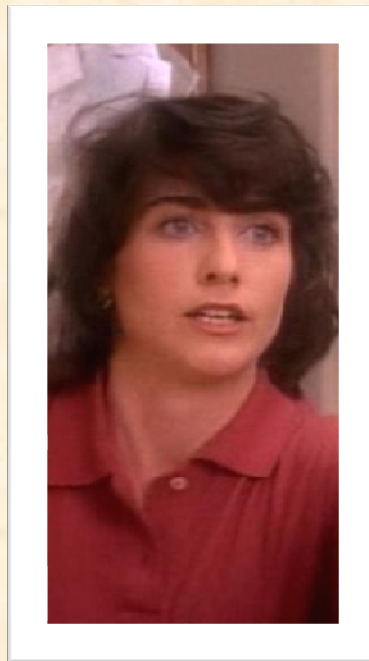


# Runaway

By Cindy Rae



*"Our lives at times seem a study in contrast... love and hate, birth and death, right and wrong... everything seen in absolutes of black and white. Too often, we are not aware that it is the shades of grey that add depth and meaning to the starkness of those extremes. – Ansel Adams*



"I'm leaving Paul. Can I stay here? Just for a couple of days? Sleep on your couch, maybe? Please?"

Of all the people Catherine thought might be knocking on her door at one a.m., Nancy Tucker was very far down on the list. Yet here she stood, a very large purse slung over one shoulder, a hefty valise in her left hand, her umbrella and raincoat in her right. A brown camera bag was slung over the shoulder opposite the purse.

"Nancy?"

Catherine said no more, as she saw the tears well up in her friend's blue eyes. Catherine was about to ask "Are you okay?" out of reflex, but of course, everything was not okay with Nancy Tucker. If they had been, she wouldn't be standing in Catherine's doorway, at one in the morning.

"Nance, come in," Catherine tugged on Nancy's hand, not needing to conduct any kind of interrogation while her friend was standing in the hall.

"Thanks, Cathy," Nancy replied, coming in with the flotsam she'd lugged up with her. Catherine had a feeling that a certain blue compact car was probably sitting next to hers, in her parking garage.

The beautiful attorney's sleep-addled brain roused itself, as she took in her longtime friend. Nancy set her hoard of things down near the corner of Catherine's sofa. She was wearing jeans and good running shoes, matched with a red blouse under a pullover sweater. The outfit Nancy had once told her was "the standard uniform of suburban moms everywhere." Catherine checked for her wedding rings, which were still on. Out of professional habit, she scanned Nancy's face for any size of bruising. There was none. But there were definitely signs that she'd been crying, as she'd made the drive from Westport.

"I think I look like I'm running away from home," Nancy said, shrugging the huge purse off her arm.

Catherine waited to find out what this was about. She knew that Nancy would tell her.

"I can make us some coffee. Unless you want something stronger," Catherine offered, moving to help Nancy settle her camera bag, then enfold her friend in a hug, knowing that more than coffee, that was probably what Nancy needed.

Nancy's answering pressure was firm, and it lingered. She clung, and Catherine knew why. She was in trouble, and looking for safe harbor. Catherine well knew the feeling.

"I'm so sorry to bust in on you like this," Nancy sniffed.

"Shhh," Catherine soothed. "You're where I ran to when I needed to get away. Fair's fair." She gave Nancy a sisterly squeeze. "Coffee?"

"Sure. I mean... no. I'm on edge enough. Maybe some wine. No, not wine. It'll only make me weepy... Oh, Cathy, I'm such a mess! And it's all that .... that THING'S fault!" Nancy wailed, pointing at the camera case. "And it's our anniversary, too!" Nancy tacked on.

Catherine eyed the case. "I'll make tea and you can tell me all about it," she said, knowing Nancy would follow her into the kitchen. Once the kettle was brewing on the stove, Catherine turned and leaned against the counter, crossing her arms, loosely. "A camera caused you to want to leave Paul?" Catherine was very confused. "Is this a good time to point out that you love photography?"



"It's not a camera," Nancy growled darkly. "It's... it's a *thing*. An offensive, ugly, boxy, *THING!* It's just *disguised* as a camera." She looked back toward Catherine's living room, where the offensive "thing" now sat.

"Oh... kay," Catherine said slowly, parting the syllable to show that she was still confused.

Nancy threw up her hands. "Cathy, you never saw such a ridiculous excuse for a camera. It's horrible. I wanted a dark room. Maybe in the garage? But Paul would have to move his precious car and golf clubs out for that, and... Oh, Cathy, what am I going to do?"

Nancy put her head in her hands, and that preceded a fresh storm of weeping. Catherine held her once more, and patted her back in a consoling gesture. "Do you want me to call Jenny? Get her over here?" Catherine asked.

Nancy sniffed. "No. No, I think just us, okay? It's hard enough, right now. What do I do about the kids? The house? I haven't worked since



Jeremy was born. What do I do about... everything?" She was overwhelmed, and clearly feeling it.

"One step at a time, honey," Catherine said, breaking the embrace as she moved the whistling kettle off the stove. "Chamomile or rose hip? Neither one will keep you awake," Catherine said, offering her a choice.

Nancy sniffed again, and went with talking about beverages, since talking about an impending separation from her husband was too painful. "You were always a coffee drinker. When did you switch?" she asked, eyeing the small assortment of tea bags in Catherine's canister.

Catherine knew when she'd begun keeping more tea in her apartment. But she obviously couldn't discuss that. "I'm still a coffee drinker. A... a friend gave me a box of some, for Christmas," Catherine lied smoothly, then made the choice for Nancy. Chamomile it was.

The two women went back into the living room, and Catherine settled them both on her small sofa.

"So. Anniversary night, and you're not at a great restaurant, or taking in a show. I take it things didn't go well?" Catherine said, stating the obvious as she eyed the offending camera bag.

Nancy inhaled the steam from the cup, and let the porcelain warm her hands. "We stayed in and got a sitter. Jeremy and Jill! Oh my gosh, they don't even know, yet!" She set the cup down on the coffee table, feeling more unsteady than ever. Nancy's life, and her perception of that, clearly felt like an avalanche of everything that was going wrong.

The investigator in Catherine came to the fore. *So, whatever this is, it was a sudden thing. An impulse. Must have been quite the fight. And quite the camera,* Catherine thought, waiting for more. "Sounds nice enough," she prompted.

Nancy scrubbed her hands on her thighs. "It was. It was all okay. I mean... I made a nice dinner and Paul put some music on." Her tone grew dark. "Then we exchanged gifts."

"I take it that's when everything kind of went downhill?" Catherine observed, taking a sip from her cup. Nancy retrieved her own. She noticed that Nancy's hands shook, as she tried to steady them.

"I'll say," she replied. "Do you know how long I looked for his gift? How many places I had to call?" she asked. "He wanted a special kind of golf club, a driver, not a putter. Real wood, with a graphite shaft. Precise measurements. Balanced. Special brand. I had to hunt all over the phone book, after three sporting goods stores didn't have them."

Catherine knew that Paul was an avid golfer, just as she knew that Nancy had loved photography.

"I'm sure he was very... pleased," Catherine said, glancing toward the bag that held the source of Nancy's upset. "But I take it you weren't very pleased with yours?" she asked.

"Not pleased isn't the word for it," Nancy grumbled, setting down her cup as she yanked over the case. She offered it to Catherine. "Go ahead. Look." Her tone was disgusted.

Catherine set down her tea and gingerly took the offered bag. Nancy held it by the strap with two fingers, as if it held something odious.

Catherine accepted the case and tugged the zipper around the brown vinyl. "It must be quite the mistake if... oh! I've seen these! My office is crazy about them. They're a huge deal, Nancy."



Catherine extracted a large, rectangular camera. A jaunty, rainbow stripe bisected the body, and Catherine briefly admired the Polaroid One Step. They had been out for a few years, and were very popular. Film for them developed instantly, right in the photographer's hand, foregoing the need for a trip to the drug store, or any other film-developing place.

"A huge deal.' They're an abomination." Nancy would not be dissuaded.

Catherine turned the camera over, and noticed that Paul had also included three square boxes of film, in the bag. Catherine knew the film alone cost approximately ten dollars a box, and that the camera itself was still fairly pricey. Whatever sin Paul had committed, he hadn't tried to be cheap about it.

"I see tourists with these, all the time. They say movie people use them on the set, to 'capture the scene' and know where everything is when they have to re-set up. The police use them at crime scenes. They like how immediate the picture is, and that—"



"If... Satan ever made a camera, *this* would be it." Nancy cut Catherine off, and shot up from her seat. She paced the room a little, and rubbed her arms, looking as if she wanted the warmth, even though the room was comfortable. Her blue eyes threatened to spill over with tears, again. Nancy dashed them away.

Catherine set the camera to one side. "Nance... Help me, here. I'm not sure I understand. These things are all the rage."

They were, and to some degree, that was no small measure of concern, for Catherine. What if someone pointed one at Vincent, some night? Or discovered one of the ways down into his world, and took a picture, then went straight to a publisher, or to the police? The image would be immediate, and impossible to deny. One of the things her department liked about these types of pictures was that the film couldn't be tampered with, or altered. Whatever was in front of the lens was what came out on the print, and the results were almost instantaneous. Any shot taken only needed a minute or two to develop, in the person's hand.

But none of that was as important as Nancy's obvious misery, right now.

"They're all the rage," Nancy echoed. "Yes. I get it. Newsmen even carry them, sometimes." Sorrow bore down her slender frame. "But they're not something any *real* photographer would have much to do with. There's no *art* to them, Cathy. None at all."

Catherine wasn't sure that was true, but Nancy clearly was. She asked for the camera with a gesture of her fingers and showed Catherine why she felt as she did. "There's no automatic way to adjust for distance, and no way to add a lens that will. So, no telephoto shots. There's no way to change the shutter speed. There's no way to create a double



exposure, intentionally, or let in more light. Or less.” She handed the camera back. “And the film... it’s crappy. It’s soaked in chemicals and all the shots have way too much yellow and orange in them. They don’t spit out good quality prints, they just spit out quick ones. You can’t fix that.”

Catherine set the camera aside while Nancy continued to list its flaws. “And... you don’t need a darkroom for it. That’s why he got it for me. Paul bought this so he wouldn’t have to give up any space in his precious garage.”

*Ah. I see,* Catherine thought.

Nancy paced the room, then walked over to Catherine’s balcony doors, standing behind the closed panes of glass. The park stood before her, and the city, beyond that. It was the same view Catherine had enjoyed with Vincent only a few hours before, on the other side of the glass.

Catherine knew that Vincent was long gone, but couldn’t help wishing for some of his wise counsel, right about now. What to tell someone in Nancy’s position?

Not sure what to say, Catherine simply left the camera on the sofa, and rose to go and stand near her friend, since that’s what friends did, when one of them was in trouble. She embraced Nancy from behind, then moved to look out at the park with her, for a moment.

Silence fell between the two women, and Catherine felt Nancy sigh, as much as heard it. The twinkling lights of the city shimmered before them, through the clear windowpanes. The green of the park spilled its dark bounty across their view. Nancy reached for the door handle, and gently pushed it open, stepping out onto the space. Catherine joined her.

"This is such a lovely view," Nancy said quietly, her eyes tracking the nighttime panorama before her.

"I bet it would make a good shot," Catherine said, "With any camera but that one," she added quickly. She knew it was the loyal thing to say, and Catherine was nothing if not devoted to her friend.

Nancy acknowledged the wry comment and took in the scene with a photographer's eye. "Maybe. But the composition is a little off. The tallest trees and the tallest buildings are both on the left. You'd need something to balance it, on the right. Maybe something... interesting, in the foreground... Maybe."

Her voice simply drifted away, and Catherine didn't pressure her to say more. She took in her view again, and realized that Nancy was right. As beautiful as the scene was, it wasn't perfect, composition-wise. It was a thing she'd never noticed before.

"You always had a touch of the artist in you, you know," Catherine said, offering the compliment not for the first time, between them.

It was true. Nancy Tucker was a woman with an artist's eye, but not an artist's hand. She couldn't draw or paint, but she had a keen eye for color, form, and composition. Her beautiful home was a testament to that skill, as were the photographs Catherine knew were now sitting all but unviewed, inside multiple photo albums, back in Westport.

"I guess I did," Nancy said, hating the feeling that her husband hadn't honored that. He'd given her a gift for a clumsy amateur, when she'd wanted to be recognized as a professional.

"Oh, Cathy. I so wish I could go back," Nancy said.

For a moment, Catherine thought Nancy was referring to Westport. But her next sentence put that idea aside. "Remember backpacking across

Europe? You, me, and Jenny? Susan met up with us in Amsterdam, but mostly, it was us.”

Catherine did, and the memories were fond ones. They were also over a decade old.

“You had the most luggage. Even though I had more clothes,” Catherine recalled with a smile, remembering all the extra cases Nancy had had to lug around, thanks to her photography. The tripod alone was a long tube. One Nancy often kept slung around her back. Extra lenses usually travelled in a train case; one with special padding.

“I’d be up two hours before any of you, trying to catch the light,” Nancy said, looking out over the shadowcast park.

*Were you?* Catherine thought, trying to remember. She knew Nancy had been up before everyone else. She didn’t realize how long before, or just why, until this moment.

Always tired from their touring, she, Jenny and Susan had usually slept in, right until room service had come to kick them out of whatever hotel they’d been staying in.

She pictured Nancy as she’d been, then. Fresh faced, athletic, and intense. Hair held strictly back in a ponytail so the wind wouldn’t blow it in front of the camera lens, and ruin the shot. Lithe, even in hiking boots and jeans, climbing all over ... well, pretty much everything, to play with the perspective, on a photograph she wanted.

Catherine knew she had one particular picture of the group of them, and that Nancy had taken it from the hood of a taxi, near an Italian fountain. Nancy had haggled (in broken Italian) with the cab driver over allowing her to use his vehicle as a perch, and been elated with the results.



Recalling it all made Catherine realize a bit more what Nancy had given up when she'd changed from Nancy Wainwright to Nancy Tucker. She truly did have gift for her art. And a devotion to that gift.

A gift she'd mostly set aside, when the demands of rearing two young children had overwhelmed her day.

"You were... amazing. And very talented. You still are, Nancy," Catherine assured.

"Am I?" Nancy asked, still staring out at the view, but not really seeing it, anymore. "Am I really? Or do we both just think I am, because I used to be?"

Cathy saw her friend doubting herself in every way, and she knew that couldn't stand.

"You're a great photographer. And a great wife and mother. A fantastic friend. When I felt like my world was just... too overwhelming, where did I go?" She gave the other woman another hug.

Nancy rested her head on Catherine's shoulder. "And I just did the same. Oh, Cathy. I want to be eighteen again. With you, and Jenny. And Susan. I want to go back. Do it differently, this time."

*That's a lot of power to give one little camera,* Catherine thought, knowing that such wishes were common to many women. Also that deep down, they often didn't really mean them.

Catherine kept her tone soft. "I can't make any of us eighteen again." She paused. "But you can... undo your marriage, if that's what you really want."

Nancy's face crumpled and she grabbed Catherine tighter, knowing in her heart she didn't want that.



"I just... I just want... him to know... how important it all was... to me!" She hiccupped between sobs.

Catherine kept Nancy enfolded, understanding very well how it felt to want others to acknowledge how important something was to you. It had been no small thing to convince her friends and family that working for the District Attorney's Office was far more than a "phase" she was going through, after her attack. She'd fought hard to be taken seriously. In ways, she still was. And of course, she knew there were some things about her life she could simply never share, with anyone. So "being taken seriously" wasn't even on the table, for those.

But this wasn't about Catherine's problems. It was about Nancy's. "You don't think he knows that?" Catherine asked, trying to pierce to the heart of things.

Nancy sniffed, then hiccupped, again. "I... I don't think he puts it on the ... the same level as the other things," she said lamely.

Catherine knew to stand quietly, and just let Nancy gather her thoughts.

"It's not that I don't love my kids, Cathy...or my whole family. All of them," Nancy said, including her husband. "But... oh, Cath. I'm spread in half a dozen directions, almost every day. Jeremy needs his lunch packed and Jill needs a trip to the store for new shoes. Paul thinks that's going out shopping and having fun, but it isn't. It's rushed, so I can get back to start supper on time, and make pediatric dental appointments, and do more laundry, and that's endless. Buddy calls and he's having a great day at work and might get a promotion, go to Vancouver for two weeks scouting out locations for a new branch. And I'm... sorting the colors from the whites, and making sure Paul's dry

cleaning gets picked up. I don't hate it. But there isn't a lot there to love, either," she admitted.

"The way you loved photography," Catherine clarified.

"Yes! Like that. I want to *do* that, not just remember that I did. I want to go out and shoot five rolls of film, then take it into my own dark room to develop it. Kind of like when we were in school and I used the college stuff for it."

Catherine gave her an understanding nod, when the phone rang. Considering the late hour, they both were pretty sure they knew who it was.

"I can just let the machine get it," Catherine said, letting it ring again. One more time, and familiar hiss of the tape came on. Paul's voice came through the small speaker, tinged with worry.

"Cathy? Cathy, is Nancy with you?... Please say she is. I already called Jenny, and now we're both in a panic. Baby? Nance? If you're there, please pick up. Just so I know you're safe. Please."

Catherine glanced at Nancy, whose eyes were full of remorse. Without pressuring her to decide, Catherine crossed the room and snatched the receiver from its cradle. "Paul? Hi... Yes, she's here. She's... upset, but fine. She made the drive okay... yes."

Nancy moved in off the balcony and closer to Catherine, her eyes looking huge, in her face.

"I just... yes. Please call Jenny back and tell her Nancy is okay. I think... no, I... Yes. The camera was made by Satan. We got that far. Does she want to talk to you?" Catherine raised an eyebrow at the question, and asked Nancy to give her any indication.

Nancy nodded, then extended her hand for the receiver. Catherine stepped away, trying to give her room.

“Paul? I ... no. I don’t think so, not tonight. Maybe not... I can’t do it this way.”

Catherine moved toward the balcony doors while Paul was clearly trying to talk to his upset wife. Nancy listened. Catherine knew that was a good sign.

“It’s just... No. Paul...a *darkroom*. Not a camera that makes you not *need* one. A darkroom. A *real* one. Something for me. I can’t.... I ... no, it’s either all about you, or Jeremy, or Jill... — no, it has nothing to do with not loving any of you. More like none of you accepting *me*, what I *am*. What I need. There’s *more* to me than... than melon ballers and sneakers and dinner... “ She paused, and Catherine knew Paul was having a say.

Catherine collected the tea mugs and took them into the kitchen, trying to give Nancy some privacy.

Her friend’s voice carried, thanks to an increase in her volume. “I *do* tell you what I want,” Nancy resumed the conversation from her side. “And if it’s easy, like a bracelet or a new watch, that’s fine. But this *isn’t* easy. And I want it.”

The two spoke for a few more minutes, and Catherine remained in the kitchen, trying not to eavesdrop as the couple each aired their side of things. Catherine heard Nancy’s sad voice as she wound up the conversation. The beautiful attorney re-entered the room as Nancy said good-bye, gently returning the phone to its cradle.

“I think I’m homeless,” Nancy said, realizing how far she’d run, and why. Clearly, the conversation hadn’t concluded with her deciding to return home.



Catherine pulled the cushions off the sofa, and tugged out the bed. "We've been more homeless than this," she tried to console her friend. "Remember the time they overbooked our hotel in Munich, and we ended up sleeping on benches in the Bahnhof?" She said, recalling the episode well. They both knew that nothing would make this terrible situation better. But that talking about the days Nancy wanted to re-live might at least help, some.

Nancy nearly smiled at the memory, though there was a wistfulness to it. They both smoothed down the sheets to the pullout bed. "I remember. It was a big train station, but we were crowded on a bench. I woke up with my tripod case in my back, and Jenny's foot on my thigh."

"We were quite a tangle. You kept your Nikon case on your stomach, so it wouldn't get damaged."

"I loved that camera. 35 millimeter, variable shutter speed, easy to mount, and a separate telephoto lens I had to beg my dad for, as a graduation gift. There's a picture of you by the fountain of Trevi from that rig. And the one of Jenny in a gondola, getting serenaded."

"There is," Catherine agreed. *As a matter of fact, I think I know where those pictures are, right now.*

She went into her bedroom to pull out a pillow for Nancy, and on impulse grabbed one of her old photo albums off the shelf. The one that contained the pictures Nancy had mentioned. They'd all had copies of the prints Nancy had taken.

Catherine returned with the pillow and sat on the open mattress, with her friend. Flipping through the pages, they both found the last one Nancy had just spoken of. There was Jenny, laughing delightedly, her curling hair half-hidden under a white baseball cap, while a gondolier



sang ebulliently, holding a pole in one hand, gesturing toward Venice, in the other.

“God, I remember this. We were all so happy,” Nancy said, nostalgia in her voice.

Catherine gently flipped through some of the other pages. There were pictures of landmarks, and pictures of her, both in the aforementioned fountain and at Piccadilly Square. The three of them, she, Jenny and Susan, were sitting in a bench on the left bank, in Paris, in one shot, and another of them showed all four of them boarding the plane for home. The latter was clearly taken by some kind bystander, and you could tell how “different” that picture looked, from the others.

The ones taken by Nancy invariable showed a lively kind of picture, and they played with perspective, often. Landmark shots were beautifully balanced, and atmospheric. But any picture of the four women was very often the “standard” kind, with the young friends standing together and being told to say “cheese,” or some such. They weren’t “bad,” and they had incredible value, to Catherine, just as they did to the other girls, for the memories they evoked. But it was easy to see which pictures in the album had been taken by Nancy, and which ones hadn’t been. Ones with her in them were clearly inferior to the ones she’d taken, herself.

“You know, I think the thing we don’t have enough of?” Catherine asked, eying Big Ben on a cloudy day.

“More landscape pictures?” Nancy asked, running her hand along the edge of the page, fondly. A perfect yellow butterfly on a pink Versailles rose gleamed back at her. Jenny’s hand was cupping the rose. It was a chance shot.

"No. You," Catherine answered. "You took almost all these amazing pictures. Jenny and I snapped a couple rolls of film off an instamatic camera. But we're no good. You are. We should have been taking tons of pictures of *you*, having fun, doing all of this."

"'You don't 'take' a photograph. You *make* it.' Ansel Adams," Nancy quoted. Catherine nodded at that.

Nancy gave the page a wistful smile, as she walked down memory lane. "I was too busy to stand still for the camera. I kept telling you all to "stand here," or "look this way." Or I'd just snap half a roll of candids, while we were walking through some landmark."

"I remember." Catherine did. The glossy pictures were full of old memories. Opera house architecture dominated one page. Catherine didn't even remember the name of the building. But she knew Susan Alcott had never looked lovelier, framed in a marble archway.

"'The negative is comparable to the composer's score, the print to its performance,'" Nancy quoted Adams, again.

Catherine squeezed her girlfriend's shoulder. "We should have taken a roll of you, taking pictures of us. Of everything. So you could have them to show Paul how animated you were. How... very happy it made you to make all of this."

Nancy smiled, glad to recall the past, rather than to anticipate an uncertain future. "If it was morning, you guys were still asleep," she recalled.

Catherine nodded her agreement. "Yeah. We were. It's kind of sad. Jenny and I have this great... record of how we looked, and where we went. What we saw. You only have the last thing." Catherine gave her another hug. "I'm sorry, Nance. We should have set up the tripod a lot

more, and got you in front of the camera. Let you see how... how beautiful you looked.”

Nancy met Catherine’s sincere green gaze, then shook her head. “A photographer is happiest behind the lens, not in front of it.” She reached the last page of pictures in the album, and closed the cover, gently. Then she struggled to hide a yawn, the trials of the long day catching up with her. “And this one is past beat,” she admitted.

“You had a tough night and a long drive,” Catherine commiserated.

“I did,” Nancy agreed. “Sure you don’t mind if I crash here?”

Catherine rose, leaving the album where it was. “Of course I don’t. I have to get up for work in a few hours, though. My place is yours,” she said, knowing she’d need to get a note to Vincent, so he didn’t come to the balcony tomorrow... later today. If she got hung up at work, she often didn’t get in until well after sundown. It wouldn’t do to have the two of them stumble into each other.

“Thanks, Cath. I owe y—”

“Not a thing,” Catherine reassured her. “Sleep, honey. It will look better in the morning. I think.” She nudged the camera case that had caused - yet not caused - a lot of the trouble out of the way.

She’d was about to head toward her bedroom when she heard the phone ring a second time.

“That’s probably Paul, with another excuse, trying to pass it off as an apology. I’m too tired for this, Cathy,” Nancy said, eying the phone.

“When he’s done, I’ll unplug it,” Catherine reassured her friend.

They let the answering machine message play, then Paul’s voice filled the room.



“Nance? I pulled all my tools and golf clubs out of the garage. It’s all on the carport. We’ll figure out something. I’m painting the one window black. You said we could just hang a heavy curtain, but I think it’s better if we just go ahead and paint it. Less chance of screwing up your work. Thing is... the kids’ bikes. Is it okay if I get one of those racks where you hang them from the ceiling? Or will that mess up the drying lines for the prints, do you think? And, um, the chemicals you need... I thought the shelf where we keep—used to keep the lawn fertilizer, but they’re kinda low and Jeremy’s a climber. So... do you think one of those locking cabinets, or...”

Nancy was racing across the room, hand out for the phone. “Paul?” She snatched up the receiver. Her husband was cleaning out the garage in the middle of the night? And painting its only window black?

Catherine couldn’t hear the other end of the conversation, once Nancy picked up the phone. But it was obvious by Nancy’s expression she was amazed. “You’re not clearing out the garage at nearly 2:00 am,” Nancy said. Catherine picked up on a little of what Paul was saying, through the line. No, he wasn’t cleaning out the garage at nearly 2:00 am. He was making a darkroom, apparently.

Nancy’s voice was as animated as the rest of her. “Shelves? No, no, you can keep the shelves for the yard stuff... A locking cabinet... Yes. Some of that stuff is poisonous, and we don’t want Jeremy to... a table? Yes. No, no, not like the card table. A long one. Plastic bins to soak the prints in, and the lines right over that. I... Yes. No. No, I don’t think so. A hook for a long apron. Fixant is hard on your clothes. Yes.... Yes... I’m not sure, I’ll have to see. If it... If it doesn’t, we can just seal it with duct tape around the garage door. But... but that would make this permanent. I wasn’t thinking about taking up the whole... not the whole thing, I... Yes. Okay. A rack for my lenses? How would that work?”



Nancy turned her back and listened as her husband tried to tell her over the phone what he clearly wanted to show her in person. That he wanted to help her make the dream of having her own darkroom come true. And he might need her help and input with some of the particulars.

This time, when she hung up the phone, Nancy gathered up her bags, as well. There was a smile on her face. A radiant one.

"I have to get back to Westport. Before Paul rips down the clotheslines and strings them up in the garage."

"I take it things are... better?" Catherine ventured, knowing they were.

Nancy's smile was brilliant. "He's trying to figure out how to convert his tool pegboard into something that will hold the stuff I need. I really think I better get back."

"Tonight?" Catherine asked, aware that Nancy had already made the trip from Westport once, this evening.

"It's like you told me. The heart won't wait!" Nancy replied, shouldering her purse. "Besides, I couldn't sleep if I stayed. And I'm sorry for this craziness," she apologized.

Catherine shook her head. "Think nothing of it. If I ever come running back your way, I expect your door to be wide open."

"It will. Oh! I'm so sorry! I didn't even get a chance to ask you. How are things? With, you know... you and Vincent?" Nancy knew Vincent's name, but nothing else about him, other than that their relationship was complicated, and that Catherine was in love with him.

Catherine smiled, knowing that that was the last thing Nancy Tucker likely wanted to talk about, at this moment.

“Not as lively as with you and Paul. This is going to be quite a finish to your anniversary. Home renovation.” She held open her door as Nancy shouldered her way through.

“Best one yet. You believe it!” Nancy said, digging for her car keys. Catherine spied a small brown bag near the corner of her sofa.



“You’re forgetting something,” Catherine said, indicating the camera that had started all the trouble, with a nod of her head.

“I’m really not,” Nancy replied, hefting her tote a bit higher, ready to make a run for the elevators. “Give it to charity. Or toss it in a river, someplace. I think Paul just figured out I don’t need it,” she said, rushing down the hall.

Catherine slowly closed the door, then went back in to set the living room to rights. By the time she had the couch put back together and the cushions back where they belonged, she heard a familiar voice, from her balcony.

“Is your friend... gone?” Vincent asked, carefully surveying the scene.

“Vincent!” Catherine called his name, joy in the sound. She rushed to him, as he took in the scene in her apartment.

“I thought you’d be home,” Catherine said.

*I am home*, he thought, knowing that there was no way it could be true, even as it was. Home, for him, was where Catherine was. It was a truth he was coming to understand, increasingly.

“I... felt your disquiet,” he explained. “I was walking, and I...”

“You came to see what was up,” Catherine surmised. “Did you hear much of that?” She knew that she and Nancy had talked on the balcony, and that the terrace doors had been left open for much of their conversation.

“I confess I was on your roof when the two of you came out onto the balcony. I may have heard... much of what was said,” Vincent explained. They both knew he wouldn’t intentionally eavesdrop on a private conversation; but also that he had to move carefully, when others were near.

“You must have caught quite the earful,” Catherine said.

“Enough to know your friend was unhappy... until your telephone rang. Are such disagreements... common, for them?”

Catherine shrugged. “I think she just didn’t feel like she was being valued for the person she really was. Or that she used to be. Was becoming. Whatever,” Catherine shrugged, returning inside to fold up a blanket. Vincent stood inside her doorway, and watched. She caught the quiet timbre of his voice.

“Catherine... is that burden not... yours as well?” he asked

Catherine considered his words. “When I first started to ... to remake who I was ...I admit it was hard, getting people to take me seriously at

first. But ... I gave them time. Things changed. Are still changing," she admitted, knowing that some of her more distant friends still thought her decision to leave her father's law firm was an insane one.

Vincent accepted her words. "It is difficult to accept when things change, sometimes." He thought of the disagreement between Nancy and Paul. "Sometimes difficult to understand ... how truly important we all are, each to the other. If I ever ... ever fail to convey that..."

Catherine stopped in mid motion, then resumed. "Vincent, you value me. I feel it. Very deeply. If anything, I feel that. I always have."

Vincent knew she spoke truly, yet something about all he'd heard was clearly bothering him. Or at least, it was puzzling him.

"Your friend had so many of the things I would wish for you, and yet..." He processed a bit of Nancy Tucker's reality. "It was not enough. She wasn't even certain she wanted them, any longer."

Such a thing was a marvel to Vincent. Vincent, who often worried that the things Nancy Tucker had, things Catherine herself sometimes wondered if she wanted, wouldn't be too high a price to pay for their being together.

Catherine shrugged. "Nancy wasn't here because she doesn't love her husband, or her children. Maybe it doesn't matter so much what we have or what we think we need. It matters that we feel valued, by the people around us. Valued for what we value in ourselves. Not just what they need us for," Catherine said, absently collecting the pillow.

Vincent would hardly be the one to disagree with that.

"Do you think your friend would have... left her life behind, if her husband hadn't understood her need?" Vincent asked, curious as to



Catherine's perspective. Marital strife in the tunnels rarely ended in such a thing as divorce.

Catherine's brow furrowed. "I don't know. She might have. This wasn't really a snap decision, after a sudden argument. When I was there last... well. I think this has kind of been brewing between them, for a while."

"Do you think Paul truly loves his wife?" Vincent asked.

Catherine nodded without hesitation. "He's a good man, Vincent. A kind one. He's a good father, and honestly, as far as I've ever known, a good husband. They've had some rough spots in their marriage. Nancy told me that much. But she never said they didn't love each other."

Vincent considered her pronouncement. It seemed at odds with the strife he'd witnessed, from Nancy. "Yet... love... sometimes isn't... isn't enough. Isn't all there is," Vincent was stepping his way carefully through what for him was a bit of a morass.

"Nancy felt he wasn't valuing something about her she held precious. Wasn't... acknowledging what she said."

Vincent nodded, and eyed the old photo album. "May I?" he asked, extending his hand.

Catherine handed him the book while she put the bed linens away.

He opened the pages, only to marvel at their contents.

Here was Rome, Paris and Belgium. Here were the Swiss Alps, and the changing of the guard. Here were deep, verdant forests, and famous landmarks. Here were friends of Catherine's: Jenny, Nancy and Susan.

But mostly, more than anything else, here was Catherine. A Catherine he'd never known.

Her face was younger, and free of the lines of her attack, her hair a touch more crimped, more curled, her complexion brushed golden by a summer spent in the sun. Here was Catherine. A young Catherine, smiling for the camera, or looking away, unaware that her photo was being taken.

Here was Catherine, years before she'd become "his Catherine." Years before she'd been anyone's Catherine, really.

She'd worn shirts with turned up collars and wide belts that cinched her narrow waist. Bangle bracelets and a large watch, and a heavy gold chain around her neck that had probably cost a fortune. Diamonds winked in her ears, and denim molded her slender legs. She wore sunglasses in several shots, but Vincent liked the photos of her where he could see the expression in her lovely green eyes.

*How open the world was to you, then. How... Impossibly open, he thought, reading the expression on her face. The world was her oyster. As much hers as it was her friends'. They were rich men's daughters. Beautiful, talented, wealthy... and just about to truly start life's voyage, as young adults.*

"Your friend had... considerable talent," Vincent said, looking at a picture of her splashing water in a fountain. She looked carefree. And very much like a young woman who was destined for a very different life.

"She does. And please tell me you're not looking at... exactly the picture you're looking at," Catherine said, noting that he'd found the picture of her and Jenny sacked out in the train station. They were an inelegant bundle, at best, Catherine sleeping with a baseball cap pulled down over her head.

"You look... Happy. And like you are having a wonderful adventure," Vincent replied, considering the picture, then handing the open album back to her.

Catherine considered the pages. "I guess I do. But... I don't know. Even here... the pictures can't tell the whole story. I think we were all determined to have a good time because we knew some of the things that were waiting for us. Grad school. Choices. Nancy's parents were wealthy, but they were separated, at the time. Jenny's family was solid, but mine, well..."

"You had still lost your mother. And were headed toward a career in law, working for your father."

Catherine shrugged. "I thought that was my fate. Nancy was ... considering what to do about Paul. He'd proposed, and she was... indecisive, for a while," Catherine remembered. "Jenny wasn't sure what she wanted to do yet, for a career, so she was worried about that. I guess no picture truly tells everything," Catherine said.

Vincent looked at the photographs again, realizing the truth of that. None of the pictures conveyed any of the inner turmoil each woman had been carrying, or reflected the complexities of their lives.

And if Catherine had thought her destiny was a complex one then...

Words she'd once given him came back, now.

*If this is my fate... I accept it. Gladly.*

Also:

*What we have is worth everything.*

He could hear her saying the words. At the time, he knew they'd eased a battered place, in his heart. But he also knew that "everything" was

too high a price to pay, for what they were. Especially for her, when “everything” encompassed so very much.

They stepped out on the balcony together, and his next question surprised both of them.

“Would you go back, Catherine? If you could?”

At first, she thought he was talking about going back to her youth, the way Nancy had done.

He had something more immediate in mind. “Back to the day we met?” he clarified. “Back to April 12<sup>th</sup>? To that morning? Change your fate? Change... everything?”

She gave him a long look. “I think I’m going to answer a question with a question: Would you?”

Her query caught him off guard. *Why would I ever want to -?*

“It would be simpler for you, if you think about it,” she elaborated. “Like what Nancy thinks she wants.”

Vincent considered the view of the park, knowing what his answer would be before he even gave it to her. “I would never want to go back. I was so... The aloneness of it. You think that aloneness is an... empty thing, that it exists because... “nothing” is there.”

His unique lips compressed in a frown, one driven by his memories. “But... It has weight. I think that’s what I remember about it: the weight of it. There were times when it felt like it was crushing me. It *was* crushing me.” His pause was a considered one. “But that doesn’t mean it was like that... for you.”

She gave him as long a pause as he’d given her. “I think it was, actually. And no. I wouldn’t go back and change that day – even if I could.”



"It would spare you... much," he prompted. She knew what he meant.

"I know," she acknowledged the brutality of her attack. "But it would cost me so much more." She didn't explain, because she didn't need to. He accepted her answer with characteristic grace.

"I would change nothing in my life that brought me to you," Vincent said, both of them knowing that his path had been far from an easy one.

She came over and gave him a soft squeeze, which he returned. "And that... is exactly how I feel." They embraced for a short time, Vincent breathing her in, collecting the night smells and her, in his sensitive nose. Her mantle clock chimed. The late hour was getting past prohibitive.

She turned her head toward the sound. The scar over her ear was prominent, as she hooked her hair behind one ear. No, she would never be that young, carefree girl in the photographs of her book again. But perhaps those pictures, like so many, failed to show what was really happening, in her life, or in her heart, at that moment. Perhaps the glossy surface, however appealing, was not truly good for her, not feeding her heart, or nourishing her soul. Perhaps many things. Things he would have to think about, later.

For now, his love needed to return to bed, so she could grab what little sleep she could get, before her day had to start in earnest.

And the phone rang.

Once more, Catherine crossed to the phone and picked up the receiver. "Paul?... No, I'm sorry, you kind of missed her. She tore out of here right after you two hung up the last time. She should be clearing the bridge by about now... What? Oh. The camera? Um... well, that is, she

kind of left it behind. Do you want me to just... I don't know. Send it to you? To your office?... No way, huh?"

Vincent waited while Catherine listened to Paul's reply. "No, no, I understand. It was expensive, and you were just trying to... no. No, I get it Paul... No, I don't know if regular plastic tubs will work for photography chemicals. Why don't you ask Nancy, when she gets back?... Nope. No idea what will get black latex paint out of a white dress shirt. You might have to just give that one up. 'Night Paul... Sure... You too. And hugs to the kids, okay?" Gently, she hung up the receiver, then unplugged the phone.

"I don't suppose you'd like an instant camera?" she offered blithely, doubting he would accept such a thing from her – or anyone.

"Of all the things I think my world may need, I'm fairly certain that is last on any list, real or imagined," Vincent said, eyeing the camera as Catherine zipped it back into the bag. "Mouse might enjoy it for the novelty of it, or to understand how it works; but for obvious reasons, the notion of a camera, Below, would give Father nightmares."

She grinned at that. "Sure you wouldn't like to have a picture of something?" He knew she was teasing him. Gently.

He returned her soft smile with a soft one, of his own. "I believe I already have a rather large portrait of you," he said, referring to the painting by Kristopher Gentian.

She yawned, and covered her mouth. "I was thinking of something a bit more portable, but I understand. Good night, Vincent."

"The memories I carry will sustain me. I've... no need of anything else. Good night, Catherine. Sleep well. I'm sorry I cannot help you solve this... problem," he said, glancing toward the source of the night's mischief.

Catherine nodded, and returned the camera bag to the freshly made sofa. "Right. Well, then, I'll just have to figure it out in the morning."

They embraced "good-bye" in the balcony doorway and made ready to depart from each other.

Vincent indicated he was leaving by tugging the hood of his cape up over his head. Catherine scooped up the photo album again and made for her bedroom, clearly intending to turn in for the night.

He closed the balcony doors quietly, behind him.

Vincent went over the side of her balcony and grasped the fire escape ladder. But instead of climbing down, he climbed up, back to his previous position on her roof. The night wind teased at the ends of his flaxen hair, and the cool breeze felt good on his warm skin. He dropped the hood of his cape, and let the night-cooled air play in his hair, as he felt Catherine settle down into her bed, below him.

*I would change nothing in my life that brought me to you.*

*And that... is exactly how I feel.*

*It would spare you... much.*

*It would cost me so much more.*

It would, and for the first time, perhaps, he understood that in words, rather than in vague impressions. He hadn't really known the woman she'd been before April 12<sup>th</sup>, any more than she had known the man he had been. They could both give each other glimpses into their respective pasts, but it was a solid truth that neither one of them had, or even could, know each other prior to their meeting. And that meeting had changed everything, for both of them.

He knew that their lives together hadn't been easy, and that it hadn't come without sacrifice. After all, Catherine too, had been a runaway,



once. Once when all they were (and all they weren't) had threatened to overwhelm her.

He realized that Nancy Tucker's abrupt departure from her husband this evening had been about much the same thing.

*Sometimes, we run from what we are. And sometimes... from what we aren't,* he mused.

*And sometimes... we are not running away from a thing, so much as running toward one.*

Vincent hadn't lied about not wanting a photograph from the instant camera. He truly did have no need of a picture of Catherine, at least not something small he could carry. He knew if he were ever captured Above, that he wanted nothing that could link him to her, nothing that could endanger her any more than she already was.

As he'd told her, he already had a resplendent portrait of her; one he would never trade for anything. One that showed her not as the photo album had done, in her past, but perhaps one that showed how things were for them now, and how beautiful their future might be.

Vincent knew that Nancy Tucker had a certain longing to return to her youth. Such a notion was foreign to him. His adolescence had been a difficult one, and had seemed endless. So he knew that for himself, that was a feeling of "longing to go back" was he didn't share. Wherever his past was, he knew Catherine wasn't in it. That was all he needed to know, on that score.

But he now understood that Catherine didn't want to do that, either. Even if it meant reliving the horrors that had been April 12<sup>th</sup>, that she'd *still* endure those, if it meant reaching him.

He knelt and placed his hand flat on her roof, just for the pleasure of feeling her, beneath him.

*You're a marvel, you know,* he thought.

Perhaps he and Nancy Tucker had something in common after all. Whatever their course was, it was forward facing. Happily so, and somewhat expectantly. Neither of the three of them knew exactly what was on the horizon. But they all knew that whatever it was, and however much previous events had guided them to it, that it was the future that beckoned them now; not the past.

He had no need of a photograph for that. Glimpses of past-captured time were no roadmap to where they were going.

*There are no maps to where we are.*

It was a thing he'd told Catherine the day she'd first awakened in his care. Bloodied. Beaten. Held together by silk thread and father's bandages, and every unspoken wish, between them.

She'd healed. Returned to her world. Changed her life. And his.

Yes, she'd run away. But she'd also run back. And flown into his arms with a force that had nearly knocked him backwards.

He lifted his hand from the gravel, knowing it was time to head home.

"Sleep well, Catherine," he whispered, feeling her agile mind drift down. She was starting to dream. He hoped it was a good one.

"Sleep well, my little runaway."

He smiled as he said it, knowing that the next time she ran, and the time after that... and after that... it would be to him.

And it was.



*In wisdom gathered over time, I have found that every experience is a form of exploration. – Ansel Adams*

*\*\**

*No matter where you are when the urge to run takes you, I wish you love. ~ Cindy*

