

“ALL I ASK OF YOU – PART TWO”

by Cathy Trotta

Anger! Frustration! Those two words kept repeating themselves so loudly in his head that he was convinced a passerby could hear them as if resounding off the rock walls of his chamber. They were also consuming every fiber of his being. He sat before his journal trying to gather his thoughts, but those were the only ones his mind seemed able to process. No, that wasn't entirely true. He was also alone. Aloneness whether self imposed or imposed by the dictates of society, was still alone no matter how he might try to rationalize it any other way. Even though an entire community surrounded him, he was still alone because Catherine wasn't in the city. She wasn't even in the state, and he was feeling guilty for that as well. Wonderful! Now not only was he angry, frustrated and alone, he had just heaped guilt on top of the already full plate of emotions he was experiencing.

Vincent put down his pen, crossed his hands under his chin, and began to think. How did they get to this place? Three short weeks ago, everything in his life was perfect. He and Catherine had awoken from their comas and she had agreed to be his wife. Now he was beginning to question whether that proposal had contributed to their current state of affairs. Perhaps it was too much too soon. At the time, he knew it was the right thing- the only thing to do. It was the only way to bring her out of her coma. His proposal had been sincere, heartfelt and he knew it was what they both wanted more than anything else in their lives. They should be making wedding plans, discussing living arrangements, deciding whether they would make love before their wedding night so that he had some practice under his belt. All the things big and small that an engaged couple discuss, they weren't able to do. It was then that the nagging question reared its head once again.

When Catherine saw his face for the first time, he told her he had never regretted what he was until that moment. Would she come to regret her decision to accept his proposal in the future? Given the depth of their love, it was doubtful. However, being alone with one's thoughts for an extended period of time could cause you to doubt anything even if was the first thing you've been completely

certain of during the course of your entire life. No, he mused, she wouldn't regret it. But would he?

He was used to his privacy, his solitude. How would that change once they were sharing everything? Not just a bed, but how would they handle the day-to-day things of life? Each of them had their own routines. Vincent had no idea what Catherine liked to do when she wasn't around him or his Tunnel family. Did she like to lie in bed and read the paper on Sunday mornings? Was she an early riser on her days off? Did she know that sometimes he stood on her balcony and watched her sleep? Would that information upset her? Would she want to quit her job? That thought struck him deeply to his core, and he grabbed his chest in anguish. It was hard enough making sure he rescued her before any harm could come to her when they only had a chaste relationship. How deeply would he be affected once they became husband and wife? Once they had become intimate. He knew the answer to that question. If something should happen to Catherine once they were married, he would stop at nothing to make sure whoever hurt her paid for that crime, even if it meant he might be discovered or destroyed in the process.

His chamber suddenly seemed to be shrinking, as if the walls were closing in on him. Imagination can often be worse than real life and right now, his imagination was telling him that the air supply was limited, and he would soon suffocate. Perhaps a walk in the park, or a visit to Catherine's balcony would help clear his head. Grabbing his cloak, he strode out of his chamber with only one thought in mind. Air. Fresh fall air. Not the stifling choking air of these Tunnels and chambers, but air that was found in only one place-Above.

While Vincent stepped out into the fall air, Catherine was witnessing a sunset on a warm evening in New Mexico. This was her first visit to New Mexico and she wished it had been under better circumstances. She was staying with Peter's daughter Susan, but the visit wasn't a social one, it was a medical one.

Not long after both she and Vincent awoke from their comas, Catherine had a minor relapse. That, combined with the stress and the toll her body had suffered during the breakdown, convinced Peter to order her to see a mental health

professional along with time away from the pressures of work, the Tunnels, of the very things that had caused the breakdown in the first place. She argued with Peter, but to no avail. Having once been the darling of the society pages and maintaining a high profile job, they both knew that the treatment couldn't take place in New York. If her file fell into the wrong hands, not only would her life be turned upside down, but also the entire Tunnel community and especially Vincent would be in peril. Since Susan was a psychologist and knew all about Vincent and the Tunnels, they decided she would be the best person to help Catherine. When she left, the confused look on Vincent's face was heartbreaking. His logical mind knew that this was the only way for Catherine to make a complete recovery, but his newly engaged heart couldn't understand how this could possibly be happening.

When Vincent was troubled or trying to work out a problem in his mind, a problem he didn't want to discuss with anyone especially Father, he sought refuge in the dimly lit streets and back alleys. The darkness was usually his friend; it welcomed him, but not tonight. Tonight he could find no comfort, not even from a visit to Catherine's balcony. If he thought he felt alone earlier he was wrong. Standing here in the place between their two worlds, glancing into the darkened apartment, then turning to gaze at the city lights did nothing but make him more acutely aware than ever before of how truly alone he really was.

Catherine had been diligent about writing to Vincent each day while she was away. He had written her as well, nothing of much importance; he didn't want to take a chance on her having yet another relapse. He wrote of his longing, of the aching emptiness of his arms without her there to hold. He wrote about the daily activities in the Tunnels, and of any news he thought might interest her from the Helpers. Neither he nor Peter dared to tell her how upset Joe Maxwell had been when Peter told him that Catherine would be taking an indefinite leave of absence due to medical reasons. It wasn't until Peter was forced to tell Joe about Catherine's breakdown, that he finally understood the full impact of the role he had played in that breakdown. Remorseful was the word Peter had used when recounting the story to Vincent and Father.

Vincent was a little calmer after his stroll and decided to drop his cloak off in his

chamber before going to say goodnight to Father. His eyes caught sight of an envelope on his table, one that hadn't been there before he left. He was always very careful to keep Catherine's letters in a safe place, away from any prying eyes. He thought he would take a quick glance at the letter, maybe something Catherine had written would be of some interest to Father. He hoped that it would give them something to discuss aside from his relationship and to help cut the tension that seemed to permeate their every conversation.

He took great care to open the letter, not wanting to take a chance of damaging the paper, or ruining any words that his Catherine might have written. As he pulled the letter from the envelope a few pictures fell out, and he was lost. Before him were images that not even his vivid imagination or the best writers in literature could have described. There were pictures of sunrises so intense that for a moment he thought he could feel the heat on his face. The sunsets were filled with more colors than he would ever see or could imagine. The last rays of sunset reflected off the mountains were so remarkable, that it caused him to fall backward into his chair, clutch his chest, and begin to weep.

Father had been waiting patiently for Vincent in his library after hearing of his return on the pipes. Knowing how irritable and unhappy Vincent had been since Catherine's absence Father began to worry and headed to Vincent's chamber. He was completely unprepared for the sight before him. There sat Vincent, one hand grasping his chest, the other holding a letter and a look of complete blankness in his eyes. Terror fueled his steps as he walked as quickly as his bad hip would allow toward his son, afraid that he had suffered another breakdown.

Vincent had been so deep in thought that he didn't hear Father's approach. When Father placed his hand on Vincent's shoulder to alert him to his presence a snarl formed on Vincent's lips and caused his adrenaline to start to flow. It wasn't until Father's soothing voice reached his heightened emotional level that Vincent began to calm down, and both his and Father's heartbeats began to return to normal.

"Vincent, are you all right? What has caused you such distress? Has something happened to Catherine?" While waiting for Vincent to respond, Father tried unsuccessfully to get a glimpse of the contents of the letter Vincent still clutched

in his hand, as if letting it go would cause him physical pain.

Composing himself Vincent responded. “I’m sorry Father for reacting that way, and for causing you any worry.”

The lack of any further explanation worried Father more than the snarl he had just witnessed. “Would you like to talk about it Vincent?” Father asked as he tightened his grip on Vincent’s shoulder. His question was answered not verbally, but by a slight nod of Vincent’s head. It wasn’t much, but at least it was a place to start.

Father pulled up a chair and sat very close to Vincent at the table. Their knees were touching; Father was hoping that the slight gesture would not cause Vincent to feel any unnecessary pressure. Father had been in this position many times over the years – watching Vincent struggle to pull himself together before giving his explanation. He watched his son, as his eyes blankly stared at the pictures and the letter, still uncertain what had caused so much distress. He would wait; he was very good at waiting, especially where his son was concerned. Thoughts that he had been trying to banish from his mind since giving his blessing to Vincent and Catherine began to come to the forefront of his mind once again. He heard himself telling Vincent just a few short years ago that Catherine would bring him nothing but harm. Had she done just that? Had she changed her mind about their relationship? No, she had stood by Vincent during some of the ugliest moments of his life; she wouldn’t abandon him now when their dreams of a “Happy Life” would soon be fulfilled. Would she?

Vincent took the letter and laid it on the table, trying desperately to smooth out the wrinkles. He became angry with himself for doing this to a letter from Catherine, to anything from Catherine. He considered everything she gave him, every touch, every letter, every word she had ever spoken to him to be a gift. How could he defame a gift like this?

Watching Vincent try desperately to remove the wrinkles from the letter was more than Father could bear to watch. He took his hands and gently yet firmly placed them on top of Vincent’s to slow the incessant motion. Father cleared his throat and very quietly said, “Vincent if you don’t stop trying to remove the wrinkles,

you're going to damage the paper, and the oils in your hands will cause the ink to smear.”

As though he had been stuck with a sharp object, Vincent quickly stopped running his hands over the paper, praying that he hadn't done even more damage to the letter. A cursory glance told him that he had not, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

It was then that Vincent became aware of Father's knees touching his, and he reached his hand to where the knees were joined, looked up at Father and smiled. “You used to do the same thing when I was a boy. When I needed time to collect my thoughts, needed human contact but not in the same manner of a hug, and the reassurance that no matter how badly I perceived things to be, that I could always count on you to be there, for guidance, for counsel, for love.”

Overcome with emotions, Father once again had to clear his throat before he could speak. “Vincent, I hope you know that even now as you get ready to begin the next phase of your life that I will always be here for you. No father ever learned more from any child.”

Finally, some of the tension began to leave Vincent's body, and a smile crossed his lips. Father breathed a sigh of relief, hoping that at long last he would get some answers as to what had caused his son such distress.

Vincent slid the letter and the pictures over to Father. Not wanting to appear anxious about the contents of the letter, Father adjusted his reading glasses and began to look at the pictures. Never having seen the Southwest, Father became just as enraptured with the beauty before him as Vincent had been. He took a little longer than necessary to look at the pictures, allowing Vincent the time to not only finish composing himself, but to allow him the chance to rescind the offer of having Father read the letter. Father hesitated before picking up the letter and as if Vincent was reading his thoughts, nodded his head in approval.

Father read the letter several times, and could not find any cause for the state in which he had found his son earlier. It wasn't an overtly private letter. Catherine talked about her therapy with Susan, not just the emotional therapy, but also the physical therapy to get her back into shape. She talked of the beauty surrounding

her, of the colors, the heat, the differences between early fall in New York and in New Mexico. The last line was the only thing that might cause Vincent to be mildly upset, but not to the extent that he had been earlier. Vincent had been watching Father's reactions while he read the letter, waiting to see if he noticed the reason Vincent had been so upset. It was apparent when he finished the letter that he hadn't. It was then that Vincent felt more trapped than ever and jumped out of his chair, bumping into Father's knees, and almost toppling him in the process.

Pacing the chamber, fists clenched Vincent stopped long enough to say, "I'm sorry Father for causing you any pain."

"That's quite all right Vincent, I'll survive," Father replied still unsure why Vincent was so upset. Watching the pacing always had an unsettling effect so Father tried to draw the attention back to the letter, hoping for an answer that made some sort of sense. "Vincent please won't you sit down and tell me what has you so upset?"

Vincent stopped his pacing, seeing the look of paternal concern in Father's eyes and sat back down at the table, hoping to explain somehow the feelings of claustrophobia that had been intensified by Catherine's pictures. How do you explain to someone who has the ability to walk freely in the world Above but chooses not to? How do you explain to someone who has no idea what it's like having to live in darkness, unable to walk in the sunshine with the woman he loves? Never able to see the flowers bloom in Central Park in the springtime as the sun warms them after their long winter's sleep. The answer was simple. You couldn't, but he would do his best to try.

The anticipatory look on Father's face was the same one he had when he had waited for Vincent the child to explain something. Now he was waiting for Vincent the man with the same look. Something about that unsettled Vincent, so instead of leaning toward Father to speak to him, he sat back in his chair and drew himself up to his full size, filling out the entire back of the chair.

Father noticed this move, but didn't comment. He would do whatever necessary to try to help his son through this dilemma, even though he still wasn't sure what that dilemma was.

“Father,” Vincent began, “I know that when you saw the pictures that Catherine sent, you found them as beautiful as I had, did you not?”

Father nodded, not wanting to speak, unsure where this line of questioning was headed.

“You see Father, if I was like other men, I would be able to travel to such places with Catherine. To see all that beauty for myself, not second-hand through other people’s descriptions in letters, books, or even in pictures. I would be able to climb those mountains, feel the warmth of an autumn evening in New Mexico for myself, and not just try to visualize it through words. If I was a normal man, I could walk Above with Catherine, be introduced to her friends; attend a party anytime of the year, not just at Halloween.”

As Father sat there listening to Vincent’s litany of the things he was unable to do, his heart was breaking, but he was still perplexed as to why he was having all these feelings now, now when he was engaged and ready to begin his life with Catherine. Catherine, who was aware of all his limitations and accepted them, loved him in spite of them. Dreading the answer, he felt he must still ask the question.

“Vincent, forgive me, but I’m not sure I understand what has caused you to suddenly become angry about the limitations in your life. Catherine knows of those limitations and accepts them, and loves you unconditionally. It’s not as though she hasn’t gone away before. She did travel to California for business earlier in the year. Did you have these same types of feelings then, or is it stronger now because you’ve become engaged?”

The logical Vincent could try to explain his feelings to Father, and eventually he would understand. The lonely, claustrophobic Vincent would never be able to fully articulate to Father, the man who was content to hide away from the world, the emotions that were threatening to swallow him whole. The emotions that were making him doubt every decision, even the one about proposing to Catherine. His need to escape this chamber put every one of his senses into overload. He looked at Father sitting there, bewildered, unable to help his son. Calming himself, he sat back down and thought he would try one more time to explain what he was feeling.

“Father, it’s not anything that Catherine has said or done. These are my feelings of inadequacy that are tormenting me so. Do you see the last line of this letter?”

It was the only one that had concerned Father. “Yes Vincent, I did see the last line. I thought however that it was something, a catch phrase perhaps that only you and Catherine would understand.”

“ No Father, she used the same line in the letter she wrote me when she went to California. At the time, it caused me no distress. At that time, I hadn’t suffered my breakdown, and subsequently causing Catherine her breakdown and relapse. At that time, we weren’t engaged, and she was of sound mind and body and now because of my limitations, she is neither. How can I live with what I’ve done to her? You don’t have any idea what it’s like to live within the confines of these Tunnels and chambers. You had a life above, and I understand why you gave it up, but even now, even after being Above and having Margaret in your life, you still choose to stay hidden.” Vincent’s voice was now rising and he was slamming his fists on the table. “Well Father once, just once I would love the opportunity to go Above and not have to hide in the shadows! Could you possibly understand how limited my life really is?” Before Father could respond, Vincent grabbed his cloak from the bed and was through the doorway of his chamber.

Shaking his head, Father picked up the letter and read the line that had caused his son so much distress. The line read; “Vincent, it is so beautiful. I wish I could scoop it all up and run to you and pour it into your hands.” Father shook his head still not understanding why this one line had triggered such a violent reaction, then reached for his cane and headed for his chamber. He would be surprised if he got any sleep at all tonight.

As Vincent ran through the Tunnels desperate to seek relief in the cool fall air, Catherine was telling Susan about the events that led to her initial breakdown. As Vincent reached for the lever and the big iron door slid open, Catherine suddenly had an inexplicable chill run down her spine. Her speech stalled for just a moment, but Susan the trained psychologist noted the hesitation and knew that something was happening with Vincent, something was happening through **their** bond, the bond that Catherine and Vincent share.

Long purposeful strides carried Vincent through the park for the second time that night. He had no particular destination in mind when he left the Tunnels. When he finally stopped to get his bearings, he found himself once again across the street from Catherine's building. Emotionally worn out from reading Catherine's letter and the subsequent discussion, if one could call it that with Father, he was unsure as to the wisdom of climbing to her balcony once again. What purpose would it serve? It would be just as empty now as it had been a few hours ago. Ducking back into the trees, he found an area that allowed him enough space to think and pace at the same time. He would stop pacing, look up at Catherine's building, and begin pacing again. In his mind, he was weighing the pros and cons of an idea that had crossed his mind earlier this evening. To accomplish it he needed a phone number and a phone, both of which were easily accessible at Catherine's apartment. His mind made up, he crossed the street and began the ascent to Catherine's balcony.

After her breakdown, she had only returned to her apartment long enough to check her mail, messages, and pack a suitcase before heading to New Mexico. Since they were now engaged, Vincent had decided to step across the threshold into her apartment. He talked to her as she packed and tried to reassure her that she would make a complete recovery, both physically and mentally, while trying to reassure himself at the same time. Catherine had shown him where her important documents were kept as well as all the keepsakes that he had given to her. She wanted to make sure that in the event of an accident; all traces of him could be removed, ensuring his safety and that of the Tunnel community.

Catherine had given Vincent a key to her balcony door, explaining that if he ever wanted to feel close to her, or needed anything while she was gone, it would provide an easy access for him. He landed on the balcony without a sound, and headed for the door. Taking the key from his cloak pocket, he unlocked the door. Lights throughout her apartment were on timers. They would come on at different times in different places during the night, giving the appearance that someone was home. When he was here before, it had been too early for any of the timers to start working. The small light that was lit by her bed chased away some of the darkness he had felt earlier. It was nearly midnight and that light

would be on for only a few more minutes. It was now or never. Slowly opening the door, Vincent stepped onto the plush carpet covering the steps. As he turned to close the door, he was overcome with emotion as he remembered the three days he spent in her bed, watching the Other become more and more powerful, hearing the voices in his head growing stronger and stronger, feeling his sanity slowly slipping away. Those memories sent a chill down Vincent's spine. Reminding himself that time was of the essence, he reached for the nightstand drawer. Inside was Catherine's address book. She had made sure that he was able to dial the phone before she left, ensuring that if he needed to hear her voice, he would be able to call her. To hear her voice would be wonderful Vincent thought, but she was not the person he needed most right now. Finding the number in the address book, Vincent picked up the receiver and began to dial. There was only one person who could help him out of his present predicament and that person was none other than his big brother Devin.

Since he had become a member of the legitimate working class, Devin no longer kept the strange hours that he had for most of his life. Now an alarm woke him in the morning and exhaustion sent him to bed, usually before 10:00 PM. He was in the middle of a dream about the new girl working at the resort. He had only the briefest of conversations with her, but he was encouraged that sometime in the future, she might consent to a date or two if he played his cards right. She was a very leggy blonde named Candy from Alabama. She was a yoga instructor, and his thoughts automatically ran to the various positions she would be able to assume. It was then that he realized he was no longer dreaming, and that the phone was really ringing. "Whoever this is I'm going to ring their neck for interrupting what could've been a very interesting dream," he muttered as he grabbed the phone. Upset about missing out on the rest of the dream and the lateness of the hour he barked a sharp "Hello" into the phone and was stunned to hear Vincent's voice on the other end of the receiver.

"Devin, I'm sorry if I woke you, but I must speak to you, and my time is limited," Vincent said. All thoughts of the dream were quickly dispelled from his mind with that one sentence and his heart began to beat frantically. Questions began running through his mind beginning with why was Vincent of all people

calling him, and why was his time limited?

“Vincent, are you alright? Has something happened to the old man, or to Chandler? Where are you calling me from, and why is your time limited?” Patience had never been one of Devin’s virtues and it seemed like an eternity before he heard Vincent’s response.

“Devin, everyone is fine. Catherine is still in New Mexico, and Father is well. I’m the one in need of your help. I’m calling from Catherine’s apartment. The lights are set on a timer and will be going off very shortly, and I don’t want to have to reset all of them.”

“Well that’s a relief little brother! Now what is so damn important that you had to call me in the middle of the night that you couldn’t ask me in a letter?” Devin snapped into the receiver.

Glancing at the clock, Vincent knew that he had to speak quickly, something he was unaccustomed to doing, but it must be done, before he lost his nerve and the light. Even though he could see well in the darkness, he didn’t like the idea of being in Catherine’s apartment any longer than necessary, so he began to tell Devin why he needed his help.

Devin just listened, and at the end of the conversation, an evil grin crossed his face as he answered, “Sounds like a wonderful idea Vincent, and I can’t wait to see the look on the old man’s face. I’m off this weekend, so Charles and I will arrive at the Tunnels late Friday evening. We’ll use the same entrance we did when I brought Chandler home, so I’ll see you then.”

“Thank you Devin.” Vincent replied, “I’ll see you Friday evening, and please have a safe journey home.”

“Don’t worry about it little brother. Just to see what this will do to the old man, trust me I won’t take any chances” was Devin’s reply and Vincent could hear the evil grin in his voice.

Devin hung up before Vincent had a chance to wish him a good night. He quickly replaced the phone in its cradle, the address book into the drawer, and rose from the bed. Just before he opened the balcony door, he caught a slight whiff of Catherine’s perfume. No one but him with his superior sense of smell would have

caught it, but it was a nice reminder, something to help lift his spirits and with a quick turn of the knob, he was on the balcony and climbing up to the roof in a matter of seconds. It was only Tuesday, and Friday seemed a long time away but he had plans to make, plans he knew the “old man” as Devin had called him wouldn’t be happy about at all. It was then that Vincent found himself with an evil grin on his face as well.

Walking through the Tunnels on the way to his chamber Vincent paused outside of Father’s library and was relieved to hear no sounds, an indication that Father was asleep. Entering his chamber, he walked straight to the table and picked up the letter and pictures that had caused him such turmoil earlier this evening. Now he viewed them with a different eye, with an eye of possibility, not of a future that could never be.

The emotional stress of the past weeks was taking its toll. Hoping to escape his fears and doubts, he had thrown himself into his duties full force, taking on extra projects, doing sentry duty, something he hadn’t done since he was a teenager. He was willing to do anything that afforded him a change of scenery from the walls of this chamber, anything to keep his mind from filling with doubt and worry, anything to keep him from missing Catherine so desperately.

He had plans to make before Devin’s arrival on Friday. He had to make sure to cover all his bases, that all the objections had answers that his responsibilities would be taken over by someone he trusted. He needed a list to ensure that he forgot nothing, but first he wanted to write in his journal. It was something he had done for many years; his journal was a trusted place. No one judged him in its pages, no one feared him there. It held all his deepest longings, his fears, his joys. It was where he turned in times of turbulence or triumph, in sadness and in happiness. It helped ease the pain after Devin had left him all alone, after his failed attempt to show Lisa some affection, of the mixed emotions he felt after finding Catherine, of trying to find his way back after his most recent breakdown and her illness.

He ran his hand over the leather bound volume, and opened the page to read the inscription from Catherine for what seemed like the hundredth time since she’d been away. The inscription read, “With love, all things are possible.” Forever,

Catherine.

For a brief moment, he was transported to that moment in time, that moment when he had forgotten her name. Even though he didn't tell Catherine, he still chided himself for forgetting her name. Vincent shook his head as if to clear the bad memory, and then reminded himself that he had a lot of work to do, and a short amount of time in which to do it. Tonight was the first time he had derived any pleasure from writing in his journal. The last time he had been this excited to record the day's events was when Catherine had awakened from her coma. He filled more pages than usual, but today was not a typical day. After re-reading the last sentence, Vincent decided to call it a night and then remembered the list he needed to make. He always kept a plain writing tablet for the children to use if they needed to leave him a note. Taking the tablet from his desk, he began writing the list. It didn't take long for him to complete it. After all, he had written it in his head on his walk from Catherine's balcony to his chamber. Satisfied, at least for tonight, he removed the page and folded it securely between the pages of his journal. He added Catherine's letter and pictures to the page as well. Quickly changing into his nightshirt, Vincent slid under the covers and was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

While Vincent had been making his plans under the streets of New York City, Catherine in the warmth of the New Mexico night began to make plans as well. That shiver she felt earlier was a sign, of that she had no doubt. What it meant she had no idea, the bond was difficult to interpret when there was such a distance between them. Her relapse hadn't helped the situation either. During her visit to Devin's, she had also begun to keep a journal. Just as it did for Vincent, it helped her to work through her emotions, her fears. Not fear about her future with Vincent for that was the only thing in her life of which she was certain. No these were fears of a different kind. Would she relapse again? Would she have any permanent effects from the damage suffered during her ordeal? Ordeal, she searched her memory trying to recall if that was the word du jour during her society days. No matter which word she chose to describe it, she had to face the truth. That it had been a complete breakdown - both emotional and physical. Her thoughts drifted back to the time she had spent at Devin's'. How did she not see

the warning signs? How could she not realize that she was heading for a breakdown? Her thoughts returned to the present and the words she had just written. Would she be able to bear children, did Vincent even want children? It was then that Catherine realized the only way to get her answers was for her to heal completely and to return home where she belonged, and tomorrow she would work even harder toward that goal. Turning off the light, and sliding under the covers with a satisfied smile on her face, Catherine took her crystal in her hands and made her nightly wish, something she had done ever since that first night Vincent had given it to her. Following Vincent's lead, she too was asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. It would be the first night since their separation that each of them finally got a decent night's sleep.

When Vincent awoke the next morning, he started to put his plan in motion. After a quick breakfast with Father, his next step was to see Cullen. He had decided that Cullen was the only one to keep his secret and was one of the few people that hadn't tried to stop his previous trip to Connecticut with Catherine.

As he approached Cullen's workshop, he could hear Mouse trying unsuccessfully to convince Cullen to loan him some of his tools for his latest gizmo. Cullen wasn't a patient man and by the tone of his voice, Vincent could tell he was almost at his breaking point. No one heard Vincent enter and as he began to speak, both men jumped and turned to look at him.

"Mouse," Vincent began in a voice he rarely used when it came to Mouse. "If memory serves me correctly, the last time you borrowed one of Cullen's tools; it accidentally fell into the Abyss. Is that what you remember as well Mouse?"

A defeated Mouse hung his head for a moment before he replied. "Told Cullen I found a worksite where I could get him another one, they have extras." Now Cullen hung his head, trying to suppress a smile knowing exactly what Vincent was going to say in this matter.

"Mouse, do you remember when you were given the silence for taking things that didn't belong to you? Do you remember when Catherine had to come to your rescue when you were caught by Elliot Burch's men, because you were trying to

stop the tower from being built?”

“But Vincent,” Mouse began, “I didn’t get caught the first time, and I’ve been practicing being invisible, just like you.”

Vincent had to clear his throat several times before he could respond. The mentor in him was flattered that Mouse was trying to emulate him, but the responsible adult in him knew he had to nip this in the bud very quickly. “Mouse, you have been told before that if it doesn’t belong to you, if it’s not thrown out in the trash or given to us by our helpers, if we don’t purchase it ourselves, then it’s stealing. Now either you stop bothering Cullen and promise me that you won’t take any tools, or I’ll be forced to tell Father about this conversation, and I guarantee you that the silence will once again be imposed. Is that what you want?”

Not wanting to disappoint his friend Mouse just shook his head no.

“Mouse look at me please.” Mouse raised his head to find Vincent standing right in front of him and he didn’t have a word to describe the look in Vincent’s eyes, but he didn’t like it, and he didn’t want to see it ever again. His hands on Mouse’s shoulders Vincent began to speak in his usual soft and patient tone. “Mouse, I want you to swear to me on Arthur’s life that you will not take any tools from any worksite or from anywhere else. Do I have your word?”

Mouse’s eyes were now as big as saucers, wondering if Vincent would really harm Arthur if he didn’t give him his word. Swallowing hard Mouse said, “I promise Vincent” and proceeded to scurry out of the workshop to check on Arthur’s safety.

Vincent put his finger to his lips, a signal for Cullen not to say anything until he checked the tunnel and had ensured that Mouse was out of earshot. Stepping back into the workshop both men broke into laughter.

“He really thought you were going to do something to Arthur,” Cullen said.

“Vincent replied, It was the only way I could think of to keep him out of trouble while I’m gone.” Since Vincent never left the Tunnels except to visit Catherine and she was currently out of town, Cullen was a more than a little surprised by his statement. “Are you going somewhere Vincent, and does Father know?”

“Yes Cullen I am going somewhere, and no Father does not knowyet,”

Vincent said with an air of insubordination that surprised Cullen. When it came to Father, Vincent was usually very respectful, but this almost sounded like a challenge had been issued and Cullen was anxious to find out the reason for this newfound attitude.

Cullen and Vincent proceeded to Cullen's living quarters, just off his workshop. They put their chairs close together so no passerby could hear what they were discussing. Vincent had brought his list with him and handed it to Cullen. After reviewing it Cullen hesitated a moment before asking Vincent for more details. Ever since he had treated Vincent so poorly after they found the sunken treasure and Vincent had forgiven him, Cullen promised himself that he would do whatever was asked of him by the community or any individual in hopes that it would somehow make up for the mayhem his greed has cost everyone.

Vincent could see that Cullen had questions, so to make it easier Vincent began to tell him where he was going and how long he would be gone. "You see Cullen, since Catherine and I became engaged, and her subsequent relapse, I've had no time to process anything, and I have a lot of things I need to work through before she returns. I can't do it here with everyone watching me, especially Father. I appreciate the compassion and the concern, but despite what people might think, I am a grown man with wants, needs, and desires. Right now, I need to think, to make plans for my future with Catherine. You were married once, I'm sure you of all people understand what I'm going through. I thought that once I proposed all the problems would be gone, but now I realize more than ever before that every relationship has its rough patches. Ordinarily Catherine and I would work them out together, but I don't want to say anything to cause her any additional stress and that's why I need this time away. Will you help me Cullen?"

Cullen sat dumbfounded listening to Vincent speak of his love, his relationship with Catherine. He had never before been so open and honest with him. Listening to him did indeed remind him of all the problems he and his wife had faced and the emptiness he felt after her loss. Vincent watched the expressions on Cullen's face and was sure that he was reliving memories from his other life, some happy, some so painful that he couldn't bear to think about them, and definitely couldn't talk about them.

After a few moment of silence Cullen nodded his head and said, "I do understand

Vincent, more than you will ever know. I will do whatever I can to help during your absence. You have my word. I also won't say anything to anyone until you give me the all clear."

As they both rose from their chairs, Vincent put one hand on Cullen's shoulder and shook the other saying, "Thank you my friend. You have lifted a great burden from my mind."

Vincent left the chamber and Cullen sat back down pretending to memorize the list, but in actuality, he was trying to compose himself, trying to hold back the tears. The conversation with Vincent had stirred up many deeply buried memories and he couldn't go back to work or into the community until all those emotions were in check, and his tough façade was once again firmly in place.

The next several days passed without incident, even though they seemed to be the slowest days of Vincent's life. He made it a point to check in on Mouse and his chamber looking for any new acquisitions. Each time he did, Mouse quickly ran to Arthur's side, ensuring his safety. Vincent had to suppress a chuckle as he watched Mouse guarding Arthur. Mouse didn't think that Vincent would ever hurt Arthur, but after seeing that strange look in his eyes, he wasn't taking any chances.

Finally, it was Friday evening. The route to the door where he would meet Devin and Charles was one he could travel quickly and in his sleep. This night however, he was nervous and left earlier than needed in order to arrive at the appointed time. In his speech to Cullen, he had come across as a confident grown man. Right now however, he felt like a child who was doing something behind Father's back. He actually was doing something behind Father's back, and that realization made him very nervous. After the phone call to Devin, his plans were never mentioned to Father. He had learned after all these years that it was sometimes easier to acquiesce to Father than to stand up to him, but that was all about to change. He was an engaged man. Soon he would have a wife and a life of his own. He was unsure of when and where that would be, but he was sure of one thing. Whatever happened, his big brother would be behind him, sticking up for him just as he had done when they were children. All these thoughts were running through Vincent's mind as he paced endlessly back and forth under the

Helper's store.

Vincent had been so caught up in the events that would take place in the next few days that he didn't hear Devin and Charles open the upstairs door. Devin was in the lead and already a few steps down the landing before Vincent came out of his reverie and went to offer assistance with their luggage.

In typical Devin style, when he saw Vincent reach out to help, he threw his bag on the floor and jumped from the steps right into Vincent's waiting arms. "That Vincent always did have great reflexes," Devin mused. As the two men were embracing, an impatient Charles was waiting in the shadows shifting from one foot to another. Although they had been in the Tunnels only a month ago, Charles, as always, was eager to see his hero, Vincent.

Vincent was painfully aware of what it felt like to be overlooked. Releasing Devin, he went to embrace Charles. A shy blush appeared on Charles's face as he reveled in the feeling of love and acceptance he always received from Vincent and now from the entire Tunnel community.

"How was your trip Devin?" Vincent asked, trying desperately to kill some time before heading to the home chambers and hoping that idle small talk would help quell some of the nervousness that had come upon him as soon as the two men arrived.

"The trip was a piece of cake little brother. We got lucky with the traffic and made it here sooner than I expected. We got a later start than I had planned due to a little plumbing problem at the cabin that had to be taken care of before we could leave." The devilish grin that preceded Devin getting into some kind of trouble or mischief was now covering his face. "Tell me Vincent, does the old man have any clue that we were coming or what's about to happen?"

Even though he was the younger of the two, it was now time for Vincent to act like the older more mature brother. He had much practice in this role, considering how many children viewed him as an older brother. Bringing himself up to his full height and in his sternest voice he said; "Devin, I assure you that Father has no idea of what is about to happen. I've only confided in one person and that was out of sheer necessity. Now I'm sure both of you would prefer a nice hot meal after your trip instead of standing here under this building." With

that, Vincent grabbed Charles's suitcase and began to lead him down the tunnel.

Since he was still standing there with that smug expression on his face, Devin didn't realize at first that he had been left behind. Grabbing his duffel bag, he yelled. "Hey, wait for me!" and began to jog down the tunnel after Vincent and Charles.

None of the sentries bothered to send messages of Devin's arrival per Vincent's earlier request. They were told that it was a surprise for Father, and no one wanted to be responsible for blowing a surprise, so the pipes remained silent. Just before they reached the main hub, Vincent stopped. Charles had been following so closely behind Vincent that when Vincent stopped, Charles almost tripped on his heels. Turning to Charles he said; "Charles, I'm sure Devin told you that Father has no idea that you are coming or what our plans are?"

Charles nodded, not daring to miss a word his hero might have to say.

"I hope you understand that there will be some shouting and it will get very loud once Father finds out what we're doing. I don't want you to think that any of it is directed toward you, or that anything is your fault. If it gets to be too much for you and you want to go to your chamber, no one will be upset with you. I prepared the same chamber that you stayed in during your last visit so you'll have less chance of getting lost. Do you understand Charles?"

"Dev told me that Father might not like your plan and that he would probably holler a lot. I know it's not about me Vincent, and I'll try to stay and help in any way I can, but if it gets too loud, I will go to our chamber. Thank you, Vincent, for telling me ahead of time."

Placing his hand on Charles shoulder, Vincent smiled his warmest smile and said, "You are quite welcome Charles."

As usual, Father was sitting at his desk reading the latest medical journal Peter had brought for him. Although Vincent looked the picture of self-assurance, internally he was anything but. His nerves were frayed due to lack of sleep and from missing Catherine so much. Realistically he knew he was a grown man capable of making his own decisions, but he hated lying to – or worse – defying

Father. He had tried to find another way to work out his problems, but this was the only solution that he felt was best for everyone concerned especially himself, so with his head held high he took the lead and walked down the metal steps into the library.

Father caught a glimpse of him descending the steps and removed his glasses. “There you are Vincent. I was wondering where you had gone. Is it me or do the pipes seem especially quiet tonight?”

Vincent tried to speak and his voice cracked, so after clearing his throat he began again. “Father, I told the sentries to keep the pipes quiet because I have a surprise for you.” As if on cue, Devin and his smug smile entered the library with Charles quietly following behind.

A smile spread across Father’s face as he struggled to get out from behind his desk. “Devin what brings you to the Tunnels again so soon? Charles, it’s lovely to see you again.”

Since his life before Devin had been void of compliments and human contact, Charles relished every kind word, every smile, and every touch. He couldn’t put his feelings into words, so he hoped that his smile showed the world how much it meant to him.

“Hello, Father,” Devin and Charles repeated in unison.

Hugs were given to both men and then they were ushered to the table. “Have you two had dinner yet?”

Devin replied, “No, Pops, we were holding out for some of William’s great grub.”

Father turned his head to look at Vincent who was standing behind the table with a strange look on his face and said, “Vincent don’t just stand there. Send a message and have dinner sent round for Devin and Charles.”

Before his head turned back to face Devin and Charles, a sly wink passed from Devin to Vincent. Devin’s smugness infuriated him and made him more nervous, if that was possible. Grateful for a reprieve even if it was only momentary, Vincent decided to go to the kitchen and get the food himself. Not wanting to

give any explanation and grateful that William wasn't in a talkative mood, Vincent prepared the plates of food and glasses of iced tea, set them on a tray and headed back to the library. Along the way, he began to feel like a man walking to his execution. Shaking his head, he chided himself for feeling this way. He kept reminding himself for what seemed like the umpteenth time that day that he was a grown man and entitled to certain freedoms that other men enjoyed without question or without having to feel guilty about said freedoms.

Father was listening to Devin explain the plumbing problem and the many other repairs that needed to be made to the cabin.

“You know Father, I never thought that all that manual labor I learned as a boy would pay off, but it's saved me a fortune in repairs just on the cabin. The property owner gave me a great rate with the condition that I would do the work myself. Plus I have the world's best helper here in Charles.”

“I've no doubt Charles is a wonderful helper Devin. After all just being around him has helped you quite a bit hasn't it... my son?”

Tears formed in his eyes as Devin quietly replied, “In more ways than you will ever know.”

Vincent had been ready to descend the steps but stopped, and waited behind a wall upon hearing the touching exchange between father and son. Having been saddled with a unique little brother, Devin had endured more than most boys his age. Vincent wasn't his only burden. Always being careful not to reveal where he lived was a constant source of worry not just for Devin, but also for all the Tunnel residents. It had been too much for an adventure seeking youth to understand. Now the man who had been everywhere South of Oz and North of Shangri La finally understood that the most important things were love and home, even if that home was a hole in the ground.

There was very little conversation while Devin and Charles ate. Father and Vincent decided to have a cup of tea and discuss some Tunnel business that had been overlooked at the last council meeting. Father thought that Vincent finally seemed more focused than he had been since Catherine's illness and subsequent departure. He was completely unaware of what Devin's visit really meant for

Vincent and the entire community.

During this time, Vincent was getting more and more nervous, while the smile on Devin's face grew larger and larger. Finally, the men had finished their meals, their tea, and the Tunnel business.

Father got up from his chair and went to his desk to retrieve the chessboard. Silently he was hoping that Devin had not practiced much since he left the Tunnels and Father could finally claim victory over someone. He sat down and prepared to open the beautiful wooden box that contained the chess set. He looked at the silver rose, remembering how Paracelsus had tried, and almost succeeded in destroying not just Winterfest but the entire community as well. He then had a flash of memory of Vincent standing over Paracelsus' body, blood on his claws and a crazed look on his face.

John Pater (Paracelsus) had been such a brilliant man, a dear friend, a visionary and it was a shame it had to end that way. However, there had been no other choice. If he had lived Paracelsus would not have stopped until the community Jacob Wells built, and the son he had nurtured and raised were completely destroyed. Father felt badly that he had not had the courage to handle the matter himself. Had he done so, he could have prevented Vincent from having another breakdown and possibly averted Catherine's first and subsequent breakdown as well. That was the problem with hindsight it was always 20/20. A good father doesn't bring harm to his child. Whether wittingly or unwittingly he had done just that to his son, the woman his son loved and the entire community. Regardless of the consolation he had received during those times, he would quietly carry the guilt with him to his grave.

The murmuring of voices finally returned Father to the present. Devin and Vincent were telling Charles about the Whispering Gallery. On his first visit to the Tunnels, the voices had caused Charles to run away in fear. He had been afraid that they were coming after him.

Charles now enjoyed a life away from the circus, away from the title of sideshow freak, away from the beatings inflicted on him by Eddie. His parent's death also put an end to any exposure Charles had to love, patience, and acceptance. Even though he was limited in his vocabulary and mental capacity, he longed to try new

and different things. Whatever project he undertook, his entire heart and soul went into it. Devin was telling Vincent about the small garden that Charles had planted. It was only a few herbs like rosemary and basil and some lilacs, but Charles took great pride in his garden. He loved all facets of it, even if it included keeping away his friends the rabbits and squirrels.

Father was just about to suggest a game of chess when Devin spoke the words that would set the ball in motion. “You know, Vincent, when Chandler and I went back to the circus to tell Eddie that he wouldn’t be seeing his brother again, we stopped along the way and took a walk in the park.”

Vincent was aware of this and of the conversation that ensued. The more Devin talked, the more the smugness in his smile increased.

“She told me that when she was a little girl, she had an imaginary friend, a pretend sister she could whisper secrets to in the dark. I told her that you and I used to do the same thing, pretend we were sleeping and wondering if we ever truly fooled Father. When she asked what we would talk about you know what I told her Vincent?”

Groaning, his imagination taking him to a thousand different thoughts, Vincent speaking barely above a whisper asked, “No Devin, what did you say?”

Devin loved every minute of watching his brother squirm and, knowing what was about to happen said, “The time has come the Walrus said, to talk of many things.”

It suddenly became so quiet in the library that one could have heard a pin drop, even on the hard rock floors. A puzzled look came over Father’s face. Charles sat with his head down, waiting for the hollering to begin. Father looked at all three men and noticed something was definitely amiss with his younger son. The pieces were beginning to come together; Devin didn’t just show up here for no reason; he and Vincent had hatched a plan of some sort. The longer the silence, the more aggravated Father became.

Devin was content to watch the storm brewing behind Father’s eyes and the nerves fraying more and more behind Vincent’s.

His patience exhausted, Father bellowed causing Charles to jump. Apologizing to

Charles, Father began. “Would one of you like to tell me what is going on here? Devin didn’t just show up for no reason especially since he was just here a month ago. No, Vincent, I believe the two of you are up to something, something big and I want to know what it is and I want to know now!” He raised his hand to pound his fist on the table, but one look at the fear in Charles eyes and he quickly placed his hand in his lap while he waited for someone, anyone to begin speaking.

Knowing he could put it off no longer, sitting straight up in his chair Vincent began. “Father you know how upset and confused I have been about everything since Catherine and I became engaged and how guilty I feel for her relapse.” Not wanting to take a chance on losing his courage, Vincent quickly continued. “You see Father I decided and Devin and Charles agreed that I am going to go home with them tomorrow night and stay at Devin’s cabin for awhile.”

The look in Vincent’s eyes was one of finality. His decision was made and he was not going to be swayed in any way. Not by Father and not by the community.

No longer able to contain himself Father pounded his fist on the table and rose up as quickly as he possibly could. Giving no thought to Charles or his feelings, Father, too blinded by anger to consider anyone’s feelings except his own, didn’t notice Charles slip out of the Library.

Devin crossed his arms across his chest and waited for the fireworks to begin, he didn’t have to wait very long.

“What do you mean Vincent that you are going to stay at Devin’s? Have you lost your mind? Did you forget what happened when you were caught Above? Do you want to take that chance again? If you need to work things out can’t you just go into the lower chambers to do so? Is it absolutely necessary to risk not only your life and your safety, but the safety of the entire community as well? I absolutely forbid you to go!”

Devin started to speak on behalf of his little brother when Vincent raised his hand to silence him.

Taking a breath and with gritted teeth, Vincent began to speak. “Father, you said almost the exact same words to me when I wanted to take the trip to Connecticut with Catherine. That trip was cancelled because of the same fears you just

mentioned. Do you have any idea how heartbroken Catherine was? How disappointed I was? No of course you don't. You have the ability to walk in the sunshine any time you choose and watch the changing of the seasons. However, you prefer to stay here in these Tunnels and in this darkness. For once in my life Father, I am putting my needs and wants ahead of the community. According to you, I may only be half a man, but the half of me that is a man is going on this trip, whether you agree or not. Am I not entitled to the same freedoms of any man? Do I not deserve to see the sunshine on the fall leaves, smell the fresh country air, for once in my life? What happened to not interfering in my life anymore? Weren't you going to do anything that you could to help me in my relationship with Catherine?"

Raising his voice to get his point across Father said, "This has nothing to do with your relationship with Catherine."

Enraged even further Vincent retorted, "That's where you're wrong Father. My wanting to go away has everything to do with my relationship with Catherine. I don't know when she will be home and if she'll need additional medical care. I don't know what our future holds and this may be the last time I am able to do this, so I am going and that's final."

Vincent then went to the pipes and summoned Cullen. In doing so, he caught sight of most of the Tunnel community hidden in various areas around the library. In no mood for any further discussion Vincent snarled; "I hope you all got an earful because nothing, and I mean nothing any of you can say will stop me from going!" With that last remark, everyone scurried back to their chambers, afraid to be involved in any fight between Father and Vincent.

While on his way to the library, Cullen was nearly flattened by the people hurrying to get back to their chambers. He smiled to himself and thought; "Well the cat is out of the bag. Let the games begin." Unlike others in the community, Cullen didn't fear Father or Vincent. He felt that he did his share to earn his keep and that entitled him to the same respect or lack thereof that he in turn showed to them.

Upon entering the library, he could feel the tension in the air. Father was seated only because his hip had given out on him. Vincent was pacing back and forth,

and Devin just sat there like the Cheshire cat with a huge smile on his face. On second glance, it looked like the smile was a façade for the anger that lay beneath.

“Vincent you sent for me?” Cullen asked.

“Yes Cullen I did. Thank you for coming so quickly. I have just informed Father that I am going to stay with Devin and Charles for a while. Father, Cullen has graciously agreed to assume all my responsibilities except for the teaching. I thought that perhaps you and I could make arrangements for my classes tomorrow.”

Father didn't like being disobeyed by anyone, especially his son regardless of his age. In a curt voice Father replied; “Vincent, I'm surprised that you didn't seek out someone else to teach your classes. It seems that everyone else knew about this trip but me.”

Trying very hard to contain his anger Vincent responded, “Father, Cullen is the only one I told about my trip. Since you are the leader of this community, and its original teacher, I thought it fitting that you teach my classes.”

“Now you see fit to remember that I am indeed the leader of this community. You didn't seem to remember that when you were making all these plans behind my back.” Father seethed.

That was the last straw. In a voice so calm that it was eerie, Vincent turned to Devin. “Devin, I realize that it would be a great imposition to ask you to drive all the way back home tonight, but it's still early enough that we would be traveling in complete darkness. If I stay here any longer, I'm afraid I might say or do something that I'll regret so could you be ready to go in say half an hour?”

“Sure Vincent” Devin replied. “Our suitcases are still here. All I need to do is go get Charles, splash a little cold water on my face, and we'll be good to go.”

It was the first time Father realized that Charles was no longer at the table. Even though he was so infuriated that he could barely speak, he still had to make one last ditch effort to convince his son that this trip was not only foolish but also risky. In a very flat voice, one he hoped wouldn't reveal his full wrath Father asked, “Vincent is there nothing I can say or do to prevent you from taking this

trip?”

Vincent reciprocated Father’s tone when answering the question. “Father I am more convinced than ever that taking this trip is the right thing... for both of us.”

Turning on his heel he left Cullen and Father standing there staring at each other and headed for his chamber to complete his preparations. Vincent had packed almost everything and hidden it in his closet away from prying eyes. The only things he needed were his nightshirt and journal. Opening his satchel, he ensured himself that all of Catherine’s letters were already packed and adding the last two items, he quickly glanced around the room and headed to Devin and Charles’s chamber.

When he arrived, Devin was explaining to Charles why they weren’t staying and that they would see the Whispering Gallery when they brought Vincent home.

Vincent hated disappointing anyone, especially dear sweet Charles. Charles and Devin were both surprised when Vincent began to speak. “I’m sorry that your visit has been cut short Charles. It is completely my fault. You see I’m just too angry with Father to stay here any longer. I promise that when we return, Devin and I will take you to the Whispering Gallery. Am I forgiven?”

Charles could not stay mad at the man he adored almost as much as he did Devin and replied. “I understand Vincent about being mad. I know when I was with Eddie and he used to make me mad and I wanted to get away but I couldn’t.”

Both Devin and Vincent had tears in their eyes listening to this gentle giant recall some of the most horrible times of his life. Without speaking, each brother took a turn hugging Charles.

Then Vincent asked, “Are you ready Devin?”

“I’m ready little brother.”

Before they left the chamber, Vincent placed something in Devin’s hand. When he looked at it he was shocked and said to Vincent, “Where did you come up with this much money?”

“Catherine leaves money here in case the community or I need anything. She insisted on giving me more before she left since she didn’t know how long she

would be gone. I don't know much about the outside world, but I do know that it costs money for gasoline and car expenses. I hope this helps.”

With a sly grin Devin responded, “It certainly will little brother, it certainly will.”

Neither of them was surprised that Father was no longer in the library as they prepared to leave. Knowing that Father was in his bedchamber, Vincent yelled loud enough ensuring that he was heard, “Good-bye Father. I'll see you when I get back.” He didn't bother to tell him that Peter had the phone number in case of emergency. After all, once he and Catherine were married he would no longer be at their disposal all times of the day and night, so he decided this was good practice. Gathering their suitcases the three men headed down the Tunnels and on to Vincent's big adventure.

Brian, the storeowner, was surprised that Devin was leaving already and that Vincent was going with him. Knowing that the Tunnel gossip would quickly find its way to the Helper grapevine, Vincent quickly explained that he and Father had a fight and he was going to stay with Devin for a while. While this conversation was taking place, Charles quietly opened the passenger door and crawled into the back of the van. Curiosity satisfied, Devin got into the driver's seat and motioned for Vincent to sit in the passenger seat. He could tell that Vincent was a little apprehensive about being that exposed, so he instructed him to crawl into the back of the van with Charles. The van was from the 1970's complete with bubble windows and a sunroof. Although the outside was a little rough, the inside was completely refurbished. With Charles deformities, Devin had wanted something that would afford him enough room to lie down while they traveled or to use in case of an emergency as they had done with Catherine.

It was just after midnight and the fall air still held some warmth. Knowing that Vincent was nervous about the trip and upset about defying the old man, Devin wanted to start his vacation out on the right foot. He opened the sunroof, just enough so that Vincent would be able to feel the breeze as they drove. Not one for classical music, Devin chose a soft rock station and put the volume on low. After checking his mirrors, he pulled away from the curb and headed for home.

The only type of transportation Vincent had ever taken was on the tops of subway

cars. He was looking around at the windows and all the carpeting in the back of the van, when he felt a breeze blow through his hair. Looking around for the source he heard Charles chuckle. When he turned his head to look, Charles was smiling and pointing to the roof of the van.

In his mirror, Devin could see the look of joy on his little brother's face. It was amazing how something as simple as a ride in a van and the feel of fresh air, something that he along with many others took for granted, could provide so much happiness for someone. True Vincent had felt the fresh air as he walked through the park or during his trips to Catherine's balcony, but this was different. This air smelled different, felt different. This air represented freedom.

William's dinner had been good but Devin found himself craving a midnight snack. He knew that Charles would be hungry as well. He told Vincent to stay out of sight and pulled into a fast food restaurant parking lot. Not wanting to take a chance on being seen, Charles and Vincent sat quietly in the back seat with Vincent being afraid to breathe too loudly for fear of being spotted.

Shortly, Devin returned and handed them bags of food. Devin chuckled as Vincent surveyed the bag of unfamiliar smells. "Relax little brother. I want you to have all kinds of different experiences on this trip so I got you a hamburger, fries, and a shake, better known as fast food," Devin informed him.

It had been a long time since dinner, and actually, Vincent had been so nervous about Devin's arrival and the confrontation he knew he would have with Father that he had eaten very little. Devin crawled into the back and the three men ate their food in silence. Devin could tell that Vincent was uncomfortable being in this parking lot and couldn't wait to be on the road again.

Vincent was finally starting to relax, and the air felt wonderful. He couldn't see much out of the bubble windows so he moved up to look out of the windshield. They were on a highway that much he knew. The cars were speeding by so quickly that at times they looked like one big blur.

Devin saw him looking and explained that at night the cars always go faster, hoping that the police weren't watching for speeders as much as they did during the day. Vincent also realized that the land was no longer flat; they were climbing up hills, mountains actually. Before too long they had turned off the main road

and were heading toward the cabin. In no time at all, Devin had turned off the engine and announced that they were home.

As he opened the van door, Devin saw that Charles had fallen asleep and decided not to wake him, just yet. He was more interested in watching Vincent and his reactions to being outdoors without any fear of being spotted by strangers or worse yet, being spotted and captured in order to be used as a lab experiment. As Vincent stepped out of the van Devin thought the expression on his little brother's face was worth any confrontation they had encountered with Father. The tension disappeared and the sense of freedom that he would be able to experience during this trip was written all over his face.

Looking up at the stars Vincent felt as if he were seeing them for the first time. He had scaled to the top of many tall buildings to view the night sky, but this was unlike anything he had ever seen. Buildings and the lights of the city had always blocked his view. Here his view was unencumbered. Vincent turned around and around, afraid if he blinked the view might change. As Devin watched him, his eyes filled with tears for the second time that evening. How many times in all the different places he had traveled to, had he looked at the sky? Plenty, but never did it have the impact on him that it did on Vincent. He promised himself that he would never again take such a simple pleasure as this for granted.

Tapping Vincent on the shoulder Devin said, "Come on Vincent, it's getting late and a little cold out here. I promise the sky will be here again tomorrow night but right now, I need to wake Charles up. I think after the day we've all had, we could use a little shuteye."

Upon seeing the stars, Vincent had begun to cry and the tear stains were evident on his face. Wiping away the tears, Vincent grabbed all the suitcases from the van and said to Devin, "You're absolutely right Devin it has been a long day, filled with emotions both good and bad. A good night's sleep sounds like a great idea." Gently they woke Charles and the men proceeded to the cabin. Vincent jumped when the lights came on as soon as they got close to the door.

Devin chuckled and explained that they were motion sensor lights and even a rabbit would trigger them.

Once inside Vincent agreed with Catherine's description of the cabin. It was quite

rustic. The furnishings appeared to be used, but in good condition. Vincent thought to himself that they looked like items one might find in the Tunnels. You can take the boy out of the hole in the ground, but you can't take the hole in the ground out of the boy, Vincent thought as he chuckled to himself.

Vincent had been so deep in thought that he was completely unaware of the activities taking place around him. Once again, Devin was tapping him on the shoulder to get his attention. "I'm sorry Devin, I was just thinking about how similar your furniture looks to what we have in the Tunnels."

"You know little brother, I thought the same thing the first time I saw this place. Let me show you to your room. While you were daydreaming Charles went to bed and asked me to tell you goodnight from him."

Immediately feeling guilty for ignoring Charles, Vincent replied, "Devin I'm so sorry for getting lost in my thoughts and ignoring Charles, I hope he's not too upset with me."

"Relax Vincent. I told Charles that this was all new to you just like it had been to him when we first came here and he understands. Besides, you two will be spending lots of time together when I'm at work so you can make it up to him then. I'll be bunking with Charles and you'll be staying in my room, so let's hit the hay. Since we got home earlier than I had planned, I have some work you can help me with this weekend."

"Of course Devin. I'll do whatever I can to earn my keep." Vincent lowered his voice and looking directly into Devin's eyes and heart said, "I never got a chance to thank you for doing all this for me. The driving, the arguments with Father, sharing your house and giving up your room all for me. I don't have the words to tell you how grateful I am for this adventure Devin." As if by mutual consent, they reached out to hug one another.

Once the hug was finished, Devin stood there and looked, really looked at his brother. He was no longer the freak that Devin had felt burdened with during his childhood. He was a man, a man who was in love with a wonderful woman and ready to embark on his new life. Vincent's eyes held more expression than anyone's he had ever met. How could he explain that this trip was helping him

assuage the guilt he felt at leaving Vincent behind all those years ago?

Vincent cocked his head to the side wondering what Devin was thinking.

It was at that moment that Devin came back to reality and said, “Vincent- you not having the words to describe something? I better mark this on my calendar.” A small jab in the arm was Vincent’s reply. They walked to the bedrooms, bid each other good night, and closed their respective doors.

Looking around the room, Vincent saw that his satchel was on the bed and the covers were already turned down. He must remember to thank Charles in the morning. It only took him a few moments to unpack. He took his toothbrush and hair brush and headed to the bathroom. He didn’t make it a habit to look at his reflection; personally, it saddened him. Tonight was different, and he took the time to look at it, really look at it perhaps for the first time in his life. Was Catherine completely certain that this was the face she wanted to see every morning for the rest of her life? He had his doubts; but the purpose of this trip was to rid himself of those doubts... forever.

After he finished in the bathroom, he put on his nightshirt, grabbed his journal, and crawled under the covers. He recorded everything about the day, both good and bad. About his fight with Father and leaving the Tunnels without telling him good-bye, something he rarely did... His experience with fast food, and the most important thing, the beauty of the stars and the freedom he felt in this place. Placing his journal on the nightstand, he turned out the light, thinking that he would fall asleep instantly. His mind however had other plans. He was acutely aware that Catherine had slept in this bed during her recent visit. Of course, Devin would have changed the sheets, but he was certain he could still smell a faint trace of her perfume. That thought would ensure happy dreams tonight. Saying goodnight to Catherine, he was soon fast asleep.

The sun coming through the window startled Vincent and he clutched his chest in fear. For a moment, he didn’t remember where he was. The last time he had awakened with the sun was when he was in the throes of his breakdown in Catherine’s apartment. It suddenly occurred to him that he was safe in Devin’s cabin. He lay back down, allowing the sun to play across his face, his body, the

room.

Since he wasn't underground, his sense of time was off-kilter. Looking around the room, he found the clock. Nine o'clock! He couldn't remember the last time he had slept this late. He was in need of a bath or shower, but wasn't sure how to work any of the shower settings. Putting on his robe, he opened the door to call for Devin. He didn't have to, for there stood Devin outside the door with a cup of tea in his hand.

"Vincent, I figured you wouldn't know how everything worked in the bathroom, so I decided to greet you with a cup of tea and an explanation. Don't get used to it, little brother, cause this is a once in a lifetime event." With a laugh and a mutual slap on the back, the brothers headed for the bathroom. Once he was certain that Vincent understood how everything worked and knew where all the necessities were kept, Devin left the room.

Placing his cup on the sink, this time he deliberately avoided his face while brushing his teeth. After using the facilities, he jumped into the shower. Devin had started the hot water, explaining it needed a few moments to heat up. The heat from the water and the warmth of the room were yet another new experience for him. He loved the feel of the water beating against his scalp and body. He didn't want it to end but knew he had to save the hot water for the other men in the cabin. Taking his time to dry his body completely and without fear of interruption was something new for him. He felt renewed, refreshed, and ready to handle anything life might throw his way. He cleaned up the bathroom, dropped his things in his room, and headed to the kitchen where the smell of bacon reminded him of just how long it had been since he had last eaten.

Charles was already at the table happily munching on a piece of bacon when Vincent entered the room, and his eyes immediately lit up. "Vincent, did you sleep well? Did you like seeing the sunshine? Did you like Dev's surprise? Did you like the shower?"

Vincent and Devin both laughed aloud at the steady stream of questions emanating from Charles. Hearing himself laugh, Vincent reflected that he couldn't remember the last time he had laughed like this, or felt no burdens resting on his shoulders.

“Charles, first let me begin by apologizing for not saying good night to you last night, and I also want to thank you for allowing Devin to bunk with you so that I might have my own room. Finally, the answer to all of your questions is yes. This morning has started out to be one of the best mornings of my life. Now if you have no further questions, I would love some breakfast.”

Devin had purposefully moved the kitchen table around so that Vincent would be sitting in the chair that received the most sun. The meal was full of laughter as Devin and Vincent regaled Charles with stories about their childhood adventures. Most of the stories ended with some sort of punishment for one or both of the boys. Devin of course did anything and everything to see how close he could push Father to the boiling point. The mention of Father’s name brought a somber look to Vincent’s face, and even though it passed quickly, it remained long enough for Devin to notice.

Once breakfast was over, Devin and Vincent went to work repairing an outdoor shed used for storing tools and lawn equipment. Charles was in charge of making the beds and doing the dishes. His chores completed, Charles sat on the porch and watched the brother’s work side-by-side. He loved watching the two of them and enjoyed their stories, but felt sad that he never had a brother that loved him as much as these men did each other. “Oh well,” he said in a voice so soft it was barely a whisper, “at least I have a brother who loves me now.”

Since fall was fast approaching and the amount of daylight was limited, the men worked until dinnertime, stopping only long enough to grab a quick drink of water and some sandwiches Devin had prepared. While they were putting the tools away, Devin turned to Vincent and said; “Well little brother since this is your adventure, what would you like for dinner? I could go to the store and buy us some steaks or lobster with the money you gave me, or we could order a pizza or Chinese. It’s your choice.”

A choice for dinner. That was something that Vincent had never thought of before. When it came to meals Below, you ate what the Helper’s provided and were grateful to have food at all. After thinking about it for a moment, Vincent said to Devin, “Tell me Devin, what did you have for dinner when Catherine was here?”

Devin could barely remember what he ate yesterday, let alone six weeks ago.

Charles of course was another story; he remembered everything from Catherine's visit. Wanting to impress Vincent with his memory, he quickly spoke. "I know what we had Vincent."

Both men turned to look at Charles and the eager expression on his face. "Please Charles tell me what you had." Vincent responded in that ever-patient voice.

Charles said, "The first night we had steaks that she bought at the store. The next couple of nights we grilled things like hamburgers and hot dogs. The night that she got sick, we had pizza with any toppings we wanted, and she and Devin had some beer. I don't drink, so I just had some pop instead."

The mention of Catherine's illness sent a stab of pain through Vincent's heart. He didn't want his voice to give Charles the impression that he had done anything wrong. He put his hand on his chin as if he was deliberating all the choices before him and then said to Charles, "Well, Charles, since I've never had a pizza with any toppings I wanted before, I'm going to trust your judgment and say let's order the pizza with your favorite toppings. Devin, if you are so inclined to order beer as well, I might be tempted to try one. I have heard that a cold beer tastes great after a long days work."

Charles was thrilled that he had helped Vincent with his food choice. Devin was smiling and considered how much fun it might be to see his uptight brother with a few beers under his belt.

Vincent and Devin took turns getting a quick shower before the food arrived. As Devin and Catherine had done when she visited, the trio ate and then sat outside with their beers to enjoy the night sky and to do something they hadn't done in a very long time...talk about what was really bothering each of them, especially Vincent, just as Vincent and Devin had done as boys all those years ago.

While the men were enjoying the night sky in Pennsylvania, Catherine was just finishing up yet another day of grueling physical and emotional therapy in New Mexico.

Below the streets of New York City, Father was barking at anyone who had the misfortune of crossing his path.

Catherine had been too tired Friday night to read the letter she had received from Vincent. Saturday had turned out to be a duplicate of Friday. Her therapy session hadn't gone well. In her eagerness to return home she was trying to speed things up, and Susan wasn't cooperating. She had tried to do the same with her physical therapist, and he quickly put a stop to her showboating, as he called it. Where was Isaac when she needed him? A hot shower did wonders to relieve some of the tension. She was hungrier than she had been in quite awhile and decided to save the letter until bedtime. Catherine was convinced that reading it right before bed would ensure she had pleasant dreams about Vincent.

Catherine sat and just looked at the letter before opening it. She loved the calligraphy of Vincent's handwriting; it made each word seem important. The weight suggested that it was a long letter, which was a good sign. Some of the letters she had received seemed to be lacking, as if he was holding back telling her something of great importance. Suddenly a sense of fear gripped her. What if something had happened to him, Father, or a member of her Tunnel family? Jumping out of bed, she found the letter opener, slit open the envelope, and quickly scanned the letter for bad news. What she found was just the opposite; to say she was astonished was an understatement. It took three readings before her mind finally registered what Vincent had done. He had gone to stay with Devin and Charles to work things out, just as she had. Now a thousand questions crossed her mind. Was he having second thoughts about marrying her?

Her first impulse was to pack her suitcase and fly to the Poconos to be with him, to help him sort through his thoughts. The practical side of her won out, at least temporarily. Vincent deserved to be in the fresh air and sunshine, and to spend time with his brother. A stab of jealousy and a flash of memory regarding the ill-fated trip to Connecticut shot through her. The first time Vincent was able to be outside in the sun, should have been with her. More than anyone, she knew how deeply it affected Vincent each time Devin left the Tunnels, even if their visits were more frequent than they had been in the past. No she would stay for a few more days, but tomorrow she would call Peter to find out the truth about what

was really going on back home. Making her nightly wish on the crystal and holding the letter against her heart, Catherine fell asleep.

Back in the Poconos Vincent was savoring not only the pizza, but also his first taste of bottled beer. Devin had told him the importance of buying only the good stuff when it came to beer or alcohol, even if you ate it with canned soup or bologna.

Charles had said goodnight a short time ago, and this left the brothers alone for the first time since Devin's arrival in the Tunnels. He was watching out of the corner of his eye as Vincent gazed up at the night sky, but he knew his brother well enough to know that stargazing wasn't the only thing on his mind. Vincent was a master of keeping his emotions bottled up, afraid that if he revealed them he wouldn't be considered normal, like other men. He had to find out what that remark meant, when Vincent said Father had told him he was only half a man. Chalk another one up for the old man, always filling his head with doubt, adding to his already insecure psyche.

Devin gave it a few more moments and decided it was now or never. Vincent had come here for a reason, and if he was going to help him, he needed to find out what those reasons were.

"So Vincent, what do you think of our little mountain retreat? Did you ever think that I would be content to live a normal life, filled with a job, home maintenance and taking care of someone other than myself?" Devin asked with a chuckle.

Vincent knew that this was Devin's way of trying to draw him out of his shell. When they were boys and Vincent had a problem, Devin always tried to break the mood with a joke, a riddle or a funny story that had happened to him when he was Above. Of course, those stories usually happened when he was Above without Father's knowledge.

Vincent needed help; he needed to talk to someone about the way he was feeling. Wasn't that the reason he had come here in the first place? Why then was it so difficult for him to begin his story? Devin, like Catherine, loved him, and he knew that no matter what he said, Devin would never judge him. Taking a deep breath and saying a silent prayer he began to speak.

“Devin, I want you to tell me what transpired when Catherine was here. What did she do? How did she act? Did you have any knowledge that the breakdown was going to happen before it actually did?”

Devin thought long and hard about the best way to answer these questions. He wanted to be truthful, but he thought that Vincent needed to talk about himself, not rehash what had happened during Chandler’s visit.

“Vincent, I’m sure Chandler filled you in on all the details before she had her relapse. Why do you want my take on it? After all you two are engaged to be married, and if you can’t trust her to be honest with you now, what does that say about the depth of your relationship?” Devin had amazed himself with that answer. He actually sounded like he knew what he was talking about! He was going to wait his brother out. He knew that asking about Chandler was Vincent’s way of not talking about himself.

Knowing that his ploy hadn’t worked – it never did with Devin – Vincent began very slowly to explain the reason for his visit.

“Devin, I feel like I’m to blame for Catherine’s relapse. I know that she told you in great detail about all the men that I’ve killed in order to protect her and the Tunnels. I thought everything was fine. I finally asked her to marry me, and she accepted. We had actually shared some degree of intimacy, were looking forward to our future together, and one week after I propose, she has a relapse. What if she said yes in haste, or to fool me into believing she was really better? What if she’s changed her mind and really doesn’t want to marry me at all? After all I am only half a man, and no one knows what the other half is, what my true origins are.”

Devin felt the heat rising in his face; the same heat he felt Friday night when he heard Vincent use that phrase about being half a man for the first time. It was more than he could bear. No one deserved to be happy more than Vincent and he wasn’t going to let anyone quash those dreams. Not the old man and not even Vincent himself!

Devin jumped out of his chair, almost spilling his beer all over himself and began to pace back and forth in front of Vincent. He had to remind himself to keep his voice down, so he wouldn’t wake Charles. “Damn it Vincent, why do you keep

saying that? Why do you think you're only half a man? What do you think a normal man is? What do you think a normal man does differently than you do? A man is a man. You may not know your entire history, but let me tell you something; when it comes to being a man, there is no one that epitomizes that word more than you do. A man wants someone to love, someone to share his life with, to have a family with. A man has desires – a desire to make love, a desire to succeed no matter what the cost. A man takes care of his family, whether financially or emotionally. A man protects that family at all costs, even if by doing so he puts himself in danger. A man is always there to help someone in need be it a friend or stranger. A man is someone that people turn to for advice, comfort and praise for a job well done. From where I'm standing, little brother, there is no one that defines that word more than you.” Devin’s heart was pounding and the veins in his neck were protruding.

Vincent sat dumbstruck. All these years he had compared himself to a normal man, sent Catherine away on more than one occasion to find such a man. Now here was the man whom he admired above any other man – even Father – telling him in no uncertain terms that he was just the same as him.

“But Devin, I’m not like other men. I have claws and fangs. When I’m angry, I roar. I hear things, see things, and feel things others don’t. I can kill a man with one swipe of my claws. How can you say that I’m a normal man?”

“Vincent, I’m not denying that on the outside you’re different. On the outside, all men are different. What I’m telling you is what really counts, what Catherine fell in love with is the man you are on the inside. When Chandler was recovering from the attack, she didn’t know what you looked like; she only had your voice to comfort her. I know that voice Vincent. It can soothe anyone, convince the angriest person to calm down, talk people into putting aside their differences. Let’s face it little brother, Chandler is a beautiful, wealthy woman who could have any man she wanted. She told me that you sent her away several times. One of those times, she had it all within her grasp, the life you thought she should have, and what did she do? She left it all behind in the middle of the night and came running back to the hole in the ground. She came running back to you!”

Vincent was still in shock over Devin's proclamation that he was really a man. Along with the shock, he was feeling strange and a little drowsy. His thinking was becoming more and more muddled after every beer. Deciding he had enough for one night, he stood up on wobbly legs and told Devin; "Devin, I thank you for all your advice, but I'm suddenly feeling very tired. Would you mind if we continued this discussion tomorrow?"

That smug smile once again crossed Devin's face as he said, "I'm sure it's the beer little brother. You're just not used to it. Go on to bed and I'll see you in the morning."

Vincent stumbled a little while reaching for the door handle. Turning he said, "I think you're right about the beer Devin. Goodnight." Within moments, Vincent was in the house and heading for bed.

It had been a long two days and nights and this was the first weekend Devin had off in a long time. He decided to have another beer. Looking up at the stars, he gave himself the proverbial pat on the back. Maybe, just maybe he was finally starting to tear down some of the walls his brother had built around himself, and if he was very lucky, throw a wet blanket on all the negative ideas that the old man had instilled into his head throughout the years.

Sunday morning found the sun once again streaming into Vincent's room, only this time he didn't welcome the brightness. He had a headache, something he rarely had. His mouth was dry and the taste in it was simply awful. He couldn't figure out why he was feeling this way until he remembered the beer he had drunk the night before. He also remembered the speech Devin had given him, the one about him being a normal man. Vincent had been too tipsy to write in his journal last night, but he wanted to do it now while the memories were still fresh in his mind and before his day with Charles and Devin got underway.

Meanwhile in New Mexico, Catherine had re-read Vincent's letter numerous times. She kept looking at the clock while pacing back and forth in her room. The time difference between New Mexico and New York was really an inconvenience she didn't need right now. Finally, she could stand it no longer and picked up the phone to call Peter, hoping he would forgive her for disturbing what was probably his only day off this week. A very groggy Peter answered the phone and was alarmed to hear the panic in Catherine's voice. After reassuring him that she was fine, she went on to explain about the letter she had received from Vincent telling her that he was going to stay with Devin for a while.

At first, Peter thought that he was still dreaming, especially when he heard the part about Vincent leaving the Tunnels. Realizing that he would get no additional sleep or peace of mind until he checked things out for himself, Peter promised that he would call Catherine back as soon as he could speak to Father.

Below the New York City streets, Father still hadn't calmed down after the dog and pony show, as he called it, Vincent had put on the other night.

Mary had been Above in Brooklyn assisting a Helper whose daughter had just given birth. She had no idea what had transpired and was shocked to hear Jacob's voice rising while he was speaking to Mouse of all people. As she approached the library, she saw a look of fear on Mouse's face before he scurried down the hallway. Father didn't see her coming toward him and she was able to catch a quick glance at his face. It was drawn and filled with worry. Seated behind his desk she could see that his eyes were red; they looked like a cross between anger and tears. Purposely she set her suitcase down with more force than necessary.

Jacob finally realized she was in the room and turned to speak to her. "Ah Mary, I'm glad to see you've returned. You have been sorely missed, especially by me. Tell me, how is the new mother and baby?"

That was odd she thought. Jacob always mentioned people by name. Something really must have happened while she was gone. Well she was here now and she was going to get to the bottom of things right now. "Well Jacob, you'll be happy

to know that Renee and her new daughter Jennifer are just fine.” Father just nodded his head, paying no attention to what she had just said. Marching over to the desk and standing right in front of him, she demanded, “Jacob Wells, what in the world is going on here, and why do you look like you haven’t slept in a week? And don’t tell me it’s nothing, because I heard the way you spoke to Mouse, and it was unforgivable. You know he’ll go straight to Vincent and tell him how you treated him, and then Vincent will really be upset with you.”

An indignant look crossed Father’s face. The tone he had used to address Mouse was one she rarely heard. When he began to speak his voice was so acerbic, she physically took a step back from the desk.

“Well it would be impossible for Mouse to run and tell Vincent anything! That is unless he plans on running to the Poconos to join him there.”

Now Mary was confused. “Jacob what in the world are you talking about? How would Vincent even get to the Poconos ,and what makes you think that’s where he is?”

With the same tone, Father replied; “I don’t think it Mary, I’m certain that’s where he went. As to how he got there, his brother came and picked him up. You see they concocted this entire plan without even consulting me. They left Friday night, and I haven’t heard from them since. I told Vincent that this was a risky thing for him to do, not just for himself but also for the entire community. Did he listen to me? Of course he didn’t. He said he needed to think some things through about his relationship with Catherine, and that he couldn’t do it here. Of all the selfish things I have ever seen Devin do, this is by far the most selfish yet.”

Peter was approaching the library and heard Jacob’s tirade. He was also surprised by the severity of his tone, especially since he was talking to Mary. Peter approached the two very quietly. He didn’t want to take a chance of interrupting Jacob, given his current state of mind.

Mary stood, shocked, her face ashen, trying to understand everything she had just been told. She was about to speak when Peter interrupted her.

“Jacob, why are you so upset that Vincent has gone to stay with Devin? You know that Devin would never do anything to endanger Vincent, and don’t you

think that if something had gone wrong, they would have gotten a message to you through one of the Helpers, or through me?”

In his mind, Father knew what Peter said was true, but he was still too angry and upset to acquiesce to anyone, not now. In a voice that was slightly calmer, but still filled with venom, Father stated in a very matter-of-fact manner; “You’re probably right, Peter, but since upsetting me is something that gives Devin great pleasure, I can’t be sure. Also, you didn’t see the look of defiance on Vincent’s face when I forbade him to go.”

A look passed between Peter and Mary. Now they finally understood the real reason Jacob was so upset. Mary started to speak, but Peter knew that she would be the voice of reason and comfort that she always was. What Jacob needed now was to be knocked down a few pegs, and after everything he had put Vincent and Catherine through, he was just the man to do it. His temper had started to flair after hearing Jacob proclaim that he had forbidden the trip. What he was about to say might put a crack in his long standing friendship with Jacob, but for the mental well being of his favorite couple he was willing to risk it.

Before Mary could say a word, Peter quickly started his own tirade. “Jacob Wells, I swear that you never learn from your mistakes. When those kids were in their comas, you promised me that you wouldn’t interfere anymore into their lives.”

Father was unaccustomed to being spoken to in this manner and began to object, but thought better of it upon seeing the fire in Peter’s eyes.

“Vincent is a grown man, engaged to be married. Do you really think that what goes on in the world Above is a shock to him? Are you so selfish that you would deny him a chance to spend some time alone with his brother in the country, especially after this community made him feel so guilty that he had no choice but to call off his trip to Connecticut? Do you plan to control his life once he is married? I have news for you my friend. While Cathy may have the utmost respect for you, she will not, under any circumstances, let you control their lives, of that you can be sure. She would do anything to keep Vincent safe, even if that means keeping him away from you. You drove one son away from here for 20 years. Do you want to take a chance of driving the other one away as well?”

Now it was Father's turn to be shocked. He was also grateful that he was sitting down because hearing his own inadequacies expressed to him would have knocked him off his feet, of that he was certain.

Mary stood for a moment between the two men, unsure how to proceed. Jacob lowered his head as if he was reviewing what Peter had said. Peter stood beside Mary, directly in front of the desk glaring. If she didn't know Peter so well, she would have thought that he was looking for a fight, waiting for Father to disagree with him, waiting for the battle to begin again. Mary had always been the peacekeeper and right now, she was torn. She hated seeing Jacob so upset, so downtrodden, but she knew in her heart that Peter spoke the truth. Realizing that the two men must settle this on their own, she touched Peter's arm lightly, a signal to him that she was leaving. Picking up her suitcase Mary headed to her chamber.

When Jacob finally raised his head, tears were streaming down his cheeks. He hadn't slept since his fight with Vincent, and it was evident on his face. "Peter, why did you come here today? Has something happened to Vincent or Catherine?"

"No Jacob." Peter replied. "I got a call from Cathy early this morning. She received a letter from Vincent telling her about his visit to Devin's, and she wanted to make sure that he was all right and not hiding anything from her. I know she's worried about his mental health and feels guilty about her relapse and the fact that I sent her away to recover."

The physician in Father re-appeared as he said to Peter, "That's silly Peter! Why on earth would she feel guilty about the relapse? It's not her fault and neither was the initial coma. I think that whatever happened to the two of them to cause their comas in the first place is something that only they know. I don't think we will ever understand the real story. In addition, with their bond it makes everything more intense. Dear God, I just realized why Vincent wanted to be away from here. Everything here in the Tunnels and even in New York City reminds him of Catherine, of their love. When she went to California, he was so lost without her and felt helpless that he wasn't close enough to protect her. Now it all makes sense. Once again, she is away from him and although not in a physical danger, there is emotional one and he can do nothing to help her. In addition, there's the

fact that this happened after they became engaged. No wonder he wanted to think things through. I've been such an idiot! I wonder if he'll ever forgive me?"

Going behind the desk and placing his hand on Jacob's shoulder, Peter said; "Deep down Vincent knows that you love him and only want the best for him. However, you can't keep treating him like a child. He has gotten this far in life because of your love and guidance but also because of his instincts. It's time for you to trust him, trust those instincts. Now I have to go home and call Cathy and figure out how to explain this in a way that doesn't have her on a plane headed to the Poconos. Susan still thinks she has some work to do. My advice to you my friend is to get some rest. By the looks of you, you could use it."

"Yes Peter, I haven't slept very well since my argument with Vincent and I owe several people especially Mouse an apology." Standing up and hugging his friend Jacob whispered, "Thank you Peter for telling me the truth, whether I wanted to hear it or not."

Peter nodded and whispered a quiet "you're welcome Jacob," then turned and headed for home.

Deciding a nap would do him some good, Peter headed for his chamber. He began making a mental note of everyone he needed to apologize to before drifting off into a peaceful sleep.

Peter was only a social drinker and as a rule, never had a drink before noon. He decided that just this once he would break his own rule. A stiff drink was definitely in order after his confrontation with Jacob. He loved the man dearly and admired him for not only the work he had done in building and maintaining the Tunnel community, but especially for how he had raised Vincent. He had taken a unique child in very frail health and kept him alive, willed him to live. It was because of his unfailing love and belief that Vincent would not only survive, but also thrive that Vincent was the kind, gentle, unselfish man he was today. At the same time, that love had suffocated Vincent and made him doubt himself on too many occasions. Some of the things Jacob Wells had done in the name of love for his son astounded Peter, and he had always kept his opinions to himself, until today. He could no longer sit idly by and take a chance on destroying not

just Vincent's but Cathy's future as well.

Praying that he would be able to call Cathy and tell her that everything was fine without revealing what really had transpired between father and son, Peter dialed the phone. It barely rang once before Cathy picked it up. She hit him with so many questions he didn't know where to begin. He finally convinced her with his fingers crossed, that everything was fine, and she should continue with her therapy.

Hanging up the phone Catherine knew that Peter was not telling her the entire truth. Being an attorney, she was trained to tell, even on the phone, when people weren't telling the truth or were being deliberately evasive. Peter had been both. She would call Devin if necessary and come hell or high water; she was leaving this place on Wednesday.

In stark contrast to the events that had taken place in Father's library or the apprehension felt by Catherine, Sunday in the Poconos was a relatively calm day. Vincent had said and eaten little at breakfast, his stomach still a little upset from the beer he had consumed the night before.

Devin told him that nothing cured a headache better than to sweat it out with physical labor, so that's exactly what they did. They finished the repairs on the shed, prepared the house for winter, and chopped firewood. Devin secretly hoped that they would have at least one cool night before Vincent left, so he could build a fire for his enjoyment. Charles was busy in the house getting everything ready for the days that he and Vincent would spend together. Before Vincent had come out of his room, Devin had gone to the store in preparation for tonight's dinner. This would be their last lazy evening, since Devin had to return to work tomorrow.

Dinner consisted of Porterhouse steaks, with Vincent's being the largest, baked potatoes and a salad. Devin had a bottle of wine he and Catherine had shared and it took a great deal of encouragement to convince Vincent that one glass wouldn't kill him. To ensure he didn't have a repeat of last night, Vincent drank the wine

very slowly. He had to admit it tasted very good, but didn't want to press his luck, switching to just plain water for the rest of the evening.

The night was cool, not cold enough really, for a fire but Devin decided to make one anyway. He cracked the windows so that the cabin wouldn't get too warm. Vincent was unaccustomed to being warm. He was used to dressing in layers, but after his shower this afternoon, he took Devin up on his offer and put on one of the lighter shirts Devin had purchased for him that morning. He was grateful to Devin for having the forethought to buy him the lighter clothes. He knew of course that Catherine's money had paid for them.

The wine and the fire were making him very warm. Charles once again left the brothers alone and went into his room to watch TV and plan the next day's adventure.

As they sat on the couch gazing into the fire, Devin rehearsed in his mind the things that he had wanted to say to Vincent for a very long time. The apology he felt he needed to make for abandoning him all those years ago, for not staying in touch, for not fighting harder for his little brother.

"Vincent," Devin began his voice full of emotion.

Vincent could hear the emotion in Devin's voice, felt the conflict raging inside his brother. He turned to look at Devin with a worried expression on his face.

"Devin, what is it? Is something wrong, did you receive bad news about Catherine or Father?"

"No Vincent. No phone calls, but there are some things I need to say to you. Please don't interrupt, or I might lose my nerve."

A slight nod of the head indicated Vincent understood the importance of whatever Devin was about to say.

Choking back the tears Devin began. "Vincent I want you to know how sorry I am that I left all those years ago leaving you behind to grow up without me. I felt that if I didn't leave when I did, I would have suffocated, or worse yet done something that would have landed me in jail. I had started hanging around with Mitch Denton and the guys from the docks. He was still living in the Tunnels at that time, and I knew that if I kept going the way I was, he would hold the

Tunnels and you over my head in order to get me to do what he wanted. That wasn't the only reason, but it's been so many years I don't remember them all now. I wanted so badly to write to you, let you know that I was safe, but I moved around so much, always looking over my shoulder, afraid of being spotted, or worse yet, returned to that hole in the ground. Every year I remembered your birthday, and no matter where in the world I was, I always bought a little cupcake, lit a candle on it and wished you a Happy Birthday.

"I kept running, trying to be something, someone I wasn't. I just kept hoping that I would find the one thing that would bring me happiness or respect from the old man. You know what I found out? Life on the run is no way to live. I couldn't tell anyone who I really was, so every relationship was a lie. Hell, I really didn't know who I was until I found out that I was the old man's son. All that searching was in vain. I scoured the world trying to find what had been in front of me all along. It was with you, in the Tunnels. It's what I now have with Charles, and with you back in my life. It's love, it's a home, and finally it's a feeling that I belong."

The tears were spilling down each of the brother's cheeks. Neither spoke; they couldn't. The emotions that Devin's words brought forth were too raw to be diminished by words, at least for now. Instead, Devin got up from the couch, went to the bookshelf, and removed a worn old box. It resembled something that one might find in the Tunnels. A safe place to house one's most treasured memories or keepsakes; it was just that.

For the next several hours, Devin showed Vincent pictures and mementos of some of the places where he had traveled or lived. At times, he had been unable to take pictures of some of those places due to his lack of funds. To ensure that Vincent would have pictures to remember his visit, Devin presented him with a small camera, and instructed him on how to use it. It was a disc camera, so the film could be easily loaded and changed. Devin told Vincent that once the film was ready to be developed, Chandler could take it to a local drug store and have that done for him.

They were finally ready to address what Devin had revealed earlier. Vincent had known how much Devin's guilt about leaving had bothered him since coming home to the Tunnels. He had to make sure that Devin knew he had forgiven him,

long ago. It was now Vincent who was rehearsing the proper words to convey just how much his brother meant to him, how much he always would even when they were apart.

Clearing his throat Vincent began to speak. “Devin, please show me the same courtesy I showed you, and don’t interrupt me until I’ve finished speaking.”

Devin reciprocated with the same slight nod as Vincent had used earlier in the evening.

“Devin, I appreciate how much it took for you to open yourself up to me, to finally after all these years tell me the real reasons why you left. I know better than anyone how stifling Father can be, as evidenced by his display Friday night. I want you to really hear me when I tell you... I forgave you long ago. I will admit that it took me a long time to get over the hurt, but as I grew up and my physical differences became more evident, I knew that the world Above held no place for me. I remind people of their aloneness. I told Catherine that when I went back to see her eight months after she left the Tunnels. I went to tell her good-bye, but she refused to let me go. In actuality I was the one that was truly alone.

“I went through the same growing pains as the other boys, but then they grew up and left or got married. It was then that I realized that my life would only ever exist, could only ever exist in the Tunnels. I had to approach the way I lived my life differently than the rest of the world. It was then that I began to venture Above, much to Father’s chagrin. I distracted myself with music, books, finding ways in and out of buildings without being caught, such as libraries and some museums. I found new friends in some of the Helper’s children. Then I truly found my calling when Father asked me to take over his literature class for the first time.

“I suddenly realized that my influence could help these children to lead their best life, regardless of what they chose to do; stay in the Tunnels, go to college, or learn a trade. I then began to teach other subjects, history, geography, and through those teachings, I had my own adventures. The children would get so excited when they learned about a new state or country. Their enthusiasm helped to ease my pain and allowed me to understand finally, why you left. As Father

was born to heal, I was born to teach, and you were born to wander. Someone that needed to travel, to experience everything life had to offer, to see if the grass really was greener on the other side. Only after you had done all that could you come back to us, to me. Don't you see Devin? All those adventures, all those experiences made you the kind, caring man you are today. I love you and I wouldn't change one thing about you. Your tolerance of my differences made you the man that took Charles out of the living hell in which he was living, helped him to lead a normal life, free of bars, free to walk in the sunshine, free to be himself. As someone who has had to live a life with limitations, I, better than most, understand how much that means. He may not be able to express it to you, but I know that Charles loves you as much if not more than I do, and will be forever grateful to you for all you have given him."

It was now Devin's turn to be in shock over the fact that not only had Vincent forgiven him and long ago to boot! Vincent admired him, despite the fact that he had left him behind so he could satisfy his wanderlust. What a remarkable man his brother was. Remarkable indeed!

To ease the tension that had begun to fill the room Devin chuckled and said; "Well little brother this has certainly been a night of revelations, of baring it all, so to speak. It means so much to me that you forgive me, but what matters the most to me is that I have earned your respect and kept your love. Believe me when I tell you I will never do anything to take those gifts for granted. Now before you once again become long-winded, I have a few questions to ask you, some of them about your differences, some about your relationship with Chandler."

Vincent chuckled as well, not because of what Devin had said, but because he had no idea what Devin was going to ask. "You may ask me anything and I will answer you truthfully. I have an inkling that you would still be able to tell if I was lying, just as you always could when we were children."

"You are so right Vincent. I'll ask the worst question so it's out of the way. When was the first time you killed, and why does it become so violent when it concerns Chandler? I think I am the only one besides the two of you who knows the entire story of what takes place. Did this happen before the two of you met? My next question is easy, and I hope a more pleasant one. What do you want?"

What do you see happening in the future for the two of you?”

A sense of dread came over Vincent, although he shouldn't have been surprised. After having witnessed not one, but two breakdowns caused by his ability to kill, he was not surprised that Devin would choose the first question as the most important one of any to ask. He deserved the truth, and as ugly as it might be to hear, that's what he was going to get.

Vincent's voice was so low that Devin had to strain to hear it when he began to speak. “The first time I had to kill to protect the community, was when I was in my early twenties. A drifter managed to get into the main living area, completely unseen by anyone. At first, we tried to befriend him. I'll never forget him. His name was Vernon. Vernon fooled everyone - including Father. He was a good worker and got along well with everyone. What we didn't know was that he was being watched. Someone followed him to the Central Park entrance one night, just as I was returning from a walk Above. I could hear them yelling. The man was threatening Vernon, and Vernon was about to open the iron door and let him in. I roared and the man ran away. We got back into the Tunnels safely and of course, a council meeting was called. When asked why he had lied to us, he lied once again, and said he had never seen the man before that night. I knew just by the way he handled himself that it was a lie. I didn't know it then, but after he died, I found out that he was a drug dealer and was hiding from his suppliers. One night he was drunk and went after Father while he was asleep. I heard Father yell and went running into his chamber. Vernon had a knife and was ready to stab him. I didn't know my own strength or what I could do, and as I went to grab him away from Father, he turned the knife on me. I felt my lip curl back, my claws raise, and the next thing I knew he was laying dead on the floor. Father and I were both so shocked. I disposed of the body in the park, so that whoever had been watching him would know he was dead.”

“The other times it's had to be done, as in the case of the Tong, I could do it as if I were carrying out a mission. That all changes when Catherine's involved, because the bond enables me to feel her fear and that in turn doubles mine. I had never mauled anyone until the first time that Catherine was in danger. Believe me, Devin, I'm not proud of what I've done, and it's one of the reasons I question why Catherine would want to marry me, knowing, seeing firsthand the side of me

that takes over when her life is threatened.”

Feeling that he had sufficiently answered the first question, Vincent began to answer the second one. “What I want with Catherine is what you have here. I want a place to call my own, where the only person I share it with is her. I know the Tunnels will always be home, but I want privacy. I want to take a hot shower and make love to my wife without fear of being seen or heard by anyone else. I want to have nice things and rooms to put them in, not just one chamber. I want to be able to hang a picture any place I want, or plant a garden, maybe have a screened-in porch so that I can still enjoy some of the same freedoms that I’ve had here. Is that too much to ask? Does that sufficiently answer your questions Devin?”

“Yes, it does Vincent, but I do have just one more question,” Devin replied with a twinkle in his eye. “Have you told Chandler how you feel and if you haven’t; why not?”

Before he could answer Devin winked and headed down the hall to bed, leaving a very frustrated Vincent sitting on the couch, contemplating the answer.

When Vincent awoke Monday morning, he found a very anxious Charles waiting for him at the kitchen table with all the breakfast fixings around him. While they ate, Charles told him what the plans of the day included. He wasn’t sure what time Devin would be returning, and Vincent wondered how he would fill in the extra time.

Charles delighted in showing Vincent the same things he had shown Catherine. He explained that things looked a little different now because fall was coming. He told him the stories about the birds, the squirrels, and the names he had given them. Of course, Charles knew he had done this before when Vincent was in a coma, but he didn’t know if Vincent had heard him, so that was why he felt it necessary to repeat it all to him.

This was the first day that Vincent really had a chance to enjoy the fresh air and sunshine. If he had been awestruck by the night sky, the sun shining on the mountains had the same effect. He now understood why Catherine had sent him

pictures of New Mexico, and why Devin had shown him all those travel pictures last night. He had been angry at first, because he felt it emphasized the limitations of his life, when in fact it was just the opposite. They had done it because they wanted to enrich his life and to share their experiences, not to make him jealous, but because they loved him and wanted only the best for him. Never having used a camera before, Vincent began taking pictures, hoping for good results. He wanted to share this experience with those he loved and who weren't with him on the trip, Catherine and Father.

Charles's chattering brought him back to the present, but only for a moment. He was enjoying the outdoors, but he wanted to be spending it with Catherine. It was then that he realized that she might feel a bit cheated about not being with him as he enjoyed his first time in the sun and fresh air. It was at that moment that he realized that he had the answer to the questions that Devin had asked him and that he had asked himself, and he knew he could tell those answers to just one person...Catherine.

The next two days found Vincent and Charles doing much the same thing as they did the first day. They would walk in the woods, visit with the animals and take some pictures. After lunch, they would build puzzles or take turns reading a book Charles liked. Since he had no idea how to use any of the kitchen appliances, Devin would leave notes, and Vincent and Charles would handle all the chores except for the cooking. Evenings were spent discussing Devin's job and his endless and sometimes futile pursuit of Candy.

After her conversation with Peter, Catherine spent all day Sunday deliberating on what she was going to say to Susan and making travel arrangements. First thing Monday morning, Catherine, in a very pleasant way, informed Susan that she was going home to make wedding plans. Peter and Father would handle the rest of her care, and her mental state would steadily improve once she was back in Vincent's loving arms. Having grown up with Cathy, Susan knew when to admit defeat. Catherine had her last physical therapy session on Monday and her last session with Susan on Tuesday. To celebrate Catherine treated Susan to lunch and

the ladies reminisced about boys, school and the different paths their lives had taken. Catherine then called Peter to tell him what she was doing and swore him to secrecy. Her next call was to Devin at the resort, telling him the time and place of her flight on Wednesday, and swearing him to secrecy as well.

Wednesday morning Charles and Vincent found a note on the kitchen table from Devin, telling them that he would be late coming home that night. Vincent told Charles, "Maybe he finally got Candy to agree to go out on a date with him."

Charles snorted, "I don't think so Vincent, she don't sound that interested in Dev, if you ask me."

Vincent felt a pang of jealousy, wishing that he could see Catherine, hold her, and tell her of his decisions. He had been so determined to stay for at least a week, that he had told Catherine not to send him any letters while he was here, and now more than ever he was anxious to go home. As soon as he and Charles finished their morning walk and lunch, Vincent went back to his room and started re-reading his letters from Catherine.

He must have dozed off because the next thing he knew, it was dark in the room and Charles was knocking on the door.

"Vincent, are you OK?"

"Yes Charles, I'm fine. I must have fallen asleep. I'll be out in a minute." Shaking his head, he went to the bathroom to splash cold water on his face and brush his teeth. There it was again, his face, and once again, he questioned if Catherine could truly love this face forever. Forcing himself to stop the negative thinking, he headed for the living room and found a huge surprise.

Standing before him was Catherine, looking as beautiful as ever. Grabbing her, he kissed her in front of Devin and Charles. The kiss was broken only by Charles's giggling. Stammering Vincent began, "How did you get here? When did you get here? Devin, did you know about this and not tell me?"

The kiss had left Catherine breathless and unable to speak, forcing Devin to answer on her behalf. "Chandler called me at the resort on Monday and we made all the arrangements. She had a feeling after talking to Peter that there was something he was leaving out of the story, so I told her if she wanted to know the

answers, she had to come here and find out for herself.”

“Catherine, what about your health? Did Susan release you, what about your physical therapy? Are you sure you were well enough to travel?”

How she had missed that voice, those arms, those kisses. With a slight giggle Catherine responded; “Vincent, I told Susan that you were the best medicine for me, and that I was leaving. Peter and Father can do any follow-up care. Right now, I would love to take a walk with you in the moonlight. That is unless you have any other plans.”

Knowing that she was teasing him, Vincent replied, “Actually we were expecting to meet Candy tonight, so perhaps we can wait for her, and the five of us can go on a walk together.” Vincent was rewarded with a slap on the arm. He laughed and led her to the kitchen and out the back door.

No words were spoken as they just stood there wrapped in each other’s arms, in their love. Time seemed to stand still, and it was if they were the only two people in the world.

Catherine finally broke the silence. “Vincent, you said in your letter that you were coming up here to work things out. Devin said that you had talked to him about us. Are you worried that you made a mistake in proposing?”

Seeing the hurt in her eyes was more than he could bear. “Catherine after you had your relapse, I felt like it was my fault, and wondered if our getting married was a mistake. Maybe you said yes just to make me happy. But then I realized you would never do something like that, something that would cause me any pain or worry.”

Catherine gasped, “Vincent, I can’t believe you would think that even for a moment. I want nothing more than to be with you, to be your wife, have a home, a family. You know if you ever have doubts all you have to do is ask. I will always tell you the truth.”

With the moonlight providing the perfect backdrop, Vincent’s response was simple and to the point; “Catherine, that’s ALL I ASK OF YOU.”

THE END

Once again, I would like to thank Tanya Hunt and Joyce Elliott for all their hard work in editing this story. These two generous ladies have enriched my life, and I will be forever grateful for their friendship.

Life is partly what we make it, and partly what it is made by the friends we choose.

Tennessee Williams