

## BETWEEN TWO ETERNITIES

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*...Our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.*

*Vladimir Nabokov*

"Cathy! My God!" Dr. Peter Alcott rushed to the pale, too-thin woman sitting in the hospital bed and threw his arms around her. "When they told me you were alive...I thought it was some cruel joke." Tears choked his voice as he pulled back to inspect her carefully. "You're OK? No pain?"

Catherine Chandler smiled beatifically at the man who was her oldest friend in the world. She reached a bony, blue-veined hand up to his face and stroked it in wonder. "I'm fine, truly. More than a bit confused, though...."

Peter gazed at her with a mixture of compassion and awe. "That's to be expected, honey. Few people ever recover from the type of long-term coma you were in. It's...it's a miracle you're alive at all!" He wrapped her in his arms again and rocked her gently, kissing her forehead and repeating softly, "A miracle! A miracle!"

When he had gotten the call on his service asking him to come to this private hospital in upstate New York, he was only told that it was a matter of extreme urgency. The caller would give him no other explanation, telling him all would be made clear when he arrived. He had canceled his appointments for the rest of the afternoon and rushed up, arriving just after eight o'clock.

The hospital had been almost eerily quiet when he'd arrived. He'd been met at the door by an FBI agent who had stood with him in the sterile, deserted entryway and imparted a terse and almost unbelievable tale. The detection of a heartbeat while the patient lay in the morgue, a quick determination to whisk the patient, a potential witness in a major crime investigation, into a protection program, a long period in which it seemed likely the patient would not survive - then, over three years later, the sudden and inexplicable awakening of said patient.

In the many months of rehabilitation and debriefing which had followed her miraculous recovery, the FBI had learned little of real value. Everything the potential witness knew had already been determined by alternate means of investigation. The agents who interviewed her knew far more about the case than

she, including the fact that the subject of their investigation was dead and his shadowy criminal organization had been left in chaos. In fact, during her incapacitation the authorities had been able to arrest a number of major players and the ultimate destruction of said organization now was virtually assured. She was of no further use to the FBI, and it was decided that she herself would not be in any danger if she left protective custody. Thus, they had asked her to provide the name of someone who could be trusted to ensure her care as she continued her recuperation. She had provided Peter's name and number.

Peter had become increasingly puzzled as the agent recited the dry facts surrounding this mystery patient, but his attempts to interrupt the agent's narrative to ask questions had been met by cool rebuffs. Finally, as the monologue wound down, he was successful in asking the question uppermost in his mind: the name of the woman involved. Told that it was Catherine Chandler, he had felt his knees buckle and was helped to a chair. Peter had sat for a few minutes, trying to compose himself, his thoughts running riot. As soon as he felt he could manage it, he had asked more questions of the agent, primarily concerning the supposed autopsy of the woman he was just told was alive. The agent invoked the old "need to know" feint, and Peter realized he wouldn't get the information he wanted...at least, not from this source. And it truly didn't matter -- whatever had happened nearly four years ago, the most important thing was that Cathy had not died. And so he had asked to be taken to her. Now, faced with the visual proof that she was alive and in relatively good health, he could no longer contain his joy.

As he held her, he wept. He hadn't even tried to fight back his tears. The unexpectedness of what was lost being so inexplicably found again had shattered his normally reserved demeanor - he couldn't dredge up his reassuring bedside manner to save his life. Finally, unwillingly, he let her go so he could wipe his overflowing eyes and blow his nose. Catherine reached for a tissue as well, and they smiled at each other through their joyful tears.

Gaining a bit of control over his emotions, Peter was the first to speak again. "We have much to talk about, Cathy, but right now I just want to look at you!" His eyes sparkled, his face crinkled with his bittersweet smile. One word kept thrumming through his brain: *Alive! Alive!*

A shadow seemed to pass over Catherine's happy countenance, for suddenly her face clouded and she grasped his hand tightly, almost painfully. With a voice filled with fearful concern, she began to speak. "Peter...I need to know. Tell me...."

Sensing what she wanted to ask, he interrupted her to immediately ease her concern. "He's fine, Cathy. And so is your son. They're both safe Below, don't worry. But...so much has changed...since you..." His voice trailed off as the ramifications hit him, the blow stealing his breath for a moment. He didn't tell her anything else -- he couldn't, not now, not when he knew it would break her heart.

She didn't catch the change in his tone, the beginning of his last sentence lost in the burgeoning of her happiness. Her eyes glittered as tears trickled anew. "Thank you, Peter!" She hugged him hard, and he let the feel of her in his arms banish the despair that was rising to engulf him.

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"And who is this woman...Diana?"

Back at his brownstone in the city, Catherine was settled on a couch in his sitting room, a comforter draped across her legs, masses of pillows at her back. He had a roaring fire going in the hearth, sensing she needed the display of warmth after the time spent in the cold, sterile hospital.

Still very weak from her long illness despite the months of rehabilitation, she had dozed in the car all the way back to the city. He had roused her only long enough to bring her into the house and get her into bed in a spare room. When she had awakened early this afternoon, he had urged her to eat something and relax, but she had insisted that he fill her in on all she had missed. She had wanted to know about her son, about Vincent...and how soon she would be able to see them. Had they been told she was alive yet? Would he go Below now and tell them? Her excitement had been palpable, as was her intense desire to be reunited with the man she loved and the child she longed to know.

She'd asked nothing about her financial situation, her home, the things others might consider important. As trustee of her estate, Peter had seen to the sale of her apartment and the dispersal of her fortune, her furniture and her personal effects. All that was truly left from her life before were the boxes of photo albums and some mementos which Peter could not bear to part with. Those he had stored, waiting for a time in the future when he could face a decision about them. He was immeasurably glad now that he had not been able to make any such decisions yet -- they would provide the basis for Cathy to reconstruct her life, the only links to her past she had left. But he realized that none of this meant much to her -- not compared to what she thought awaited her Below.

Peter had sighed disconsolately, knowing he could put off the upsetting news no longer. And so he had begun, telling her of all that had transpired since her kidnapping - of Vincent's unrelenting search for her, of his despair and guilt over her death, of his joy in the recovery of their son...and of the woman who now shared his life.

Cathy had sat stunned and immobile by that last piece of news. It had broken Peter's heart to relate it...but she had to know of the friendship which had blossomed into love, of the Joining which was planned in a month, shortly after Jacob's fourth Naming Day celebration. He had gently explained that Diana lived Below now, although she kept her apartment Above. He did not tell her of the growing resentment of many Below over Diana's lack of involvement in daily Tunnel life, expected once she'd committed to moving there. Or of the necessity for Vincent to defend her decision to retain her punishing work schedule in a job at which she excelled, a job which desperately needed doing and doing well. Her job was not the problem, exactly, for several Tunnel dwellers had Topside jobs. It was the odd hours, the idiosyncratic periods in which she might be missing, sometimes for days at a time and without warning, in order to handle a particularly troublesome case - leaving work schedules Below in a shambles, with others scrambling to fill in for her when she didn't return. Why burden Cathy with this knowledge? He imagined Cathy might have had that same struggle, had she and Vincent ever had the opportunity...ah, but that way lay madness.

Better to speak of Diana's steadfast devotion to Vincent, of her fondness for baby Jacob, and of her protection of the world Below. He would not tell her that even Vincent worried that Diana's long and frequent absences wreaked havoc on his family life, that she was not a consistent, dependable presence in Jacob's life, not someone he could count on to be there when he needed her. Mom-mom (Diana's honorific, since Cathy was always referred to as "Mommy") was not usually the female "parent" Jacob turned to for comfort or assistance. Mary filled that function for him still, in so many ways. But again, what benefit to trouble Cathy with this? She needed to hear that her son was well and happy, which was true enough. That was what was important to impart. All families had their adjustments to make, and that special one Below was no different. Now, in answer to Cathy's inquiry, he told her of how Diana had come into Vincent's life.

"...and after Vincent got safely away with Jacob, she confronted Gabriel...and she shot him. She killed him...with your gun, Cathy."

Catherine sat back against the pillows supporting her. Almost to herself, she murmured, "So...I owe her...everything. She found Jacob...." A tender smile lit her face, the same one that had filled his heart when he'd first told her of the name Vincent had chosen for their son, after which she'd confided it was the name she'd secretly called her babe in the womb. Her smile faltered slightly as her focus shifted back to the information he'd just imparted, a flicker of pain warring with the tenderness as she added, "And she...protected Vincent...." Turning to Peter, she offered some comfort to the obviously stricken man. "Thank you for telling me this. It couldn't have been easy for you. I know you didn't want to be the one to have to break all of this to me."

He nodded in relief, but his eyes reflected the deep sympathy he felt for the fragile woman before him. *To have awakened full of hope, to have endured long, painful months of rehabilitation with just one goal in mind...and to have found this news instead....* "I'm sorry, Cathy. If only we'd had some inkling, some clue...."

Shaking her head, she cut in, "But you didn't. No one can be blamed for going on with their lives, Peter. It's the only thing anyone could do." She reached over and clasped his hands in her own. "It's a shock, I can't deny that. Just give me...a little time...."

He nodded numbly. He had broken her heart, and it was *she* offering *him* comfort!

Catherine's gaze pierced his own, as she willed him to understand her. "Peter...I have so much to be grateful for. I'm alive -- as you said, a miracle. Vincent is well...and has found happiness." Her voice broke on the last word, but she took a deep breath and went on. "Our son is with his father, surrounded by all the love I could hope for him. I've lost little, when you look at it."

"How can you be so brave, Cathy?" Peter could barely get the words out, he was so strangled by emotion and anguish.

She smiled weakly and patted his hands, then leaned back against the pillows once again. "I'll be fine, Peter, I promise...just give me a little time." A sudden thought hit her, and a frown creased her brow as she asked, "Just one more thing -- please, a favor? Don't send any message Below about my return, not just yet?" At his questioning look, she begged, "They've lived without this knowledge for almost four years, surely a few more hours won't matter?"

Although he thought it strange, he acquiesced to her request. "Sure, sweetheart. You tell me when. I'll wait as long as you want me to." He smiled encouragement.

It couldn't hurt, and if it would mean less distress for her right now...how could he deny her?

Catherine nodded, then turned to look into the flames. The flaring, crackling fire brought to mind the soft candlelight of the tunnels. The tunnels.... Without turning, she whispered hoarsely, "Is it OK if...would you mind if I was alone for a while?"

Peter collected himself and rose, bending over to kiss her gently on the forehead. "Of course not, pumpkin. I'm going into the clinic for a while. See you after dinner?" She reached up to pat his cheek in confirmation and dismissal.

Catherine's brave smile faltered as she watched Peter's retreating back, and after he closed the door and she was alone, she gave in to her misery and despair: bending over double, she began to sob.

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"What do you mean, she won't let us see her?" Father was outraged.

Peter had come Below this night with a heavy heart to speak with Father, Mary, Vincent and Diana. Catherine had been with him for a week, and today she had finally told him he could reveal her return to her Tunnel family. Although he had the most wonderful news to impart, he also had a message from Catherine which he knew would diminish their joy at learning that she was alive. Catherine had asked Peter to send her love to all Below, and to beg them to understand that she believed it best for all concerned if she remained just a fond memory. She would not come Below, as she did not wish to disrupt their lives, and she hoped they would respect her wish that no one come Above to see her. When he delivered this news, the subtext of her message was not lost on anyone. They all knew that she would have rushed Below as soon as she could physically accomplish it -- if Vincent were still free.

Vincent's heart twisted in an agony of mingled joy and anguish. Diana, standing next to him, stared in horror as his face lost all color. He sank into the closest chair in Father's study, pale and silent, looking at no one.

Peter turned from the heartbreaking tableau before him and faced his old friend once again. "Jacob...be reasonable. What would be accomplished if she came Below? She's part of your collective past, and she wishes to remain that way. After all she's been through -- what we've *all* been through -- who's to say she isn't right?"

Suddenly, a hoarse voice cut into the conversation, stopping Father just as he was about to raise another protest. "What of Jacob?" Vincent looked up at Peter, the misery in his eyes wrenching the older man.

This was going to be difficult, Peter knew. He had his own very strong opinions about what should be done, but he had failed to convince Catherine that she had a right to be in her child's life, and that Jacob had a right to know his own mother. He was acting only as the carrier of the message now, so he forced his face and voice into a neutral mask and said, "Cathy asks that she be allowed to see the boy...just once. She suggested that perhaps Mary or I could take him to see her, Above, for a little while. Just to meet him. She won't ask for more. She wants him to continue to live with you, Vincent...and you, Diana." Peter nodded in the young woman's direction.

Diana started visibly. Catherine was giving up her child...to *her*?

Peter explained. "She knows how much you love him...both of you. I've described to her how happy he is, how he's thriving. Cathy wants you to know that she considers you his family...his parents. She also said that, if you would rather not let her see him...she would understand."

Vincent was stunned. Too much had happened at once. Just a few moments ago, his life had been simple, his world sure, his future set. He had his son to cherish and raise, his community to foster and protect, and a woman who wanted to spend her life with him. Now...everything within him was in turmoil. He had to focus, had to find something to grasp onto before he drowned in the emotional chaos which overwhelmed him. Jacob...Jacob...he had to think of his son...of *their* son. Vincent surged to his feet and asserted, "Of course she shall see Jacob. I would never deny her the chance to be with her own son. Whenever she wishes, as often as she wishes, she will see him. Tell her that, Peter!"

Peter clasped the agitated younger man on the shoulder, understanding him, knowing his avowal meant more than what his words conveyed. "I will, I will. But she thinks it would be better -- for everyone -- if she sees him...just this once."

Mary, who had been sitting stunned and silent during Peter's visit, now spoke up. Her voice full of tears, she pulled herself together with a visible effort and stood. "I'll go get the boy right now, Peter. She hasn't seen him for nearly four years. If it were me, I wouldn't want to wait a second longer than I had to before setting my eyes on him again. She must be frantic! Poor dear." Not waiting for a response, she quickly exited up the stairs, heading for the nursery.

"Wait, Mary, please!" Diana's desperate plea reached Mary, and the older woman returned to the top of the stairs, an inquiring look on her face.

Diana looked despairingly at Vincent, then at Father. "Perhaps...I don't mean to sound cruel, but...perhaps we should think about this. Think rationally, not emotionally. Jacob doesn't know Cathy at all. He's not used to meeting strangers. I know he's seen her picture and heard stories, and he knows in the abstract that she's his first Mommy, but that's not like meeting someone in the flesh. He might become upset, and neither of his parents would be with him to comfort him."

Vincent stood and turned, confronting her. "Catherine *is* one of his parents, Diana. I will *not* deny her this one boon she asks. She's sacrificing so much...to make our lives easier, to make Jacob's life secure." His voice had started out strong, but was now little more than a ragged whisper. "How can we tell her that we won't grant this small request?"

Diana persisted, her concern growing. "I'm only saying we should *think* about it for a minute! Think of how this will affect Jacob!"

Her objections caused an uncharacteristic response in Vincent. With more heat and less thought than was his custom, he answered, "To know Catherine's love could do him no harm, Diana. I know how powerful and healing that love can be."

Shocked by this unexpected rebuke and the disconcerting reminder of all that Catherine had meant to Vincent, Diana swallowed hard, then resumed her argument in a more conciliatory tone. "I'm not suggesting she not see Jacob at all. I agree, that would be too cruel. But he's so young. I know he's quite intelligent, and he has proven time and again that his perception is greater than that of other children his age. But this might be too much for even him to grasp all at once." She leaned toward him, unconsciously assuming a supplicating position. "Instead, perhaps...." She thought quickly, casting frantically for a solution. "...Perhaps Mary could take Jacob Above to the playground. He loves to go there. Peter could arrange for Cathy to be nearby. She could see him without their actually meeting. Then...after we've all had time to think this through more carefully...we could prepare him gradually, develop a strategy for introducing them."

In Diana's mind, the solution, if a temporary one, sounded reasonable -- reasonable enough to gain at least grudging acceptance. She felt she could count on Father's support, and that was critical. She needed more time to absorb the fact of this miraculous return...and to determine her best approach. As much as she feared for little Jacob...she feared for herself more. Diana's stomach lurched with the qualms

flooding through her. A living Catherine Chandler was not a foe easily vanquished, even one determined not to...interfere. For as much as she trusted in Vincent's love, she didn't know how it would stand up to this challenge.

Mary looked unconvinced. She knew with a mother's heart what Catherine must be feeling, the incalculable desire to embrace her child, a child once torn from her so mercilessly. She eyed Diana with a dawning suspicion, almost guilty that she felt it so strongly. Yet, her argument was compelling -- the little boy in question must be of paramount concern, even if every fiber of her own being cried out on his mother's part. Gradually, her face softened and, reluctantly, she nodded, then again walked out of the chamber. For some reason, she had an urgent need to find and cuddle one special little boy whose life was about to become so much more complicated than anyone realized.

Vincent stared gravely at Diana, as if trying to discern every motive in her heart. Satisfied that concern for Jacob was uppermost in her mind, he nodded. Peter heaved a silent sigh of relief. The last thing he'd wanted was for this issue to tear those Below apart. For a moment there...but that moment was gone. *We've survived the first crisis*, he thought grimly. *I wonder how many more there will be?*

Diana surveyed the room, reading acceptance from all. "This is really for the best...for Jacob," she stated.

Then, aware that the tension - in herself and in the others assembled there - would dissipate faster if she left, she strode from the chamber, seemingly in complete control. But as she turned the first corner leading from the chamber, she began to run. She didn't know where she'd end up, but right know her only thought was, *Go!*

Father turned to his son. In the years since Catherine's death, he'd castigated himself time and again for the stubborn old fool he'd been where his son was concerned. He'd come to love the beautiful and courageous Catherine, but he knew how often his own voice had been raised against her when Vincent had struggled over the special relationship they'd shared. He held a great deal of guilt inside over it. So when Diana had appeared in Vincent's life, clearly drawn to him, and when Vincent had seemed amenable to continuing their friendship, Father was overjoyed. Vincent deserved happiness, he deserved the love of a good woman, and Jacob needed a mother. Father saw in Diana his chance to atone for his past mistakes. He'd failed his son when it came to Catherine, but he was resolved he would not fail him again. Thus, Diana had become his "cause." He did all he could

to encourage them, to guide and counsel Diana and Vincent toward a relationship. His support and his urging had been unceasing, and if his son hadn't shown the same ardor for Diana as he had for Catherine, Father chalked it up to the fact that, for Vincent, the possibility of a relationship was no longer something wondrous and unexpected - this was no enrapturing "first love," but a practical, opportune match. They were, in Father's mind, quite well-suited. Diana was clearly deeply in love with Vincent, and he was sure that Vincent cared for her equally, even if his son didn't speak of his feelings for her. In fact, he'd grown so introspective since Catherine's death, Father often these days had to guess at what was going on in his son's mind. But when he'd suggested that Diana move Below six months before, Vincent hadn't resisted the idea. And when, later, he'd encouraged...suggested, really...the idea that they should Join - again, Vincent hadn't objected. He'd asked Diana to Join with him while sitting in Father's chamber only a month ago, and Father, the only other soul present, had been the first to congratulate them both, pleased beyond measure that his plan had succeeded so admirably. By now, support for Diana was so deeply ingrained in him that it rose naturally to the surface during this time of crisis.

"I know you mean well, Vincent, but think about the effect of this news on Diana. You mustn't blame her for seeking to protect what she has with you, with Jacob." His expression softened as he continued, "You have told me yourself that she has struggled to become the nurturing parent Jacob needs. She's worked hard to forge a motherly relationship with him. Now that she's made some progress, she fears it will all be swept away by the force of the woman whose memory she has competed with every moment she has been with us Below. Be fair to her, son."

Vincent gazed into the older man's eyes. Memory...yes. That powerful memory, which swept all before it like a flood. Catherine...*alive*! And she would not see him. How could he come to terms with this miracle? For four years he'd known that he could never live in happiness again, that peace would have to suffice, but how could he even have peace, knowing she lived, and was alone, forever outside of his life? He closed his eyes as a shudder ran through him, then he turned away and vaulted the stairs.

Father somehow knew he was not going to Diana. Both of them would brood alone, in silence. He sighed heavily and clapped a hand on Peter's shoulder. "I've always said you can clear a room faster than anyone I know."

Peter stared at him glumly. "Gallows humor, Jacob?"

"Do you know a better time for it?" Father shook his head, then leaned his forehead upon Peter's shoulder and began to weep.

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Mary and Peter walked side by side to the basement access to his brownstone. Jacob clung happily to Peter's hand, delighted to be going on an "adventure" Above. It was a rare treat, and he was excited and, as always, intensely curious. Under one arm he held a battered copy of Redwall and a ragged, limp toy monkey he called Bobo for no discernable reason. These went with him everywhere except into the bath, and only with great reluctance did he let go of them then.

"Unca Peter? Firtht I'm gonna go on the thwingth," his high-pitched voice chirped with great excitement.

"An excellent plan, Jacob!" Peter squeezed the boy's hand affectionately. He knew he wasn't really the child's uncle, but sometimes...like now...he felt like he was. Just as Cathy felt like his own flesh and blood....

They reached the basement stairs and Peter climbed up first, then reached down for Jacob. "Can you make it without help, Mary?" he called down.

"I most certainly can!" she responded huffily. "I'm not as old as *you*, my friend!" She proved it by scampering up the stairs as lithely as a young girl. They entered the kitchen from the tunnel access stairs. Knowing the way, Jacob made a beeline for the front door, then waited impatiently for the others to catch up.

"When we get outside, Jacob, you keep hold of my hand or Uncle Peter's. Remember what we discussed about traffic and always being aware of what's going on around you?" Mary's reminder was softened by the loving way she brushed his hair with her hand, and the youngster looked up at her with a solemn, "Yeth, ma'am."

*Sometimes I just want to hug him so hard,* Mary thought to herself. Her eyes filled with tears as she imagined Catherine sitting on a lonely bench, anxiously awaiting a glimpse of this precious child. "Come, Jacob."

Peter opened the door and they went out into the gentle sunlight together.

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Catherine had been at the park early. Peter had accompanied her, and together they had selected a bench close enough to the playground to provide her with a good line of sight, yet far enough away that it wouldn't be obvious to anyone that she was watching one particular little boy. She fidgeted now, impatient.

When Peter had conveyed Diana's suggestion, she had readily agreed. She didn't want to do anything to antagonize the woman who was now raising her son, and if this was what she felt comfortable allowing, this was the way it would be. She had been prepared for any eventuality, including being told that it would be best for the child if she not see him at all. This arrangement was not exactly what she'd have wished, but it would be enough. Maybe later, Peter had said. Maybe. But she couldn't live on maybes, she'd learned that the hard way. So she'd just make the most of this time, this moment.

Suddenly, she saw Peter's tall frame emerge around a bend in the path, a somewhat older-looking Mary beside him. As they rounded the bushes, a little boy came into view, and Catherine thought her heart might stop. He was a sturdily built blond cherub, tall for his age, clutching a ragged stuffed animal and a well-thumbed book under one arm. She could tell even from here that his blue eyes sparkled with intelligence. Even though she hadn't seen a picture of him, he actually looked familiar -- his face was so like pictures of herself at that age. Yet there was much of his father about him -- in his eyes, his height, his carriage, in subtle ways about him. She ached to hold him. She felt her arms begin to come up of their own will, in a welcoming gesture, and she had to force herself to hold still. Her heart hammering in her chest, she tried to memorize every line of him, thinking as she did so -- *Vincent, our son is so beautiful!*

Following Peter's terse nod, Mary caught sight of the correct bench. She was shocked at how thin and wan Catherine looked. *The poor child*, she thought to herself. *Waking after all this time, only to find she's lost everything that mattered in the world to her.* She allowed herself to cast a quick but warm smile in Catherine's direction, and was rewarded by a subtly blown kiss.

"Mary? Mary!!" Jacob shook Mary's hand emphatically. He was practically at the playground. Surely now she would allow him to run free?

Mary looked down at him and smiled fondly, releasing his hand. "Have fun, honey," she called after him, as he pelted away in a blur of motion.

Peter pushed young Jacob on the swings, then played on the teeter-totter with him. How he managed to play so easily while carting around that book and that toy

monkey was beyond Mary, who shook her head in wonderment. His determination was very strong. In that he was definitely his father's son -- and his mother's, too, she realized wryly.

Mary was sitting on a bench close to where Peter and Jacob played, one that allowed her a view of Catherine sitting a bit further away. The younger woman's gaze was glued to her child, and the naked hunger on Catherine's face tore into Mary as forcefully as any emotion ever had. *It just isn't fair! I know it's what we decided...but no one else has to sit here and watch this...this torture. Oh, Catherine!*

Mary had talked earlier with Peter when plans were made for this outing, and she had confided that, despite Catherine's request that no one visit her, she felt she could not go Above and sit so close without speaking to her, at least for a moment. Peter had agreed to take Jacob to buy an ice cream cone in order to give her time for a brief talk with Catherine. Now, at a prearranged signal, Peter called to Jacob and made an offer the youngster couldn't resist. Waving enthusiastically at Mary, Jacob took Peter's hand and allowed him to lead him over to a cart where a very serious choice would have to be made -- vanilla or chocolate?

Mary watched their retreating backs to ensure that Jacob's attention was fully riveted on the ice cream cart, then she rushed to Catherine and enfolded her in a fierce embrace. "Oh, Catherine! It's so good to see you!"

The younger woman returned the hug warmly, allowing herself a brief moment to savor the feel of "home" that Mary carried with her. As they parted, Catherine whispered in Mary's ear, "Give him a kiss for me tonight? Tell him his Mommy's thinking of him always?"

Mary nodded mutely, too overwhelmed to reply, then rose and walked back to the bench she had momentarily abandoned. Presently, a very excited little boy came up to her to display his choice. "It's chocolate!"

"So I see! Why don't you sit here with me while you eat it and give Uncle Peter a chance to sit down, Jacob? His old legs get tired more easily than yours."

Peter issued a muffled, "Hmmp!" as he sat beside Jacob, watching as the boy happily turned his complete attention to eating his ice cream. He was a careful and meticulous child, mindful of waste. Although hanging onto his stuffed animal and his book, he paid attention and did not allow the smallest dribble of melting ice cream to escape his tongue. Mary marveled at how neat he was. He made sure

every morsel of the delicious treat ended up in his mouth and not on his clothes. He wasn't quite as careful about his face, however, and Mary took her handkerchief to clean up the evidence left around his lips and on his chin.

As he turned to Peter, ready to beg to be pushed on the swings yet again, Jacob's gaze raked the scene before him. It snagged on a figure sitting alone on a bench several yards away. He hopped off the bench and gaped. A strange feeling came over him. He stared in fascination at the woman sitting there. He knew her! She looked just like the picture Daddy always had him kiss at night before he went to sleep! He'd always dreamed of meeting her, and now...here she was!

Suddenly, he dropped his treasures and, squealing "Mommy!!!," ran full tilt toward her. Astounded, Mary and Peter exchanged glances. So much for all their caution. The boy saw more than they thought he did.

Right before he reached her, Jacob skidded to a stop. He gazed expectantly at Catherine, hope in every line of his body. She knew she couldn't pretend not to know him. She didn't have that much strength.

"Hello, Jacob!" she said in what she hoped was a light and friendly voice, devoid of the deep emotion she was feeling at the sight of him. He was so beautiful, this child of her body. She would memorize everything he did and said to store away, a hoard of riches for the long, lonely years to come.

The little boy needed no more encouragement. As soon as she uttered the words of welcome, he lifted his arms to her.

Catherine bent and held out her arms to him. Jacob threw himself into her embrace and plastered an enthusiastic and very wet kiss on her cheek. He wrapped his own arms tightly around her neck, and as she rose up, holding him close against her, he squeezed her and whispered "I love you" into her ear.

Catherine nearly collapsed, overcome with the child's response to her. Peter hurried over and started to say, "Be careful, Jacob, she's not well..." but Catherine shook her head sharply and he fell silent. She sank back upon the bench, still clutching the child close. She pressed warm kisses into the child's hair as she whispered, "I love you too, Jacob, so much."

Peter quietly returned to Mary, leaving the two alone in their joy.

Jacob, for the first time in his young life, had felt an instant connection with someone other than his own father. From the moment he set eyes on this woman, he "knew" her -- just as he "knew" his Daddy. He was too young to explain it, but he just had a feeling deep in his tummy that this lady was "his" in a way that no one else except his Daddy was. He was happy, so happy!

Catherine cautioned herself not to expect too much. She was, after all, a complete stranger to Jacob, for all his enthusiasm at seeing her. She had been told that Vincent kept her memory alive for the boy, but those would seem like bedtime stories -- fairy tales -- to a child with no other frame of reference. And today was not supposed to be like this. They'd all agreed, no meeting would occur. Well, there wasn't much any of them could do about that now. They'd all have to deal with the consequences, whatever they might be.

She refused to feel bad about this abrupt change in plans; in actuality, she was thrilled beyond belief. To hold this warm bundle of love in her arms was more fulfilling than anything else in her life...except for...well, that dream was gone now. He had moved on, and she had to teach herself to...forget? No. Perhaps, to learn to live with the pain. Right now, though, she *could* forget everything else and concentrate on the unexpected and completely wonderful response her son had to her. She nuzzled him, inhaling the warm baby scent that clung to him, overlaid with candle smoke, shampoo...and a hint of chocolate.

"How are you, Jacob?"

The boy disengaged his choke hold long enough to stare at her with grave blue eyes and reply very properly, "I'm fine, thank you. How are you?"

Catherine laughed. Peter, on the bench nearby, heard it and marveled. It was the first time he'd heard her laugh since she had been miraculously restored to him. He realized that Mary was grasping his hand tightly in her own, and when he looked over at her, tears were shining in her eyes, falling unheeded. His own eyes felt suspiciously wet, too. Mary leaned over and whispered, "I'm so glad." He nodded. No other words were necessary. They both felt the same way.

When Catherine recovered her composure, she gave her son a dazzling smile and said, "I'm fine, too, thank you. You have very nice manners, Jacob. My compliments to your teacher!"

"My Daddy taught me," was the not-unexpected response.

Catherine smiled indulgently at him, and tilted her head. "Of course," she said.

"Do you know my Daddy?" Jacob asked in all innocence.

A look of anguish swiftly swept her features, but she mastered it for the sake of the boy, and just answered, "Yes." To distract him from further uncomfortable questions, she pointed at his forgotten book and stuffed animal and asked, "What are those?"

Looking over his shoulder, Jacob realized he had left his "necessaries" behind in his haste to greet his Mommy. He clambered off her lap and rushed to retrieve the items, then climbed back up into her waiting arms and settled himself comfortably. "Thith ith Bobo," he introduced his ragged companion. "And thith ith Redwall."

Among so many other things, she'd missed a lot of reading over the past four years. This was a book she'd never heard of. She shook her head. "I don't know that book. Is it good?"

Jacob grinned happily, the usually enticing playground forgotten. Someone who wasn't bored from repeated re-readings of his favorite book! At this point, the only person he could count on not to groan and roll their eyes when he requested being read to from this book was Daddy -- Daddy never got bored or impatient about anything. He burred to Catherine, "It'th the *betht*! Wanna read it?"

He looked eagerly at her and opened the book to the first page. He began to intone the first sentence. Catherine picked up the narrative, knowing he wasn't reading but only reciting by heart, and they spent a happy half hour together in the world of Matthias and his friends. Occasionally, Jacob's pudgy hand would reach out to caress his Mommy's cheek or arm; sometimes Catherine's hand would stray to his tousled locks and she would stroke the soft hair in wonder. The words of the book were a counterpoint to their growing awareness and familiarity with each other, and each of them basked in the contentment of the moment.

When Mary came over to tell Jacob that it was time to go home, he refused to go to her. She was shocked when the normally amiable and agreeable child became stubborn and declaimed, "No! Wanna thtay with my Mommy!"

Catherine cupped the child's chin in her hand and turned him to face her. "Jacob," she reproved mildly, "You know you shouldn't talk back to Mary. You don't want to make Peter and Mary feel sorry that they took you on this special outing, do you?"

Glumly, he shook his head. He looked so miserable at the thought of leaving her that Catherine was compelled to hug him hard. If it was only up to her, she'd never let him leave her side again! She whispered as she held him, "Go home with Mary, honey. Your Daddy will miss you if you don't."

Tears sprang to his eyes, but he obeyed her request. Hopping off her lap to the pavement, he turned to her and blubbered, "But I mith you now!"

It took all of her strength not to reach for him again, but she had to let him go. Had to let him go...out of her life. She prayed that she'd hold up just for the next minute, just until he was out of sight. "Take care, Jacob. Remember that I'll always love you. Goodbye."

He tugged at her arms until he pulled her down to him and he hugged her again, pressing soft, warm kisses on her. Her cheeks were wet from his kisses and their tears when he pulled away. After staring at her hard for a moment, he ran from the playground, causing Mary to hasten after him.

Once he was gone, harsh reality swam into focus once again. She couldn't overlook the growing trepidation she felt that there might be recriminations over the broken agreement. Well, she'd asked for one meeting with her son, and now she'd had it. And she intended to honor her vow to stay out of the lives of everyone Below from now on.

Peter, standing over her, placed his hand consolingly on her shoulder. Catherine pressed her cheek against it, grateful for the small comfort it offered. As she looked down, she noticed that Bobo and the book were still on the bench beside her. Her hands shook as she handed them to Peter, unable to say anything. Peter silently took the boy's things from her hands and left to find Mary.

Catherine's heart was bursting from both joy and sorrow. She'd finally found her precious child, and now she was letting him go...forever. The sound of Catherine's bitter weeping began before Peter had taken two steps from her.

\* \* \*

"I tried to warn you about something like this!" Diana's frustration was nearing the breaking point. Since Jacob had returned from the park and his unexpected meeting with Catherine earlier that day, he had been withdrawn, almost sullen. For a child with a usually sunny disposition, it boded ill. He had only picked at his dinner -- another unsettling omen, since normally he ate heartily. Diana had been trying to

put him to bed for the last hour, but he had first squirmed and struggled, then launched into a crying and screaming jag which had frayed her already frazzled nerves. She could not quiet him. He kept calling for his Mommy, but when she said, "Mom-mom's here, honey," he shook his head and shouted, "No! Not you!"

Vincent had tried to soothe the boy, with only partially satisfactory results. True, he had stopped screaming at a word from his father -- something else which discouraged Diana mightily, as he never obeyed her so readily -- but his crying had not ceased. He wept copiously, as if his little heart was breaking. Clinging to his father, he refused to be comforted, but sobbed and hiccuped and wept anew.

Now, Diana hoped, Vincent would understand what she had been saying when she had tried to get everyone to rationally consider Jacob's possible reaction to Catherine. She was not angry that the meeting had occurred, not really -- she had been assured that it had been an accident. But the ramifications were becoming increasingly clear: seeing her once would not be enough. Even if Catherine could keep her word...and Diana had no reason to doubt that she would...how could Jacob be convinced that he should not see his Mommy again?

"Diana, please. You know this would have happened eventually. It would not have been right to keep her from meeting him. Whatever must be borne as a result, we will bear. Consider for a moment how she must feel." He couldn't say it, but his eyes conveyed his meaning -- *Think of her*, they pleaded, *who has given up so much -- for us*.

Facing Diana's defiant gaze, he realized that the emotional chaos of the day could not be eased by an appeal to her sympathies -- she was struggling with her own demons now, unable yet to consider or care about another's pain.

Sighing, he held his son close as he said, "I know this situation is difficult...for all of us. I'm sorry for the distress it's causing you. We may not be able to find a way right now...but I promise you, we *will* find a way through this. Give it time, Diana. Don't despair."

Unhappy that this was the only comfort he could find to give her at the moment, he nonetheless had to think of his son before anyone else. And so he strode from the chamber, walking with Jacob, rocking him, murmuring soothing phrases to him, urging him to settle and sleep. The child eventually did fall asleep, but from exhaustion rather than tranquility of spirit.

As he walked, Vincent thought about Jacob's reaction to Catherine. What Mary and Peter related had astounded him. It seemed clear to him that Jacob had known Catherine instinctively, intuitively. The picture in his chamber, the stories he was told, none of that explained the intense response he'd had upon seeing her for the first time. Although a friendly child, Jacob was not overly fond of strangers. Vincent had never known him to approach a stranger without being drawn to the person by someone he knew. Yet they said that he had literally thrown himself into Catherine's arms...and called her "Mommy"!

Perhaps, he thought, Jacob had a kind of Bond with his natural mother, just as he had with his father. It was not as intense and all-encompassing as the one Vincent and Catherine had once shared -- and the loss of that Bond still wounded him viciously, deeply -- but it was there nonetheless. Perhaps Jacob was responding to that spark which still connected them, mother and son.

Returning to his chamber, Vincent lay the sleeping boy upon his bed. At her questioning look, he advised, "I don't want to leave him in the nursery tonight, in case he awakens and upsets himself again."

Resigned that this would effectively prevent any serious discussion between them until the morning, Diana tugged her robe more tightly around herself and left for her own chamber.

Vincent did not watch her leave. He sat looking down at his son for a long, long time, then blew out all but one candle and settled himself beside him in the large, lonely bed.

\* \* \*

The next day, Jacob remained listless and ate poorly. At night, he wept inconsolably for his mother until exhaustion once again claimed him. After several days in succession of this behavior, Father was becoming alarmed. Young Jacob was starting to lose weight, and his pallor was becoming unhealthy. Vincent wanted Mary to take the child back to see his mother, but Diana was justifiably concerned that it would reverse whatever small gains had been achieved. Discussion could not resolve the problem. The stalemate wore on.

Father, troubled deeply and worried for Jacob's health, resolved to intrude upon Catherine's self-imposed exile. He sent a note to Peter, asking for a meeting as soon as possible, someplace outside of the Tunnel community.

Their meeting occurred that evening at the threshold to Peter's basement stairs. He was already sitting on the lower step, waiting, when Father came into view, wearily leaning on his cane from the effort of the long walk. Father seldom came this far from the Hub anymore because of his bad hip. Peter had tried to convince him to come Above for a hip replacement operation, but Father somehow could never find the time for it. Peter knew he never would.

"What is it, Jacob? Is it the child?" Peter knew his old friend would not come this far to exchange pleasantries, so he cut right to the heart of the visit.

Father sat heavily beside Peter on the step, assisted by his old friend. He ran one hand distractedly through his cropped gray hair, a gesture of frustration which disheartened Peter immediately. "I'm at my wit's end, Peter. Vincent and Diana cannot decide what to do, and meanwhile young Jacob is...wasting away."

Peter knew his oldest friend hadn't come all this way just to moan over impossibilities. He urged him on by saying, "But you have a plan."

Pained grey eyes looked into his. With a nod, Father replied, "I have a *possible* solution. Much depends upon Catherine, upon her...strength. But after everything that's happened...I have no right to ask it of her."

"Why do you say that? Surely you know she'd do anything to help her son?" Peter was puzzled.

"Yes, I know that, Peter. What I'm speaking of...goes far back." His eyes took on an unfocused gaze, and Peter realized he was seeing another time. "I...God help me...I fought her every step of the way...long ago, when she first knew my son. I...said things...to her...to Vincent...."

"That's all in the past, Jacob. Cathy speaks of you only with affection, and from the stories she's told me, she knows of your loving concern for her."

"Perhaps. But the wounds I inflicted...with the best of intentions, I assure you...." Peter caught the rueful grimace emphasizing the irony of the other man's last words.

"You're feeling guilty, old friend? Because...if you hadn't fought her so hard...perhaps this situation we're faced with today...might never have existed?"

The bitter look of self-recrimination which flooded his friend's face took Peter by surprise. So...it was much worse than Cathy had ever let on...much worse. But this retreat into regrets of the past would not help little Jacob now. "Forget those times, Jacob. Concentrate on the here and now. Whatever mistakes were made...there is no undoing them at this late date. Let's focus on what we *can* do. Now. At least for Jacob, if not for Cathy...or Vincent."

"Yes." Father nodded briskly, pulling himself together with a hard effort. "Well, now...what I wish to propose...if Cathy will see me....and I ask you to intervene for me with her on this...is for some sort of...joint custody arrangement."

Peter was confused. "Joint...custody? Do you mean for Jacob to live part-time Above so he can be with his natural mother? Won't that disrupt his life completely?" Seeing the argument forming in those forbidding gray eyes, he quickly added, "I know, it's done routinely Above. Couples separated by divorce find ways to share the raising of their children. But the differences between two families living Above are far less compelling than the dichotomy between Above and Below, Jacob. You'd be asking a child to try to live in two different worlds. All the secrecy, the confusion, the conflict -- it's not right to ask a *baby* to take all that on." Another thought occurred to him, and he pressed on somberly, "And...what if...in the future...what if Cathy were to...find...someone. How would she explain her child's...situation to him?"

Father nodded grimly. "I've considered all those things, Peter. That's why the only solution is for Cathy to...to come Below. To become a part of our lives again...as a Helper, as a friend. Jacob could have a stable family life Below with regular visits from his...his Mommy." He saw the expression in his friend's eyes. "I am well aware that it will cause her more pain, but I'm sure she would do anything to help the child. Although how she can learn to live a new life if we ask her to see...to see...everyone...again...." Father shrugged helplessly. He knew that Catherine must be trying to put her past...and its emotional ties...behind her. What he would ask of her would be a sacrifice so great.... And he didn't even want to consider....

Peter supplied the rest of his thought. "How would Vincent handle this, do you think?"

Father snorted. "You took the words right out of my mouth, Peter. The pain for all involved will be enormous. I can't even imagine the toll it will take on my son...on Cathy...on Diana.... But they...*we*... are all adults. We are better able to deal with the...the complexities and turmoil that such an arrangement would bring, rather

than forcing the burden onto a child just to make it easier for ourselves. We owe it to Jacob. For his well-being, we've got to do this, Peter!" Father squared his shoulders and snapped his head down, once, in determination. "Talk to Cathy, Peter. Or ask her to allow me to see her. If Cathy will allow it, perhaps I might speak to her...now?"

\* \* \*

As he hobbled into Peter's study, Catherine turned from her position by the fireplace and looked at him. She looked impossibly frail, a wraith-like figure, almost ethereal, as if she was not wholly back from the dead even yet. Father was shocked into immobility.

"Hello, Father." A simple greeting. Her eyes were hooded, unreadable. She was standing stiffly, her thin back almost arched from a strain so great he knew it couldn't hold.

"Cathy...I'm...so glad...you're alive." He was a proud man, but he knew this was no time to stand on ceremony. It was up to him to reach out to her. He walked the length of the room until he stood before her, tears glittering in his eyes. "Oh, Cathy...I am so sorry....I...."

Before he could finish whatever he would have said, she moved. Thin, pale arms enveloped him and he threw his cane aside to return the embrace. He held her as tightly as he dared -- she felt so fragile in his arms -- and he wept against her hair as she wept against his shoulder.

"Cathy...oh, Cathy...."

"Hush, Father, it's all right...everything's all right...."

Who gave and who received the most comfort from the reunion was uncertain, but comfort there was, desperately needed, gratefully received.

Eventually Father regained some of his composure and urged Catherine to sit beside him on the couch. He clung to her slender hand, pressing it in both of his, as he spoke. "Did...did Peter tell you...why I'm here? What I would ask of you?"

She nodded, then whispered hoarsely, "I...I don't know if I can, Father...."

"Can't you try, Cathy?" But even as he asked this, his resolve faltered. He looked at her hollow cheeks, her large eyes burning almost feverishly within the thin, pale frame of her face. "I had no real idea how...how ill you still are. To ask this of you now...perhaps it's unwise."

"I'd do anything for Jacob, Father...anything! But...."

"There's no need to go on, Cathy. I know...I know...." He understood as he hadn't before that he couldn't ask her to do this thing, not right now. Perhaps later, after she'd recovered more of her strength. Right now, he realized, it was all she could do to get through a day...given all the pain, all the grieving she had to deal with. The last four years of her life were compressed into just a few months, and she'd had even fewer days in which to try to absorb the emotional blows which must have brought her to her knees. Peter and Mary had tried to tell him, but he hadn't listened...at least, not with his heart.

She was still speaking, and he forced himself to concentrate on her voice. "...and if you haven't even spoken to Vincent...or to Diana...about this...well...they may not want me to come Below, even for Jacob's sake. I can't imagine any situation in which Diana would...welcome my presence...and...and...Vincent...I couldn't bear...."

Fresh tears spilled from her eyes as they pleaded with him. She couldn't even say the words. How could she handle the distress of being forced to see him again, to act the way she would have to act around him, now and forever? She knew that Peter hoped that...some day...she'd find someone else. She didn't contradict him, but in her heart she knew it would never be. She'd never love another. Never. She might...just barely...be able to keep sane by loving Vincent from a distance, his being a cherished memory shielded within her heart. But to have to confront the living reality of him...and of him and Diana together -- no, that she could not survive.

Father watched in horrified fascination as all these emotions played themselves across Catherine's gaunt, ashen face. She was beyond the point of trying to disguise her feelings, needing him to understand implicitly all she could not put into words. He was devastated. He'd been so concerned about how Vincent might react to Catherine's homecoming, but he could see now that, as difficult as it would be for his son, it would be far easier for him than for Catherine. Her emotions were so very raw, close to the surface, and as fragile as her still-healing body. He could not do this to her, not even for his grandson. Not for anything or

anyone. For all the times he had hurt her, all the times he had undermined the relationship she'd tried so hard to forge with his son, he owed her this reprieve.

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and tenderly wiped the tears from her face, shushing her with sympathetic murmurs. When the tears abated, he said, "You're right, Cathy. It's much too premature to be discussing such visitations. But perhaps, if you could handle it, Mary might bring Jacob to see you? He's been having a...difficult time...adjusting. Peter told you, I'm sure, of his trouble sleeping and his poor appetite. He calls for you, Cathy, especially at night. No one can comfort him. The poor child is confused. It would help so much if you could see him."

Catherine nodded mutely. Her son! She would gladly break whatever vows she'd made for the chance to see him again.

\* \* \*

He'd confessed to Vincent and Diana that he'd visited Catherine. He'd told them of his initial plan, thwarted after seeing her condition, and of the arrangement he had made with her instead. He had expected them to be angry, and they did not disappoint him.

"Father, whatever possessed you to take such a thing upon yourself?" Vincent's infuriation was matched only by Diana's indignant, "How could you do that without discussing it with us first?" In their anger, each had spoken at the same time, and both questions deserved answers he wasn't prepared to give, they weren't ready to hear. How could he tell them that it wasn't a simple matter of Jacob's well-being, that their inability to arrive at a mutually agreeable solution stemmed from each's reaction to the potential of Catherine's presence in their lives. The specter of her return haunted each of them...in different ways.

"You are both right to be angry with me. All I can say in my defense is that I was worried for Jacob. You were at an impasse, and he was getting no better. So, I acted...rightly or wrongly. But at least I acted. Now, I may have been impetuous with my initial plan, but as you now know, that is not going forward. I...."

"Damn right, it's not going forward!" Diana interrupted him. "I can't believe you'd bring Catherine Below without consulting us, without considering our feelings...the ramifications...." She became speechless in her fury, amazed that this man, who had always been so supportive of her and her relationship with Vincent, would do something so blatantly against that interest.

"But it *didn't* happen, Diana. I know now I was wrong. Catherine herself reminded me that you particularly should be consulted about such a drastic step. Let's focus on what *is* going to happen, shall we?"

"Father..." Vincent threw his hands up in a rare display of frustration. "You cannot interfere in our lives this way, running roughshod over our feelings if they don't happen to agree with yours. For Catherine to have come Below...." His voice grew so soft the others had to strain to catch the rest of his comment. "You have no idea what that would cost...everyone involved."

"I have already apologized, Vincent." Father was getting testy. He wanted to move on to the situation at hand, not to continue to contest dead issues. "Please, shall we speak of Jacob's visits to Catherine? She has agreed to see him whenever we wish to arrange it, and to be guided by us on the number and length of such visits. I suggest that Mary or Peter take the boy to her, perhaps...oh...once a week for an hour or so? That wouldn't be too disruptive, do you think?"

Diana shot a glance at Vincent, but he was beyond any ability to take part in the planning, his mind still a mile away -- with Catherine? In some memory of the past? This disturbed Diana greatly, but this wasn't the time or place to examine the problem. Instead, she tore her gaze from him and responded to Father. "That's fine. For now."

She somehow knew from the first that Catherine's intention to stay out of her son's life, though noble, would not last. But it was not, as she'd feared, Catherine who had broken down and begged to see him. *They* were admitting defeat. What must Catherine think of them? Would Catherine begin now to worry about how well Diana was raising her son if they ran to her for help so soon upon her return? Diana wanted desperately to keep Catherine Chandler a memory, to keep her Above. Once she was allowed back into their lives, even a little.... How could Vincent forget her, distance himself from the thought of her, if every week his son came Below with tales of what he had done with his Mommy, of what his Mommy had said....

She wanted this life, needed it -- no, she needed *him*. This was where *he* lived, so this was where *she* must be. Everything else that came with it -- his son, his father, the tunnels and their inhabitants -- everything else was secondary. To think that he might...slip away from her...back to the woman he'd loved before her...was the most frightening possibility of all.

\* \* \*

As soon as Jacob saw Peter, he lifted his face in hope. "Ith my Mommy with you?" He tried to peek around the older man.

Peter bent down and took him by the shoulders. "No, Jacob. She's not with me." At the boy's slump of dejection, he gave him a quick shake and said, "But Mary and I will take you to her, when you're ready."

Jacob's eyes grew round, and he whispered, "Will you take me right now?"

Peter nodded. "If you like."

Jacob grabbed the man's hands and started to drag him out of the room. "Now! Take me now!" Impatient for Mary's arrival, he shifted from foot to foot, and started off at a trot as soon as she came into view.

"Jacob! Wait for us!" Mary's cries fell unregarded as the youngster raced ahead.

\* \* \*

"So, you see, Jacob, it's very important to me that you eat when your Mom-mom and Daddy ask you to, and you go to bed and go to sleep when it's time. I know that you love them and don't want them to worry about you. But they've been very worried lately."

He ducked his head timidly, causing his long blond curls to fall forward, and peeked up at her from beneath his bangs. "But...I *mith* you! Why can't you come home with me? I want you home with me!"

Catherine clutched the arm of the sofa for support. She gazed up into Peter's eyes in a mute plea. Peter sat beside Jacob and put his arm around the boy's shoulders. "Your Mommy *has* a home, Jacob. She loves you very much, but she lives here. And you live with your Mom-mom and Daddy, who love you more than anything. You're a lucky boy, you know, to have so many people who love you so much."

Obstinately, Jacob shrugged Peter's arm off and climbed into his mother's lap. "I wanna thtay with my Mommy!" he declared.

"Oh, sweetheart..." Catherine buried her face in his mop of soft hair, wishing she could make this easier for him. She had been selfish -- and wrong -- to ask to see him, to get him so confused. She should have been content to know he was with his father. But how could she have lived, knowing he was so close, and never

seeing him again? She sighed dispiritedly. Nothing was easy anymore. Perhaps it would have been better for everyone if she had not survived.

Taking a deep breath, she urged her son to face her and smiled tenderly at him. She couldn't resist running her fingers through his silky tresses, smoothing them away from his face to reveal the perfection of his brow, the astonishing clarity of those blue, blue eyes. "Jacob, I have something very important to tell you. Will you listen real hard to me?"

He nodded seriously and waited for her next words.

"I love you very much. Very much. Do you understand?"

Again, he nodded.

"That will never change. But...you have a wonderful family Below, and so many friends, and all of *them* love you, too. You know that, don't you?"

Another nod.

"They worry so much when you don't eat and don't sleep. They need you to do that so you can grow up big and strong."

"Like my Daddy?"

Her smile broadened. "Exactly like your Daddy. So I'm going to ask you to do me a very special favor. Will you do me a favor if I ask you?"

"Yeth!" He nodded vigorously, proud that there was something he could do for her.

"When you feel bad, or miss me, just think about me here, smiling at you and loving you. Then you can't be sad, if you know I'm just sitting here thinking of you. And I want you to hear me tell you to please eat and sleep so you can grow up strong and good, just like your Daddy. Do you think you can do me that great big favor?"

The child's lower lip began to tremble, and he murmured, "But I *mith* you."

"I know you do, my darling. And I miss you." She lowered her voice and whispered, "But I'm going to tell you a secret."

The child's eyes widened -- a *secret*!

"Each of us carries the other...right here." Catherine rubbed his chest above his heart. "My love for you beats here. Can you feel it?"

He held his hand to his chest where she'd indicated and felt the soft bump of his heart with wonder.

Catherine placed his hand upon her heart. "Can you feel *your* love beating inside me?"

Jacob was astonished to find that, yes, he could feel his love beating there. It took his breath away.

"So you know we're never really apart now, don't you?" She stared into his eyes, hoping he could understand with a child's mind the comfort she offered him. She thought to herself, *Your father already has my rose, or I'd give that to you, my beautiful boy.*

\* \* \*

After his visit with his mother, Jacob regained some of his former ebullience. If he felt sad or missed his Mommy, he had only to place his hand on his heart to find her with him. Vincent noticed him doing this, especially at bedtime, and finally asked him about the gesture. When Jacob told him of the "secret" he shared with Catherine, Vincent sat stunned for a moment, then kissed him fiercely and hugged him hard. Jacob felt his father's tears upon his head, and wondered why his Daddy was crying.

\* \* \*

The Joining Ceremony, which had been scheduled for a week after Jacob's fourth Naming Day celebration, was being postponed. Many Below engaged in speculation about whether Catherine's return had caused the change in plans. Diana began to notice that sometimes conversation would dry up as she approached, and she realized that gossip must be running rampant concerning the postponement. But what else could she do? It had hurt her to suggest it, but when Vincent had immediately agreed, she had been devastated. She had hoped he would reaffirm his commitment to her in this tangible way, by refusing to consider a postponement. But...always pragmatic, she had to admit that if there were any doubts, they had best be brought out into the open now, before something happened that couldn't easily be changed. At least when she had whispered, "I love you," he had responded that he loved her, too.

Diana had not made many close friends in the few months since she'd moved Below. The nature of her job, her long days and nights Above when involved with a case, made her presence Below a sporadic thing. She had always been a loner, an intensely private person. Since her move Below, she had made an attempt to fit in, but her awkwardness with groups of people and her cool demeanor made it difficult. She was respected...but not well loved, nor well understood. It pained her that this was true, but she had to acknowledge the fact, and had to acknowledge her part in creating this situation. Too many times, when she'd volunteered to help in some project Below, she'd had to cancel at the last minute, or she didn't show up at all, due to the press of work Above. She was committed to the work she did, no one doubted that. And no one doubted that she loved Vincent and was committed to him. But there was some concern about how committed she was to her new life Below. In some ways, this problem was most manifested in her difficult relationship with Jacob.

Although he loved her, many observed that Jacob didn't trust her with the absolute trust a child should have for a parent. When he was hurt or frightened, in the absence of his Daddy he most often turned to Mary or Father, constants in his young life, rather than to her. It concerned her that this was so, but she didn't know what to do about it. She wasn't naturally demonstrative, especially with children, never having been around them much in her life. She loved Jacob, but expressing that love in ways that a child could accept was hard for her. And so they struggled toward their goal.

She couldn't give up her work -- it was too important to her, and Vincent supported her decision. Others weren't as understanding. Cullen had made some snide comments to others, and even to her, before Vincent had spoken to him about it. He now treated her formally, with mocking overtones which were almost worse than the cutting remarks. It didn't help to know that she was sometimes discussed by her family Below, and compared to the memory of Catherine Chandler. Catherine...Catherine...a burden as a legend. How much more of a burden would she be now?

Her one good friend Below besides Father was Pascal, who understood the immersion in work which was the hallmark of her craft, as it was with his. But, because they both devoted so much time to their respective jobs, they had little time to spare for each other. Today, she decided to seek him out. She found him, as usual, in the main pipe chamber. She had to call him several times before he heard her. It was strange -- he could hear obscure tappings that most people couldn't

discern, but normal conversation often escaped him. She supposed that he was just attuned to a different type of communication.

Now that she had his attention, she shouted, "Can I come up and talk to you?"

He waved an arm and replied, "Sure, Diana, come on up."

She climbed a rickety ladder to an upper level of pipes leading to the chambers closest to street level. It was on these pipes that the sentries most often relayed their reports. Pascal kept one ear to his pipes as they talked.

"I've postponed the Joining Ceremony," she began without preamble.

"I know. I heard. Why?" Although his attention seemed focused on the pipes, he flicked his gaze to her often to let her know he was listening.

"Vincent seems...troubled. With Catherine's return...."

"That's amazing, isn't it? I couldn't believe it when I heard. She's a wonderful person, Diana. You'd like her."

Sometimes men could be obtuse, Diana decided. "So I hear...from everyone."

Pascal took the hint. "Oh. I see. So that's the problem."

She nodded. "I know Vincent loves me...."

"Is there a 'but' in that sentence? There shouldn't be. If he says he loves you, he does. I've never known Vincent to say anything he didn't mean in his life."

Comfort came from odd places sometimes. Absurdly, after hearing Pascal say what she knew herself to be true, she felt better.

\* \* \*

After talking with Pascal, Diana had felt a renewed sense of hope that everything might just work out her way after all. Yes, the Joining Ceremony was postponed -- but it hadn't been canceled. And she hadn't really had much of a chance to have a long talk about things with Vincent yet, so she didn't know exactly what he was thinking. With Jacob being so upset after meeting Catherine, they were now rarely alone. The child had slept in Vincent's bed every night since that fateful meeting, to provide him with the physical as well as emotional assurance he seemed to need

now. Diana had wished that were not the case -- she was alone with Vincent seldom enough as it was -- but she had been comforted in knowing that wouldn't last. And she was right. Jacob had recovered his equilibrium -- children seemed to be able to do that so much easier than adults, they were so resilient -- and at last they had decided to resume his normal routine of sleeping in the dormitory with the other children.

Diana had been glad that some semblance of their normal evening ritual had returned to them, so that Vincent might turn to her now to discuss the tumultuous emotional storm she was sure was raging through him. She had helped him so many times before to come to terms with his feelings -- after Catherine's...supposed...death, when he was beginning his new life with Jacob. And she needed to unburden her own soul to him, to take out her fears and examine them one by one, so that he could put an end to them with his love and his compassion. So last night, she had made a special point of coming Below shortly after dinner, so that she and Vincent could be together. She had desperately needed his reassurance, needed him to tell her that everything would be all right.

When they had been unable to truly begin the discussion about Catherine Chandler's return, she had become upset and frustrated. Well...sometimes when they couldn't manage to verbalize their concerns, they sought the comfort of each other's embrace to ease the way. And last night, she had needed his touch as never before, whether or not anything else was resolved.

Diana had changed into her nightgown and robe, then returned to his chamber, where Vincent was bent over his journal, not writing, just staring. As she leaned over to kiss him, she was surprised at his reaction -- he'd seemed startled. Usually, his awareness of his surroundings was so acute that he could not *be* startled. She murmured to him, "Let me hold you, my love," and reached for his hand. He had allowed her to draw him to his feet, then had not protested as she slowly encircled him within her arms.

What she had asked of him, he had done - he had opened his arms to her and she had gone to him, clung to him. She had leaned up to kiss him, noticing that, as always, his eyelids had fluttered closed well before their lips made contact. And although she had taken the initiative to that point, Vincent slanted his mouth over hers and began to kiss her so gently, so tenderly, she thought her heart would break with the joy of it. He kissed her sweetly, as if this were their first time and he was unsure of her response to him. Relief and happiness flowed through her, and she relaxed fully for the first time since their world had been turned upside down. She

began to caress his hard-muscled arms, to stroke his broad back, and she smiled inside with satisfaction to hear him groan softly at her touch. Then a feathery whisper left his lips - one word, almost indiscernible...but for Diana the word he uttered was an arrow through her heart. She froze against him as he, startled for the second time that night, opened his eyes and asked her, "What is it?"

"You...you said a name...just now. You said...‘Catherine.’" She could barely choke the words out of her suddenly tight throat. A cold fist of panic settled into her stomach, and her mind listed, thinking of the gentle, loving kisses he had bestowed upon her tonight. Were they all truly for her...or for...someone else?!

Vincent looked shocked. "No, Diana!"

"I heard it, Vincent! You whispered Catherine's name, not mine!"

Vincent stepped back from her, his head in his hands, his posture one of defeat and despair. "I...I didn't mean to say that, Diana. Forgive me. Oh, God!" He turned and left her side, striding out of the chamber, pausing only to snatch his cloak from the back of his chair. In a moment, he was gone. And he hadn't returned for the rest of the night.

Diana realized it would do no good to go after him -- he knew these tunnels better than anyone, and if he didn't want to be found.... She tried to convince herself that he had spoken that name only because of the events of the past days. After all, Catherine Chandler seemed to be uppermost on everyone's mind, including her own. So why should she be surprised if Vincent accidentally spoke it. But...while they were embracing, kissing? She shuddered, gradually feeling the chill of the tunnels...and something more...settle into her bones. Finally, she left his chamber and returned to her own. There she burrowed deep under the covers, willing herself to forget what was most likely only a slip of the tongue. Eventually, she got to sleep, but her dreams were disturbing. She was running through the tunnels, searching, searching...and not finding whatever it was she was searching for.

\* \* \*

The next day, while organizing the paperwork left over from her last case, Diana made a decision. Breaking the rules was something she didn't mind doing at all, when the ends justified it. She'd done it often enough in her position with the police department - the kinds of cases she worked almost demanded it. And she considered her future happiness more than important enough to justify breaking one promise. She had a meeting at precinct headquarters to report on the results of

her last case, a phone call to return to a former partner in Los Angeles to turn down a job offer there, and she had promised her sister ages ago that she'd visit her tonight. But after all that - and before she was expected Below....

\* \* \*

"Diana!" Peter's surprise was complete as he opened the door to his home. Visitors normally did not knock this late at night without calling first, and his wonder at such a late-night guest had turned now to astonishment.

"I need to talk with Catherine, Peter. Please."

Gesturing her inside, Peter closed the door behind her, but did not invite her further into his home. "I...forgive me, but I really don't think that's wise, Diana. She's...very frail. Emotionally, physically. Please...don't ask this."

"Believe me, Peter, if there was any other way...any other time...but this is the only way, the only time. *Please.*" She was absolutely determined. She had to know...*now*...what she was facing, had to confront the phantom who was an almost palpable presence between Vincent and herself. There was never going to be a "good" time for this meeting -- best to have it on as close to her own terms as she was able to arrange, catch Catherine at an unguarded moment, read her eyes and her body language when her resistance was lowest. It was a cruel thing to do, but Diana's desperation was such that she would do it...to hold onto Vincent, she would do anything.

"Well...." His first impulse was to send Diana back Below. It felt wrong. Cathy couldn't take many more of these confrontations with her past. Now, here Diana was to...to what? She didn't seem angry or argumentative. It was all beyond him. He honestly didn't know what was right to do anymore. "Wait here. She's...I think she's asleep. Let me check on her first."

Peter hurried up the stairs and down the hallway to the door of Catherine's bedroom. The door was ajar, and he pushed it open slightly as he called out in a loud whisper, "Cathy, honey? Are you asleep?"

A groggy voice responded, "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"I'm going to turn the light on, sweetheart." The soft glow of lamplight revealed the tousled hair and sleep-creased face of his favorite patient. "You *were* asleep," he said accusingly, shaking his head with a smile.

"It's OK, really, Peter. I can catch up on my sleep tomorrow. What else do I have to do with my days? What is it?"

Peter sat on her bed and reached for one thin hand. "This may be difficult for you, pumpkin. Diana's here. She wants to see you."

"What?!" Catherine immediately tensed.

"I'll send her away if you want. I've already told her you might be asleep...and that I didn't think you two meeting was such a good idea right now anyway."

Catherine shook her head sadly. "No, that's OK. I half-way expected this. After Father came...." She pushed the blankets off her legs and rose. "I imagine she wants to ask me some questions. And she's entitled to that."

Peter demurred. "I won't have it, Cathy! What right does she have disturbing your sleep, just so she can...."

Catherine cut him off gently. "It's OK, Peter. I'll be down in a minute. Just let me get my...." She stopped speaking and looked up as the door was pushed open and she saw a slender red-haired woman framed in the doorway.

Peter jumped up, shocked at the effrontery. "Diana! I asked you to wait...."

Catherine forestalled his lecture. She was bone-tired, soul-tired. Whatever this woman had to say to her, she'd hear it and then...finally...another sad day would be over. "Peter, please...leave us alone. Let Diana say what she needs to say. I'm all right."

He looked at her, baffled, but acquiesced to her request and left the room, not bothering to spare Diana another glance.

After he left, Diana closed the bedroom door, then turned back to Catherine. "Thank you for agreeing to see me."

Catherine inclined her head, then gestured to a chair beside the bed. As Diana sat, Catherine put on her robe, then sat on the bed facing her. She put out her hand. "Hello."

Startled, Diana took the proffered hand and shook it formally. "Hello."

Catherine looked at the woman before her frankly, appraisingly. "You are very beautiful, Diana. I'm sure your heart must be beautiful as well, for Vincent to love you."

Amazed and confused by what she was hearing, Diana floundered. "Th-thank you." It wasn't what she'd meant to say, but it just came out. She struggled to regain her composure. She was surprised by a strange feeling which came over her as she stared at the flesh and blood woman who had possessed Vincent's soul all these years. "You're beautiful, too, Catherine."

Catherine smiled wanly and shook her head. "I used to be."

"You still are. You always will be." Unspoken in her mind were the words *in Vincent's eyes*. "I'm sorry I barged in here. I'm normally more polite than this. But what I have to say...it couldn't wait."

Catherine nodded, resigned. "Tell me."

Now that she was here, facing this woman, she found she didn't know how to start. "I...I need to know how you feel...about Vincent."

"I'm sorry...?" Catherine thought she must have heard Diana wrong - surely she had to realize that Catherine's feelings for Vincent couldn't have changed in the few short months since she'd awakened from her coma?

"I know...stupid question," the younger woman conceded. "I guess...what I meant to say is that I need to speak with you about Vincent." She sighed heavily, then continued. "He...he's very confused right now. He...he may be...confused about *me*."

"I don't know what to say to you, Diana. I haven't seen him. I promised not to...not to see *anybody* from Below." Her tone held a mild reproof - she was keeping her end of this agonizing bargain, after all. It was those Below who kept breaking it.

Diana could read the tension and pain in the ashen face of the gaunt woman before her. She nodded. "Yes, I know. I also know that's probably impossible. He loves you, Catherine. He always has, maybe since before he even met you. He told me that, you know. He's never stopped loving you, and...."

Catherine interrupted her. "He hasn't seen me in four years. Please don't confuse his old feelings for me with what he feels for you."

Diana smiled sardonically. "What he feels for me is true, I know it. But what he feels for *you*, Catherine...it's so deeply ingrained, so a part of him, nothing and no one else can ever come before his love for you. Not even Jacob. Certainly not me."

Scrubbing one hand across her eyes distractedly, trying to banish her grogginess and focus on the conversation which was quickly becoming very personal, Catherine leaned forward. She found herself almost reaching for Diana's hand. But at the last moment, she checked herself, unsure of whether her touch would be welcome. An ironic thought flitted through her mind: the last thing she ever imagined she'd be doing was offering comfort to the woman Vincent now loved. "Don't do this to yourself, Diana. Allow him some time to come to terms with the shock he's had. He may be confused now, but it will pass."

Diana shrugged her shoulders, trying to express her concern. "He seems so...distant these days. So detached. I can't get him to talk to me about any of this. I can't help but feel I'm...losing him."

"Don't *let* him be lost to you then!" Catherine's voice roughened with impatience. Why was this woman here? She couldn't believe Vincent could love someone so seemingly insensitive that she'd turn to the woman who'd loved and lost for advice on how to keep her man. Or did Diana have another motive tonight than the one she'd so readily stated? Well, she wasn't going to play a game with this woman - she'd just answer her as if she believed her motivations to be genuine. "You've been with Vincent for four years - you know him at least as well as I did, and likely much better, considering how much further your relationship has progressed than ours ever did. Whatever temporary problems there might be between you because of my...recovery, I'm not trying to add to them. I won't come between you. Work on what's wrong, Diana. You must be a strong person, or Vincent wouldn't love you. Use your strength to help him come to terms with all that's happened. Stay by him, support him, get him through this."

"But...don't *you* want him back?" Diana's eyes held tears as she choked out the words.

Catherine sat back, stunned. So...this was what she'd come for - to assess Catherine's own motivations, not for advice for the lovelorn. She must have known how emotionally draining her meetings with Jacob and then Father had been. And it was so late...she also must have known that she'd be interrupting a recovering woman's rest. It made a certain wry kind of sense. From what Peter had told her of Diana's work, she knew her to be a tenacious investigator who would stop at

nothing to get to the truth. And her insight was renowned within the police department, bordering on legendary - Catherine had heard of her when at the D.A.'s office, although they'd never met.

So...she was probing Catherine for signs of second thoughts, to see if she might pose a problem in the future, might try to come between her and the man they both loved. That seemingly anguished question had been the one she'd sought to ask from the first moment she'd entered the house tonight - it was planned, its insertion into their conversation calculated for maximum possible impact. Confess that Vincent was distant, confess that he still loved her...and then ask if she wanted him back. Well, Catherine wouldn't take the easy -- and oh, so tempting -- bait that Diana seemed to be offering her. *Vincent isn't a thing to be bartered between us, she thought cynically, and this woman knows that. She's been with Vincent all this time - surely she knows him, knows how he really feels about...everything. If Diana appears to be bowing out, wouldn't that make Vincent run after her, beg her to stay? Is that what she wants -- to prove to everyone, including me, how much Vincent loves her, wants her? Maybe that's what she wants - proof positive, to everyone, to silence any murmurings Below and questions even in Vincent's mind. To shut the door firmly on my hopes - if, indeed, I harbored any in secret. Well, Catherine, smiled grimly to herself, what Diana doesn't seem to understand is that I'm a realist - I see this new world I've awoken into and know my place in it...or rather, that I have no place in it. Certainly not one Below, especially not one with Vincent and my son. Hard truths, but I've become accustomed to hard truths in the past days - the hard truths that I am as if just born, orphaned - into a world where all I had before is gone, where only the kindness of friends remains. It's futile to want more, to ask for more...to dream of more.*

All these thoughts flowed through her mind in an instant, and she almost immediately responded to the tearful woman before her. "As a lawyer, I'd call that an argument against interest." She gave Diana a tight smile which didn't reach her eyes, then shook her head. "The answer is no."

Diana was bemused...but not displeased. She had thought that Catherine would be grateful to believe that she was stepping aside. Isn't that what she wanted? Well, if one of her reasons for coming tonight was to gauge the intensity of her competition, she was relieved to know that this woman did not intend to provide any competition. The meetings with Jacob weren't, as Diana had wondered, the opening salvo in a war to regain her dominance.

Catherine saw the disbelief on Diana's face and reacted to it, unwilling as she was to reveal her pain. "Understand me, Diana, it's not that I don't...care deeply for him. But...what you and Vincent have now...is more than he and I *ever* had. You're making a life together, as a family. The commitment you've made to each other, the trust and...love...between you is obviously...greater than whatever once existed between Vincent and me." Her words were mere whispers now, remembrances, old pains dredged to the surface to be exposed like raw nerves.

Catherine's response almost took Diana's breath away. It's what she herself believed, what she desperately needed Vincent to understand. Still...she needed to be sure this wasn't still all some elaborate plan. "But you were taken from him...before your...your love had a chance to bloom."

"That doesn't matter anymore," Catherine managed to choke out. "What exists now is what's important. I can see you love him very much, Diana. And I know what you're trying to do...."

Diana started, hoping it wasn't a visible flinch. She knew...?! Did she see through Diana's less than honest attempt to convince her to try to return to Vincent? Well, this one ought to flush her out.... "But...what of your son?"

The pain in Catherine's eyes made Diana sorry she'd pressed so hard. If she didn't have to know so badly what this woman's intentions were....

"You have been...generous enough to me in his regard. I have the chance -- one I thought never to have -- to know him and to have him know me."

"But...."

"No, Diana. Please. Go back to...your world...to your...your man...and to the child you are raising together. Thank you...but go."

\* \* \*

On her way back to the park entrance, Diana tried to come to terms with her emotions. Relief was paramount. From everything her trained investigator's mind told her, Catherine had been truthful and honest. That she loved Vincent still was obvious, but it was also indisputable that she was running no game -- she was exactly what she appeared to be. Catherine was convinced that she, Diana, had the superior claim to Vincent's affections. Between that and her own sincere belief that

this was true, coupled with the help she'd come to expect from Father, she hoped that in time she could make Vincent see it, too.

Diana was surprised at how practical Catherine had turned out to be. Somehow, she'd developed the impression that Catherine was pure emotion. Something in the way that Vincent expressed himself on the occasions when he spoke of her made her think this was so. Her own profile on Catherine Chandler, begun so long ago when Joe had brought her onto the missing persons case, had disclosed a conflicted personality, one drawn to Vincent and the Tunnels, but very much at home in her own world...much like herself, she had to admit. Maybe more than she did care to admit.

The bottom line was, however, that Catherine Chandler was the unlikeliest of allies. She wouldn't interfere with things Below, not with Jacob...and not with Vincent. Diana had only to remind Vincent of all the things she and Catherine had discussed tonight. The logic was indisputable. And Catherine wouldn't be fighting her at all. If...*when*...Vincent went to see Catherine, Diana was now confident that the words spoken to her face would be repeated to him.

That was all that mattered.

As for that incident the previous night, when Vincent had whispered Catherine's name as he kissed her...well, she'd accept that he'd been amazed and confounded by the events of the past days, and not dwell on it. He was with *her*, after all. He hadn't gone running to Catherine as soon as he'd heard she was alive - as many Below had supposed he would, judging from the discussions she'd heard in the Tunnels when others thought she wasn't around. And it *had* been nearly four years - a man's affections, even Vincent's, could cool in that time, especially when he'd entered into a new relationship with another woman. That Vincent would always love Catherine, she was not fool enough to disbelieve - he'd told her that often enough over the years. But there were so many kinds of love. She herself still loved a boy she'd known in college, one she'd dated for almost two years. He'd been killed in a car accident and she'd mourned him as the love of her life...but if he were to suddenly reappear in her life now, although she'd still care for him deeply, she wouldn't leave Vincent for him. He was a beloved part of her past - not a part of her life now...nor could she imagine he could ever become a part of it again.

Vincent must feel the same about Catherine. He must. Father, who knew him so well, believed it. Pascal, his good friend, believed it. And she believed it.

She did.

She had to.

She thought fleetingly of the contact with her former colleague who now worked for the Los Angeles Police Department and smiled - well, if she'd thought she needed a Plan B, that would have been a good one. But she really didn't believe she'd need it now.

\* \* \*

"Cathy, honey? Diana's gone. Are you OK?" Peter approached the huddled form lying crumpled on the bed. "Damn it! I *knew* I shouldn't have let her in here! What did she say to you? I'll go Below right now and....."

"No, Peter. She didn't say anything hurtful." Catherine turned her face up to his, and compassion lanced through his heart as he beheld her tear-swollen face. "She was...respectful." With a sardonic grimace, Catherine added, "But she did ask if I wanted to reclaim my relationship with Vincent! What was she thinking? Why would she say something like that to me?"

Peter was astounded. "It doesn't sound like the Diana I know. She's a fighter. I've never seen her willingly give up on something she believed in. Are you sure that's why she was here?"

"I'm honestly not sure why she came - although I have my suspicions." Catherine sniffed and sat up, reaching for a tissue from the almost-empty box by her bed.

"You're thinking that it's a common tactic for an investigator to play devil's advocate...to see what the other person's true feelings are?" Catherine nodded, and Peter considered his own words. "Perhaps Diana was saying that...to test your reaction. If she sensed you want Vincent back...."

Catherine sighed deeply. "It was the hardest thing I've ever done -- harder even than sending Jacob away -- to face the woman whose love Vincent wants now, and to...beg her to keep him close. But what else can I do?" Fresh tears formed in her eyes. She began to sob again and turned back to the cold comfort of her pillow.

\* \* \*

For Vincent, the past days had been lived in a haze of agony, confusion and regret. Catherine would not see him, so he could resolve nothing, not knowing how she felt, what she was thinking. Still sharply tormented by the loss of their Bond, he struggled to come to terms with his own feelings. He had grieved her loss for so long, had come to a bitter peace within himself for the sake of their son, and finally had succumbed to the solace of Diana's love, allowing it to steady him in the hard-fought-for peace he'd carved out of the remains of his life. But the tidal wave of feeling which had overcome him upon hearing that Catherine was alive had made him realize just how much of a shadow life he'd been leading. He was going through the motions, making the best of what he had left to him, concentrating primarily on his son's health and happiness. Diana was understanding, good to him, good to his son. It had been...enough. He had been...content. And he would have been able to continue in this fashion...if *she* had not been returned to him.

And yet, she had *not* been returned to him. And he could not move forward. He could not move at all.

\* \* \*

"What would you like for your present, Jacob?" Father asked his grandson. They had been talking about what a Naming Day was, this being the first year that the youngster could begin to understand what the words meant. Considering all the child had been through recently, he was prepared to be as indulgent as possible. The boy startled him with his reply, yet, looking back, he realized he should have expected nothing less from Vincent's son.

"I want my Mommy to come live with me, pleathe," young Jacob answered solemnly. That's all. Pleathe, Grampa?" Large blue eyes filled with tears as they silently added their plea. Father bent his head in despair, then roused himself and leaned over to engulf the child in a hug. Although a man of erudition and education, words failed him. He offered the only consolation he could as his own tears mingled with his grandson's.

\* \* \*

"Please, Peter! You *must* convince her to see me! I cannot go on in this way!" Vincent paced the narrow tunnel, feeling constricted as never before, not by physical barriers, but by this promise which he found so difficult to keep. "If I can't see her, how can I ever find any peace? How can *she*?"

Peter's sympathetic heart was troubled. He had known this day would come. He had recognized the futility of trying to keep Vincent from Catherine from the beginning. He knew Vincent, knew that he *must* see her if she lived. Still, for Catherine's sake, he had to try to argue her case. "I understand your side of this, Vincent. But...try to understand *hers*! She knows you are about to Join with another woman, that this woman has been living Below for months, that you've been close to her for years. The two of you are raising your son. What other course can she follow but to stay away, to let you continue to live your life as you have chosen to live it? Can't you understand and honor that sacrifice?"

Vincent hung his head, despair and shame sapping his strength. He leaned heavily against the tunnel wall, then looked up at Peter and begged, "Even knowing all that...*please*, Peter!"

The older man relented, his heart not truly in his arguments. "I'll speak to her, Vincent. Explain how you feel. But I can't promise anything."

Relief suffused Vincent's face. "I understand, Peter. Thank you."

\* \* \*

"No, I can't! Don't ask me, Peter. It's not fair!" Catherine collapsed across her bed, sobbing. Peter gazed at her with a worried expression - was it possible she'd gotten even *thinner*, even *more* gaunt than when he'd found her? It was as if she were wasting away, her will to live bleeding slowly from her - that vital will which had sustained her all those long months, had brought her back from the brink of oblivion, had driven her to get well so she could come home...to the man she now could not bear to see.

After a moment, she collected herself. He imagined it cost her more than a little to force the tears down again. When she opened her eyes, they stared bleakly at him. "It's so...hard. In my mind, it's only been a few months since I gave birth to Jacob. When I see him, I recognize how much time has passed. But if I see Vincent...it will feel as if no time has passed at all. How can I face him, knowing he loves someone else?" She lifted her tear-stained face to his, desperate for understanding.

"Cathy...Cathy...." Peter was at a loss. How to explain that this meeting was inevitable, that neither of them could move forward with their lives unless this barrier could be broken, this awful situation could be confronted? "Sweetheart," he stroked her hair as he tried to persuade her, "You must have known from the beginning that you couldn't keep from seeing Vincent. Too much has happened

between you to be able to walk away without a word...even if that word is goodbye."

Catherine gasped. "Goodbye?"

Peter looked puzzled. "Isn't that what you're dreading?"

She shook her head in resignation. "No. If I could say goodbye, I'd do it in a heartbeat...for both of us. What I fear is seeing him and...begging him to stay." Fresh tears fell from her eyes, as, thoroughly miserable and defeated now, she crawled into Peter's arms and wept her heart away.

\* \* \*

The tension in the air was palpable.

Peter had come downstairs to leave a note for Vincent, only to find him still waiting at his basement threshold. He had sighed heavily and told Vincent to go up, that Catherine would see him after all. Immensely grateful, Vincent had grasped the man's shoulders briefly before brushing past him up the stairs, and Peter had turned to take a long, long walk through the still, cool tunnels.

Now, as they stood facing each other in the sitting room, neither knew what to say, how to begin.

Vincent was shocked at how pallid and frail Catherine looked. Her skin was as pale as bone china. She looked almost like a ghost to him ...or a beloved and sorely missed angel. He could almost believe she was only a vision, except that her perfume filled his senses, and he could almost see her heartbeat in the blue veins of her neck. It was beating so fast....

Catherine's battered heart tore into pieces when she first beheld the achingly familiar planes of Vincent's face. To her, he was the man she'd last seen mere months ago, when she'd stumbled to the rooftop in a desperate effort to reclaim her son, only to find herself in Vincent's arms as she succumbed to the drug which was meant to kill her. So much had remained unsaid then - words of love and commitment and gratitude. She tried to force herself to focus on the fact that several years had actually gone by, that he was another woman's man now, that he had another dream, another life -- one that didn't include her. But when she looked into his eyes, all that fell away, and she was mesmerized anew by the beauty and power of his presence.

Each took a step toward the other, and suddenly the space between them melted away until they were locked in each other's arms. Clinging tightly, each began to speak.

"I'm so sorry...I never meant to...."

"Catherine...I couldn't rest until...."

They both stopped speaking and pulled back, gazing at each other raptly. Deep in his soul, Vincent felt the stirrings of wonder and a painful twinge of sorrow -- but neither emotion was being generated from within him. In her heart, Catherine felt an unbridled joy and a pulse of fear -- yet neither feeling was emanating from her. Shocked and stunned, amazement spread over their features. Their Bond! It was...returning!

Vincent fell to his knees before Catherine, wrapping his arms about her waist, pressing his face against her stomach. "Forgive me for not waiting...I should have known...."

"No, Vincent, no. You did the only thing you *could* do -- you went on."

"All the pain..."

"I caused it...I'm sorry...."

"No! Not you...I...."

"I love you, Vincent!"

"Oh, Catherine...I love you!"

She slid down until she, too, was on her knees, facing him. His arms seized her firmly and he sought her mouth with his own, blindly, desperately. The kiss they shared became a living thing, full of all the passion and torment of their lives since they had been forcibly parted. No thought of anyone or anything intruded on their need for each other. It was a pure, perfect thing, long denied, long suppressed, now freed gloriously, intensely, rapturously. For a long exhilarating interval suspended in time, their hearts, their very souls flowed together in a perfect harmony of love and desire within their restored Bond.

Irrevocably, realization finally struck them, shattering the bliss of that timeless moment. Catherine gasped and wrenched herself from Vincent's arms, falling back against the carpet. She lay panting, a look of agony on her face. "Oh, God! Forgive me! I didn't think...how could I...I'm sorry...." she babbled, horrified at what she had said and done. All her stern promises to herself had been undone at the first glimpse of his beloved face. He belonged to another! A shaft of hopelessness pierced her soul. She closed her eyes tightly, but the hot tears squeezed out and splashed down her face.

Vincent still knelt before her, hands against his heart, his great chest heaving, gulping air. At his first sight of Catherine, she whom he had believed forever lost to him, all his inhibitions, all his restraint had been overwhelmed by the surging potency of his physical and emotional response to her. He had forgotten himself, after all his years of iron discipline. What worse torment could he have conceived of than to kiss her as if he were free to offer himself to her? Throwing back his head, he roared his frustration at the universe. The walls of the study shook with his explosive howl of despair. When he could speak, he dropped his head to his chest and whispered huskily, "What exists between us...has only grown...stronger."

Slowly, Catherine rose to her feet and stepped close to Vincent, gazing with a desperate longing at his slumped form. Forcing herself to suppress the trembling of desire which suffused her at the thought of touching him again, she reached down and gently urged him to stand. When he had regained his feet, she held herself apart from him and stated sadly, "This is what I feared, what I sought to avoid. I never wanted my return to cause you...." She could not finish, but knew he understood more than her words could express. Through their Bond, she knew he felt...everything -- her joy, her hopelessness, her undying love -- just as she felt his.

Echoing her own question from so many years before, he replied, "And now...what?"

Summoning every bit of strength remaining in her slight frame, Catherine answered him, her voice strained, choked. "You must...go back. You must go...home. We must not meet again."

Vincent's anguished eyes were filled with tears. "I hear you say the words, Catherine...but our Bond belies you."

She nodded ruefully. "You didn't ask me what I wanted, Vincent. You asked what we should do." Unable to bear being in the same room with him any longer -- the

urge to touch him again, to forget everything else and beg him to stay was so overpowering -- she turned and fled.

Long after she left him, Vincent stood staring after her, the pain, like acid, etching cruel furrows in his soul.

\* \* \*

"After she begged you not to go...you went to see her anyway?!"

Father was beside himself with rage. Everything he most feared when he had first heard of Catherine's return was coming to pass. His son and his family were being torn apart. Once she had heard of all that had transpired Below since her kidnapping, *why* had Catherine let them know of her return? He understood her desire to see her child, but she must have known of the turmoil her reappearance would cause, of the ripple effect, the results of which were evident now.

All at once, Father sighed and rubbed his eyes wearily. It was all inevitable. If there was anyone to blame, it was not her -- nor was it his son, nor Diana. He bitterly regretted that he could no longer see the future clearly. He cursed himself for vanity that he ever thought he could.

"Father...please understand...I couldn't...."

"No, no, son, that's all right," Father interrupted him. After his initial outburst, all the fight had gone out of him. He wanted only to be left alone to weep. But right now his son needed him. He had few words of comfort or guidance to offer, but he would try to be of what little help he could. "I understand why you had to see her. What the two of you once shared...."

"What we *still* share, Father." Vincent knew the effect such a statement would have on the older man. But the time for avoiding the hard truths was past.

"*What?* What...do you mean?" *Worse and worse*, he thought to himself. *Is there no end to this agony?*

Grimly, Vincent pressed on. "What I mean, Father, is...our Bond has returned. We had only to...touch, and it was restored to us. I don't know why or how, but one thing I *do* know is this: we love, Father, as we did. No - more deeply, more purely...more passionately than we did before."

Barely above a whisper, Vincent heard his father's "Oh, my God!"

He dropped heavily into a nearby chair and leaned his elbows on his knees; his head hung low, his mane wild from the mad flight from Peter's basement threshold which had brought him here just minutes ago. Through the curtain of hair which hid his features, Father heard his mumbled confession. "She told me...we must...never see each other again."

Father could only imagine the strength and courage it had taken for Catherine to pronounce such a sentence upon herself. Vincent would go back to a family, a whole community which loved and supported him. She? What would Catherine's life be like, knowing that the comfort of her adopted family Below was forever denied to her, that the love of the man whose child she had borne was given to another woman, that her time with her own child was so measured, that he was being raised by others when she ached to keep him with her always. "She is a remarkable woman, Vincent. She has set you free."

Vincent rose and stalked over to where Father sat. "No! She cannot set me free! I cannot *be* free! What she wishes is noble and worthy, Father -- but altogether *impossible*!"

Trying to bring his desperate son back to the problem at hand, Father reminded him, "You are planning to Join with Diana, Vincent! What of your love for *her*? What of all she has sacrificed for you, for us, these past years? Can you toss all of that -- and her -- away so lightly, now that you have found Catherine again?"

Vincent turned away and began to pace. "No...I.... How can I explain this, Father? What is between Diana and me...that never would have happened if Catherine had not died...I mean...."

Father nodded his head tiredly. "I *know* what you mean, Vincent."

"I could never have turned to another woman...."

All the breath seemed to leave Father's body, and he gasped, "Are you saying...you don't love Diana anymore?"

"No! I *do* care for her!" Vincent struggled to find the words to explain his tortured feelings. "But...Father, this is so difficult.... It is true that I cannot be free from Catherine -- but that was true even before I knew she was still alive. I could never be free of her, not in any way. But that doesn't mean that I don't care for Diana."

He shook his head as if trying to clear his thoughts. "Diana knows that I love Catherine. I have always told her that my love for Catherine would never change, and it never has."

Father's eyes narrowed in sympathy. Gently, he said, "But a beloved memory is a different thing to accept than a live, breathing rival for a man's affections."

Earnestly, his son avowed, "Catherine is no rival, Father. She has no rival. Catherine is first in my heart, always."

Shocked, Father questioned him. "And...Diana *knows* this?"

"I...have struggled...always...to explain this to her. I have never lied to her, Father. I believe she understands...although now she must confront that knowledge in a way she never expected to."

Father sighed. He felt old...so old. "Yes."

Vincent looked at his father with eyes bereft of all joy. "But none of this matters, Father. Catherine...has sent me away. She believes the life I am living now is the one I was meant to have. And I must honor that belief, Father."

"So, you intend to go forward with the Joining Ceremony?" Father was incredulous. He couldn't understand any of this...any of it.

"Yes. I'll tell Diana tonight...we will be Joined as planned."

\* \* \*

Pain - cold, sharp as winter's wind - tore her soul to shreds. Vanity! Until this moment, she had truly thought she was the one he loved...more. Quietly, cat-like, Diana retraced her steps back down the tunnel from which she had come just moments before. Hearing voices, she had paused just before the threshold to Father's study, and she had heard enough of the exchange between Vincent and Father to realize what she had to do. Before the shock set in. Before the denial and the recrimination and the myriad other emotions which were sure to follow. While she still saw the truth, before she allowed illusion to cloud her judgment. Before she followed her heart instead of her head.

\* \* \*

Vincent stepped wearily into his chamber, carelessly throwing off his cloak, and sank into the closest chair, the picture of dejection. He didn't see Diana sitting on his bed. She'd been waiting for him since she'd left the scene of his recent discussion with Father, but he was unaware of that. When she spoke, announcing her presence, his shoulders tensed and he raised his head.

"I'm sorry...I didn't realize you were here." His voice was strained, hushed.

"That's been happening a lot lately - you've been more preoccupied than usual," she replied neutrally.

"Yes." Vincent threw his head back against the chair, blinking back sudden tears. "And for that, too...I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's understandable," she replied. "I have been, too. Catherine's return...has dredged up a lot of old memories."

Vincent thought to himself, *No, those memories are living things - they've kept me alive until now*. He shook his head. These were thoughts he couldn't share, not now. Besides, he'd expressed them often enough before; he couldn't help it if Diana had steadfastly refused to understand their import. How many times over the past four years had he told her how Catherine filled his heart, his soul? How her love sustained him in his darkest hours? Had Diana deliberately misunderstood, or could she truly not fathom a love so deep? He cared for her, but sometimes she baffled him.

Diana looked upon the tormented figure before her and bit back bitter tears. She knew what she had to do, had been thinking of how to broach the subject since she'd arrived, knowing she'd have only minutes before Vincent returned. She began.

"When we were kissing the other night -- I was with *you*...who were *you* with?"

Tortured eyes turned to her briefly, then Vincent bowed his head, unable to respond. She already knew - she'd heard the name he murmured clearly.

Diana pressed grimly on. "Was that...the first time, Vincent? Or have there been...other times...?"

He closed his eyes against the fierce bolt of agony which jolted through him. This was a thing which had tortured his soul ever since Diana had become more than a

friend to him -- he knew that, when his eyes were closed, he wished the lips he was kissing belonged to the woman who was first in his heart, not the woman in his arms. He had told himself it was a harmless fantasy, that it only mattered that he also cared for the woman he was with. If he longed for another who was beyond all touch, if she gave balm to his soul through the arms, the lips of another, did it truly matter? And if, once they were Joined, he could close his eyes when they made love and imagine.... But now, when that lost love was again within reach...it mattered a great deal. He owed Diana...and Catherine...this honesty. If he were to honor Catherine's sacrifice, he must do it openly. This was the woman to whom he would pledge himself for a lifetime - she deserved the truth, always.

Softly, he voiced his response. "Since...since the beginning."

Diana flinched almost as if he had struck her. She'd expected the answer to be *Sometimes...not Always*. What a fool she had been!

Vincent felt the slight movement in her as she flinched, even with his eyes closed. "I'm so sorry, Diana. I care for you, but when I close my eyes...the face before me is...not yours." He turned to face her. Deep blue eyes pleaded for understanding, even as he realized it was too much to hope for. His voice cracked and broke as he said, "I...missed her...*so much*! I could never truly...have her. So...I...allowed my mind...to conjure her...and I imagined...how I would have held her, kissed her...if I had only found the courage...."

She was glad the chamber was in semi-darkness, so he couldn't see the hot tears she blinked from her eyes. *What a fool...what a fool...what a fool...* was the mantra that her stunned mind kept repeating. Paradoxically, the pain of this sudden understanding made her decision somewhat easier. "Yes, that's clear to me now, as never before," she answered. "And still...you plan to Join with me - but now, not because you wish to...but to honor the sacrifice of the woman you love more than me." Diana laughed hollowly. "I guess I never realized before now how much I truly *am* just 'another woman' in your life!"

"I have never lied to you, Diana."

"No, that's true, you never have. Perhaps I just allowed myself to hear what you were saying in the way that was most flattering to me. I'm so crazy in love with you, I just imagined what we had was that special for you, too."

"It *is* special, Diana! I do not give my love lightly."

"I believe you. Still.... Tell me something, Vincent. You went to see Catherine, didn't you?"

He nodded, uncaring how she knew.

"Did you just...talk? Or did you...do more?"

Vincent stirred uncomfortably in his chair. Was she prescient...or had she somehow overheard his conversation with Father? It didn't matter now, of course - it only mattered that she obviously knew. "We held each other...and we kissed."

"Was it a...friendly kiss, as you'd give to Mary? Or was it a loving kiss...as you'd give to me?"

Vincent paused to reflect. "It was...unlike either. It was a kiss unlike any I have ever felt before."

Diana bit her lip. To herself she thought, *Sometimes his honesty can be as sharp as those deadly claws of his.* The investigator took the forefront again. "How would you describe it then?"

Vincent turned the full force of his gaze upon her. This answer would forever alter their relationship. He would not have told her this, but since she asked, he could not withhold it. With sympathy brimming in his voice, he responded, "It was the most pure and passionate kiss I have ever experienced. It was perfect."

Diana smiled sadly. "I'm sorry to put you through this, Vincent - but we both needed to be sure." She shook her head in amazement. "It's strange to know that I've just talked myself out of a relationship with the man I thought I'd be spending the rest of my life with. The funny thing is...I know you love me. But...because I love *you*...I can't let us both make a terrible mistake."

She stood and walked over to Vincent and stroked his face tenderly with the backs of her fingers. "My love, I don't think you would ever have described our first kiss as 'perfect' -- *I* would have, but you wouldn't. Tell Catherine for me...thanks, but no thanks. You and she belong together. You'd have realized that eventually, even if we had Joined. And by then it might have been too late to correct the mistake." Bending down, she kissed him softly, once, twice...then stepped back quickly, avoiding all further touch. Vincent stood and reached out to her.

"No. Please. Allow me some dignity. If you touch me, I'll crumble. I never want to do that in front of you."

"Diana...I'm so sorry...what can...."

"Nothing. There's nothing you need to say or do. I'll be gone in an hour, I just need to pull together a few things. I've spoken with a friend in L.A. - there's a job waiting for me there if I want it. I think I want it. I think that's the best thing for both of us. Will you...explain things to everyone? Father? Jacob?"

He nodded, stunned, unable to reply.

She gazed tenderly into his eyes, her heart in her throat, choking her, tormenting her. "Thank you for loving me," she murmured. Then she was gone.

Vincent stood, rigid as a statue. But he did not look after Diana as she left. He stared straight ahead -- into his future.

\* \* \*

"No, please! I can't bear this, Vincent! You promised you wouldn't come back!"

Catherine had been curled up on her bed, staring hollowly into the darkening shadows outside the small pool of light cast by her bedside lamp. At his whispered, "Catherine," she had started violently, snapping out of her reverie with brutal force. Now she stared at him in bewilderment, her pain and misery pulsating through their Bond, almost driving Vincent to his knees.

"Catherine," he begged, "I must speak to you." He held his hands out to her beseechingly.

Catherine took several deep breaths and forced herself to sit up. Raising her knees, she leaned her upper body against them, sagging from the slight effort. The events of the past days had all but reduced her to jelly. She was not up to having a "scene."

Almost desperately, she pleaded in return, "I can't...I just can't. No more, Vincent, please!" She bowed her head, unable to look at him, hoping without hope that he would be gone when next she looked up. Suddenly, at her side, she felt his presence. He exuded a subtle warmth that, despite her better sense, she still leaned toward, like a flower turning its face to the sun.

Kneeling beside her, he urged her to face him, his hands closing gently upon her upper arms. Realizing she was about to succumb to him, she yanked herself out of his grasp, then scrambled across and off the bed. She stood stiffly, hands clenched, as if at attention. Then she closed her eyes in resignation as she capitulated to his insistence. "Say what you have to say...then leave me."

Looking across at her, Vincent spoke his heart. "When I say what I have to say, Catherine...if you wish, I shall never leave you again."

Stunned, Catherine's eyes flew open and she stared in stupefaction at him. "What....?"

He rose quickly and came around the end of the bed to her. Taking her hands in his, he patiently urged her fingers to release the hard fists they were making. Then he bent and kissed both hands and pressed them to his heart. "Diana has spoken with me. She has finally realized how much you have always meant to me...and mean to me still. She will not Join with me, Catherine. She has left the Tunnels...and me."

Catherine shook her head, unwilling to believe her ears. "She...left you?" she repeated numbly. "But...why? She loves you. She must know that you...love her?"

Vincent nodded. "But she never fully understood my feelings for her, Catherine. She thought that she had somehow...supplanted you. When I told her that I had never stopped loving you, even when I thought you were dead... She, for the first time, truly realized that she had never, could have never, replaced you in my heart. Under those circumstances, no matter the pain it caused, she would not stay."

Wonder replaced consternation on Catherine's face. "Are you sure, Vincent? You must be sure."

Struggling to find the words to explain the complex emotions spinning within him, he said, "I would have Joined with her, Catherine -- I had made that promise, and I would have honored it. I do care for Diana. I will miss her. Jacob will miss her. All those Below will miss her." Sighing, he continued, "But...since the moment I heard you were alive, my heart was at your feet. Even if you had never agreed to see me, it would have made no difference. If Diana did not realize that before, it is better that she did now. If she had come to understand it after we were Joined -- the pain, the mortification would have been even more unbearable for her."

"But...you had never made it clear to her before today?"

"Catherine...how many different ways can one say to another that the one who came before still lives in your heart? I told her...many times...and I thought she understood. Obviously, she did not. It might never have mattered to her, except that...you came back. And when you did...after assuming that my feelings for you were abstract, passionless...she was forced to confront the living reality of them."

Catherine's eyes filled with empathetic tears. She well understood how someone could love this man to the point where she could admit no other option but to be with him always. Hadn't she herself been taken aback when Lisa had reappeared in Vincent's life, when it suddenly became apparent that feelings long dormant were surfacing? How much more stunning would it have been for Diana to find herself face to face with not just the memory of a long-lost love, but the breathing reality of her? She could easily imagine the pain, the anguish, the fear. She had lived it herself, since she had found out about Diana.

These thoughts of remembered pain vanished as Catherine gazed up into Vincent's eyes, eyes that held the question he desperately required an answer to. "I have always been yours, Vincent. Nothing can ever change that."

Still not sure, he forced her to confront what he feared was an insurmountable obstacle. In a hoarse voice filled with tears, he rasped, "Even...even though I...I betrayed you? Even though I lost faith in our dream?"

Catherine shook her head, a gentle smile playing across her lips. "Do you call it a 'betrayal' to search for happiness after tragedy, after loss? How were you to know I was alive? No, Vincent, you did *not* betray me. Please, if you love me, don't ever say that again."

Relief surged through their awakened Bond -- and with it, a volcanic wave of love and gratitude. Almost unable to believe that all was truly well, that he had his Catherine back in every way, Vincent clung to her, embracing her fiercely now, even as his legs trembled from the violence of his emotional response. He sank to the carpet, bringing her with him. She toppled against him, pressing as closely as she could to him.

Vincent brushed his lips against her hair, her forehead, her eyes, savoring the taste of her, inhaling her sweet fragrance. Since he had first looked upon her that night in the park so long ago, broken and bleeding, his heart had urged him to claim her, and now he had no will to resist. His tenderness was engulfed by a rising hunger which caused his kisses to burn upon her skin, his lips to possess and brand her with a heat she craved and welcomed. Fleeting, he realized that he had never, in

all his time with Diana, felt such a profound and overwhelming desire as he felt for this woman now in his arms. With Diana, it had been so easy to put off any lovemaking until some time in the future - the night of their Joining was to be their first time together, and now Vincent's heart gladdened that at least that pain was spared them all. His first...his only...lover would be Catherine.

Catherine groaned in ecstasy, absorbed in the sensual onslaught of his ardor. He fastened his lips to the pulse point at her throat, worrying it, nuzzling it, causing the blood to pound in her veins like wildfire. All the restrained passion within her broke through and flooded her soul. She took his face in her hands and bestowed hot kisses along his eyelids and cheekbones, until she came to his searching lips. She urged them apart, nipping and sucking on his full lower lip, sending her tongue to stoke the fire searing his soul, devouring him with her hungry mouth.

Their kisses, their caresses grew more fervent, more demanding. But Vincent could feel through their Bond that the limits of Catherine's strength had been taxed almost beyond endurance, no matter how welcome his ardor was. So, mindful of her weakened state, he forced himself to restraint, breaking away from the intoxication of her lips, the invitation of her willing arms. He panted heavily from the effort, but he managed - just barely - to regain a measure of control. Lifting his Beloved gently to the bed, he followed with every intention of denying his body's urges, of letting his Catherine rest and recover before he begged for the sweet solace of her body. His embrace as they lay together was meant only to be comforting, but Catherine squirmed out of his arms and rose on one elbow to regard him, her face flushed, her hair tousled, her breath coming in short gasps.

"Why...why did you stop?" she asked, her eyes wide, confused. They absorbed the reflected candlelight, the deep black pools of her pupils showing her advanced state of arousal.

Gently, he responded, one trembling finger raised to brush away a stray lock of hair from her forehead. "You're exhausted, Catherine. Please rest. I won't leave you. And later..."

Tears welled and fell from her eyes as a sudden, deep sob wracked her thin frame. The wounded look she gave him tore through him mercilessly. "I know...I'm too thin, and my face isn't...."

Concerned about her misunderstanding and the pain it had caused her, he responded quickly, "No, Catherine! I'm not pulling away because you don't please me. I want to be with you more than I can express." His face softened, the

adoration in his eyes taking Catherine's breath away. "Your beauty is undiminished. It cannot change. But I feel your weariness, your strength fails. How can I...impose myself when you're...."

She shook her head, her eyes pleading with him. "We almost lost each other, Vincent...and now, against all odds, we're here, together. Don't keep us apart any longer...*please*."

His will to resist her melted at her words, supplanted by the burgeoning desire which he'd held back only with great effort. He groaned, "Oh, Catherine," and pulled her to him, taking her mouth again even as his hands pressed her body to his.

She was so frail, but the ferocity of her hunger astonished him. He abandoned his efforts to make exceptions for her fragility, as her arms clung tightly to him. Her hands were everywhere, demanding and insistent, even as his took license from her and traced across and around every curve and plane of her body. Soon their clothing lay in untidy piles on the bed, the floor - wherever it had been strewn in their haste to undress.

Vincent's mind was filled with only one thought: to touch and taste his Beloved as he'd longed to for all these lonely years. His hot tongue lavished attention along the tender column of her neck, taking in the silken smoothness of bare skin, the slightly salty taste of her flesh; his nostrils flared to inhale the rich, musky aroma of the arousal he had inspired with his attentions. Her small, perfect breasts lay couched in his palms as he nuzzled and licked them, suckling against taut, dusky nipples, and he exulted in the moment, feeling every response both from her body and within their Bond.

Her body enchanted him, tormented him, as he sought and found every curve and hollow with his tongue, his lips, his hands. More than anything, he needed her to *feel* his love for her, this physical manifestation which expressed his heart's overflowing ardor for all of her, for everything she was. How long he had dreamed of this, his eyes always closed so he could imagine it. Now he kept his eyes open, to take in every reaction, every expression, every trembling inch of her. He felt her shiver with excitement beneath his hands, and fought with his own desire to take her *now* in order to extend the pleasure of this first thrilling exploration of her exquisite body. If it were possible, he'd make love to her forever, although that still wouldn't be enough time to communicate the depth of his love.

Catherine's fingers slid appreciatively through the thick golden fur covering Vincent's bare chest, delighting in the hard play of muscle beneath. Her imagination had not prepared her for the incredible, virile reality of him, the beauty and power of his body transcending every fantasy she'd ever had. Even as her Beloved adored her with his mouth and hands, she did the same, pressing fervent kisses against every inch of him she could reach. She couldn't get enough of touching him, of caressing every part of him so long denied to her - his massive shoulders, the strong, lean muscles of his thighs, his thick, corded biceps, his taut, perfectly defined stomach, the tight, luscious curves of his bottom. To think she'd almost lost him...that she'd willingly have let him go had his heart truly led him to another - it was enough to drive her crazy with imagined regret. She knew she'd never take his love for granted. It was more precious than any possession, more cherished than any memory. To be his...to be loved and wanted and *his* - that was *everything*.

Her hands strayed low, until she caressed the thick, impressive length of his steely erection. It burgeoned at her touch, the heat of him there quickening her own barely contained desire past bearing. She moaned his name low in her throat, begging, "*Please...please...*" as she burrowed into his embrace, rubbing shamelessly against him, until he lifted her to straddle him and gently, tenderly impaled her willing flesh.

As she took him deeply into her core, they both moaned in ecstasy. This was beyond bliss, beyond rapture - this was a physical Bonding which transported them into another dimension of euphoria, much as the return of their spiritual Bond had done. Each realized with stunning force the impossibility of sharing themselves with any other - it would have left them incomplete, bereft. Both needed the embrace of their Bond to sanctify and enhance their physical union. They truly were meant for no one but each other. This was their fate, their destiny...the culmination of every moment of their lives since their meeting.

Vincent had never remembered that brief, frantic coupling when Catherine's desperation to revive him had resulted in Jacob's conception - to him, this was their first time, this rapturous merging of flesh, of souls. He was hers, wanted only to be loved and wanted and *hers* - that was *everything*.

The perfection of the moment expanded as they undulated together, bodies and hearts intertwined, enveloping them in a defining moment of complete oneness. Their shared climax reverberated through their Bond; the shuddering intensity of it magnified and amplified their union until their souls melted together in a blinding

burst of pure synergy - and their Bond swelled and blossomed into something larger, deeper, grander, more all-encompassing than either had ever dreamed.

It was to be ever thus with them - their bodies' joining always a presage to a new intensification of their Bond. But they knew none of that yet. For now, this was all...it was incredible...it was enough...it was everything.

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The celebration for little Jacob's Naming Day was in full swing. William had made a large cake covered with icing mice and monkeys -- even he was aware of the youngster's twin passions. The candles had been lit -- four colorful tapers made especially for the cake by Rebecca -- and Jacob stood on Father's favorite chair as he prepared to blow them out and accept the congratulations of his Tunnel family. The boy was delighted to be the center of attention, and his eyes sought his father's to make sure he was being watched during this most important moment. Satisfied that he had his Daddy's complete attention, he frowned fiercely in concentration, his little face screwed up in a scowl -- where did he come up with *that* particular face, Father wondered -- then took a deep breath and blew with all his might. The candles obligingly went out, and the room erupted in cheers.

As soon as Jacob had done his candle duty, Father leaned over and asked him what it was he had wished for. The youngster gazed at his grandfather with all the disdain his cherubic face could muster, reminding him, "You aren't th'ppothed to *tell* or it won't come *true*."

Chagrined at his *faux pas*, Father responded quickly, "Of course. How silly of me. Forgive me, Jacob."

The child wasn't looking at his grandfather any longer, however. He had turned with a look of such astonished wonder on his face that Father marveled at it. What could have caused it? He followed the boy's gaze until his eyes fell on the slight figure at the top of the steps. The crowd hushed, as all eyes turned to the newcomer.

"*MOMMY!!*" Jacob scrambled down from the chair and thrust his way through the assemblage, which parted before him, as anxious for him to reach his goal as he was. Catherine knelt as he neared her, and caught him up in her arms to swing him high before clasping him firmly and kissing him again and again. The unbridled laughter of the little boy, so long unheard in the tunnels, echoed now in the near-

silent chamber. As if in relieved response, his laughter sparked delighted murmurs and applause from one and all.

Vincent hovered near his son and his Beloved, drinking in the sight of his restored family. He alone, besides Catherine, heard the whispered confession of his son. "It came true! My wish!"

"What did you wish for, sweetheart?" Catherine whispered in response.

"For you! For YOU!!!"

As Catherine's eyes met Vincent's, it was not just their hearts and eyes alone which overflowed in that chamber deep below the streets of New York City. And as Vincent moved to close the space between them, to embrace forever his dream of a happy life, his entire family Below raised their voices in a roaring cheer.