

A Wonderful Real Dream

by Carebearmaxi

Catherine awoke with her head pleasantly lying on her husband's hairy chest. She noticed some of the white hairs mixed in with the gold and red ones. She smiled as she touched them. She kissed the hairs and Vincent rustled in his sleep. His chest expanded wide as he exhaled deeply lifting Catherine's head. She smiled as she had been waking this way for most of the last thirty years since they had married after the birth of Jacob and her return to life.

Vincent felt his wife's kiss on his chest. She had awakened him for most of the last thirty years this way. Even after all these years, her touch on his skin was still electric to him. She gave him delicious tingles wherever she touched him. What was so amazing was that he could feel through the bond that he did the same for her.

A little over thirty years ago, Vincent fought his last battle with his dark side. Catherine had saved him and loved him in that dark cave. Once she had done that Vincent, the gentle, kind, loving Vincent, had been victorious. Miraculously, then or soon after they had conceived a child. However, this newfound peace caused a loss of he and Catherine's bond. It did return, though, nine months later when Catherine gave birth to Jacob, their eldest child.

There had been complications in that Catherine had been involved in a very complicated case and was kidnapped and gone from him for all of her pregnancy. Gabriel the head of the malicious multi-layered crime syndicate was eventually killed, Jacob returned to his parents who had been miraculously reunited a few months before.

Catherine had been very ill from malnutrition and constant drugging. However, Jacob had been declared healthy and perfect upon his return. Jacob was returned thanks to new Helpers Joe Maxwell, Catherine's boss from the DA's office, and Diana Bennett the police investigator that Joe had employed to find Catherine and Vincent's son. It was a great shock (as always) to finally see why Vincent had been such a secret and Joe was always leery of Vincent because of his unusual physical characteristics; but, in time, as Catherine had grown more happy being with Vincent and her son Below, Joe finally accepted that Vincent was truly Catherine's everything. Diana had fallen under Vincent's spell many months before while the investigation into Gabriel's syndicate, Catherine's kidnapping, and Jacob's finding continued.

Back to present early morning, Vincent stroked his wife's back as her head lay on his chest.

"Catherine," Vincent spoke in a husky still sleepy voice.

"Yes," Catherine simply acknowledged.

"Do you remember what today is?"

"Of course, I do, silly," Catherine playfully answered back holding him close to her with her one arm flung over his massive chest. She squeezed him as best she could. Vincent was a large man and Catherine had always been petite. The years had been kind to her and her beautiful face was still lovely now in her early 60's. She leaned up to look at Vincent's sleepy face. She had always likened him to a sleepy kitten when she watched him wake. As time had matured him, his face took on that of a majestic older stately lion. However, to Catherine this was her husband's face and there was nothing unusual or abnormal in that.

"So, I expect all our children will be here," Vincent said.

"Invitations for the party went out to all five including, of course, the two that live here Below," Catherine acknowledged.

Vincent looked over at the armolu clock sitting on the mantel in their chamber. He, personally, had an instinctual clock; however, Catherine felt more comfortable having one in their chamber. Although she had come to live primarily below with Vincent she still had responsibilities as a Helper and a participant in the world Above. As Vincent had pointed out a long time ago, she was a woman of both worlds.

"It's only 6:30 am," Vincent announced throwing his head back onto his pillow.

Catherine turned her head to acknowledge her husband's announcement.

"I'm sorry to have woken you. I knew it was early, but I didn't think it would be this early," Catherine laughed as she kissed his chest one more time. Laying her head, once again, on his chest she pried his chest hair with her fingers twirling it gently. She stopped as Vincent's hand came and stopped her.

"You know what that does to me, Catherine, when you do that," Vincent said knowing his wife wanted something---that something especially---as today was their 30th wedding anniversary.

"Then you know why I'm doing it," Catherine whispered as she scooted up their bed and kissed her husband good morning.

They then conducted their own celebration of 30 years of wedded bliss---alone.

Jacob Wells, Vincent and Catherine's eldest child at 30 years old, looked again at the invitation for his parents' wedding anniversary. He was currently a professor of World Literature at New York University. He had inherited the reddish gold coloring of his father as well as his strong muscular build when he hit puberty. Other than those few physical attributes, he was all Catherine with green eyes in a round face with a big smile. Jacob was extremely smart and had been accepted into college when he was 17. At 21 he began to teach Above and Below while studying for his Masters and then research for his Doctorate. He was given his Doctorate in World Literature at the age of 28 and had been teaching now for two years at Columbia University.

His childhood had been wonderful. He loved his parents very, very much and they had both influenced his life immensely. Another person who had weighed in his own advice and experience into Jacob's life was his paternal grandfather for whom Jacob had been named. Being the eldest of five children born to his parents, the position and responsibility also rounded the person whom Jacob became.

Jacob's girlfriend, Taylor, lived with him. He had not had the opportunity nor the desire to introduce her to his parents. Taylor, of course, knew of them and had seen the pictures of his more usual looking members of his family which made her naturally curious as to what she had been missing. As their relationship continued and grew, Jacob was desirous of making Taylor his wife which, therefore, would encompass her becoming acquainted with all his family.

Jacob called his next younger brother, Jonathan, who at 27 was a younger almost identical replica of Jacob.

"Hey, Jonathan, it's Jacob," greeted Jacob on the line. "Got a minute to talk?"

"Well, I'm about to do rounds but sure I think I can spare a minute. Is this about mom and dad's party today?" Dr. Jonathan Wells, ER doctor extraordinaire responded.

"Yes. It is."

"You are going, right? It's a command performance. Mom would never forgive you if her oldest son decided not to show."

"Yes. I'm going, but..."

"You want to bring Taylor, right?"

"She's getting curious about dad and our other siblings," Jacob half whispered into his phone. Jacob could hear Taylor in the other room preparing for work. They would both be leaving soon as they both taught at NYU.

"Send a message down to them and ask. I'm sure they are curious about her as well," Jonathan advised his brother.

"Sounds like a plan. I had thought of that, but I was not sure if this would be the best time for me to introduce her to them."

"I can't think of a better time because all our family will be there as well as the extended family. No one is missing this party. It will be bigger than Winterfest!" Jonathan exclaimed.

"Thanks, brother. I will see if I can get a message through Mary-Margaret's husband. He's coming up to advise me on adding onto my living room."

"See ya later, Jacob," Jonathan saluted as he hung up the phone.

Jonathan Wells, only three years younger than his older brother, was influenced by his parents and his grandfather, Jacob, in another way. He became a physician. At 27, he was just starting his internship at St. Vincent's Hospital coincidentally where his father had been found 70 years before.

Jonathan did not have a girlfriend and did not have time for one. Medicine was his life. He felt he had been raised in the best of both worlds. His mother whose wealth had always been used as a Helper when needed and his father's wisdom and wide knowledge of all things experiential and fantastical. To Jonathan, the Tunnels were both experienced and a fantasy. He was primarily raised Below, but they all had access to a regular house on a regular street with regular items like television, game systems, etc.

Unlike his elder brother and father, Jonathan was not as introspective. He was more of an outgoing sport; however, he was an avid reader as is most of the Tunnel family. Books to him were important but different books than Jacob. Science had always been fascinating for him and so at a young age he spent many years under the tutelage of his grandfather who appreciated Jonathan's quick and agile mind for scientific facts and research. Jonathan's desire to be a physician seemed to be the normal outcome of this love of science as well as his love for his grandfather and his patriarchal role in the Tunnels.

Jonathan quickly ran to catch up with his medical students whom he was teaching for the next six weeks in their ER rotation.

Mary-Margaret Wells Brubecker gathered her three children and husband Bruce so they could get breakfast in the dining chamber next to the kitchens. Mary-Margaret was the third child of Catherine and Vincent's and the eldest daughter. Mary was only 24 but she had married at 16, had her first child at 17 and then two others followed in subsequent years. She lived Below with her husband of 8 years and was a teacher like her father as well as a planner, so the anniversary party had been her idea as well as her plan to gather all her siblings together along with the extended Tunnel family.

Mary-Margaret was named after Mary who had essentially become their grandmother after wedding their grandfather late in life and Margaret, her grandfather's first wife, and someone who had become special to her parents in her short lifespan Below. She had met her husband, Bruce, when his parents had become part of the witness protection program. Assured that no harm would come to the Tunnel family, Joe, or Uncle Joe, as she called him had attained council permission for Bruce's family to live Below.

Bruce was two years older than Mary-Margaret but since they had grown up with each other since he was 10 and she was 8 permission for them to marry at 18 and 16 had been more easily given than in any other situation. Plus given Mary's somewhat softened feral appearance, The Wells' and The Brubeckers knew any other chance for Mary to marry and maybe have children may have been an impossibility.

Mary-Margaret was her father but as a female. Of course, Catherine's genes tamed the lion-like appearance to be mainly a whimsical flat nose with a hint of a snout and the cleft in her mouth somewhat matching a deep cleft in her chin which was all Catherine. Jonathan, Mary-Margaret's older brother was her special guard growing up and he was always in awe of her just like he was of their own father.

Mary-Margaret and her father were decidedly happy that none of her three children with Bruce resembled her or their grandfather. All three were decidedly usual looking. However, the resident sky blue eyes and reddish gold hair were the only things Wells' influenced.

"Let's go get breakfast. It's going to be a long day with Grandma and Grandpop's party tonight," Mary-Margaret announced as she rushed her children from the chamber.

"I forgot, love, I have to go above for some materials for your brother's living room expansion. I can eat first, though," Bruce all dark hair and dark eyes said as he kissed his wife.

Mary-Margaret smiled as she pulled her red hair back in a ponytail. "You will be back in time to at least be a part of the celebration. Your mother will be there."

Bruce who always had had an extraordinary relationship with his parents replied, "Of course. I wouldn't miss this party for the world."

Caroline Charlotte Wells was the second daughter and elder twin sibling of her brother, Vincent, Jr. Caroline and Vincent, Jr. or V.J. as he was called had both recently turned 21. Caroline would be finished with college shortly and would be going onto Harvard Law School in the fall of 2021. Caroline spent much time Above at school and always rebelled against her Tunnel family as well as her family unit's responsibility. She was the apple of her father's eye, but Vincent was never been sure how not to spoil her over his other children and constantly had a hard time punishing her when she would have those times acting out her rebellion. He would, however, for the all of the community's as well as his own family's safety. Caroline's mother prayed that one day she would understand how special her heritage and privileges are.

V.J. on the other hand was being groomed as next head of Tunnel Council and community. His father had inherited all the responsibilities when their grandfather passed late last year at the age of 90. One item that had come to light with his grandfather's passing was the age at which he had helped create this community. Blacklisted due to the Communist which hunts in the early 1950's, Dr. Jacob Wells, late 20's maybe early 30's, entered this community and helped formed it to be a safe haven with governing rules and organized network of Helpers and Dwellers.

Growing up, V.J. understood at an early age that he may not be accepted if he showed his face Above. So, on those nights when his father was feeling restless and his mother was not up to the long journey above after a busy day, he and his father would walk the in the dark of Central Park or climb onto the buildings and enjoy their special time together.

His mom had mentioned one time to him that sometimes, if she waited Above for them, or in their private home for them, it always took her breath away to see her husband and their identically looking son walk home.

"Your older sister resembles your dad, too, and it is extraordinary. However, you V.J. are so extraordinary that God could create an exact replica of your beautiful father through me."

"Mom, I think that if you wanted to know how scientifically that works, you ought to speak to Jonathan. I'm sure he knows the answer."

V.J. laughed to himself when he thought about that conversation now at 21 years old as at 10 years of age he had not realized what his mother's comment meant.

Both children were the spitting images of their parents: Caroline (named after her maternal grandmother) had always been a diminutive version of Catherine and V.J. was a miniature version of Vincent, Sr. Their Uncle Joe, as all five Wells children affectionately addressed their mother's special friend from Above, called them Cathy and Vincent's mini-me's as the resemblance was so prevalent.

V.J. knocked on the doorway of his parent's chamber.

"Come in," Catherine said as she watched her large lion like son walk into the room carrying a message.

"Good morning, mom," V.J. said as he kissed her cheek. "It looks like Caroline is not coming to your party tonight."

"What!" Catherine exclaimed appalled. "That's not going to happen if I have to go up there and drag her down! She promised your father and me that she would be here. I can't believe she would let your father down like that."

"Catherine," Vincent said emerging from the adjoining bathing chamber dressed in his bathrobe. "Did you say that Caroline is not coming to the party tonight?"

"Yes, love, that's what is on this note from her," Catherine said as she showed the note to her husband.

"Morning, dad," V.J. greeted his father.

"Good morning, son," Vincent returned to his youngest son encompassing him in a manly embrace.

"I knew you would be disappointed. You had told all of us that it was a command performance and very special," V.J. explained.

"Yes, it is," Vincent mused as he tried to read between the lines of his youngest daughter's note.

"She's not in trouble, is she? Do you think?" Vincent asked.

V.J. lowered his eyes and surreptitiously looked at his mother who was about to go on one of her fuming rants as they used to call them when they were children. Their mother could expound for hours on why something was wrong or right. V.J. chalked it up to her having once been a practicing attorney with some trial experience.

"No, it's just Caroline being Caroline," V.J. interrupted before Catherine could start on her rant.

"I'm sure that's what it is. Well, I'm going to the college and making sure her butt is down here even if I have to get a court order to do it," Catherine said determinedly.

"Catherine, please," Vincent tried to calm his wife by holding her close while looking over her head to his son.

"V.J. get a message to Caroline through one of your brothers or Bruce. I think he told me the other day he was going Above to get materials for Jacob's living room expansion.

"Sure. I will see what I can do," V.J. said as he left his parents' chamber in search of someone who could help him contact his errant twin sibling.

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Chapter 2 – Getting in Touch

As Vincent, Jr., had promised, he was able to contact his twin sibling, Caroline. She was living Above in the dorms and sometimes accessed their mother's apartment which was a subway trek from the college. V.J. was able to get a message to her by way of their eldest brother, Jacob, who said he would track her down by her schedule. She had deliberately not taken any literature classes but as requirement Caroline took required and general English electives which did not encompass literature. Of all their children, Caroline was the last person to read any type of poetry, prose, or other type literature thinking that no real knowledge came from books like that.

V.J. had left a message with Jacob for their sister to meet him at the drainage tunnel inside right after her last class which was around 3:00 pm. He knew she would come because Caroline always took care of him and was always there if he needed her. She had told him when they were little that she would always come if he contacted her. She took her responsibility as the older twin very seriously. If her father had contacted her, she would have come as well. However, if their mother had contacted her, she would put it off and never send word why she was not coming to meet her. V.J. thought it had to do with Above.

Caroline breezed in wearing her expensive torn jeans and blue short peacoat carrying her backpack of books. Her long blonde hair was down and thrown behind her as she walked.

"Caroline!" V.J. greeted in his deep voice sounding almost like his revered father. She stepped into his arms giving him a hug.

Caroline hugged her brother back and said, "I know what this is about, but I can't come to the party. I don't care what mom said. I have something more important to take care of."

"Mom is going to come up and find you. You do know that, don't you?"

"I have something that I have to do. What time is the party again?"

V.J. hung his head. He had no idea how she retained anything. How she was going to be a lawyer with all that she had to remember was beyond him. V.J. knew himself to be a scholar but it did not mean that he had a memory like their father.

"It's at 7 pm sharp. Everybody else is coming."

"Of course, they're coming! This is Vincent and Catherine! I think the Tunnels would collapse without their presence!" Caroline exclaimed sarcastically. She was so sick of being part of that extension

of the Wells family. She suddenly remembered that when she was about five she had petitioned to live with Uncle Devin and his family.

“You don’t mean that. Think of dad. He will really miss you,” V.J. said playing on her heartstrings since he knew that Caroline loved Vincent very, very much.

Caroline stood in front of her brother who was now as tall as their father and shifted position from one foot to the other. She took a quick spin around the vestibule and then smacking her lips she came to a halt back in front of V.J.

“All right. I will be there, but I don’t guarantee that I will be at 7. I suppose Mary-Margaret needs help preparing this party since I knew she was the one that instigated it?”

“Yes, she does. She would love to see you. So would your nieces and nephew,” V.J. agreed.

“We’ll see. I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Caroline agreed. She then kissed her brother and left through the tunnel that led through to Central Park.

Caroline went straight back to school. She could not wait until she could leave the Tunnels permanently but that would not be until she actually graduated from law school and became an associate in some law firm. It’s not that Caroline was ashamed of where and how she grew up but it was the secrecy issue she could not take. Although ingrained from childhood, she totally understood the necessary secrecy; however, it just annoyed her.

She just wanted the same chance to fly without having the heavy burden of keeping part of her family under cover. In other words, Caroline wanted to forget her family.

The only problem was that Caroline did love her family. She loved her brothers, her sister, and especially her father. If her father knew of her desire to forget about where she came from it would break his heart, and her mother took a very staunch position on anyone ever hurting Vincent. She was almost over protective to a point. Catherine did tell her that it was just a remnant from their past but still a very real issue among the Tunnel Family and Helpers.

Caroline understood. She just did not like it very much; hence, her refusal to go to the party tonight. She may make an appearance, but she was not staying long. Sometimes to Caroline, when she was enveloped into her family's bosom, she felt suffocated almost claustrophobic and not able to breathe again until she emerged Above.

Meanwhile, Catherine decided to give her husband his anniversary gift early. She had a serious one and a funny one. Vincent always had a good sense of humor, so she thought the funny one would be right up his alley.

“Vincent!”

“Yes, Catherine,” he said as he emerged from the small adjoining bathing chamber.

“I have what I want you to wear tonight for our party,” Catherine said with a chuckle in her voice.

He advanced warily knowing by the look on his wife’s face and the tone of her voice that something was afoot.

Catherine turned to look at him. She held a huge black T-shirt in her hands.

“What is this?”

“Just a little funny gift I thought you might appeal to your sense of humor,” Catherine said handing him the shirt.

Vincent turned it around and on the black cotton was printed in colorful characters:

30 years together which in time is

360 months; 1,560 weeks, 26,200 hours and 1,576,800 seconds....

AND WE’VE ONLY JUST BEGUN!

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY

LOVE – YOUR WIFE

Vincent looked it over and stared at Catherine with a question.

“How do you want me to wear this, Catherine?”

“Under your top shirt, over your top shirt, I don’t know...however you want,” Catherine stated wondering why he was hesitating.

“Something wrong with it?”

Vincent immediately shook his head.

“No, of course not. It’s just not the usual type of clothing I wear.”

“Yes, I know,” Catherine said moving forward. “That’s why I thought you would like it.”

Vincent smiled at his wife and walked back to the bathing chamber.

“You don’t have to wear it, you know,” Catherine called disappointed that he was not more enthusiastic about the funny gift.

She did not hear anything come from Vincent.

After a minute or two, she called him again and said, “I’m going to the Great Hall to see if I can help our daughter with the preparations. If I know our Mary-Margaret, she has all three children helping.”

Vincent emerged for a moment still dressed in his bathrobe. He nodded to Catherine as she turned and left the chamber.

Catherine found her daughter in the Great Hall flying around preparing food with the other cooks and having her husband and children hang homemade decorations. One daughter, Tessa, was helping her father hang a decorative handpainted paper banner that read "CONGRATULATIONS ON 30 YEARS - VINCENT AND CATHERINE".

Mark called out to his daughter, "Got it, Tessa, honey?"

The seven-year-old strawberry blonde girl said, "I got it daddy." Mark continued hanging the banner and when he was done he turned Tessa around and pointed at Catherine.

"Look who's here."

"Grandma!" Tessa ran right into Catherine's arms. Catherine squeezed her and looked down into blue eyes that resembled her husband's.

"Where's your mom? I wanted to see if I could help," Catherine said coming down to Tessa's height so she could look her in the eye.

"She's with William in the kitchen. I don't think she needs help. She shoed me and daddy out here to help hang stuff."

All of a sudden two other small children ran into Catherine calling her Grandma. Edward Mark, Mary and Mark's youngest at 4 almost knocked Catherine completely on her butt with the force of his hug. Melanie, the middle child at 5 1/2 hung back but called loudly to her grandmother nonetheless.

"Hey, you guys, don't knock Grandmom on the floor. It's her and Grandpop's special day!" Mary-Margaret said as she ventured from the kitchen wiping her hands with a towel.

Catherine rose and kissed her daughter on the cheek.

"Mother," Mary-Margaret said in a sarcastic tone. "What are you doing here? You're not due here for hours with dad unless you dropped him off in the Chamber of the Winds.

"I came here, dear daughter, to see if I can help with the preparations. V.J. was meeting your sister at the Drainage Tunnel to see if she will for sure be coming. He hasn't come back with his report yet."

Mary stroked the dark head of her son as she spoke with her mother. "Well, we are all good here. Aren't we love?" Mary called to her husband who was now hanging lights around the "star" places at the table.

"We're good," Mark responded. He blew a dark curly hair out of his vision as he responded.

Mary bent down to her three kids and said, "Give Grandma a kiss and tell her to go have fun with Grandpop until around 7:00 pm."

Catherine hugged her family and waved to the others trapped in the kitchen and then went on her way back to her and Vincent's chamber.

When she returned to the chamber, Vincent's back was to her. He was sitting in one of his oversized antique chairs reading a book. It looked like he was still wearing his bathrobe. That was until she saw him as she came around to face him in the chair.

Vincent looked up at her with a smile and he nearly burst into loud laughter as he watched Catherine's reaction to what he was wearing.

Catherine smiled and then laughed really loud covering her mouth.

"It fits...sort of," Vincent said loudly laughing himself with deep guffaws.

"Well, you are a big man. I forgot cotton runs small," Catherine said as she saw her husband wearing the anniversary gift on his massive chest. He had one of his thermal Henley's underneath. Even without the extra shirt, the T-shirt was stretched beyond belief so as to make the characters almost unreadable.

All of a sudden, Catherine's smile became serious. She walked forward and put her knee between Vincent's as he sat on the chair.

"I am thinking that, perhaps, this gift looks better framed than on you."

She reached out to the hem of the shirt and started to roll it up finally with Vincent's help they pulled it off over his head.

"I like this much better," he said as he threw the gift on the bed and pulled Catherine to his lap. They kissed and Vincent almost purred he was so contented.

"I got thrown out of the Great Hall by our daughter," Catherine purred back in a deep smoky voice as she played with the buttons on Vincent's thermal shirt. "She told me to go have fun with "Grandpop".

They both smiled as Catherine and he were thinking the same. That their behavior especially this day did not resemble your typical grandparents.

"I think that was a wonderful idea," Vincent said. He rose and being sure he placed his cloak on his shoulders and another overshirt to guard against the chill of the Tunnels took Catherine's hand as they began to exit their chamber.

"Let's take a walk to the Chamber of the Falls."

Catherine smiled her acquiescence and took Vincent's arm laying her head against it temporarily.

Confirming she had her watch so they would return in time to dress for the party, Vincent and Catherine celebrated in another pleasant way. A thing they did even before they had gotten married. They took a long walk to one of their favorite places Below.

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Chapter 3

It was drawing nearer to the time that Caroline would have to leave for her parents' anniversary party. She looked at the clock on her desk in her dorm room and just kept thinking that she was not going. Then she would waver back and think how disappointed her father would be. She had not seen him since she left in September. They kept in touch by way of Helpers who could get messages to him. Caroline knew her father would never want to use an iPhone with all its conveniences of texting and calling. She knew her mother possessed one and had made sure that her children had them when they went Above, but they were not used on a regular basis by anyone.

"Hey, don't you have to leave soon for your parents?" Caroline's boyfriend, Ethan, said.

"Yes," Caroline said not turning to look at Ethan who lay on her bed. "Don't you need to study for that science class?"

"I did. That's why I came over here. I know you're going to ace that exam tomorrow, and I already studied; so, I thought we could find something else to do."

"Ethan..."

“I know. Since I got here, though, all you’ve done is sit at that table and pretend to read that book. You haven’t paid attention to me at all,” Ethan complained and made a pouty face.

Caroline finally turned around and spotted Ethan’s face. Her smile reached her eyes and she fell into his arms on the bed. She began to kiss him as well. Finally capturing his lips in sweet kisses that Caroline felt to her toes.

“I’m sorry. I’m torn. I want to go home to see my dad and my brother not necessarily to revel in Catherine and Vincent!”

Ethan looked at his girlfriend with hooded eyes. Ethan was a tall thin young man the same age as Caroline. He had dark wavy hair and blue eyes and along aquiline nose. He had met Caroline Wells two years ago at freshman orientation. Then he had met her mother, Catherine and one older brother, Jacob, who was a professor at the college. Though Caroline had never extended an invitation to her home, Ethan always wondered why Caroline’s father and two of her four siblings were kept well-guarded. When asked, Caroline hedged and told him that “it was complicated.” His curiosity was still peaked.

“I wish, somehow, you could come with me, but that would take too long.”

“What do you mean? I could jump on the subway with you and accompany you.”

Caroline stroked Ethan’s long jaw. “No, you don’t understand. It is way more complicated if I wanted to bring you to meet my parents.”

Ethan sighed heavily and clasping her hand as they lay on the bed together said, “Can’t you tell me why?”

Caroline looked away in decision.

The Great Hall was lit like it was Winterfest. Banners hung, musicians playing including the eldest grandchild of Catherine and Vincent. Catherine and Vincent had known how hard Tessa had been practicing the violin solo for he and Catherine’s dance later in the party plus learning her other music and schoolwork as well. Most Tunnel children were taught Below and only later when they were ready for their college boards did they have access to schooling Above. So far in the many, many years of teaching orphaned or parented children, the Tunnels success of those same children continuing on to college far outweighed those who did not.

Catherine wore her favorite party dress of pale blue gathered in the middle of her bust with a blue rosette. Catherine was reunited with the original crystal that Vincent gave her on their first anniversary together. It had been lost after Catherine had been kidnapped. Vincent had found it in her apartment having taken her there after finding her on that cold rooftop on the night of Jacob’s birth all those years ago which to Catherine seemed a different lifetime.

Vincent was dressed in his most regal outfit and Catherine’s favorite. His ruffled shirt with his leather vest belted at his waist and his long thigh high boots which were showing more wear and tear every time he wore them. Vincent’s legs were encased in dark green corduroy pants. He still carried the pouch with the ivory rose tucked in it which was Catherine’s first anniversary gift to Vincent.

Both entered the hall to applause and their favorite music being played by the children’s orchestra. As they took their seats at their table, many of their friends came to wish them well. Their children and grandchildren were to sit around them. Mary-Margaret, of course, as hostess/mistress of

ceremonies, commanded a performance all her own. She kept her parents informed of each event whether it was a part of the meal or a performance or a speech.

The children's orchestra took a break from performing so they could eat before the next round of playing. The next movement of the orchestra was for Catherine and Vincent's celebration waltz.

Vincent and Catherine looked around and counted their children as they saw them. They were all mingling with their friends of whom they may not have seen for quite some time.

"Jacob is here, but who's that young woman who's holding his arm?" Catherine asked puzzled.

"Jonathan is over there," Vincent pointed as he watched his second son speak animatedly with one of his old friends.

"Well, we know where Mary is and her husband and our grandkids," Catherine joked as she pointed to Mary flitting around the room, Mark her husband carrying the youngest child, Edward Mark to calm him it seemed while Tessa and Melanie had settled and were eating.

"There's V.J.," Vincent said as his youngest son and replica took up residence at the door as host and keeper of the gate.

"Where's Caroline?" Catherine asked. "I don't see her."

"Wow, I didn't think I would make it. That's the last time I let one of my girls drive from upstate New York," complained a visitor sneaking in behind Catherine and Vincent.

"Devin!" Catherine and Vincent exclaimed simultaneously.

Vincent stood up and hugged his older brother fiercely. Catherine stood up as well hugging him and giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"Did Jenny get here yet?" Devin asked.

"Jenny's coming?" Catherine asked in surprise thinking her oldest friend was probably away on one of her excursions.

"Yes, of course, she's coming, Chandler," Devin said using his old nickname for her. "I called her myself. I think you should know that I've introduced her to her current boyfriend."

"She's not bringing him here, is she? She knows the rules."

"Chandler, relax. No, Jenny guards this place better than any Helper I know of."

Catherine grinned and held Devin's hand. He had been the main proponent in Jenny being accepted as a Helper when Catherine returned.

Still looking around at two of her nieces and her nephew, she asked Devin, "You don't know if Caroline has talked to her cousins and confirmed whether she's coming today or not? V.J. saw her earlier, but she didn't promise anything."

"Still acting the rebel is she? I know what's that like," Devin said looking away in the distance as the old memory of why he fled the Tunnels more than once popped into his brain.

"Yes. She is determined to make her own path without our guidance," Vincent said. "She's always been like that." Vincent lowered his eyes thinking of his youngest daughter.

Catherine felt Vincent's pain and put her arm around his waist and soothed the pain away stroking his back. Vincent felt everything through their bond and wrapped his arm around his wife and pulled her close. He smiled down to her as she looked up.

"That's what I'm talking about," Devin said loudly. "A little conjugal affection."

"Where's Angela?" Catherine asked wondering where her sister-in-law was.

"She's coming a bit later with our Heather Marie. Both were on duty at the hospital until earlier, they'll be here. I know Angela wouldn't miss this for the world."

"Yo, Radcliffe, when do we eat?" Joe Maxwell said as he approached the celebrated couple.

"Hi Joe. I'm surprised I have to tell you. You know who's in charge," Catherine asked as she pointed to Mary-Margaret organizing the first course onto the buffet table. "I'm not sure if she thought of everything, but she normally does. Go check."

"Happy Anniversary, you two," Joe said as he turned. "Nice to see you Devin."

"Great to see you, Joe. You haven't changed much."

"Yeah, I have. That's for another time, though," Joe said running his hand through his thinning salt and pepper curls. "Well, I'm off to the eats." Joe left them and called Mary's name.

"Looks like he didn't bring his children or Diana," Vincent mused looking around.

"I'm sure they'll come," Catherine comforted patting his arm as she resumed their seats.

At the door, Mary approached her brother and said, "No sign of Caroline yet?"

V.J. shook his head and looked down at his older sister. Mary-Margaret, though shorter than her younger brother, was still taller than their mother.

"Haven't got a word from her either. She only told me she would try but wouldn't promise."

Mary held her arms across her body and paced back and forth in disgust. "Oh, that child drives me bonkers!"

V.J. laughed at his older sister and said, "I know she'll come. She just might come a little late. Mom and Dad are worried, aren't they?"

"No, I don't think so. Look over at dad, though, he keeps searching for her," Mary said as she pointed in their father's direction.

"Did you say that Jacob brought Taylor? He didn't come to me and introduce her to me or mom and dad," Mary asked.

"He didn't mention anything to me. He probably talked to Jonathan before he brought her here unless that dark haired young woman isn't her?" V.J. asked raising his shoulders with a question.

"I don't know either," Mary confirmed.

Finally, they saw a shadow carrying a flashlight coming hurriedly down the stony steps. Her heels clacked on the hard surface. Mary and V.J. called to the figure.

"Caroline?"

“Yes, it’s me!” Caroline shouted to her brother and sister as she stumbled the few feet to the Great Hall door where V.J. caught her.

“Careful, there, sis,” V.J. said helping her to an erect position.

“Hi Mary-Margaret,” Caroline said stepping forward and hugging her tight.

“You’re late,” Mary-Margaret admonished while she squeezed her little sister.

“I know, but didn’t you tell them V.J. that I wasn’t making any promises that I was coming in the first place?” Caroline admonished her twin.

“Of course, I did, but...I knew you would be here,” V.J. said and smiled leaning on the big wooden door.

“Let’s get in there before the wind blows all the candles out,” Mary said as she ushered her younger siblings into the big room

Dinner was being served as Caroline walked up to her parents at the head of the family table. She looked and said hello to everyone as she went up there. She was surprised to see her Uncle Devin and Aunt Angela with all her cousins in tow. Uncle Joe, Aunt Diana, and their two kids (one by Uncle Joe’s previous marriage to Gina Barrett) were also present. She waved and promised everyone she would speak later.

As she approached her parents, Vincent rose to his full height to confront his errant daughter with a big hug. Caroline loved her dad’s hugs. She always felt safe and secure. After kissing the top of her head and saying a few words with promises to talk later, Caroline moved onto Catherine.

Catherine wiped her mouth on her napkin and put a hand up to her daughter and smiled.

“I’m so glad you came, baby. You have made us very happy.”

“Thanks, mom,” Caroline said as she bent down and gave her mom a kiss on the cheek.

Caroline went back to her assigned seat next to her brother Jonathan and her cousin, Miranda with whom she always had a good rapport. Miranda and their relationship was one of the reasons why she wanted to move to the other side of the Wells family.

Jonathan and Miranda were still in heavy conversation discussing some social issue from both viewpoints Above and Below. As Jonathan was once a denizen of the Tunnel world and is now a member of Above society, he really did not stop speaking until Miranda cleared her throat and threw her eyes to light on his youngest sister.

“Caroline! So nice you decided to honor us with your presence! I thought dad was going to convulse if you didn’t show up,” Dr. Jonathan Wells reported to his sister as they looked at one another.

“Jonathan, Caroline is a grown woman. She is bound to have a lot on her plate with school and her boyfriend, Ethan. You know?” Miranda defended.

Caroline rolled her eyeballs. She appreciated the defense from Miranda, but she and Jonathan always have this topical argument whenever Caroline was around. From birth she and Jonathan always rubbed each other the wrong way. No one was really ever certain why. Most times they both would put a

good front on it because if Catherine and Vincent realized that not all their five children got along there would be hell to pay.

“So, Jonathan, living La Vida Loca? Caroline asked being purposefully sarcastic.

Jonathan took a bit of his meal into his mouth and grimaced at his sister narrowing his blue eyes not appreciative of her sarcasm.

“Funny,” Jonathan biting responded.

They agreed to eat in peace. If Jonathan felt like being conciliatory he would give his younger sister a hug and a ride in his new car back to campus.

“I assume by this little exchange that Ethan knows nothing about your family? You’ve been with him for what? Two years?”

Caroline nodded as she chewed her food thoughtfully.

When she was finished, she put down her fork, wiped her mouth, and started to spew.

“How do I explain them to him? He’s about as far away from the Tunnels socially as anyone I ever knew! If he meets dad, V.J. or Mary what do you think Ethan would do?” Caroline shook her head and then left the table.

“Jonathan, why did you get her started? You know how sensitive she is about where she was raised!” Miranda berated her beloved cousin.

Jonathan just shoveled another piece of meat in his mouth and looking skyward stated:
“Women!”

After dinner and before his parents’ Waltz, Jacob and almost fiancée, Taylor approached his parents. He had prepared her for the unusual look to his two siblings and his father only the day before. He thought that Taylor would be frightened as so many people are when they see Vincent, but instead she swallowed hard and held the picture in her hands as she examined him.

“So, this—man is the one responsible for your classical education?” Taylor had asked.

“I owe a lot to this man and my mother. Don’t be afraid. He is a gentle soul. He very rarely gets into a temper. My mother is more of a hothead and a fierce protector.”

Taylor had nodded. “I bet she is being in love with him.”

“He looks like a rock star,” Taylor had said. She giggled a little bit about that. “I could picture him playing an Eddie Van Halen solo with a guitar slung low on his hips.

Jacob looked at her at first appalled and then knowing that his father would have found that image amusing laughed along with her.

Then he asked her, “Taylor, I really want you to meet my parents now. I was scared at first, but seeing that you are so accepting of my family I thought you may want to come with me to my parent’s 30th Wedding Anniversary celebration in two weeks?”

Taylor smiled and a tear escaped from her eye. “I would love to come meet your parents.”

So, then he was off getting the proper approvals from the council without his father finding out which was a bit difficult. However, the approval came by messenger of Jenny, his mother's good friend and who was publishing his first text soon to be out late next year.

Hence, the reason they were here tonight and approaching Catherine and Vincent.

Vincent and Catherine enjoyed their meal and everyone approaching them giving them their heartfelt congratulations on 30 years together. They were both so immersed in these people who helped them and supported them on their journey together that Catherine was surprised when her son and his soon to be fiancée appeared in front of them.

“Jacob, honey,” Catherine rose hugging her eldest child fiercely. Jacob came around to his father's side and Vincent did the same.

Jacob and Vincent were both the same height and the same coloring except for the eyes. Jacob's were green different from Vincent's very blue.

After being released from his father's fierce embrace, Jacob presented Taylor.

“Mom, Dad, this is Taylor Ritchie. She's the one I was telling you about and I have asked her to become my wife,” Jacob said eloquently.

Catherine's eyes filled with tears because she never thought all those years ago that what seemed to be a complicated situation was actually very simple when you believed in love and faith and each other.

Vincent said with a nod. “Congratulations! That is wonderful news!” He walked around Catherine and stood before Taylor whose gaze Vincent could tell was not of fear but of fascination.

Vincent looked at the girl that would become his daughter-in-law. She was very pretty and petite Vincent thought and shorter than his wife. He was afraid to embrace her in case he squeezed too hard and broke her. She had long dark hair, big blue eyes, a pert nose, and a beautiful smile.

“Dad, it's ok. You can hug her. She won't break,” Jacob coaxed his dad when he spotted the uncertain look on his face.

“Oh, yes, I won't break. I'm stronger than I look,” Taylor said for herself.

With that Vincent smiled and hugged his future daughter-in-law carefully welcoming her into the family.

Catherine followed next and hugged her. “Welcome to the Wells family.”

When they all released each other, Taylor said, “Well, I am anxious to meet the rest of the family. Jacob has told me all about your other two children. I do know Jonathan and Caroline.”

“Ok. That's my job. I'll take care of it. Congrats mom and dad,” Jacob said before he departed for the other immediate family members now dispersed throughout the room.

Caroline had found her nieces Tessa and Melanie. Tessa tuning up for the solo for her grandparents' waltz and Melanie who was having a fight with her younger brother Edward Mark.

“Aunt Caroline!” Melanie exclaimed running to her and hugging her tight. Edward Mark with his finger in his mouth did the same. Caroline reach down and picked up her nephew.

“You look like you could use a break Mel,” Caroline said using her nickname. “I’ll just put Eddie on my hip like this. Then you can either come with me or find Uncle Jacob and your new aunt. See? Your mom and dad are with them?”

“I’ll stay with you. Where are you going?”

“To talk to Grandmom and Grandpop about something.”

“I’ll go with you. Tessie’s too busy playing the violin,” Melanie complained and then taking Caroline’s free hand accompanied her aunt to see her grandparents.

Aunt Jenny (as she was known to the Wells’ children) was in heated conversation with her mother and Uncle Devin.

“...so, we left Acapulco and came here on the fastest track possible. You never told me that Darius had his own plane and was a pilot,” Jenny recounted to her friends.

“I knew you guys would hit it off,” Devin acknowledged.

“I hope this means you might give marriage another try,” Catherine said.

Jenny rolled her eyes. Then she smiled. “Well, they do say that the third time is the charm. Not many people are as lucky as you are Cathy.”

Catherine smiled and averted her eyes then looked over at her husband who was talking to Mouse about something that he and Jamie’s son invented. *Oh boy! That can’t be good! Catherine thought.*

“Caroline!” Jenny greeted her pseudo niece. “I know these are Mary’s children. Are you practicing or something?”

“No way. I’m not ready for that yet,” Caroline protested all the while Jenny was playing with Edward Mark trying to get him to laugh.

“Say these two wanted to say hello to their grandparents and then I need to speak to you and dad, if it’s ok?”

Catherine took her grandson from her daughter’s arms and then bent down to talk to her granddaughter.

“Listen, I haven’t talked to anyone here yet. How about I take these guys off your hands,” Jenny said setting Edward Mark on his feet and holding one hand and Melanie’s in the other. “I’ll just go find Mary and Mark Bruce and say hello.”

“Thanks, Aunt Jenny,” Caroline said. She knew that Jenny couldn’t keep her hands off her niece and nephew. Jenny’s own daughter and grandchildren lived in California and she rarely saw them.

“Let us go get your father,” Catherine said examining Caroline. Sometimes, to Catherine, it was like looking in a mirror many years ago.

“Vincent?” Catherine said standing next to their daughter.

“How nice to see you, Caroline,” Vincent said hugging her one more time. He really missed her because she always stayed away the longest. To Vincent, she reminded him of Devin’s spirit always on the move.

“It’s good to see you, daddy,” Caroline said trying to squeeze her dad as hard as he was hugging her. “I need to talk to you about something and I’m not sure when I will be back in the Tunnels to see you.”

Just then, Mary-Margaret decided it was the best time for Catherine and Vincent to have their celebration waltz.

Quietly, Caroline found her way to the door of the Great Hall and slipped out.

A Wonderful Real Dream

Chapter 4

Vincent held his wife’s hand aloft as they came to the dance floor for their anniversary waltz. On the count of four the children’s small orchestra played a waltz by Strauss though not the Blue Danube. It was something that Mary knew her parents would like and taught the orchestra how to play. Catherine and Vincent whirled around the floor with no eyes for anything or anyone else except each other. Catherine did happen to wink at Tessa who was playing her heart out on the violin.

As they danced across the floor, Catherine felt she was floating. Vincent was such an accomplished dancer, but few knew about his skill. Catherine was glad of that because she knew that most women would swoon at the way Vincent was so light on his feet. It made total sense to her simply by the look of him. She loved those differences and had loved those differences between he and other men, and she also relished the similarities between he and other males. She was wife to both sides of him and mother of his children which made Catherine very, very proud.

Vincent looked at Catherine and as he swept by the children’s orchestra he also winked at his granddaughter as she pursed her lips tightly together and focused on her music. Vincent gave her a look as if to say, ‘you haven’t memorized it yet?’ which Tessa noticed and smiled at her grandfather nodding her head as if to say ‘yes, sir!’

His gaze fell back to Catherine in her beautiful blue used formal gown. He remembered the first time she wore it. It was on the first Winterfest where he had invited her as part of his Tunnel family. That night there was tragedy as Narcissa was injured by Paracelsus disguising himself as their beloved barber Helper and friend whom Paracelsus killed.

Later, though, after all the candles’ flames had been doused and everyone had returned to their chambers, he and Catherine stood alone in the Great Hall.

“Do you hear it, Vincent?”

“What, Catherine?”

“The music.”

Vincent simply nodded and stared at his love.

Catherine still hearing the lovely waltz music in her head quietly asked, “Vincent?”

“Yes.”

“Do you dance?”

He then went to her and took her in his arms and they swayed and waltzed to the same music playing in their heads.

It was a thrilling moment and one that Vincent, for sure, thought he had forgotten. All the memories from that time swept away by the tragedy that would happen only months later.

Catherine noticed his little smile and asked, “What’s so funny, my love?”

He smiled and pulled her close and kissed her forehead.

“I was just remembering the first time we danced in this Great Hall.”

Catherine shifted her head and looked up at him and smiled.

“I remember, too. The only music was what we heard in our heads.”

They both put their foreheads together and shared a laugh.

Eventually the piece was completed. Vincent and Catherine bowed and curtsied at one another to formally end their dance together and stood applauding the children’s orchestra who had accompanied so them so well.

Mary Margaret who was still applauding made the announcement that there was a five minute break for the orchestra and that there was still plenty of food and drink left.

“But save room for the anniversary cake that we women in the kitchen have been slaving over for the past two days,” she said loud and proud.

She spotted her parents trying to sneak away and she called to them

“Mom, Dad, don’t think of leaving! We need you to cut the cake!”

Catherine looked up at her husband whose arms surrounded her and held her close from behind. They both called to their daughter

“We wouldn’t dream of it!”

However, as they returned to their table hoping that Caroline was still there and willing to tell them what was happening, they noticed she was no longer in the room let alone at their table.

Catherine sighed, “Vincent, where do you think she went?”

Vincent who knew his children very well said, “Let me find her. I know where she is. Wait here. I think she needs to talk to me first.”

“Just like when she was a child. She always asked for you first.”

“Don’t worry. She is our daughter so she will have to tell you sooner or later,” Vincent said kissing Catherine once again on her forehead.

“Don’t be long. If I know Mary Margaret the cake is as big as you are. I can’t cut a cake that size alone!” Catherine could not help but smile.

“Where’s dad going?” Mary Margaret said as she swooped Mark Edward into her arms and onto a hip all in one motion.

“He went to find your sister. She was going to talk to us about something and then when it was time for us to dance she suddenly flitted away.”

“That’s Caroline all right. She never wanted to stay too long in one spot.”

“Well, your dad says he knows where she is and that she needs him right now.”

Mary-Margaret patted her mom’s shoulder. She loved her mom fiercely and knew how much each of her children were special to her. Everyone seemed to understand this except Caroline.

Vincent went searching for his youngest daughter. Even as a little girl, Caroline suffered from Wanderlust. Vincent knew the condition to a certain extent but because of his limitations he had to grow up quickly realizing that his Wanderlust could only be quenched by words in books or by other people’s tales of their travels. Catherine had provided much of that to him in that she had been all over the world and seen things only he had imagined from books.

He went to the Mirror Pool because he knew that was his daughter’s favorite place. She would spend many an hour sitting there just looking at the stars. Unlike her father, she was able to see the stars for herself Above sitting in some small alcove in Central Park or lately sitting on her bed in her dorm at the college.

He found her exactly where he thought she would be. Caroline sat on the dusty ground in her overcoat, long skirt, and boots. Her knees were bent to her chest and she had her arms clasped around them. He stood there for a second seeing so much of her mother in her and knowing that Catherine and Caroline were really most alike. Not only in looks but in restless nature. Vincent had known that Catherine’s restless nature had surfaced only after her accident and when she met him. Caroline’s seemed to be inherent in her character.

He went forward and noticed that Caroline had heard his footfalls.

“Daddy?” Caroline asked without turning around because she knew instinctively it was her father.

“You always had the most acute hearing of any of our children,” Vincent said with a smile. He came behind her and then took a seat beside her. He placed a quick touch on Caroline’s clasped hands.

“I knew you’d find me. You always knew where I would be when I was not happy.”

Vincent looked up at the stars himself and smiled. He then turned his head to look at his daughter.

“What makes you so unhappy, Caroline?”

Caroline turned her head to look at her father. Her eyes were red rimmed and wet. She then turned away and answered.

“I wish our family had a regular home. I know that we can always use mom’s apartment Above if we really need it,” Caroline said.

She looked at her father, but in his inimitable way which always brought comfort to most people, he focused on her and just sat quietly waiting for her to say her peace.

“I just want to come home and find my family waiting for me or at least not have to travel almost an hour tracking them down in the chambers Below. Also, I wish I could just say, “Mom, Dad I brought someone home from school!” without having to get The Council’s permission or a preliminary warning to you and V.J., and Mary to a certain extent. I’m sure you understand, right daddy?”

“Of course, I understand. This was one reason why I was so reluctant to have children. For a long time, I never thought that I could marry your mother let alone produce a child. We have been very blessed your mother and me,” Vincent said looking off in the distance and smiling in that soft way when memories flooded his mind.

He returned to the present time and moved closer to his daughter. He put his arm around her and pulled her close kissing the top of her head as he did when she was little and troubled.

“I wish no burdens on any of my children. I know this one is a difficult one, but it is a burden we all share. I always wanted to give your mother a normal life that’s why I never pursued her as a normal man would for the better part of two years. We knew we were in love, but I could not say the words until I had reconciled with my dark side illness and thought all hope was gone for us. That she could go on without me.”

“Oh, dad, you were so wrong,” Caroline said lifting her head up from under her father’s chin and looking into his sky blue eyes. “Mom could never live without you. She doesn’t think there is anything abnormal with our family.”

“She never has. Her acceptance, love, faith, and loyalty are fierce.”

Caroline sat up straighter and looked sheepishly at her father this time.

“Daddy, would you mind if I went away for a while? I know I’m not to go to Cambridge until next September, but I thought maybe I would stay up there with my friend Alicia’s family much sooner. Mom met her parents last year at a gala event. I’m sure she’ll remember if you ask her.”

“I know which one it was,” Vincent nodded. “I would have to consult your mother. I know she would miss you terribly.”

“I’m not so sure. Mom is extremely critical of me and she doesn’t realize it. It seems that because I am the only daughter that looks exactly like her and named after my deceased grandmother that the bar is set higher for me.”

“I have never seen that behavior. I know she’s proud of all her children. You should really discuss this with her. It is between you and her,” Vincent said and squeezed Caroline’s forearm gently.

“Your mother loves you so very, very much. Her heart is so big that she accepted me, loved me, and gave me children. She protects me and all of us even those of her children who are Above. She protects everyone as best she can whoever is in her reach.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes while they mulled through their own thoughts about their discussion.

Caroline changed her position and leaned on her arms looking directly into the Mirror Pool. She turned to look at her dad who looked at her back knowing that she had a question. He smiled at her when she smiled at him in her Catherine-like way.

“So, how did your waltz go with mom? Did Tessa make a face all the way through? I’m she played great, didn’t she?”

Vincent smiled and looked away at his daughter’s question. This was Vincent’s way of blushing when a question became too personal from one or another of his children.

“I loved dancing/waltzing with your mother. I always feel like we’re the only two people in the world when I have her in my arms,” Vincent said.

“And Tessa?”

“Tessa looked exactly how you described her. She played beautifully, though. I think she was afraid your sister would give her kitchen duty if she hadn’t played well,” Vincent said laughing. We winked at her and hugged her when she was finished.

“How did Mary-Margaret get to be such a hard ass?” Caroline asked using a word that was rarely used by anyone in their family.

“Caroline!” Vincent exclaimed surprised at her use of the word. If no one could see a difference between Catherine and Caroline this would be it. Caroline’s vocabulary had always been influenced by her encounters of the people Above. Caroline is an adult now, but when she was a child the arguments and the discipline that ensued could be heard for miles Below.

“Well, I’m sorry, dad. I just could not think of a better description of her right now. She’s another one that’s critical of me, and I don’t know why? She was fortunate. She found a man who loves her and was able to have children. She picked up where Grandma Mary left off.”

“Caroline, you really should discuss these questions you have with the person directly. I cannot answer for them either your sister or your mother. You may find that their behavior is not meant to be critical...just loving and caring.”

They sat a couple of more minutes and then Vincent remembered.

“Speaking of your sister, she needs me to return to cut a large cake with your mother. So, are you ready to go back to the party now and see what all the fuss is concerning this gigantic cake?” Vincent asked smiling at her.

“Sure dad. I don’t want to make Mary-Margaret any more angry with me than she already is.”

Vincent rose and held out his hand to his daughter. Caroline took it and used it to rise off the ground. She brushed the dust from her skirt with the other one.

They started to walk toward the Great Hall when Caroline stopped and looked up into the majestic lion face of her beloved father.

“Did I tell you how much I love you, daddy?”

“Yes, but I always like to hear it,” Vincent said teasing his daughter.

“I love you with all my heart and to the tips of my toes,” she said clamoring for a hug.

Vincent smiled into her hair. "You haven't said that since you were a little girl."

"Still true, daddy."

"I love you, too, Caroline with all my heart and to the tips of my toes."

A Wonderful Real Dream

Chapter 5

Catherine watched as her youngest daughter returned through The Great Hall's doors and down the wooden staircase. She watched as Caroline wore a humble expression and her pace slow as she spotted her at the bottom of the staircase.

Caroline reached out to her mother and hugged and kissed her on the cheek and quietly told her mother that she loved her 'from the bottom of my heart to the tips of my toes.'

Catherine pulled away and said, "I love you, too. Is everything ok?"

Caroline just nodded and excused herself. "I see Uncle Devin and Aunt Jenny over there. I want to go say hello."

Catherine nodded in acquiescence and said, "Ok." She watched her daughter walk away with a questions written all over her face.

Then she watched as Caroline found Devin and Jenny in the crowd and left her to speak with them.

"Caroline is feeling her oats," Vincent whispered as he sneaked behind his wife putting his hand into hers as it lay by her side. Catherine's focus was still riveted on their daughter.

"You know what she did when she came back in, Vincent?" Catherine asked as Vincent released her hand and instead gave a little massage to his wife's shoulders.

"Did she tell you she loved you to the 'tips of her toes'?"

Catherine turned her head and looked up at her husband and said, "She told you the same thing?"

"Yes. I think the last time she uttered those words she was no older than 8."

"I think she stopped telling me a lot younger than that. We've always had a precarious relationship. I mean I love her and I know she loves me, but there's something else between us. I know some mothers and daughters have issues between them, but I think she believes that I want to live vicariously through her. It is almost as if she resents me being her mother and she being the daughter that can go freely out in the world."

"She did tell me during our talk that she feels you expect too much from her."

"I hope you told her that's not why I push. It's not that I expect too much from her. I want her to be happy and do her best. That's all I want her to do. I was hoping she would tell me what would make her happy."

"I think she is giving us a clue by talking to Devin and Heather Marie."

"What do you mean?" Catherine asked as she turned and put her arm around her husband's waist.

"I'll tell you later," Vincent whispered in her ear. "Right now, I want one more dance with my wife before the orchestra has to go to bed."

"What about the cake? Our elder daughter forbade me to touch it until you returned".

Vincent smiled down at Catherine and smiled. He bent down and whispered.

"Dance first, cake later."

With that Vincent whisked his wife away onto the dance floor and they were swept away with many of the other couples as the last waltz was being played by the young orchestra.

Caroline watched her parents as they danced again around the floor in a beautiful waltz. The other inhabitants of the dance floor quickly made way for them. Soon it was only her mom and dad on the floor. She really did love watching her parents together and understood their deep love for one another.

"Aren't they lovely together?" Jenny asked as she patted Caroline's shoulder.

"Yes, they are," Caroline said almost inaudibly and wiped an errant tear from her face. She felt her aunt stroke her shoulder.

Pulling her into a side embrace, Jenny hugged the young woman whom she had known since she was born.

"So, Caroline, I understand you have a plan for after graduation," Aunt Jenny said after the music stopped and Vincent and Catherine had stopped moving with hands clasped together between them staring at no one but themselves. They then kissed in the middle of the dance floor. Jenny waited for Caroline's answer as they waited for Mary Margaret to announce it was bed time for the young musicians. The young musicians including Caroline's niece stood and bowed then began casing up their instruments and proceeded in single file up the stairs to be chaperoned back to their home chambers.

Caroline turned back to Jenny and told her her plan.

Devin, in the meantime, managed to make it across the Great Hall to finally have a conversation with his little brother. He found him standing speaking with his three sons.

"Well, little brother and sons," Devin greeted as Vincent and his nephews brought their attention to the graying well-dressed man. They all responded with hugs for their Uncle Devin. Since he had returned when they were little and V.J. not quite born yet, Devin had become a real part of their family. It did help that Uncle Devin had a wife and a gaggle of cousins (all girls except for one) to include into their family circle.

"I understand that congratulations are in order, Jacob. Your mom pointed your fiancée out to me. She's beautiful. If she has any brothers, remember I have two unmarried daughters."

All five men laughed with the younger men rolling their eyes at Devin trying to sell off his unmarried daughters as if it were ancient times.

"Uncle Devin, you are incorrigible! Just because Angelica married right after high school doesn't mean that Miranda and Heather aren't capable of finding their own husbands. However, I know for sure Taylor has a brother around Miranda's age," Jacob joked watching his own father shake his head in disbelief.

Jonathan said, "I see Caroline is finished talking with Aunt Jenny. If you'll excuse me, I need to apologize to my baby sister."

"If you excuse me, I have something I need to work on as well," V.J. said. "It's good to see you Uncle Devin. I will talk to you tomorrow, dad, because I know after this you and mom won't be available the rest of the night."

Vincent blushed and ducked his head. *Sometimes it is odd when your children are adults and know what can happen between a husband and wife he thought.*

Jacob said, "Please excuse me, too. I see Taylor is hailing me from across the room. Looks like she's needs help with introductions to some of my former Tunnel students."

After Vincent's sons left Devin and Vincent alone, they took a seat at the head table where there was a monumental mess of half eaten food and half empty glasses.

"So, I gather you know what Caroline has in mind after she graduates from law school," Devin said.

"Not in so many words, but I have an idea what my daughter is planning," Vincent remarked.

"When she came back, she headed straight for me. Here's why," Devin said.

"I'm listening. How about I get Catherine and you can tell both of us," Vincent said as he eyed his wife conversing with Jenny, Angela (Devin's wife), and Mary Margaret as they assisted in clearing the tables preparing for the last social event of the night.

"Uh-oh, Angela may be the particular ringleader of that particular little band. She may have already let the cat out of the bag about Caroline."

"Let's find out, shall we?"

Just at that moment, Jonathan and Caroline walked out of the room and away from the little band arm-in-arm instead of joining their relatives at the head table. Soon, Catherine, Angela, but not Mary Margaret nor Jenny joined them all and took seats. Catherine took a chair next to her husband who quickly put his arm around her and rubbed her upper arm. Catherine's hand stroked Vincent's massive thigh lazily.

Naturally, Angela took a seat next to her husband and kissed him. She showed him something on her cell phone which made Devin smile.

Vincent always curious especially about his brother's family asked. "I know this is none of my business but what made you smile?"

"Charlie, he was in the middle of a project at school and just wanted to prove to us why he could not come with us for your celebration. Look," Angela said as she showed the picture of Charlie's charts and graphs on the computer screens at the lab at Syracuse University.

"What is he studying?" Catherine asked.

"Finance of all things," Devin rolled his eyes.

They all shared a laugh because they knew Devin who had worked many occupations in his early life with or without credentials never seemed to find a venture which would yield him an overabundance of wealth. Despite how he was raised poor and in the Tunnels, it never bothered Devin. However, Devin eschewed anything that influenced the rich to get richer.

"To Charlie's credit, he is endeavoring to find a way for the poor to actually attain a more even share of the wealth that goes on in the world," said Devin justifying his own disgruntlement at his son's major course of study.

"God bless him for that," Catherine said and poured some wine out of a bottle she had left on the table. They toasted Charlie for his efforts.

Vincent looked at his wife and then over at his brother and sister-in-law and asked, "So what is the big plan that Caroline has after she has graduated from law school?"

Catherine looked away and smiled. "She is enlisting with the Peace Corps or Unicef. Angela told me that she was not sure yet which she wanted to pursue."

Vincent taken aback by his wife's words said, "So she doesn't want to work in one of the funds that you sponsor?"

Devin interjected. "She knows that Angela and I spent some time in the Peace Corps, so Caroline was just cultivating some knowledge about it and our contacts to see if that is a path she wishes to pursue before returning and becoming a fully immersed lawyer in American society."

"We told her we would text her or call her or email her our contacts so she could apply," Angela explained.

Vincent and Catherine were relieved, surprised, and scared all at the same time regarding what Caroline wanted to do. They also thought Caroline's timing of her desires was suspect. Caroline was always the one unpredictable element at any family event. Through the years, it was always at a birthday celebration or Winterfest or other social gathering when Caroline would always turned up concern, made them laugh, or began a conga line to liven up the works. The timing of her antics were always a surprise from her birth to now 21 years of age.

As they continued to sit at the table, Caroline's parents noticed that she had returned with all of her siblings as they helped Mary Margaret carry a massive sheet cake lying on a massive decorative aluminum tray. As the traveling pack of Wells' children came closer, others including all their cousins and close friends joined the caravan finally stopping to lay the massive piece of pastry on the table which Catherine and Angela had quickly cleared on seeing the pack's approach.

Devin, Angela, and the others who remained in the Great Hall shouted, "Happy Anniversary!" Those who had drinks in their hands toasted to Vincent and Catherine and wished them well.

Suddenly, Devin raised his voice all at once quieting the din in the room. He focused on Joe, Diana, Jenny, and all Vincent and Catherine's children and then his own daughters with his final gaze resting a little longer on his own wife's face.

"Tonight, is Vincent and Catherine's night. When we were boys I never envisioned that Vincent would have a wife and children. Of all Vincent's qualities, how to love was by far his best. I was so

happy when I realized many years ago tripping into the D.A.'s office pretending to be a lawyer that my special little brother had garnered a love from a woman who is as special as he.

To Catherine, I, besides Father knew what it is to love Vincent. However, your love for my brother knows no bounds and I have to say I am glad it does not. For you are part of him and the best of part of both of you shines in your children.

May you have many more celebrations like this with family surrounding you. I endeavor to still be a part of those family celebrations because nothing is more important than family.

Happy Anniversary! Love you!"

With that, Devin raised his glass and they toasted Vincent and Catherine one more time.

A Wonderful Real Dream

Chapter 6

The Great Hall was in near darkness except for the one lone candle burning in the center of the head table. Catherine and Vincent sat companionably together. Catherine lay against Vincent her back to him with her head on his chest. She looked up at the barely lit ceiling of the chamber with a smile on her face.

In similar fashion, Vincent sat with his long legs stretched out and leaning on a chair held Catherine with his head on top of hers. He could feel the press of her fingers on his forearm and once in a while she would kiss him there.

When she sighed heavily and contentedly, Vincent asked, "What are you thinking?"

Catherine smiled and said, "I'm thinking what a great 30th wedding anniversary we had."

"Surely that's not all your active mind is thinking of," Vincent importuned.

"You know me too well. My mind was just remembering all the celebrations we've shared in this room."

"Ahh...remember your first Winterfest?"

"Yes, how could I forget? It was a lovely party until Paracelsus reared his ugly head," Catherine remembered with a frown.

"My heart and mind dwell on afterward when the lights were out and the orchestra had packed up and gone back to their chambers."

"Like now," Catherine said with a chuckle.

"What other events can you remember?"

“Our wedding reception, the naming ceremony receptions...but most of all Winterfest celebrations,” Catherine said. She continued to smile as Vincent picked up the litany after her.

“Mmm...” Vincent mused.

She sat up and turned around and looked at her husband. She still held his hand in hers.

“What’s the matter, Vincent?”

“Unfortunately, my mind will wander to times when this place didn’t hold good memories,” he said.

“Oh Vincent, I know sometimes all one wants to do is remember the good times, but you must know by now that the bad memories pop up from time to time. I have bad memories, too, but I try not to dwell on them. I hope the last 30 years you have good memories?”

“The best memories, Catherine. I never thought I would have a life like this and it is times like these that I am truly thankful to the family who raised me and the family that you gave me,” Vincent said. He saw Catherine’s shining smile in the midst of the darkness and he could not resist bending forward with his unoccupied hand curving his thumb and forefinger under her upturned chin and kiss her.

Vincent pulled out of the kiss and watched as Catherine’s eyes were still shut. She then opened her eyes and smiled her mischievous smile. She stood on her knees on the chair and placed her hands around her husband’s neck.

“How I love you, Vincent,” she said.

He held her tightly by her still slim waist and said started reciting one of his favorite Sonnets.

“But love me for love’s sake that evermore Thou mayst love on, through love’s eternity,” Vincent finished as Catherine had pulled back far enough to watch him as he recited Elizabeth Barret Browning’s Sonnet 14.

“Vincent, I love that you chose that one on our anniversary. That was beautiful. You’re beautiful,” Catherine said.

Vincent blushed. Even after 30 years of marriage he still felt like his life with Catherine was still at the beginning even before they were married and started their journey in separate worlds. He looked up at her chuckling.

“Why are you smiling now?”

“Because I think I am the only one who can still get you to blush,” Catherine remarked in an amused voice.

“I think you are,” Vincent said chuckling.

They resumed their prior positions and then a memory sparked her to remember her first Winterfest and what happened afterward. She again turned around to look at her husband.

“Vincent, can I ask you a question?”

“What is it, Catherine,” he said smiling remembering that same question from that long ago Winterfest. He loved playing along.

“Do you dance?”

This time instead of silently taking her in his arms for an answer. He quietly came close and whispered in her ear. “You know I do.”

Catherine leaned into the vibrations that his breath and his voice caused. She quivered at the touch of his hand as it lightly stroked her shoulder. They breathed together and sighed.

Vincent being bold and wanting this special night not to end he said, “Let’s dance in our chamber, wife.”

Catherine laughed. “I thought you’d never ask.”

They both rose from the table which had been cleared of the remnants of cake, food, and decoration. Catherine lifted the candle from the table and Vincent took it from her. He carried it to guide their way from the chamber. Before opening the doors which would blow both of them away from the draft, Vincent blew out the candle leaving it on a table next to the door. He hefted the doors open with his strength as the winds had changed direction during the late evening making it hard to open with just a push. Catherine stood there admiring her husband’s great strength and look forward to his gentleness before they were done with their own celebration--- just the two of them.

After closing the doors behind them and placing the restraining bolt across it, Vincent picked up the torch so they would not lose their way back to their chamber. Vincent could have picked his way in the dark and not missed a step but he knew that Catherine still had fears of complete darkness after all this time and so to reassure her he carried the light.

They made the trek back passing other families’ private chambers and the nursery where the orphaned Tunnel children slept in the care of mothers and childless women who had learned at Mary’s footsteps. They waved to Leyna as she had inherited Mary’s spot as chief child caregiver. Soon after giving birth to little Catherine and returning to the Tunnels for good, Leyna discovered her own affinity for orphaned and abandoned children.

Finally making it past the chamber which was once Father’s but now fulfilled the promise of being called a library, Vincent and Catherine were home.

Vincent placed the torch in the brace near the mouth of their chamber. Catherine lit one lone candle in its sconce on the table across from the bed. When the light hit the room, Catherine audibly gasped at what she saw.

Vincent with his acute hearing heard her sigh and strolled back into the chamber with a smile on his face. He watched as Catherine turned to him beaming.

“Lilacs and red rose petals? Where did this beautiful bedspread come from?”

“This is my gift to you. I asked the children what they thought their mother would like as a present. They answered this and that, but then it dawned on me that you never had a bridal bed.”

“Well, we were past that when we did get married. We already had a child,” Catherine said amused. “This is beautiful. I almost don’t want to touch it.”

Vincent smiled at her and silently coaxed her to reach out and feel it.

The bedspread was embroidered with an old fashioned lace applique in the shape of an “S”. The coverlet itself was white satin and when Catherine ran her hand over the material she again audibly gasped at the softness. *It does look fit for a new bride. I always feel that way, though. I have him and, at one time, I never thought I would have.*

Catherine turned around after stroking the softness of the white satin disrupting the specific arrangement of petals and flowers on the spread. She walked toward Vincent and took his hand.

Vincent watched as Catherine’s passion lit eyes found him. He let her take his hand and led him to their bed