

## FOR THE LOVE OF A FRIEND

Snuggled warm underneath layers of quilts and the heat from Vincent's warm-natured body, Catherine wondered if the moment could be any more perfect. The brazier he'd lit to chase away the worst of the cold was also keeping their heavy ceramic mugs of tea hot. Add a lazy Saturday evening and Bronte's *Little Women*, and life was exactly the way it should be.

"Your feet are still cold," Vincent gruffly commented from behind his copy of *Les Miserables*. Beneath the quilts his legs moved slightly, just enough to trap her sock feet beneath his tree trunk thigh.

Catherine snorted softly. "My feet are always cold. Deal with it."

"As much as I love you, having two pieces of ice shoved between me and my mattress is keeping my mind off of enjoying my novel." There was the sound of a page turning before he continued. "Would a second pair of socks help?"

"Some nights I have to use a hot water bottle," she confessed, lowering her tone so she could face him. Blue eyes peered over at her, suddenly crinkling at the corners while he hid the rest of his smile.

Laying the book face-down beside him, Vincent dove beneath the quilts to search for her feet. Once they were in hand, he started to vigorously rub them. "Let's see if we can't get the circulation going first."

His hot hands and nimble fingers did wondrous things to her feet. She wanted to ask if someone had taught him how to massage, or if it was something he'd learned naturally. Then decided it didn't matter. Groaning softly, Catherine confessed, "Some women pay good money for rubdowns like that."

"I didn't say I was doing this for free," the man murmured almost too softly for her to hear. But she had.

Her eyes flew open in time to see the fleeting grin disappear from his as he concentrated on the job at hand. He was teasing her, and she was more than willing to see where it would lead.

The slight flick of his nails over the ticklish pad under her toes also confirmed her suspicions. Catherine jerked her foot from his grasp as laughter bubbled out. Immediately Vincent reached for the other foot, but she was already curling that one underneath her, as well.

"I thought you were going to help warm my feet," she protested, giggling.

Vincent started to respond when alarm flickered over his features. His head jerked toward the door, his whole body tensed, as he listened. Catherine also sat up and watched him as he interpreted the insistent banging on the pipes that seemed to fill the chamber.

Before she could ask him what the emergency was, Vincent jumped out of bed and began to tug on his boots. She did likewise, determined to follow him and help if necessary.

“What is it?” she asked, grabbing for her heavy full-length sweater.

“It’s from Mouse,” Vincent responded. He dashed out of the chamber without further explanation. Catherine hurried to follow.

When she had come down into the tunnels to share some quiet time with Vincent, it had been late afternoon. By now it had to be nighttime. That explained why Vincent wasn’t hesitant to hurry outside, knowing the cover of dark would keep him safe from discovery.

They met another small crowd of people also on their way to the surface to aid in whatever Mouse’s plea for help contained. Vincent ordered them to return to their warmer chambers; he would take care of the matter. The rest disbursed after eliciting a promise from Vincent that he would call if he needed assistance.

After the crowd turned to leave, Vincent and Catherine made their way topside. The closer they got to the surface, the lower the temperature dropped. It wasn’t long before she could make out the sound of thunder and steady patter of rain. Since the weather wasn’t cold enough to snow, the rain would turn to ice by morning. Or slush. *Just peachy*, she groaned to herself.

They emerged onto the Shearin Street exit through the basement of another abandoned building not too far from the lower east side. Mouse was there, waiting for them. He was soaked to the skin, hair and clothes plastered with bits of ice. Catherine realized it wasn’t just storming—it was sleeting.

“Mouse, what is the emergency?” Vincent asked as they hurried over to the shivering form.

“Help Arthur,” the young man answered through chattering teeth. His breath emerged in puffs of white vapor. “Stuck.”

“Stuck where?”

“Come,” Mouse gestured, and he took off down the alley toward the rear of the building. The rest of them followed, jogging to keep up and to prevent themselves from becoming even more chilled as the icy particles melted and seeped into their clothing.

Once they reached the back, they noticed a narrow sluiceway built to carry off excess rain and prevent flooding. Where it disappeared underneath the cross street was a small drainage tunnel. Mouse got down on his stomach, heedless of the refuse, and peered into the opening that couldn’t have been more than eight inches in diameter.

Catherine joined Vincent in getting down on their knees to look inside. The flashlights from Mouse's makeshift headlamp penetrated only a few feet down the tunnel's throat before they illuminated a mass of wire, cloth, and wood. No telling what kind of garbage was clogging the tunnel. Catherine winced as a sliver of ice bruised her cheek. Vincent glanced back at her with concern in his eyes.

"Mouse, are you certain Arthur went in here?" he asked, turning back to the opening.

"Listen!" the young man insisted. "Arthur's hurt. Hurt bad."

Even with the sound of sleet pinging off of the pavement and concrete around them, and thunder rumbling in the distance, the pitiful chirping of the stuck raccoon came faintly to them. "He can't be too far inside," Catherine observed.

"Let's see." Scooting as close to the tunnel as he could, Vincent reached down the narrow aperture and managed to pull out a handful of sodden and mud-covered debris. It was difficult at first to make out what mess was, until Mouse pulled bits of it apart.

"Kite."

Wordlessly, Vincent reached in again. His reach was much longer than Mouse's; his grip was more sure. There was a little bark of irritation inside the tunnel, and Vincent pulled back with a handful of wet, angry raccoon. String and plastic were still tangled around the two left paws and the tail. Evidently the animal had been doing a little investigating inside the culvert and managed to get trapped by the broken pieces of the kite.

Handing the chattering pet over to Mouse, who quickly swaddled it inside his jacket, Vincent helped Catherine to her feet. "Let's get back down before the weather gets worse."

The moment they stepped back inside the empty building, the trio was greeted by the small group of people who had stayed behind. Or at least some of them had. Most were holding blankets and towels in anticipation. Vincent raised an eyebrow at Tall Peter, who grinned in spite of the irritated look being given to him.

"Hey, we did what you asked. We went back to our chambers," the man chuckled.

"I can see," Vincent dryly said, eyeing the thick blanket being draped over his shoulders.

Smiling, Catherine added, "You didn't say anything about *not* coming back."

Before Vincent could reply, Mouse broke in. "Taking Arthur below. Thanks, Vincent. Thanks, Catherine." And holding onto his pet, now wrapped in wet, muck-covered towels, the young man hurriedly disappeared through the hole in the basement wall. Silently, the others who had come to offer their help followed suite.

“I need to get out of these wet things,” Catherine said. Already she could feel some slight sensation in her frozen hands and feet. “You do, too,” she added.

“There’s still a change of clothes for you in my chamber,” Vincent commented.

She grinned wider. “You mean, I don’t have to go back to my apartment to change?”

“I mean...” he started, paused, then a bright flush of color came over his face. Added to the diamond-bright chips of ice and water clinging to his hair, he appeared quite festive.

Catherine giggled. “Why, Mr. Wells. Are you inviting me to spend the night?”

“The weather outside is frightful.” He wagged his eyebrows at her, suddenly playful.

“And the fire is so delightful,” she continued. “Not to mention our tea still sitting on the brazier.”

“And since we’ve no other place to go,” Vincent softly added, taking her hand.

“It’s not snowing, Vincent. It’s sleeting.”

“And since I must rub your feet, let it sleet, let it sleet, let it sleet.”

She burst out laughing at his rhyme. “That’s terrible!”

“It’s the best I can do on such short notice. Plus I’m starting to feel the need for a warm bath to remove the chill from my bones,” he smiled. “Come, Catherine. It’s getting late.”

Giving her arm a little tug, he led her through the basement entrance and back down into the depths of the tunnel. Down where warmth and companionship could be found any time of the year, regardless of the weather topside. And where no emergency or cry for help was ignored whenever it involved the love of a friend.

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