

ASHES OF ROSES

By JoAnn Baca

It was unusual for Catherine to receive what amounted to a summons to come Below. For it was not an invitation; an invitation ordinarily would arrive ahead of an event, with an explanation of the activity, so she could dress appropriately. And notice of an emergency Below was usually delivered in person.

This was different. And all she could call it was...a summons.

Vincent's note, slipped under her door while she was grocery shopping on a quiet Saturday morning, was terse: *Please come. Now. I need you. V*

Quickly she loaded the perishables she'd purchased into her refrigerator. The rest of her groceries could be put away later. Glad her outfit would serve her for a trek in the Tunnels, Catherine lost no more time – the mail, even the blinking light on her answering machine, could wait. She tucked her keys into a pocket of her leather jacket and swiftly answered the summons.

It was somewhat surprising that Vincent was not there to greet her at her threshold. Of course, she knew her way to the inhabited tunnels by heart by now. And although she missed the opportunity the stroll to the Hub offered for uninterrupted conversation, concern over-rode her disappointment.

She approached his chamber, assuming he was inside. Still, Tunnel etiquette must be served.

"Vincent? Your note said you needed me?"

"Please, come in, Catherine."

The way he said her name never failed to send a shiver of delight down her spine. But she tamped down on that feeling, assuming he had something serious to discuss. As she entered, Vincent rose from his chair to greet her. The frown on his face, she knew, was not for her. Still, it disturbed her to see it.

"What's wrong?"

He opened his mouth to respond and yet didn't speak for a moment. Finally, he sighed and said, "Now that you're here, I feel foolish." He shook his head and then bent it. "My apologies for dragging you down here to...."

She cut off his apology, saying simply, "Tell me." Standing before him, she slipped one hand under his chin and squeezed it with her thumb and forefinger, urging him to look at her.

When he gave her a reluctant nod, she moved to his bed and perched on it, knowing he was likely to begin pacing as he spoke of what was bothering him.

He didn't disappoint.

As he took a step and then another, she waited patiently while he ordered his thoughts. When he turned, he came to stand in front of her. Looking down at her, he started to explain.

"About two years after...after...Lisa...." He seemed to stumble over the memory before continuing. "We had a Helper who came Below from time to time, and she began bringing her teenage daughter with her. Father wasn't entirely pleased about trusting someone that young with our secret, but the Helper was a generous woman and so he allowed it. Her daughter and Rebecca got to be friends. Rebecca was close with me, of course. And we were all about the same age...."

He couldn't stand still any longer, and he turned and paced again.

"Apparently...and I didn't see it, wasn't looking for it, not after Lisa...."

Catherine rose and took a few steps towards him. As he turned, she lifted a hand to his shoulder, squeezing it. "This Helper's daughter...she had a crush on you?"

A frown appeared, and he looked unhappy as he admitted, "So everyone tells me."

Trying not to let the smile she was fighting show, she asked, "I assume nothing came of her attachment to you?"

He shook his head. "No. Of course not, I was oblivious. And I think Rebecca realized I was still too fragile after Lisa and my illness, so she made sure we were never alone together. This girl, Melanie, eventually went off to college, somewhere out of state." He shrugged, indicating he never had an interest in finding out where. "Her mother passed away soon after, and...we all lost touch with her."

Confused by why this situation would be bothering Vincent all these years later, she asked, "And now...?"

Looking abashed, he said, "Melanie made contact with Peter this morning. She is planning to come Below."

It took Catherine a moment to follow his thinking, but she finally said, "You suspect that, perhaps, she still has feelings for you?"

"I...I fear it, yes."

The admission obviously pained him - the potential of a difficult conversation, as remote as it might be, was something he didn't wish to face. Then Catherine understood the reason for this revelation.

"You want me here...with you... when she arrives."

The relief in his voice was apparent, even though he only uttered one word. "Yes."

Smiling, she hugged him. "Of course."

He embraced her, and she felt his gratitude, mixed with a bit of embarrassment. "When I said it out loud just now, I suddenly felt foolish for asking you to come."

"I'm glad you did." She leaned back in his arms so she could look at him. "Melanie should have no illusions that you are still on the market." She nodded as if considering and then agreeing with her own words.

She felt the tension in him ease. They stepped apart as he opened his mouth to say something more. Suddenly a voice was heard outside his chamber.

"Vincent? Are you in there? Surprise!"

Before he had a chance to reply, a tall, strikingly beautiful woman entered. Catherine had been around society women all her life, and she recognized a major player when she saw one.

Not a hair was out of place, and her makeup was subtle perfection. She was impeccably dressed in a bespoke suede suit and knee-high leather boots that fit with an impressive suppleness. Her overcoat was of the finest cashmere, trimmed with leather at collar and cuffs, with matching gloves. It was "Tunnel chic" of the most expensive kind.

Catherine mentally calculated the cost of such an outfit. It easily surpassed her monthly pay. This Melanie was definitely dressed to impress those Below.

The woman's smile faltered slightly as she saw that Vincent was not alone, and that he apparently was not surprised that she was there. This was not the entrance she seemed to have hoped for. She recovered quickly, though, and approached him. "I see you knew I was coming. Well...it's so good to see you again!" she said, opening her arms for a hug.

If she noted his hesitation, she didn't let it stop her from giving him a lengthy embrace to which he finally responded. After she let him go, she looked at Catherine, her eyes flicking over her quickly from her head to her toes.

Catherine felt the gaze for the inspection it was. She could see that Melanie was not greatly impressed with her, with her hair pulled back in a ponytail, wearing scuffed hiking boots, a well-worn leather jacket, her simple jeans and a Tunnel-knit sweater.

"Hello, you must be Melanie," Catherine said brightly, reaching out a hand to the other woman. "I'm Catherine Chandler."

Gamely, Melanie shook Catherine's hand. "Melanie Masters. How nice to meet you," she murmured, clearly not interested in her.

"Why don't you sit?" Catherine offered her Vincent's one large chair. She herself sat on his bed and turned to Vincent. "Maybe Melanie would like some tea?"

Vincent inclined his head in response, needing no further encouragement to leave the chamber.

While they were alone, Catherine made small talk. "Vincent told me you went away to college. Where did you go?"

Melanie didn't answer at once. She rose and began wandering around Vincent's chamber, examining small items, trailing her hand across furnishings. It was obvious she did not want to expend much energy engaging with Catherine. But as the silence lengthened, Melanie finally relented and said, "Yale." She turned to Catherine, smiled frostily, and added, "Undergrad *and* law school." Her tone could not have been haughtier.

Acting as if they were, in fact, having a friendly conversation, Catherine nodded and said, "How nice! I was at Radcliffe, and got my J.D. at Columbia." She schooled herself not to laugh at the surprise on Melanie's face.

"You're a lawyer?" Catherine could see her making the connection with Catherine's last name. "Chandler...not of Chandler and Coolidge, by any chance?"

Catherine shrugged. "Initially, yes. But currently I'm with the District Attorney's Office."

Melanie's eyes flashed triumphantly. "Couldn't cut it in private practice?"

Laughing, Catherine replied, "Not exactly. Daddy was very disappointed when I left. But my heart just wasn't in corporate law."

Vincent re-entered his chamber bearing a tray with a teapot, mugs, and a plate of cookies, which he placed carefully on his desk.

Despite herself, Melanie asked, "How did you two meet?"

Vincent gazed at Catherine and spoke to her, although he was answering Melanie. "It was the most remarkable thing."

Catherine, caught by the look in his eyes, added, "It ended up being the most wonderful night of my life."

Melanie looked from Vincent to Catherine. She could sense that, for the moment, they had forgotten she was there. She frowned.

"I remember the first time *we* met," Melanie said, laying a hand on Vincent's forearm. "Remember, Vincent?" She squeezed his arm, using that pressure to turn him away from Catherine and toward herself.

The momentary spell broken, Vincent tensed. "Forgive my manners," he murmured, gently pulling his arm out from under her hand and changing the subject with, "Please, have some tea. William's sugar cookies..."

"Oh, I remember his sugar cookies!" Melanie said with a forced enthusiasm. "Delicious!"

As Vincent poured the tea, he said, "Actually, William came to us well after you stopped coming Below. You are remembering Hattie's cookies, and yes, they were good, too."

Hardly chastened, Melanie accepted a filled mug from Vincent and sat down. "I really don't want to take any food from the mouths of those Below," she said pointedly, timing her comment to the exact moment Catherine bit into a cookie.

Catherine disguised her bark of laughter as a cough, but the merriment in her eyes made Vincent smile.

"The ingredients for these cookies were donated by Catherine," he informed his guest.

Melanie's darkened look was almost too much for Catherine. When she was sure she could speak in an even tone, she asked, "How long have you been back in New York, Melanie?"

The woman seemed happy to change the subject, and especially happy that the subject was now herself. "Several months now. I transferred to my firm's New York office once I made partner."

Clearly she expected to be asked which law firm she was with - Catherine knew it had to be a top one, if she could afford those clothes - but after she took a sip of her tea, Catherine instead said, "I'm surprised you found your way Below after all these years. The ways change."

Shrugging, Melanie said, "I've kept in touch." Her implication was that she had maintained her connection with those Below. Catherine doubted it, and wondered at the lie, which Vincent could easily counter.

"That's how we knew Melanie was coming to visit. She dropped in on Dr. Peter Alcott, a Helper, and he let us know to expect them." Vincent said it casually, letting Catherine understand both the meaning behind Melanie's comment and, by the formal way he named her old friend, that Catherine shouldn't reveal her own connection to Peter.

"Is Melanie here?" a voice from the tunnel outside called. "I thought she might come to see me first, but I can't find her."

"Yes, she is. Come in, Rebecca," Vincent said, perhaps a bit more urgently than usual.

"Oh, Mel! It's wonderful to see you!" Rebecca rushed to her old friend and threw her arms around her. Melanie reciprocated, but her hug with Rebecca was decidedly less enthusiastic - and much shorter - than the hug she had given Vincent.

"We won't keep the two of you from getting re-acquainted," Vincent said, adding, "Besides, Catherine and I have...uh...we have...."

"We've been talking about a hike we've been meaning to take, and even if we leave now, we wouldn't be back until after dinner. So I suppose we should say goodbye now." Catherine extended her hand once more, and gave Melanie a firm handshake. "It was so good to meet you. Maybe we'll run into each other at the courthouse sometime."

Helpless to ask to accompany them when she so clearly was not dressed for hiking, Melanie could only watch as Vincent and Catherine exited his chamber, leaving the frustrated woman alone with Rebecca, who winked at Catherine just before the latter disappeared out the entryway.

"A hike?" Vincent asked, amused.

"I didn't exactly lie," she said. "We often talk about hikes we might take. And if we were to leave now, undoubtedly we wouldn't have returned in time for dinner. Besides, you were grasping at straws there."

He snorted softly and took her hand in his.

As they entered Father's study - a chamber Melanie was unlikely to want to visit - Peter and Father looked up from their game of chess. Peter was the first to speak. "I apologize, truly. But when she showed up and insisted on being taken down to see you, Vincent, making it sound like the two of you were quite close and you would love to see her again, I couldn't really refuse her. I stalled for as long as possible, telling her I needed to make some calls to move patient appointments." He shrugged. "She is a bit of a force of nature, just like her mother before her. At least I was able to warn everyone about our coming." He slapped his thighs in preparation for rising. "Thankfully, now that she's met Catherine, that should discourage further visits."

"I'm not sure she's convinced about that, Peter." Catherine kissed his cheek and then kissed Father's before pulling up a chair. "You should have seen the hug she gave to Vincent. She practically plastered herself to him! And that's *after* she saw me!"

Chagrined, Vincent nodded. "'Plastered' is a good word for her embrace." He looked extremely uncomfortable at that admission.

Father bent his head to hide a smile. "Yes, well...we shall just have to deflect her should she wish to come Below again." He shrugged. "We do owe her kindness. Her mother was a great Helper during some dark times for us. In her honor...."

Catherine looked from man to man, each hanging his head as if succumbing to the inevitable. "I know attorneys like her," she said. "The never, ever give up."

That's how she became a partner, by being more focused than her colleagues, more willing to put in the work, more talented at finding ways to stand out, to win at all costs. If you think this little attempt at a dust-off will dissuade her, I'm afraid you are wrong. It might just make her more determined."

Peter looked up at her, a pained expression on his face. "We'll just have to keep up the gentle dissuasion." At her shake of the head, he added, "What else *can* we do?"

Catherine took in a deep breath and let it go in a gust. "Let me deal with her."

Father's eyebrows went up as he raised his head. "You don't even know her!"

"Oh, I know her...or people like her. Trust me, she's a type I've dealt with for years. And I've developed...coping skills." She smiled.

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While Rebecca was suggesting she led Melanie back Above - and having little luck in persuading her to go - Catherine re-appeared in Vincent's chamber. "Hello again!" she said brightly, not bothering to explain that the "hike" was now off. "Rebecca, Father asked to see you. Something about a batch of candles...."

Rebecca's brow furrowed for a moment, until she realized that Catherine was asking her to leave. "Oh! I totally forgot! I need to...I have to...." She turned distractedly to Melanie. "It was lovely seeing you again!" Then she scurried out, leaving Catherine alone with the visitor.

Melanie took Vincent's chair, sitting down in a regal manner with an air of proprietorship. "They've sent *you* to usher me out?" Her voice was laden with disbelief and sardonic humor.

"Oh, no. They're too nice to even think of that. I took it upon myself." Catherine sat on Vincent's bed, scooting up until she was reclining against the pillows at its head. She burrowed her shoulders into the pillows as if she had done it hundreds of times before: getting comfortable in a place she knew well.

Melanie's eyes narrowed. "It's like that, is it?"

Catherine merely smiled.

"Funny, as clueless as he was about how much I wanted to be with him before, and as traumatized by that silly Lisa, I find it hard to believe he's loosened up that far, even a decade or so later." She rose and began wandering around Vincent's chamber as she had before, inspecting his things, taking books from shelves to examine their spines.

"A lot can change...*has* changed...in nearly twenty years."

"It's only been fifteen," Melanie responded. "Still, having you with him instead of facing me alone - Peter obviously found a way to get a message Below before we got here - means he isn't at all ready to deal with me one on one."

"He's very polite, or had you forgotten that about him?" Catherine turned onto her side and nestled her cheek into a pillow. "I suspect he wanted to spare your feelings."

Melanie laughed. "Spare me? He sent *you* in here to do what he's afraid he can't."

Ignoring the suggestion - there being no need to confirm the obvious - Catherine said, "Bulldozing your opposition may work in court briefs, but it doesn't work where real people are concerned. What was your plan, exactly? Or did you think he would see you and suddenly fall at your feet?"

With an imperious turn of her head, Melanie gazed around the chamber. "Memories of old times...of good times together can resonate through the years. If I can recall them so completely, so can he. We shared wonderful things...long hikes..." and here she glanced over at Catherine and gave her a broad wink, "and adventures...and we shared our deepest thoughts and dreams." Melanie turned to Catherine. "I could make him smile, even laugh sometimes."

"Did you forget that Rebecca was with you all those times you were Below?" Melanie's implication that Vincent and she were alone together hadn't deterred Catherine, as she knew the truth.

“Not always...” Melanie said, a purr in her voice, hinting at other types of “experiences” between them.

Catherine countered with what she knew. “Yes, always. Rebecca has always been very protective of Vincent. Especially back then, after his illness. And this community comes together to safeguard their own when they are vulnerable.”

“How do *you* know how vulnerable he was or was not? You weren’t there. I was.” Melanie said it with a toss of her head – a bit too theatrically for Catherine, who took it as a sign of over-reach.

“What makes you think that Rebecca...and others...hadn’t filled me in on all of this, long ago?” Parsing words - the lawyer’s capacity to suggest without stating - was deeply ingrained in Catherine, much as she despised using that particular art form. But the gloves had to be off if she were to have any hope of disarming this enemy.

“As far as I know, you’re just some Helper recruited for the task of trying to dissuade me from pursuing Vincent. I see no evidence of you in this chamber – no feminine touches, no personal items.”

So, Melanie’s inspection of Vincent’s chamber hadn’t been only to fill time and ignore Catherine. If she hadn’t realized what a formidable adversary Melanie was before, Catherine knew now.

Melanie waved one hand in dismissal. “So why don’t you run along now and let the adults do what...well, what adults do.”

Catherine rose to a sitting position. “Think, Melanie. This isn’t a court case you can win by force of argument. This is about emotions, and connection, and choice. You cannot argue anyone into loving you.” She leaned forward slightly. “If I can’t convince you to back off, fine. That just proves my point. But neither can you force Vincent to see you as anything more than a friend from his childhood who is now overstaying her welcome.”

Her words seemed to penetrate Melanie’s icy calm for the first time. There was the smallest hint of doubt in her hazel eyes now as she considered

Catherine's words. But she didn't get where she was by giving up at a bump in the road. "He just needs time to get to know me again."

Catherine sighed and shook her head.

"And I can do so much for this place," Melanie added, obviously already prepared with that argument. Becoming a Helper herself would be her natural fallback position. But Catherine knew that Melanie would realize that was not a winning position, as she herself could offer the same monetary benefits and, as far as Melanie knew, was already doing so.

Catherine rose from the bed and went over to Vincent's armoire. She prayed that the nightgown she had once worn was still in the middle drawer. It was imperative that it look as if she were occupying the chamber with Vincent...especially at night. She expelled a sigh of relief when she found it there, folded atop Vincent's nightwear. Turning, nightgown in hand, she closed the drawer with her hip.

As she lay the gown across the bed, she asked, "What is it you hope for, may I ask? Vincent can't attend social functions Above with you, nor even live with you there, even if he wished to." She turned, sitting again. "Or is it the prospect of a secret lover that appeals to you? Someone you can visit when you are free but can otherwise ignore?"

The snide smile was back. "It seems you already have that covered, *Miss Chandler*."

The implication stung, but Catherine kept her poker face. "Our love is a lot more than a sometime thing. It's true that we aren't together every moment, but we have a connection...a bond. I can't explain it, but we are as close, always, as two people can be."

Melanie rolled her eyes. "Oh, please, Cathy. A bond? Spare me the cheap melodrama! You were trained better than that...even at a second-tier law school like Columbia."

Catherine let the attempt at ridicule pass. Besides, she'd put her education at Columbia up against anyone's. *Second-tier*, indeed! She proved her training to be equal to Melanie's as she countered, "And yet here *you* are, in a tunnel

chamber far beneath the streets of New York, trying to appeal to a man who has no interest in you, even after finding out that he is already with someone else. Desperation isn't a good look on you, Melanie."

Melanie stared hard at Catherine, searching for a chink of weakness. But Catherine's words seemed to finally pierce that veil of superiority, and it was Melanie who broke first. The young girl she once was surfaced, and Catherine got a hint of the longing and desire she had felt all those years ago - understanding it, in a different way, herself.

"I...I would have given him everything...back then. I wanted to comfort him, to prove to him he was lovable...desirable. The dreams I had..." Tears welled in her eyes as she bared her soul for a brief moment.

Acknowledging her pain and frustration, Catherine commiserated. "Lisa did a lot to hurt him, in so many ways. But...Melanie...he's a grown man now. Life didn't stop for him when you left. He's had relationships...experiences.... He's no longer that boy. He knows he's loved...and desired." She rose off the bed and stood before Melanie, putting her hands on the other woman's shoulders. "And he has his own dreams now."

She felt Melanie shudder beneath her fingers, and she backed away from the woman, leaving her alone with her disappointment. Yet she needed to put a final nail in the coffin of Melanie's hopes. And while she might feel bad about what she was about to do, fairness even in a war of words wasn't always the right tactic.

Catherine returned to the armoire and took out Vincent's nightwear, laying it beside her nightgown.

Melanie was silent for a long minute. Catherine could almost hear the calculus going on in her head as Melanie watched her bustle around the chamber, readying it for the night to come. Catherine herself was still reeling internally from the direct hit Melanie had made. Despite her external bravado, the criticism was something she had to consider. And although she had pushed it to the back of her mind for now, Catherine marked it as something she would have to face within herself, and soon.

"You aren't just making this all up, are you?" Melanie's suspicion was edged with the beginnings of resignation. Catherine could hear it in the tenuous quality of Melanie's voice.

Catherine turned to face the woman. "You must be a great lawyer, Melanie. What do you advise your clients when all the evidence points in one direction?" Her steady gaze pierced Melanie's veneer of disdain. It began in her eyes – the hesitation, the uncertainty, then the doubt. Finally, she sighed, winding down like a clock. Catherine could almost feel the fight leaving her.

"Can Rebecca see me out?" she asked, chastened now.

"I'm sure she can."

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Rebecca led Melanie out by a little-used passage, blindfolded, and she was put in a cab owned by a Helper, who drove her quite far from the entry point before allowing her to remove her blindfold. Melanie, not at all a stupid woman, got the hint.

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Catherine was still setting things to rights in Vincent's chamber when he returned from Father's chamber. He couldn't help but notice that she was folding the nightgown she had worn, about to return it to the open drawer in his armoire.

"I see you took some liberties with the truth in order to convince Melanie that she should leave."

He was half-embarrassed, half proud of her, she could tell by the tone of his voice.

"It was all theatrics. I didn't actually say anything. What she may have assumed...well, that's on her." Catherine's lips twitched with her attempts to hide a smile.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have put you in such a position."

While Catherine agreed in principle, she also understood that fighting fire with fire was sometimes the best option. “It all worked out. It was bloodless, and at least she left with her dignity intact, which is important to someone like Melanie.”

Catherine closed the drawer and sat down on his bed. She was unsure how to bring up what Melanie had accused her of. At first she had thought to examine her own feelings on the matter. But she had realized that no resolution was possible without Vincent’s input, even if it would be one more in a long line of awkward conversations today.

True to form, Vincent picked up on her mood. “Tell me.”

Catherine chuckled ruefully and shook her head. “She hit me right in the bull’s eye about something.” Looking up at him, she added, “In a way, I’m just like her.”

Vincent’s brow furrowed. “Other than being women and attorneys, I see no resemblance between you.”

“Hear me out.” Catherine straightened her shoulders and plunged in. “I asked her why she wanted to form an attachment with you, someone she couldn’t include in her life Above but who she could see when she wanted to. And she called me on having that same motivation.” She sighed. “It hurt to hear it. Am I...”

“Oh, Catherine.” Vincent sat down beside her, one arm reaching out to pull her close. She nestled her cheek against his chest, needing his comfort even after she had confessed her fear that Melanie was right.

“You couldn’t be more different. You were right about her – her motivation *was* selfish. Had she truly felt anything for me, she would have kept in contact with me, and she certainly wouldn’t have tried to ambush me with a surprise visit, already contemplating the relationship she planned to have with me, not knowing anything about me now...including the fact that I...” He turned, and Catherine lifted her gaze to his face. “...that *we* are...together.” Both arms came around her now, embracing her, pulling her close. His next words were murmured into her ear. “I know your heart, Catherine. I know the love you

feel...your desires.... We don't speak of these things but...perhaps that time has come. I don't want you to have to endure another situation like this."

"*Another* situation'?! Are there any more like her out there?" Catherine asked, only half in jest, as she pulled back slightly to look into his beloved face.

He shook his head, an embarrassed smile on his unique lips. "The list of women enamored of me is quite short, Catherine."

"Well," she said, smiling in return, although her eyes were completely serious, "this woman right here is completely enamored."

Catherine found herself captured in the kind of embrace Melanie had longed for earlier in the day - the kind reserved now and forever only for her.