

## A Family At Last

By Tunnel Writer

*Author's note: This story begins immediately after "No Way Down."*

"Catherine, he saw us... Saw Vincent...the tunnels." Father worriedly glanced first at Catherine and then around at the council members. He had hated waking everyone so early in the morning, but this was an emergency. Their security had been breached.

Vincent, normally in attendance, was in his chamber sleeping. The brutal treatment he had endured during the night had left him exhausted. He desperately needed the rest, and to heal.

"What if he goes to the authorities?" Mary exclaimed in fright.

"What would happen to Vincent?" Jamie asked, equally afraid.

"What if the authorities are on their way now?" William spoke up.

Catherine let out a deep sigh before speaking. "I don't think Isaac will tell. I know him, he's a good man. I don't believe he would betray my trust."

"How can you be sure? We can't just assume all is well." Father looked sternly at Catherine.

"I will speak to him. Honestly, I believe he could be a great asset to the community. He'd be a loyal helper if given the chance. I will explain to him the importance of silence, but deep down I feel like he already knows."

Catherine quickly glanced at her watch: 7 am. "If I go now, I may be able to catch up with him." She stood up to leave.

"I'll come with you," Father said as he, too, stood.

"Travelling the tunnels will be quicker than travelling Up Top. I'll take you to an entrance close to his building," Jamie piped up, grabbing her crossbow.

Catherine knew the girl was right. Rush hour traffic would be a nightmare. She nodded in exhaustion, and left with Jamie and Father.

"Catherine, how did you meet Isaac?"

"Jamie, I'm too tired to get into it right now, but he taught me to fight."

Jamie's eyes lit up. "Do you think he could teach me to fight?"

"Jamie, we do not condone fighting," Father spoke up sternly.

Jamie rolled her eyes. She walked with them to Isaac's building then waved and disappeared back into the tunnels. She would wait for Father to return and walk back with him.

For Catherine, it had been a very long night. The adrenaline that had kept her going strong was now gone. Her head was pounding with a sleep-deprivation headache. Her bed and a long sleep were what she wanted most of all.

That long sleep would have to wait. A talk with Isaac was top priority.

Catherine pounded on the door. "Isaac, we need to talk," she yelled through the door.

The door flew open.

"Yes, we do. Come in. I've been expecting you. Would you like some coffee?" he asked while eyeing Father.

"Yes, please," Catherine stated.

"No, thank you," Father explained.

Isaac grabbed a mug and poured Catherine a cup of coffee. "Please, let me talk first," he said as he handed her the full mug.

"When I was a boy, I lived in Chicago. My pop was on death row, and momma worked three jobs to make ends meet. Both of my brothers were killed in two separate drive-by shootings. I was only eight years old the day my last brother was shot while playing basketball with me. He died in my arms."

"How awful," Catherine exclaimed as she froze, the mug at her mouth.

"Gang life was all my brothers and I knew. We were born and raised into it. I was told the gang was my family. They would take care of me.

"I was arrested at age 13 for drug dealing and carrying a gun. That's the day I realized they didn't care. I was put into the system."

Isaac paused a moment before continuing.

"I wanted a better life. I wanted a REAL family. A family that protects, guides, and loves each other. However, every time I was placed in a home, a gang member would bust me out. I knew I NEEDED to get away. I told my social worker that I wanted to grow up and make something of myself. I told him about the gang and them busting me out of homes, and that the only way out was to die.

"When he knew I was serious about wanting out, he got my momma to sign over parental rights, and he drove me here to New York. My name was changed, and I moved around from place to place until I aged out." Isaac paused a moment and looked directly at Catherine. "Cathy, when you told me about your friend, I could see your protection over him. I know you didn't want me to see him, but I did. Then I saw you." Isaac turned his gaze towards Father. "You were waiting for him. As if you knew he'd show up. I could see the concern and love you both have for Vincent.

"I know you have no reason to trust me, but I want you to. Perhaps if I told you this: my name is really Lamar Brown, and I escaped The Dragons."

Isaac sat back in a chair. "Wow, I haven't spoken that out loud in years." He gave a chuckle. "There, now you know a secret that is as heavily guarded as your own. If I tell your secret, you're allowed to share mine. Fair enough?"

Father nodded.

"Er...I must ask, have you found that family you've searched for?" Father asked gently.

Catherine looked at Father in surprise. *Is he really going to bring him into the community this quickly?* she thought to herself.

Isaac frowned. "No," he whispered sadly.

"Do you have a few hours?" Father asked.

"Sure, what do you need me to do?" Isaac replied curiously.

"Walk me home."

Isaac looked at Father with a confused look. "OK, but where is home?"

"Come with me and I'll show you."

Father and Isaac looked over at the half-asleep Catherine.

"Cathy, you're welcome to crash here until I get back. Let me grab you a pillow and blanket before I leave."

Catherine gave a yawn. "That would be great. Oh, would you mind if I use your phone? If I don't call the office, Joe will worry."

Isaac smiled and handed her the phone.

"Get some rest. You deserve it."

"Oh, I will."

The two men left the building and walked a few blocks to the tunnel entrance.

"WHOA!" Isaac yelled, putting up his hands.

Jamie was standing ten feet away with her crossbow aimed at Isaac's forehead.

"Jamie, this is Isaac. He's a friend."

Jamie lowered her weapon.

"That's an impressive weapon you have there. May I have a look?"

Jamie smiled and handed over the bow.

"This isn't store bought. Did you make this yourself?"

"I told Mouse and Cullen what I wanted and they made it for me."

"You'll have to teach me how to use it sometime."

Jamie's eyes danced with mischief. "Only if you teach me to fight."

Isaac laughed. "Deal."

"Jamie, I allowed you to have the crossbow under the understanding that it is to be used solely to protect the community. I do not condone violence."

"Father, can't learning to fight be used to protect as well?" Jamie countered.

Isaac, listening, spoke up. "I teach women and girls how to use whatever they have around them to defend themselves. Not to start fights. What if young Jamie here was attacked in the park and didn't have her bow? What then? Shouldn't she have the knowledge to protect herself?"

Jamie grinned at Isaac. She was always the one standing up for others. Now, seeing a stranger stand up for her, and to Father no less.... She knew she had a strong ally in Isaac.

"I'm sure some other women would like to learn. I bet Samantha would even enjoy it," Jamie continued.

"Absolutely not. Samantha is only 11. Much too young."

Isaac stopped walking and stared at Father. "You have children here?"

Father nodded. "We have all ages and all walks of life. Some have been born here, others join our community, and then we have helpers. They live above and help by giving us things they can't use anymore. Old clothes, shoes, and sometimes food and money are all welcome."

"I'd like to help. I'll be a helper if you'd let me."

Father smiled and opened his mouth when a tapping on the pipes got his attention. An intruder alert had been put out.

"Johnathon is on sentry duty. He must've seen Isaac and put out the call," Father exclaimed.

Jamie grabbed a small pipe she always carries with her and tapped out on the main pipe: *All clear. False alarm.*

The same tapped message echoed down several different pipes.

"That's amazing. How did that message jump from that big pipe to those smaller pipes on the opposite side? Are they all connected? Was that Morse code?"

Jamie giggled. "Nope. The main pipe goes to the pipe chamber. Pascal repeats the message on all the other pipes. It's how we talk to each other."

"We started with Morse code," Father interrupted. "We shortened it and abbreviated quite a bit. Pascal's father is the one that made it faster and easier to learn the code. As a helper, you will be required to learn how to tap out messages. You can learn at your own pace, but it's the first thing everyone learns. Even our youngest toddlers know how to tap for help if they're lost or hurt.

"The pipe closest to the ground is strictly for the lost or hurt. It leads directly past the living chambers to the pipe chamber. It has come in handy when a new helper or new member gets lost. Every child and adult knows it's only to be used to find the missing.

"We have another pipe that runs along the living chambers which isn't connected to the pipe chamber. That one is used the most by parents calling for their children, or children asking permission for something. It's also used to ask permission to visit another person's chamber. It's like calling before showing up at someone's door. It's mainly parents that listen to that one the closest."

"Sounds like you have a well-run system here. This is very impressive."

"When can you teach us?" Jamie interrupted.

Isaac started to laugh. "You have a one-track mind. I bet you're a stubborn one. We can set up weekly classes every Sunday afternoon for an hour to an hour and a half. I sure don't want to get in the way of things here."

Father let out a long sigh and nodded. "All right, but if I hear of anyone using their new knowledge to cause fights, I will stop the lessons."

"Thank you, Father," Jamie squealed as she gave him a quick hug and a peck on the cheek.

Her spontaneous action took Father by surprise. Jamie was never the type to show affection. Only very rarely did she give a hug and never a kiss. *This must have really meant a lot to her*, Father pondered.

They were just rounding the last corner when Geoffrey, Samantha, and Eric came running down the tunnels. They stopped, frozen, when they saw Father's stern face.

"How many times must I tell you children to stop running?"

"It was Samantha's fault. She made us late for class," Eric spoke up.

"It was not my fault," Samantha argued back.

"You're the one that said, 'I bet I can beat you to class.' So it was, too, your fault," Eric argued back.

"Eric, I don't care who is at fault, there is simply no running in the living tunnels. You children know that. You could've bumped into someone and hurt them."

None of the three children could bring themselves to look at Father. Their eyes were glued to Isaac.

"You're new," Eric stated matter-of-factly.

Isaac knelt down to Eric's level. "I'm Isaac. You're Eric?"

Eric nodded while grinning ear to ear.

"Nice to meet you, Eric." Isaac offered his hand to Eric.

Eric took it and shook the bigger hand with enthusiasm.

"My, that's quite the grip you have there."

Isaac was getting ready to address the other two when they were interrupted.

"We've been waiting for you three for fifteen minutes. You're late for class."

"Sorry, Mary," Geoffrey spoke up.

"Come along. I hope you've done your arithmetic homework," Mary continued as she led the trio to class.

Isaac stood and just watched as the small group walked away. Mary had one arm around Samantha's shoulders and was combing through Geoffrey's hair with her other hand. It was plain to see how much Mary loved those children.

"You really do love and protect each other here, don't you?" he asked with amazement in his voice.

"We're family. We take care of each other," a soft voice spoke up.

Isaac turned around, and could only mutter one word. "Vincent."

"Ah, Vincent. I was just going to explain to Isaac his role as a helper. Would you like to join us?"

"Of course. Welcome, Isaac."

A year or so later...

Father was deep into his book when he got the feeling someone was staring at him. "Ah, Catherine, what brings you here?"

"I was wondering, since Winterfest is only two weeks away, if there wasn't something I can do to help."

"Catherine, Winterfest is when we thank our helpers. We don't allow helpers to get involved with the preparations." Father put his finger to his mouth in thought. "We do have five new helpers this year that will need to be led to the meeting point. Would you be willing to guide a couple of them down?"

"Yes, of course. I'd be honored."

Father took out a piece of paper and wrote down an address. "This is where we told two of them to meet, and the time. I appreciate your willingness to help."

Catherine took the paper. "This isn't too far from Isaac Stubbs's building."

Father chuckled. "He is one of the newer helpers. I thought, since he already knew you, it would make it easier. The second helper just started helping about six months ago."

Catherine grinned. "I'll be happy to help."

Winterfest evening...

Catherine arrived at the address and she wasn't surprised to see Isaac waiting for her.

"Cathy, so great to see you," he exclaimed as he greeted her with a hug.

"It's so good to see you too." She looked around. "Our other helper isn't here yet?"

"Not yet. I'm early anyway."

Catherine checked her watch. "We can wait a few more minutes. We can't be too late though."

Catherine and Isaac were catching up when a taxi pulled up.

"Here you go, handsome. Keep the change," the lady said as she got out of the car.

Catherine's heart fell. *No, how am I going to explain this away?* She began trying to think up a believable excuse about why she was standing on a sidewalk in this neighborhood.

The lady turned and smiled. "Cath!" Edie said as she gave her friend a quick hug.

"Edie? What are you doing here?" Catherine asked, alarmed. *Stay calm, Cathy. Don't give anything away.* "It's so great to see you. I'm meeting a couple friends here for dinner this evening. What are you doing here?"

"I'm doing the same." Edie gave Catherine a mischievous look.

*What do I do now?* Catherine thought to herself.

Edie pulled out a Winterfest candle. "Isn't this the prettiest candle you've ever seen?"

Catherine's eyes grew wide. "You're the other helper?"

Edie just nodded.

"When? How?"

"Six months ago, I found the tunnels. It was an accident, but I stumbled upon them.

Edie leaned in and whispered, "If you weren't in a relationship with Vincent, I'd snatch him up myself."

She laughed and realized Isaac was silently watching. "Where have you been my whole life?" she staged whispered.

"Right here," Isaac replied, smiling.

"Oops. Did I just say that out loud?" Edie asked in embarrassment.

Catherine chuckled.

Edie walked over to him. "Edie Woods," she introduced herself as she offered her hand.

"Isaac. Isaac Stubbs," he replied as he shook her hand.

"I hate to break up this little meeting, but we can't be late," Catherine interrupted.

Isaac offered his arm to Edie. She accepted the offered arm as they followed Catherine to the Great Hall. Catherine led the way while the couple behind her talked. Their voices were too low to hear.

When they got to the meeting place, everyone was crowded around.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll go find Vincent."

"Uh...OK, whatever," Edie said, not taking her eyes off Isaac.

Catherine smiled as she walked away.

After the meal was over, Catherine started mingling around the Great Hall. Children chased each other to cookies or games. Adults were dancing and talking. Over in the corner, Isaac and Edie were in a deep conversation.

"When my brother died, I felt lost. All I wanted was a family. Vincent has become as close as a brother to me.

"How did you find the tunnels?" Isaac asked.

"Yes, I would like to know that, too," Catherine interrupted as she stood next to them.

Edie took a deep breath. "Do you remember six months ago? What was going on in my life?" Edie asked Catherine.

"You lost your grandmother," Catherine said softly.

"She was my only family member. My depression was uncontrollable and I just shut everyone out."

"Yes, including me and Joe. I was so worried about you. Then you started missing so much work, I was afraid you would lose your job."

"I almost did, too. I took it hard, Cath. I felt so lost and alone. I found myself in Central Park sitting on a bench and crying my eyes out. Then I heard the kindest voice ask me what was wrong. I felt safe with him, and I told him everything. I told him about being alone, and how I didn't think I could go on.

"All he would tell me about himself was his name. Vincent. I then told him about maybe losing my job. I happened to mention your name. I told him how you were the only friend I had in the world, and yet you seemed so guarded. That I felt like I was an intruder in your life."

"I bet he was surprised," Catherine softly added.

"Surprised isn't even the word for it. We talked all night. I told him how much you love him."

"EDIE! YOU DIDN'T!!!" Catherine gasped in shock and embarrassment.

"She did." Vincent chuckled softly as he joined the trio. "I was so surprised, I jumped up to leave. When I did, the wind caught my hood and blew it back," Vincent continued.

Catherine's eyes grew wide and she turned to look at Edie.

"I have to admit I was a bit startled at first then I realized no one with that much compassion to sit and talk with a crying stranger could ever be cruel. A split second later, something happened. Everything made sense. It was like the final puzzle piece that I needed. I realized why you never spoke of your personal life."

"Then what happened?"

"I turned to flee, but I felt her grab my arm to keep me there. She told me everything was all right, that she wouldn't tell anyone," Vincent continued.

Edie laughed as she picked up the story. "I told him I wanted to know all about him. That you're my friend and I wanted to know about your life, which included him. I wasn't going to take no for an answer. I was persistent."

Catherine laughed. She knew all about Edie's determination.

"I just knew she could be trusted, so I brought her here, and showed her my world."

"My life turned around after that night. I felt like I had a family, a purpose, and, most importantly, a shared secret."

"Edie, why didn't you tell me?" Catherine said as she playfully nudged Edie's shoulder.

"I tried to bring it up. The first several times Joe or someone walked up on us, and I had to stay silent. Then the time I saw the inscription in your book, I tried to get you to open up, but you were still so guarded, with that thick wall around yourself. I just wasn't sure if blurting out our shared secret would put you on defense or even push me away. I wasn't sure how to broach the subject."

Catherine nodded in understanding. "You're right. I would've most likely broken off our friendship if I had an idea that you discovered my... OUR secret. Now I know I have not just one but two friends that know," Catherine said, smiling warmly at Isaac and Edie.

"There you are. How are you two enjoying your first Winterfest?" Father asked as walked up.

"It's amazing," Isaac stated.

"I agree, I never would've guessed that so many people would know about the tunnels," Edie replied.

"Yes, we appreciate our helpers. I was wondering, Edie, do you play chess?"

"No. I never learned," Edie said with a smile.

"Well, no better time to learn," Father said as he put his arm around her shoulders to lead her to the chess board.

"I'd better go help Edie. Father won't give in and just let beginners win. You earn your wins. He doesn't like playing me, because I beat him too badly. Vincent is more of a challenge." Isaac laughed as he went to watch the game.

The evening was winding down. The closing ceremony was over. All the children were soundly asleep in their beds. The majority of the helpers had been led back Uptop. The Great Hall was a mess. Clean up would take place the next morning. Winterfest cleanup was another tradition. Everyone was expected to help tidy the Great Hall.

Vincent and Catherine were grabbing a few extra minutes alone when something caught his eye. Catherine followed Vincent's gaze to a far corner where Edie and Isaac were deep in conversation.

"They're still talking?" Catherine asked in amazement.

Vincent gave a slight nod and gently pulled Catherine closer to his side. "They haven't left each other's side all evening. Seems like we have a romance blooming before our eyes, Catherine."

Catherine smiled as she put her arm around Vincent's waist and snuggled in closer. "I suppose I should lead them back," she sighed, resting her head against him.

"I will go with you. Perhaps we can share the warmth of the fireplace when we get back to your apartment."

Catherine smiled warmly at Vincent before they walked up to their two friends.

"We will lead you back," Vincent said softly.

Isaac stood up and offered his hand to help Edie up. She accepted his hand, and refused to let go after she stood.

The walk back was in comfortable silence. Even the pipes were silent, and Catherine smiled as she noticed that Edie and Isaac were still holding hands.

She looked down to where her and Vincent's hands were joined. *May they be as happy and we are*, Catherine mentally blessed her friends.

"Here's where you go out," Vincent stated.

"Oh, shoot. I need a taxi. Isaac, may I use your phone?"

"I have a better idea. Why don't I fix you breakfast and we can spend the day together?" he mischievously replied.

"You cook? Is there anything you can't do? Yes, that sounds great," Edie teased.

"Thank you so much for a great evening. Tell Father I'll be down first thing Saturday morning to help with those pipe repairs," Isaac said as he pulled Vincent into a brotherly hug.

"I will."

"Lunch date soon? I want details," Catherine whispered to Edie as she hugged her friend.

"You know it!" Edie answered.

Vincent put his arm around Catherine as they watched their friends walk away hand in hand.

The End