sweat; one, two, three... He looked gratefully at the glass of water on the nightstand and drank it in one gulp. I can’t take this anymore.*

Anxiety was stronger than fatigue; he lay in bed until he heard the morning

## Healing by Paula



*Vincent by Laura G*

commotion. Someone was heading to the kitchen, and Mary's voice in the distance signaled that the younger children would soon be running down the hallway. He was already sitting up, dressed in a gray sweatshirt and patched pants.

Breakfast was already in his stomach, and during class, as he rubbed his eyes, he managed to muster what little concentration he had left. Yet he was lost in thought, present yet distant. Completely unaware of the keen observation of a close friend.

Dark circles under his eyes, sluggish movements, and slow reactions. It was getting harder and harder to hide his worry.

Wanting to keep up the pretense, Ike agreed to play soccer with his friends. Clumsy, distracted, and lacking energy, he tried to have fun with his buddies; and it wasn't until the ball hit him in the head again that he stopped his efforts. Mitch mocked him and called 'loser.'

## Healing by Paula

Determined to avoid a barrage of snide remarks directed at him, he shrugged off the provocation and walked out, leaving his friend standing there in astonishment...

Slowly, he passed through the rocky corridors, staring at the ground, his hands tucked into the pockets of his sweatshirt. The sounds coming from the pipes grew fainter and fainter, and the air grew cooler, a light breeze brushing against his face.

There was such a silence that one could lose oneself in thought, lose oneself entirely; finally breathe

Just around the corner, the wind was playing a loud, ominous tune, and the place was darker; it drew him in; step by step, he descended the stairs...

His gaze wandered toward the precipice just a few steps away. *I'd heard about this place. It's dangerous, and I probably shouldn't be here.* But human curiosity got the better of him, and he stepped closer to look down.

And the view was breathtaking; a mystical spectacle – *was it smoke or fog?* Everything swirled hypnotically, alluringly; shades of gray and white intertwined, nothingness, emptiness. His body leaned dangerously forward. *I'm standing on the edge, and the slightest gust of wind is enough to send me falling...*

"Ike, back off!" A familiar voice cut through the gusts of wind.

He gave him an indifferent look. "Bro! Don't be afraid; I'm just enjoying the view." He stretched out his arms wide.

Vincent held his breath. "Please. I can see what's going on with you – you're exhausted and bottling everything up inside!"

The words hit him like a bucket of cold water. His eyes widened. *You know me better than I thought.* "You're right, something's weighing on me, but I wanted to escape into the silence, to think. I ended up here by accident – or maybe on purpose." He ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't even know myself."

Vincent felt his knees go weak as he watched him still standing on the verge. "Let's get out of here and talk."

"I prefer to talk right here; this place makes me want to get it off my chest. It's as

## Healing by Paula

if I could leave all my secrets and all my torments here.”

“You're right, it's pretty intense – whatever you put in there stays in there, forever.” He gave him a serious look. “Let's sit by the wall, I feel like my heart is going to break my ribs when I see you there.”

Ike smiled at his expression of concern. “You're worried.”

“Come closer and put an end to my worries.” His muscles were tense and his lips were pressed together.

Ike took a step toward him, and they sat together against the wall, keeping a safe distance.

“Get it off your chest; it'll make you feel better.”

His companion took a deep breath and slowly let it out. “I have nightmares, night after night, and then I sleep restlessly, which is why I walk around so dazed.”

“The same dream every night?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me.”

Ike closed his eyes and swallowed. “I often left the room where I slept when my mom had company. There were drugs, alcohol, and other things that made them disconnect. She didn't want me to be part of it, so I'd sit in the hallway and read books that nobody wanted or a magazine.

“She wanted to protect you.”

“In a way, yes, but by then I was old enough to understand what those meetings were about.” He rubbed his forehead, feeling the heat rising.

“Did you peek?”

“Yes, out of simple curiosity.” He grimaced. “It made me feel sick.”

“Is that what the dreams are about?”

Ike pulled his legs up and rested his hands on his knees. “No, but they're connected to it.” Once again, he took a breath. “One evening, there was a particularly wild party going on there. I couldn't stand listening to it, so I went for

## Healing by Paula

a walk around the building. I guess I'd gone too far." He ran his hand through his hair.

"I was in an abandoned room – a mattress, empty bottles. I thought I was alone... but.." his voice started to tremble. "Suddenly, some stranger showed up. He started spouting nonsense, saying I must have come for drugs, but I had to pay for them. Of course, I told him I didn't want drugs and..."

Vincent looked at him with a concerned expression. "Don't worry, you're safe here."

But his friend was somewhere else, reliving the event all over again. "I have to say this. He pushed me against the wall and covered my mouth with one hand. He said I was probably one of those who make money that way. I could smell alcohol and I don't know what else; his stubble pricked me, his nose brushed against my neck, and I tried to break free, but he was stronger. His hand slammed against my chest, then reached for the button on my pants; I felt sick and wanted to die."

Vincent shook his head and clenched his fists, feeling his anger rising. "Ike... what happened next?"

"A miracle happened. A friend of my mom's – the one who taught me to read and write – found me and pulled me away from that pervert. He told me to run, and he didn't have to repeat it. Fueled by adrenaline, I ran all the way to the tunnels – that's when you saw me for the first time."

"You went through something terrible."

"It could have been much worse. I wouldn't have been able to pull myself together after something like that, which is why I have nightmares – because I'm afraid that something like that might happen to me again and no one will save me."

"You're safe here. You need to tell Father, and he'll give you something to calm you down. You told me about it; maybe the burden will feel lighter now that you've shared it with me."

Ike tilted his head back and closed his eyes. "Thank you for listening to me and for being here. I think I'm starting to feel that lightness."

## Healing by Paula

“You can always count on me. That’s a promise.”

“And you can count on me.”

They sat there in silence for a few more moments, buffeted by the wind, which soothed their senses after the harrowing story. The abyss swallowed Ike’s secret; he felt that some force had brought him here so that he might finally find peace.

For a moment, they looked at each other, sharing the same sense of understanding; that instant when the burden of the secret was finally lifted strengthened their budding friendship.

Ike felt as if a weight had been lifted from his heart; even though he knew that talking to Father would mean revisiting that terrifying event, he felt a sense of ease and strength within himself. “Let’s get out of here; I’ll shake this weight off for the second time, and maybe I’ll finally be completely free.”

“I’m sure sharing this will help.”

He put his hand to his heart. The pain of missing his mother would remain, but it can only grow fainter; it will never disappear, but perhaps other memories will fade. He pressed his lips together. “Everything is still bleeding; the wounds are too fresh...”

His friend put a hand on his shoulder. “You need time.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to believe it.”

It was time to leave the area around the chasm. They moved slowly, and with each step they got nearer to the tunnels leading home.

Vincent was mulling over their conversation, still shaken by the evil reigning in the world above. He glanced at his companion with admiration – for his inner strength, which he doesn’t even know he possesses, for his sensitivity and understanding. *He doesn’t isolate himself from me, doesn’t reject me like a freak, and with all this, he heals my heart that longs for Devin.*

The entrance to the library loomed in the distance. Ike took a few deep breaths and

## Healing by Paula

turned to his companion. “I’ll always be grateful to you for listening to me.”

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly. “That’s what friends do, right?”

He smiled back. “I just haven’t gotten used to a lot of things.” He bowed his head. “I hadn’t made any friends, I didn’t have the comfort of a clean bed or regular meals, and I never imagined that learning could bring me such joy.”

“It’s a life worth living – one you deserve.”

A flood of emotions washed over him in waves; trembling, he gasped for breath; his glance at his friend spoke louder than an ocean of beautiful words – he turned and stepped over the threshold.

With his sleeve, he wiped his eyes, making them even redder and more swollen, and went down the stairs, feeling a surge of courage with every step.

The community leader raised his eyes from the pile of documents and furrowed his brow. He immediately sensed the gravity of the moment. *There you are at last: tired, determined.* “Is something wrong?”

“I’d like to talk.”

He set aside the documents and moved closer. “Sure, have a seat.”

The boy settled comfortably into his seat and folded his arms across his chest... and after a few seconds, he slowly poured out his troubles.

Father shook his head and pressed his lips together as he listened to the story about the environment in which Ike had grown up. When he recounted the situation with the stranger, Father grabbed his hand. “Good Lord... Ike... tell me, did he...?” His voice was barely a whisper.

“A friend of my mother’s saved me... but if no one had been looking for me, then...”

He was pulled into a fatherly embrace. A wave of relief washed over him. “You don’t have to be afraid here; we’ll take care of you.” He felt his nod.

## Healing by Paula



*Father by Laura G*

“I have nightmares about what happened, night after night, and I can’t get any sleep.”

“It’s good that you told me about this. I’ll make you some of my friend’s herbal tea; it’s soothing and helps you sleep... and if you wake up in the night and still can’t sleep, come to me and I’ll give you some medicine.”

“Even though he didn't do what he set out to do, I feel as if he's taken something away from me.” He sobbed, nestled against Father’s shoulder.

“Innocence...You see life differently now. You've been touched by evil.” He cupped his face in his hands. “It hasn’t taken away who you are: brave, strong, and courageous. Life hasn’t broken you, and now, in your new home, you’ll be able to live with dignity and learn to cope with your memories. We’ll be here to

## Healing by Paula

help and support you – don't keep your problems inside.”

The boy wiped his wet cheeks. The words acted like soothing bandages. “Thank you, I'll try.”

“Come on, let's prepare a wonderful mixture.” He ruffled Ike's hair like a little kid's. “You've got a new haircut!”

Ike waved his hand dismissively. “It was Rebecca's handiwork.”

Father raised his eyebrows high.

“Please don't ask...” A slight blush spread across his cheeks

Father smiled slightly at that reaction, sensing there was quite an interesting story behind it, but he didn't press the issue – the boy had enough confessions for one evening....

\*\*\*

A month had passed since he had arrived in the underground world.

Sharing his worries was a balm for his inner wounds. Dr. Wong's soothing infusions worked perfectly; Ike slept like a baby; although he sometimes tossed and turned during the night, the nightmare of past events did not return.

The teenager discovered that when he shared a problem, it actually became smaller.

*I feel that relief, but I still need time to come to terms with my memories. My childhood wasn't sweet, with family vacations or a warm hug from my parents when I scraped my knee. For me, it was a dark time, one of stealing food, reading found books, and avoiding looking at things so repulsive they make you feel sick.*

“Ike! Come to the library! Father says we're going to have a new companion.” His close friend's voice snapped him out of his quiet contemplation. He looked at him and furrowed his brow. “I don't know, I feel a little unsure about making friends.”

His buddy patted him on the shoulder. “You've got this. So far, everyone likes

## Healing by Paula

you and values your honesty, hard work, and sensitivity.”

He exhaled through his nose. “Mitch would say I’m a wimp.”

Vincent raised his eyebrows. “Do you care what he thinks?”

“Not a bit.”

“In that case, let’s go.”

“Let’s race,” he challenged him. In his blue eyes, he saw a spark of rivalry, a quick nod – and then he was gone, leaving behind a cloud of dust...

A smile lit up his face; *our friendship is healing us.*

“I gave you a head start; I’ll catch up to you in a moment.” He set off after him, but not so as to outrun him.

They bumped into each other at the library entrance and burst out laughing.

“Well, well, there you are.” Father looked at them with amusement and cleared his throat. “Now that we’re all here, I wanted to introduce you to Amy – our newest member of our community. I hope you’ll welcome her warmly into our family.”

The older man turned around, and a girl about Ike’s age stepped out from behind him. She looked around at the crowd. “Nice to meet you.” Her soft voice barely reached Ike’s ears, drowned out by his pounding heart.

Their eyes met, and her lips curved into a shy smile. It was like a shot straight to the muscle that pumped blood through his body.

*I immersed myself in her uncertain, frightened gaze and lost my head. My whole life had led up to this very moment; the cage around my heart is breaking apart, and I was overcome by the feeling that I had met someone I might fall in love with, and I can only hope that she will be my strength...*



## Salem Word Search

Teresa and J'écris

O	Z	S	P	D	H	A	W	T	H	O	R	N	E	S	U
C	T	B	M	O	N	O	P	O	L	Y	K	C	Q	W	R
S	G	Q	P	W	E	L	I	T	E	R	A	T	U	R	E
E	Q	O	M	N	H	A	L	L	O	W	E	E	N	D	L
G	H	I	R	T	O	R	Q	D	L	A	T	S	A	O	C
S	E	A	F	O	O	D	P	E	K	T	O	U	R	S	B
L	A	M	L	W	A	O	I	H	M	Q	J	J	I	P	S
S	I	R	J	N	H	L	R	C	U	Y	U	L	G	H	U
E	S	G	Y	Z	V	Q	A	T	S	E	D	E	N	I	C
I	T	M	H	R	S	E	T	I	E	W	G	M	I	S	O
R	R	Z	O	T	E	P	E	W	U	S	E	I	R	T	P
E	I	F	P	O	H	T	S	E	M	T	B	T	E	O	S
L	A	X	P	G	R	O	E	B	S	R	B	I	K	R	U
L	L	S	A	B	V	B	U	M	I	A	U	R	C	Y	C
A	S	R	O	B	R	A	H	S	E	K	K	A	I	J	O
G	Z	E	U	T	A	T	S	U	E	C	F	M	P	H	H

- arts
- bewitched
- brooms
- cemetery
- coastal
- downtown
- galleries
- halloween
- harbor
- hawthorne
- history
- hocuspocus
- judge
- lighthouse
- literature
- maritime
- monopoly
- museums
- pickering
- pirates
- seafood
- shop
- statue
- tours
- trials

## Bewitched Word Search

Teresa and J'écris

E	D	D	A	U	G	H	T	E	R	Y	F	R	L	Z	S
W	C	S	J	U	G	O	L	D	E	N	G	L	O	B	E
O	I	T	A	E	P	I	S	O	D	E	S	T	E	W	T
H	G	A	E	Y	S	A	T	N	A	F	Q	Y	G	I	K
S	A	T	I	S	N	E	I	G	H	B	O	R	A	F	U
V	M	U	G	V	H	U	S	B	A	N	D	P	I	E	S
T	N	E	H	M	T	J	A	P	J	E	L	P	R	D	A
D	O	S	T	S	O	C	A	G	Z	E	K	L	R	R	N
R	M	A	S	B	S	C	I	I	U	U	C	I	A	A	T
A	I	M	E	O	X	K	T	S	X	Q	N	L	M	H	A
W	N	A	A	N	F	O	N	I	S	K	B	D	Q	C	W
A	E	N	S	K	A	C	J	A	S	A	A	L	C	Z	D
Y	E	T	O	R	M	B	F	E	R	C	L	E	V	O	L
M	X	H	N	O	I	U	G	Q	C	P	A	C	X	U	N
M	C	A	S	O	L	N	E	R	D	L	I	H	C	H	J
E	B	N	L	D	Y	W	M	O	T	H	E	R	C	F	B

- adman
- children
- classic tv
- daughter
- doorknobs
- drinks
- eight seasons
- emmy award
- episodes
- family
- fantasy
- goldenglobe
- husband
- love
- magic
- marriage
- mother
- neighbor
- nominee
- pranks
- queen
- samantha
- santa
- sitcom
- statue
- tv show
- wife

# Vantage Point

## Part Two: Catherine

Maryann Wood

AUTHORS NOTES: For the purposes of this story anything, other than Vincent rescuing his son Jacob, after the episode Walk Slowing happened. Meaning Gabriel, Elliot, and Father are alive. Special thanks to JoAnn Baca for all your help in editing, encouragement and advice. This story will be told in four parts from a different vantage point of three characters.

### *CHAPTER ONE*

The first thing Catherine smelled when she woke up was rain. Slowly she opened her eyes and blinked a few times, trying to adjust to the light. She looked around the room, trying to figure out where she was. She was in a small white room, a hospital room, she decided. She could see dark clouds out the window.

Catherine struggled to sit up; her muscles felt weak. Sitting at the side of the bed, she closed her eyes, willing the dizziness to fade. She tried to search for a call bell to alert someone that she needed them but couldn't find one. She didn't feel confident standing on her own.

She looked around the room again, taking in her surroundings. A bedside table and a chair were the only other furniture in the room. A door was off to the side which she figured led to the washroom.

Catherine didn't know how long she had sat on the bed when the door to her room opened suddenly and a nurse entered, looking down at a clipboard. When the nurse looked up, she screamed at the sight of Catherine sitting up in bed and dropped the clipboard.

"Oh my God, you're awake!" the nurse said, turning and running out of the room. A moment later the nurse returned, followed by two orderlies and a man in a lab coat that looked to be a doctor. "Well, isn't this a pleasant surprise. Our resident sleeping beauty awakens," the doctor said, walking over to Catherine and beginning to take her vitals.

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by *Maryann Wood*

“Do you know your name, my dear?”

Catherine stared at the doctor for a moment, trying to find her voice. Her throat was dry and scratchy, causing her to cough when she tried to talk.

“Nurse, will you grab a glass of water, please?” the doctor asked, briefly looking at the nurse before turning his attention back to Catherine, listening to her lungs.

The nurse nodded and hurried to the washroom, returning with a glass of water. Catherine accepted it gratefully and took a few sips.

The doctor pulled the chair in front of Catherine and sat down. “My name is Doctor Waterson. Do you know your name?”

“My name?” Catherine rasped, her voice weak from lack of use. “My name is Catherine. Where am I?”

“You’re in a long-term care facility. You’ve been asleep for a long time. Your guardian placed you here after your accident.”

“My accident? My guardian? I don’t understand. What happen to me?”

“I don’t know all the particulars, my dear. I haven’t been working here that long, but Mr. Fallon and Mr. Cooper here have been overseeing your care since you were admitted four years ago.”

Catherine looked up at the men that stood behind the doctor. The one named Mr. Cooper stared at the ground, refusing to meet her eyes. The other, Mr. Fallon, stood with his arms crossed, looking down at her with contempt.

“I’ve been here for four years? What about my family? My friends? How did I get here? My baby. Do you know anything about my baby?”

“All in good time, my dear. How do you feel? Any dizziness?”

The doctor continued with his preliminary examination, dictating information for the nurse to write down. When he finished, he sat back in the chair and smiled at Catherine.

“Well, your vitals are good. Blood pressure is a little low, we’ll keep an eye on it. Mr. Cooper and Mr. Fallon here are going to be in charge of your care with the assistance of nursing. I’ll check in with you in few days.” With that, the doctor rose and started to walk out of the room.

## **Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** *by Maryann Wood*

“Doctor, wait, please,” Catherine called out. “What happen to me? Does my family know that I’m here? You asked me my name. It’s Catherine Chandler. Catherine Chandler. I have friends in New York City. You need to contact them. Surely their numbers are in my file.”

The doctor ignored her and left the room without another word.

Fallon waited for the doctor to leave before stepping forward and grabbing Catherine by the chin. “Your name is not Catherine Chandler. It’s Cathy. Catherine Chandler is dead.”

Catherine shook her head, moving away from his grip. “That’s ridiculous. I’m Catherine Chandler and I demand to know where I am.”

Fallon grinned wickedly at her and then without warning backhanded her. “Catherine Chandler is dead. We were told you might believe that. I assure you, you are not her. Soon enough you’ll be shown proof. It would be wise of you to listen and obey our instructions.”

Fallon looked at the nurse and motioned towards Catherine. “Get her cleaned up. I need to make the call. Her therapy sessions start this evening.” Fallon left the room without another word, closely followed by Cooper.

The nurse nodded and left the room briefly, returning with some clean clothes and a wheelchair. “You’re going to need to learn to walk again. It should be relatively easy, since you’re young and you were receiving therapy during your comatose state,” the nurse said, assisting Catherine into the chair.

Tears streamed down Catherine’s cheeks. “Please, you have to help me. My name is Catherine Chandler. I work as an Assistant DA in New York. Contact Joe Maxwell at the DA’s office. He can vouch for who I am,” she begged the nurse.

The nurse looked down at her and simply said, “Catherine Chandler is dead,” and then pushed her towards the washroom.

### *CHAPTER TWO*

Catherine found out she had been in a coma for just over four years. The last thing she remembered was being on the rooftop with Vincent, telling him about their

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by Maryann Wood



*Catherine* by Laura G

son, about how beautiful he was. At least, that was what she thought. They told her she was in a car accident.

Every day for the past week since she woke, she was tied to a chair in a windowless white room for hours while the man she came to know as Fallon drilled into her that Catherine Chandler was dead. He showed her newspaper articles about Catherine Chandler's funeral.

"How can you be this Catherine Chandler when all the proof shows that she is dead? You share the same first name Cathy, but you are not Catherine Chandler. Catherine Chandler is dead," Fallon would rant over and over again.

At first, Catherine fought it, insisting that she knew who she was, that there was some terrible mistake. "What is my last name then? I must have one. Who is it that you think I am?" she would yell back, fighting.

"Does it matter? Your guardian registered you under the name Cathy Geller. Geller, not Chandler."

"That's preposterous. There's been a terrible mistake."

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

“The only mistake is that you believe that you’re Catherine Chandler. Catherine Chandler is dead. Everything I’ve showed you proves this. You must give up this illusion; it’s for your own good.”

Fallon stood behind her. Leaning down, he breathed into her ear. “Come on, Cathy, don’t make this so hard on yourself. Tell me your name.”

“My name is Catherine Chandler,” she answered through clenched teeth. She refused to believe anything he told her.

Fallon sighed and stood up. He placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed tightly, causing her to wince.

“I’m sorry to hear you say that, Cathy. I guess we’ll have to try harder to make you see reason.”

It was then that the sleep deprivation began. She would barely be asleep for an hour when Fallon would pull her out of her bed and drag her to the windowless room, yelling at her that Catherine Chandler was dead. Slowly breaking her spirit down. It went on for almost 48 hours before Catherine finally repeated the words.

Cooper, one of the men she met the first day, was in charge of her physical therapy. He wasn’t mean to her like the others, but he wasn’t kind either. He had her up and walking short distances within a few days. One day when they were alone in the physio room walking around a small track, he told her, “Your guardian made sure you had physical therapy while you were asleep so when you did wake up your muscles would be exercised, making learning to walk easier.”

“Who is this guardian of mine? Why aren’t they here now that I’m awake?”

“Only Mr. Fallon knows who they are. It’s not information I need to know.”

“Could you find out for me, please, Cooper? I promise to keep anything you tell me to myself.”

Both of them jumped as an angry voice yelled out from the doorway. “He’ll find out nothing of the sort.” Fallon stood there with his arms crossed, his usual intimidating pose.

Cooper took a few steps away from Catherine as Fallon approached them. “Cathy, Cathy, Cathy. What are you trying to do now?” he asked, brushing his knuckles

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by *Maryann Wood*

across her cheek.

Catherine turned her face away from his touch, repulsed.

Fallon grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him. “You really should learn to be kinder to me, Cathy, I could help you. A shame, really.” He let go of her chin and grabbed her by her arm, dragging her away towards the windowless white room.

“Come now, darling, it’s our therapy time together.”

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Hours later, after a particular grueling session, Fallon brought Catherine back to her room and pushed her onto her bed, where she collapsed, exhausted.

“Til tomorrow, darling,” Fallon said, patting her on the head then leaving the room, locking the door behind him.

Catherine closed her eyes and curled up in a ball, rocking. Her head ached and she felt sick to her stomach. All she wanted to do was sleep but she knew it wouldn’t come.

Hopelessness started to creep its way into her heart when she heard the first whisper.

“Mother?”

Catherine opened her eyes and glanced around the dark room, seeing nothing but white walls. She closed her eyes again and prayed for sleep to take her.

“Mother, is that really you? It’s me, Jacob. I knew if I tried hard enough I could find you.”

Catherine’s eyes popped open again. She got out of the bed and searched the room for the source of the voice. Seeing nothing, she whispered, “Father? What’s happening?”

The childish voice giggled at her response. “No, silly, not Grandfather. Jacob, your son. I miss you, Mother. When are you coming home?”

“You’re my son? Where are you? Where’s your father?”

“Father is playing a game of chess with Grandfather. I’m waiting in my chamber

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

for Father to tuck me in.”

“You live Below?”

“Yes. Father’s coming, Mother. I have to go. I’ll visit you again tomorrow. I love you.”

Catherine heard nothing after that.

She sat down at the edge of the bed, contemplating what she had just heard. It couldn’t be real, she told herself. It was just the stress from Fallon’s session. Still, something inside her said to believe.

Lying down once again, Catherine closed her eyes and envisioned what her son might look like today. Did he have Vincent’s eyes or hers? What colour was his hair? A shade of blond for certain, since she and Vincent both had blondish hair. He said his name was Jacob. After Vincent’s father, the patriarch of the Below community. Yes, that’s exactly what she would have named him.

“Jacob, my son,” she whispered to herself, falling into an uneasy sleep.

### CHAPTER THREE

Fallon came for her one evening, frustration already evident in him. He grabbed her arm in a painful grip and dragged her to the windowless therapy room. He forced her into the chair, securing her down. He pushed the table away from her chair and without warning slapped her across the face.

“I’m not in the mood for your defiance tonight, Cathy!” he yelled, standing in front of her. “Let’s just get to the point. Catherine Chandler is dead. I’ve told you this numerous times. I showed you proof of this. Now say the words. ‘Catherine Chandler is dead’.”

Catherine refused to look at him, remaining silent. She knew her rebuttal made him even angrier.

“Say the words, Cathy. I’m warning you.”

She remained silent.

He placed his hands on either side of her chair and screamed in her face. “Say the

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** *by Maryann Wood*

f\*\*\*ing words, Cathy! I swear to you, if you don't start complying, you'll regret it. Now, say the words. 'Catherine Chandler is dead'!"

Fear gripped her heart but she still remained silent.

Fallon waited a beat, his breathing laboured. When she still didn't answer him, he released her from the chair and grabbed her by her hair, dragging her away.

"Bring me the damn restraints!" he yelled as he pulled her down the hall by her hair.

She tried to remain on her feet, reaching up to his hands to try and relieve the tension he had on her hair, but failed.

Nurse Hathaway met them at her door, holding out the restraints. Fallon grabbed them as he entered the room. He pushed her down on the bed, kneeling on her stomach to hold her down.

Catherine struggled, trying to fight him off.

"Hold still, damn you!" he yelled, trying to grab hold of one of her wrists.

Then, without warning, Catherine felt a blow to her head. Her struggling stopped immediately as her vision swam. She wasn't sure what she was hit with but she felt herself losing consciousness. She felt the restraints attach to her wrist and ankles and Fallon's weight left her.

The last thing she heard before she lost consciousness was Fallon's voice. "He's going to be here in five days and she's still not ready. We need to up our game or it's our heads on the line."

It was still dark in the room when Catherine woke hours later, still restrained to the bed. She blinked a few times, trying to clear her head. Her head hurt where she was hit and the room spun when she opened her eyes. She pulled at the restraints at first but knew it was useless. Fallon always made sure they were secured tightly.

Hopelessness filled her once again as she stared up at the ceiling. She was doubting everything about herself. Doubting who she really was, where she was from, even doubting if she had anyone out there looking for her. Aside from this solitary guardian, who still hadn't come to see her and whose identity was unknown to her, she had no one. She had only seen four people since she had awakened: Fallon,

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

Cooper, and Nurse Hathaway, the latter two who barely spoke two words to her, and Doctor Waterson, who never showed up again.

She laid in the bed well into the next day. She watched the sunrise against the wall, unable to look out the window. She called out for help, having to use the rest room, but no one came, forcing her to soil herself. She cried, ashamed of herself, for an hour before the door clicked opened, Cooper and Nurse Hathaway entering. Cooper carried with him toast and juice for her, and the nurse clean clothes and linens.

Catherine kept her eyes downcast, tears of humiliation threatening to fall, as Cooper placed the food down and released her restraints. He helped her to stand then walked over and stood near the door. The nurse handed her the clean clothes then immediately went about stripping and remaking the bed.

Wordlessly, Catherine took the clothes and went to the washroom to wash and change. When she immersed, both Cooper and the nurse were gone. She curled up on the chair next to her side table and nibbled on the cold toast left for her. Judging by the position of the sun, she knew it must be well past noon, which only meant that Fallon would be making his appearance soon. There was no doubt he would gloat about the condition she was found in.

*Just tell him what he wants to hear, she told herself. Just say the words and he'll leave you be.* Saying the words, though, were almost as painful as what would happen to her if she didn't comply.

She knew she was losing her sense of herself. Periodically throughout the day, she would hear Jacob for a minute or two. The child wanting to check in with her as he went about his day. A part of her prayed that when she heard him, it was real. Not just in her mind. Though the more Fallon drilled her, taunted her, the more she felt her grasp with reality slipping.

She sat in the chair for the remainder of the day, rocking slightly, a motion that brought her comfort. The sun was setting when the door to her room clicked open again. She didn't need to look up to know who it was.

“Good evening, Cathy. I trust you had a pleasant sleep last night. How was your morning? Well rested, I hope?” Fallon said, strolling into the room, his voice condescending.

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

Catherine closed her eyes and took a deep breath before rising to her feet. She stood before him, her head down, not wanting to give him a reason to lash out at her.

Fallon walked up and stood closely in front of her. He leaned forward and whispered in her ear; the smell of his breath foul. “Shall we get started? I’m a little late this evening for your session, and we both know how important your therapy is to your well being.” He took a step to the side and held his arm out towards the door.

Slowly, Catherine walked out the door, Fallon only a step behind. He followed her down the empty hallways to the windowless room, where she was once again strapped down in the chair.

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Fallon stood behind her, massaging her shoulders. Catherine stiffened at his touch, feeling repulsed. He was always touching her. The way he stared and smirked at her made her feel dirty.

They had been in this room for over three hours.

“Let’s start again, shall we, Cathy,” Fallon whispered in her ear. “What’s your



Catherine by Laura G

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by Maryann Wood

name?”

“Catherine,” she whispered.

Fallon squeezed her shoulders painfully. “What is your name?” he repeated, louder.

Catherine didn’t answer.

Fallon squeezed harder, his fingers digging into her clavicle, causing her to gasp from the pain. “What. Is. Your. Name?” He seethed, pronouncing each word separately.

“Cathy!” she cried, trying to pull away from him, but Fallon held on.

“That’s right, because Catherine Chandler is dead. You’re not her. You may think you were her, but you aren’t. Catherine Chandler is dead. Catherine Chandler is dead. Say the words, Cathy. The sooner you start to believe that Catherine Chandler is dead, that you were never her, the sooner things will become easier for you.”

Fallon continued squeezing her shoulders painfully, repeating the words *Catherine Chander is dead* over and over, until Catherine finally broke and cried out the words with him.

“Catherine Chandler is dead,” she sobbed as tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Catherine Chandler is dead.”

Fallon let go of her shoulders and sat down in the chair opposite her, smirking.

“You see how easy that was, Cathy? Four simple words and everything stops. We all want to help you here, Cathy, but you need to let us help you.”

Catherine sat with her head down, tears still streaming down her cheeks. She felt so weak and confused. She wasn’t sure what to believe anymore. “Can I go back to my room, please?” she asked quietly, trying to keep her tears at bay.

“You want to go back to your room? Then say the words, Cathy, and I’ll let you get some rest.”

Catherine closed her eyes, her head hanging in defeat. *Just say the words*, she told herself, *just say them, it will be all over*. “Catherine Chandler is dead,” she whispered.

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by Maryann Wood

Fallon smiled at her and stood. He walked over to her and released her restraints and pulled her up by her arm. He dragged her out of the therapy room and down the empty hall to her room.

Catherine knew there were other patients in the building, she heard them when she was locked inside her room, but she never saw anyone. She was sequestered in her room when she wasn't in therapy. All her meals were brought to her by the same handful of people in charge of her care. She could hear distant chatter from what she thought to be a common room further down the hall but saw no one. She never did.

Fallon stopped in front of her room, unlocking the door and pushing her inside. "You did good today, Cathy, perhaps I'll bring you a little supper. You earned it."

Catherine stood with her back to Fallon, waiting to hear the door close and lock before she stumbled to her bed and laid down.

Fallon returned a short while later with a stale turkey sandwich and bottle of water, making her repeat the words *Catherine Chandler is dead* before leaving the food.

Not feeling the hunger anymore but knowing she had to eat, she made herself finish the sandwich before she curled up in bed and closed her eyes, hoping sleep would come quickly. She was about to doze off when she heard the whisper again.

"Mother, I'm back."

Catherine opened her eyes. Lifting her head, she glanced around the room, seeing nothing. She laid down again and took a few deep breaths.

"Mother, it's Jacob," a little boy whispered again.

Catherine squeezed her eyes shut tightly, afraid to believe what she was hearing was real.

"Mother, please, don't be scared. It's really me. Please talk to me."

Catherine fought herself, not wanting to give in to the illusion that this was real. That her son was really communicating with her. Tears escaped from her closed eyes.

"Mother, please don't be sad. Maybe I should read to you. When Father reads to me it always makes me feel better. I have your doll, Mother. Father found it in

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

your chest with all your special things. She has blond hair and a blue dress. I didn't know her name, so I called her Alice, like Alice in Wonderland. When I hold her and concentrate real hard, I can come and see you."

Catherine slowly sat up at the boy's words, thinking. A chest with her special things and the doll with blond hair. She immediately thought of her hope chest that was in her closet back at her old apartment. The doll from her childhood was in there. The one her father bought her after her mother died. "Caroline," she whispered. "Her name is Caroline."

"Caroline. I like that name, Mother. What book do you want me to read? What's your favorite book from when you were little?"

Catherine shook her head. She wanted to believe that this was really her son talking to her somehow. That she wasn't imagining this. Everything in her heart told her to believe. To just let go and believe.

"My favourite book was The Velveteen Rabbit. My father used to read it to me when I was little. It helped me to sleep."

"That's one of my favourites, too. I thought so, Mother. It was in your chest with Caroline. Father gave it to me for my bookshelf. Let me read it to you, Mother, so you won't be sad."

Catherine nodded and smiled sadly, lying down. She closed her eyes and let the soothing voice of her son reading lull her into a peaceful sleep.

### CHAPTER FOUR

Every day was the same for Catherine. In the morning, she would walk around the physio track for exercise. Then she was sequestered in her room until Fallon came for her "mental health sessions", as he called them. He was breaking her will. She felt it every day; a part of her resolve was chipped away.

Catherine began questioning herself. Wondering what was real and what was not. Jacob continued to visit her almost every day. She wanted to question him about Vincent. Ask him how his father was, but she was worried that it was all in her head. That Jacob was just her mind creating a defense mechanism to cope with the trauma she was experiencing. Still, every time he came to her, she gave in and

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

talked to him.

Jacob would tell her about his day. Everything he learned. He would ask her questions about herself. Asking when she was coming home. What was wrong with her that she had to be in the hospital. He even asked about her scar next to her left ear. She didn't know how to answer any of those questions. Not really sure of the answers herself anymore.

### CHAPTER FIVE

Catherine sat in bed one night, waiting for Jacob. She absentmindedly ran her finger up and down her scar. It gave her comfort, the feel of the slightly raised skin. The scar gave her a sense of hope that she wasn't crazy. That she was Catherine Chandler. She tried to hold on to that hope but it became harder each day.

She had started to doze off when she heard Jacob's voice. "Sorry I'm late, Mother, I fell asleep," he said. "I didn't know I could come to you in my dreams. Father talks about a bond that he has with me. Maybe you and I have the same thing, Mother."

"I think you may be right, Jacob," she told him, smiling. "Your father and I used to share a bond a long time ago."

"Really? Why don't you anymore? Was it because you were sleeping for so long? I couldn't find you until you woke up. Father says that you're not real. He won't believe me when I say I can talk to you and see you."

Catherine chose not to respond to what Jacob told her. Her hope diminished more. If Vincent didn't believe Jacob, then he must think her dead. Must think that Catherine Chandler was dead. If Catherine Chandler was dead, then who was she?

"Are you okay, Mother? You look so sad."

Catherine closed her eyes. "I'm okay, sweetheart. I'm just tired. Why don't I sing you a lullaby? A lullaby from when I was your age."

"Yes, please, Mother."

Softly, Catherine began singing the lullaby from her childhood. She envisioned her

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

son, curled up against her in bed. His head resting on her breasts, his fingers playing with her hair. She was so absorbed in the moment that she failed to hear the door to her room open.

“Cathy,” she heard Fallon sing, walking into her room.

Catherine jumped from the bed, backing away from the door.

“What are you doing, Cathy? You were making such good progress. I know you’ve been talking to yourself. I’ve received reports. Now I caught you in the act. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Catherine shook her head, afraid to say anything. She started to panic as Fallon slowly walked towards her, his hands behind his back.

“No, Cathy? Nothing? Do you have nothing to say in your defense? Well, I’ll have to take that as an admittance of guilt.”

From behind his back Fallon pulled out the pair of restraints, holding them up for her to see. “And with admitting that you are guilty comes punishment.”

He tossed the restraints on the bed and continued to advance towards her. Then, without warning, Fallon pounced. With the full force of his weight, he plowed his elbow into her midsection, forcing her to double over, then he grabbed her from behind, dragging her to the bed.

As Catherine struggled to get away, she could hear Jacob begging for Fallon to leave her alone, to stop hurting her. She wanted to tell him that it was okay, to go back, to leave, but she couldn’t get the words out. She continued to struggle to free herself but was abruptly stopped when Fallon backhanded her, causing her head to spin. Jacob’s cries faded away as Fallon pushed her arms down on the bed and attached the restraints to her wrists.

Catherine struggled at first after Fallon left the room, knowing it was useless. She laid in bed for the night, unable to sleep, silent tears falling down her cheeks. She was so tired. Physically and emotionally. Her hope and sense of self diminished every day. Some days she found herself wishing that she would just fall back into her coma to escape the life she now led.

Catherine knew she must have dozed off at some point because she awoke to the sound of the locks clicking open on her door and Cooper walking in. He carried a

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by *Maryann Wood*

breakfast tray and placed it on the bedside table then went about releasing her restraints.

“There are clean clothes in the washroom. I’ll be back in a few hours for your walk,” he said, and left the room without another word.

Catherine sat up and massaged her bruised wrists before rising and washing for the day. She ate her meager breakfast before sitting on her bed and pulling her legs tightly against her chest. She rested her head on her knees and stared towards the window, watching early morning light stream through. She rocked slightly and under her breath hummed one of her favorite symphonies.

She stayed like that for the better part of the morning, when she heard the little boy’s whisper once again. Jacob was talking to her. At first, she tried to ignore it, knowing it was in her head. Fallon had drilled that into her last night. But the sweet little voice continued.

“Mother, please! Father’s here. Don’t be afraid.”

Catherine covered her ears with her hands and rocked frantically. “No. It can’t be real,” she mumbled to herself, praying for the voice to go away, yet hoping it would stay. Then, suddenly, she heard it. The voice she thought she’d never hear



**Catherine and Vincent** by *Laura G*

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by *Maryann Wood*

again whisper her name.

“Catherine?”

She stopped rocking and looked up towards the sound of the voices. Her eyes searched desperately for the source of the voices but saw nothing. Tears sprang to her eyes. “Vincent! Vincent, is it really you?”

“Catherine, it’s me. It’s Vincent. I’m with Jacob. Catherine, where are you? Tell me where you are.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe it wasn’t all in her head. Catherine was about to respond when her room door opened suddenly, Fallon and Cooper entering. She jumped from the bed and backed into the corner of the room.

“Cathy, you know what happens when you start talking to yourself,” Fallon said slowly, advancing towards her.

She started to panic. She couldn’t be restrained so soon again. She couldn’t. She begged them. “No, please. I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

Her pleas were ignored as Fallon grabbed her and dragged her to her bed, kneeling on her chest again, making it difficult to breathe. He pinned her arms down to the bed, smiling sadistically down at her as Cooper restrained her wrists and ankles.

She heard her son crying, begging his father to help her. She heard Vincent scream her name in agony, “CATHERINE!”

Then there was nothing. The only sounds were her gasps for breath and Fallon’s chuckle as he continued to kneel on her.

“Cathy, why do you continue to disobey?” Fallon asked before he stood up and stared down at her. He briefly looked up at Cooper. “Leave us. She needs to learn that this behaviour will not be tolerated.”

“Fallon, I think she knows. Look at her. She’s terrified.”

“I said leave us!”

Catherine begged Cooper with her eyes not to leave her alone with Fallon. Cooper looked back and forth between the two, then left, closing the door behind him.

When the door clicked shut, Fallon sat down next to her on the bed, placing his

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

hands on either side up her. His thumb stroked her side, next to her right breast, causing Catherine to shiver and pull away.

“It’s such a shame that something that looks like you has to go to waste. You and I could have so much fun if you would just cooperate. Of course, I got paid a lot to make sure you learned your place after you woke up. Your guardian is supposed to be here soon, and if he comes and finds out you’re not ready, well, that doesn’t bode well for me. So, let’s you and I come to an agreement. You start minding yourself and listening to me, and I’ll take it easy on you until he comes. If you don’t, well, you should know by now how bad things can get. So, what will it be, Cathy? Easy or hard? Makes no difference to me.”

Catherine closed her eyes and turned her face away from him. She knew she wouldn’t be able to take much more of him, of his ways of persuasion. This guardian of hers was supposed to be coming. If this guardian ordered such treatment, she was terrified to think of what kind of person he was. She was still unsure if she’d really heard Vincent’s voice. If it was real. Self-preservation was kicking in. She had to do whatever she could to survive. Finally, after several minutes, Catherine opened her eyes and looked back at Fallon. With one word, her spirit finally broke.

“Easy.”

Fallon smiled and patted her cheek.

“Good girl. Just the word I wanted hear. Now that we have that settled, let’s get on to some less savoury items. You still need to be punished for your recent defiance. Hopefully, you’ll keep your word and this will be the last time. I promise I’ll go easy on you.”

Fallon stood up again and looked down at her. After several blows to her face and one to her stomach, he stood up straight and wiped the blood from her split lip on his shirt.

“I’ll send Cooper in here in an hour to take you for your walk. It’s been lovely, Cathy. I look forward to our new understanding.”

Catherine was able to keep her sobs at bay until he left the room. It was the only thing that gave her some comfort, him not seeing her cry.

*CHAPTER SIX*

Catherine kept silent and docile for the remainder of the day. She took her walk around the track. When Fallon brought her to the therapy room, she answered his questions with “Catherine Chandler is dead.”

“Well done today, Cathy,” Fallon said, leading her back to her room after their short session. “You deserve a nice supper tonight. How about a nice warm bowl of soup and some tea? Would you like that?”

Catherine nodded and sat down on her bed.

As promised, a nurse brought in the first warm meal she’d had since she’d woken up from her coma. She thanked her kindly then devoured the food.

That night, she lay in bed and thought of her son and Vincent. Wondering if they were just a dream that she imagined. Her heart told her it was real. That they were real and out there, waiting for her return. Her mind, though, hesitated. Fallon’s words were etched into her brain. With her spirit broken, she felt herself losing sight of everything she believed to be real. Losing sight of her true self.

Sleep was close when she felt something move within her heart. A warm, peaceful feeling came over her. Then, in her mind, she heard the most beloved voice.

“Catherine. Catherine, it’s Vincent. If you can hear me, know that I’m coming for you. Don’t let them know if you can hear me. Just whisper my name softly if you can. Please, Catherine, stay strong. I’ll be there soon.”

Catherine started to cry. The warm feeling of love filled her. She felt him, she felt Vincent’s love. The bond they shared she never felt so strongly as she did at that moment. Her Vincent was reaching out to her.

Catherine closed her eyes and concentrated on her love for her beloved. “Vincent, I love you,” she sent back to him, the words spoken so soft, barely a whisper. She prayed that he heard them. That he felt the love she was willing back to him.

A gentle peace came over her, lulling her into the first restful sleep she’d had in weeks.

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## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

For the next two days, she kept her head down. She listened and obeyed every instruction, answered every question the way they wanted her to. On the night of the second day since she'd heard Vincent, Catherine started to doubt that he may be coming for her. She had no idea where she was. Was she even in the state of New York anymore? Could he even reach her if he were coming?

She hadn't heard from him or Jacob in days. *Please be real*, she begged silently.

This place was destroying her. Her so-called guardian would be here any day and then what? If he ordered the treatment she was receiving, what kind of man was he? What would become of her if she were taken away? Anything would be better than this place, she told herself.

As she lay in bed that night, she heard it. The familiar sound that would send her heart soaring were she back at her apartment. It was a light tapping-on-glass sound.

Catherine quickly sat up and looked towards the window. Standing on the other side of the glass was Vincent. She closed her eyes for a brief moment, praying that it wasn't an illusion. When she opened her eyes again, he was still there.

Slowly, she walked towards the window, waiting for the vision of Vincent to disappear like a mirage in the desert. When finally she stood in front of the window, he was still there.

"Vincent," she whispered, reaching through the bars, wanting to touch him. All she could feel was the cold glass against her palm.

He, too, raised his palm to the window to reassure her that he was there.

Catherine was locked in a daze, staring at Vincent, her heart beating ferociously in her chest. She heard him order her to back away so he could break the glass.

Quickly, she did and hurried to put on the slippers that would be basically useless outside.

She jumped as Vincent smashed through the window, the glass shattering all over the floor. Ignoring it, Catherine rushed to the window and pushed against the bar Vincent was trying to pull out. It would be only a matter of seconds before Fallon would be at her door.

She was right. She heard Fallon screaming at her to move away from the window. Threatening her. She knew that if Fallon got through the door before Vincent could

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by *Maryann Wood*



**Vincent and Catherine** by *Laura G*

get to her, the punishment would be just short of death.

Vincent must have felt it as well, for suddenly he roared and, with strength that far exceeded his capabilities, he ripped two of the bars clean of the cement and threw them away.

Catherine didn't hesitate. Quickly, she squeezed through the opening and launched herself into Vincent's arms, gripping onto him with all her might. Vincent returned her embrace, holding her tightly, and even tighter when she begged him to.

A loud clap of thunder and rain forced Vincent to lower her to her feet. She heard the door to her room open but, before she could look back, Vincent grabbed her hand and started to pull her along to run into the darkness.

The rain poured down, soaking them both within seconds. Catherine held on to Vincent's hand as tightly as possible, but with the wet grass and her useless slippers, she fell to ground, losing her hold on Vincent. Within seconds, he had her

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

in his arms, running.

They stopped in front of an open sewer grate. Catherine held onto Vincent from behind as he began descending the ladder. They were halfway down when they heard voices. It was Fallon and Cooper. Vincent froze on the ladder, looking upwards.

The sound of Fallon's voice brought terror to Catherine. She grasped Vincent tighter, hiding her face in his hair. She begged to whomever might be listening for Vincent and her to remain undetected.

Vincent felt her distress and placed a comforting hand on her arm. They listened to the two men talk, alerting another to watch the roads.

"Why all the fuss?" Cooper asked. "Cathy's harmless."

"Do you have any idea who she is?" Fallon asked angrily. Hearing no reply, he continued, "That's Burch's girl."

"Elliot Burch?" the other man asked, scared.

"Yes, you idiot. He was notified when she woke up four months ago. We were told to start on her, make sure she doesn't remember. He's been stuck in Russia for half a year with the big bosses. He's supposed to be here the day after tomorrow. If he comes and she's not here, we're dead. Let's go. We need to find her...now!"

Fallon's and Cooper's voices faded away and Vincent continued their descent. Catherine, though, was shocked. Elliot. Was Elliot Burch her elusive guardian? She couldn't even begin to comprehend the implications of that when they reached the bottom of the ladder and Vincent gathered his supplies, then took her hand once again and started to run through the drainage tunnels.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Vincent dragged Catherine along, running, for what felt like hours. The further they ran, the darker it got, and soon Catherine couldn't see anything around her. Her chest started to hurt as she struggled to breathe. She knew Vincent was in survival mode, wanting to get them both as far away from the grate as possible. But it was becoming too much. She couldn't keep up with him anymore. She

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by Maryann Wood

pleaded with him, “Vincent, I need to stop.”

Stopping, he let go of her hand. Catherine immediately fell against the wall, sliding to the ground, trying to breathe. She vaguely heard Vincent trying to catch his breath before she felt him suddenly before her. He was holding her in his arms. Touching her face, her arms. She couldn’t see him through the darkness but lifted her hands to feel the contours of his face. “It’s too dark, Vincent, I can’t see you!” she cried.

She felt his arms leave her, then the soft glow of a lantern illuminated the tunnel around them. Catherine immediately began to cry at the sight of him.

He stared at her for only a second before taking her face between his hands and brushing her tears away from her cheeks. “You are my Catherine,” he whispered.

She nodded at him, raising her own hands and gently placing them on his wrists. Then Vincent did something she’d only dreamed of. He pulled her close and gently kissed her. It was all too much. He started to pull away when Catherine launched herself into his lap, burying her face against his neck, crying hysterically.

*This can’t be real*, she thought. Any moment now, she was going to wake up in that dreadful hospital room alone.

“Please tell me this is real. That I’m not imagining this. Please tell me you’re real, Vincent. I don’t know anymore.”

Vincent rubbed her back and held her tightly, whispering soothing sounds in her ear. “This is real, Catherine. I’m here. You’re not imagining. I need you to try and calm yourself.”

She couldn’t stop sobbing and felt herself start to hyperventilate. Vincent rubbed her back and urged her to breathe, whispering words of comfort in her ear. When she finally managed to calm down, he handed her a canteen of water, encouraging her to take small sips. He then started to run his hands over her arms and face again, examining her for any injuries.

“Are you hurt anywhere? Do you have any pain?”

“I’m okay. I’ll be okay. Just tired,” she told him, trying to reassure him.

“Are you able to walk a bit farther? I want to put as much distance between us and

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

that place as possible.”

Catherine nodded and let Vincent assist her to her feet. He gathered their supplies and put an arm around her waist. “Lean on me, I won’t let you fall.”

She managed to walk for an hour before Vincent had to pick her up and carry her. “I’m sorry,” she cried softly.

“Nonsense. Don’t worry. You know how much I love having you in my arms. This just gives me a reason to hold you.”

She smiled sadly at him and then rested her head against his chest. “You never need a reason. I welcome your arms always. I love you, Vincent,” she whispered to him before drifting off to sleep.

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When Catherine woke again, she was still lying in his arms. She looked up at him, trying to gauge if he was real or not. After his reassurances, she asked him about their son.

“Yes, his name is Jacob, and he’s beautiful. He’s so intelligent. He’s the one that showed me to you.”

Catherine relaxed in his arms and told him about when she first heard Jacob talking to her. The joy she felt hearing his voice. Then Vincent felt the anxiety and fear coming through the bond.

“Then the orderlies overheard me talking to him one day. They were already trying to manipulate me into believing I wasn’t who I thought I was. Telling me I wasn’t Catherine Chandler. That Catherine Chandler was dead. Over and over again they would say that. Catherine Chandler is dead. Catherine Chandler is dead. Then when they heard me talking to Jacob, they would tie me down, saying I was crazy. That it wasn’t real. That it was all in my head.”

Catherine felt his arms tighten around her, trying to comfort her as she told her story.

“It was real,” he whispered in her ear. “You’re alive. Catherine Chandler is alive.”

“I’m alive?” she asked softly, looking for reassurance.

Vincent gently kissed her temple. “Yes. You’re alive. Catherine Chandler is alive

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by *Maryann Wood*



**In My Arms** by *Laura G*

and in my arms.”

Catherine tried to force herself to relax. Vincent was real and was holding her in his arms. She could feel him sending her his love. She could feel it through the bond they shared. Could feel it strongly.

She wanted to know everything about Jacob. She didn't even know what he looked like. The only time she had seen him was just after his birth. Even then, she wasn't allowed to hold him.

“Tell me about him, Vincent. Tell me about our son.”

Vincent pulled out the suede pouch she gave to him for their first anniversary. It brought tears to her eyes to see he still carried it with him after all this time. From inside the pouch, he pulled out the rose she had given him, her crystal pendant, and most beautiful thing of all, a picture of Jacob.

Taking the picture from him, Catherine stared at it in awe. Her son was beautiful. He was perfect. “A spitting image of his mother,” Vincent told her, though she had a hard time seeing it herself. Catherine leaned her head against Vincent's chest and stared at the picture. Then suddenly panic started to rise in her. She remembered the early stages of her pregnancy and all the drugs Gabriel had the doctor inject her

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

with.

“Is he healthy? I was so afraid. When Gabriel first kidnapped me, they injected me with drugs, trying to get me to tell them about a book Joe gave me. I told them I was pregnant, but they didn’t care. I was afraid that the drugs were going to harm the baby.”

“He’s perfectly healthy. In fact, that is one trait I passed to him. My immune system. I’m also beginning to believe he will have my strength. He’s showing signs of it.”

Catherine sighed in relief, knowing Vincent would not lie to her about something so important. She gazed lovingly at the picture of her son until Vincent suggested she eat something. Catherine nodded and made him promise to eat and rest, as well.

Reluctantly, Catherine handed Vincent the rose and pendant to put back in the pouch. With a kiss to the photo of Jacob, she handed that back, as well. Then, to her surprise, he placed the pouch around her neck, asking her to hold on to it for him until they reached home. Touched beyond words, Catherine nodded and squeezed the pouch gently.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

Catherine tried to be strong for Vincent. She didn’t want him to know how much the journey home was affecting her. She knew she was holding them back but couldn’t help it. Each time she fell asleep she would dream of being back at the hospital with Fallon hovering over her. Taunting her. Touching her. Breaking her down until she was a shell of her former self. Vincent and the thought of holding her son in her arms were the only things that kept her going.

After days of traveling, Vincent finally pointed out the pipes. “Look, Catherine, we’re almost home. I can send a message that we’ll be home in a couple of hours.”

Catherine leaned against the tunnel wall and slid to the ground, sighing in relief. She listened as Vincent tapped out a message on the pipes. She closed her eyes and squeezed the suede pouch hanging around her neck. “Mother’s coming, sweetheart,” she whispered. “Don’t worry. I love you.”

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

It took a few minutes, then she heard Jacob's voice in her mind. "I know, Mother," the boy answered, his voice filled with joy. "I just heard the message on the pipes. Pascal's been teaching me the codes. I'm going to meet you. I love you, Mother."

Catherine smiled and let go of the pouch. Vincent finished his message then helped her to her feet. "Are you ready?" he asked her. She nodded and Vincent gathered her in his arms and started to run towards home. The closer they got to home, the more Catherine started to feel Jacob. It was a feeling that warmed her heart.

They came to a brick wall that looked like a dead end. Vincent set her down and pulled the lever that open a small entrance to the Below community. Warm torchlight lit their way as they walked towards the main hub.

Two people came into view and Catherine knew that one of them was Jacob. She stumbled forward a few steps then fell to her knees as Jacob ran into her open arms. She cried out his name and hugged him tightly to her. She then held his face between her hands.

He was so beautiful, her son.

Jacob gently traced her face with his own fingers. His touch was so soft. Jacob was saying something to her but she didn't hear all the words. She was taking in the sight of him, her heart swelling with love. Jacob then tugged on Catherine's hand, pulling her to her feet and down the tunnel.

"Come, Mother, I want to show you my chamber. Caroline is there and some of your old storybooks. Would you read to me before bed?"

Catherine would have fallen to the tunnel floor if Vincent hadn't rushed forward and taken her around the waist. Mary hurried up to them and pulled Jacob back, trying to explain to him that his parents needed to rest first. She then pulled Catherine into her arms and hugged her tightly, whispering in her ear and rubbing her back.

Catherine couldn't find the words, crying in Mary's arms. She hugged the old woman tightly. Mary held her face in her hands and kissed her face. She then turned to Vincent, hugging and thanking him for bringing Catherine back to them. Jacob held on to Catherine again before Mary convince him to lead them to the hospital chamber so his mother could be looked after.

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

Mary and Jacob left Vincent and Catherine at the entrance only after Catherine promised to come and tuck him into bed. Catherine watched Mary lead him away then let Vincent help her up and, when exhaustion took over, he carried her inside the chamber, setting her down where Father instructed.

She sat on the gurney, tensed, as Father did his examination. She knew he wouldn't harm her but couldn't help feeling stressed. She couldn't help the trembling as Father continued his exam. Mary returned as Father started to explain his findings and concerns. Her blood pressure was low, she was anemic, dehydrated, borderline malnourished.

*Not surprising, since they barely gave me food,* she thought, but didn't want to say, knowing it would only distress Vincent even more.

Then Father said he wanted to take some blood to send off to the lab. Panic filled her at those words. Taking blood would mean a needle. Another needle. She knew it was years ago that she was stuck in the room, receiving injection after injection, but to her it was like yesterday. Catherine tensed, a look of panic on her face.

Vincent stepped forward and sat down next to her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "Catherine," he whispered, "it's all right. You're safe. Father doesn't have to if you don't want him to, but it will help to make sure you get well. I'll stay with you. Will you let him?"

Catherine looked between the two men, shaking. *I can do this,* she told herself. *I can do this for Vincent. I can do this for Jacob.* Turning her head to Vincent for comfort, she held out her arm and allowed Father to draw the blood.

When finished, Father took Catherine's hands in his own. "My dear, I want you to go with Mary and get washed up. Vincent is going to help me bring the IV equipment to his chamber so we can get you resting."

At his words, Catherine shook her head no, grasping onto Vincent's hand. "I can't. Please. I don't want to leave him," she pleaded, the panic evident in her voice.

"Catherine, listen to me," Father continued. "Like Vincent said, you are safe. Nothing will harm you here. Please go with Mary and get cleaned up. I promise you, it won't be more than ten minutes. Then you'll be back with Vincent in his chamber. I promise you he will not leave your sight until you allow him to."

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** *by Maryann Wood*

“It’s all right, Catherine,” Vincent said, trying to comfort her. “Go with Mary. I need to help Father with the IV for you.”

Catherine looked back and forth between everyone in the room before finally nodding. Vincent helped her down from the gurney and into Mary’s waiting arms.

“Come, sweet girl, let’s get you washed up and then into bed,” Mary said softly, picking up the clean clothes and towels, slowly leading Catherine away. Catherine continued to look back at Vincent for reassurance. At his nod of encouragement, she followed Mary out of the chamber.

Mary held on to her arm and led her down the hall. “We’ll go to Vincent’s private bathing chamber. No one will bother us there.”

“Thank you, Mary. I’m sorry for my reaction. It’s just been difficult lately.”

“Not to worry, Catherine. Everything will be all right. You’re home now. We’ll get you right as rain before you know it.”

Once at the chamber, Mary sat Catherine down at a bench next to the bathing pool and started to gather soaps for her bath. Catherine watched her for a moment, trying to gather the courage to ask about Vincent. Mary returned and helped her undress and slide into the pool. “Mary,” she began, taking the washcloth from her. “Has Vincent been okay, Mary? I mean, how has he been since I’ve been missing?” Catherine looked up at the older woman and could tell by the look on her face that the answer wasn’t good.

“He missed you a great deal,” she answered.

“Yes, I imagine so, but how is he? I know how sensitive he is, and with the bond that we shared and the last moments that I remember us together, I’m just worried about him.”

Mary remained silent for a moment. She started washing Catherine’s hair before she answered. “You are Vincent’s world. You have been since the moment he found you all those years ago. He was there for Jacob, but only just. He went through the movements of life, but only that.”

Catherine looked up at her and saw tears in Mary’s eyes.

“I fear, Catherine, that if this miracle we have all be given, the miracle of your

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

return, did not happen, we would have lost Vincent to his grief soon. He loves you so. You're his soulmate. One cannot live when a piece of their soul is missing."

Catherine started to cry once again at her words. She knew her disappearance, her death, would have devastated Vincent. She knew that pain when she thought Vincent had died in her arms when they were alone in the cavern deep below. "Not without me," she had told him. "Not without me." Then the chain of events after that night led to her leaving him alone.

Only he had to suffer the loss of her years. She made him come back to her but she couldn't do the same for him. The thought of that broke her heart. She abandoned him. Not of her own accord, but still abandonment in her eyes.

"How can he ever forgive me for leaving him, Mary?" she cried. "I should have fought harder. Fought for him and Jacob when I was taken. If only I had fought then, he wouldn't have had to go through that."

"Catherine, no. You mustn't think like that."

Mary quickly rinsed Catherine's hair then helped her from the pool and wrapped her in a towel then hugged her close.

"Catherine, what happen to you was in no way your fault. I know you. I know you must have fought like hell, but the people you were up against were evil. Evil men who, no matter what you did, you couldn't win against at the time. But think about it now, Catherine. You did fight. Against all odds, you fought and you survived. It took awhile, but you fought your way back to Vincent. The love you have for each other prevailed against all odds. You both stood at death's door and managed to fight your way back to each other."

Mary cupped Catherine's face between her hands, wiping the tears away with her thumbs. Catherine wanted to believe the words Mary had spoken but her self-confidence had disappeared. She no longer was the woman she had been before her kidnapping. Self-doubt flooded her mind and her sense of self. Though Mary's words did give her a glimmer of hope.

"Come now, sweet girl, let's get you dressed. Father's waiting for you in your and Vincent's chamber."

Catherine smiled. Vincent's and her chamber. She liked the sound of that. When

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by *Maryann Wood*

she was dressed, they made their way to the chamber. Mary was about to assist her getting into the bed when Vincent and Father entered. Vincent dropped what he was holding and hurried over to lift her into the bed himself. When she was settled, he stroked her face, a gesture that had such a calming effect on her.

“Are you feeling better now after your bath?” he asked her.

She smiled and took his hand in her own and kissed his fingers. “Yes. Thank you,” she said. “Now you need to go get cleaned up. Quickly though, I like having you close.”

She could see his hesitance to leave her, and evidently Father could, as well.

“Go, Vincent. You’re filthy and you smell. I don’t think Catherine wants you sleeping next to her like that. Perhaps Mary can go grab you both something to eat from the kitchen. You both must be famished. Nothing too heavy for Catherine right now. Some soup and crackers I think are best. But for him, try to get as many sandwiches as William is willing to part with.”



**Vincent** by *Laura G*

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

Mary happily obliged, smiling as she left the chamber.

“Now, Vincent,” Father continued as he walked over to the bed, “if you would just bring the IV pole and bag of saline over to the bed, I can get Catherine’s IV going while you’re cleaning up.”

“Will you be all right while I’m gone, Catherine?” he asked.

Catherine smiled at his concern and nodded.

*Jacob*, she thought. There would be no way Father would allow her to leave the chamber to go to her son, but she needed to see him once more. She had promised him she would read to him.

“Yes, yes, just go. Don’t worry. Will you bring Jacob with you when you return? I promised I’d tuck him in but maybe I can still read to him before he goes to sleep.”

“Whatever you wish.”

Catherine watched as Vincent rose from the bed and brought the supplies over to Father. She was distracted slightly when Father dragged a chair over to the bed and sat down, giving Vincent a shove. “Go, Vincent,” he said. “The sooner you go, the sooner you can come back, and you won’t have to leave again anytime soon.”

With a kiss to her fingers, Vincent started to back away. Catherine followed him with her eyes, unable to turn away from the love she saw. His brilliant blue eyes never left hers as he slowly made his way to his wardrobe. They were lost in each other’s gaze when Father startled them both.

“Vincent, go!” Father said loudly.

Vincent jumped, making Catherine giggle, then she turned away, smiling. She watched from the corner of her eye as Vincent left the chamber, then turned her attention back to Father.

“Now Catherine,” Father began, “I’m going to have to insert an IV port in your hand. You’re in desperate need of fluids and this is the best way for you to get them. I’m going to clean the area and then I want you to relax and close your eyes. You’ll feel a small prick when I insert the needle but, believe it or not, I have a knack for started IVs.”

“I know this is necessary, Father. It’s just that I’ve developed a fear of needles.

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** *by Maryann Wood*

There were so many when they held me captive. The doctor administrating them was none too kind about it. I know it's an irrational fear but I can't help it."

"That's nonsense, Catherine. You have every right to feel the fear, but it is important that you talk and not let it fester inside of you. Sit back now and close your eyes."

Catherine nodded and laid back against the pillows, closing her eyes. She felt Father lift her hand gently and jumped when she felt him clean her hand with cotton and alcohol.

"Relax, Catherine," he reminded her, and poked her hand, looking for a vein.

She nodded once again and bit her lip, knowing what was to come.

A small prick, then Father announced happily, "You see there, all done. Not bad for an old doctor like me."

She opened her eyes and saw Father securing the IV to her hand. It hadn't been as bad as she'd thought. He really did have a gift.

He flushed the port and hooked up the IV bag then held her hands in his own. He smiled at her but there were tears in his eyes.

"Father, what is it? Are you all right?"

"My dear Catherine," he said squeezing her hands gently. "I know you and I have not always seen eye to eye in the past, but when you disappeared and then when we found out that you had passed, I saw what it did to Vincent. I realized then, and at the time I thought it was too late, what you truly meant to my son, to our world. I was so wrong about you, Catherine. My jealousy of your bond with Vincent blinded me. The guilt I felt of not being able to reconcile this with you tore at me; it still does. I guess what I'm trying to say, Catherine, is that I love you like a daughter and I want to thank you for all the happiness you brought my son back then and now. I hope you can forgive an old man for his foolishness."

Catherine sat up and pulled Father into her arms in a fierce hug. She cried on his shoulder. "I love you too, Father. There's nothing to forgive, I understand. If you must hear the words though, I do forgive you."

She felt Father hug her tightly back, cradling her head in this hand. "You're the

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

best thing that has ever happened to my son, Catherine. Your return has proved that miracles can happen.”

After a few tender moments, Father pulled away from her and packed away his things in his medical bag. He rose from the chair and pulled it back to Vincent’s writing desk. When he turned back, he saw Catherine rising from the bed and immediately started to scold her. “Catherine, I told you, bedrest for the next few days. What are you doing? You are in no condition to up and about.”

He moved to help her back into the bed when she held her hand up. “Please, Father, I need to sit up. I promise to rest after a short time. Please, just for meals.”

“If I have your word that you will remain in bed and not get up without assistance for the next two days, I will allow you to have your meals at this desk with Vincent and Jacob. If I find out that you have been up on your own, I will not hesitate to have you brought to the hospital chamber, where you will remain until I say otherwise. Do we have an agreement?”

“Yes. I promise to stay in bed. I just would like to have some normalcy right now.”

“I will permit it then. Mark my words, Catherine, you are very ill right now. You have just returned to us, and I will not allow anything to jeopardize that.”

Father took her gently by the arm and helped her to a chair at the table then took a seat himself. A moment later, Vincent walked into the chamber with Jacob in his arms.

Catherine turned her head towards them and was about to speak when Jacob wiggled out of his father’s arms and bounded towards her and into her lap, hugging her fiercely. Her arms immediately went around him, holding him tight against her. It was the most wonderful feeling in the world, holding her son to her.

Vincent rushed forward to remove him but Catherine held out her hand, stopping him. “No, Vincent, it’s fine. I want to hug him,” she said, and closed her eyes. This was what she’d dreamed of. Since she’d awakened, she’d dreamt of her son. Not since the first day, when she asked about her baby, had anyone mentioned him. She’d begun to think that he wasn’t real or that he hadn’t survived after his birth. Then she’d heard his voice. It had warmed her heart.

What she felt now was so much more. The bond between them was so intense. She

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

could feel his heart beating next to her own. It was similar to what she felt with Vincent but with an overwhelming sense of possessiveness. Jacob was a part of her. He was hers, and now that she held him in her arms, she swore to herself that no one would take him away from her again.

Catherine vaguely heard Vincent protesting about her being out of bed but didn't care at the moment. Jacob sat back in her lap and she immediately held on to him at the waist to prevent him from falling. She stared at her son's face as he traced her own with his soft fingers, running them over her nose, her lips, even the scar on the left side of her face.

She couldn't hold back the tears that formed as she looked at him. She'd never seen something more beautiful in her life. A tear escaped and Jacob gently brushed it away. "Are these happy tears again, Mother?" he asked.

Catherine only managed to nod, more tears escaping. Then Jacob leaned forward and kissed both her cheeks. Catherine pulled him close again, whispering, "I love you, sweetheart. Thank you for helping your father bring me home. You are such a brave boy."

Mary entered the chamber a few moments later carrying a tray of food, and she placed it on the table. Father rose from his chair. "Well, I think it is time for me to go to bed," he said, placing a hand on Catherine's shoulder. Catherine looked up at him, smiling. "Remember your promise, my dear. You stay in that bed unless it is mealtime," he told her sternly.

"I promise, Father. Thank you."

Pointing to the soup on the tray, he told her, "Eat as much of that soup as you can. Slowly. Your stomach needs to adjust. If you eat too fast, you'll get sick." He then looked at Vincent. "See to it that she listens. Don't let that pretty face of hers entice you."

Catherine heard Vincent agree but paid no mind. Jacob was resting his head against her shoulder, playing with the suede pouch. She rested her cheek against his head and closed her eyes. Mary gave them both a kiss on the cheek before leaving with Father. Once they were gone, Vincent approached them and tried to lift Jacob off of her lap.



**Father** by Laura G

“Come now, Jacob, your mother needs to eat some supper. Why don’t you sit on the bed and pick one of the books you brought for her to read?”

Jacob shook his head no and wrapped his arms around Catherine’s neck tightly.

“Jacob,” Vincent repeated, tugging at the boy. “Let’s go now. I told you, your mother needs to have her supper.”

“No!” Jacob said, refusing to let go of her.

Vincent was about to pull him away when Catherine looked up at him and held up one finger, silently asking him to wait a moment. She gently kissed Jacob’s head then took his face between her hands. “Jacob, sweetheart,” she whispered softly, stroking his cheeks with her thumbs. “If you listen to your father now, I promise to read to you until you fall asleep. You and I can curl up on that bed, all warm under the covers, and read whatever story you wish. First, though, I promised Grandfather that I’d eat a little supper, and I can’t break a promise to Grandfather. So please, listen to your father and go sit on the bed and pick whatever book you wish. Will you do that for me, please?”

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

Jacob reluctantly agreed and climbed off her lap. He picked up his book bag then jump into the bed to wait for her. She looked up at Vincent and smiled as he looked back and forth between the two of them before kneeling down in front of her. They shared a silent moment together before he took her hands in his and kissed her fingers.

“Are you all right? Are you in any pain?” he asked her, concern written all over his face.

Catherine smiled and nodded, trying to assure him she was okay. She knew if she told him about the pain she felt in her chest or how exhausted she really was, he'd have Father back in here in moment. All she wanted to do was to crawl into bed with Jacob and Vincent and try to forget all that had happened in the last few weeks. She wanted to hold Jacob against her chest while he slept and listen to the sound of him breathing. She wanted to feel Vincent's strong arms encircle both her and their son and feel his warmth and love envelop her. Feel the safety only Vincent could provide. She knew, though, that she had to eat a little something to lessen Vincent's worries for her.

She could feel through their bond how scared he was for her. How worried. His face showed it, but not to the depth that she felt through the bond. From their first touch, when he pulled her through the broken window and into his arms, she'd felt something explode inside of her. She'd felt Vincent's essence fill her. It was nothing like before she was kidnapped. Back then she felt floating instances of Vincent, but she hadn't managed to learn how to center it. Now it was like a floodgate was opened. She could feel Vincent's feelings, his love, but was still trying to decipher those feelings.

She managed to eat half a bowl of broth, which seemed to please Vincent. He then lifted her in his arms and carried her the few steps to the bed and tucked her in next to Jacob. She let Vincent rearrange the IV line, making sure it wouldn't snag on anything. Jacob noticed Vincent arrange the IV and asked about it. “It's called an IV line. It helps me get the medicine I need to get better,” she told him.

She noticed Jacob holding her old doll Caroline. She gently took the doll from Jacob and held it, smiling at the childhood memories the doll brought forward. “My father gave me this doll when I was ten years old. I named her after my

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by Maryann Wood

mother. I'm so glad she found her way to you, Jacob. She can be a good friend and never tells anyone any secrets you tell her."

"Can I keep her, Mother? I'll take good care of her."

"Of course, you can keep her. That would make me happy."

She handed the doll back to Jacob and pulled him close.

"Now, which book did you pick?"

He proudly handed her The Velveteen Rabbit. "You said it was your favorite when you were little," he told her and snuggled up close to her.

"Will the two of you be okay for a few minutes while I take the supper dishes back to the kitchen?" Vincent asked them softly.

Catherine smiled at him and nodded. "Yes, we'll be okay," she told him, "but hurry back, we both want our goodnight kisses before we fall asleep."

"As you wish."

Catherine kissed Jacob's forehead then began reading him the book as Vincent gathered the dishes and left the chamber. She managed to finish most of the book before Jacob dozed off. She carefully set the book aside then stared at her son as he slept. She smiled at the content look he had on his face. She watched for a few moments. The rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. The sound of his small intakes of breath soon lulled her into a sleep of her own.

She knew she wasn't asleep for long when she felt Vincent climb into the bed and pull her against his chest. Catherine sighed happily and opened her eyes slightly, smiling at him. She turned her head slightly to look up at him, her eyes half-closed.

"Do I still get my goodnight kiss?" she asked softly.

"Of course, a night will never pass again that we don't share at least one kiss."

Carefully, Vincent brushed her lips with his own.

Catherine smiled and closed her eyes. "May I have one more? You know, just in case. It's good to have one in the bank."

Vincent obliged, giving her two more soft kisses. "There you go," he whispered. "Have two. Go back to sleep and I promise that we'll build that bank of kisses up so much in the coming days that you'll be a wealthy woman."

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

Feeling safe and at peace for the moment, Catherine let herself drift off to sleep.

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Early the next morning, Catherine woke to the sound of Jacob's whispers.

"Mother? Mother, are you awake?" His fingers softly stroked the bridge of her nose.

She smiled and opened her eyes and saw Jacob smiling at her. "Good morning, sweetheart" she whispered back and gently kissed his nose.

"I'm glad you're home. I missed you. I always knew you would come home one day."

"I missed you too, so much. I love you, Jacob. Thank you for helping your father bring me home."

Jacob smiled up at her but then suddenly frowned as he studied her face. "Mother, are you going to be okay? You've been in the hospital a long time. Grandfather's a doctor, he could have taken care of you."

Catherine hesitated to answer. She knew he was an intelligent boy. The last thing she wanted was for him to worry. After a moment, she smiled at him. "I was asleep for a very long time. I only just woke up when you started to come and visit me. I'm sorry for what you had to see, Jacob. Those were bad men at the hospital. Your visits helped me though. It was the only time I was happy."

"Why did they hurt you, Mother?"

"I don't know. Sometimes people do terrible things to others and we don't know why."

"Will they make you go back? Please don't leave, Mother."

The sadness she heard in her son's voice made her want to cry. She was trying to formulate a response when Vincent sat up in bed and looked down at them with a smile and reassured them. "No one, and I mean no one, is ever going to take your mother away again. I won't let them. I won't let anyone hurt either of you," he told them confidently.

"I know you won't, Father," Jacob said, sitting up in bed. "I'll protect Mother, too. When you have to go and work in the tunnels, I'll take care of her."

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** *by Maryann Wood*

Catherine smiled, looking between the two of them. They were her life. She wanted to cherish this moment forever. Nature was calling though, and she went to sit up at the side of the bed but found it a struggle to do so.

Vincent noticed immediately and hurried out of the bed and assisted her to sit on the side.

She sat still for a moment and tried to catch her breath.

Vincent frowned and held onto her.

She was glad he did; she didn't feel confident that she could sit up on her own yet.

“Jacob, why don't you go brush your teeth and get dressed? It's almost breakfast, and it's Thursday. You know what Thursday is,” Vincent said, keeping his eyes on her.

“Pancake day!”

Jacob excitedly jumped from the bed and started to run for the door. He stopped though, and turned back, running to give her a kiss.

Catherine smiled at him as he begged Vincent to stay home from classes this morning. Yes! She knew that answer before Vincent had a chance to reply. She wanted her son near to her for as long as possible. “That would be lovely, sweetheart” Catherine answered before Vincent had a chance to oppose. “First, you must do as your father tells you and wash up before breakfast. Though I'm sure he would want you to go to your afternoon classes.”

Jacob jumped up and down, pleased with the answer, then ran from the room.

Catherine shook her head as she watched him, amazed by his energy.

Vincent was helping Catherine to her feet when Mary entered, carrying clean clothes for Catherine. “How are you feeling today?” she asked Catherine as she approached the two of them.

“A little shaky but rested. I need to use the washroom though. Would you mind helping me?”

“Of course, my dear. Vincent, I'll push the IV pole if you want to help Catherine walk. We'll use the private wash chamber here. I imagine Vincent's going to have to get used to sharing it now. Later on, I'll bring some nice-smelling soaps and



*In Their Chamber by Laura G*

lotions, some flowers. Before you know it, we'll turn it into a nice lady's powder room."

Catherine chuckled. *Vincent's going to love that*, she thought. She glanced around the room, thinking how the whole chamber could use a woman's touch. Slowly, the three of them made their way to the wash chamber, where Vincent sat Catherine down on a stool. He kissed her head and was about to leave when Catherine started to panic slightly.

"Wait, come back," she said, grabbing his hand.

Vincent went back to her and bent over to look her in the eyes. She took him by the collar and pulled him towards her for a quick kiss. "You promised last night that we'd start banking kisses."

Vincent smiled and hugged her. "Don't worry, my love," he whispered low enough that only she could hear. "I'll return shortly and stay at your side for the rest of the day."

He stood then and looked to Mary. "Call to me when you two are finished and I'll

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by *Maryann Wood*

be right back to assist you.”

Mary shooed him away with a towel.

“Of course. Go get changed yourself. We won’t be that long. I asked William to have breakfast delivered to your chamber this morning. Father will be by shortly after to check on Catherine.”

Once Vincent was gone, Mary helped Catherine to relieve herself then sat her in front of a wash basin to clean up. Mary hovered over her like a mother hen. Before, Catherine would have found it annoying, always wanting her independence, but now she found it comforting. Mary was a surrogate mother to her.

“Thank you, Mary, for all your help. You’re heaven-sent.”

“Nonsense, my sweet girl. You’re family. That is what families do.”

“Regardless, thank you.” She looked up at Mary and started to cry once again.

“Thank you for all you did for Vincent and Jacob in my absence. I can never thank you enough for taking care of them.”

At the sight of Catherine’s tears, Mary herself started to cry. Catherine sighed as Mary pulled her head against her chest in a hug and stroked her hair, comforting her.

“Hush now. It was my honor to help them, as it is now to help you.”

Catherine tried to gather her composure but struggled to do so. A tightness started to form in her chest, followed by a pain that made her wince.

Mary felt her tense and pulled away looking down at her. “What is it, Catherine? Are you in pain?”

Catherine closed her eyes and unconsciously place a hand over her heart. After a moment, she shook her head. She opened her eyes again and smiled reassuringly.

“No. I’m fine, Mary,” she responded, feeling guilty about lying to her friend. “I just want to be able to stop crying so much. I feel like such a baby.”

“It’s good for you to cry, Catherine. Don’t hold in your feelings to spare us. You need to let it out.”

Catherine nodded, knowing what Mary said was true. Still, she didn’t want to have to burden everyone more than she already was.

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

Mary had just finish assisting Catherine into a nightgown when they heard Vincent's voice from outside of the wash chamber. "I've returned. Are you ready for some breakfast and then bed, Catherine?"

Catherine sighed, noticing how Vincent had to make sure he got the word "bed" in. She nodded to Mary, who helped her to her feet, then answered, "Yes, you can come in."

Vincent entered and frowned when he saw her already standing. Before she had a chance to object, he stepped forward and picked her up.

"Mary, would you please follow us with the IV pole?" he asked and started his way to the main chamber.

"Vincent, I can walk..." she started to say, but stopped at the angry look he gave her. She knew she couldn't fault him for being overprotective, not after everything they'd been through. If she thought he was overprotective before, she knew that he would be in overdrive now. Her heart told her to let him. That he needed to be this way for his own peace of mind.

Gently, as if she were made of glass, he sat her in the chair at the writing desk, where breakfast was waiting. He sat a plate with toast in front of her and stood with his arms crossed until she picked up a piece and took a bite before he stood back a few inches. His arms remained crossed, his eyes never leaving her.

Mary stood behind her and began to brush and braid her hair. "Your hair has gotten so long. It's beautiful. Do you plan on cutting it?" Mary asked, tying off the braid.

"I haven't really thought about it. I haven't had it this long since I was a girl."

"Vincent? Vincent, what do you think?" Mary asked him.

When he didn't answer, both women looked over at him. He was still staring at Catherine. Mary repeated his name a few more times before he finally acknowledged them, a confused look on his face. "What was that?" he mumbled.

"I asked whether you thought that Catherine's longer hair suited her. I've been telling her how beautiful it is and we wanted your opinion."

Catherine smiled as Vincent struggled to find any words before mumbling how lovely it was. He was saved from any further comment as young Jacob and Father

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

entered the chamber. Jacob immediately threw his schoolbooks aside and ran to Catherine, jumping into her lap once again. Her arms went around him as she held her son against her tightly.

Vincent rose quickly to stop him but Jacob returned his mother's fierce hug, refusing to let go. Vincent went to pull Jacob off when Father interceded. "Jacob, will you please pull a chair in front of your mother so I may sit and have a look at her?"

Catherine kissed Jacob's cheek and whispered in his ear, "Sweetheart, will you please do what Grandfather has requested? Then go and make your father sit down and eat his breakfast. He knows how grumpy he gets if he doesn't eat."

Jacob giggled and returned his mother's kiss before sliding off her lap. He pulled a chair over for Father, then went over to Vincent and tugged at his hand. "Mother wants you to sit down and eat breakfast," he said, then he jumped on the bed to wait.

Vincent looked at everyone around the room before he sulked over to the chair next to Catherine and started to eat.

Father sat down and began looking Catherine over. Taking her blood pressure and temperature. Listening to her heart. Examining the ugly bruises on her wrists.

"How did you sleep? Did you eat something? Are you in any pain?" He asked question after question, Mary making notes of each answer on a notepad from her apron.

"I'm feeling better now that I'm home," Catherine said, after answering all his questions. "I am tired and I get a little winded when I walk, but I'm sure after a few days' rest, I'll be able to move about more and help out where needed."

Father looked at her sternly over his glasses. "Hmmm, well, I'll be the judge of that," he said, packing up his medical bag. "Peter will be back from vacation at the end of the week and I've made sure he'll be made aware of all that has transpired down here."

Catherine teared up at the mention of her godfather's name. "Peter," she whispered, smiling. "Make sure he's Below before you tell him, in case he needs assistance from the shock."

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

“Of course, Catherine.” Father reassured her. “I’m also going to request he bring some equipment with him when he comes. There are just a few tests I want to perform on you.”

Catherine scrunched her eyebrows in concern as Father and Vincent looked at one another, silently communicating something between them.

“What sort of tests, Father?” she asked him, looking at him with concern.

Father smiled and patted her hand. “Just standard tests, my dear. We don’t have access to any of your medical records from the last four years, and from what we understand, you were in a coma for many of them. I just want to make sure all is well.”

Catherine nodded and looked down at her hands. Something was wrong and no one was telling her. She felt the panic and anxiety building up. She tried to push it away, to hide it, but she knew Vincent felt it immediately.

He stood and quickly rounded the table so he could kneel next to her. “Catherine,” he said, placing his hands over hers. “Try not to worry yourself. All will be well. You’re safe here. Please remember that. Whatever happened back at that facility, whoever hurt you, they will not harm you again. This I promise.”

She tried to fight the tears that threatened to fall but failed.

Vincent pulled her to him in a tight hug. “Hush now, my love,” he whispered, rubbing her back.

At the sight of her tears, Jacob cried out her name as he jumped from the bed, running to hug her.

Catherine quickly tried to compose herself. She didn’t want Jacob to be witness to her distress. She smiled at her son, hugging him back. “It’s all right, sweetheart,” she said, kissing the top of his head.

“All right, Catherine, back to bed,” Father said, standing up. “I want to check that IV before I head back to the library. Jacob, turn down the covers so your father can help your mother into bed.”

Once Catherine was settled in bed, Jacob jumped in and snuggled up to her, hiding his face in her nightgown. Catherine smiled and stroked his head with her free

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by Maryann Wood



*Vincent by Laura G*

hand as Father checked the IV in the other.

“All looks well. This bag should be empty by this afternoon. I’d like to run one more once it’s finished. Make sure your mother stays in bed, Jacob. I’m leaving you in charge,” Father said, patting his grandson on the head.

Jacob peeked up at his grandfather and smiled. “I will, Grandfather.”

Catherine thanked Father and watched as Vincent assisted him toward the chamber exit.

Jacob crawled up so his head was under her chin. He held onto the strings of the suede pouch again, content to be in her arms.

After Father left, Catherine watched as Vincent picked up Jacob’s schoolbooks and placed them on the desk. He then walked over to the bed and quickly picked up Jacob and sat him in a chair at the desk before he could protest.

“Schoolwork now, Jacob. That was the agreement. You promised that if you stayed home from your morning classes, you would work on your letters and phonics. If you don’t, I will send you off to class.”

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

“But I promised Grandfather I’d take care of Mother. How can I take care of her if I have to do schoolwork?”

“You make sure she stays in bed and sleeps. Keep quiet and let her rest. I’m going to work on my class lessons, as well. Now, enough, start your work. We’ll wake your mother for lunch and then you go to your athletics and afternoon lessons.”

Jacob pouted angrily but grabbed one of his workbooks and started his lessons.

Vincent then sat at the edge of the bed and took Catherine’s hands in his own. “Are you feeling okay, Catherine? Is there anything you need?” he asked, giving her hands a squeeze.

She shook her head and squeezed his hands back. “No. I’m okay, Vincent. I just need you close and need to know that Jacob is safe,” she said, leaning back into the pillows.

“Close your eyes and get some sleep. Jacob and I are just a few feet away should you need anything,” Vincent said, motioning towards the table.

She nodded and smiled when Vincent kissed her hands before placing them on her stomach.

They stared at each other for a few minutes before Vincent rose, gathered his own work, and joined Jacob at the desk.

Catherine stared at the two of them together, engraving the sight of them into her memory. After awhile, she finally closed her eyes and let the sound of their quiet whispers lull her into a peaceful sleep.

### CHAPTER TEN

Catherine obeyed Father’s orders and stayed in bed for two days. Vincent rarely left her side, and Jacob stayed with her from the moment he finished his afternoon classes till Vincent forced him off to bed in his own chamber.

She wanted to beg Vincent to allow Jacob to stay at night, needing her son close, but knew it was best that Jacob kept his routine. In the end, it was for the best, because Jacob wouldn’t be there to witness when she woke up screaming from the nightmares.

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

Vincent would hold her, whisper to her, trying to comfort her. He wanted her to speak about the nightmares, but she didn't want to upset him.

Sometimes the nightmares were of what happen recently at the hospital. The psychological torture Fallon put her through. If he knew the full extent of what had happened to her, she was sure it would send him into a rage.

The worst dreams, though, were of the time she gave birth to Jacob and he was taken from her. She relived over and over Gabriel taking him right after the birth, barely letting her see him, and refusing to let her hold him. She dreamt of Gabriel ordering her death, the feel of the needle prick that was meant to kill her. Then, perhaps the worst pain of all, she dreamt of when she finally made it to the roof and saw Vincent.

She'd fought so hard to stay with him, but knew it was inevitable. Vincent's face came in and out of focus. She barely was able to get out her final words to him. *Though lovers be lost, love shall not.* It was after that she'd wake up. The feeling of loss and emptiness filled her until she realized where she was. She was in Vincent's arms. She was safe, but remnants of her dream were still there when she closed her eyes again.

Two days after her return, she and Jacob cuddled in bed in the morning after breakfast. Vincent was returning the dishes to the kitchen. When he returned, she knew he would take Jacob off to his classes, but she wanted a little private time to talk with Jacob.

Jacob was holding onto Caroline, his eyes closed. She could here him talking with her with his mind. "Mother, I want to stay with you today. I miss you when I'm not here," he said sadly.

Catherine herself was quickly learning how to communicate the same way with her son. She gripped the crystal pendant that hung around her neck once again. She had returned the suede pouch with the rose to Vincent but asked to keep the pendant and picture of Jacob. The latter sat in a book of sonnets that she kept at her bedside. When she held the pendant in her hand and closed her eyes, she found she could talk to Jacob the same way.

"Sweetheart," she whispered in his mind, "you know you need to go to class. I'll be right here when you return, but you must promise me something. This gift we

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** *by Maryann Wood*

share. The way we can talk to each other must only be used in emergencies or when are together in the same room.”

“But how will I talk to you when we’re not together?”

Catherine opened her eyes and turned Jacob’s head to face her. “Jacob, open your eyes,” she said out loud.

He looked up at her, confused.

“I know you want to be able to talk with me, but until we both learn how to control our gift, we have to be careful. Each night we’ll practice before bed. We have to learn how to knock first to respect each other’s privacy. What happens if I come to say hi and you and Luke are sneaking cookies from the kitchen?”

“Luke and I would get in trouble,” Jacob answered out loud.

“Exactly. So, I suggest you leave Caroline with me every morning to watch over me. She’ll keep me company while you are away. Would that be all right?”

Jacob hugged Caroline tight for a moment then nodded his head yes. He kneeled on the bed and placed Caroline on the shelf in front of the stained-glass window.

“I’ll leave her right here. That way she can see the whole room and make sure you’re okay.”

Vincent returned then, carrying Jacob’s school bag. “Time for class, Jacob,” he said, holding out the bag. “Tell your mother goodbye.”

Jacob gave her a hug and kiss. “I love you, Mother.”

“I love you too, sweetheart.”

He then jumped off the bed, ran up to Vincent, and took the bag. “Love you, Father,” he said, and gave Vincent a quick hug before running from the room.

They both smiled after him, then Vincent walked over to the bed and climbed in next to her, pulling her into his arms.

“Father took the IV out last night, Vincent. Do you think perhaps we can take a walk today? Just a small one to Father’s library. He did say I can start moving about some. I can sit with him while you teach your literature class.”

“So long as you tell me the moment you feel tired. Don’t push yourself too hard

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

yet.”

She agreed, desperate to be out of this bed.

“All right then. I’ll take you to Father later this morning. Perhaps it would be good, so he can watch over you while I’m gone.”

Catherine nodded, then rested her head against his chest so she could listen to his heartbeat. They remained that way, content to be in each other’s arms, until it was time to leave.

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Things continued that way until the night before Peter was scheduled to return Below.

After a particularly bad nightmare, Catherine woke in a full-blown panic attack. Her heart hammered painfully in her chest as she struggled to catch her breath. Vincent struggled to calm her. It was a while before his words of comfort reached her.

When she finally managed to calm herself, she burrowed close to Vincent, wanting him to hold her tight in his embrace. He did, and rubbed her back, kissing her temple. “Talk to me, Catherine,” Vincent whispered, trying to encourage her. “You mustn’t keep this inside of you. It will help you to say what you are feeling. You yourself once encouraged me to do the same thing. Please, let me help you.”

Catherine shuddered in his arms, trying to sort out her thoughts. Tonight, she had dreamt about Elliot and his betrayal. The man who she thought was her friend. Who she thought cared about her. He was the one holding her in that awful place.

“Why would Elliot be keeping me there all that time?” she finally said. “I thought he cared for me. I thought that we were able to move forward and be friends. But that man, Fallon, said Elliot was coming. Why would he betray me like that? First John Moreno, then Elliot. Why?”

“I don’t know, Catherine. I think John Moreno was so afraid of Gabriel that he was ready to sacrifice anyone to save himself. He ended up losing anyway. Joe made certain of that.”

Catherine nodded at his words. She thought of her sweet Joe, and Jenny and

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

everyone else she was forced to leave behind. She was happy when Vincent told her of the lives they were leading now, and hoped one day she could be reunited with them.

“Elliot’s betrayal hurts the most, Vincent. I’m sorry. I can’t imagine the feelings you have towards him, but I just keep thinking that he cared for me.”

She did feel bad for Vincent when she thought about Elliot. Vincent was the love of her life, but Elliot and she had shared something in the beginning, and then again on the docks when they almost died together. She had thought of Elliot as a dear friend. Someone who she considered asking to be her child’s godfather back when she still held hope of being rescued while she was pregnant.

She questioned now if he knew where she was all along. Did he take the black book knowing that if she had decoded it herself, she’d find his name among others? The thought that he, along with John Moreno, was working with Gabriel all this time terrified her.

“He loved you, Catherine. Men will do almost anything for the woman they love. He may have thought he was saving you.”

Vincent’s words did have a ring of truth but it didn’t lessen the pain she felt in her heart.

“Perhaps. It still hurts. Fallon said that Elliot told them to work on me. To make me forget who I was. Elliot ordered them to psychologically torture me. Why? If he cared, how would doing that fit into his agenda? Fallon. That man is evil, Vincent. The things he did, the things he said. ‘Catherine Chandler is dead. Catherine Chandler is dead’.”

Panic started to rise in her again at those four words. She heard Fallon screaming them at her, forcing her to repeat them. Hitting her and restraining her to the bed. Then she saw herself back in the windowless room. Her wrists tied to the chair arms. Fallon was standing behind her, his putrid breath warm on the back of her neck. His hands touching her. She broke out in uncontrollable sobs. The memory was assaulting her mind. She started to hyperventilate, felt her heart rate accelerating.

Vincent sat up in the bed and pulled her into his lap, rocking her. “Shhh, Catherine.

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by *Maryann Wood*

You are all right. You are safe,” he whispered, trying to soothe her. “Say the words with me. ‘I am safe. Catherine Chandler is alive.’ Come now, say the words with me. ‘I am safe. Catherine Chandler is alive.’”

He repeated the words in her ear over and over until she was finally able to whisper, “I am safe. Catherine Chandler is alive.”

“Yes, Catherine. Say it again with me. ‘I am safe. Catherine Chandler is alive.’”

They repeat the words together over and over again until her sobs subsided. Vincent continued to whisper the words in her ear as she fell back into an uneasy sleep.

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The next morning, Catherine sat in the hospital chamber with Father as they wait for Vincent and Cullen to escort Peter Below with the medical equipment Father had requested. Her eyes were cast down as she twisted a handkerchief in her hands nervously. “Father, do you think Peter will be all right? When he sees me, I mean? I don’t want to burden him,” she asked, her voice shaking as she struggled to control her emotions.



**Father** by *Laura G*

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

Father rose and limped over to her, placing his hand gently on top of hers, stopping her fidgeting. She looked up at him and Father smiled reassuringly. “Catherine, my dear, I think he is going to be perfectly all right. Overjoyed to see you. I admit he will be shocked, but when he feels your arms come around him in a hug, that will pass quickly.”

Catherine gave a quick smile and nodded. The smile only lasted a second when she lowered her eyes once again and continued to fidget with the handkerchief.

Father rose and went back to his seat in the chamber when the pipes rang out that Peter and his entourage were headed in their direction.

“I don’t understand why your father wanted me to bring this equipment down,” they heard Peter say as he moved his way closer to the hospital chamber. “It would have been easier to take whomever is ill Above to my clinic than to cart all this Below.”

“You’ll see why soon, Peter,” Vincent’s voice answered.

Catherine stood as they neared the chamber. Vincent and Cullen entered the room first, carting the equipment inside, followed by Peter.

Peter was staring down at the file he held in his hand when he entered the chamber. “I swear, Jacob, you better have a damn good reason for me bringing all this equipment down here,” he started to say when he looked up. When he saw Catherine, his next words were lost. His mouth hung open as he stared at her standing there.

“Hello, Peter,” Catherine whispered softly, offering him a shy smile.

“Cath...Cathy,” he mumbled and took a hesitant step closer.

She closed the distance as fast as she could between them and wrapped her arms around his neck in a hug. “It’s really me, Peter. I’m here.”

Tentatively, he raised his arms to hug her back. His hesitation was gone in a moment when he pulled her tightly against himself and started to cry. “Cathy? How is this possible?” he asked, looking up at the other men in the room.

Cullen quickly bowed out and left.

A series of emotions crossed Peter’s face in a matter of seconds before ending in

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

anger. “How long has she been here? Why wasn’t I notified sooner? How is she standing here now?” Peter demanded.

Vincent and Father both tried to explain to him what had occurred in the last two weeks, starting with Jacob making contact with Catherine when she awoke from her four-year coma to Vincent traveling across the state to rescue her from the hospital.

“No one must know that she is alive, Peter. There are people looking for her Above. It’s not safe,” Vincent told him.

Peter held Catherine close, refusing to let her go yet. “I understand that, Vincent, but if what you say is true, I need to know the extent of the illness that kept her in a coma for four years.” He pulled Catherine away slightly so he could look at her face. “Cathy, I need to take you above to run some tests. A CT scan, an MRI.”

Before Catherine could respond, Peter looked back up at Vincent and Father, his eyes full of concern. “Is Cathy the reason you wanted me to bring the EKG machine and Holter monitor? Is it her bloodwork you had me pick up from the lab? If it is, I must say, I am very much concerned. I’ve read over the results of the blood work, Jacob. You and I need to have a consult immediately about her health.”

Catherine tugged on Peter’s sleeve, getting him to look at her again. “Peter, I’m not leaving the tunnels,” she said, pulling away from him. “Whatever care I need, I will receive down here. I’m not leaving Vincent. I’m not leaving my son.”

“Cathy, be reasonable. You need specialized care that you can’t receive down here.”

Catherine felt the panic rising up again. She couldn’t leave when she had just gotten back. She couldn’t leave Vincent. She couldn’t leave Jacob when she had just gotten him back.

“I’m not leaving!” she cried out, distraught. “Do you know what they did to me last time I was in a hospital, Peter?! I’m not going back Above, ever!”

The air was leaving her lungs and the room started to spin. If Vincent hadn’t come to her and brought her over to the gurney to sit, she knew she would have fallen to the floor.

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and whispered in her ear, “No one is going to force you to do anything you don’t want to do.”

He encouraged her to take deep breaths and rubbed her back, but all Catherine could think about was being taken away again. Being torn away from her family. “They’ll find me if I leave here, Vincent,” she cried, hugging her legs against her chest, and she started to rock back and forth. “Elliot will have someone on every corner of the city looking for me, let alone the hospitals. He’ll have them take me again. They’ll take me away from you and Jacob.”

Father sat down on the other side of the gurney next to her. “My dear, neither Peter nor I will make you leave. Will we, Peter?”

Peter walked up to Catherine and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Cathy, sweetheart, I won’t make you leave, but I’m going to need you to follow Father’s and my instructions without any argument. Whatever it is that happened to you while you were missing has had some lasting effects. With Father’s observations and the results of your blood work, I’m concerned you may have a type of arrhythmia. That is why I brought down the EKG and heart monitor.”

Catherine stopped rocking and looked at Peter, a panicked look in her eyes. Why was she just hearing about this now. “Is there something wrong with my heart?”

“We don’t know anything for sure until we run a few tests. If it is arrhythmia, it is a very treatable disorder. The most important thing is for you to keep yourself calm. Keep your stress level low. Light physical activity. Take Jacob for a walk after dinner each night. We’ll run the EKG today and have you wear the monitor for a week. Then we’ll go from there.”

Catherine buried her face between her knees, hugging her legs tighter. *No. This could not be happening*, she thought. She’d just found her way back to Vincent and Jacob, and now this. The thought of leaving was too much to bear.

Vincent, God bless him, continued to whisper words of reassurance in her ear. “Let them run their tests. There’s a concert in the park tonight. It’s not exactly classical. Highlights from the composer John Williams. I hear he is a talented movie score composer. I’m sure Father and Peter will not object if you and I go to our special place and listen. Some of the adults are taking the children Above, including Jacob, to listen.”

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

“That sounds like a lovely idea, Vincent,” Father said, trying to sound cheerful. “Mary has this beautiful gown that she just finished sewing. I’m sure you’d look splendid in it.”

Catherine remained silent for a minute, trying to get her emotions in check. She tried to focus on Vincent’s words. A concert in the park. Their special place underneath the bandstand. She concentrated on the composer, remembering some of the movies he wrote the scores for. Then she remembered one from her teen years. “*Jaws*,” Catherine whispered softly.

Her words were muffled, and Vincent asked her to repeat herself. “*Jaws*,” she said again, looking up at Vincent. “He composed the music for *Jaws*. I saw the movie back in the ‘70s. I refused to go in the ocean for the entire summer after seeing it.” She felt herself begin to relax again and gave Vincent a small smile. She rested her cheek on her knees, facing him.

“Well, it’s settled then,” Peter said, walking over to the EKG machine and wheeling it back to the gurney. “Let’s get this out of the way so Catherine can get some rest before her and Vincent’s concert date.”

Both men stood up from near the gurney and Vincent helped Catherine to lie down. She involuntarily flinched when Peter started to attach the electrodes to her. She hated this. This chamber. It reminded her too much of back at the facility.

Vincent must have sensed her discomfort. He leaned down on the gurney and held one of her hands and stroked her face throughout the test.

Catherine kept her eyes closed. She didn’t want to see Peter’s or Father’s face as the preliminary results came through.

The test was over quickly and she was allowed to sit up. Peter then hooked up the small monitor to her. “Press this button when you feel any chest pain or shortness of breath,” he said, pointing to a blue button on the monitor. “It will record your heartbeat. It doesn’t matter how many times you push it. Father has the equipment to download and reset the monitor each day. I want you to wear this for a week and then I’ll bring the results Above to have a cardiologist look at.” He then took her face between his hands and drew her close so he could kiss her forehead. “Try not to worry yourself, Cathy. You’re in good hands. Now go rest for a while and give that son of yours a hug for me.”

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

Catherine nodded and stood up from the gurney, tucking the monitor in her pocket. Vincent was quickly at her side, taking her arm. She sighed at his attentiveness. She appreciated his concern but wished he wouldn't worry so much. She needed to start doing things on her own if she wanted to regain her strength, but she knew Vincent wouldn't hear of it. His need to protect her wouldn't allow it.

Slowly, she allowed him to guide her out of the hospital chamber and towards their own. When she stumbled over her own feet halfway there, Vincent automatically went to lift her in his arms, but she sidestepped away from him. "Vincent, no. I need to walk. How am I to regain any strength if you carry me everywhere?"

From the look on his face, Vincent was about to protest when she continued, "They did give me some physical therapy while I was at that hospital. Cooper, the therapist, was good about that. I walked a track once a day. The problems with my breathing and tiredness started after I woke from the coma. The journey through the tunnels home did not help either of us, however necessary it was."

He looked away from her to a spot in the distance; guilt filled his eyes. "I shouldn't have pushed you so hard. I could very well have worsened your condition."

"Vincent, no. Don't think that way." She took his face between her hands, forcing him to look down at her. She gently stroked his cheeks with her thumbs and smiled. "You saved me, Vincent. Who knows where I would be now if you hadn't come for me when you did? I love you. Please believe me when I say that you in no way brought harm to me. My God, Vincent, you carried me for a great deal of the journey. If anything, it was I that brought harm to you. That was not easy for you, and I am so grateful that you did that." She held his face until she saw a flicker of belief in his eyes.

Vincent looked down at her then pulled her close and buried his face in her hair. "I love you, too, Catherine. If I'm to believe you then I ask you to believe me that I will always come for you. Wherever you may be, I would make that journey a thousand times over if it meant you would be safe in my arms at the end."

"Then we are in agreement that we will believe in each other, always."

Vincent nodded then pulled away slightly so he could look into her eyes. He then very slowly placed a soft, gentle, lingering kiss on her lips.

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** *by Maryann Wood*

Catherine closed her eyes and sighed in contentment at the warmth that filled her. When they parted, Vincent held one of her hands in his own and pulled it up so it rested between them, then leaned his forehead against her own. She could feel the love radiating from him through the bond.

They stood like that for a few minutes before Vincent whispered, “We should head back to our chamber so you can rest before the concert.”

Catherine nodded and linked her arm through his and let him guide her through the tunnels.

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Catherine found the concert amazing. The music was fantastic but the company made the night extraordinary. She still remembered Vincent’s face when she walked out in the dress Mary had made her. It was an empire waist, floor-length gown with short sleeves and a matching shawl. The dress was in earth tones, green and brown, tunnel colours. She left her hair down but had it pulled away from her face with a simple hairband. Vincent’s mouth hung open slightly when she approached him and twirled around once. “How do I look?” she’d asked him, though she was pretty sure she already knew the answer.

“You’re a vision of beauty,” he’d answered, gently brushing a finger down her



**Vincent and Catherine** *by Laura G*

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine by Maryann Wood

bare arm. “You would have put Helen of Troy to shame.”

“Hardly, I think, but thank you for the compliment all the same.”

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They made their way to their special spot for the concert where Vincent had set up the pillows and blankets for them to sit on. There was even a small spread of refreshments for them to enjoy.

As the concert started, they sat as they usually did, curled up next to each other, but then shortly after, Vincent leaned down and kissed her. One kiss turned into two, then many. She soon found herself lying down, Vincent’s hand in her hair as he kissed her lips, her face, even her neck. Her small moans of pleasure must have given him courage because soon his hand was skimming up and down her side before it landing on the bare skin of her chest that the dress didn’t cover. Catherine returned his kisses with the same enthusiasm, sneaking her hands in between the folds of his shirt so she could feel his skin.

“Catherine,” Vincent whispered as he kissed his way from her lips down her neck and throat. She arched her head back as his mouth traveled further down and placed kisses along her chest and then finally between the valley of her breasts. His hands traveled up again, intent on moving the fabric away that stopped his mouth from further exploration when a voice called out to them from the grate above.

“Mother? Father? Are you still there?”

They both jumped, startled at the sound of their son’s voice calling down to them. Vincent sighed in frustration before rising and walking over to the grate so he could see his son and Luke smiling down at him.

“Jacob,” he hissed, shaking his head at his son. “You know you shouldn’t be talking through the grate. Someone will see you.”

“No one is looking, Vincent,” Luke said.

Catherine rose and walked over to stand next to Vincent. “Sweetheart, listen to your father. Go and join the others. You’re supposed to have ice cream after the performance.”

Jacob and Luke looked at each other and smiled. “Love you, Mother!” Jacob yelled

## **Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** *by Maryann Wood*

down, then both boys jumped up and ran off.

Vincent wrapped his arm around her and led her back towards the blankets. “I think it’s time we head back,” he told her sadly.

Catherine nodded and moved to start to clean up, but Vincent pulled her back. “No, Catherine, I’ll come back later. Let’s enjoy our walk back.”

Vincent took her hand and kissed her knuckles, then, still holding her hand, started to lead her away.

“You know, Vincent,” she began, leaning into him as they walked, “perhaps you should leave the blankets and pillows for awhile. I’d like to come back here soon so we can continue our endeavours that our son and Luke interrupted.”

Vincent chuckled and leaned over and kissed her temple. “That, my Catherine, is the best idea I have heard in a long time.”

### *CHAPTER ELEVEN*

Time passed quickly for Catherine after her return. Peter came Below with her test results and diagnosed her with tachycardia arrhythmia, a heart condition brought on by what he and Father could only assume was the extreme stress she was under from the time she awoke, and perhaps whatever she went through before Jacob’s birth.

Catherine spent a good deal of time in the library when she found out her diagnosis, combing through Father’s medical textbooks, trying to find out whatever she could about her condition and what she could do prevent it from worsening. The treatment plan she was prescribed was working, but she still worried.

The more time she spent with Father in his library, the more she came to realize how disorganized it was. “Father,” she said one day as she sat at his reading table with him. “You really should let me help you organize this place. I could create a card catalogue that could cross reference subject, genre, and author. As part of my law degree, I did have courses in Taxonomy and Ontology. With a little hard work, I could have this place running like the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building.”

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

Father lowered his book and looked at her over his glasses with a frown. “Are you trying to tell me, Catherine, that you take issue with my style of organization?”

“Not at all, Father. All I’m saying is that perhaps with my help we can make it a little more user friendly.”

She stared at him with such seriousness that his frown broke into a smile. “Of course, Cathy. It would be an honor to work with a woman of your education to get this place up to shape and running more smoothly. I daresay that even I, at times, can’t find the book that I need.”

“It’s settled then. Tomorrow I can start going through the books. Maybe we can recruit one of the older children to help with the lifting at times.”

She set aside the medical text she was reading and pulled her writing pad forward and started to write down the things she would need to start her new project.

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Later that night, after she tucked Jacob into bed, she returned to her and Vincent’s chamber to find it dimly lit with the soft glow of candlelight. Vincent stood near the bed, dressed in only his sleeping bottoms and no top, holding a rose in his hand. A flutter went through her heart at the sight of his naked chest.

This was the last thing she had expected to see when she entered their chamber. It was so out of character of him to be standing there so exposed that she hesitated at the entrance. She stood statue-still as he, if she dared say, sauntered towards her and stopped in front of her, handing her the rose.

“Good evening, Catherine,” he whispered in her ear, then brushed past her to place a lantern in the doorway and lower the tapestry to close off the entrance. He returned to stand in front of her and took her hand. “Would you care to join me by the bed, my Catherine?”

Catherine simply nodded and let him pull her across the room. They stopped just short of the bed.

“Vincent, what is all this?” she asked him.

He cupped her face between his hands and smiled nervously. “Catherine, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking as of late. We’ve been given a second chance and I don’t

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** *by Maryann Wood*

want to waste it any longer.”

She felt his hands shaking as he held her face. Fear along with love filled his eyes. She lifted her hands and gently gripped his wrists in encouragement.

“Catherine,” he began again. “I want to be with you. I want to love you the way a man loves a woman. I’m scared though, Catherine. I don’t want to disappoint you, and most of all I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You could never hurt me, Vincent. We promised each other that we would always believe one another. I’m asking you to believe me now. There is nothing you could do that would hurt me. This I’m certain of.”

She let go of his wrists then reach behind and unclasped her dress, letting it fall to her feet. She stood in front of him clad in only her underwear and bra. “Don’t be afraid, Vincent,” she whispered then unclasped her bra and let that fall to the floor. “Don’t be afraid to love me, and don’t be afraid to let me love you back.” With those words, she removed the last of her clothing and stood before him.

Vincent stared at her, the expression on his face unreadable.

Catherine slowly walked to the bed and turned down the covers. She hopped into the bed and pushed back until she leaned against the pillows and held her hand out to him, beckoning him to join her. When he took her hand, she pulled him to her and onto the bed.

“I love you, Vincent.”

With those words, she pulled his face down to hers and kissed him.

Her kiss seemed to release him from whatever was holding him back, and soon they were joined in a lover’s embrace. The bond they shared exploded in passion and love, rippling throughout both their bodies, leaving them both breathless and satiated.

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Afterwards, as they laid in bed together, fingers entwined, Catherine rested her head on his chest so she could listen to his heartbeat. She felt his fingers making small circles on her bare shoulder.

“Will you marry me?” he asked and kissed the top of her head.

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by *Maryann Wood*



**Together** by *Laura G*

Catherine raised her head and rested her chin on his shoulder, smiling at him. “You’re asking me this after we made love? Are those endorphins wreaking havoc on your brain?” she teased.

“Perhaps,” he said, a smile crossing his face. “Or perhaps I wanted to find the perfect moment to ask you, and how more perfect can the moment be than after we’ve expressed our love to each other to such a degree that, if the world would end now, I would be content because I have you in my arms for my final journey.”

Catherine smiled. He could be such a romantic. His timing was questionable but her answer would be the same regardless of when he asked her.

“Well, when you put it that way, it would be the greatest honor, consenting to be your wife.”

With a smile that reached his eyes, he flipped her to her back and kissed her passionately. “I haven’t a ring to give to you, only my heart,” he whispered, trailing kisses along her face.

Her sweet Vincent. Didn’t he know that something as simple as a ring meant nothing? His heart was the only thing she wanted and he gave her that without

## Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine *by Maryann Wood*

restrictions. “Your heart is the only thing I desire,” she whispered back, giving him kisses of her own. “Plus, I already consider my crystal my engagement ring. So, all is well.”

Vincent lifted the crystal that hung around her neck so it dangled between them. It was the first symbol of their love that he had given her and, in her mind, it bound them together the moment he hung it around her neck. “I think I like the thought of that,” he said and kissed her.

“Then it’s settled. Come. It’s time to sleep. You have a busy day in the lower tunnels, and I promised Father I’d help him start to categorize the library. You’ve seen the library, Vincent, there is absolutely no system in there. I have my work cut out for me.” She pushed him onto his back and rested her head against his shoulder once more, closing her eyes.

Her sleep was peaceful. Nightmares didn’t fill her dreams. Her dreams were filled with Vincent, and their love for each other.

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Like Vincent, she had no idea that while she slept in the arms of the man she loved with every ounce of her heart, another man from her past was lurking around the Central Park tunnel entrance.

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Three men walked around the entrance, one snapping pictures of the iron gate and everything else around. “She let me out through this gate,” Elliot said. “There was some kind of lever on the other side she pulled to open the wall. There must be a similar lever on this side.”

He circled the room, looking for anything out of the ordinary. He and Cleon stopped in front of smaller gate. Slowly, he opened it and examined what was on the other side. It looked similar to a fuse box. Many switches and levers were enclosed.

“It must be one of these,” Cleon said, looking at it. He lifted his hand to pull one when Elliot grabbed his wrist to stop him.

“No,” Elliot said. “Reconnaissance only. We can’t alert anyone that we’re here.” He looked at the man with the camera. “Take pictures of this, Brad,” he said, then

**Vantage Point, Part Two: Catherine** by *Maryann Wood*

went and stood in front of the gate once again.

He reached through the bars and pressed his hand against the stone on the other side. Cathy was somewhere on the other side of this wall.

He had worked so hard to try to protect her. To hide her away so Gabriel wouldn't find her. He had sold his soul to the bastard in an effort to keep her safe, and for what? So that beast could spirit her away from him? No. That was unacceptable.

Her place was at his side. Only he could protect her and keep her safe. "I'm coming for you, Cathy," he whispered. "Stay strong. Soon you'll be safe and in my arms, and I'll never let anyone harm you again."

With a final look at the barrier that separated him from the woman he loved, he turned away and made his way out the tunnel entrance, flanked by his two accomplices.

***COMING SOON***

***PART THREE: ELLIOT***

