

On the River's Other Shore

by Olivia K. Goode

“Hey, Chandler.”

Catherine stopped short at the sound of the voice, knowing who it would be even before she saw him. Who else had ever called her that?

She turned back toward the imposing brass-framed doors of the Criminal Courts Building. Devin was leaning there, one knee bent and braced flat-footed against the building's art deco face. He crumpled the Daily News he'd been hiding behind into haphazard folds and smirked, crossing his arms over his chest in that casual, confident way she'd begun to associate with him.

“Devin. What are you doing here?” She held her breath and scanned the exiting crowd, hoping that no one had recognized him.

“Waiting.” He spread his arms wide as he pushed off from the building and sauntered down the steps to join her. He gestured with a jerk of his head over his shoulder. “I couldn't very well go in there, now could I? Or should I say, Jeff couldn't. Too many questions, not enough answers. So, here I am, taking you to lunch.” He crooked his elbow in invitation and grinned.

Unable to resist, she took his arm. “What's the occasion?”

“I just wanted to thank you.” He gave her hand a brief squeeze of emphasis as he led her south on Centre Street. “I really appreciate everything you've done for Charles and me these last couple weeks. Charles feels the same way, even if neither one of us is any good at expressing it. So, I figured the least I could do was treat you to a slice of Basso's.”

She glanced up at him, confused.

“You don't know about Basso's? Cullen told me Carmine and his dad are still Helpers, and they still make the best pizza in the city. And since it's only a couple of blocks from here...”

“I guess I haven't met them yet.”

“Then they’ve been holding out on you Below, Chandler. The Bassos have this little hole in the wall place down off Broadway. You could walk right by it a hundred times and never notice it, but it’s worth hunting down. When I was a kid, going there to pick up deliveries was always my favorite errand – Carmine would sneak me slices and I’d take them back to share with Vincent. We never made it ten feet past the threshold with that pizza.”

A warm thrum of love jolted through Catherine at the mention of Vincent. As she had trained herself to do, she didn’t let the emotion reach her face. Or so she thought.

He chuckled under his breath. “You thought about him just then, didn’t you? Vincent.”

“Why do I feel like I should plead the Fifth?”

“Don’t try to con a con man, Chandler. You’re pretty good – you proved that upstate – but you just thought about my brother.”

She tilted her head in acknowledgement.

They walked on, dodging the masses of pedestrians filling the sidewalks, discussing their plans for Catherine to obtain a van for Devin and Charles. At Basso’s, once the introductions were made and the pizza ordered, they took their slices and sodas to a small table in the back of the pizzeria.

“It’s hard, isn’t it?” His gaze met and held hers. “The hiding.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yeah, you do. You’ve gotten used to hiding - so much so that sometimes you forget when you don’t have to hide. You got a pocketbook full of secrets – no, make that a suitcase full of them. Hell, you got a whole matched set of Louis Vuitton luggage full of secrets! Secrets named,” his voice fell and he leaned over the table closer to her, “Vincent... Father... Mouse... Below...” He leaned back again and resumed his normal speech. “And you can’t unpack them, and you can’t share them, and you can’t even let anyone else help you carry that luggage around, either. Am I right?”

She nodded.

“It’s not easy.” She heard experience in his voice when he said that.

“No. It’s anything but easy.” She studied Devin’s face. Written there along with the scars and the dimple, she saw deep knowledge and resignation. “I guess you know something about that, too.”

“Hah!” He barked a biting laugh. “You could say that. Over twenty years experience, though it’s not exactly the kind of thing that I can put on a resume now, is it?” He leaned back, canting his chair onto its rear legs. He crossed his arms and offered her that cocky grin again, trying without success to distance himself.

Catherine saw right through his charade. She couldn’t miss the pain behind his smile. “There’s so much we can’t say, Devin. So many things we can’t tell anyone. Sometimes,” she struggled to find the words. “Sometimes, I won’t allow myself to even *think* about Below, so I can’t accidentally betray it. Does that make any sense to you?”

His eyes looked over her shoulder without seeming to focus. He pursed his lips, uncrossed his arms and righted his chair again. “Perfect sense. We’ve both had to create personas... the faces we’ve chosen to show the world. District attorney, socialite, volunteer, neighbor...” He gestured first across the table to her, then to himself. “Lawyer, knife thrower, chef, piano player.... But they’re all fake. All of them. Or at least huge parts of them are. They’re the facades we hide behind, so that we can hold onto the real things... Vincent... Father... Mouse... The things that really matter.”

He knows, she thought. He really knows. Perhaps as well - or even better - than I do.

“You’ve hidden so much for so long, Devin. How have you done it?”

He shrugged. “I’d make up backstory for myself. Sometimes I’d incorporate as much of the truth as I could into it – a brother I lost when I was a teenager, a home I ran away from as a kid – something, anything, so that even when I was pretending, I could feel like I had some little shard of truth with me.” He contemplated the slice of pizza in front of him, but Catherine imagined he was seeing something entirely different. “Once in a while, I’d start almost believing

my own stories, and I'd start forgetting... little things, like which way you'd turn from the chandlery to get to the Whispering Gallery. I'd sit alone at night and doodle little maps of the tunnels so that I could remember... make it real again."

Catherine's breath caught in her throat as she recognized herself in his words. "When I was in the hospital after my plastic surgery - I didn't know when I might see Vincent again, if ever - I felt like all my memories of my days Below were fading, escaping, slipping through my fingers. Like I was waking up from a dream that I didn't really want to wake up from. I started making a mental list of everything he'd ever said to me, everything that had happened, so that I could hold on to it better.

"When the bandages came off, I went back home again. The next day I started to write it all down, every word, every sensation, everything. The herbs in the soup I'd eaten, the sound of the pipes, the brush of leather and fur against my fingertips... I even tried to draw little sketches of what things had looked like, where the furniture was placed in his chamber, people and things I saw on the walk back to the threshold beneath my building, everything I could remember." She could feel her cheeks tingling and flushing at what she was about to confess. "I even drew what had to have been the worst portrait of Vincent anyone has ever drawn." She smiled and realized that she'd folded her napkin into a small, hard square in her lap. She let it fall from her hands.

"I spent ten or twelve hours that day alone in my apartment writing and drawing. I filled two and half legal pads with those details, those stories, those pictures. I tried to capture every memory I had of Vincent. He'd touched something in me that no one had ever recognized before. Not even myself. I couldn't bear to let that go, so I trapped them all on those pages.

"And that evening, my father said he was coming by to see how I was." A hot stone of regret burned through her soul and her voice fell to a whisper. "As soon as I got off the phone with him... I dropped all those notepads into the fireplace. I didn't open the door until every one of them had gone up in flames."

She stared at the chrome napkin dispenser but saw there only the shadows of those yellow sheets of paper, blackening and curling as they flared saffron and crimson, their black smoke acid in her chest.

Devin flinched at her words, his eyes scrunched shut as if he were in physical pain. "Catherine. You had to. You couldn't risk your father seeing them."

Her soft sigh acknowledged the truth of his observation. Devin, more than anyone, understood what it had cost her to destroy those papers. He knew all about secrets, disguises and walls. “It started then, I guess. I started building these walls that keep the whole world out. The world Above, especially.”

“This is nice, Chandler.” His hand traced an invisible path back and forth in the space between them. “Talking like this. I’ve always tried to make sure I never let anyone get too close, no matter who I was or where I was. See,” he shrugged, “I’ve always known I’d be leaving whatever life I was living... and I didn’t want to hurt anyone when I left, like I hurt Vincent back when I was a kid. So I figured if I never let anyone in, I could never let anyone down. I’ve never had anybody that I could talk to like this - not one person who knew the truth about where home was... or who I loved there.”

“I know what that’s like,” she whispered.

“None of your friends know? Not even one?”

She shook her head.

“That is rough. But at least you got Vincent. You can be truthful with him at least, talk to him when it gets hard or you feel...”

Her raised eyebrows stopped him in his tracks.

“What’s that look mean? Tell me.”

“Devin... I walk a fine line with your brother.” She sighed. “It’s been a long time since he tried to tell me to go find someone else, to go live some life I was meant to live, to do everything I was meant to do... but he’s always a hair’s breadth away from that. I can’t exactly pour my heart out to him. If I unburden myself, that would only burden him, so I can’t. And he can feel what I feel. If I’m sad, he’ll blame himself for my sadness.”

“So you can’t even let yourself feel your own sadness...”

“Right. Because he’ll feel it, too. So sometimes I can’t even be myself... with me.”

“You can’t be yourself with anyone Above, because they can’t know about Vincent. And you can’t be yourself with anyone Below, because you have to be strong for Vincent.” He stated that as the fact that it was. “I don’t envy you, Chandler.”

Catherine looked up into Devin’s face and what she saw there went beyond understanding or sympathy, beyond even empathy. Like her, this man walked the world hiding, dissembling, lying, pretending... *and dragging around his own matched set of secret-filled baggage*. Perhaps there was no one who could understand quite so well what it was like to live with the unrelenting reality of the hiding, all to keep safe the dearest secrets of their hearts.

“Does it get easier?” she asked.

A long moment passed. “I don’t know. The habit gets stronger. I don’t know if that’s the same as *easier*. But we’ll both keep managing it, Chandler.”

She nodded. “We have no alternative.”

They finished their meal and walked back to Catherine’s office in companionable silence. Around the corner from her office, Catherine stopped. “You know, Devin, you aren’t going to be alone any more. You’ll have Charles from now on. And he knows the real you and where you come from. You won’t have to hide from him. That should make it easier for you.”

“Right back at ya, Chandler.”

She tilted her head slightly at him.

“You got me to talk to now. I’ll be just a phone call away. You’re not alone, either.”

“Thank you, Devin.” She reached up to hug him. “And it’s worth it. He’s worth it. He’s worth everything.”