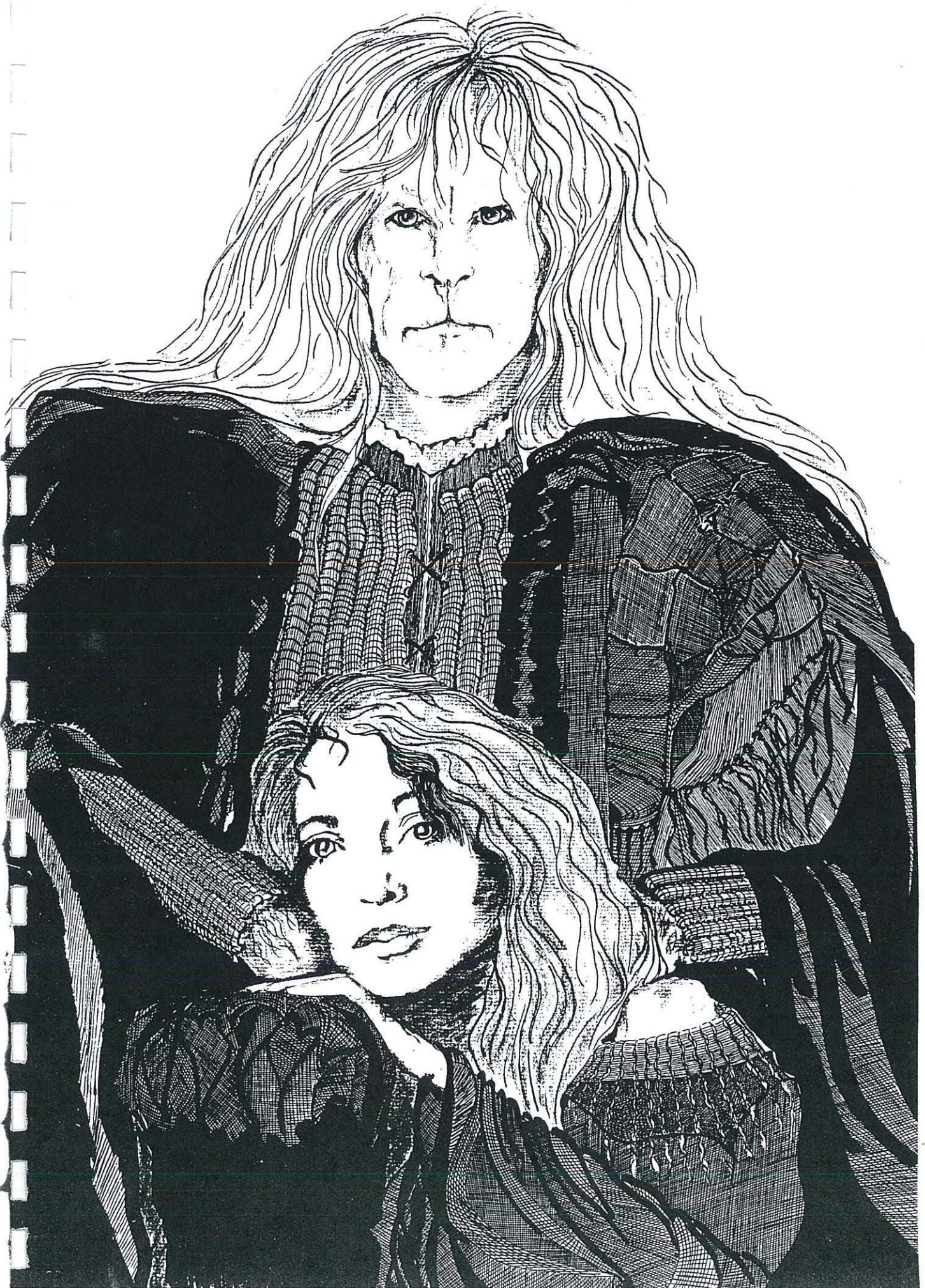


# RE N A S C E N C E II





*RENASCENCE II - NO SAFE PLACE BUT THE HEART*

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"Beauty and the Beast" copyrights.*

*As always this effort is dedicated to Linda Hamilton, Ron Perlman, Roy Dotrice, Ron Koslow,  
and the cast and crew of "Beauty and the Beast."*

*"RENASCENCE" contained a dedication which spoke of the dream that they have given us, a  
dream that is . . . "one of what we all are . . . less than a drop in the great blue motion of the  
sunlit sea . . . but it seems that some of the drops sparkle . . . some of them DO sparkle."*

*Those words were spoken by King Arthur on the eve of a battle which he believed would see the  
end of his dream. Yet, in the midst of his despair there appeared hope, hope in the form of a  
small boy, who, inspired by the tales of the Round Table, had come to fight for a cause he  
believed in.*

*King Arthur recognized in this small, valiant figure hope for the future, the chance that his  
dream would not die. He knighted Tom of Warwick and charged him with a mission greater  
than any quest his doomed and heroic knights had ever attempted. Sir Tom was to remember,  
to never forget or let be forgotten, the dream of Camelot, to ask each person he met "if they  
remembered . . . and tell it strong and clear, if they did not, that once there was a fleeting wisp  
of glory . . . that was known as Camelot."*

*We remember that dream and those tales that have enchanted and inspired us through the ages.  
This then, is our attempt to "tell it strong and clear . . . that once there was a fleeting wisp of  
glory that was known as . . . Beauty and the Beast."*

*The dream lives and in honor of that dream and all the dreamers who will not let it be forgot  
we have dedicated this story. Because we like King Arthur know that the children are the future,  
part of the proceeds from the sale of this 'zine will be donated to Pediatric Children with AIDS.*

*And a special thank you  
to*

*Victoria and Sheryle for the endless encouragement and editing through many long days and late  
nights.*

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its author/artist*

*Dear Reader:*

*As we promised in "RENASCENCE," here is the "next episode of Beauty and the Beast." Its title "No Safe Place But the Heart" is a statement that we have come to believe in.*

*Although the storyline deals with serious issues, they are issues we hope will compel you to look deeply into your heart; we believe there you will find an affirmation of hope for the future and the dreams that are its promise. We also hope you will feel that No Safe Place..... when all is said and done, is ultimately, a confirmation of the nobility of the human heart, its limitless capacity for love and its never-ending struggle to make this a better world for us all. As Vincent says... "That is the only guarantee of safety we have . . . that we will ever have."*

*In this troubled and searching world there is truly, No Safe Place But the Heart, let us live there together and dream of brighter tomorrows to come.*

*Victoria Monteleone  
& Phoenix Press*

*Letter of Comment are welcome. Please forward to Phoenix Press, PO BOX 473, Helmetta, NJ 08828-0473*

## *Prologue*

*"Catherine."*

The timeless quiet of the graveyard captured the hoarse whisper, sent it echoing down the cold marble rows of silence and dreamless sleep. Each syllable of her name was a spoken caress. Unable to speak or breathe without her touch, Vincent's lips met hers, responding to the need in them as deep as his own. Renewing a fervent promise, their kiss deepened, became an eloquent dialogue between one heart and another. In that baptism of emotion, Catherine found everything she was searching for, she found, herself.

"Catherine . . . you . . . died." His hands trembled as they framed her face. One fiercely-clawed finger gently traced tears across the hollows of her cheek, lingered on the quivering fullness of her lips.

She immersed herself in the sound of his voice, its timbre deep with the distance between wonder and believing. "I have dreamed of this Catherine, but I . . . you . . . were . . ."

"Dead, Vincent? Yes." How simple really. "Yes, I was . . . dead." Her hands grasped the worn fabric of his concealing hood, gently drawing it back to uncover the raveling amber and gold of his flowing mane. "Until I found you again."

Catherine clung to him; her arms rediscovering the familiar expanse of his broad shoulders as Vincent cradled her close to his heart with a fluid sweep of

motion. His long, powerful strides carried her swiftly away from that place of death and forgetfulness.

The entrance to the abandoned railway tunnel, overgrown and forgotten, was a dark shadow in the shadows surrounding it. Safely hidden within the memory of its existence, Vincent paused beneath the crumbling masonry of its arch. Breathing deeply with the force of the emotions coursing through him, he rested his forehead upon the dark silk of Catherine's shining hair with a muffled groan. She felt his lips move as his husky whisper filled the darkness. "And this . . . is this also a dream Catherine?"

Holding her only a hair's breadth away, he searched the glowing warmth of her eyes, still fearful he would find she was the phantom he had first imagined her to be. "No," he breathed as the face before him did not fade, did not dissolve as it had so often before. Catherine heard the relief in his voice, smiled as it was replaced by a note of wonder. "No, not . . . a dream." His heart beat quickly toward surrender while his mind struggled, groped for an answer to this impossible hope become reality. "But . . . how?"

"I'm here, Vincent." A simple answer to such a complex question, yet it was enough to convince him that she was . . .

"Alive." It was a whisper. "ALIVE!" It was a shout.

Vincent spun her round and round in a giddy imitation of a waltz. Caught in the shining blue beacon of Vincent's gaze, Catherine melted beneath the sudden brilliance of his smile. Closing her eyes with a sigh, she nestled against the strong, steady beat of his heart. With one last dizzying pivot Vincent turned, running effortlessly, he carried her deeper into the welcoming darkness.

Moments, or perhaps hours later, Catherine would never be quite sure, Vincent's warm breath stirred the tumbled curls about her forehead as his whispered words reached her ears.

"Welcome . . . home Catherine."

The artlessly endearing, cherished jumble of Vincent's chamber surrounded her with a silent welcome. Everywhere, candles burned brightly, their golden flames dancing in the topaz glow of the stained glass window above the bed. Home? Yes, this was home; this was where her heart lived.

Placing her with care upon her feet, Vincent's arms reluctantly relinquished her. She stood very still upon the threadbare, faded carpet as her eyes swept the room, searching -- hoping she would find, fearing she would not -- Catherine found the object she sought in the shadows beside the bed. His hand grasping

hers, Vincent nodded in reply to the eager question in her eyes and gently led her forward.

Suddenly breathless, Catherine bent over the cradle. As if aware of the tender regard of his parents, the sleeping child stirred and slowly opened his eyes. Drowning in the vivid aqua of her son's gaze, Catherine whispered, "Vincent, he is beautiful."

"How could he not be? He is part of you, Catherine."

"No." She gathered the child into her arms, "He is part of us both."

Vincent's voice resonated with pride, "Catherine, I've named our son -- "  
"Jacob."

Brushing the red-gold tumble of her child's head with her lips, Catherine surprised a look of puzzled wonder in the shining blue of Vincent's eyes. Of course she knew his name. She had always . . . known; just as she knew that somehow she had been present at the naming ceremony, had been there to hear the traditional words as Vincent spoke them.

"Yes." The knowledge was bittersweet, yet Vincent knew her spirit was the presence and the blessing he had felt on that day.

Jacob seemed to share that recognition. Although his child's mind did not have the words to identify the arms holding him for the first time, he did not need them as he cooed softly in response to the liquid radiance of his mother's smile.

Completely enchanted by the miracle of her child, Catherine stroked the smooth curve of his rosy cheek, traced the straight bridge of his tiny nose, laughed as one pudgy fist came up to grasp her finger.

"Vincent, he's grown so." Regret roughened the wonder in her soft whisper, "See how he . . . see how strong he is." Her voice faded; tears were spilling from Vincent's eyes, glistening upon the soft stubble of his cheeks as he bent over them. "He is a miracle Catherine. This is . . . a miracle."

Jacob reached up and captured a strand of his father's hair, gurgled with delight as his father responded, gathering them both into his arms. In that moment they were a family, together at last within the charmed circle of things beautiful and impossible, things which should be . . . and were.

Long moments later, Vincent felt Catherine begin to tremble, sensing the potent combination of joy and relief overwhelming her, he led her to the bed, gently placing her upon it. Still cradling Jacob close, Catherine relaxed gratefully against the supporting cushions. She could willingly sit here forever, quiet and content, yet only minutes passed before she stirred, became aware of a vague sense of fear.

Puzzled, finding no source of the feeling within herself, with a start she realized it was Vincent's fear she felt. How often had he dreamed this and watched as that dream faded even as he reached out to embrace it? In a sense, she had been the lucky one, for her amnesia had denied her the memory of all she had lost. The feelings she had experienced upon awakening from the coma, the strange dreams of searching -- of losing something terribly important to her -- paled in comparison to the pain and grief Vincent must have known.

How he had suffered. She sensed the depth of his anguish, ached with regret for the pain he had endured. The enormity of Vincent's grief was there for her to read in the haggard cast of his features. The memory was a grey shadow which dimmed the vivid blue of his eyes.

She remembered when her pain . . . the terror at the thought of losing him had been more than she could bear. For Vincent, it had been . . . agony, and now he was . . . afraid. She felt it in the gentle, urgent touch of his hand in hers. Not once had he relinquished that physical contact. Fearful that if he broke the spell -- lost the talisman of her touch -- he might end the dream . . . might lose her again.

For Catherine, what had gone before was a dream; this was not. She was awake at last. She was alive and she must help Vincent to accept, to trust in this, the miracle they had been granted. It was not his mind which refused to accept the reality of what had occurred. No. It was his heart, gravely wounded and fearful, which trembled at the risk of daring to believe once more.

There was much left unsaid between them; questions unasked that must be answered. But words were not the way. Vincent did not need words, the why and how of what had happened to them could wait. How then could she reassure him, help him to believe?

The sound of Jacob's yawn diverted her thoughts as she realized the child in her arms was drifting off to sleep once more. Vincent reaching out and bringing the cradle closer, watched silently as Catherine laid Jacob in it, carefully tucking the blanket around him.

Catherine's arms, deprived of the comforting warmth of her child, felt so very empty as she turned to Vincent. She longed to fill them with him, to bring him close, surround him with her love. He desperately needed her and she could think of no better way to dispel his doubts, his fears. Yet, despite the impassioned embrace they had shared in the moment of their meeting, she felt suddenly shy and unsure.

Vincent had given her back her memories and those memories held the clearly marked boundaries within which they had lived and loved. Did he

remember, as she did, the night when they had crossed those boundaries? Jacob's existence was testimony to that journey, but . . . did *he* remember?

The question brought her to her feet, uncertainty placing the width of the chamber between herself and the silent, beloved figure on the bed.

Absently, she caressed the books arranged on the shelves before her. How many quiet hours had they spent reading to each other, sharing with each other the treasures each volume contained? She glanced slowly about the chamber her eyes finding, lingering upon the familiar statue of Justice standing in the shadows. How many times had they sat alone together beneath her blind, penetrating gaze?

Always before, she had known what she must do, or perhaps more importantly, what she must not. Always before, there were the limits they had agreed must define their journey -- their progress upon the path into the unknown of their dream. Always before, her intuition -- finely attuned to Vincent's willingness to go forward, his need to hesitate, or even to retreat along that path -- had been her compass. Now their stars were altered, their sky filled with strange constellations she could not name.

*Did he remember?* That was the restraint keeping her from him. And, if he did not remember? Catherine shrank from the sudden realization she would have to begin again the lonely vigil outside the walls of Vincent's fear, the frustrating torment that was his denial of the physical expression of their love. This had been difficult enough when she had only the aching longing of her imagination to test the strength of her resolve, but now, when each imagined touch was a vivid memory . . . She shivered with the urgency of her desire to know that ecstasy again. Dear God how she wanted him!

Yet, if he did not remember, could she deny that longing, hide the knowledge of what it been to love him?

And what of Vincent, knowing that she knew, that she remembered what he did not, how would he . . . ?

Sitting where she had left him on the bed, Vincent felt Catherine's retreat, followed her nervous movements with his eyes, marked the anxious beating of her heart with his own. Her every emotion was clear, vibrant within the newly familiar sharing of their bond. It's touch, so long absent, stirred the fathomless void that had been his soul without her, forced aside the bars of the dark prison that had held his heart.

"Catherine, do you remember?"

Startled by his words she turned to him. Her heart beat fast as he opened the book in his hands -- faster still as he turned to its final page -- stopped as he



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began to read, ". . . and as the morning mist had risen long ago when I first left the forge." His voice was deep and sure in the silence. "So the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me . . . " He looked up, his eyes meeting, holding hers. "I saw no shadow of another parting from her."

Uncertainty, hope and longing all combined in the breathless question of her gaze.

Vincent held out his hand, his gesture eloquent in its simplicity.

"I remember Catherine."

Tonite  
I was sailing,  
Above  
time and space.  
The realm of eternity  
shining  
before me.

Since the moment  
I found you,  
All is possible,  
attainable.

Now,  
our spirit  
our power,  
lifts me to heights  
never taken.

That which was  
never more  
than a dream,  
a glimpse of hope  
is  
reality.

Our love  
is the path  
we dared to take.  
Its denial,  
the beast  
we dared to battle.  
Conquered.

Yes.  
Eternity is before me.  
It is there in your eyes.  
and life  
is ours  
for now we hold it  
in our hands.

Sheryle Ann Renéé

**RENAISSANCE II**

**NO SAFE PLACE BUT  
THE HEART**

## *Catherine's Journal*

*I watched Vincent a long time last night as, by the light of a single candle, he wrote in his journal. The scratching of his fountain pen as it crossed and recrossed the pages, was curiously loud in the late night hush of our chamber.*

*Jacob was fast asleep and I, well, I was trying to copy a knitting pattern of Mary's. Imagine me, Catherine Chandler, knitting! Well, trying to knit. The tangle of yarn in my hands looks more like an odd-shaped afghan than the sweater it was meant to be. Will I ever get the knack of this?*

*Why is it I can easily follow the intricacies of a legal opinion and still be hopelessly lost when it comes to counting stitches? Oh well, perhaps in time.*

*'Perhaps in time.' What an uncertain, hopeful expression that is, and yet uncertainty and hope are compelling me to write this, my journal.*

*Vincent has told me that keeping a journal helps him to understand thoughts and emotions that confuse or trouble him and so, finding myself confused and troubled, I have decided to try keeping one also. It is not the first time I have done so. When I was a child my mother gave me my first diary. I remember the red leather cover with my name engraved upon it, the small brass lock, the tiny key. I kept the key hidden in a shoe box along with all my other childhood treasures perfectly certain the box, the key, would keep them safe for me. Such a childish notion, that secrets could be kept safe by a cardboard box, a small metal key and a delicate toy lock.*



*Now, I depend on less tangible safeguards to keep safe the secrets I hold dear -- secrets so many lives depend upon for their very existence, secrets that keep this world safe -- even more precious to me now that they also protect my son.*

*And then there are, my secrets. I cannot, I have not . . .*

*For the first time I cannot speak of them, cannot share them with the one person I have promised, have always shared everything with.*

*Vincent, how can I tell you, and not make it sound like a betrayal, that despite the happiness we share -- my doubts have returned. Not the old doubts, how insignificant they seem, now, but how can I remain here, Below, when there is so much I have left undone, Above?*

*I know you fear what may happen if I were to return, I too would be, am afraid, when I let myself think of what happened, what could . . . happen. Why then do I find myself trying to tell you what you must, what we both already know and . . . cannot speak of?*

*Do you -- do I -- believe we have only to leave the words unsaid to avoid what becomes more clear each day? No. That is not, has never been, your way and -- I hope, I believe -- it is not mine.*

*After all we've been through, can I blame you -- or myself -- for wishing, for trying, to put off the day when we must face those dangers again?*

*How can the safety of so many be threatened by the existence of one small, leather notebook? Would I have taken it so willingly, I wonder, if, I had known then what I know now?*

*When I began to realize just what it contained I hid it. Is it still there? It must be. No one would ever suspect that hiding place. But they came for it. They came for me, took me to that place, to that man, to Gabriel. Will I ever be able to forget the pain? The fear of the hours that became days? The endless questions, always the same, the threats . . .*

*Perhaps it was only days, I do not know how long it was before you came. I was taken to a car, there were screams, and shots, I heard you calling my name, and then . . . nothing.*

*When I regained consciousness I was in another room. For months they kept me there. Alone, afraid, our child growing within me, and with him a terrible fear. Gabriel meant to take him from me.*

*He did take him from me. On the night our son Jacob was born, Gabriel took him . . . and he took my life.*

*I remember that moment -- the moment when I realized I was dying. The moment when, for the first time in months, I felt you nearby, knew you were coming for me. Too late. Too late.*

*I died in your arms that night. Your face, your tears, were the last thing I saw before that terrible darkness claimed me.*

*Vincent, do you remember the poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay? "Renaissance" -- you told me the word means, rebirth. Miraculously, I too, was reborn. I emerged from the deep and dreamless void of a coma without a name, without a past.*

*Those who looked after me gave me my name, gave me bits and pieces of my past. Yet they could not give me the one thing that is the essence of who I am. They could not give me you Vincent. You were lost to me, and though I did not know it, you were what I searched for in the strange, desperate dreams of that, my second captivity.*

*Yes, I was a prisoner again. The prisoner, this time, of the Federal Witness Protection Program. They were kinder captors, but captors nonetheless. How odd to think that our government, which is founded on freedom, could rationalize such an act. But they too, wanted the notebook. There is a kind of irony in that. They had rescued me, and I, in turn, could not give them the only reward they asked for their efforts. The memory of where I had hidden the notebook was gone. Lost, as were all the memories of three years of my life, the three years in which I had met, and loved you.*

*After what seemed months, they moved me to a house in the country. There I was told I would complete my recovery, prepare to assume the new identity they had created for me. During that time I began to experience the strange feelings I know now was the reawakening of the bond we share.*

*And still, I could not . . . Why didn't I . . . remember?*

*Finally, I resolved I would escape my captors, whose motives I had begun to question, and find for myself that part of my life still hidden behind the invisible walls of amnesia. I did escape. I made my way back to this city, to New York, with the hope that a familiar sight, a familiar face, would provide the key to unlock the gates of my memory.*

*You have told me of that time, Vincent, of that day when you felt my presence; our bond telling you what your mind could not comprehend, telling you I was alive -- alive and somewhere in the city above! Vincent, how terrible it must have been for you. You are so strong and yet . . . you thought you were going mad!*

*For my part, at the end of a long and terrifying day, all my hopes unanswered, I had decided to return to my captors, to take a new name, begin a new life. Catherine Chandler and her memories, the memories I no longer possessed, would continue to rest quietly in her empty grave.*

*The grave. It was the final place I had to visit.*

*Something was compelling me to go to my grave. I was, I am still, unsure of why I felt I had to go there. Perhaps, as you have told me, we are guided by some unseen hand, our fates, inextricably entwined, were not destined for such a farewell, for such a . . . surrender.*

*I went to my grave; a strange, unsettling thought this, that even now there exists a small piece of earth bearing a tombstone with my name upon it. There I said goodbye to the life I had lived, to the part of that life I no longer remembered. As I rose to leave I saw you standing in the shadows.*

*Your face, your impossible, beautiful face, was the key I had been seeking, the answer to all my questions. In the moment I found you, Vincent, I found myself.*

*You took me in your arms -- as you did that first night -- brought me Below, to your home -- which has become mine -- to our son, to the life we now share. The joy of our reunion was beyond any words.*

*I have been happy here. I have learned it is possible to live that part of our dream which we had denied ourselves for so long. In that at least, I have no doubts, and I can see so many of the doubts you tortured yourself with are gone. You no longer question your right to the love we share, to the passion which is a natural, beautiful expression of that love. Each time you look at me Vincent, each time you touch me, each time we make love; I see, I feel -- your*

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*acceptance, your . . . victorious surrender. I feel how much you love me and I know that we are one, in body, as we have always been in spirit. Even in my wildest dreams I never imagined how wonderful . . .*

*But, that is not what I wanted . . . that is not, why, I am writing this. How do I find a way to tell you Vincent, of my fears, of the growing belief that I must return to finish what I began? I, too, am afraid, but now I am beginning to understand that what I fear most . . .*

*Vincent, if I do not return Above, I am afraid -- I am beginning to believe -- we will never be free, truly free to possess the happiness we have just begun to grasp, Below.*

*Questions. Always questions, yet never any doubt that ultimately I am now, and will always be, where I belong, with you, Vincent, and Jacob together, however, wherever that may be. Perhaps in time I will find the way. Surely there is still time? Surely the decision can wait a little longer? Just a little longer.*

*But for the moment it is time to feed Jacob, Mary will be expecting us in the nursery, and oh, yes . . . Vincent, Father has invited me to join him for dinner tonight. I haven't accepted yet -- you won't be there and I know there is no reason to be nervous -- but Vincent, I don't think I want to go . . . without you. Vincent, do you think . . . Vincent, perhaps, I am . . . a coward.*

## Chapter 1

"If I've told Mouse once, I've told him a hundred times. When will he learn that he must consult the council before proceeding with one of his harebrained schemes?" Father rapped his hand upon the table to underscore his irritation. "Mark my words, sooner or later his irresponsible behavior will result in more than just a few days of hard work and inconvenience."

Catherine glanced across the table. Abandoning her attempt to persuade Jacob to take one last spoonful of his dinner, she resisted an impulse to comment that Vincent and a few of the other men were doing all the "hard work," that perhaps, the "inconvenience" Father was referring to was his own.

After all, Mouse's well-meaning but disastrous "tunnel improvement project" had delayed plans to have new bookshelves installed in Father's chamber. As the excavation to clear the cave-in progressed, the wood collected for that purpose had disappeared, piece by piece, and was being used to shore up dangerously weakened tunnel walls.

"We were lucky this time," Father leaned forward as he gave voice to his feelings. "At least he had the sense to try out his half-baked theories in a relatively unused access tunnel. I shudder to think what might have happened if . . ."



"But Father, you know Mouse didn't mean any harm." Mary's soft-voiced defense was characteristic of the gentle, warmhearted woman.

Father dismissed her words with an imperious gesture. "That's precisely my point. The boy never *means* to cause any of his catastrophes. No. The truth of the matter is, Mouse is simply incapable of comprehending the consequences of his actions. Don't you agree Catherine?"

Catherine's smile was non-committal and she immediately occupied herself with the task of removing the remains of Jacob's dinner from his small person.

Interpreting her silence as agreement, Father continued to pontificate on Mouse's reckless behavior and general lack of foresight. "This is not the first time something like this has occurred. Remember, Mary, the time he decided William's kitchen should have hot *and* cold running water . . . ?"

With an inward sigh Catherine purposely allowed her attention to stray from the table and she gazed absently about the chamber. A dozen or so candles burned in their various niches and shadows danced on the walls mimicking the gestures Father made to emphasize his words.

When Father had sent the invitation to join him for dinner she had hesitated to accept. Catherine sensed Father was uncomfortable with -- perhaps even disapproved of -- the physical intimacy she and Vincent now shared. This had made the thought of an evening alone with him a somewhat daunting prospect. Although she had been living Below for weeks now, her relationship with Father, never simple, or easy, was still . . . uncertain.

When Father had mentioned Mary would be joining them Catherine, secretly relieved, had hoped the other woman's comfortable, uncritical company would somehow make the situation easier.

Yet now, as Father continued to dwell upon Mouse's shortcomings, Catherine found herself growing more and more distressed. It was so difficult for her to sympathize with him. In Catherine's opinion there was no reason for him to carry on so. It wasn't as if there had been any injuries; unless, of course, you counted Mouse's pride. Poor Mouse. Catherine would never forget the crestfallen look on his face as he admitted he might have miscalculated, just a bit. Just a bit! Mouse was, if nothing else, a master of understatement. All things considered, Father was blowing this all out of proportion, and besides, if anyone had cause to be annoyed with Mouse . . .

A few days ago Vincent had surprised and delighted her with the suggestion they visit a special cavern he had discovered on one of his solitary "explorations." No one else in the tunnel community knew of the cavern's existence or location.

Catherine had eagerly agreed. At last, they would have the chance to be alone together, be able to put aside duties, obligations, the cares and questions that seemed to multiply with each passing day. The cave-in had indefinitely postponed their plans.

Disappointment was a mild description of what she had felt. Then she had learned that Father had requested Vincent personally oversee the excavation and repairs. Catherine knew Father had not known of their plans -- that Vincent would have shouldered the responsibility anyway -- yet unreasonably, she found herself resenting Father, questioning his motives. She was not proud of those feelings.

Now, listening to Father's sermon on Mouse's shortcomings, she was forced to admit, if only to herself, that her initial reaction had been much the same as his with regard to the impulsive, erratic, exasperating, but always endearing Mouse, and she was doubly ashamed. What right did she have to sit here and silently criticize Father? She suddenly felt she could not remain where she was, could not listen to him a moment longer. Impulsively, she rose from the table.

"Surely you're not leaving us so soon Catherine?" The disappointment in Father's voice brought a guilty flush to her cheeks.

"I'm sorry Father, but . . ." Frantically she searched for a plausible excuse. "I . . . actually . . . Jacob's diaper needs changing."

Too late she remembered that she and Mary had changed it just before dinner. Quickly glancing at the other woman Catherine saw only sympathetic understanding in her eyes. With a grateful smile for Mary and an apologetic one for Father, Catherine bid them both goodnight. Taking Jacob in her arms, she made good her escape.

Father watched her go in silence before turning to Mary with what sounded suspiciously like a sigh.

"So much for any hopes I had of a quiet family dinner."

"I'm sorry Jacob, but . . . babies will be babies."

"Yes, well," he shrugged. "No matter. Another time perhaps. Now what was I . . . ? Oh yes, Mouse's plumbing project. As I was saying . . ."

Mary was not fooled by his easy dismissal of Catherine's hasty departure. She knew the cause of the hurt frustration in Father's voice.

Father would never admit -- perhaps did not even realize -- he was envious of Catherine and to a lesser extent, even Jacob. These days, Vincent's attention and what little time his duties afforded him, were devoted entirely to Catherine and their child.

Mary suspected Father's invitation to Catherine -- an invitation to join them for a dinner he knew Vincent would be unable to attend -- was an effort on his part to know better the woman his son loved so deeply. Mary knew Father would never admit he was feeling neglected, instead, he was giving voice to his hurt feelings with his harangue of poor, hapless Mouse.

Looking across the table, Mary longed to reach out to him, to tell him she understood. There was no need to tell him she was here for him, that she would always be here. He knew, and yet, just once, she longed to be able to say the words.

## Chapter 2

"Now why did I have to say that? Why did I have to lie?" Conscience-stricken, Catherine muttered the words under her breath as she made her way along the passage.

It was not exactly a lie, she argued in self-defense. Jacob's cloth diapers nearly always needed changing. Although Catherine supported the environmental and economic reasons preventing the use of "Pampers" in the tunnels, she was guilty of secretly longing for the disposable baby product's ease and convenience.

As she moved from the light of one flickering torch to the next, the worn stone beneath her feet caused her light footsteps to echo eerily down the passage, and her thoughts turned involuntarily to some of the other conveniences that belonged to the world above.

She was ashamed to admit, tried to ignore the fact that she missed a microwave oven when it was her turn to help William prepare meals in the communal kitchen, and often sent up a silent entreaty for a dishwasher while she was washing the dishes used at those meals. Perhaps there were, after all, traces of the pampered daughter of a wealthy Park Avenue attorney lurking within her.

Perhaps, but she knew that was far from the whole truth. Taking care of



Jacob, being with Vincent, their life Below, occupied much if not all of her time and was the source of so much joy. Yet Catherine sometimes missed that particular sense of purpose and accomplishment that had come from her work, the work a small voice inside her accused her of leaving unfinished.

"And just who, do you think you are Chandler?" She scolded herself angrily. Was she really so egotistical to think that only she could do, could finish, the job she had begun? She brushed the thought aside as she lifted the heavy velvet drape that now hung across the doorway of their chamber.

Tenderness, a feeling of protectiveness almost maternal in its intensity, flowed through her at the sight of Vincent lying across their bed sprawled in an attitude of exhaustion, and by the look of him, fast asleep. Catherine's eyes greedily caressed the striking planes and hollows of his beloved face. The thin tracing of blue which shadowed his eyelids was a mere suggestion of the brilliant depths that lay hidden beneath them.

His boots and outer garments lay in a dusty, jumbled heap on the floor beside their bed; a testament to the extremity of the fatigue that could cause Vincent to abandon his customarily fastidious habits.

Reluctant to disturb him, Catherine remained silent, standing just within the chamber entrance, content for the moment to savor the satisfying warmth of his presence, the security of just having him near.

The terrifying and painful separation caused by her kidnapping and the events that followed had taken a terrible toll on both of them. Contrary to any yearnings she might have to return and try to tie up the loose ends of her former existence, Catherine found it difficult to contemplate ever again being separated from him.

For his part, Vincent was visibly shaken by and vehemently resisted even the suggestion that she venture Above. Nothing -- not Diana's calm good sense, Elliot's promises of protection, or her own tentative suggestions that this necessity might one day arise -- could move him from this conviction.

Since her return, Catherine never left the tunnels during the daylight hours; going Above rarely, only at night, and then always under Vincent's watchful eye and vigilant escort.

Refusing to dwell upon these thoughts Catherine crossed to Jacob's cradle and laid him gently upon the blankets. She instructed him softly to be a good boy and not make any noise that might awaken his father. As she turned toward the bed she discovered her precautions had been either unsuccessful or unnecessary.

Beneath a cascade of tousled amber hair, Vincent's eyes were open and following her movements with that particular blend of tenderness and wonder that was present in them whenever he looked upon her and their child. As their eyes met he extended his arm and Catherine took his outstretched hand, melting wordlessly into his embrace. Securely cradled, supremely content, they lay there together in silence. Luxuriating in the cozy, comforting feel of his homespun shirt, the slow, steady beat of his heart beneath her cheek; the questions which had haunted Catherine just moments before fled. How could she ever wish to be anywhere but here beside him?

She could feel Vincent's exhaustion -- it was an almost tangible thing -- and she knew its cause. Huge boulders and slabs of stone had come crashing down during the cave-in, and lacking the heavy equipment necessary to move them, Vincent was the one called upon to perform the task. She wondered, not without resentment, how much they could expect -- even of his extraordinary strength? Yet, that was Vincent's way, always he would give, would ask, so much more of himself than of others. Catherine's free hand gently brushed the tangled strands of dust-dulled hair from his face, smoothed the lines of fatigue creasing his forehead.

In response to her tender caress, Vincent's arms tightened about her as a small, weary sigh of contentment escaped his lips, his deep voice murmured above her ear. "We're almost finished Catherine. By tomorrow afternoon, early evening at the latest, we'll have cleared the worst of the debris and it will be done."

"What you mean is that *you'll* have cleared it." Catherine regretted the impulsive words the moment they left her lips.

"Catherine, I . . ."

She raised herself on an elbow and looked at him, silently reproaching herself with the look of remorse that clouded his eyes. Catherine pressed him back upon the pillows with one hand as he moved to gather her back into the circle of his arms. Lightly running an index finger down the bridge of his nose she examined the dusty digit with a mock grimace of disgust. "Tsk, ts, ts." Waving it at him she exclaimed, "Will you just look at this. Really my love, did you have to bring quite so much of your work home with you?" She evaded his playful grab with a soft laugh, and slipped off the bed to cross to the chamber entrance. "I'm going to get some hot water and soap." Her eyes leisurely travelled the length of his body. "Hmm yes, lots of soap." At the doorway, she paused, looking over her shoulder, an impish grin sparking a twinkle in her eyes. "Too bad we don't have a vacuum cleaner Vincent. If we did," she teased, "I just

might be tempted to use it on you." She disappeared into the passage without giving him a chance to reply.

Vincent lay where she had left him, his gaze never leaving the doorway through which she had passed. He was conscious of a warm, flowing languor slowly replacing the ache of his earlier exhaustion and he allowed his thoughts to wander. How many times had he returned to this chamber alone, forbidding himself even the dream of having Catherine here beside him? Now, he savored the lingering sensation of holding her in his arms, the memory of a kiss they had shared just this morning . . .

He had awakened early. There was still much work to be done and he was as anxious as the others to be finished with the tedious, exhausting task. Leaving the bed quietly, so as not to disturb Catherine, he dressed swiftly and paused silently beside Jacob's cradle. A small smile crossed his lips at the sight of his son sleeping peacefully there.

Turning back to the bed, he bent over Catherine. Even now there was a small part of him that could not quite believe what had seemed an impossible dream was now reality. No matter how often he saw her he was still deeply touched, awed by the sight. Not wishing to awaken her he pressed the lightest of kisses upon her hair and turned to leave.

Catherine's hand upon his arm stopped him. Her face, pink with sleep, her hair, a honey-gold fan of silk upon the pillows brought him back to her more surely than the gentle tug of her hand upon his sleeve. Her voice was low, sleepily warm as she whispered, "Good morning." Her parted lips were an irresistible invitation for his kiss. Cool and dry, they answered his gentle caress with a drowsy, deceptive indolence; for as Vincent reluctantly moved to end the embrace, they opened and released the moist heat of her true response.

"I must go . . . Catherine." His murmured protest was lost in the sigh of pleasure that was her name.

For a moment it seemed she would ignore his plea. The velvet tip of her tongue probed the fascinating cleft in his upper lip before she lay back against the pillows once more. Her eyes were closed and a slow, mysterious smile lifted the corners of her mouth. Despite his words he did not rise from the bed. His fingers traced the outline of one gently arching brow, lingered in the delicate hollow of a temple as her eyes opened to capture his with a languid look of seduction.

Vincent tried to resist the beguiling promise of those warm emerald depths. "Catherine, it is late . . ." Even as he protested he bent over her again. Her arms

slid up his chest, her fingers found the sensitive nape of his neck and sent a fluid rush of desire coursing through him.

"Catherine, there is no . . . time." In response to her wickedly enticing grin, Vincent's eyes were a deep blue flame. His actions contradicted his words as he buried his face with a low moan in the soft, scented hollow of her throat -- immersed himself in the silken heat of her body. "The men . . . will be . . . waiting." His voice was a hoarse whisper.

Catherine's soft laughter vibrated in the slender column of her throat beneath his lips. "Let them wait." Her breath in his ear was a warm, whispered encouragement to his hand as it swept downward, caressing her with a long, lingering motion.

The urging of her hands as they slipped beneath his shirt and teased the crisp curls covering his chest might have been his final undoing if it were not for the sudden sound of footsteps coming down the passage toward the chamber.

"Vincent?" From the other side of the heavy drape, Nathan's gruff whisper dragged Vincent back to his senses. He captured Catherine's roving hands and stilled them. Taking a deep breath he rose shakily to his feet.

Stuffing his shirttail into his trousers he reached for his vest and with a silent, burning look at Catherine he turned and made for the doorway.

"Vincent." The way she whispered his name was a caress. "When will you be home?" The soft rustle of the sheets as she stretched intensified the aching need he was desperately willing himself to control. Avoiding a backward glance to where she lay on the bed, he ignored her soft laughter as he whispered a husky, impassioned promise to return . . . early.

The day that followed had seemed very long, but now, as he waited for Catherine's return, impatience, weariness, any thought of denial was forgotten as he leisurely contemplated the pleasure to be found in keeping promises.



## Chapter 3

The swish of tires on the wet pavement of the drivethru was lost in the sodden rustle of rain soaked foliage as the late night breeze stirred the branches above his head. Elliot hunched his shoulders against the damp chill and smothered an exclamation of disgust as a sudden shower rained down upon him. It was, as the saying went, 'not a fit night for man nor beast.' Yet here he was, huddled against the damp bark of a tree trunk, watching a deserted cul de sac in Central Park, waiting for what or whom he did not know.

The tip had come from one of Diana's mysterious 'sources.' There would be a meet tonight. They had no information other than his statement that a member of Gabriel's organization would be meeting with someone in a position of power and influence who was on the organization's payroll. The source had been unwilling to elaborate, promising only that the contact was above suspicion and therefore, very valuable to the organization.

After nearly two hours of crouching beneath dripping shrubbery and hiding in clammy shadows, Elliot was beginning to begrudge Diana the warm, dry shelter of the parked car in which she was sitting. A flip of a coin had decided the argument regarding which of them would go to the park tonight while the other continued to watch the midtown office building they had under surveillance. Elliot

had been the 'winner,' but now he wondered just what he had won, and how reliable that source of Diana's was. It was beginning to look like he had been sent on a wild goose chase.

Straightening to ease his cramped limbs, Elliot froze as the headlights of a car sliced through the shadows and rounded the curve of the approach. The black stretch limousine came to a halt a short distance from the dense clump of undergrowth that hid Elliot. The low hum of its engine was clearly audible in the damp silence. The grey-blue smoke of its exhaust floated like a ghost in the chill night air. His eyes straining to make out the identities of the limo's occupants, Elliot mouthed a soundless curse as its tinted windows hid them from his view and forced him to be satisfied with making a mental note of the license plate.

Elliot caught his breath in anticipation as the rear door of the limo opened and the figure of a man emerged. He was of medium height. In contrast, the compact squareness of his frame beneath the expensive tailoring of his overcoat, suggested what was lacking in stature was more than compensated for in strength. Close-cropped hair, black or possibly dark-brown, capped a complexion which appeared swarthy in the sulfurous light of fluorescent lamps. The regular features of his face were those of a man who might easily go unnoticed in a crowd, until one looked into his eyes. Even from a distance Elliot was struck by the chilling expression in those black, lifeless irises. Those eyes were, in themselves, enough to convince Elliot he was looking at a man capable of murder.

His assessment ended abruptly as the limo's other passenger bent forward to speak to his companion. The muted interior lights illuminated the details of a face which swam in the red haze of the anger and hatred consuming Elliot. He knew that face, he doubted he would ever forget it.

Pope, Gabriel's former right hand man and -- it was whispered furtively on the street -- Gabriel's successor. It took all of Elliot's self-control to keep from rushing forward. Assaulting Pope was the closest he would ever come to wreaking a personal vengeance upon Gabriel. Diana had denied him that particular pleasure when she had shot Gabriel dead months before. Elliot did not condemn Diana's act, rather he regretted he had not been the one to pull the trigger. Now, unable to do more than watch, Elliot allowed himself the luxury of imagining the feel of his hands around Pope's neck as he slowly squeezed the life out of him. In less heated moments, he might be ashamed of such imaginings. He knew Vincent would not approve of such blood lust; and as for Cathy . . . these days Elliot could only guess at her reaction.

After the miracle of her return from the dead, she had further confounded them by refusing to disclose the whereabouts of the notebook they had been searching for, the notebook that was the cause of so much suffering. The only reason she had given for her startling refusal was she would not endanger those she loved by supplying them with this information. She had informed Elliot she would wait until she came to a decision about what to do with the notebook, about the men who had tried to kill her -- had tried to kill them both. No amount of reasoning, or ranting, had changed her mind. Elliot would say this for her, when Cathy made up her mind, heaven and earth couldn't move her. Lord, she was a stubborn woman. No one knew better than he just how stubborn.

To make matters worse, Vincent's support was not forthcoming. Amazingly, Vincent agreed with Cathy. He would not discuss his reasons, but Elliot knew they were connected with his refusal to allow Cathy to go Above.

Elliot understood Vincent's fears. Having lost Catherine once, believing her dead, Vincent would not allow anyone or anything to place her in jeopardy again. It was an impossible, if perhaps not unreasonable wish, yet Vincent seemed determined to protect her against even the possibility of danger.

Elliot's attention was abruptly claimed by the sound of another vehicle's approach. A dark colored sedan pulled up slowly, stopped a short distance from the waiting limo. The hoarse, choppy sound of its engine as it idled and died was a marked contrast to the finely tuned purr of its highbred counterpart. Although the windows of the sedan were not tinted, the driver's identity remained hidden in the unlit interior of his vehicle.

The overcoated man closed the rear door of the limo and straightened. He appeared unconcerned by the new arrival but Elliot knew he was following the movements of the other car's driver closely.

The door of the sedan opened, and as the driver emerged, Elliot received the second shock of this eventful evening. Joe Maxwell left the vehicle and made his way purposefully across the pavement, coming to a halt a few feet away from his destination, he exchanged words with the man waiting there.

Elliot could not hear what was said. Yet he could tell by the belligerent hunch of Joe's shoulders, the agitated gestures of his hands, that he was not pleased. Shaking his head, the other man drew something white and rectangular from his pocket and handed it to Joe. Joe returned to his car. The engine roared reluctantly to life and its tires squealing on the wet pavement as it pulled away. As soon as Joe's car was out of sight, the rear door of the limo opened again and

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the overcoated figure disappeared inside. Moments later the limo also pulled away, this time in the opposite direction from the one that Joe had taken.

As its taillights disappeared around the curve of the roadway, Elliot remained where he was until, satisfied that enough time had passed, he emerged from his hiding place, walking slowly out of its shadows.

His thoughts and emotions in a turmoil, he crossed the pavement without a sound and came to a halt upon the spot where Joe's car had stood. All that remained was the dark rainbow gleam of oil floating atop a shallow puddle. A sudden gust of wind sent eddies rippling across the filmed surface and a shiver down Elliot's spine. Gathering his coat closer about him, he buried his chin deeper in its upturned collar. Turning, he melted into the shadows from which he had come. They seemed darker to him now, somehow more threatening than they had been moments before.

## Chapter 4

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep, And miles to go before I sleep, And miles to go before I sleep . . ."

Laina's soft voice faded with the last words of the poem. Looking up from the open book in her lap she saw Cathy was asleep at last. She had been so cranky this evening, lethargic, complaining of having a sore throat, and unable to fall asleep. Laina hoped Peter would send the results of the tests he had taken last week. Then they would know what was wrong, treat it and have her little girl healthy and active again. Soon, please God, soon.

Closing the book with a sigh, she stood and bent to straighten the tumbled bedclothes, tuck the blankets securely about her daughter. Her hand stilled as the child stirred in her sleep, cried out softly, "Mommy . . ."

"Hush, darling," Laina whispered as she tenderly smoothed a stray tendril of silver blonde hair, "Mommy's here . . . Mommy will always be here." Reassured, the child snuggled deeper into her pillow and continued to sleep.

As she watched the sleeping child, Laina silently repeated the word, *always*. To her it was a promise made -- and broken -- a long time ago. Now it was a promise she wanted to believe in again. It was a promise she made to Cathy with all the love and hope in her heart, a promise she meant to keep.

It had taken a long time after coming Below, but Laina had finally lost the feeling that she was an outsider. Slowly, she had responded to overtures of friendship, had found herself believing it might be possible to have the one thing she had never expected to possess -- a home. For Laina it meant a place of her own where she belonged -- a life worth living -- far removed from the numbing shame, the degradation of her former existence.

Shy and insecure -- her hopes betrayed countless times -- there was still a small part of her that was afraid to believe she did have that place. That there was somewhere she belonged, and people who cared for her. And now, incredibly, there was a man in her life.

Cullen.

Cullen was a good man, a gentle man whom she trusted and was beginning to . . . care for.

Laina smiled as she remembered the first time he had approached her. With the brusqueness so characteristic of him, he had presented her with a small wooden carving . "For Cathy," he had said as he thrust the toy into her hands. Her initial surprise had given way to gratitude and his awkward, even shy acceptance of her thanks had touched her.

Without knowing quite how it happened they began to talk, to spend time together. At first it was the three of them, for he had quickly won Cathy's heart and her daughter adored him. Then, more and more often, the two of them would find themselves alone and slowly their friendship was beginning to blossom into something more.

Something more, a small smile of anticipation lifted her lips, banished the lines of worry creasing her forehead. Yes, perhaps . . .

Laina turned, and retrieving the book of poetry, settled herself against the cushions of her chair as she closed her eyes and allowed herself to dream of the future. Those dreams stretched out before her, like the long miles of Frost's poem.

## Chapter 5

Sitting alone in his chamber, Father surveyed the untouched chessmen arrayed before him. The pieces were poised, ready to begin their age old battle of wits. It was a battle which had been fought countless times upon the scarred, checkered surface of the chessboard. He fingered them absently, considered an opening gambit he was devising to use against Vincent. His son had been a quick learner, had surpassed Father's own game years ago. More often than not, Father lost, and yet he had never tired of the challenge, the quiet companionship of those evenings together. It seemed such a long time since the deep rumble of Vincent's voice had filled the silence of the chamber as he triumphantly declared, "Checkmate Father." Checkmate Father. It was an apt description of what he was feeling.

Earlier this evening Catherine had sat at this very table. He had sensed an uneasiness about her; or was it merely a reflection of his own uncertainty, his own ambiguity about her, about the relationship she shared with his son? Old ground this; from the very beginning Catherine -- Vincent -- their bond, all the implications of their involvement with each other had caused him much worry and many sleepless nights. It was an impossible situation which he had come to grudgingly accept. His acceptance had not lessened his resistance as each step

they took brought them closer to one another. It had not altered his initial belief that the relationship was a dangerous one, a threat to the safety of his son and their world. Time and again events had validated this conviction, yet his innate honesty forced him to admit that now, whatever compromises had permitted Vincent's solitary existence before he met Catherine would never, could never be possible again. Now, for Vincent, there was no life without Catherine.

Father knew the torment Vincent had suffered without Catherine. When they had first thought her dead, apart from the very real grief and regret he had felt, he had been aware of a small sense of relief. He had been ashamed of that, had punished himself for it repeatedly, as he watched Vincent grieve and was helpless to alleviate his son's pain and despair.

When Catherine returned, although he had shared in the happiness of that reunion, the old doubts had returned. Now, even though Catherine was living Below and there had been no serious discussion of the possibility, Father was not unaware that she might, someday, choose to return Above.

Perhaps choose was not the right word. There were so many things that could happen, so much left unresolved. His knowledge of Catherine -- of her character, her sense of justice -- told him she was not a woman to abandon a task that she had begun. He knew she felt responsible for much of what had happened and should events conspire to force a decision, she would not turn her back on what she believed to be her duty. Father could not help but admire her, just as he could not help but fear the possible consequences for them all.

He took a piece from the board and held it between his fingers. The white queen. Like its black counterpart, the outcome of the game often depended upon her. Catherine was the white queen. Father could only hope she would not find it necessary to place herself in jeopardy again.

He glanced down at the white king. Vincent. Without his queen beside him he looked so vulnerable, open to threat on every side. A strange sense of foreboding overtook him and Father quickly replaced the queen. The uneasiness left him, for when they stood together -- the white king and his queen -- they appeared invulnerable.

Father rose slowly from the table and prepared to seek his bed. As he reached for his cane his hand froze as he caught sight of the shadows on the far wall. By some trick of the candlelight, the elongated shadow of the black king seemed to loom over the white king and his queen, seemed to . . . engulf them. The vague fears of just a moment before returned. Father sighed, shaking his head to free himself of these childish fancies as he turned and left the chamber.



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For a long time afterward the flickering flames of the candles moved the shadows on the wall, making it appear as though they were engaged in a surreal conflict of their own. Finally, one by one, the candles guttered and the only shadows remaining were those of the white king and his queen. In the moment before the last candle flared and died they seemed to move toward each other, to meet and become one.

## Chapter 6

Catherine stirred and groaned silently. Was it morning already? The bed was warm and she was reluctant to leave it, but it was time to get up, time to go to work. Slowly opening eyes heavy with sleep, she was puzzled by the dark shadows on the ceiling above her head; shadows where there should have been pastel reflections of early morning light. There would be rain today she thought sleepily and glanced toward the french windows that opened onto her terrace.

For a moment the deep shadows she saw there startled her; then, she realized . . . she had been dreaming again.

She turned her head toward the muffled sound of breathing. The sight of Vincent's head upon the pillow, the rough silk of his golden mane beneath her cheek sent a warm rush of tenderness coursing through her. Gently, so as not to awaken him, she brushed back the lock of hair falling across his forehead. Her gaze came to rest upon the tip of one of his canines as it lay against his lower lip. A slow ripple of delight moved through her as she recalled the pleasure those lips had given her in the night.

Resisting the sudden heat of an impulse to awaken him -- satisfy her desire to have him repeat those caresses -- Catherine savored instead the sensations created by running the tip of her tongue over her own lips. They were tender,

swollen with the aftermath of the passion which had caused their slight, deliciously sensual discomfort.

With a small frustrated sigh she reminded herself that Vincent needed his sleep. Last night, a tiny, self-satisfied smile played about the corners of her mouth, last night she had returned to their chamber with towels, soap and water. Her intentions for their use . . . innocent enough. The highly satisfactory mutual seduction that followed had afforded precious little rest -- for either of them.

Strange that afterward she should have fallen asleep in his arms to dream she was alone in her apartment. Alone, when so often in the past her dreams had been of awakening, as she had now, with Vincent beside her. In those days she had wondered if their dream of being together -- truly together -- would ever come to pass. Now at last, when her longing for a close, physically intimate relationship had become reality, new and disturbing questions had arisen to replace the doubts and fears of the past.

The past. No one could have imagined, could have foretold these past months. Catherine shuddered with the disturbing memories belonging to them. Vincent's terrifying descent into madness had been only the beginning of their ordeal. Any hopes she had for happiness following the events of the night she had gone to Vincent -- the night Jacob had been conceived -- had been destroyed by the horrors that had followed.

She would never forget the soul-numbing solitude of her captivity, punctuated only by fear and, ultimately, a despairing hope that somehow Vincent would find her, rescue her . . . as he always had before.

Her death had very nearly destroyed Vincent, while for months, a victim of amnesia, she had no memory of him or their child. Precious months of her child's life had been stolen from her and could never be returned. On the momentous night when she had found Vincent -- when they had found each other -- the impressions that stood out from all the others were of the simplest things. The feel of Vincent's hand in hers; the welcoming, familiar sights of Below. Indeed, there had been a dreamlike quality to the moment when she had bent over the cradle and seen, for only the second time, her child, Vincent's son.

She heard Jacob stirring in his cradle just a few feet from the bed. How the child had slept through the sound and fury of their love-making was beyond her and Catherine said a silent prayer of thanks. He was such an extraordinarily good-natured, complacent child.

A new mother, her confidence in her ability to care for him was a fragile, often uncertain thing and she was grateful for the advice and assistance of the more experienced women in the tunnel community.

Laina, a first time mother herself, had been especially helpful, sharing with Catherine the experience and knowledge she had gained with little Cathy. A small, worried frown creased Catherine's forehead as she thought of the precious little girl Laina had named after her in a gesture symbolizing much more than gratitude. Little Cathy was not well; refusing her food and exhibiting a listless crankiness so unlike the cheerful, energetic toddler.

Father had diagnosed a virus, prescribed antibiotics. Yet, despite this course of treatment, Cathy's health had not improved and Father had found himself unable to provide an explanation, or a remedy. Finally, Peter had been called in. After what seemed a particularly long and involved examination, he had drawn blood samples -- from both Cathy and Laina -- and left them with the vague assurance that he would run some tests. Meanwhile Peter had recommended they continue to follow Father's prescribed course of treatment, monitor Cathy's condition, and notify him immediately should any change occur. They were all worried now, anxiously awaiting word from Peter.

A soft cry interrupted her thoughts, prompted her to rise and leave the bed. Jacob was hungry. A small, relieved smile came to her lips, lightened the frown in her eyes, Jacob was always hungry.

Vincent did not awaken as she quietly dressed and took Jacob from his cradle. She sighed realizing he would not be there when she returned and she bent to place a soft kiss upon his hair. She made a mischievous mental note -- as she turned and tiptoed out of the chamber -- to tease him about the lack of stamina that would cause so deep a sleep that he did not hear his family leaving. She had just passed through the doorway when his quiet call stopped her . . . "Catherine don't forget Elliot and Diana are coming Below tonight."

As a reminder, his comment was unnecessary. She understood Vincent was merely letting her know he had been awake all along.

Catherine responded with a husky chuckle, "I haven't forgotten . . . but Vincent -- do you think you'll have recovered sufficiently to be able to get out of bed by then?"

Vincent's answering laughter followed her as she continued down the passage. In those first glorious days following her return, that spontaneous sound had been a source of great joy. Now, his laughter was heard less and less and Catherine found it necessary to work at teasing the wonderful sound from him.

A difficult task this, she knew his increasingly somber mood was in large part due to her tentative attempts to discuss the future, the decisions she -- they -- would have to make. Vincent sensed the growing need in her to complete the task she had begun. To find a way to bring to justice -- without endangering those she loved -- the persons responsible for the pain and tragedy of the past year.

Vincent would have none of it. He was uncharacteristically unreasonable in his refusal to allow any discussion on the subject. This was not the first time they had disagreed and it probably would not be the last, but sooner or later, they must . . . talk, must face their fears and find a way to overcome them.

## Chapter 7

The early morning light slanted through the windows and across the jumble of papers littering the desk. A half-filled styrofoam cup cast a long shadow, its contents -- a dark, viscous liquid -- the cold dregs of the office coffee pot. The unnatural quiet that had been his only companion through a sleepless night, was broken by the sounds of the first of his staff arriving for work.

Soon, he knew, the phones would begin to ring. Irene, his secretary would bring in his mail and his schedule for the day. Joe tried to remember just what appointments were on his calendar but his exhaustion was a leaden weight upon his shoulders and his eyes felt as if they were on fire. He needed sleep and sleep had not come. For perhaps the hundredth time he went over the details of what had occurred last night.

The phone call had come the day before, on his private line. A male voice, unfamiliar and devoid of emotion, had spoken just one sentence. "If you are interested in obtaining information about Vincent, be at the Astor Overlook in Central Park tomorrow night." The caller had given him the hour he should be in the park and had hung up before Joe could say a word.

Vincent. That name had haunted him ever since it had come to light in the investigation of Cathy's murder. He never could uncover much more than the

name, yet he was certain it was the key to the mystery. A mystery with so many bizarre and still unexplained details.

Why had Cathy been held so long? Why had she been killed in that building on Sixth Avenue and her body brought back to her apartment? No one in the building had seen anything and forensics had never come up with an explanation for those strange fingerprints found on the door to her terrace. One wise-cracking technician had observed that they belonged to an in-human fly. How else could a body have been carried twenty-one floors above the street without the use of an elevator? The freight elevator had been out of service the night before Cathy's body had been found and the tapes from the closed circuit cameras monitoring the elevators in the front of the building had neither malfunctioned nor shown any evidence of tampering. Whoever . . . or whatever had placed Cathy in her bed must have scaled the outside wall of the building or come down from the roof carrying the dead weight of Cathy's body. Impossible!

Yet in the months that followed no other explanation had surfaced. What had come to light was a name -- Vincent. It was written in flowing script, as though the writer had used an old style fountain pen, on the flyleaf of a book of Shakespearean sonnets found in Cathy's apartment. The sentiment, *With love's light wings did I o'er perch these walls*, implying a romantic relationship. Was Vincent the man Cathy had told him of shortly before she had disappeared? She had said there was a man in her life, she had used the word "love."

Diana had questioned him about Cathy's relationships; had revealed to him the startling news that she had been pregnant, although she admitted she had not personally attended the autopsy. She had been allowed to enter the room and read the report only after the procedure itself had been completed. But, there was no reason to question the coroner's findings. His report, painstakingly thorough and detailed, was a matter of record.

Records, Joe thought with a cynical sigh. Was that all we are reduced to in the end? A few words and numbers written on an official document that detailed and declared the end of a life? What of Cathy, how, where, could he record the vital statistics that were . . . *Radcliffe*? His nickname for her. At first it had been a taunt, a mocking reminder of her privileged background of wealth and social status. In time it had become an endearment.

How could he place in the record her spirit, her courage, the determination with which she had fought for justice, fought for what she believed was right? Where did he describe the fierce, unswerving loyalty of her friendship; or list, one by one, the small things that would always remind him of her?

Renaissance II  
No Safe Place But the Heart

Things like, the special way she had of saying his name. The lopsided grin that would suddenly blossom into a smile so warm it caused you to feel as though you would happily fight a dragon to catch a glimpse of it. She could make you feel as if she thought you were a knight in shining armor or something. The darndest thing was, for her, a guy wanted to try and be that knight, protect her from the disillusionment and disappointment of the world and all the dangers in it.

Protect her. The thought shook him. He had been unable to protect her and his guilt had driven him -- was still driving him. That mysterious call, those cryptic instructions. He had gone -- of course he had. There had never been any real doubt he would. If there was even the slimmest chance of a lead he would have snatched at it and he had the uneasy feeling that they, whoever they were, had known this.

He had gone, had met a character he would not have been surprised to find possessed a thick file in Interpol's records. His words had been of some interest, implying some kind of videotape of the mysterious Vincent existed. He had been handed an envelope, told if he were interested to follow the directions it contained.

Inside the envelope was a sheet of paper containing only three lines. The first was a date, the second was a time, the third an address.

Would he go . . . should he go? He had, to borrow a hackneyed phrase, "a bad feeling about this." But Joe Maxwell had never been one to welch on a debt. He owed this to Cathy. Dammit, he owed it to himself.



## Chapter 8

As Catherine entered the nursery she was surprised by the sight of Diana's fiery copper head bent over Cathy's flaxen locks. The normally serious young woman was attempting to coax the pale, gaunt child into taking a mouthful of her cereal by pretending the spoon was an airplane. The ridiculous sounds she was making, imitating the whine and putter of an engine as the spoon swooped toward the child's tightly closed mouth, caused Catherine's own lips to part in an amused smile. Jacob was enchanted and his delighted gurgle alerted Diana to their presence.

She looked up, a slight flush of embarrassment coloring her cheeks as she smiled a greeting. Catherine's response was followed by a questioning smile. Diana explained, "Laina went to get one of Cathy's toys, I'm filling in until mom returns." Catherine settled herself on the bench opposite Diana and propped Jacob on the table before her.

Taking in the almost untouched food in Cathy's bowl Catherine's smile faded. "No luck, huh?"

"Not much," Diana shrugged. "So much for my charm and influence with kids."

The truth of her statement was belied by the fact that as they spoke, Jacob had crawled across the table cooing a welcome and was busily engaged in tugging at his Aunt Diana's hair with one hand, whilst investigating Cathy's breakfast with the other.

"Now that's an effective way of getting attention, young man." Diana began to remove his hand from the little girl's bowl but stopped at Catherine's silent signal. Observing little Cathy's scowl as Jacob began stuffing a fistful of her cereal toward the vicinity of his mouth, Diana nodded her comprehension. Both women watched as the little girl snatched the bowl away from Jacob with a high-pitched cry of "Mine," and began pushing its contents around with a spoon.

Jacob's pout blossomed into a howl of anger as Cathy smiled and deliberately spooned a small portion of the cereal into her mouth. Her expression, while she chewed with exaggerated slowness, was a child's version of the cat that swallowed the canary. Catherine grimaced as Jacob's protests approached ear-splitting volume but did nothing to quiet him, hoping his continuing complaint would induce the little girl to eat most, if not all her breakfast.

Two more spoonfuls disappeared into the rosebud mouth before Cathy lost interest in the game of taunting Jacob. "Well, it almost worked." Catherine's disappointment was echoed in Diana's sad smile.

Catherine attempted to mollify her indignant son. "Okay, okay already. Breakfast is on it's way. Here Diana, hold him, will you, while I get his food." She placed Jacob in Diana's outstretched arms. "While you're at it, you might as well try to get a bib on him." Catherine handed her the small square of fabric with a resigned smile. "He hates wearing these things." She left the small group at the table and went to the small pantry adjoining the nursery to fetch a portion for her son from the large bowl William had placed there.

Returning, she accepted Diana's offer to feed Jacob, and placed Jacob's bowl on the table before Diana. Seating herself next to Cathy she lifted the little girl onto her lap. Catherine was dismayed at how thin the child had become. Smoothing Cathy's hair, she watched as Diana finally succeeded in her attempt to tie the bib around the neck of the squirming bundle that was her son.

The two women sat in companionable silence as Diana fed Jacob spoonful after spoonful. After a few minutes of watching her son devour his breakfast, Catherine inquired casually, "What brings you below so early Diana? We weren't expecting you till this evening."

The hand bringing the spoon to the expectant "O" formed by Jacob's mouth hesitated a moment. Catherine waited for her reply as Diana carefully wiped a

small trickle of cereal from Jacob's chin before looking up and across the table, her expression suddenly serious.

"Catherine . . . last night, in the park, Elliot witnessed something . . . something very disturbing connected with our investigation of Gabriel's organization."

Catherine sighed, she did not want to discuss this again, not just now. "Diana, we've been over this before. You know how I feel. I can't . . ."

"Yes, I know." Diana interrupted Catherine's protest. "We've been through all that a hundred times." She kept her voice carefully neutral, allowing no hint of her frustration to show. "But Catherine," she continued, "Elliot and I freely chose to pursue this investigation. If we put ourselves at risk, we do so consciously, and with all possible care. The risks we take are calculated ones, ones we can be reasonably certain of controlling. We know the dangers of the situation. Surely you can't imagine we could forget who or what we are dealing with?"

There was a certain kind of logic and not a little seduction in Diana's argument. Both she and Elliot were more than capable of dealing with dangerous situations. Perhaps it would be best to place it all in their hands and yet . . . no one knew better than Catherine who they were up against. Though they insisted it was what they wanted, did she have the right to do this? So much danger, so many things that could happen, so many things that could go wrong . . . "There are some things beyond calculating or controlling, some things beyond imagining." The wide sweep of Catherine's hand encompassed their surroundings. "Just look around you, Diana."

Diana glanced about the large chamber, saw the rough hewn tables and benches, the handwoven carpets covering stone floors. Sometimes, even now, Diana found it hard to believe that this world really existed. Everywhere candles burned to provide light, here, hundreds of feet below the reach of sunlight. The shadows of the ceiling high above their head were never completely banished, no matter how determined the golden glow of candle and lamplight. Though it was early morning Above, Below it was perpetually twilight. Finally, her gaze moved to the child sitting in her lap.

Vincent's child, perhaps the greatest impossibility of all. Catherine's eyes had followed Diana's and came to rest with hers upon Jacob. "Yes Diana, some things are . . . beyond imagining."

Unable to contradict her, knowing for the moment, it would be fruitless to pursue the matter, Diana smothered her frustration and abruptly changed the

subject. "Catherine, would you -- would Vincent mind, if Elliot and I postponed tonight's visit?" At Catherine's questioning glance she made a depreciatory gesture and explained. "Jan and Nina have asked us to dinner. Elliot says Nina has demanded he bring me to meet them and this time she refuses to take no for an answer."

Catherine could not quite control her amused grin, although she did refrain from teasing Diana about the possible significance of such an invitation. The old couple were the closest thing to family Elliot had. She knew from his fond description of them, just how important they were to him. Catherine wondered if the invitation could mean what she hoped it did; that Elliot and Diana's friendship was slowly growing into something more.

From their first meeting Elliot had held a special, if sometimes troubling place in Catherine's heart, and in the past weeks she had come to know and like Diana as well. She respected her keen intellect and straightforward character, there were depths to Diana she might never fully fathom, but in her Catherine had found a friend.

A friend who had a secret. A secret which, by mutual consent, remained unspoken between them. During Catherine's absence Diana had come to feel very strongly -- about Vincent. Catherine knew this solitary, fiercely independent woman had been deeply troubled and confused by this. Yet, with the rare perception and sensitivity so characteristic of her; Diana had buried those feelings deep within her, had put aside her own needs and offered Vincent what he had needed most --her friendship and her help in a dark and difficult period. For this Catherine would be forever grateful.

Now, Catherine sensed, Diana had come to terms with those feelings and perhaps, although she was as of yet unaware of it, the place Vincent had held in her heart was slowly being filled by Elliot. They were well matched those two, and it was Catherine's secret hope that someday they would . . .

The little girl sitting in her lap let go a glad cry. "Mommy . . ." Catherine and Diana looked up to see Laina standing in the doorway, the expression on her pale face distracted, a worried frown creasing her forehead as she glanced about the chamber.

Her gaze finding the object it sought in Catherine's lap; she raised a shaking hand to brush back a stray lock of her silver blonde hair then came forward quickly to join the little group seated at the table. Without a word she took Cathy from Catherine's unresisting arms and gathering her close, hugged the child so tightly Cathy whimpered a frightened protest.

"Laina?" Catherine's voice betrayed the concern she was feeling. "Laina, what is it?" Laina did not answer, instead she pressed her cheek upon Cathy's head and began to rock her back and forth.

Diana watched Laina's strange behavior with a worried frown before meeting Catherine's puzzled eyes across the table, a bewildered question darkening her own. "What . . . ?"

Catherine shook her head wordlessly and laid a gentle hand upon Laina's shoulder. "Laina, what is it?" Laina seemed not to have heard the soft question and Catherine repeated her name in a stronger tone. "Laina . . . you're frightening Cathy!"

This seemed to bring her to her senses and Laina loosened her hold a fraction as she whispered assurances to the child in her lap. Becoming aware that Catherine and Diana were watching she murmured, "I met Ethan in the passageway. He was on his way to Father's chamber." Ethan was one of the young men who regularly went Above delivering and collecting messages from the Helpers.

Laina paused and drew a deep breath before continuing. "He had a message from Peter . . . he's coming to see Father today."

Both women drew their own conclusions. Peter's busy schedule had always limited his ability to come Below. The long and physically demanding journey Below had become increasing difficult for him. His visits were less frequent now and they were scheduled a week or more in advance . . . unless of course there was a medical emergency of some kind. Since there had been no accidents or sudden illnesses, Peter's coming Below -- to see Father -- so soon after his last visit and on such short notice could mean only one thing, Cathy's test results must have arrived. Catherine tried to allay Laina's fears. "Peter could be coming Below for any number of reasons Laina. It doesn't necessarily mean it's . . ."

"Bad news?" Laina finished the sentence for her. "Catherine, you know Peter usually sends a written message to Father, some special medicine or something like that. He never comes himself. Not unless it's serious."

"Laina, you shouldn't jump to conclusions, or worry needlessly . . ."

Diana's calm, reasonable tone seemed to aggravate Laina's already emotional state. She shot to her feet with Cathy in her arms. "That's easy for you to say," Laina accused. "She's not your child! You don't even have a child! Do you know how a mother feels? How can *you* tell me not to worry!" Laina caught her breath on an angry sob and turning, ran from the chamber.

Diana looked as though she had been slapped, for a brief, unguarded moment all the hurt and confusion she felt was clearly visible in her stunned expression.

Shocked, Catherine hastened to apologize, tried to excuse Laina's hurtful words. "She's upset Diana. I'm sure she didn't mean . . . didn't know what she was saying . . ."

An unreadable mask descended like a shield effectively concealing her emotions as Diana shrugged. "It's okay Catherine. Go after her. I'll look after Jacob."

With a grateful nod Catherine rose. After a sad glance at Diana, whose face was hidden as she bent over Jacob, she hurried after Laina.

Diana's expression softened as she regarded Jacob. She took him from her lap and propped him before her on the table. "Well young man, look's like I put my foot in my mouth that time."

For a moment Jacob's curiously steady gaze held hers and she could have sworn he was aware of what was going on, was silently offering her comfort. Dismissing the thought -- after all he was, just a child -- she took one of his chubby hands in hers. "Okay fella. How about opening your little mouth and finishing your breakfast while I keep my big one safely closed? What do you think of that? Do we have a deal?" She smiled as all five of his fingers curled enthusiastically about two of her own. As she shook them, he made a small sound that Diana would have sworn expressed his agreement.

## Chapter 9

"The results of last night's little charade were extremely gratifying were they not, Jonah?" In spite of his words, Pope allowed only the slightest hint of satisfaction to color his voice.

The man to whom he addressed this question appeared absorbed in a piece of Pre-Columbian sculpture sitting before him on the desk. It had a primitive, menacing quality in its mute, simplistic lines that appealed to him. Knowing some kind of reply was expected, his level glance traveled slowly across the wide, dark expanse of Carrera marble that comprised the desk top that separated him from his employer.

"Not particularly." His voice, although similar to Pope's unaccented, cultured speech, had a clipped, military quality to it. "I find no pleasure in -- what did you call it? Oh, yes, weaving webs."

Pope chose to be amused, appreciating Jonah's allusion to his description of the intricate planning and complex strategy of his plans. "No, you would not. You prefer a more direct approach do you not?"

Although not a muscle moved, Pope had the distinct impression the man facing him tensed in reaction to the criticism implied in his question. Not wishing to alienate a valuable tool, or antagonize a particularly lethal enemy, Pope

diplomatically withdrew the barb. "Not to worry, my friend. I may weave the web, but the kill will be yours, when the time is right. I have complete faith in your ability to deal with the elusive Miss Chandler. After all, it would be futile to implicate Mr. Maxwell as an accomplice in her murder, only to have her make what would surely be a dramatic and somewhat sensational reappearance from the dead."

"I still fail to see why Gabriel did not dispose of her when he had the chance." It was Jonah's turn to criticize but he did so without any outward sign of the satisfaction Pope knew he must be feeling.

There had been no love lost between Gabriel and the man who sat before Pope. It had been Gabriel who had fostered Snow's rise in the organization, preferring Snow's eclectic style to Jonah's straightforward, even somewhat conventional methods.

"We -- had disposed of her. She was given a fatal overdose of morphine. It was not discovered until much later that she had survived." Annoyance was an emotion Pope rarely permitted himself to experience, let alone admit. Yet he had been annoyed, extremely so, when he had learned Catherine Chandler was alive. Location unknown.

The source that had passed along the information was an obscenely expensive, but extremely well placed one. Pope did not spare a thought to the cost. Such expenses were a necessary evil in his particular profession. Long ago he had learned information and not force was the true key to power. He had built his career avidly collecting the first while judiciously using the latter.

In the weeks since learning Catherine Chandler was alive he had spared no expense in his efforts to learn her whereabouts. When the news that she had left the safe house where she had been kept reached him, he ordered his men to begin combing this city -- her logical destination. The search had been to no avail; she appeared to have gone to ground -- disappeared as it were -- from the face of the earth.

He had waited -- experiencing the closest emotion to fear he had known in years -- for the announcement of her reappearance. Days passed, then weeks, and still nothing was heard of, or from Catherine Chandler. Finally, tired of waiting, he had decided to take the initiative, had formulated the plan he was now putting into action.

"In any case, we know she is alive, and in all probability somewhere here, in New York. We will use Mr. Maxwell to coax her out of her hiding place."



Jonah did not seem impressed by Pope's faith in the plan he had devised. "Why are you so certain she will contact you? Risk her own safety to protect Maxwell?"

"Joe Maxwell is her friend. Miss Chandler possesses a misguided and excessive loyalty to her friends. She is, as our previous "acquaintance" proved, very stubborn on the point of betraying or endangering them. Really quite a remarkable woman, albeit an extremely troublesome one."

"You sound as if you admire her?"

"In a way I do." Pope's voice took on a thoughtful quality as he considered the question. "I've seen men beg for mercy during the interrogation we put her through. Yet the only fear she displayed was for the safety of her unborn child. Not once did she show any for herself. Chapman, you remember him . . . ?"

Jonah nodded. Chapman had been Gabriel's "persuasion expert." It was rumored that Chapman could make dead men talk. "You mean to tell me Chapman couldn't get anything out of her?"

"Amazing, isn't it?." If Jonah's tone had held disbelief, Pope's, held an almost grudging respect. "We used drugs and still it was a battle. A few names were all she would give. As I said, she was," he corrected himself, "is, a most . . . remarkable woman. I could find it in myself to regret having to kill her . . . again." He shook himself free of the ridiculous sentiment. "That is, however, not the point. She must be eliminated and that damnable notebook recovered. My plan will accomplish both."

"If, Maxwell continues to cooperate."

"Oh he will." Here Pope was on more familiar, comfortable ground. He understood men, understood their all too human nature and its motivations. Joe Maxwell desperately wanted to solve the Chandler murder. This was the linchpin of his plans, a desperate man was not a cautious one. Desperation and the same misguided loyalty Catherine Chandler possessed had forced Maxwell to forget caution.

They had Maxwell right where they wanted him. His plan had delivered him, and through him, Catherine Chandler. The exquisite irony of it all was that she would, of her own choice, walk right into their hands.

## Chapter 10

"The results were positive, Jacob. No error. The lab ran the Elisa test twice, then the Western Blot confirmatory and all three tested positive on both specimens. Of course, there is always a margin of error, but in this instance, the case history, the supporting symptomatology, error is contra-indicated." Peter's voice dropped, sadness and regret evident in every difficult syllable. "It's HIV. Laina is the dormant carrier, Cathy's is an active case. The child has AIDS Jacob."

The words hit Father, struck him like a blow. AIDS, acquired immune deficiency syndrome, the complex medical terminology amounting to -- in layman's language -- the systematic destruction of the body's defense against infection. A death sentence. Not a quick, or merciful one, but a slow, painful wasting away as one opportunistic infection after another attacked the body, robbing the victim of health, of vitality and ultimately, of life itself.

Father realized Peter was still speaking, outlining the probable course of the disease in the little girl and the accepted course of treatment. The words, the terminology, these he understood. Yet behind the professional detachment he called upon to absorb the information, was a small questioning voice, an uncertainty that demanded to know what this would mean to his world, to the

safety and well-being of all those who inhabited it and looked to him for guidance.

No matter he knew little enough about this disease, or its treatment. What he did know was it attacked more than just the body -- it attacked the spirit; and not just of the person afflicted, but of those around the victim. It raised questions medical science could not answer with any certainty. For the present there was no vaccine, there was . . . no cure, into that void rushed suspicion and fear.

He had seen this happen with the scourges that had been tuberculosis and polio before a vaccine had been found. AIDS victims Above were ostracized, discriminated against. Finally, they were often left to fight alone their last, futile battle against the enemy, which in the end, always won. At least -- for now.

"Jacob, how do you wish to break this to Laina?"

"Pardon?" He had not been listening. "What? Peter . . . you were saying . . . ?"

Patiently Peter put the question to him again. "Jacob, how shall we tell Laina? We have to tell her."

"Yes, yes of course." They would have to do this, have to face the implications, the effect this would have on Laina, the child, on all of them. How would she, how would they, be able to cope with this? Dear God, how was he going to tell her?

Peter sensed Father's distress, he knew how deeply his old friend cared and how difficult this was for him. "Perhaps, Jacob, it would be . . . better if I spoke with Laina? There is, after all, much to explain that can be difficult for someone close to the patient to say."

He placed a hand on Father's shoulder. "This is something I have had to do before my friend." He sighed. "And, something unfortunately, I will have to do again. Let me speak with Laina."

Father was deeply touched by Peter's words, by the friendship and concern which enabled him to offer to assume the burden of so difficult a task. Father's hand reached up and grasped Peter's as it lay on his shoulder. He pressed it in gratitude. "No, Peter."

Peter's hand tightened in silent acceptance of Father's refusal.

Father glanced at their joined hands as they rested on his shoulder. Together those hands had learned, so many years ago, how to heal, and had practiced that noble art for more than three decades. They knew how to cure, how to ease pain, bring new life into the world; and yet, at this moment they looked so . . . old, so helpless.

Father's eyes were dark with grief and worry as he read the understanding and the promise of support in the eyes of his longtime friend and colleague. "No, Peter. This is something I must do. I must tell Laina."

*"Tell me what?"*

The question took them both unawares and they turned to face the young woman standing at the top of the short staircase near the entrance to the chamber.

"Tell me what . . . ?" Her voice rose then dropped to a frightened whisper as she pleaded. "Father, Peter, what is it? Please!"

Father, momentarily frozen with the shock of her unexpected arrival, recovered himself and coming to his feet, crossed the room quickly. Placing an arm around the shaking girl he drew her to the chair in which he had been sitting and gently placed her in it.

Wide, frightened grey eyes looked into his with a combination of fear and trust that tore at his heart. Softly, his voice sounding strange to his own ears, he began. "Laina, we have . . . the results of the tests."

## Chapter 11

The storm had blown up suddenly, without warning. With it came a chill wind which whipped in from the bay, fashioned stinging darts from the brine of crashing breakers on the seaward side of the jetty and flung them inland with an indiscriminate violence. The sharp tang and corrosive crackle of salt was everywhere.

Two muffled figures bent forward, their exaggerated movements making slow but determined headway against the opposing force of the wind. Diana and Elliot were on their way to Jan and Nina's for dinner. The invitation had given them a much needed excuse to postpone their visit with Catherine and Vincent until they had had a chance to sort out last night's disturbing developments.

They were making their way along a boardwalk toward the houseboat the old couple called "home." The weathered, shabby craft was now moored at a marina in Brooklyn.

"Is this your idea of a 'quiet little get together,' Elliot?" The mocking words were torn from Diana's freezing lips and lost in the howl of the late autumn gale.

"What?" As Elliot bent toward her in an effort to hear what she was saying, the angle of his body provided a broader target for the onslaught of the wind. Its

determined efforts to topple him were aided by an unseen patch of ice. Legs flying forward, arms flailing wildly, he lost the last of his balance and landed squarely on his backside.

His expression was a mixture of chagrin and indignation as Diana turned to look down at him, a grin of wicked appreciation lifting the corners of her mouth. Extending a hand to help him to his feet, her amused laughter became a shocked gasp as a sudden gust of wind struck her, spun her about and deposited her in a sprawling heap across Elliot's lap.

As the full weight of Diana's body landed, Elliot's breath expelled with a soft whoosh leaving him powerless to do more than sit for a stunned moment as Diana frantically struggled to lift herself into an upright position. He regained his wits and his wind just in time to prevent her thrashing arms from landing a blow to his chin.

Damp tendrils of dark red hair lashed across his face and stung his eyes as he grasped her arms and tried to pull her into a sitting position. Her struggles seemed to increase as he dragged her closer in his attempt to set her upright. "Hey! What the . . . easy, lady . . . I'm only trying to help you."

"I don't need your help. I can . . . do it myself." She ground out the words between her teeth as she pulled away and pushed herself up onto her knees.

"Okay, okay," Elliot's hands came up, palms outward. "Didn't mean to imply that you weren't capable of . . ." His words trailed off and he bit back amused laughter as he watched her clumsy, increasingly frantic attempts to regain her footing. The patch of glare ice beneath them foiled her efforts and returned her each time more or less to where she began, between Elliot's outstretched legs.

Finally, he grasped her once again by the arms, held her firmly, and gave her a small shake which stilled her movements completely. "Diana . . ." He was speaking to the top of her bowed head as she knelt before him.

"Diana." He spoke more forcefully this time.

Slowly she looked up, her face coming level with his. In the faint light of a nearby street lamp he could see the cobalt blue depths of her eyes were darkened by a glaze of fear . . . and something else. For an instant he thought he glimpsed -- may have imagined -- a trace of shyness there before she looked quickly away.

"Let's try this together, shall we?"

The request was made in a matter-of-fact tone, and, after a moment, Diana responded. "Fine, who goes first?" The slightly acerbic quality so much a part of her usual manner informed Elliot that whatever had frightened her -- *What had*

*frightened her?* -- had passed and she had herself under control. "I'll go first, okay?"

At her nod he leaned forward, and coming to his knees, he rose carefully to his feet. Testing his footing on the ice, he widened his stance, braced his legs and offered her his hand.

With an almost imperceptible hesitation Diana placed her hand in his and allowed him pull her to her feet. As her full weight came down on her left foot she let out a small cry and stumbled. Gingerly she tested the foot, gritting her teeth as the injured ankle protested with a sharp stabbing pain. Lifting it off the ground she drew a deep breath as the pain subsided leaving a throbbing ache in its place.

Elliot watched her movements with concern, the cause of her discomfort all too obvious though he felt compelled to ask, "What is it?"

"My ankle . . ." Diana looked up, her expression a mixture of annoyance and pain. "I think I've sprained it."

"Can you walk?"

"Of course I . . ." Carefully Diana tried the ankle again, bringing her weight slowly down upon it, she ended lamely, ". . . don't think so."

The admission clearly cost her and Elliot remained silent, waiting for her to speak. He would have to carry her to the houseboat, it was the obvious solution and he watched as she struggled with it.

"How far?" The question was at once defiant and defenseless.

Elliot did not pretend to misunderstand. "Just to the end of the pier."

She followed the movement of his hand as he indicated the direction, measured the distance with her eyes for a long moment before she turned to face him. "Okay . . . I'm ready." Her attitude seemed to say 'Let's get this over with.'

He bit back the indignant retort that sprang to his lips . . . did she actually imagine he was going to enjoy this? Bending, he lifted her into his arms. Her arms came up to encircle his neck as he steadied himself and began walking.

The wind had picked up again and as the full force of it struck them Diana involuntarily pressed her face against Elliot's neck, instinctively seeking shelter there from its biting onslaught. Bending his own head to escape the icy blast, Elliot's chin was buried in her soft curls. His nostrils flared at the fresh clean scent of her which filled his senses, replacing the bitter tang of salt in the air. Perhaps, I was wrong, he thought, I just might enjoy this after all.

## Chapter 12

The climb upward from the lower level was steep, the passage a treacherous slope in the half light of the flickering torches the men carried. They were tired, all of them, walking with a quiet determination mellowed by the satisfaction and comraderie of a day's work done. Now and then a murmur of conversation, a short burst of laughter at some half-hearted joke would ripple through their ranks, only to fade away.

Again and again, a hushed farewell would announce one of their number had reached the turnoff to the part of the tunnels that was home. At the final junction, near the central hub, Vincent turned to his few remaining companions and bade them a quiet goodnight, thanking them for their efforts and a job well done.

He watched them disappear down the passageway, listened to their quiet words of parting as they reached their destinations. Their leader in the truest sense, he would not allow his footsteps to turn homeward until he was satisfied each of them was safely on his way.

Finally, when the only sound he could hear was the ever present tapping of the pipes, he turned and began the solitary journey that would take him home.

Home, the images the word conjured were as familiar to him as the walls of stone silently regarding his passage. They were lit by the soft, diffused glow



of candles, the bright crackle of torches burning in sconces -- fashioned by anonymous hands from another age -- which pointed the way to his chamber. All his life, these images had guided him homeward.

Always what had awaited him there were the carefully collected mementos and castaways of other lives. Books discarded -- thoughtlessly or with regret -- by their previous owners, which had found their way into his eager hands and mind. Bits and pieces of unknown lives that had touched a chord in his. A piece of jade, cunningly wrought, smooth and cool to the touch, would bring thoughts of the hands that might have held it. The Chinese said rubbing jade brought good luck and peace of mind. What worries had been pressed upon the stone, what favors asked of it?

And there were souvenirs of the city above, miniature recreations of its many wonders, wonders he had never . . . could never visit. A soaring skyscraper which had retained the romance of being the world's tallest building long after it's right to the boast had been claimed by others. The statue of a woman, her torch and the simple, eloquent words inscribed on the tablet she held, a beacon and an inspiration for so many weary souls. A promise of welcome, the hope of belonging for strangers in a strange land.

Often, in his childhood, he had felt this yearning, the need to belong -- truly belong. The wish he could lose himself, become one among many and know an end to the singularity which was the very core of his existence.

He *had* been alone -- unique. Separate and distinct in a way beyond the comprehension of even those whom he loved and who loved him. It was a loneliness which had molded his character, colored his every thought and emotion. It was a battle he had fought and lost countless times within himself. The passing years had brought a quiet resignation, a philosophic acceptance of the boundaries and barriers of his life. And yet, he had found a kind of happiness, a contentment which allowed him to pursue, in peace, the joys permitted him. The pleasure of poetry, of literature, words written by minds akin to his own in their hunger for the adventure of knowledge, the gift of wisdom, the wonder of the human spirit, the beauty that was its heart.

Then, one night, in the space of time which exists between one beat of a heart and the next . . . Catherine had come into his life.

Catherine.

Shakespeare had once asked, "What's in a name?" Vincent's heart knew the answer.

She was his soul, that other part of himself he had searched for all the long, lonely days of his life. The answer to the riddle of his existence, the *why* of his being. She was every line of poetry that had ever touched him, the truth behind every written word he had ever read.

Had she, he wondered, always been there, only waiting for him to find her?

He had found her, they had found each other, and, at last, he knew he would never be alone again. Never feel he was a stranger in a strange land. He had come home and home was Catherine.

What's in a name? Everything.

The chamber was dark when he entered, a single candle burning upon the small table in the center of the room. The bed was empty, Jacob's cradle bare. He searched the shadows first, then instinctively, without conscious thought, he searched the awareness of the bond he shared with her. He felt . . . anticipation, and the gentle warmth which had colored his thoughts of her as he made his way homeward.

Suddenly he knew *where* Catherine was. His questioning gaze found a small square of paper propped against the candlestick on the table. Crossing to it he read the message written there.

*Elliot and Diana, not coming . . .*

*Jacob is with Mary . . .*

*Meet me at the Hot Spring.*

*Catherine*

The Hot Spring. He had turned and left the chamber before finishing her note.

## Chapter 13

"You should get some rest dear."

Her eyes never leaving the small figure lying on the bed, Laina mutely shook her head in response to the whispered suggestion.

Mary laid a gentle hand on the girl's shoulder and ran experienced eyes over the sleeping child. Father and Peter had administered a new antibiotic and afterward had insisted Cathy remain in the hospital chamber so they could closely monitor her reaction to it. "She'll sleep for hours now, child. Couldn't you try to rest? You'll feel better for it."

"I can't leave her Mary." Laina's eyes, dull with exhaustion and red-rimmed in the aftermath of tears met Mary's briefly. Her haggard expression touched the older woman's heart. The young woman looked close to collapse.

"Laina, I really must insist. What good will it do Cathy if you make yourself ill?"

"I . . ."

"Now, don't argue. I'll send someone to fetch you the moment she stirs. *I promise.*" Mary's voice took on the note of command long years of nursing

experience had given her. "Let's go, dear." Laina instinctively reacted to the authority in that voice and against her will, began to rise.

Mary did not give her the chance to reconsider. She signalled to one of the women helping in the infirmary and asked her to sit by the child as she took Laina gently by the arm. Before she knew what was happening, Laina found herself outside the hospital chamber. Still in a state of shock, emotionally and physically exhausted by the ordeal of the afternoon, she had neither the strength to resist nor the desire to protest. She allowed herself to be led, down one passage, then another.

"Here we are." There were only a few candles burning in the chamber, and some of Cathy's clothing, a shirt, a sweater or two that needed mending, lay on the chair where Laina had left them this morning. "You'll feel much better after you've had a short nap." Mary brought her to the bed, and taking a pillow in her hands, plumped and propped it against the headboard. "There. You just lie down for a while. That's it, lie back, close your eyes, there you are."

Wordlessly Laina obeyed Mary's instructions to sit on the bed and lay back against the pillows. An involuntary sigh left her lips as she turned her head and pressed her cheek against their cool, soft covers. Drawing a quilt over her, Mary tucked it around her before gently smoothing Laina's hair.

"Sleep now child," was Mary's soft command as she extinguished the candles burning by the bed. With an inarticulate murmur, Laina slept.

## Chapter 14

Secure in its slip, battened and braced against the storm, the houseboat rose and fell gently with each swell. The motion went almost unnoticed by its occupants whose seasoned sea-legs negated the effects of -- were barely tried by -- such a minor squall.

"*Zły szczescie*, it is bad luck this storm, bad luck I tell you."

"Such a *stary kobieta* you are Nina. Seeing omens in everything."

"Hah, look at who calls me an old woman."

Jan shrugged as he bent over the lure he was tying with painstaking precision, his large, calloused hands working the hair-thin wire with delicacy and dexterity.

Nina's diminutive form stiffened with indignation, her hands folding across her chest as she regarded the large bulk of her husband sitting in a small chair at the kitchen table. "Who was the one to say this was not such a good thing. . . to make with the invitation, the dinner for this *dziewczyna*, this young woman, this Diana, Stosh speaks of?"

A lifetime together had taught Jan the signs. Nina was nervous and would try to hide this by bullying him. Hunching his shoulders he maintained a stoic

silence letting the squall that was his wife's mood blow itself out, much the same as the storm outside was doing.

Knowing she would get no response, Nina turned with a muttered invocation to the saints to protect her from the trial of menfolk in general, and two of their number in particular. The clash and clang of metal pots and lids, the rattle of cutlery provided an outlet for and an expression of her anxiety as she completed the last of her preparations for this ill-omened meal.

A small smile tugged at Jan's lips as he listened to his wife mutter invocations involving a gruesome end for the butcher who had provided them with such a scrawny chicken. Now and again he nodded his head in agreement at a comment tossed over her shoulder, knowing she was more or less talking to herself and her beloved saints, and did not expect him to answer.

She was not a quarrelsome woman, his Nina. Her warm heart and gentle spirit could not hold a grudge, or harbor an unkind emotion for very long. He knew it was her deep affection for young Stosh which was making her so upset. After all who was this Diana, this young woman he was bringing to meet them?

When he, Jan had first found the boy, near dead he had been, they had cared for him, nursed him slowly, carefully back to life. In the craziness of the fever, Stosh had called many a name over and over again. One of those names had been a woman's, he called to this one more often than the others. Catherine, Cathy. He had called for her when the fever was at its worst and they had feared that he would die, that Nina's blessed saints would not make the miracle to let him live.

Jan was not a religious man, or a superstitious one. He lived by what he could see with his eyes, believed in the things he could do with his hands. He left the prayers and the miracles to his Nina and her saints. He was not, however, a stranger to the ways of the heart. He knew something of love. He loved the *morze*, the sea that gave him his living, his boat, the little craft which shared his days and his toil, and he loved his Ninotchka, the woman of his heart, his lifelong companion and friend.

He knew because of what he felt for her now -- what he felt since the day so many years ago, when they first met -- that young Stosh had loved this woman, this Catherine. It had been in his voice, in the way he had called to her when the fever and the pain made everything but the most important of things fly from the heart and the mind.

From his words, they came to know she was dead and they had felt, sadness, for him, for his loss. Later, much later, they had asked him about her.

A strange light had come into his eyes and he would only say she had died, killed by the same men who had tried to kill him. He would say no more.

Some wounds heal with care and time, others do not. Stosh's body had healed, his heart -- someday, it too, would mend, would find a new life and a new name to call. When Stosh had left them, he had promised to return. They knew without his telling them that he had made other, darker promises to himself.

He had kept his promise to return -- many times -- bringing with him the news that his Catherine was alive, but they knew in the way he now said her name, she was no longer . . . *his* Catherine.

Then there had come another name, Diana, and as the time passed, Jan knew Stosh was not aware that his heart was making of it, his own. Who was she, this Diana? Because they cared for him they worried. Yes, who was this Diana? Tonight, perhaps, they would know.

It seemed Nina's thoughts had followed the same direction for she turned to him saying, "And who is this Diana I ask you? Always we hear of this woman, but do we meet her? Does he bring her to us? No, we have to twist with the arm, make the special invitation . . . make the big production."

'Big production' was one of Nina's favorite expressions. This was her way of describing life's sometimes silly, often sad rituals, her comment on the way people dealt with the important and the trivial. Marriages were big productions, births and death were -- so, it seemed, was this evening.

"Always he says . . . maybe. Why maybe, I ask you? Why not yes thank you, no problems thank you? Why so mysterious this young woman?" Jan did not reply, there was nothing he could say. They would wait and they would see. This was the way of things, how it had always been and would always be. Young people made their choices and it was not for the old ones to make -- his shoulders shook with silent laughter -- 'the big production.'

They heard the sound of footsteps outside, the slight creak of worn boards as the gangplank gave beneath added weight. There was a knock and the door flung open.

Framed in the light of the lamp hanging above the doorway, clearly etched against the darkness of the night beyond, were the wet and somewhat bedraggled figures of Elliot and the woman he held closely in his arms.

Nina's expression, as she met her husband's amused gaze, said . . . What did I tell you? She hesitated only a moment before she moved forward to greet her guests.

## Chapter 15

The entrance to the cavern was a low overhang leading into a narrow, twisting tunnel. On a peg driven into the rock at eye level, a small square of white silk hung. It was a signal used by the tunnelfolk to indicate the cavern was occupied -- a discreet request for privacy.

Vincent touched the silk, inhaled the fragrance of it. Catherine's fragrance, Catherine's invitation to enter. He bent low and made his way down the dark passage, until, turning sharply at its end, he emerged in a fairyland of floating, golden light.

Countless candles burned in the warm mist rising from the underground spring which fed the pool. The vaulted ceiling collected the vapor's moisture, glistened with the soft brilliance of diamonds in candlelight. The only sound disturbing the quiet of the cavern was the soft bubbling of water as it rose to the surface, the sibilant murmur of cool air and heated liquid.

His eyes searched the dark, rippling surface of the pool, found the pale glimmer of white that was Catherine's body as she reclined on one of the submerged natural rock projections at the far edge of the pool.

Her eyes were closed, her head flung back in attitude of sheer, sensual pleasure. Her hand caressed the water, her fingers tracing intricate designs on its



surface, their movements evoking the grace of a dancer expressing an exquisite passage of music. The smallest of hesitations was the only indication she was aware she was no longer alone. Slowly, in a gesture which seemed to take forever, her hand extended, beckoned to him to join her.

He drew a deep, unsteady breath of the warm moist air, and held it, noticing for the first time the clinging weight of the many layers of his clothing. His cloak slid from his shoulders with a sigh.

The lacing of his vest was a puzzle demanding his reluctant attention. He willed his eyes downward, noticing with a distracted frown his hands were shaking. Shrugging himself free, a small shiver shook him as the air met the damp cloth of his loosely-woven shirt. It clung to him, molding itself to the contours of his deeply-muscled chest, resisting his efforts to pull it up and over his head.

Casting the shirt aside, he brushed back the tangled cascade of hair which had fallen forward to cover his face. The fine pelt of amber arrowing downward from the broad expanse of burnished gold covering his chest was teased by the soft leather of his wide belt; the metal of its clasp felt slick to his touch as, with a soft click, it slithered to the ground.

The tension in his long, powerful thighs released as he lowered himself onto a convenient outcropping of rock. The uneven stone of the floor reproached his bare feet as boots and leggings joined the growing pile of discarded clothing beside him.

Rising slowly he approached the pool, his hands encouraging the halting descent of his trousers, peeling them away from the corded muscles of his thighs. They slipped slowly past his calves, coming to rest about his ankles where he stood, scant inches from the water's edge.

Catherine's hand was floating on the surface, palm upward, long, tapering fingers slightly curled, awaiting his touch. He felt rather than heard her sigh of satisfaction as he entered the pool; his body slipping into the moist heat as she slid from the supporting stone to stand facing him across the dark expanse of water.

Her eyes opened, the warm glow of their grass green depths caressing him with a welcoming smile; had the same silken touch as the water gently lapping at his chest. The rising mist swirling about her, gave her an almost ethereal quality.

He hesitated, unwilling to destroy the illusion. She finished his approach for him, floating across the distance separating them with a seemingly effortless grace.

Her small white hands rose from the obscuring depths and came to rest lightly upon his chest. Standing on tip-toe, her lips brushed the soft stubble of his cheek in a fleeting caress even as she glided past him.

He felt the soft ripple of her movement against the muscles of his back as her fingertips began to trace a leisurely path upward. Her palms pressing against his shoulder blades, were stilled by the knot of tension the battle between weariness and burgeoning desire had placed there. Slowly, the pressure of her hands increased, described a small circle whose circumference widened in a slow upward sweep to encompass the broad, muscular slope of his shoulders.

Involuntarily, his head fell forward in a gesture of surrender and pleasure. His hair fanned out before him, a golden tide. His eyes closed as he abandoned himself to the purely physical sensation of her touch.

Behind the darkness of his eyelids muted colors swirled as her fingers ascended the nape of his neck and began a leisurely downward spiral whose descent drew with it the last remnants of coherent thought.

He lost all sense of self, became part of the liquid heat that enveloped him as her hands smoothed the ridge of muscle defining his waist, caressed the taut, flat surface of his abdomen, moved downward across the concave surface created by the swiftly indrawn breath of his reaction to her touch.

He reached for her.

Had he turned, or had she turned him? Nothing mattered but the feel of her as his hands spanned the soft flesh of her slender waist. Buoyant, weightless, her body flowed against his.

Her face was a pale glimmer of porcelain, her cheeks, two pale damask roses blooming in the heat of his gaze as her eyes, dark absinthe with desire, met his. Her fingertips began a slow, sensuous exploration of the well defined musculature rippling beneath the dusky gold fur of his chest as it rose sharply.

His breath -- matching the quickening tempo of his heartbeat as she traced two small circles of sensitive flesh -- ceased as her lips descended to replace the soft brush of her fingers with the warm velvet torment of her mouth. Her swirling tongue stroked the center of first one, then the other, gently suckling their hardening peaks.

His arms responded to the electrifying caress, grasping her, his thumbs slipping beneath her soft, full curves as he lifted her effortlessly. Catherine was shaken by the intense thrill of desire coursing through her as the tips of her own swelling breasts brushed the taut muscles of Vincent's hard body.

The slow, backward arch of his lean torso guided the gliding ascent of her silken legs as they slid past his thighs to encircle his waist in an intimate imitation of the embrace her trembling arms sought to complete.

He resisted the insistent grasp of her fingers as they entwined themselves in the silken tangle of his flowing mane; his arms denied her quivering breasts the touch they ached for.

"Vincent." He heard her whispered plea, was unable to tear his eyes from their fascinated regard of gleaming white flesh, pale-rose peaks hardening and darkening as they emerged from the water's heated caress to meet the air's cool, invisible touch.

"Vincent . . ." A note of passionate impatience crept into her husky voice. "Please . . ."

He savored the sound of her low cry as she flung back her head, offering him the vulnerable arch of her slender throat in a gesture of supplication and surrender.

Her hair flowed, floating behind her, a honey gold fan spread upon the ebony surface of the water as he lowered his head to complete his mastery of her. His lips found the soft joining of her neck and shoulder, drew back exposing long, deadly canines to nibble at the sensitive flesh. Their pointed tips traced a torturous path downward followed by the searing rasp of his tongue as it lapped the creamy white flesh quivering beneath each long, lingering stroke.

Beyond words, her hands encouraged, rebuked his dalliance. Unable to deny her, or himself a moment longer, his hungry mouth resumed its quest. Catherine's aching sigh marked its passage, her breathless gasp its completion.

A deep answering groan barely escaped his lips before it was submerged in the pounding of her heart at the base of the shadowed, silken valley of her breasts.

Lost in the wild rhythm beneath his lips, he did not feel her hands loosen their convulsive grip in his hair and slip around the nape of his neck, coming to rest lightly, at the sides of his head.

He felt but could not place the feather-light touch of her thumbs as they smoothed his temples in a fleeting caress before her fingers splayed, grasped him tightly, brought his head up in one sure, swift movement, forcing his eyes to meet her own.

Caught unawares, unguarded, the immeasurable depth of his love, the ferocity of his desire lay naked, open to her searching gaze. The blazing light of

his shining spirit, the dark, primal shadows of his strength were inseparable in the vortex that was his passion. It swirled around her, swept through her.

As she fell into its center she cried. "Vincent, I love you . . ."

"Catherine . . ." Vincent's lips finished her name against hers, drew his next breath from deep within her. For a timeless moment he stood poised, balanced on the precipice of oblivion.

He trembled as he heard her call his name once more. It was a plea and a command. Urgent and undeniable. He answered her with a primitive cry of his own as his body reacted, surging upward to meet her breathless descent.

Their bodies merged in a perfect moment of completion which was the joining of their two hearts, the communion of their single soul.

A long time later, hand in hand, they emerged from the pool. Bending, Vincent retrieved his cloak, wrapped Catherine tenderly in its voluminous folds. Swiftly donning his own discarded clothing, he swept her off her feet and into his arms.

Ignoring Catherine's gasping plea to let her dress, Vincent made for the tunnel at the far end of the cavern. A husky laugh escaped him as she half-heartedly protested, pretending to struggle as he carried her into its twisting shadows.

In the stillness remaining behind, the murmur of their hushed voices retreated until there was only the soft whisper of the water as it caressed the pool's edge.

## Chapter 16

The faint hiss of a candle as it sputtered, its wick spent, its feeble flame guttering in a liquid pool of wax, woke her. Laina stirred and sat upright with a start, her hands going to her head in a confused gesture. Unsure of the time, she thought for a moment that she had overslept and glanced across the darkened chamber to Cathy's bed. It was empty and the neatly turned, undisturbed coverlet brought memory flooding back. Suddenly fearful in the darkness of the chamber, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and set fresh tapers upon the nightstand. Lighting their wicks she sighed with relief as the shadows retreated.

Rising, she mechanically straightened the rumpled bedclothes and crossed to the washstand standing in a corner of the chamber. One moment she was pouring water into the porcelain basin, the next the ceramic pitcher was shattering as it hit the far wall of the chamber. Laina watched the pieces scatter and fall upon the worn carpet covering the stone floor of the chamber. Why Cathy? Dear God why her child?

She buried her face in her hands and began to sob, her slender shoulders shaking with the force of her emotion. Everything Father and Peter had said, their words, their faces were a macabre dance in the darkness before her tightly closed eyes. She tried to hide from the panic, the heartstopping terror that gripped her

by denying what they had told her. It could not, it must not be true! But it was. With a determined stiffening of her spine, Laina straightened. She had come too far in the past two years to ever again delude herself . . . but Cathy? Why Cathy?

Was this her punishment? The price for the years of denial and degradation during which she had watched her dreams die a slow and painful death? Abused, abandoned, knowing no other way to live, to survive, she had done . . . what she had done. She had come to hate everything and everyone and she had hated herself most of all. Little more than a child, she had become pregnant. Having no hope of escape for herself from the cruel reality of her world, what hope was there for her child? No, better to end it . . . for both of them, and she would have . . . if not for Catherine.

Catherine had listened, had cared, and she had brought Laina here. Here she had found a home, a family. Here she had found a world she could live in, a world she could bring a child into without fear. She had made a life for herself and her child, a life she could be proud of, and a future . . .

Was it only yesterday she had dreamed of the future, hers and Cathy's? Now those bright and promising dreams were crumbling around her . . . shattered like . . . the remains of the pitcher. With a sigh Laina crossed the room to collect the wreckage.

As she bent over the broken shards at her feet, a sound at the doorway startled her. Turning, she forgot the broken glass in her hands. Cullen was standing there. She gasped as a sharp edge sliced her finger.

"Laina, what . . . ?" Seeing the bright crimson stain spreading on her fingertips, he crossed the room and quickly took the broken glass from her hands. Depositing the pieces in a waste bin he held out his hand with an indulgent smile.

"Let me see your hand." When she made no move to obey he took her hand in his and gently probed the cut. "It doesn't look too bad, no splinters and," he teased, "no need for such a woeful expression. Here let me kiss it and make it better."

As he bent to press his lips against her finger Laina snatched her hand away. "Cullen! No . . ." Her quick movement startled him. Puzzled, he watched her turn away.

"Laina, it's only a small cut. Did I hurt you?" Her back still facing him, she shook her head slowly. Relieved he took a step towards her. "Then why?" There was something in her attitude, in the way she stood, shoulders hunched, her head bowed that frightened him. He glanced about the chamber, saw Cathy's

empty bed. His voice was concerned as he turned her to face him. "Laina, where's Cathy?"

A curtain of ash blonde hair hiding her face from him, she did not answer. Her head came up as he gently prompted, "Laina, tell me . . ." the words trailed off into silence as her stricken eyes met his.

"Oh, Cullen." His name was sob as she threw herself against his chest and began weeping uncontrollably.

Frightened now, he put his arms around her, bewildered, helpless in the face of her tears, he searched for words to comfort her. "Laina, please don't." She continued to sob, lost in a nameless, wordless grief he did not understand. "Tell me. Please." He gently stroked her straight, fine, baby soft hair. "Sweetheart . . ." The endearment came awkwardly to his lips, he was not a man accustomed to expressing his feelings. "What is it? Don't you know you can tell me anything?"

Her slender body stilled suddenly, confused, and he did not resist as she slowly withdrew from his arms. They dropped involuntarily to his sides as she raised her head and determinedly wiped the tears from her cheeks. There was a haunted expression, a mingling of hope and doubt in her eyes as they searched his.

Could she believe him? Dared she believe him? There was so much she had not told him. So much she might never be able to tell anyone. Perhaps one day, when the wounds were well and truly healed, she might be able to tell him . . . anything. But to tell him this, now . . .

Cullen cared for her, she knew he cared. Could that caring survive? A wounded creature herself, she recognized the scars that Cullen carried. They were, not so very . . . different, and no less deep than her own. His fears, the betrayals and disillusionment of his past. The barriers he had placed between himself and the pain, between himself and . . . the emotions that had caused it. They were just now beginning to weaken. Had they weakened enough? Had he healed enough? For that matter . . . had she?

Her silence, the silence in the chamber, lengthened as Cullen watched her, trying to find in the emotions crossing her tear-stained face, a clue, a reason. Instinctively he knew it had something to do with Cathy's absence, and . . . the lingering illness affecting the child's health in the past few weeks. The thought struck him like a blow. Cathy, it must be something -- something was wrong with Cathy! "Laina." His voice, unsteady, gruff broke the silence. "Laina, is it . . . Cathy?"

She did not speak, she did not have to, her face, the grey misery of her eyes told him. Something was seriously wrong with the little girl who had come to mean so much to him. Cathy was the child he had never had, the child Betty had never given him . . .

"No!" His denial was a gasp as the memories swept through him, filled with faces faded by time yet the pain was as sharp, as fresh, as if it had all happened only yesterday.

Laina moved toward him. "Cullen, she is so ill, so very ill." Cullen's arms hung at his sides, did not move to hold her as she clung to him, pressed her face against his chest, her arms encircling his neck. Inwardly, he . . . shrank from the contact.

"What do you mean?" He loosened Laina's arms, stepped back to look down at her upturned face, pale, framed by the ashen tangle of her hair, dominated by wide grey eyes which were dark, filled with shadows. "Laina," his grip on her arms tightened as he repeated the question. "What do you mean? What's wrong with Cathy?"

She moved then, pulling herself free with a sudden twist of her shoulders. He made no effort to stop her, watched as her hands clasped tightly before her, her teeth raking her bottom lip before the words came with difficulty. "Cathy is ill, Cullen." He heard the deep breath she took, waited as she released it slowly. "She has AIDS." Her eyes held his, willing him not to look away, "and I . . . I am HIV positive."

"That's impossible!" He had imagined . . . anything . . . but not this. This was . . . this couldn't be happening! This couldn't be true, yet all he had to do was look into her eyes and see that it was . . . true and the little he knew of the disease told him that those who had it . . . died. Died. NO . . . !

"It's true Cullen." Laina's voice was barely audible above the scream of denial in his mind.

"Why, how . . . but the disease only affects . . ." He could not prevent the question, did not need the answer. Laina's past . . . he could see . . . Laina blamed herself for this. He cursed himself, punished himself with all the guilty pain in her eyes. He could see her suffering, could feel it. He began to reach out to her and . . . stopped. His fears, all the doubts he had fought so hard to banish held him -- stilled him -- he could not move.

"Cullen, please . . . "



Laina needed him, and he could not go to her. She held out her arms to him and he saw . . . Betty's arms. His wife's arms, frail, wasted with the cancer reaching out to him, begging him to help her and there was nothing he could do. He had watched her die. He closed his eyes against the sight, when he opened them again the illusion had faded. Laina stood there. He shrank from the feeling of helplessness consuming him. He could not, he would not . . . go through this again. "No." He was unaware that he had spoken the word.

Laina heard. Despite the bitter disappointment of that rejection, despite her own anguish, or perhaps because of it, she understood his and she felt, compassion. Her own need for comfort was forgotten as she searched for a way to comfort him. She did not move closer, something told her he could not accept that. What could she say? Anything she -- words would only wound him further. What then?

She offered him the only thing she could -- something she had only just begun to realize the value of -- she offered him . . . time. The time to face what she had told him, time to think, time to . . . decide.

"Cullen," There was so much fear in his eyes, so much . . . pain. "I'm sorry." It was not what she had meant to say but in the face of such suffering there was nothing else she could . . . say.

Her simple, heartfelt apology nearly unmanned him. That she should, in the midst of all she must be feeling, apologize, to him! It was what he should -- wanted to say -- to her. It was more than he could bear. All he wanted to do was run, run fast and far, away.

With a silent, hopeless prayer that he would stay, Laina offered him the means of escape. "Cullen, Cathy is in the hospital chamber. I must go to her, I must be there when she . . ."

"Yes, of course." He could not keep the relief from showing in his voice. Laina heard it and bit back a sob as she said. "We'll talk, we should talk . . . but, not now. Now, I . . ."

He was already at the doorway. "Yes, later, we'll . . . talk later. Laina, I . . ." Cullen gave her one last look, begging her forgiveness. Laina looked away from the pain and shame in that glance. When she looked up, he was gone.

Tears threatened to fall as she fought the hurt bewilderment of his desertion. "Oh, Cullen," it was no more than a choked whisper. "Why didn't you stay? I needed you to . . . stay." She dashed away the tears with a ragged sigh. There

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was no time for tears now. Cathy needed her. There would be time for tears later.

## Chapter 17

The sound of raised voices outside his office penetrated the daze of shocked disbelief clouding his mind and hampering his ability to think. He had to think, decide what to do, but how, when the only thought he could grasp was, "this can't be happening, this can't . . ."

"You can't go in there. Mr. Maxwell isn't seeing anyone."

"He'll see me."

The door flew open, slamming against the wall with a loud crash as Diana, followed closely by his secretary, strode into the room.

Well not exactly strode. Joe noticed with a detached interest that she was favoring her left foot and limping slightly.

"I'm sorry Mr. Maxwell." Irene's normally calm voice was flustered as she tried to apologize. "I told Miss Bennett . . ."

"It's all right Irene."

With a small nod and an indignant glance at Diana she turned and went to the doorway. "If you need me I'll be right outside." She closed the door behind her with a small, angry bang.

"Irene tends to be a little over protective."

"She has good reason to be." Diana limped towards the desk. "You could use some protection Joe." She drew a folded newspaper from under her arm and spread it on the desk before him.

Beneath his photo the tabloid's headlines blared in typical hyperbole.

### MANHATTAN DA UNDER INVESTIGATION.

The smaller caption went on to read, *Acting District Attorney Maxwell facing charges of corruption, implicated in the unsolved murder of former Assistant DA Catherine Chandler. (Story on page 2).*

"Not a very flattering photo is it?" It was at best a half-hearted attempt at humor.

Diana was not in the mood to be amused. "No," she agreed. "But then neither are the accusations."

Joe's expression hardened. "You can't believe that I . . ."

She lowered herself into a chair with a tired sigh. "I don't know what to believe." When he would have protested she held up her hand. With the directness characteristic of her, Diana did not waste words. "Joe, two nights ago, acting on a tip from a reliable source, an . . . associate of mine watched a meet go down in Central Park." Diana noted that Joe had stiffened, was avoiding her steady gaze. Her grave expression deepened. "He watched a man, a member of Gabriel's organization, meet another man. Words were exchanged, and, what looked like an envelope. That other man was you Joe."

Was he relieved that she knew? His thoughts were in a turmoil. Did she think he could be bought? Did she believe the accusations being levelled at him? He grudgingly admitted to himself the events of two nights ago could appear damning to the eyes of an observer. He had been set-up, had walked into a trap. The signs were all too clear. The address written on the sheet of paper in the envelope he had been given was a vacant lot, the limo rented, paid for in cash, no questions asked. And now this . . . He glanced at the ugly headlines of the paper on the desk before him. How could he have . . .?

"Joe, what did happen that night? Why were you in the park? Why did you meet Pope? What was in the envelope they gave you?"

His head snapped up, anger and defiance replacing uncertainty, all of his attention riveted on her use of the unfamiliar name. Who was this Pope? How did she know his name when he did not? The case had been officially closed.

Although he had not believed, still did not believe her when she said she wasn't holding back any information, he had been forced to accept her refusal to discuss it. Now, her words were an admission that she had been lying to him all along.

Unaware of the direction of his thoughts, Diana was saying, "I know you're innocent Joe, but unless I know the truth, unless you tell me . . ."

"*Tell you? You tell me Diana!*" His hurt and frustration fueling his angry reaction, he almost spat the words at her. "Tell me how you know this Pope? Explain to me why you would be following a lead in this investigation; an investigation you removed yourself from in spite of my objections? A case closed by this department months ago? *Tell you the truth Diana?* You want me to tell you the truth? What would you know about the truth?"

Shocked into silence Diana could only stare as he continued, "Perhaps the elusive Vincent could tell us. Now there's a name we *both* know, don't we? But we're not the only ones who know *that* name, are we, Diana?"

"What?"

"Now the lady is interested, is she?" Joe's sneer of contempt emphasized the ugly, mocking irony in his voice. "What is it about this Vincent that the mere mention of his name can spark so much interest?"

"Joe, I don't . . ."

He did not let her continue. "Oh, I think you *do* Diana. I think you know more . . . much more about Vincent than you let on. *Who is he Diana?*"

"*Joe please . . . you don't know what . . .*"

"You're right. I don't know. I just don't know . . ." He rose from the desk and went to the window, his anger fading. Exhausted, he leaned his forehead against the cool windowpane.

"Joe Maxwell." His voice was no more than a whisper. "Hot shot district attorney, can't accept . . . that. Can't live with the fact he couldn't prevent, couldn't solve Cathy Chandler's murder. So what does he do? He allows himself to be set-up like some green, wet behind the ears, rookie investigator." He turned to face her. "Damn it Diana, I should have known better!"

Rising from the chair Diana came to stand beside him. Her eyes were dark with concern and remorse. She was partly to blame for his pain; wanted -- but was unable to -- provide him with the answers he so desperately needed -- the answers he deserved.

Joe's eyes searched hers. "Tell me Diana." He hated himself for asking, for trying to take advantage of the distress he was causing her, but he was only human and he *had* to know. "Diana. Who is Vincent?"

He felt her retreat, saw in her eyes the resolute expression of denial and the shadow of . . . a secret.

"Joe, please. Try to understand. I can't . . ." She laid her hand on his arm.

The vulnerable, bewildered young man of a moment ago vanished as an obstinate defiance rushed to the defense of his injured pride. Pushing her hand away he lashed out at her.

"Oh, but I do understand. Keep your secrets Diana. I don't need them."

Returning to his desk he flicked the intercom. In response to his signal the door opened and his secretary entered. "Irene, Miss Bennett is leaving." His tone brooked no argument.

Accepting defeat in that dismissal, Diana slowly limped toward the young woman who stood holding the door open, her expression one of blatant curiosity. "This way Miss Bennett."

Diana paused. "Joe. I meant what I said."

Joe looked up from the papers he was pointedly shuffling. His reply was coldly polite. "Thank you. I'll take that into consideration."

"Joe, I want to help."

His expression as he bid her, "Good-bye Diana," implied he doubted both her ability and . . . her desire to do so.

Diana left then and as Irene closed the door behind her she stopped and glanced at the opaque glass upon which Joe's name and title were painted.

"Was there something else, Miss Bennett?" The remark seemed to imply Irene doubted there could be, she added in a smug, secretarial voice, "Something you'd like me to tell Mr. Maxwell?"

Tell him? Diana sighed silently. If only she *could* tell Joe . . . Shaking her head she turned and as she made her way past the rows of desks she couldn't help but feel she had lost a friend. Worse still, perhaps, was the feeling that friend had lost himself.

## Chapter 18

The candles in Father's chamber were guttering, nearly burnt out. Father was seated at his desk, books covering nearly the whole of it's broad surface, some in haphazard piles, others lying open and scattered before him. Father's head was bent over one of them, his shoulders bowed in an attitude of exhaustion and despair.

"Father . . ." Vincent's deep voice vibrated with concern. "Father, what is it?"

Father looked up, his face grey, exhaustion etched in every line. Behind his glasses, his eyes were nearly black with fatigue, deeply shadowed under heavy red-rimmed lids as they met the questions in the troubled blue of Vincent's.

"Ah, Vincent, you've come." Relief only, none of the pointed irony Vincent might have expected in having taken so long to answer Father's summons. Father's note, left in their chamber last evening during their absence, had gone unnoticed upon their return. Vincent had come across it only this morning. Descending the short staircase, he came to stand beside the desk.

"I've been reading." The gesture accompanying Father's statement encompassed the array of volumes before him. Vincent followed the sweep of Father's hand and saw that the books were all medical texts. The small, close

print of the pages was interspersed with precise anatomical drawings and slightly surreal, strangely beautiful photographs of the minute workings of the human body.

Father's gaze followed Vincent's. "Remarkable isn't it? Such an intricate design, each infinitesimal part dependant on countless other infinitesimal parts, the sum of which is the marvelous machine we call the human body. A miracle really . . . and despite all we know about it . . . a mystery still."

"Father, your note . . . I don't understand." Now puzzlement vied with concern in Vincent's voice as he tried to grasp Father's meaning.

"Precisely. We don't understand. We try. God knows Vincent, we do try. Medical science solves one riddle and before we've finished patting ourselves on the back, congratulating each other on our cleverness, some new disease rears its ugly head. A new gauntlet is thrown down to mock our self satisfied complacency -- ask questions we can't answer. What good is all this then? This collection of knowledge from decades of research; this testament of man's conceit, his vainglorious attempt to play God. What good is it I ask you?" In a gesture of disgust, Father swept the books from the desk before him and buried his head in his hands. "God help me Vincent, I call myself a doctor -- a healer -- yet what do I really know . . . what can I -- what am I to do?"

"Father, what is it? Are you . . . ill?"

Father's reply was a muffled laugh with no humor in it. "I? No, not I. I wish it were that . . . simple."

Stunned, a slow, chilling fear crept into Vincent's mind, formulated a question which forced itself from his lips in an overwhelmingly urgent need to know. "If not you then . . . who?" An unreasoning panic shook him as Vincent's mind found the names nearest his heart, stopping it for an endless moment as he struggled for the breath with which to form the words. "Is it . . . Catherine? Jacob?"

Leaning across the desk, he forced Father's grief stricken eyes to meet the tortured intensity of his own. "No. It can't be! Father. Answer me!"

Father shook his head vehemently. "No, Vincent. No, not that!"

His head bowed, relief flooding through him, he saw with a kind of detached interest, that his hands, hanging heavy as lead at his sides, were trembling with the force of his feelings.



Father, realizing what his self absorbed rhetoric had done to Vincent, rose slowly and moved around the side of the desk to stand before the mute figure of his son.

"Vincent, I'm sorry." The apology brought Vincent's head up.

Father responded to the unanswered questions clouding the brilliant blue of those eyes. "Vincent, it's . . . Laina. Laina and young Cathy. Peter brought the news yesterday afternoon. The tests he took, the results came back positive. The reason the child has been ill, the reason why she has lost weight . . ."

"You said she had a virus . . ." Vincent repeated Father's diagnosis, his simple, unswerving faith in Father's medical omniscience an unintentional rebuke to the older man.

"Yes." Father sighed. "I said she had a virus. That, at least, I did know. But what I did not know was the virus the child has, the virus both Laina and Cathy have, is AIDS."

"Father, no!" There was no need for Father to explain what the acronym meant. Even here in their separate and sheltered world, news of this terrible plague had reached them.

"Yes, Vincent." Father's voice held a wealth of self-recrimination, as if in some way he held himself responsible. "Peter feels certain, and I agree, the possibility of error, of misdiagnosis, is so slim as to be non-existent. The child has AIDS; Laina, is HIV Positive. There is . . . no way of determining when, or if, she too . . . will develop the disease."

Vincent's mind understood the meaning of Father's words. His heart, however, could not grasp, would not accept the grim reality they contained. And it was his heart which listened, grieved, as Father went on, carefully explaining what this would mean for Laina and Cathy -- what it would mean, for them all.

## Chapter 19

As Diana rode downward in the small, dingy elevator she knew an overwhelming desire to find Elliot. She didn't question why she needed to be with him, to talk to him. She only knew she needed him and that need guided her more surely than any conscious thought. She did not notice the well-dressed figure of a man move away from the opposite wall as she stepped out of the elevator. Did not see his silent, determined approach.

To the casual observer it would have appeared they knew each other as his arm came around her waist pulling her close. That same observer was not meant to see -- would not have seen -- the small pistol pressed into her side.

"What . . ." She tried to struggle out of his hold.

"Don't do anything foolish Miss Bennett." The vice-like pressure of the arm about her enforced the command, effectively stilling her as she was propelled out of the building and across the sidewalk to where a long black limo waited at the curb, its engine idling. The rear door was held open by an impassive figure in a chauffeur's uniform, the muscles bulging beneath the dark jacket belying its wearer's present occupation. One quick thrust deposited her in the passenger compartment as the door closed, with a solid click of its locking mechanism, behind her.

She was not alone. She sank into the cushioned leather of the seat, her eyes taking a moment to adjust to the gloom of the vehicle's interior, before she turned to face its other occupant. A slight widening of her eyes was the only outward indication that she recognized him. Remarkably, she found herself thinking she would have to congratulate Elliot on the accuracy of his description.

"I believe you know who I am, Miss Bennett."

"What, but not who." It seemed her sarcasm had an appreciative audience for his laugh was quite genuine.

"*Touche*, Diana. May I call you Diana?"

"Hah!" Her derisive snort amused rather than offended him. "I expect you will do whatever you please."

"As you wish." He shrugged and looked out the window seeming suddenly to have lost interest in the conversation and his companion.

Diana, however, had not yet finished with her share of polite insults. Her voice was deceptively casual, sweetly mocking as she inquired, "I suppose *you* know where we're going."

He refused to rise to the bait. Without withdrawing his gaze from the passing scenery he replied "Of course."

Provoked, goaded into an emotional response she demanded. "Well are you going to tell me." She collected herself quickly and added in a cynical voice, "Or, is it a secret?"

He glanced at her then, a curiously unpleasant smile curling his lips. "Oh there's no secret Diana. A mutual acquaintance would like the simple pleasure of your company and . . . perhaps some, shall we say, stimulating and informative conversation?"

Diana's skeptical expression indicated the pleasure would be one-sided. He inclined his head and turned to resume his contemplation of their progress through the city streets.

Sensing he would say no more, Diana bit her lip nervously and began to think of escape. She wondered if she should try to reach the small handgun concealed in the ankle holster she wore. She discarded the notion as she realized threatening the man beside her with it would, in all probability, not deter the two men who occupied the front seat.

For the moment it appeared escape was . . . unlikely. Trying to contain both her curiosity and her fear, she settled back in her seat as the car smoothly accelerated and turned north onto the West Side Highway.

## Chapter 20

It was Vincent's heart which had spoken to Catherine, had cried with her, his arms holding her as she protested -- as he had -- refusing to believe what they both so desperately wished to deny; continued to deny, even now -- hours later -- as they sat together in the community dining room.

"Vincent, it can't be. I can't believe . . . I won't believe this can be happening." The shock and distress Catherine had felt upon first hearing the tragic news continued unabated; was evident in the husky, heartfelt trembling of her voice. "Laina *and* Cathy . . . *AIDS*. My God Vincent . . . *Why?*" Catherine repeated a question she had voiced again and again each time with more hope and less conviction. "Perhaps there has been a mistake? The tests are not always . . . accurate."

Vincent's emotions echoed the painful intensity of Catherine's stunned whisper. He reached across to take her hand, holding it tightly in his own, he gave her comfort with his touch he could not give her with words. Catherine bent her head, pressed her cheek to his hand in a gesture of gratitude and shared grief before lifting her eyes once again to meet his.

The noise and clatter all around them went unnoticed as they sat facing each other across the table until the wordless communion flowing between them was broken by a sudden stillness which encompassed the entire room.

All conversation seemed to skip a beat, cease for no more than handful of seconds, before resuming with a determination which made the preceding pause all the more obvious. The arrested look on Catherine's face turned Vincent swiftly in the direction of her startled gaze.

Laina stood frozen in the doorway, framed by its uneven arch as if she were a statue. Her expression clearly indicated she was painfully aware of the reason for the incriminating pause . . . and that she was its cause.

"Oh, no." Catherine's anguished whisper echoed the distress in Laina's hurt, defiant eyes as they desperately searched the room absorbing the attitude of unwelcome in deliberately turned backs and studiously bowed heads. Even those who had continued to watch her would not meet her eyes, looked quickly away from her brimming grey gaze.

"Vincent please . . ." Catherine's plea was unnecessary. Already on his feet, Vincent crossed the room with his long stride. Arriving beside Laina at the very moment she turned to leave, his hand took hers. Gently, he drew her back into the room, guiding her with a reassuring firmness to the table where Catherine stood waiting.

"Laina, hello. Won't you join us?" Though every muscle in Catherine's arms ached to reach out to the girl, the casual invitation -- despite her longing to cry out in sympathy for what Laina must be feeling -- was a triumph of will over emotion.

Laina's small, trembling smile of gratitude, her whispered, "Thank you." were Catherine's reward.

As Laina settled herself on the bench beside her Catherine turned to Vincent. "Vincent, I'm starving. Could you get me a plate and," with a quick glance at the pinched look on Laina's face she added, "one for Laina, too, please."

Despite Laina's whispered protest that she wasn't hungry, Vincent smiled, and draping a napkin over his arm, bowed slightly, in a humorous imitation of a waiter. "Two house specials, coming right up ladies."

Catherine watched him leave with a small, crooked smile. Turning to Laina she winked before commenting in a conspiratorial whisper, "The service here is . . . wonderful. The food, however . . . Rumor has it, today's 'house special' is William's latest attempt at homemade pasta."

Laina was not paying attention, her eyes appearing . . . dazed, not focused on anything. Momentarily discouraged, Catherine busied herself rearranging the silverware on the place setting before her.

Vincent returned to the silent table moments later carrying a tray in his hands, he was followed closely by William who was also holding a tray. William's surly, shamefaced expression was the only outward indication of the uncharacteristically harsh, stinging rebuke Vincent had delivered in his kitchen for his reluctance to serve Laina. The cook set the tray on the table and acknowledged Catherine's polite, "Thank you, William," with a abrupt "Hrrumph" before leaving.

Catherine passed out plates, laughing as she observed, "I see William still hasn't gotten the knack of that pasta machine Mouse found and repaired for him." The odd, uneven shapes on their plates were proof of the accuracy of her comment. "Will you look at this." She held up her fork from which an amoeba-shaped macaroni was suspended.

"Now, Catherine," there was a gentle note of censure in Vincent's voice. "Knowing William, I'm sure this will be," he surveyed the food on his plate, " . . . delicious."

Catherine's exaggerated grimace indicated she doubted Vincent's description of this particular example of William's otherwise expert culinary skill. She was about to make another comment, then, as Vincent glanced at her with a mock-serious warning, she changed her mind saying instead, "Well, let's hope it tastes better than it looks. What do you say Laina? Do we all dig in at once? Or, do we let Vincent take the first bite and see if he survives?" Laina did not respond. With a silent sigh Catherine abandoned her attempt at humor, after exchanging a puzzled glance with Vincent she looked down at her plate and slowly began to eat.

Laina's plate remained untouched and after a moment Vincent spoke. "How was Cathy feeling this morning Laina?"

Laina looked up, meeting the gentle concern in his eyes she made a visible effort to speak, swallowed and tried again, "She seemed . . . better."

The worn, worried expression on Laina's face tugged at Catherine's heart. "That's . . . I'm glad, Laina."

"Catherine and I would like to visit her. With your permission of course Laina."

Laina stared at Vincent for a moment before she turned to look at Catherine. Catherine met the question in Laina's eyes, smiled her agreement as she added, "We thought we'd bring Jacob with us. I know he would love to see Cathy."

Laina hesitated. "I don't know. She'd like that . . . I . . . I'll have to ask Father . . ."

"Good. We'll do that then." Catherine lapsed into silence once more when, in reply to her statement, Laina merely nodded.

"Laina, why don't you try to eat." Vincent quietly encouraged her. "I promise you it is quite good."

Without a word Laina picked up her fork and began to eat in a mechanical manner, submitting to her body's need for nourishment without having any real appetite for it.

As she ate, in the silence that followed, the murmur of voices buzzing through the room became noticeable. The sound had an ugly undercurrent of nervous fear, an angry hiss of suspicion, punctuated now and then by the scrape of benches as their occupants rose -- meals unfinished -- to leave the room, their manner ranging from varying degrees of furtive guilt to undisguised outrage.

As Laina became painfully aware of each sound, her fork began to traverse the distance between her plate and her mouth with an increasing slowness. Finally, she lowered the utensil to the table, completely abandoning even the pretense of eating. She bent her head over her plate attempting to conceal the hurt written plainly on her face, the tears gathering in her eyes.

Catherine eyes met Vincent's across the table, their green depths almost grey with heartache. He responded to the unspoken entreaty in them as he whispered, "Laina?"

She looked up as he said her name. "I'm . . . It's alright, Vincent." Her attempt at a smile froze upon her face as, from a nearby table, the whispered insult reached them. "Whore."

The ugly slur snapped the slender thread of Laina's self control. Catherine's gasp of outrage died on her lips. With a smothered sob, Laina had risen, was up, away from the table and out of the room before even Vincent's lightning reflexes could stop her. For a stunned moment he watched her retreat before he silently communicated his intention to Catherine and with a quick nod, accepted her fervent, unspoken blessing.

Renascence II  
No Safe Place But the Heart

As he left the table, every head in the room followed him. Reaching the doorway he turned. One by one, heads bowed or looked away from the blazing look of contempt and pity with which he branded them all.

The silence following his departure was abruptly broken by the sound Catherine's fork made as she slammed it to the table. Pushing aside her own nearly untouched plate, she reached across the table and drew Laina's plate toward her. Taking Laina's discarded fork in her hand, slowly, deliberately, she began to eat. Aware that every eye in the room was riveted on her she took one bite, then another -- unaware that the food tasted like ashes in her mouth, and that tears were coursing down her cheeks. She ate until the plate was clean then, setting the fork carefully upon the plate, she defiantly met the looks of horror and shame on the faces around her. She gathered Jacob into her arms, rose slowly and with her head held high, left the room.



## Chapter 21

The ringing at the other end of the line went on unanswered. Elliot let it continue well past a reasonable or even an unreasonable number of rings. "Where is she?" He had been trying to reach Diana for hours now. Muttering under his breath, he slowly replaced the receiver and considered what he should do next.

Their plans had been simple enough and Diana's part in them had been confirmed only this morning. The morning papers had merely precipitated the need for a talk with Joe. Diana, of course, was the only possible candidate for this, as Elliot still remained "dead" to all but a few carefully chosen individuals. In any case, his former relationship with Joe would not have helped matters.

No, Diana was the only one who could confront Joe with what Elliot had seen two nights ago in Central Park. First she was to have gone to Joe's office this morning, then they had planned to go Below, together, to share what they knew with Catherine and Vincent. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, they would ask Catherine for the notebook.

Surely now, Catherine would reveal the whereabouts of it. The ordeal of waiting for that decision would at last come to an end. Another would take its place, for now they feared the ugly headlines -- appearing in this morning's more sensational tabloids -- might also make it necessary for her to reappear. If there

was enough false evidence to implicate Joe in Catherine's murder this might be the only way to clear him.

Diana's meeting with Joe should have been long over with. Even if she had been delayed, Elliot was certain she would have left word for him with the service that had been employed to take messages. He had checked there several times and the answer was always the same, no word from Diana.

Deciding to take a chance, he dialed the DA's office and asked to speak with Miss Bennett. When he was informed that she had left quite a while ago, his vague uneasiness became a certainty. Something had gone wrong. The only salve he could apply to his growing ache of anxiety was to tell himself that Diana knew how to take care of herself. She had proved her ability to do just that a number of times. He would just have to trust in that knowledge until time or events proved him wrong.

An impatient tapping on the glass door beside him recalled him abruptly to the present. With an apologetic shrug, he relinquished possession of the booth. Needing an excuse to sit and think, he went to the counter of the seedy, downtown diner where he had stopped to place the call and ordered a cup of coffee.

Although he was not quite sure what to do next, there seemed, at the moment, only one place to go. He had to go Below, but he would not do so until the time they had both agreed upon. He would wait, and at the appointed hour he would go to the entrance to the tunnels. Whether Diana came or did not, he would go through with their original plan.

## Chapter 22

Leaving the dining chamber, Vincent followed Laina. His footsteps took him to her chamber. There he found her, lying across the bed, her slender body trembling, racked with sobs. Vincent came into the room, crossing it to stand beside the bed. "Laina?"

"Vincent, please just go away."

With a small shake of his head Vincent sat on the bed beside her, laid his hand gently upon her shoulder. "Laina, let me help you."

Her body went rigid beneath his touch. Her small hands clenching the pillow beside her head, she lashed out at him, "Don't you understand? I don't need your help." Raising tear-stained eyes to his she rejected the concern, the caring she saw there. "I don't . . . want your . . . help." She took a deep, shaky breath. "Go away! Leave me alone!" Turning her face from him, she shrank from the touch of Vincent's hand as it covered hers. He barely heard her muffled plea, "I just want to be left alone."

"You don't mean that Laina."

For a moment she resisted, tried to pull her hand from Vincent's grasp. He would not let her. Finally, with a sigh, her body relaxed, her hand slowly unclenched beneath Vincent's. Curling her legs under her body, she raised

herself to sit facing him on the bed. Her eyes met his, a small spark of hurt defiance flaring in them and quickly dying. She looked like a small child, lost and afraid, as she admitted, "No, I . . . don't mean that."

"I know, Laina."

Encouraged by Vincent's steady gaze, she returned the clasp of his hand. "It's just that . . . I can't . . ." With a strangled sob she threw herself forward and buried her face against Vincent's chest. "Tell me it isn't true Vincent. Tell me it's all been a bad dream. Please tell me . . ."

Vincent's arms came around her, held her gently as he said, "I can't tell you that Laina. You know . . . the truth."

She shook her head, denying his words. "Then lie to me Vincent. I don't want the truth. What good is the truth, what good is anything . . . now."

Vincent's hand stroked her hair, silently comforting her as she wept.

Long moments later, her tears spent, her sobs subsiding, she took several long, slow gulps of air and raised her head. Trying to collect herself she gratefully accepted the handkerchief Vincent offered with a moist sniff. Sitting upright, she carefully wiped the tears from her cheeks and prosaically blew her nose on the damp, crumpled square of fabric.

"I'm sorry Vincent."

"Laina . . . there's no need to apologize."

She laughed -- it was at best a weak, tremulous attempt. "That's all I seem to do lately, apologize, to you, to. . . Funny, the one person I can't, I haven't -- the one person to whom I should . . . Oh God Vincent. Cathy. How could I have done this to her? *How could I have let this happen to my child?*"

"Laina, it's not your fault."

"Oh yes it is . . . my fault. My life Vincent. My choices. I just didn't know then . . . that I would have a child . . . that this could happen . . ."

"How could you have known? No one knew Laina. This threat, this tragedy, was for so long, no more than a shocked whisper. Above. AIDS was a new and terrible disease which seemed to have stricken only the homosexual community. The self-righteous, the narrow-minded had called it a judgement upon a way of life they did not accept or understand. Those without compassion had turned their backs believing that this could not possibly touch them, could not affect *their* lives." He sighed, saddened by the enormity of the price their ignorance was now exacting. They had all been proven wrong.

"That's no excuse." Laina rose from the bed and stood before Vincent. Her small, slender figure shaking with the force of her emotions. "Don't you see Vincent. I did this. Cathy is ill. Cathy is . . ." she took a deep breath, swallowed with difficulty, ". . . dying. Because of me, because of what I did, because of what I am. Whoever said it in the dining room this afternoon was right, I am a wh. . ."

"No!" Vincent would not let her say the word. "No, Laina. You are not. Don't say it. Don't even think it."

She smiled at the vehemence of his denial. "You *would* say that Vincent, it's so like you to say that. You would never . . . But that is exactly what I am. I sold myself. I put a price on my body. I gave myself to anyone . . ."

"*That was not giving Laina.*" There was anger in his voice as he contradicted her. "You never gave yourself, not the part that is truly yourself, to anyone until . . ."

"I offered myself to you?" She laughed, it was a sound filled with bitterness, self-mockery. "All things considered, you were wise to refuse."

"Laina." There was a wealth of compassion in the voice that said her name, and there was . . . regret. "That isn't what I meant."

"But it is the *truth*, Vincent. Whatever lies I've told -- or lived -- before, that at least, is true."

"No Laina, it is not."

"How can you . . ." Stung by his denial, she would have argued with him. He did not allow her to continue.

"You gave yourself to your child Laina, to Cathy. Whatever happened before, or after, nothing, no one can deny or destroy that gift. Nothing or no one that is, except . . . you."

"But this terrible thing . . . I am to blame, I am responsible . . . My daughter is going to die . . ."

"Laina, Cathy doesn't need someone to blame. She needs her mother. She needs you. Are you going to deny her the one thing she needs, the one thing she is going to need more than anything else because of the guilt you feel? A guilt that has nothing to do with who she is, with who you are . . . now. Laina, you are willing to accept the responsibility for Cathy's death." The cruelty of those words hurt him as much as they did her. Vincent hesitated, his heart tormented by the anguish of her eyes yet he had to say the words. "What about the

responsibility . . . for Cathy's life . . . your responsibility . . . for the time there is left to it?" "

"I can't . . ."

His voice was very sad but very sure and strong as he gently placed his hands on her shoulders. "Yes, you can Laina. You will."

"Vincent. How can you be so sure? How can you know what I . . .?"

"I know you. I know who you are Laina and . . . I love you."

She surrendered then to the comfort he offered, went into his arms fresh tears falling from her eyes as she whispered, "Vincent how can I ever . . . ? You, Catherine -- both of you -- have never made me feel . . . have always had such faith in me. I want so much to be . . . worthy."

"You are Laina. Never doubt that you are. Never let anyone make you doubt that."

"I'll try Vincent. I want to . . . try." She was silent for a long moment. "I only wish Cullen . . ."

Vincent held her at arms length, his fingertips turning her face to meet his questioning gaze. "Cullen?"

"Cullen knows Vincent. I told him last night. He . . ." She closed her eyes against the painful memory, opened them to find Vincent watching her closely.

"What did he say? Laina, did Cullen accuse you . . . ?"

Frightened by the spark of violence she saw in his eyes, she emphatically denied his furious demand. "No Vincent! Cullen didn't . . . he would never . . ." A deep sadness darkened the grey of her eyes, the momentary panic in her voice replaced by a weary understanding far exceeding her years. "Cullen didn't . . . say, anything. He didn't have to. I knew. He was -- he is -- afraid Vincent. Even more . . . than I am, I think."

"I see." Compassion extinguished the angry flame in Vincent's eyes. "Yes, Cullen, would be . . . afraid." He knew -- they both knew of Cullen's past, of the loss that had scarred him so deeply. The wound that had never healed. "Laina, what can I say?"

"There is nothing anyone can say Vincent. I must face my . . . fears, And hope that somehow Cullen can . . . face his."

## Chapter 23

Diana watched the river on her right. At this time of day traffic was light. Her companion had not spoken since they had turned onto the highway, had ignored her sporadic attempts to question him until she herself had lapsed into a sullen silence.

She wondered, with a growing concern, why they had not blindfolded her? The only reason which came to mind was they did not care if she knew the location of the place they were taking her, because she would not have the opportunity to tell anyone of it afterward.

Her eyes widened in shocked disbelief as they turned at a familiar exit and drove down quiet, tree-lined streets . . . streets which would lead past the ornate gates of . . . St. Cleo's cemetery.

As the limo turned into the wide avenue just beyond the ivy covered marble plaque upon which the cemetery's name was engraved, those gates swung open, allowing the limo to slip past the stone columns flanking the entrance. Making a wide arc past the memorial chapel and the small parking area, the vehicle effortlessly navigated the cobblestone drive which wound past the irregular rows of monuments and mausoleums.

Diana had known where they were going from the moment they had exited the drive, yet now she had an uneasy premonition of why.

Directly ahead, facing them, an identical vehicle was parked. Diana stiffened as the limo came to a smooth stop. The door beside her opened and a gloved hand was extended into the car to help her out. Ignoring the assistance offered, she unfolded her long legs and forced her protesting left ankle to bear its full share of her weight. Brushing past the rigid, impassive figure of the driver she walked onto the graveled verge separating the drive from the carefully tended sod of the graves.

The watery brilliance of the late afternoon light was a glaring contrast to the dim interior of the limo, narrowing her blue eyes with its intensity. Her companion, having donned dark glasses, was not similarly affected as he appeared beside her. "I believe you know the way, Miss Bennett?"

With a curt nod Diana turned and started off in the direction his gloved hand indicated. Yes, she knew the way.

Twice before she had taken this very path. The first time it had been morning, and the occasion had been a funeral. The second time it had been deepest night, and she had come, alone, in search of someone whose existence was no more than a wild conjecture on her part. What she had found here had changed her life, now she wondered if what awaited her would end it. Just ahead, before the simple tombstone, a man stood, his back to her. She could only guess at his identity. As she drew closer he turned and, without surprise, she saw her suspicions had been correct. It was Pope.

He had not changed in the months since their last, brief meeting. Then, he had stood beside Gabriel. Now, he stood alone. Pope lifted his hand in a small gesture of dismissal. At his signal her silent companion nodded and turned aside to take up a position a short distance away. Out of earshot, but still close enough, she noticed, to foil any attempt she might make to escape.

Glancing quickly about she saw there were people in the distance. The small, buried knot of tension within her began to unravel. Surely Pope would not attempt to harm her with witnesses nearby? Breathing a silent sigh of relief, she gave her full attention to the man standing before her.

Pope had been watching her closely, seemed to know her thoughts. "You are quite safe, Diana, I assure you. I mean you no harm."

"That's very kind of you." The acerbic irony in her voice was not lost on him.



"Ah yes, it is good to see you, *too*, Diana. I have always regretted that our former acquaintance was so . . . fleeting. Unfortunately, this meeting -- of necessity -- will be equally brief."

"I can't tell you how disappointed I am."

Unaffected by her sarcasm, he continued, "I thought this was a particularly appropriate place for our little chat."

Diana followed him as he walked the short distance to the grave. "Such a quiet, peaceful place." His voice took on a contemplative tone, as if he were talking more to himself than to her. "From its appearance, one would never guess how many significant events have taken place here. Did you know, Gabriel chose this very spot to meet with Mr. Burch? The results of that conversation were not . . . profitable, for either party. I do hope we are more fortunate, you and I." He reached out and touched the cold, smooth marble of the stone. "Yes, so much has happened here. Really quite a full history for an empty grave." Diana could not prevent the small gasp his words forced from her. Her eyes met his, a wary question and a defiant challenge in them. "Surely you don't pretend to be surprised, Diana? Now that disappoints me."

"What makes you think . . .?"

"Oh, I don't *think* my dear. I know the grave is empty. I also know Miss Chandler is not, shall we say, ready to rest in peace in it. I'm sure you are also well aware of this, are you not?"

"How would I . . .?"

"Please Diana," Pope cut short her protest. "Your pretense of ignorance insults us both. I know you know she is alive. Just as I am also aware of your relationship with another mutual acquaintance of ours. Tell me Diana, how is Vincent these days -- and the child? It must have been quite a touching little family reunion when Miss Chandler returned, literally from the dead, but in actual fact from the Witness Protection Program." He paused for a moment to gauge the impact of his words, or perhaps, merely to savor their effect. When Diana did not speak he continued, "a remarkable feat, but then Catherine Chandler is a remarkable woman. I was quite . . . impressed when I was informed she was alive."

"You were 'informed' wrong." Diana commented sarcastically.

"I think not. You see Diana I have found that I can trust, can rely on certain 'sources.' One of which, by the way, I believe we share."

Diana reaction to that was immediate. "So. It *was* a set-up."

Pope did not pretend to misunderstand. "Of course it was, as you so quaintly put it, a 'set-up.' We intended that meeting with Mr. Maxwell to be witnessed. But to be perfectly frank, we had thought you would do so yourself." Casually, almost too casually, he added, "Tell me Diana, who *was* watching in the park that night?"

Diana ignored the question, sought to divert his attention. "Why Joe?"

She was almost relieved when he replied, "Surely you know, Diana? There is a certain item. A document that we believe is still in Miss Chandler's possession. We wish to persuade her to return it to its rightful owners."

"By that, I take it you mean, yourself?"

"Of course." Diana longed to wipe the smug, self-satisfied expression from Pope's face. Instead, she chose her next words carefully, "*If* Catherine Chandler were alive . . . what makes you think she would agree to return this document to you?"

"Really, Diana." An impatient note had crept into Pope's voice. "Let's stop playing at cross purposes. *We both know Catherine Chandler is very much alive.*" Realizing he had allowed his frustration to show, Pope quickly collected himself. No hint of emotion was evident in his voice as he said, "But, indeed, why should she cooperate?"

Two could play at that game. Diana's careless shrug suggested the question was of little or no interest to her. Pope was not deceived.

"Perhaps if she were informed by an interested third party, yourself for instance, that we would be willing to enter into negotiations for the item? Shall we say Mr. Maxwell's good name in return for the notebook?"

Infuriated by the casual manner in which Pope referred to his sinister manipulation of Joe, Diana countered, "What's to prevent Catherine Chandler, *if* she is alive, from clearing Joe Maxwell by simply reappearing, with the notebook, or even. . ." she smiled, appearing to relish the thought, ". . . without it?"

"Yes . . ." Pope sounded thoughtful, though undismayed, by the possibility. "I have considered that, and of course, it would complicate matters somewhat. We can't have Mr. Maxwell charged with murder if the corpse -- you'll excuse the cliché -- suddenly sits up and starts talking, can we?"

Inwardly, Diana damned him to the hottest fires of eternal hell and perdition. Outwardly, she was icily sarcastic as she calmly inquired, "You seem to have all the answers. Why don't you tell me?"

Pope ignored her mocking tone. "However, would that happen, if Miss Chandler were informed, by that same third party, that while someone very close to her was Gabriel's -- unwilling guest -- there were video tapes made of that eventful visit? I'm sure she would prefer no one other than herself and perhaps certain other family members to be in possession of those tapes. After all they would raise questions she might find extremely . . . difficult to answer."

Diana did not reply and after a moment, Pope continued in a brisk, business-like tone. "You, Diana, will inform Miss Chandler of our little chat and extend my invitation to discuss this matter in a more direct manner in the very near future." Pope signaled to the waiting limo. "It is, I'm certain, an invitation she will not refuse." As the vehicle's engine started, he added, "Tell her, that if she is interested, she should call this number." He held out a small slip of paper with the warning, "Should you try to pursue this matter yourself, Diana, be assured I will not hesitate to release those tapes. They will have been creatively edited, of course, with an anonymous but generous reward offered for the capture of the beast. *Dead or alive.*"

Diana flinched at those words, despising him as he continued, "I'm sure you'll agree there is a certain fringe element who would find both the tapes, and the reward extremely -- shall we say -- motivational?"

She challenged him. "What guarantee is there that you would not release those tapes, *if they exist*, even if she agreed to the exchange?"

"Diana." He did, Diana thought incredulously, appear to be genuinely offended by the question. "I am not Gabriel. I have no real interest in Miss Chandler, her child, or its rather . . . unusual father. I would be quite willing to forget the existence of all three, as well as the destruction of Mr. Maxwell, if our property is returned. A reasonable, even . . . generous proposition don't you think?"

Diana would not trust herself to tell him exactly what she thought of him and his proposition!

"That concludes our little chat, I think." She would have spoken, but he raised a hand, saying, "No, don't. It was a pleasure seeing you again, Diana. But as I am well aware of your feelings in the matter, let's just say farewell and part as old, but not, I think, *dear* friends?" Pope motioned toward the waiting limo. The gesture was a dismissal.

Diana turned and without a backward glance, walked slowly to the car. This time, she was the only passenger. As the limo pulled away she allowed

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herself one brief, parting glance at the grave. Pope still stood where she had left him, a black shape against the darkening autumn sky.

## Chapter 24

Elliot had waited at the entrance to the alley for an hour past the appointed time, longer than he had promised himself he would -- longer than was safe. He was beginning to feel conspicuous. If he wanted to use this entrance to the tunnels he would have to do so soon, or move on to a different location. The leisurely but determined approach of the patrolman who had eyed him curiously as he passed by not ten minutes ago, made the decision for him.

Ducking into the alley behind him, he moved swiftly to the doorway of the abandoned building. Finding the hidden locking mechanism, he pushed the door inward. It closed behind him with a soft click. Scattered all around him was the litter and debris of years of neglect. Concealed beyond a jumble of crates and packing boxes was the narrow doorway which led to the basement. Elliot walked to it, ignoring the scurrying patter of rodents startled by the sound of his footsteps.

When he was sure the light from the small flashlight he carried would not be seen from outside, he directed it into the black well of the staircase. It's narrow beam revealed a treacherous, virtually vertical descent with gaping holes in nearly every tread, holes that would have -- in actuality were meant to -- discourage any further progress downward.

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With the unerring accuracy of practice, Elliot's feet found the solid portion of each step, followed a drunken zig-zag path Vincent had shown him. A few feet from the bottom of the stair was a dead end in the form of a brick wall. Pressing gently against the third brick to the left of a protruding pipe, Elliot slipped sideways through the narrow opening appearing in the apparently seamless barrier of the wall.

The darkness about him was absolute, broken only by the slender beam of his flashlight. He played it against the stone wall to his right and located the pipe that ran parallel to the ground slightly below eye level. Placing his hand on the pipe's dry, rusted surface, he used it to guide his way toward the junction where there would be the first faint light of torches and a passageway, the first of several, which would eventually lead him to his destination Below.

It had taken him many trips to learn the way without a guide. Now, although he did not need assistance, he paused several times and tapped a signal on the pipe to announce his presence.

## Chapter 25

Catherine was alone in the chamber having left Jacob to play in the nursery with some of the other children under the watchful supervision of one of Mary's young helpers. A gregarious, extroverted child, Jacob genuinely enjoyed the company of others.

Vincent had not yet returned. She had not seen him since he had gone after Laina, earlier this afternoon. The memory of what had precipitated Laina's flight still had the power to make her tremble with outrage and dismay. How could they have been so cruel?

Catherine prayed Vincent had found her, had somehow succeeded in comforting her. Theirs was, Catherine knew, an especially close relationship, a deep and mutual understanding which had been forged at their first meeting. Vincent had spoken of this to Catherine, told her how deeply he had been touched by Laina's immediate and complete acceptance of him. His sensitive soul had recognized in Laina a kindred spirit which knew the same frustrated longing to be free. Laina's words had moved him. They had evoked Vincent's own impossible dreams of escape, of mountains -- that neither had ever seen -- of places they went with their minds, when the prison of their bodies became too much to bear.

They understood each other, and in that understanding Laina had found the

first, faint promise of . . . love. Vincent had been, still was, a stranger to the conceit which would have allowed him to imagine Laina could come to look upon him as more than a friend, to look upon him as a man she could love. Catherine, living Above, separate and apart from their lives Below, had not had the opportunity to observe -- to recognize, the signs of Laina's growing attachment.

During her visits Below, Vincent and Catherine rarely expressed their deep and consuming love with public gestures. Rather, it was an unspoken thing between them -- a profoundly private feeling -- acknowledged, but seldom openly discussed by the tunnelfolk.

Catherine had also been touched by the way Laina had accepted Vincent, had included him in the miracle of the birth of her child. Loving Vincent as she did, the heartache Catherine had suffered on that occasion had not been caused by the obvious rapport Vincent and Laina shared. No, the deep ache of longing, the sharp pang of jealousy she experienced, had sprung from the expression of wonder on Vincent's face as he held Laina's tiny newborn baby in his arms.

The thought that she might never be able to give this most sensitive and loving of hearts the joy of holding his own child had pierced her heart. The enormity of what they were denied -- the impossible cruelty of their self-imposed limits -- had never been more deeply, achingly clear to her than at that moment. Afterward, she had been unable to stop herself from asking him how it had felt to hold a new life in his arms.

Vincent's simple, eloquent answer had haunted her until the day she had learned she carried his child. His child.

She looked about the chamber and, although it was empty, the miracle of that child, the warmth of the passionate intimacy they now shared lingered everywhere. Her eyes -- her heart -- found it in the wide bed, the memories bringing a sudden flush of heat to her cheeks.

Her gaze travelled across the room, alighting on Jacob's crib and the scattering of toys upon the rug beneath it. A gentler warmth suffused her with the boundless devotion of a mother's love. Crossing to the cradle, she picked up a small stuffed toy lying there. The soft fuzz of the fabric was already beginning to show the signs of wear and tear only a child's enthusiastic loving can inflict.

Like the skin horse in her father's favorite children's story, the little bear in her hands was well on its way to becoming real.

The thought of her father drew her to the corner of the room that she had made her own, to the pile of books sitting upon the small table there.



"My desk," had been her sheepish reply to the question in Vincent's eyes as Ethan and Cullen carried it into their chamber one quiet afternoon. Seeing the shadow which had flitted across the clear blue of his gaze as Kipper appeared carrying an armload of legal texts had caused her to make light of the new additions. Vincent had not been deceived, she knew he was troubled by her need to have the familiar tools of her profession about her.

She ran her fingers lightly over the leather binding of the book beneath her hand. The worn spine was creased and cracked with some unknown attorney's frequent and repeated use. She conceded silently to herself that Vincent had cause to be concerned. Despite the fullness of her days she was increasingly aware of a vague restlessness, a small, empty ache that was the loss of her work, the absence of the purpose and the practice of Law which had shaped her life Above. There was also the undeniable conviction that she had left a vital part of that work undone, was avoiding the task Elliot and Diana were even now pursuing. The thought was an indistinct shade of gray which crept into the bright haze of her happiness; passed like the shadow of a restless cloud over the peaceful landscape of her life with Vincent and Jacob.

It was her job . . . no, it was her duty to bring the criminals in Gabriel's organization to justice. She had the power to do so -- she had the means -- and still she hesitated, unwilling to face what it might cost her if she took action. There was so much at stake, so many risks involved. Yet what did she risk if she did not?

What would happen to her, to Vincent, and the dream they shared if she walked away from that commitment -- from the unswerving dedication to what was right and just -- which was a vital part of who they were? Always they had promised to face the truth, always they had taken the difficult path demanded of them in pursuit of the higher purpose they shared.

They could deny this, could perhaps, for a while, ignore -- justify compromise in order to steal a small piece of the happiness they deserved. Surely they had suffered enough, given enough of themselves? Yet ultimately, she knew they would have to make this difficult decision, face this . . . test. Their dream, the vision they shared, would accept . . . no less. For a moment Catherine railed against a fate which asked so much, yet in her heart, she knew the rewards it offered were worth any price. Whatever came they would face it. Together. But until then, just for this moment, she would savor the quiet joy of their long denied

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dream of a life lived together -- here Below. Sighing, she opened the book in her hand and began to read a passage of the text before her.

## Chapter 26

*"Laina and the child have to go. It's the only way!"*

"How can you say that?" Jamie's voice rang out, rising above the murmur of approval greeting that demand. It seemed half the tunnel community had found its way into Father's chamber. They milled about in small groups, talking, arguing among themselves.

Word that some of their number were going to insist Father do something about the woman, the child -- and the disease they carried -- had spread like wildfire through the tunnels. Last night, all this morning the shocking news had traveled the length and breadth of their small community, communicated by furtive whispers from one shocked, dismayed or outraged pair of lips to another. By mid-afternoon only the most isolated of their number did not know that the terrible plague from above had appeared among them.

A small, vocal group, close to the focal point of the gathering, pushed forward one of their number to speak. Father's audible sigh of dismay was lost in the noise surrounding him as he realized Brenna was to be the spokeswoman.

Brenna had been part of the tunnel community for more years than Father cared to remember. In spite of this, she was a woman he had never come to truly know, or like. Indeed, there were few among them who willingly sought her

company, for she was that most difficult of persons, a self-proclaimed preacher with her own peculiar mix of religious dogma and intolerance.

Though not a member of any sect Father could identify, Brenna had, over the years, patched together a personal creed which was based upon her unshakable belief that there was evil in everyone and everything. Brenna preached salvation whilst proclaiming certain damnation. Father winced at the zealous light in her eyes, the eagerness with which she began, "You all know who I am."

"How could we not Brenna?" There was a ripple of laughter as a voice toward the rear of the chamber remarked, "You proclaim it day in and day out."

Rising above the slurs of the wicked and unenlightened, Brenna held herself rigidly erect. "My work is of vital importance, it is my duty to bring the word to those who have not yet heard."

Father resisted the impulse to groan and bury his head in his hands. Someone else, however, was not so tactful, calling out, "Get on with it Brenna. Say what you have to say and let someone else have a chance to speak."

Ignoring the mocking laughter which followed this remark, Brenna drew a deep breath. "It is the will of the Almighty that sinners be brought to trial for their sins. This harlot, this painted woman which you have allowed to live among us must be cast out. His judgement is at last visited upon her and she is being punished for her transgressions." She paused as if expecting a chorus of Hallelujahs from her listeners. All she received were a few hesitant nods of agreement in the stunned silence which followed her words.

"How dare you say such things Brenna!" Rebecca's voice was shaking with outrage as she made her way to the front of the gathering to stand facing the woman. "Laina has lived with us for almost two years now, there isn't one of us who hasn't known her kindness; how *can* you say such things about her? And what about the child? What sin is Cathy guilty of?"

Brenna clasped her hands together. "The sins of the fathers shall be visited . . ." The gathering erupted then, opposing voices trying to drown each other out, the meeting well on its way to becoming a shouting match, possibly even a melee as one or two of the men began to punctuate their angry words with threatening gestures.

Father could hold his tongue no longer. "*Enough!*" He rose to his feet with the stern reprimand. Waiting until the last angry whisper had died away, slowly, deliberately, he began to speak.

"Each of you are here because you have heard . . . something which has frightened or disturbed you. I do not know, I do not care to know, how you may have heard of something which is, should be, a private matter. Yet, you know and now you have . . . questions. Without answers, those questions will threaten the safety of our community more surely than this disease -- than any disease ever could. The only way to prevent this is to tell you what I know, try to answer your questions as best I can."

Straightening, holding himself erect, he faced his family much the same way he had faced that committee nearly forty years ago. The reasons for the coming inquisition were much the same as they had been before. Then, as now, he felt it was his duty to speak out, to warn his fellow men, to caution them against letting their fear, their ignorance, blind them.

He had only what he knew, what he had learned, to offer. Armed with the meager facts that medical science had been able to glean from the great unknown of AIDS, he prepared himself to defend Laina and her child. To counsel and to speak for them, when they could not speak for themselves, to plead for their right to remain here in this world they had made their home. "So, ask your questions."

"Father," It was Mary who spoke. Her soft, tremulous voice clearly audible in the hush which had fallen at Father's words. "Father what will this mean, what is the danger, the risk that the other children might be . . . exposed, might become . . . infected?"

"Mary, AIDS is not like the common cold or any of a number of diseases which can be transmitted by casual contact. Transmission of the disease requires direct contact with bodily fluids, fluids such as blood or semen. The kind of contact which occurs during unprotected sexual relations with an infected partner. It can be transmitted in a transfusion, such as is the case with hemophiliac AIDS victims who have received contaminated blood or clotting factor. It can be spread by drug users who share their infected needles. And . . . it can be passed from mother to child in the womb, during birth, or through breast-feeding. But it is a fragile thing, this virus, exposure to air will kill it within seconds. *No!*" Father's voice strengthened as he emphasized his denial. "*No* Mary. There is no proven danger of infection through normal day to day contact. The children are safe."

"Are you sure of that . . . ?" The challenge came from somewhere in the room. Before Father could reply, other voices had begun to shout, to question, to demand. "Yes . . . how do you know? What proof is there? Why should we risk ourselves, our families? Make her leave, send the child with her. Nothing

else to do . . . Better safe, than sorry . . . Send her away . . . send them both away . . . now . . . before it's too late."

Raising his hands in a gesture of helpless confusion, Father appealed to them, "Please! *I can't answer all of you at once.*" His words went unheeded as the hysteria in the room mounted to an almost deafening crescendo.

Cowering in a corner, Mouse was frightened, his simple heart overwhelmed, shaken by the anger, the harsh words all around him. He looked about in confusion for a way to escape. In his frantic search of the room, he suddenly found the one person he knew could put an end to the hurting words, the terrible noise. Pushing his way through the crowd, his voice gained volume, made itself heard above the clamor as he shouted -- encompassing in one word -- his relief, his certainty all would be made well again.

"*Vincent!*"

Vincent appeared not to have heard Mouse's cry. He stood transfixed upon the gallery running the length of Father's library. His eyes, as they surveyed the scene below him, registered his stunned disbelief at the words, the emotions, the hostility rising from the gathering.

Others, however, did hear, they followed the direction of Mouse's eager gaze with varying degrees of relief or consternation. Their voices faded as Mouse made his way to the circular staircase and quickly ascended it, all the while stuttering his distress.

"*Vincent . . . Tell them! . . . not right . . . wrong . . . Mouse knows . . . Father knows . . .*" His words trailed off as he reached the top stair, his nervous hands insistently tugging upon Vincent's cloak.

"Mouse?" Vincent seemed startled to find the young man standing just below him on the stair.

"Yes . . . yes." Mouse's hands twitched and fluttered, impatient with Vincent, with the distracted expression in Vincent's eyes as they met his own.

"*Tell them . . . Laina, little one must stay . . . not go!* Vincent knows better than . . . anyone . . . *Go bad . . . Worse than FRAIDS. Worse than anything.* Must stay, must help, not be alone. Alone bad . . . worse than bad . . . *worse than worse . . .*" Mouse's voice ended on a sob as he slumped on the step beneath him. His dismay, the effort of his words -- more words than anyone could recall his saying at one time before -- seemed to have exhausted him.

Vincent's head slowly bent toward the dejected figure at his feet. He laid his hand gently on Mouse's head. Mouse's face left the shelter of his knees, as

his eyes met Vincent's, their mournful expression lightened, recognizing the resolve in the deep azure of the gaze that held his own. A profound sigh of relief shook his small frame. Vincent, Mouse knew, would not let them do this terrible thing.

"It will be alright Mouse." His hand still resting on Mouse's tousled head, Vincent transferred his attention to those assembled below. His eyes travelled over the sea of upturned faces beneath him and found Father.

A look of defeat crossed the older man's features as he silently relinquished to his son his authority, his right to defend Laina and the child. With an almost imperceptible nod Vincent accepted the charge.

Leaning forward, his hands came to rest on the railing of the balcony as he commanded their attention with his quiet, steady regard. As he surveyed the scene below, each face was familiar, well-known to him. They were his family, and they were frightened, confused. Like him, they were, for the most part, outcasts, refugees, who for whatever reason, could not or would not live in the world Above.

Just when it began to seem as if he would never speak, his deep voice echoed through the stillness of the chamber. "You say Laina and Cathy are to go? Very well then, who among you will tell her this? Who among you is willing to force her and the child to leave?"

He let the silence that met his questions stretch out in an endless moment. "Or, if she agrees," he searched the faces below him, "who among you will answer her if she asks where they should go?" The only reply was a deepening in the silence below him.

"No one? Perhaps not. There is no . . . answer. There is nowhere else for Laina and Cathy. This is where they belong. Just as this is where I, and each of you belong. This world is our home, our safe place. Together we have made it so."

"Have you forgotten? Shall I help you to remember that this place, our home, Laina and Cathy's home, is beyond the comprehension of most of those who live Above? They would not believe in the existence of this, our world." A small murmur of agreement rippled through the crowd. "Blinded by their fears, they have forgotten the hope, and perhaps, even the dream . . . of such a place."

Vincent challenged them with the enormity of the betrayal they were contemplating. "Are we then, like them, to forget our dream? Abandon the very things that make it possible? What of the beliefs upon which this world was

founded, the means by which it survives, do we abandon them now, because of fear? Will we, like so many of those who live Above, offer only scorn and ridicule instead of understanding, choose cruelty and callousness before compassion?"

Some of those below had begun to murmur uneasily, stung by his words.

"No! We do not turn away when one of us is in need, or refuse help when help is needed. We do not betray our trust in one another because we fear for our own safety. *That* is our strength. *That* is the only true guarantee of safety we have . . . will *ever* have." Vincent drew himself up to his full height, appeared to tower above them like some terrible, avenging angel, yet his eyes touched them with the intensity of the care and concern he had always given to each of them. "If you do this thing, you may succeed in denying Laina and Cathy their safe place . . . but you will surely destroy your own."

His voice died away as the silence in the already still chamber deepened. Vincent turned, and in a single, soundless movement became part of the shadows from which he had come. He was gone almost before they were aware of his leaving, but he left his words behind, and the truth in them remained.



## Chapter 27

Elliot found her, standing, her head bent over the thick pages of the book, a small frown of concentration creasing her wide brow. "Catherine?" His soft call did not penetrate her study, and coming forward, he crossed to her side, lightly laying a hand on her shoulder. "Catherine."

She looked up then, a small smile lighting her features, pleasure brightening her eyes. "Elliot! Hello."

His answering smile banished the shadow of worry darkening his light green eyes as she impulsively added an affectionate hug to her welcome. Stepping back, her glance travelled from his head to his toes and back again, her own smile widening as she observed, "You're looking well."

His glance swept over her slender figure, his features assuming an exaggerated leer. "So, are you m'dear." An impish grin belied the flirtatious gleam in his eyes.

Laughing, Catherine motioned for him to take a seat. When he declined, she propped herself on the arm of Vincent's favorite chair and looked up at him expectantly. "Well Elliot, what brings you here so early and so . . . alone?" His only response to her question was to begin pacing the room.

Her smile faded to a look of concern as she watched him measure the length of the chamber and back, thinking Vincent did the very same thing when he was troubled or agitated. At that thought her hand went out and stilled his movement as he passed. "Elliot, what is it?" When he did not answer immediately an alarming thought shook her, she voiced it in an urgent whisper. "Why isn't Diana with . . . Your message said you were both coming Below. Elliot, where is Diana?"

"I'm not sure."

"Not sure? What do you mean?"

Elliot ran his fingers through his hair in a nervous gesture Catherine knew well. "I mean she was supposed to have met me at the Delancy Street entrance almost two hours ago."

She was worried by his words but sought to reassure him, and herself, with a plausible explanation. "Perhaps she was delayed, something may have detained . . ."

He interrupted her abruptly. "No Cathy!" Seeing her puzzled expression he leaned toward her, his features gone grey with the worry he could no longer hide. "Diana had an . . . appointment this morning. She went to see someone, about . . . something connected with our investigation. Afterwards, she was to leave a message for me, to meet me." He started pacing again. "Diana never left any message Cathy. She never came."

"Where did she go Elliot? Who was she going to see?"

His back was to her as he pulled something from the pocket of his coat. Turning, he held out a folded newspaper, silently handed it to her. As she opened it he said softly, "She went to see Joe, Cathy to ask him . . . about that."

The headlines struck her like a blow. Speechless she looked up, shock and disbelief stamped on her face. The words forced their way between her lips in a dazed whisper. "How can they print such lies? How can they accuse . . .? *My God Elliot! Joe! What must Joe be feeling?*"

Elliot shook his head. "Cathy, listen to me. Two nights ago following a tip Diana received, I watched Pope and one of his men meet a man in Central Park. Diana's source said the person they were meeting was on their payroll." He placed his hands on her shoulders and looked directly into her eyes. "That man was Joe, Cathy."

It took her a moment to digest this. "No! Elliot you're . . . you must have been mistaken!" Shaking her head violently, Catherine let the newspaper slide

unheeded to the floor as she pushed his hands away, coming to her feet she protested. "Joe would never, could never . . . You know that Elliot!"

When he did not immediately agree she challenged him again. "Don't you?"

"Of course I . . . Cathy, we, Diana and I, think it may have been some kind of a set-up."

A quick frown of anger crossed Catherine's features. "Diana knows, this? But she was here . . . just yesterday morning she . . . She mentioned something but . . . Why didn't she tell me?"

"We agreed to speak with Joe first. We didn't want to . . . worry you, didn't want to make any accusations or assumptions."

Angry and confused she lashed out at him. "And what are you doing now?"

Stung by the question Elliot retorted, "Exactly what Diana and I have been trying to do all along -- bring those bastards to justice!"

He had literally shouted the words and seeing her wince, was immediately contrite. "I'm sorry Cathy I didn't mean to . . . its just that its all been so damn frustrating. All these long weeks, doing nothing but waiting, watching, you're refusing to --" He looked away suddenly before going on, "and now this." He looked back at her again. "Cathy, surely now . . ." She did not speak, was watching him, a wary, guarded expression in her eyes as if she knew what he had meant -- was about -- to say.

"Cathy, don't you see? Now more than ever we need the notebook. Cath . . ." He was pleading with her, seeing denial in her face, but unable to believe she could still refuse him. "Cathy, please! Just tell me where it is."

He could not see her eyes, her head was bent and her voice when she spoke seemed to come from somewhere deep inside her. "No, Elliot. I can't."

"What!" He could not, would not accept what he had just heard. "Cathy, you can't be serious! How can you possibly refuse . . .?"

"Elliot, listen to me . . ."

"No!"

"Yes!" She met the urgent entreaty of his gaze with the anguished appeal of her own. "Elliot, please. Just listen to me. The notebook by itself would not be enough to clear Joe now. You know that."

"I don't know anything of the kind . . ."

"Yes, you do, Elliot." It was a firm but gentle contradiction. "You know it would not be sufficient to clear him of the accessory to murder allegation if there is enough evidence to implicate him." Her legal training was enabling her

to think logically even though her emotions were in a turmoil. "The notebook would not be enough Elliot. We both know the only thing that would be."

"No." He shook his head denying the conclusion she had already reached. "No Cathy!" A frightening thought crossed Elliot's mind. What if Pope somehow knew Catherine was alive? Impossible and yet, could this, was this all a crazy plot to bring her out of hiding? "No, Cathy, you can't. It would be too dangerous."

His words told her he had finally reached the same conclusion she had. She would have to go Above, reappear, to clear Joe. "It's the only way Elliot."

"No." He protested, unwilling to accept the logic of her statement. "Just give me the notebook, tell me where it is. We'll destroy Pope, destroy his whole damn organization before they can do any more harm."

"Elliot." Her voice was tolerant, infinitely patient, as if she were trying to explain a complicated concept to a child. "You know it would take weeks to decipher the notebook's code, then months before there was a trial. By that time the damage to Joe would be irreparable. A district attorney can't do his job effectively if he is under investigation. An acting district attorney would be replaced . . . almost immediately. Joe's career would be ended no matter what the outcome. No, the only hope for Joe now lies in my coming forward. My testimony, my very existence, would show the accessory charge to be false and help to negate the other allegations against him." She paused, each word a struggle. "It's the only way, Elliot. I have to go Above."

"No!" They both spun around as Vincent strode through the doorway into the chamber.

"Vincent . . ." Elliot took a step forward.

Vincent ignored him, pushed him aside to stand before Catherine.

As the blue-white heat of his intense gaze swept over her, she tried to explain. "Vincent, I must . . ." Her words ended with a startled gasp as his hands grasped the soft flesh of her upper arms, forgetting his incredible strength in the extremity of his emotions.

*"No! Catherine. I will not let you do this!"*

"Vincent." Elliot was pulling at one of Vincent's arms with both of his, ineffectively trying to loosen Vincent's grip. *"Vincent stop it! You're hurting her!"*

The meaning of Elliot's words hit Vincent like a blow, his arms fell to his sides with a groan as he saw the dazed pain in Catherine's eyes. "Catherine, I . . . "

The look of self-contempt which crossed his tortured features as he looked down at his hands snapped Catherine out of the numbed stupor gripping her. As Vincent turned away her anguished glance at Elliot silenced him when he would have spoken, begged him to leave.

He hesitated for a moment, then, with a worried glance at Vincent, he nodded briefly and walked to the doorway. Catherine watched him go. Without looking back his parting words reached her as he disappeared into the passage. "You know how to contact me Cathy."

The sound of his receding footsteps echoed eerily in the painful stillness of the chamber. Wordlessly, Catherine crossed the room to Vincent. He stood before her, his head bowed to his chest, his face hidden by a heavy curtain of hair, his hands, clenching and unclenching at his sides, an indication of the intensity of his inner turmoil.

"Vincent please . . . "

His downcast eyes watched her slender fingers slip beneath the tight knot that was his fist to press the smooth hollow of her palm against the calloused pad of his own. Overcoming his resistance, she brought his hand up, cradled her cheek tenderly against the rough hairs at its back while the thumb and fingers of her free hand found his chin and gently raised his face to hers.

Open to her searching gaze was remorse, humiliation . . . terrible torment. Her vision blurred with tears, the words with which she sought to comfort him were frozen on her lips by the deep unreasoning fear she saw there. Catherine had seen this once before, it had blazed in his eyes as he held her, her life slipping from his grasp on that terrible night -- the night he had lost her.

Now, the fear that he might lose her again was consuming him, driving all else from his mind, his heart. Helpless in the dark prison of that fear, Vincent pleaded with her, "Catherine you must not do this. The danger . . . " One fiercely-clawed fingertip gently traced the path of a glistening teardrop as it spilled from the sea-green eyes raised to his.

His breath caught as he saw his fear reflected in them, mingling there with her own, caught in the struggle with the shining courage which formed and strengthened her resolve. With a muffled groan he caught her to him, his

encircling arms molding her pliant body to his. Pressing her cheek to the wild beat of his heart, Catherine ardently returned his fierce embrace.

Vincent buried his face in her neck, his voice rough with pain as the words forced their way between his lips in a broken whisper, "I . . . could not . . . bear it, if I . . . lost you again . . . Catherine."

Stricken by the incredible anguish in his voice, Catherine smoothed the tumbled mane of his bowed head, seeking to reassure him, "Vincent. You could never lose me . . . no matter what happens . . . we could never lose each other." Her eyes were bright with tears, her love a shining beacon piercing the dark shadows clouding the depths of his searching gaze.

Lost to the desperate need she saw burning there, her lips parted to meet his, the tender urgency of her kiss willing him to accept the truth of her words. Vincent's arms tightened convulsively around her, his lips answered her unspoken plea with one of his own.

Catherine's resolve fled as his mouth slanted a rough caress across hers, devouring the quivering fullness he found there with the rough velvet rasp of his tongue. She surrendered with a sigh as he drew her heart from her. He possessed it for a timeless moment before, with a muffled groan, he gave it back with his own to beat with hers; a single wild pulse in her breast as their tongues met and mated.

Long, breathless moments later, Catherine returned to the awareness of Vincent's heart pounding beneath her fingertips. His voice was the deep rumble above her head. The meaning of his words were slow to penetrate her dazed senses. "We'll find another way Catherine . . . you'll see. Elliot and Diana will . . ."

"No. Vincent." Her voice, husky with regret, softly denied that possibility.

Her legs, unprepared to support her weight, folded, as Vincent's arms suddenly dropped away. Startled, she stumbled slightly before she regained her balance, grasping the back of a nearby chair.

The broad, rigid expanse of his back was a silent rebuke as he placed the width of the chamber between them. He stopped before the small table where she had been standing when Elliot arrived. His hands reached out to touch the books scattered upon it.

His back still to her, he could not see her arms reach out to him in a tangible expression of the anguished appeal in her voice as she pleaded, "Vincent, don't you see? I must do this . . . I'm the only one who can."

*"No!"*

Catherine cringed involuntarily as his hands came crashing down upon the table with enough force to splinter the wood of one of the legs which supported it. Unbalanced, the table tilted, slowly spilling most of its contents to the floor in a series of dull thuds.

Stunned, Catherine watched the sweeping arc of Vincent's arm send the remaining texts flying from its surface as he turned to face her with a movement that was a blur of motion to her startled eyes. The wild emotion in his face sent her reeling backward, her hands coming up, palms outward, as if to defend herself from the violence she saw in his contorted features.

*"Vincent! Please . . ."*

It was a plea he ignored as with two quick strides he crossed the room to stand in the doorway. "If you do this thing Catherine . . ." His voice was a low, feral growl, savage in its intensity. "It will destroy us."

Stricken, suddenly blinded by tears, Catherine blinked them away to find that he had gone. "Oh my love . . . don't you see?" She whispered in the aching emptiness of his absence. "It will destroy us if I don't."

A sob tore past the sudden, painful constriction in her chest, strangled in her throat, before breaking free with a cry as Catherine threw herself upon the empty bed.

## Chapter 28

"Do you think she will call?" Jonah's voice broke the silence in the darkened room. Even, unemotional, it was devoid of the curiosity the question implied.

Pope, ignoring the question, did not turn away from his appreciation of the glittering panorama before him. Below, in the early twilight of late autumn, the FDR drive was a sparkling river of moving light. Its outer lane flowed northward, in opposition to the dark, deceptively motionless current of the river whose western bank dictated the roadway's sweeping curves.

The United Nations on his right was a variegated pattern of matte black and shining fluorescent white. To the south and west the distinctive spires of the Chrysler and Empire State buildings pierced a charcoal grey sky, the darkest shade permitted the night by the concentrated glow of countless city-lights. On the southernmost tip of the island, the twin towers of the World Trade center rose. Conspicuous upstarts amidst the aging architectural lineage of lower Manhattan, it's columns were an unimaginative monument to man's boundless conceit and insatiable need to assert his supremacy over land and sky.



Turning, Pope crossed the wide swathe of plush carpeting and took his seat behind the marble expanse of the desk. An unopened black leather attache, rested on the cool, dark surface of the stone.

"Do you think Bennett will try to interfere?" Jonah motioned towards the case which contained a mobile, cellular phone. "Try to trace the number you gave her?"

Leaning forward, Pope rested his elbows on the desk top. Making a steeple of his fingertips, he studied the effect with an air of abstracted concentration.

"Diana Bennett knows the rules and the stakes of this game too well to do such a foolish thing. No, if anything, she will probably try to convince Miss Chandler to agree to an exchange under her watchful surveillance, or barring that, to call my bluff."

A slight note of interest crept into Jonah's voice as he inquired, "Is it a bluff?"

"Surely that is immaterial so far as your part in this is concerned?"

Pope's polite inquiry was a thinly veiled warning Jonah choose to ignore in pursuit of details which had been frustratingly sketchy in this contract.

"Let's just say curiosity is getting the better of me."

"Ah, curiosity." Pope smiled. A singularly unpleasant expression crossed his thin lips. "Now that is an emotion which has been known, on occasion, to be extremely dangerous."

Jonah appeared unaffected by the observation. "So are the people *we* are employed by."

All pretense of civility vanished as Pope leaned forward, the implied threat in the movement making the distance between the two men suddenly negligible. In a voice which flashed the cold steel of anger, Pope pointed out, "Your participation and services in this matter are as an independent contractor." It was a statement. "Your somewhat exorbitant fee was agreed to based upon that irrevocable condition."

Jonah weighed the advisability of pursuing this particular subject, before satisfying himself with an oblique warning of his own. "Under certain conditions, the interests of prior commitments might render such an agreement null and void."

"I do not allow the possibility of any such conditions existing -- and were I you -- I should take care to insure that you do not allow them to." Pope dismissed the discussion with a small wave of his hand. "For the time being I suggest we both meditate upon that admirable virtue known as Patience." Rising,

he returned to the window and resumed his silent contemplation of the Manhattan skyline.

Accepting the dismissal with barely concealed ill-grace, Jonah satisfied himself by making a few mental notes regarding the future downfall of the figure standing at the window. Certain questions, would it seemed for the present, continue to remain unanswered.

What for instance, did Pope use as his bait, first for Maxwell, then Bennett, and finally Chandler? What was it that would cause an acting DA to risk his professional career and personal freedom; and force a cool customer like Bennett to cooperate with Pope's demands? What, he wondered, could compel this woman, Catherine Chandler -- who not only reportedly possessed enough evidence to seriously damage, if not destroy the organization, but who had also, amazingly, escaped their previous attempt to kill her -- to agree to place herself, and that evidence, once again within their grasp? What was Pope hiding? Jonah had read Pope's report of Gabriel's attempt to recover the notebook, his dealings with Chandler and his subsequent demise. In Jonah's critical opinion, Pope had left more than a few questions unanswered there as well. Why had Gabriel kept the Chandler woman his prisoner for so long? Pope had stated Gabriel had wanted the child she carried. A man with Gabriel's power could have had any child he wanted. Why had he wanted this particular child?

Although Jonah had never held a high opinion of Gabriel's personal brand of sanity, he was reasonably certain Gabriel would not have endangered himself, or the organization, merely for the sake of frustrated paternal ambitions. What had driven him to do what he had done? There were, unfortunately, no survivors, other than Pope, who had witnessed any part of that unorthodox operation.

Had Pope's well-known, fastidious attention to detail made sure of that also? Jonah was beginning to take an uncharacteristically avid and decidedly personal interest in the hidden agenda behind this personal contract of Pope's.

But for the present he had a job to do. Catherine Chandler. All things considered it was proving to be an interesting, as well as profitable situation.

## Chapter 29

It was an impossible situation that was -- as Diana hobbled down the passage it had taken her far too long to reach -- getting more impossible by the minute. Damn Pope, and damn this ankle of hers. Stiff and painfully sore from the abuse she had inflicted upon it concealing her limp from Pope, it now protested at even the slightest weight placed upon it.

Trying to ignore the pain she went on, concentrating on the task of sorting out the few alternatives she had. Like it or not -- and she did not -- she would have to tell Catherine of Pope's offer. "Hah!" Her derisive snort echoed in the passageway before her. Some offer. More like an ultimatum if you asked her. Pope had not asked her. Oh, the words had been polite enough, an invitation, an offer to negotiate, he had called it. It would be Catherine's choice to accept or decline. What choice?

Once Catherine learned that there was even the slightest possibility that Vincent might be in danger of exposure, let alone the fact that Joe had already been publicly implicated in her murder . . .

"Well Bennett, what would you do?" The sound of her own voice startled her. If Elliot could hear her now . . . Where was Elliot? Almost three hours late

in arriving she hadn't expected him to be at the Delancy Street entrance, yet she had hoped that somehow he would be waiting for her there.

The service had given her several messages from him each increasing in their degree of urgency. The final message had simply said. "Keeping appointment." She knew what that meant. He was going Below . . . without her. Going to tell Catherine and Vincent about Joe. To ask Catherine for the notebook.

*"Well Elliot, there's been a small monkey-wrench thrown into those plans."*

With an audible sigh of relief she took a final turning into the passage which ended at her destination, Catherine and Vincent's chamber.

The doorway, an irregular arch of buttery golden light, beckoned ahead of her at the far end of the passage. Reaching it, she paused as was her habit, standing just outside the entrance, wishing, as she always did, that there was a door she could knock upon. There were no sounds coming from within, nothing to indicate the chamber was occupied. The illuminated dial of her wristwatch showed it was not quite past the dinner hour. Perhaps they were still . . . A small sound coming from inside the chamber told her someone was there.

"Hello?" Calling softly she stepped into the chamber and came to an abrupt halt as her eyes found the object of their search on her knees on the other side of the room. "Catherine?"

Kneeling beside the wreckage of her desk, Catherine looked up as Diana entered. "*Diana!*" She dropped the book in her hands and rose swiftly to her feet. "Diana, where have you been? What . . . ?" Concern drove all else from her mind as she watched the other woman limp forward. "You're hurt! What happened? Elliot said . . ."

"Has Elliot been here?" Diana looked about the room, her eyes swiftly noting the splintered desk. Its empty surface canting drunkenly above the jumble of books on the floor; the candlestick lying against the far wall amid the broken shards of the fluted glass which had encased it.

Her eyes returned to Catherine's face, recognizing the evidence of recent tears in her over-bright eyes and too pale complexion. "So. Elliot told you." It was not a question. "Told Vincent too . . . by the look of things."

The news Elliot had brought, and what it had precipitated between Vincent and herself made words difficult, as Catherine nodded. The movement, the memory, or perhaps a combination of both now caused fresh tears to spill.

"Catherine. Please don't . . ." Diana was at a loss to cope with Catherine's obvious distress.

Dashing away her tears with an impatient gesture, Catherine's laugh sounded suspiciously like a sob, "I don't know what's the matter with me. Sorry, Diana. I . . ."

"You don't have to explain. Elliot told you about Joe, and of course you believe the only thing to do now is go Above and clear him. Vincent, it appears, does not . . . agree." Diana responded to Catherine's startled look with a laugh. "I'm a professional investigator, remember? So, am I right?"

"Yes," Catherine sighed. "Vincent does not. But, Diana it's the only way, surely *you* can see that."

Suddenly tired, the events of the day -- what she would now have to tell Catherine -- making her very weary, Diana moved slowly to a chair and sat in it. "Perhaps it *was* the only way."

"Was?"

Respecting the other woman's quick intelligence, Diana knew that like herself, Catherine would not accept or appreciate any attempt to sugar coat the truth. She told her simply what had occurred between herself and Pope.

Catherine listened quietly, without comment, as Diana recounted the details of her brief kidnapping and the proposition Pope had put before her. When she had finished, Diana waited patiently while Catherine absorbed the information.

"Pope has tapes of Vincent?" Catherine's question held all the shocked disbelief and fear she felt, faced with such a possibility.

"I don't know Catherine. I just don't know." Diana met Catherine's imploring look with a helpless shrug. "Gabriel had a pretty sophisticated surveillance system and there were closed circuit cameras in the cell where they were holding him."

"Then, there is a chance . . ." There was a defeated look to Catherine's suddenly bowed head and shoulders, as if a great weight had been placed upon them.

"A chance, yes. But I can't believe Gabriel . . . it wouldn't make sense. You're an attorney Catherine. You know how incriminating taped evidence can be. It's not logical. I think Pope may be bluffing."

Catherine considered Diana's slender offer of hope and dismissed it. "Gabriel was not . . . logical. You know that Diana -- we both know that. He was insane, and an insane man might not stop to consider how damaging tapes could be."

Diana could not argue with her, having already admitted that possibility herself.

"It wouldn't matter anyway, Diana -- tapes or no, Pope is threatening to expose Vincent. The danger . . ."

Dryly, Diana reminded her. "Aren't you forgetting that I also mentioned he knows you're alive Catherine? What about the danger that puts you in?"

Catherine brushed the question aside. "That's not important."

"Ahem. Excuse me if I choose to disagree with you there." The dry mocking tone in Diana's voice brought a small, crooked smile to Catherine's lips.

"Don't worry Diana, I'm well aware of the danger to myself."

"Are you? Are you really Catherine?" Diana sounded angry now. "Haven't you realized yet that it's you Pope wants? Not Vincent. Not Joe. Just you. You and that damn notebook you've refused . . . kept hidden."

All the pent-up frustrations of endless weeks of waiting and watching rang clear in Diana's voice. "Oh, he'll threaten them, because he knows that's the only way to get to you. He knows you'll do anything to keep them safe. That's the point of this dirty little charade of his, the object of his whole devilishly clever plan."

Catherine had moved to the bed while Diana was speaking, and sitting upon it, ran her hand over the quilted coverlet. Her fingertips traced its soft ridges, the warp and weft of its homemade fabric. She considered the intricate weave, the individual threads which combined to form the pattern. Lives were like that. Individual threads braided, coiled about each other, flowing or forced into patterns, the patterns themselves part of a larger design. She felt as if the thread of her life, of Vincent's, of so many others, were entangled in a dark and devious design.

The legends of Greek mythology tell of three old women, the Moirai, the Fates who spin the thread which is an individual's destiny. When the thread is broken, life ends. What threads, she wondered, would be broken in the unravelling to come? Funny, the things which will come to one's mind . . . She became aware that Diana was no longer speaking, was waiting, not very patiently, for some kind of response. "Then Pope has planned well Diana."

Catherine's voice, level, even unemotional, drew an gasp of denial from Diana. "You can't seriously consider . . .?"

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, expelling it a long moment later with a heartfelt sigh, Catherine began to speak. "Diana, I know, Vincent has told me, what your friendship, your help, meant to him during those terrible months when he believed I had died and Gabriel held our son captive. I also know you understand the bond we share, Vincent and I, and . . . I know what that understanding cost you."

The look of hesitancy, mingled with resignation in Diana's eyes as they met Catherine's, told her that although Diana might not wish to discuss this, she understood -- accepted Catherine's need to speak now, of things which had remained unspoken between them for so long.

A faraway note in her voice, Catherine began to explain what had always been, for her, beyond explanation. "When Vincent found me, on the night I was attacked and left for dead, a large part of me was already, dead, or dying. Long before that night my life had lost its meaning, its purpose. Oh, I had wealth and privilege, all the things they could provide, and still, somehow it was not enough. Something was missing. For a long time I looked for something, anything and found . . . nothing. Then one day, I don't remember exactly when, I just stopped searching. Afterwards, I was just going through the motions really, doing what was expected, or at least, what I thought was expected, of the daughter of a successful, socially prominent attorney."

Catherine paused, appearing to realize . . . something she had never understood before. "If I had died on the night I was attacked, it would have been a meaningless death. Not because of the way I died, but, because of the way I had lived. Perhaps I did die that night, or at least the woman others would have known as Cathy Chandler died. When Vincent found me, when he brought me here and cared for me, at first I was frightened and confused. Then, slowly, I don't know why, perhaps it was the sound of Vincent's voice as he read to me, or the feeling that -- for no reason I could find, let alone understand -- this stranger cared; deeply and truly cared about me."

Catherine's expression told Diana just how much that had meant to her. "I tried to find a reason why he should care so. I had little enough to do with the time, all those dark hours when the future seemed too frightening, too uncertain to imagine. Without meaning to, I began to think about the past, to look at my life, to examine what it had been before a seemingly random, senseless act of violence had changed everything. I found myself asking questions I had never asked myself before, and I did not like the answers. I think I came to despise

myself then, almost as much as I hated the men who had done that terrible thing to me."

"Catherine, you don't have to . . ." Diana reacted to the pain in Catherine's voice.

"But I do, Diana. I want you to know, to understand. Perhaps almost as much as I wanted -- needed -- to understand myself. Vincent did more than save my life that night Diana, he gave it back to me. What I did not know then was the life he gave me was . . . his own."

"You see Diana, the qualities that made it possible to go on -- have made it possible, every day since then -- are Vincent's. It was his courage, the courage he gave me which sent me back to face what my life had become and made it possible to . . . change it."

"It was his aloneness, which forced me to face my own pampered isolation. It was his compassion, his capacity for giving which showed me the way to reach out to others, to try and return a little of all that I had been given. It is a gift beyond price Diana. It is a debt I can never repay." Catherine stopped speaking, her voice fading into the silence of the chamber as she looked away.

"So you repay it, repay Vincent, by placing your life -- his life -- in Pope's hands again?" Diana knew the answer but she had to ask. "Haven't you risked enough -- your work with the D.A., everything you've done, all that's happened -- isn't it enough Catherine?"

"Diana, you know that's not . . ."

Diana did know. That was the problem, she had known before Pope had finished speaking, had known what Catherine would do, just as she had known she would be unable to stop her. Diana hated feeling powerless. All her life she had striven to remain in control, and now . . . now she was helpless to stop this from happening. The thought frightened and infuriated her. She tried the only threat she could think of. "I won't give you the number Catherine." Dammit -- the woman was smiling at her. Did she think she was bluffing? "You can't contact Pope without it."

The gentle smile which had come to Catherine's lips at Diana's words faded, replaced by a set, almost angry expression. Her husky voice was soft, the calm determination in it at odds with her expression. "If you do not give me the number, Diana, I will find a way to let Pope find me." She saw with a curiously detached feeling of satisfaction that Diana understood this was not an idle threat.



Having said that Catherine's brief flare of anger died. "Diana, I have to do this. Just as I would have had to go Above for Joe. Just as I would have had to eventually do something about the notebook. Vincent understands, he will understand, once he finds the way past his fear, because . . ."

"You are the same foolishly brave, headstrong, impossible, magnificent fool that . . ." Diana stopped herself, biting back the words which were the admission Catherine sought. It was too late.

"That he is." Catherine finished for her. "Thank you Diana. I knew you would understand."

"Just what am I supposed to understand? That no matter what I think, no matter what I say, ultimately, you will go your own way?"

The defiant question was a concession of defeat. Catherine accepted it, giving Diana in return the only reason she had left to give. "Vincent once told me one either moves towards love or away from it." Catherine walked to where Diana sat. "Diana, give me the number."

## Chapter 30

The sound of the falls began as a soft murmur, grew to a gentle roar as Vincent's long strides covered the distance to the cavern through which their waters plummeted. No clear thought of a destination had guided his footsteps upon leaving Catherine, yet somehow he found himself heading toward this place. The tumult of his anger matched the violence in the crash and thunder of the cataract.

The torches lining the passage flared in the freshening breeze as Vincent approached the narrow crevice opening onto the soar and chase of air currents, the wind of water falling hundreds of feet in a cloud of sound and spray.

There was, he knew, danger in coming to this place, the thought of Catherine had brought him here so many times before, and those memories, like its mists, were . . . everywhere. His steps grew hesitant, he paused, perhaps he should turn back, seek a darker, emptier place in which to face the fear consuming him. *If you do this thing . . . It will destroy us.* The words seemed to echo in the confined space of the passage. The urgent emotions which had given them birth propelled him forward onto the ledge overlooking the sweep and majesty of the natural cathedral before him.

"Vincent?" To less sensitive ears, the surprised whisper would have been lost in the thunder of the falls.

Following the direction of the sound Vincent saw the other man seated on a low outcropping which formed a parapet between the rocky shelf and the sheer drop below.

"Cullen. I'm sorry -- I didn't think to find anyone here." Vincent turned to leave.

"No; Vincent, wait. Don't go." Cullen had risen with the words, sinking back only as Vincent turned to face him once more, a question in his eyes. "It's alright . . . really, please . . . stay."

With a small nod Vincent crossed the space between them and took a seat beside him. For long moments they sat, side by side in silence, lost in their separate thoughts until, suddenly, Cullen spoke. "Do you remember, Vincent, when I first came Below?"

The faraway quality of his voice seemed to equal the distance memory would have to travel to find the place in time that was the answer to that question. Vincent nodded. "It was just after Winterfest, nearly . . . fifteen years ago now."

"Fifteen years." There was a note of incredulity in Cullen's voice. Had it really been fifteen years? It had, and he remembered, "It was cold that year, so very cold."

"Yes, I remember, Cullen." Fifteen years earlier they had experienced the cruelest winter in the memory of all but the oldest amongst them. The bitter cold snap had lasted for weeks, penetrating far below the upper levels, making its presence felt in the normally temperate chambers and passages where the tunnelfolk made their homes. As a result, some of their number had fallen, victims of the pneumonia and influenza that had ravaged the population above. Cullen's wife, dying slowly of cancer, had also succumbed to that harsh winter.

As though it were only yesterday, Vincent could recall the scene in Father's chamber, could picture clearly, the bitter, defeated young man who had stood beside Benjamin. The kindly old helper had brought Cullen to them shortly after the death of his wife.

Cullen had said nothing as Benjamin pleaded with the council to allow him to live Below. Although a salesman by trade, he had always been skilled with his hands, was using that skill to work in Benjamin's shop. Times were hard and the business was failing, its income barely supporting an old man, let alone the needs of a young one with a sick wife. There had been so little money for the doctors,

for the expensive treatments the cancer required. Then, there was nothing, and Benjamin, after nearly forty-five years, was forced to close the small shop which had been his life's work.

Benjamin had a place to go, a brother who would take him in, while Cullen had no one. Worse still, the young man did not seem to care what happened to him. Benjamin had told them his young friend was a good man, a hard worker, told them of the tragedy which had taken his wife from him. The genuine concern, the trust and affection in the old carpenter's words had won for Cullen the chance to stay.

Vincent recalled Cullen had not been particularly grateful or even relieved when he had been accepted. In those first weeks after coming Below, he had kept very much to himself, holding apart, saying little. He did, however, do more than anyone asked or expected when it came to work. Instinctively, Cullen seemed to know what was needed, or wanted.

No one knew how he knew, or where he obtained the wood or the tools, yet, almost by magic, much needed shelves appeared for Father's library and William's pantry. Where rickety, broken-down pieces had once stood, new, carefully crafted, sturdy pieces of furniture were found to have replaced them. With time, although he would always remain something of a loner, Cullen became part of the community.

The years had passed and their passing had not been without incident. There was the time when Cullen and some of the others had nearly lost themselves in the fever of greed and dissension Mouse's discovery of treasure in a buried galleon had caused. The grief and bitterness of Cullen's past failure to provide for his wife had caused him to risk everything for the blinding illusion of wealth. The madness had passed, slowly old and new wounds began to heal, and life had returned to normal.

Cullen's memories travelled farther back than Vincent's, revisited faces and feelings long dead, buried, yet never truly forgotten. Lost in the grip of those memories, he relived the desperation of watching his wife sicken and die, the rage he had experienced knowing he was helpless to save her. He would have done anything, yet there had been . . . nothing he could do.

He had lost her and with her, all belief in life, any hope or faith he had in it. Old memories these, and yet there was still so much pain in them. Why had this happened, why was it happening . . . again?

Turning, Cullen considered Vincent's leonine profile, starkly etched against the backdrop of the falls. There were many who would have said that fate had been unkind to Vincent, setting him apart, denying him so much of the freedom others took for granted. If Vincent resented this, if he had ever railed against his fate, Cullen had never known. Yet surely, Vincent, even Vincent, must question, must ask . . . "Do you ever wonder why, Vincent? Why things . . . happen as they do? What reason . . .?"

"Reasons do not always . . ." Vincent paused, "Laina . . . needs you Cullen. Almost as much as you need her."

Cullen shook his head, angrily denying Vincent's words, his own confused, tormented emotions. "I'd be no good to her. I couldn't . . . I won't go through that again Vincent. No man should be forced to watch the woman he . . . loves . . . die. Once was bad enough, don't ask me to do it twice."

"Cullen . . ."

"No! Don't you see Vincent? You of all people . . ." With a cry Cullen leapt to his feet. "I can't . . . I won't do it . . . not again. Not now. Not ever!"

He turned, and without another word, left the chamber at a run. He ran from Vincent, from his memories, from everything but the one thing he could not escape. Himself.

Deeply saddened, Vincent watched him go, made no effort to stop him. Cullen had made his decision long ago, and now he was condemned to the purgatory created by his shame, haunted by the guilt which would never let him rest. He would always be a prisoner of the fear that made him unable to face losing -- would never allow him to risk -- loving again.

The pain, the defiant denial in Cullen's voice echoed Vincent's own fear, was so like the never forgotten terror of the nightmare which had once been reality, the anguish, the indescribable emptiness of losing Catherine. Like Cullen, Vincent could not face that again.

Cullen sought to protect himself by running away, by denying the bond which had begun to grow between himself and Laina. Vincent knew Cullen had spoken the truth . . . for himself. He could not allow himself to love Laina.

Laina would have to face the future and whatever it would bring, without Cullen, without the support -- the love -- she might have hoped to find with him for herself, for Cathy. Cullen's fears. Whatever chance they might have had, destroyed by . . . destroyed . . .

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*If you do this thing. It will destroy us!* His words. His fear, the fear which had caused him to fling that angry accusation at Catherine.

He clapped his hands over his ears trying to drown out the sound of those words, the sound of his own footsteps, running away . . .

With a groan Vincent buried his head in his hands, became lost in the maelstrom created by the fear of what could happen to Catherine if she went Above, before he was struck by the sudden realization of what would happen to who they were, what they shared . . . if she did not.

## Chapter 31

Jacob stirred in her arms as Catherine bent over the cradle and laid him gently in it. Her touch softer than a feather, she brushed back wisps of pale amber hair, stroked the warm, flushed cheek of her drowsy child. Delicate, shell-shaped eyelids fluttered open at her touch revealing the vivid aqua of his sleepy eyes. It was as if the green of her eyes, and the blue of Vincent's, had blended to create the miracle of those eyes, the miracle of Jacob, their son.

Jacob's chubby hand found the slender fingers of his mother's hand, curled about them with a small gurgle of contentment, resisted the slumber trying to claim him as his mother's voice soothed him, and began to softly sing, a lullaby. *"Sleep, my pretty one. Rest now, my pretty one. Close your eyes, the day is nearly done. Rest your head, tomorrow will surely come . . . "*

Jacob sighed, snuggled deeper into the pillow beneath his head, and drifted quietly off to sleep.

"Sleep my darling, sleep now." The kiss she placed upon his cheek held all the tenderness of a mother's love. Would he dream of the tomorrow the lullaby promised? She wanted him to have so many wonderful tomorrows, his future to be filled with all the promise life offered.

Here in the world his father had helped to build, he had a chance for that future. Here, with Vincent to protect him, to guide him, surrounded by all the love and encouragement so much a part of life Below, he would grow, and one day, become the man she dreamed -- knew he could be. The man his father was. It was a dream she had. It was a dream worth fighting for, worth any risk. Worth any price.

"Catherine." Diana called to her softly from the chamber entrance. Turning, Catherine picked up her coat, and with one last lingering backward glance at her sleeping child, went to join her.

They walked together in silence, heading towards the drainage pipe and the hidden doorway of the Central Park threshold. As they reached the end of the last passage and they stopped before the steel panel blocking the exit, Diana tried again to change Catherine's mind. "Catherine, you don't have to do this. We'll find another way to . . ." The look in Catherine's eyes, an eloquent mixture of determination and resignation silenced the protest on her lips. "Alright, okay." Diana wearily conceded. "But don't go alone. At least let me come with you."

Catherine's hand reached out to touch hers, grasp it in a brief gesture of gratitude and denial. "You know that's not possible, Diana."

"Why? I'll follow behind. Pope will never know."

"He'll be expecting you to do that Diana. I can't take the chance." She changed the subject. "What time is it Diana?"

Distracted, Diana glanced at her wrist. "Just past eight o'clock."

They were both surprised to find it was so early. It seemed hours since Diana had entered the chamber and found her alone. Unstrapping the timepiece, Diana handed it to Catherine. Then, muttering something under her breath she slowly bent over, her hands fumbling about her ankle.

Catherine watched as Diana removed the small automatic pistol from its holster and held it out to her. "Here, take it." The steely note of command in her voice told Catherine she would brook no opposition, not in this. "I needn't ask if you know how to use it?"

Catherine took the weapon from Diana's outstretched hand, held the dark, gleaming object in the palm of her own hand for a moment before, fingers curling around the short stock, she hefted its compact, deadly weight, tested its balance. Wordlessly, she slipped it into the pocket of her pants. Thrusting her arms through the sleeves of her coat, she wrapped its belt tightly around her waist and activated the hidden mechanism which opened the door. Her hand upon the outer gate,



she paused and turned to Diana. "I have your promise then, you won't try to follow?" Diana's curt nod was her reluctant assent. "Or tell Vincent?"

"Won't he know? Your bond. Won't it tell him what you're doing, where you are?" Desperate now, Diana clutched eagerly at her one last hope of forcing Catherine to abandon this crazy plan.

"No." Catherine shook her head gently. "No, I . . . won't let it." Once before, when Paracelsus had taken her hostage, she had refused to let herself feel fear. She had known that fear would be communicated to Vincent, bring him to her, place him in danger. She had not permitted that to happen then. She would not permit it now.

Catherine held out her hand. "Thank you Diana. Thank you for . . . everything."

Diana returned Catherine's firm, steady grasp.

Catherine looked down at their joined hands for a long moment before she looked up with a small smile saying softly. "Go back to Jacob. I need to know he's not alone -- that you'll be watching over him until Vincent returns."

Turning, Catherine pushed the gate open, stepped over the raised brickwork of its sill, and releasing it with a shove, let the momentum of its weight swing it closed behind her.

Diana called after her in a hoarse whisper. "What about you, Catherine? When will you return?"

"As soon as I can Diana. As soon . . . as I can."

To Diana the words had the hollow ring of a promise it would not be possible to keep. Watching Catherine's elongated shadow recede until it was out of sight, she realized tears were spilling from her eyes and slipping down her cheeks, she dashed them away with an angry sigh. The inner door slid shut with a click behind her as she turned and began the long walk back, alone.

## Chapter 32

"Vincent?"

Laina's voice, soft, trembling with concern and some other, deeper emotion, brought Vincent's head up. Since Cullen's abrupt departure, he had been sitting here alone.

"Vincent?" Uncertainty in that whisper before she saw his face, saw the moist furrows his tears had placed there. She was shaken by the sight. "Vincent, are you alright? What is it?"

"It's nothing, Laina. I . . ." He shook his head gently. "Come, sit here." He motioned to the spot on the ledge beside him and held out a hand to her. She placed her own small hand in his and he drew her down. Neither of them could help but recall the first time they had sat here side by side, just as they were sitting now. It seemed a lifetime since then and now . . . now it seemed they had come full circle to meet here once again. They were different. Time and experience had changed them both.

Vincent had lost some of the unworldliness which had captivated her in that first meeting, while Laina had regained some of the faith and innocence which she had lost too soon in her young life. As it had then, a silent communication flowed

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between these two kindred souls. Vincent turned to her, his eyes darkening with a weary sadness at the decision he saw in hers as he said, "Laina . . . are you sure?"

She nodded slowly, her voice calm as she answered, "I've decided to leave the tunnels Vincent."

## Chapter 33

Cautiously, Catherine paused at the end of the pipe, remained in its shadow until she was sure it was safe for her to emerge. Satisfied there was no one about, she stepped from the culvert onto the grassy embankment and followed its gentle slope upward toward the field beyond. She paused at the top looking from side to side and before her, but, not back for somehow she knew that if she looked back she would be unable . . . With a determined tilt of her chin she took a deep, bracing breath of the chill night air, and squaring her shoulders, walked quickly away.

The park was quiet, the damp autumn mists swirled about her feet as she moved northward across the small field toward the edge of the Sheep Meadow. Instinctively she kept to the shadows, not forgetting what could befall her if she crossed the path of one of the park's night denizens.

Without Vincent's preternatural senses to warn her of the sound of a stealthy approach or distinguish a hovering shadow in the distance, she had only her own fear-sharpened senses to guide her, keep her out of one kind of harm's way, while she deliberately walked straight into another. Carefully following landmarks known only to her, she skirted the wide meadow to her right and followed the line of trees bordering the rolling lawn.

Before her rose the dark towering shape of the tree. Its branches, except for a few lingering leaves rustling softly in a rising night breeze, were bare. Standing beside the trunk, she glanced upward to a point just above her head, seeking the place where the wide bole split, creating a fork from which two great branches rose, their boughs twining away into the night sky. Very near the top of the left branching was a wide bough which grew horizontal to the ground. If someone were to climb that high, they would find there a natural perch formed at the junction of branch and trunk.

Catherine found a foothold in the gnarled trunk and pulled herself up into the tree. She followed a torturous zig-zag route from limb to limb, slowly, carefully ascending through the tangle of branches. She reached her destination -- a dizzying climb from where she had started -- and with a small grunt of satisfaction pulled herself onto the branch. For a moment she allowed herself the pleasure of looking out over the dark expanse of meadow and park before her. All around her the surrounding treetops rose out of the pale mists shrouding them, ghostly gossamer nets through which bare, skeletal branches slipped to shiver in a sudden, stiffening breeze or point mutely at the crescent moon hanging low in the sky. The few visible stars were distant pinpoints of frozen, white light.

Following the curve of the branch with the fingers of her left hand, she found the small knothole nearly hidden beneath a fold in the bark. With a grimace she probed the small opening, her hand encountering a sodden leaf, the remnants of some small bird's attempt at nest building, before finally, her searching fingers found the slim, rectangular object she sought.

The protective plastic covering was slick with moisture as she grasped it. Carefully removing the notebook from its hiding place she held it gingerly in her hands, sickened by the sight, the feel, of something which had caused so much harm to so many. The notebook itself had survived remarkably intact. Except for a few spots of mold where moisture had succeeded in penetrating the thick plastic, its pages, the coded information written upon them, appeared, in the nearly non-existent light, to be still legible. With a sigh of relief, not untinged with regret, Catherine shoved it into her pocket and prepared to start down again. As she crouched, balanced upon the limb, the memory of the first time she had climbed to this spot came back to her. With a small sob she leaned back against the trunk and closed her eyes.

Her father's death had been a deep and painful loss which she had suffered twice in her life; upon his death -- then, her memory of that part of her life torn from her, they had told her and she had grieved again.

That first time Vincent had been there for her, to help her, to hold her. He had gently led her through the shadows of her grief to the place where she was able to make her peace with the memory of her Father and find the strength to let him go.

She had dreamt -- had it been a dream? -- one dark night when her grief had been almost unbearable, that her Father had visited her. Charles Chandler had sat across from her and had spoken words she would never forget. She had repeated them to Vincent, shared with him her father's acceptance and understanding, his blessing of the love, the dream they shared, and his faith in her.

Yet it had been those very words which had led her to the realization that she must return to her life Above; to admit that, perhaps, it was not yet time for their dream, Vincent's and hers -- of being truly together -- to come, to pass. Vincent had said her destiny was to be a woman of both worlds, had told her that she stood for him, carried him and the light of their dream, where he himself could not go.

If -- and she knew this to be true -- if Vincent lived for her, his existence creating for her a place where she could belong, Below, then it was no less true that she lived for Vincent, her existence -- her life -- bringing him out of the shadows, giving him a place and a purpose Above.

She stood for him, she stood for them both, in the sunlight. This knowledge was the source of her strength, her determination to defend both worlds against the darkness which now threatened to destroy them. Softly she whispered to the night sky, "Don't worry Vincent. We won't fall. We won't fall."

## Chapter 34

Three hours, the man was not human. Jonah shifted uncomfortably in his chair, silently repeating the frustrated observation to himself yet again. For three hours he had sat in this chair, had watched the unmoving object that was Pope's back.

At first his reaction had been one of grudging respect, but as the slow minutes dragged into hours Jonah had become increasingly annoyed by the unnatural stillness of the man. Patience was one thing, but this, this was something else. The thought brought with it an uneasy flicker of something which might have been fear.

Choosing not to dwell on this, he quickly reviewed all he had learned about the man he knew only as Pope. Pope was not, he knew, his real name, just as Jonah was not his. In the organization to which they belonged, names were either assigned or earned.

A reputation for infallibility and a cold dispassionate nature had earned Pope his name, just as Jonah's ability to wreck vengeance on those unlucky, or unwise enough to cross the organization, had earned him his. So far Pope had lived up to his name and his reputation. Jonah wondered, not without impatience, if tonight he would have the chance to prove the aptness of his.

The question was, how much longer would he have to wait? The answer came in a soft, pulsing tone emitted from the briefcase on the desk. He barely controlled the urge to jump at the sound as it broke the stone silence of the room, noting with an intense flash of anger that Pope, unlike himself, had not seemed to move a muscle in reaction. Instead, he let it ring, five, six, seven times, before he turned and slowly crossed to the desk. With a deliberate movement he bent forward and lifted the handset from its cradle.

Pope was silent as he listened to the voice at the other end of the line and Jonah could tell nothing of what was said from the expression on his face.

Finally he spoke, "Yes, of course, that is the agreement. The seventy-second Street entrance to the drivethru, Miss Chandler. A car will meet you, and Miss Chandler . . . do be sure you come alone."

Jonah was already on his feet, was halfway to the door when from the corner of his eye he saw Pope was pulling on his overcoat with unhurried movements. With an involuntary protest, he halted in mid-stride. "This is my . . ."

"On the contrary, I have a small part of my own still to play in this." Pope opened a drawer and extracted a videotape, breaking the seal on its packaging, he removed the wrapper and placed the tape in the pocket of his overcoat. In response to Jonah's puzzled look, he replied. "A vital prop in my little production. Please remember that it is *my* production, and you will continue to take your cues from me."

Perhaps it was an uncharacteristic carelessness on Pope's part, or in his desire to see his plot through, he did not stop to consider his words or their effect. Crossing to the double doors he pushed them open and walked through without a backward glance.

If he had turned he would have seen the look that flashed across Jonah's face before it was quickly masked. That expression might have given Pope cause to reconsider the wisdom of ever presenting, unprotected, so broad, or so tempting a target as his back, to Jonah again.



## Chapter 35

Vincent's strides lengthened as he hurried back to Catherine. His emotions were still troubled. The fears which haunted him were not the kind easily dismissed, even by the determined discipline of his will. They were, he now knew, fears he could never completely banish, for they had been born in the moment he had first met Catherine. The moment he had known that he loved her.

Those fears were the price of love, its test of worthiness. To know love one must also know the fear, take the risk of losing it. Cullen had chosen not to take that risk again. His fears would keep him safe from loss, but they would also keep him from love.

Vincent knew the same fears, and he chose love, with all its risks and its rewards. The thought took him through the doorway of their chamber with Catherine's name an apology and a promise, stillborn on his lips at the sight of Diana sitting there, alone.

"Vincent." Her expression was worried, filled with an apprehension which chilled him.

"Diana. . . where is Catherine?"

Unable to meet his eyes and the question in them, Diana bent her head, studied her hands clasped about her knee, the knuckles white with the convulsive

grip she was keeping on herself. "You can't, you don't know?" The question was a murmur, as if she were speaking to herself.

Vincent's eyes searched the room even as his heart searched their bond for a sense of Catherine, and found, nothing. "Diana!" Vincent growled her name, the sound forcing her to meet his eyes, the expression in her own dark and frightened. "Tell me! Where is Catherine?"

Diana hesitated, silently cursing Catherine for leaving her here to face this, begging her forgiveness for breaking a promise she should never have made, could not keep. "She went Above, Vincent. She went to meet Pope, to give him the notebook."

"NO!" It was a thunderous roar which shook the very stones of the walls of the chamber. Ignoring Jacob's terrified scream, Diana's startled cry, he grabbed her -- lifted her bodily out of the chair. "Where, Diana?" He shook her. "Where?"

Her teeth rattling she gasped, "I . . . don't know, the . . . park . . . she used the . . . drainage di -- " Her words ended abruptly as Vincent dropped her and was gone.

With a strangled sob Diana rubbed the painful throbbing of her arms. Shaking her head to clear it of the sound filling her ears, she realized with a start that Jacob was crying in his cradle. With a sigh, she rose, and lifting him in her arms pressed her cheek against his smooth forehead. She comforted him gently, "Hush Jacob, don't cry. Everything will be alright. It has to be."

## Chapter 36

Catherine stood in the shadows clinging to the low stone walls which flanked the two lanes of traffic. One eastbound, exiting the park, the other westbound, entering it. Her eyes scanned both, then looked northward along the broad expanse of Fifth Avenue. She had no way of knowing from which direction the car would come or where it would take her, but she hoped the place Pope had chosen was well away from the park.

"The further the better . . ." she kept repeating the phrase to herself. The chant had a calming effect, helped her to maintain the tight control she was keeping on her fear. If she allowed herself to feel it, it would bring Vincent -- this she could not allow to happen. No matter what happened, she must protect Vincent -- she could not risk bringing him to her, placing him in danger. She did not know if Pope had videotapes, although somehow she had to find out, had to find a way to keep him from using them . . . If she had to bargain with the devil, than so be it. It was a small price to pay if it would keep Vincent, her child, their world safe. It was a price she was prepared to pay with her life . . . if that became necessary.

She could only hope there would be another way . . . she would find it somehow, and if she didn't . . . well, better not to think of that. Instead, she

concentrated on what her possible options would be. There were not many she could see. The weight of the gun Diana had given her, the protection it might offer was reassuring, but she doubted she would be allowed to keep it. Issac had taught her there were other, equally effective weapons.

A long, black limo caught her attention as it made a slow, wide, arcing turn onto the avenue from seventy-third Street, hugged the curb on the parkside of the road and came to a stop before her. The passenger door of the driver's seat opened and a dark-suited male emerged.

Taking a deep breath, Catherine pulled her coat closer about her and stepped away from the protective shadow of the wall. The man nodded and opened the rear door of the vehicle. Catherine approached slowly and as she bent to enter he held out a hand to assist her.

To a passerby it may have appeared she was having some slight difficulty getting into the vehicle and was being helped by the man beside her. In actual fact she was being professionally and impersonally searched. The gun was quickly taken from her -- although the notebook was not -- and it disappeared into the pocket of the man's jacket before the door closed and locked beside her.

Settling back against the soft leather seat of the passenger compartment, Catherine watched him get in beside the driver. He said a few unintelligible words to an individual who's face was obscured by the shadow of a chauffeur's cap. The limo pulled smoothly away from the curb and almost immediately crossed the avenue to turn east at the next traffic light, and began to leave the park behind them.

Good, Catherine thought, permitting herself a small sigh of relief. She hoped they would continue to drive away from the park, increasing the distance from it and therefore the possibility of safety for Vincent. She tried to ignore the other side of the equation which was her own chance of safety diminished with each passing city block.

Her effort was wasted, for the flash of terror which shot through her was involuntary and absolute. The man seated before her had turned and meeting his eyes, cold, black and devoid of emotion, she knew with a certainty which stopped her heart and turned her blood to ice, that they were the eyes of an executioner.

## Chapter 37

The pounding of his booted feet was lost in the pounding of his heart as Vincent raced down the passage. The wind of his passing sent his cloak billowing out behind him, giving him the look of a winged fury in flight. He ran on blindly, no thought of direction, his legs finding the way by instinct while his mind, his heart, frantically searched for her.

She was alive, this he knew. The small, steady beat of her heart still pulsed beside his own. His soul, tortured scream of fear that it was, was still whole, still within him.

He reached the doorway, his outstretched hands crashed into the mechanism activating the door. Desperate with impatience, he grasped its rounded edge and forced it open, oblivious to the metallic squeal of protest issuing from its straining gears. The heavy iron gate flew outward as he hurled himself through it to crash blindly into the far wall of the culvert.

Momentarily stunned, he leaned against the brickwork, panting heavily, less from exertion than with the force of the emotions gripping him. At the end of the short tunnel before him was the park and beyond. Catherine was out there somewhere. He must find her, but how?

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With a muffled groan he slumped against the supporting wall and slipped slowly to the ground. Where, Catherine, where?

The answer to the agonized plea in the question was silence. The only sound reaching his ears was the tortured rasp of his own breathing and the rapid, painful drumming of his heart as it beat in his chest.

Suddenly, terror, deep and absolute, seized him, crushing the breath from his chest, stilling his heart before sending it slamming against his ribs in its effort to pump the gelid liquid his blood had become.

"*Catherine!!!*" His cry reverberated within the confined space. A shower of loosened dirt rained down around him as he spun around and catapulted through the gate, running blindly in the direction she was being taken.

## Chapter 38

The limo had turned south on the FDR drive, picking up speed as it joined the traffic's flow. Catherine looked out the window, not seeing the buildings passing by, oblivious to everything but the horror of that brief look into the face of death.

He had held her eyes for only a moment before turning to face the road again but the momentary contact had been enough to shatter her determined composure. Even now she was panting softly with her effort to regain control. "Think," she murmured under her breath through gritted teeth. "Think, don't feel, don't let emotions . . ."

Oh God, Vincent! She knew with a heart-wrenching certainty that violent rush of fear would have been felt by Vincent. He would know where . . . No. She willed herself to be calm, to concentrate on what she must do.

The limo exited at the Houston Street ramp, drove slowly through the darkened, deserted streets of that seedy section of the formerly industrial area of lower Manhattan which had not yet fallen into the grip of gentrification. The looming bulk of a warehouse filled the whole of the window, the whole of her vision as the vehicle slid to a stop before it. Instantly, the door beside her was

opened. Unknowingly repeating Diana's disdainful dismissal of assistance, she ignored the hand extended to her and climbed out onto the pavement.

"This way Miss Chandler." The rubber soles of her shoes made a soft squeaking sound on the metal treads of the short staircase leading to the elevated ramp of the building's entrance. The tin awning covering the walkway obscured the faint fluorescent glow of the widely spaced streetlights.

Unable to see clearly in its shadow, Catherine stumbled over the small step before the door. Her companion's hand shot out to bring her upright, steady her, his hold tightening when she would have shrugged off his grasp. Propelled through the doorway by that hand, she was silently ushered past row after row of stacked pallets, packing crates and finally through a doorway.

In contrast to the dim shadows of the warehouse, the muted lighting of the room was glaringly bright. Involuntarily her eyes narrowed and through the screen of her lashes she made out the dark shapes of filing cabinets lining the walls. Across the expanse of bare wooden floor stood a desk with the dark outline of a man behind it. A small shove sent her forward.

At her approach, the figure behind the desk rose and came round to stand in the pool of light cast by a shaded lamp sitting on the steel top of the desk. "Well, Miss Chandler. What an unexpected pleasure to see you again."

Pope was as she remembered him. Catherine barely controlled the shudder that ran through her as once again she faced the reality of such urbane evil.

Determined that he should not see her fear, she matched his greeting with her own politely ironic. "Unexpected perhaps. Although hardly a pleasure surely?"

His laugh seemed to chill the already cold room. Catherine felt she now knew what a cornered mouse felt staring into the eyes of a cat. She wondered how long he would play with her before he pounced. Her metaphor was even more apt as his hand came up and his fingers absently stroked the ends of his moustache, as though he was cleaning his whiskers before his meal. She could not help but smile, to think of such things, and yet it helped somehow, for now she was able to face him less frightened than a moment ago.

Seeing that smile Pope observed. "Remarkable. My compliments Miss Chandler." The note of respect mingling with regret in his voice sounded genuine as he continued. "Really quite remarkable. I should have enjoyed the opportunity to know you better. But alas, circumstances will not allow that to be possible."



The implication in his words were not lost on Catherine. Her heart began to beat in thick, painful strokes. She swallowed the lump of fear rising in her throat with difficulty and replied. "I believe you wanted to see me for a reason?"

"Ah, yes. How kind of you to remind me. You're quite right, business before pleasure. My associate would agree with you there, wouldn't you Jonah?"

Catherine had almost forgotten. They were not alone. The figure standing behind her in the shadows moved forward to stand at the edge of the circle of light she and Pope occupied.

"But then your business is your pleasure." The slight mocking tone in Pope's voice drew Catherine's attention to undercurrents in the room she had been previously unaware of. There was, it would seem, no love lost between Pope and this Jonah. Perhaps there was an opportunity here to play one against the other.

As quickly as they had arisen, her hopes were dashed by Jonah's impassive expression, his flat voice saying. "Get on with it, then. She has the notebook."

Pope seemed annoyed by his words, seemed to consider a reply, but then motioned toward the chair beside the desk. "Will you have a seat, Miss Chandler?"

As she shook her head he shrugged and turned back to the desk. "Very well." When he faced her again he was holding a videocassette. He held the tape out to her.

Catherine hesitated, unwilling to touch the tape or the hand that held it. Surely, she thought, it would not be that simple?

Pope seemed to understand her reluctance and was amused by it. He took a step toward her, extending his arm. "Really Miss Chandler, I do believe this is what you came for?"

Catherine reached for it.

The sound of the shot in the small room was deafening, her startled gasp was lost in it. Catherine watched in horror as the small circle of red on Pope's chest darkened and spread.

Her shocked expression mirrored the almost ludicrous look of surprise frozen on Pope's already lifeless face as he slowly toppled towards her. His body hit the floor with a sickening thud, raising a small cloud of dust which slowly settled upon the dark fabric of his suit with an insulting disregard for its immaculate, expensive tailoring.

Unable to tear her eyes from that sight, Catherine watched as Jonah came forward and with the toe of one shoe shoved Pope's body aside before bending to retrieve the tape which had fallen beneath it. Catherine took an involuntary step backward as he straightened and turned to face her, tape in one hand, gun in the other.

He was smiling as his eyes met hers, the expression in them sending a shiver of pure terror through her. He had enjoyed what he had done, and in that inhuman look of satisfaction she saw no trace of remorse. "Now, Miss Chandler." There was a note in his voice which told her he had waited a long time for this moment, and that wait had not been enjoyable. "There has been enough talk. The notebook. Give it to me."

Fumbling, shaking with reaction and the certain knowledge the next moment would be her last, no possible means of escape presented itself as Catherine reached into her pocket. Silently she whispered a prayer, a plea that Vincent, would somehow understand, forgive her. No matter what the cost she had had to try.

"Come on."

She drew the notebook from her pocket, held it in her hands, her eyes never leaving the man before her. He would have taken it from her but she stepped back, keeping herself and it, just out of his reach. "Not yet."

Her refusal surprised him. Catherine saw a ripple of indecision disturb the shark-like dead of his eyes before it all too quickly disappeared and was replaced by a dark, unholy gleam of delight. It had just occurred to Jonah that her unexpected resistance might prove interesting, might make it worthwhile to allow her to live a little longer, if only to prolong the intense thrill her terror was providing him. She was afraid. Although you would not know it to look at her, make no doubt about it, she was afraid. Oh, she *was* good. What was it Pope had called her -- 'remarkable?' Yes, that was the word he had used. 'Remarkable.' The killing of such a woman was a rare opportunity. Might it not prove a new and indescribably satisfying experience to make the woman who stood there defying him . . . beg for mercy? Yes that would be . . . pleasurable. But first he would have the notebook.

Horried, Catherine had watched, had known the moment a particular thought had struck him, had captured his attention. She shivered, trying to control her fear as a terrifying smile of . . . anticipation? . . . spread across his lips as he stepped toward her.

She swallowed the lump of fear in her throat, held herself rigidly erect and shook her head. "The tape."

An amazed anger began to roil in Jonah's mind as he stared at her. She dared to dictate to him! Had he thought her remarkable? The woman was mad! Mad -- or an idiot. Didn't she know she was in no position to refuse him? Deliberately he raised the gun in his hand, let her see his finger tighten on the trigger as he aimed it at her heart. Reaching out, he took the notebook from her nerveless fingers with a small grunt of satisfaction.

She stood there, defenseless yet determined, even now, in the face of her imminent death, to attempt to protect . . . She had to know, the tape . . . He still had the tape and the thought of what that could mean . . . Vincent, the tape could contain evidence of his existence. That knowledge in the hands of the monster before her terrified her beyond any thought of what might, what . . . was going to happen to her.

His words sliced through the haze of fear numbing her, "Tell me." Catherine looked up, he had the tape in his hand and touched it with the muzzle of his gun. "Just what is this supposed to contain?"

"You don't know?" Although a small voice in the part of her mind that was curiously calm -- removed from what was happening -- warned her it was the wrong thing to say, she could not prevent the question.

"Know what?" It was obvious Jonah was not pleased that he had had to ask, was not . . . satisfied with her reply.

He wanted to kill her, Catherine could see a terrible kind of hunger in his eyes, an eagerness that chafed at delay. Yet it appeared he could not overlook the opportunity to extract possibly valuable information from her. What was it that had forced her out of hiding?

Jonah had never believed it could be concern for Maxwell alone, or she would have gone to the authorities. No, the tape proved that it was something else. There was something she was hiding and it must be something very important. The information might be valuable to the organization, and therefore valuable to him. The price for Pope, the Chandler woman and the notebook had been agreed upon previously. This -- this might be worth even more.

She would tell him. He would make her tell him before she died. The pleasure he experienced at this thought almost made up for the annoying necessity of admitting to her he did not know. Perhaps it was greed which caused him to choose his next words so unwisely.

"What should I know about a blank tape?"

"Blank!" The word on her lips was a whisper of relief, and Catherine's heart gave a cry of gladness. The tape was blank. Pope had lied!

The woman was crazy, Jonah thought, she was actually smiling. He knew how to wipe the smile from her face. He raised the hand holding the gun, preparing to strike her.

Catherine saw the blow coming before her eyes, closed in anticipation of the stunning pain she knew would follow. Silently, her lips formed the whisper that was the name which would give her the strength to endure anything. "Vincent." It became a scream as the room erupted around her in an explosion of sound and fury.

Jonah's hand never finished its downward motion, frozen by the sight of Vincent hurtling through the splintered remains of the door, possessed by all the savagery of a demon from hell. Instinctively Jonah took aim, his body's reflexes reacting to a threat his horrified mind could not comprehend.

"No!" Catherine threw herself against his outstretched arm. She flung the whole of her body's weight upon it, sending the bullet downward to the floor to ricochet upward, the nearly spent round grazing her head, stunning her. With a small cry she slumped over Jonah's arm and crumpled toward the floor.

Above her head Jonah's legs thrashed helplessly in mid-air as Vincent's hand brought him upward with one fierce thrust. In the endless moment which was the end of time and the beginning of oblivion, Jonah's unbelieving eyes met the red-hot flame of avenging fury in Vincent eyes. The vision of hell he saw there was beyond anything he had ever imagined.

No stranger to death -- having seen it in his victim's eyes countless times -- Jonah saw his own death waiting to claim him. His face contorted with hatred as he raised his gun. He would not go alone, he would take this demon back to hell with him. It was his last thought as his neck broke beneath a single stroke of Vincent's arm.

## Chapter 39

Catherine's limp form had no weight in Vincent's arms as they lifted her with a tenderness as infinite as the quick and terrible justice they had exacted moments before.

Cradling her close to his heart, he carried her swiftly away. He knew she had been stunned, not seriously injured. Secure in this knowledge he ran easily, effortlessly from shadow to shadow toward the derelict building, toward the entrance to the tunnels.

Finding the way down in the darkness, he paused just beyond the threshold. Catherine stirred and with a soft murmur, instinctively pressed closer to the warmth and safety of Vincent's chest beneath her cheek.

Vincent's arms trembled even as they tightened about her, bringing her closer still. Slowly, Catherine's stunned senses began to register sensations. His hand was stroking her face, smoothing her hair so gently she might have been forgiven for thinking she was imagining their touch, for believing this was all a dream. Opening her eyes she knew it was a dream, the dream which now and forever would be her only reality, shining there in the lambent blue of Vincent's eyes as they met hers.

Vincent's eyes . . . memory came flooding back and she was suddenly afraid she would find somewhere in them the terrible remorse and self-loathing that was for Vincent the aftermath of a killing, the emotions with which he tortured himself each time he had been forced to take a life to save hers. Apprehension turned to hope as she searched and found only the shadowy trace of regret and a sad acceptance which lingered there for a moment before it was lost in the warmth of his smile as he bent his head to hers. "Catherine . . ."

Her name was a sigh of relief as he buried his lips in her hair. She pressed her face against the warm column of his neck and sought the shadowed hollow of his throat where she could feel his strong pulse beneath her lips. She sighed, inhaling the faint musk of worn leather, the smoky taste of candlelight, the subtle blending producing the intoxicating, warm, male scent uniquely Vincent's. "Why Catherine?"

The soft question stilled her, recalled her from the safe haven of his nearness. His hands found her arms, moved her gently from him as he repeated. "Why?"

The expression in her eyes was a plea for understanding as they met his. Finding only a puzzled question there, she tried to explain, "Pope claimed Gabriel had made tapes of you. He threatened to make them public unless I agreed to give him the notebook. I had no choice." There was a note of apology in her voice not entirely devoid of defiance as she continued. "He lied. Vincent -- there are no tapes."

Her words trailed off into silence, it seemed so foolish now. How could she have hoped that Pope would have kept the bargain he had proposed. He had known she would come, that she would have had to come. To think what she had risked, what she would have lost, and she had been willing to give him the notebook in exchange for . . .

The notebook! Her hands let go their grip on Vincent's arms and made a futile search of her pocket even as she realized the notebook could not possibly be anywhere but . . .

Vincent watched her without speaking, considered the frantic expression in her eyes as she raised them to meet his. He read the sudden fear and equally swift determination which darkened them.

"Vincent . . ." She could not return below without it. "The notebook. I must go back. I must . . ."

She thought he did not understand. His smile was curiously tolerant, as if he were regarding a rather wayward but charming child. "Catherine, that won't be necessary."

He did not understand. She had to make him understand -- the notebook, they must have the notebook. It was . . . Her thoughts stilled at precisely the same moment Vincent's hand emerged from beneath the shadows of his cloak. Held loosely there was the notebook she sought.

He smiled at her dazed expression, seeming strangely pleased with himself as he held it out to her. "Is this what you were looking for?"

She reached out to grasp it and stopped. What had happened changed nothing. She would have to go Above, she would have to clear Joe's name, finish the job she had begun. Did he understand? He must understand, she could not take the notebook from him unless she was sure he knew what she must -- what she was determined -- to do with it.

It seemed he did know, for now he held the notebook in his hand as if he were weighing it, and with it, something of great importance to them both. His eyes were dark, the blue of the sky just after twilight, or perhaps, just before the dawn. Slowly he held it out to her. She saw in them the understanding she had hoped for, and something more. In Vincent's eyes she saw the trust she had seen once before -- in her father's eyes.

For a long moment his eyes held hers as slowly, incredibly she felt his gentle surrender deep within the bond that was their shared soul; waited in breathless anticipation as the last feeble doubt of his resistance and his fear crumbled. "Catherine," His voice was strong and clear, yet he spoke so softly she had to strain to hear his words. "You stand for us, for our dream. You must go back -- I know you must do this for us both."

Catherine accepted the notebook from him as she moved into his open arms. They tightened about her. She pressed her cheek against his heart and found there the beat of her own.

Vincent's hands cradled her face gently, raised it to his as his lips whispered an endearment, first across one delicate lid and brow, then the other. Catherine's breath was a sigh as he rubbed the line of her cheek and jaw with the gentle rasp of the short, downy stubble covering his own. His lips traced a path to the place where his thumb explored, stroked the trembling fullness of her lower lip. The velvet abrasion of his tongue joined the teasing promise of his finger.

When Catherine encouraged his lips with her own, his free hand curled about the sensitive nape of her neck, cradling her head in the palm of his hand, his fingers tangling themselves in the silken net of her hair. With a gently savage tug, he bared the ivory arc of her neck to his searching gaze.

Through lowered lids Catherine watched, fascinated by the possessive heat of his eyes as they devoured her sensitive flesh. They scorched her, left her quivering as they claimed her with the ardent brand of his complete faith in a truth he would never again question or deny. Whatever was to come, they were one -- one heart, one soul . . . one dream.

His lips took hers, his free hand locking about her waist, sweeping her from her feet, molding her body to his. Intimately aware of the hardened sinews of his powerful thighs, the lean line of torso, his broad, muscular chest, her mouth opened in response to his passionate assault. To think she had risked, had almost lost this. It was her last coherent thought before all thought was swept from her mind as he took her to that place which was neither Above or Below, but theirs alone.

He may have said the words aloud, or perhaps he did not. It did not matter now, for he spoke to her heart, and it was her heart that heard them.

"Don't worry, Catherine. We won't fall."



## Chapter 40

The denim of the skirt felt strange, confining after the soft, flowing freedom of her tunnelclothes. Laina smoothed the heavy fabric over her hips and struggled with the zipper, her fingers not quite steady as she fumbled with the fastening.

"Mommy, I want *my* clothes." It seemed Cathy was faring no better with her new outfit. Tugging at the bib of the overalls Diana had provided, the plaintive note in her voice echoed the distress and confusion on her pinched face.

Laina knelt beside her, straightening the jumper with a gentle tug before taking both of Cathy's hands in hers. "I know, sweetheart, I know, but Mommy explained why you have to wear these clothes. Remember?"

"I 'member. You said we were going 'bove to a hopspital so I could feel better."

"That's right. Dr. Peter says its a place where the nice people will help you get well." Peter had arranged to have Cathy admitted to the pediatric unit of a well-known children's hospital where Cathy would get the treatment she needed and Laina would be able to stay close by. "So, you'll try and like your new clothes, won't you?"

A small thumb was jammed between quivering lips as Cathy's nod sent corn silk curls tumbling. Laina gave her a quick hug as much to comfort Cathy as to

hide the tears threatening to fall from her own eyes. Cathy must not see her cry. She buried her face in the sweet smelling skin of her daughter's neck as two thin arms crept around her and returned her embrace. "Don't worry, Mommy."

With a sigh that sounded suspiciously like a sob Laina rose and ran her fingers through the tousled mop of hair, gently raking it into some semblance of order. "Now, why don't you go and find Mary? She told me she had a surprise for you."

"A 'sprise?"

Laina smiled at the tiny squeal, the sudden grin of anticipation which brightened Cathy's pale face. She gave the child a gentle push in the direction of the doorway. "Go ahead then, she said she'd wait for you in her chamber." Cathy needed no further encouragement as Laina called after her. "Tell her I'll be there soon."

Laina watched her toddle off as fast as her tiny legs could carry her. She turned to look about the chamber for one last time, making sure she had left nothing she would need behind. It was an excuse really, a reason to linger, if only for a moment, here where she had found the first real happiness she had ever known.

Her eyes swept the room, trying to memorize each little detail. The mismatched collection of furnishings, patiently and carefully gathered over the last two years. The battered armoire she had retrieved from a pile of rubbish. She remembered how Cullen had badgered one of the other men into helping him carry it Below.

Cullen. The thought was painful and she tried to understand, to forgive him. He was afraid, she knew that. Not of the disease, she knew the others might fear the risk . . . but she did not believe Cullen . . .

A small sound from the doorway drew her attention. He stood there, his manner hesitant, his eyes unable to meet hers.

"Cullen?" Her voice was a whisper. She had not seen him since she had told him about Cathy . . . about herself. He seemed to hesitate, then began to turn as if to leave.

"No -- please don't go. Come in, Cullen." Laina motioned for him to enter and after a moment, he moved into the chamber. Still avoiding Laina's eyes, he looked about the room. There was a curious, disheartening bareness to it, devoid as it was of the odds-and-ends, personal articles of Laina's, Cathy's toys and playthings which had always been scattered about it. They were all gone now,

packed and waiting to be taken with them or stored in some unused corner of the tunnels to await their return. Cullen knew they might never . . .

"Cullen?"

"I came to say . . ." The words refused to come. "I came to explain."

Responding to the pain in his voice Laina held out her hand to him. "It's alright Cullen. You don't have to."

His head came up at her words, his eyes meeting hers for the first time. There was so much compassion in her look, such a wealth of gentle understanding -- when he had no right to expect anything but scorn. He was ashamed. "I don't deserve . . ."

"Of course you do, Cullen. You've never been anything but kind to Cathy and me."

"Not this time."

There was so much self-condemnation in those few words that Laina's heart went out to him, searched for a way to comfort him. "Cullen, I . . . understand. Really I do." If only she could make him believe she truly did -- understand. She knew what it was to be afraid of losing someone you loved, and she knew what that fear could do. It was not . . . She could find nothing in her heart to . . . blame Cullen for the choice he had made. She only wished she could help him . . . to see.

She saw him struggle with that fear, for a breathless moment felt him try to move past it, to her. One hand began to rise slowly toward her, moving perhaps only a fraction of the distance separating them before dropping to his side with a defeated gesture infinitely more expressive than mere words. He could not do it.

What could she say? It seemed he already -- he did know. The realization of what his fear was costing him was written everywhere for her to see. It was in the downcast curve of his neck, the slump of his shoulders and the shadowed, hopeless expression in his eyes.

"Laina, I'm . . . I . . . Here, I made this for Cathy." He thrust a small box into her hands, turned and with one final tortured glance, left.

Her fingers trembled as they opened the package and withdrew the intricately carved figure of a carousel horse. "Oh Cullen." There were tears in her voice as she held the gaily painted carving to her cheek, cradled it there. "I'm so sorry, so sorry for us all."

She stood where he had left her for a long time, then slowly, carefully, she placed the horse back in its box and closed the lid securely upon it. Bending, she

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**No Safe Place But the Heart**

picked up the satchel lying at her feet and with one last backward glance, turned and left the chamber.

## Chapter 40

It was so very quiet. Everyone had gone home, the phones no longer rang off the hook as they did during the day, the background murmur of office machines and voices had faded until there was only the nearly inaudible hum of the building's ventilation system.

Joe moved away from the window and glanced around his office. *What am I doing here?* Another of Diana's typically cryptic messages had asked, no, had commanded him to remain in his office after hours this evening. She had written that she had something very important to show him. Some new evidence regarding the accusations being levelled against him.

At first he had refused, still smarting from their last encounter, but she had insisted. Oh well, it couldn't hurt and the situation had become so incredibly puzzling he would now welcome help from wherever it was offered.

Last night a squad car had responded to a report of shots fired in a warehouse on the lower East Side. The officers' reports had raised more questions than it had answered.

Two bodies had been found and the check for identities had drawn a blank until, as was the routine procedure in non-identification cases, the information was fed into the special crimes unit computer in Washington. All hell had broken loose then, and two separate teams of federal agents had descended upon the

coroner's office clamping a lid on all information, denying access to the homicide detectives assigned to the case. Crossing to his desk he thumbed through the report he managed to have smuggled out. He had called in some heavy favors to get it and he wondered how much longer he would be in a position to do anything with the information it contained.

The identities of the bodies had been established and the results both shocked and elated him. One of the bodies had been that of an associate of Gabriel. A character known only as Pope -- Diana would have some questions to answer. How had she known Pope's name? Joe felt sure this man had participated in Cathy's kidnapping and murder, and he could not find it in him to pity his violent demise.

The other corpse belonged to a character well known to the feds. He was described in the rather extensive report as a professional hit man, known as Jonah, with numerous unproven assassinations to his credit. Joe could not help wondering what if any part he might have played in Cathy's murder.

The guys in forensics were going crazy trying to figure out how he had been killed. His neck had been broken, but how and by whom? Ballistics confirmed Pope had been shot by the gun found in Jonah's hand. A second bullet had been fired and the spent round found imbedded in a wall.

Everything pointed to at least one other person having been in the room. But so far there had been nothing found to provide the identity of an individual powerful enough to crash through a solid door with enough force to reduce it to kindling, and kill a trained professional like Jonah without any sign of a struggle.

Joe knew it was a vain hope he would remain in office long enough to see this investigation through. The special attorney was already interviewing candidates to replace him. As it was, he had an appointment with the mayor and police commissioner tomorrow and he fully expected he would be asked to hand in his resignation. It was, he knew, the only possible course of action; no Acting DA would be allowed to remain in office while under investigation.

The sense of failure which shook him was overwhelming. Nothing he had accomplished in the past few months could compensate for the shame and defeat he now experienced. With a sigh of resignation he cradled his chin in his hands and began to read the report before him, concentrating on finding something, some small clue, anything he may have overlooked before.

## Chapter 41

They left Mary's chamber alone, Laina gently but firmly refusing the offer of company on the journey to the Central Park threshold. She wanted to say that goodbye, alone.

The other goodbyes had been so hard, and there had been so many. Some had been tearful, like Mary's. The gentle-hearted woman had wept as she tied the muffler she had knitted around Cathy's neck. Rebecca, Olivia and Sarah had watched silently as Laina made her final preparations for the trip Above. Though they had said very little, she could feel their sadness and their unspoken support. Even William had stopped by Mary's chamber, shamefaced, but gruff as usual, and had thrust a small basket of food into her hands. The food was unnecessary, but she understood and accepted the cook's touching gesture. Mouse had been there. Dear Mouse, she would miss his odd ways, silent, solitary creature that he was. A small smile touched her lips as she thought of Jamie -- Jamie who had stood beside Mouse and had poked him in the ribs each time he tried to ask why they were leaving. Mouse did not understand partings or the reasons for them. Laina hoped he would never have to. They were good friends, and she would miss them all.

Holding Cathy's hand in hers, they made their way through familiar passages. The wide arcs of the central tunnels had given way to the narrow, low-hanging ceiling above them. They were very close to the threshold now, very close to the place where they would leave the underground world they called home, and walk under the unfamiliar expanse of open sky.

They were more than halfway down the passage ending at the steel door which opened onto the drainage pipe of the culvert when Cathy's free hand tugged on Laina's jacket.

"Mommy." Laina looked down at her daughter's small, serious face. "Mommy, come home soon?"

Laina flinched at the question. She tried never to lie to Cathy. How could she tell her two-year old daughter she might never again see the only home she had ever known? "We'll see, honey. We'll see." Cathy's frown told her it was not the answer she wanted to hear, but it was the only answer Laina had.

They reached the locked steel door which hid this entrance to the tunnels. Laina hesitated for only a moment, then reached for the mechanism which opened the door. It slipped and creaked beneath her hand as she drew it downward. The dull black barrier slid away, allowing the golden light of the torches in the passage to spill through the doorway into the murky shadows beyond.

Clutching her battered suitcase firmly in one hand and Cathy's in the other, she stepped over the raised doorsill.



So intent was Joe on his task he did not immediately look up at the sound of the door opening. "Okay Diana, I'm here. Now what . . ." He never finished what he was going to say.

She stood there, just as she had stood so many times before, the small crooked grin he remembered so well tilting the corners of her mouth. God help him, he must be going mad for the hallucination was speaking, and it was Catherine's voice, warm and smiling, which said, "Hi Joe."



## ***Vincent's Journal.***

*"Sometimes we must leave our safe places, and walk empty-handed among our enemies." Those were Bridget O'Donnell's words to me one extraordinary night, All Hallows Eve, when I walked openly in the world Above.*

*To those who walk in the sunlight, that night has always been a time for putting on the masks and manners of the creatures they believe inhabit worlds outside, beyond their own. On that night they amuse and frighten each other -- and themselves -- by stepping outside the safe, the known, the accepted.*

*Yes Bridget, the walls do grow thin, but they are not the walls between one world and the next. They are the walls men have built between themselves and . . . their fears.*

*I have always lived outside those walls. My existence belongs to the realm of shadows just beyond the watchfires of their reason and experience. My safety lies in those shadows, and I -- I have always known this was my fate. I could never be . . . part of their world. Never live or be welcome within their walls.*

*Yet, there is something in me which longs for that welcome -- imagines what it would be to stand under the open sky and feel the sun's warmth upon my face -- to move freely between sunlight and shadow.*

*It was . . . a dream I had, and still I was, what I have always been, a solitary creature, "one with the night," until . . .*

Renascence II  
No Safe Place But the Heart

*I no longer have only the dream of sunlight, for Catherine takes me there. I walk there, with her now, in the one place where there are no boundaries, no limits, where there is nothing to fear and no danger to part us.*

*Catherine, you have shown me.  
And I shall never forget.  
There is . . .  
No safe place but the heart.*

*Come home soon, Catherine.*

The path  
leads us  
to another fork,  
another  
barrier  
to eternity.

There is a light  
shining from you.  
It is within you  
and I will carry it  
with me.

Wherever life takes us,  
we can have no fear.  
For that which has never been,  
has lifted us.  
From the fires of the past  
To where we now stand.

Our love  
brought us here,  
will bring us  
Back  
Again . . . and Again.

Sheryle Ann Renéé

Once upon a Time in the City of New York...

a fairy tale was born. For three wonderful years  
we have lived beneath its spell. Suddenly, one dark day,  
the enchantment was broken and we were set adrift with  
only the memory of its haunting beauty to warm our hearts.

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Excerpts from "RENASCENCE".....

*...The pain in the eyes that met his took his breath away.*

*"Vincent, what is the matter...?"*

*"Father..." the word was a plea. "Father, it's Catherine.*

*I feel her..."*

*Father's expression of concern turned to one of shocked disbelief.*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"I can feel her, now, this moment. She is so... sad."*

*"Vincent, surely you must know that is... impossible?"*

*"Impossible...!" he leapt from the chair, striding across the room and back as if he were a caged creature, going mad with frustration and grief. "What IS impossible Father?...."*

*For the space of an unfinished heartbeat, her eyes, chased with moonshadow met his. Blue? "Yes," she sighed. "Yes, of course...", his eyes were blue. But what an impoverished description for the prism of his gaze. Brilliant sapphire depths swam in their cloudless summer skies, flawless as the crystal of a sparkling autumn day. "To forget such eyes...."*

*Finished. That life was finished.... There was no going back, there was nothing to go back to.... The past was dead, gone.... She let herself mourn someone she had once known, someone who was no more... someone, named Catherine.*

*When he moved it would be to keep the promise he had made; when he moved it would be to turn away, to arise... and awaken from their dream.....*



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