

# FLESH AND BLOOD

## Part 1

By JoAnn Baca

The moment of madness, the slip into chaos and obliteration, slithered past and out of his mind. He stared in horror at the gore on his hands, at the strips of flesh caught in his claw-like nails, and lastly, fearfully, at the torn bodies of those who would have killed his Catherine.

Horror wasn't the least of it. For when he looked into the face of the one he had saved, confusion, panic, humiliation – all these clashed and tore at his heart.

She had seen...she had *SEEN*.

But then came words so strange to his ears he could not imagine he was hearing them.

“We can't stay here.”

Unsure despite the urging, he allowed himself to be led. She brought him through the broken bricks and smashed plaster of the wall that had separated him from her attackers just moments ago. Moments...that's all it had taken to transform him, to change him from beast to killer, from savior to murderer.

And she had seen...she had *SEEN*.

They stepped through and were away, down tunnels and through caverns she chose at random. He let her, for despite her attempts to lose them within the earth's depths, he would always know his way home. He offered no resistance, still numbed by her emotions, which were centered not on horror at his actions, but on intense relief and strong determination.

At some point, he realized what she was doing. She was looking for water. He tugged gently on her hand, and she followed willingly, immediately, as he brought

her to a spring on the outskirts of the inhabited tunnels. It was lit by torchlight as a beacon for lost travelers. He thought she must be thirsty. But instead of drinking, she reached out to clutch both his bloody hands in hers. The blood – gobs of it...sticky, drying – clung to her skin immediately, so that their fingers became hard to separate, and he shuddered to see the transformation, her innocent flesh now covered in gore. His doing.

Carefully, she urged him to kneel until they were both crouching on the rocky ground, then she immersed their clasped hands into the pool. Fresh, cold water rushed over and around their fingers, rinsing the worst of the blood away. He closed his eyes and turned his head when he saw the reddened water carried away into the darkness beyond the light of the torch. Still she held him there, letting the water do its work. Even when he pried his fingers from hers, she grasped his wrists to keep his hands plunged deep in the cleansing waters.

He endured the intimacy that in any other context would have thrilled him, further dismayed when Catherine began to stroke through the sodden fur on his wrists and the backs of his hands, helping stubborn clots dissolve. She turned his hands and flicked her nails along the insides of his, clearing the last of the blood away.

When he dared look again, his hands were clean. Even the edges of the sweater he wore, which had been splattered with blood, were cleaner, left only faintly pink in places.

Catherine rocked back onto her heels and dried her hands on the wool jacket she was wearing, the water soaking into the material, leaving a deeper gray coloring in its wake. Shaking her hair out of her eyes, she faced him. Her intention was fierce, penetrating his soul so that he was forced to raise his gaze to meet hers.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice as steady as the stare that betrayed no hint of fear or revulsion. “You saved my life...again, Vincent. I will never forget that.”

He shuddered. “Nor should you. It was....”

She cut him off by finishing his sentence in her own way. "It was a godsend. I was a moment away from drawing my last breath." She shook her head. "How you got to me in time...or even knew I was in trouble..." The confusion on her face melted away as comprehension dawned. "What you told me that night on my balcony – how you can feel what I'm feeling? I didn't get it then but...this is what you meant."

It wasn't a question. Clearly, she now understood that their connection ran deep, more than empathy could account for. The sensation was so new he hadn't been able to explain it well but knowing she now comprehended the bond they seemed to share was a relief more immense than he had expected. He sighed deeply, releasing the tension that had held him in a vise of anxiety. Not trusting himself to speak, he just nodded.

She nodded in turn. Then she looked around. "I have no idea where we are. Do you?"

"Yes," he said. "We're about a 20-minute journey to a junction. One of the passages there will lead you back Above."

"Good. I need to go back, and quickly. There will be questions to answer and I need to answer them well." She grasped his forearm. "I will protect you and this place, I promise, Vincent. You are more than a friend to me."

"I know." And he did. The phrase *flesh and blood* came to him, and with it the images of what had just transpired. But on a deeper level, while flesh and blood had been washed from his hands, what remained within their hearts was the truest thing he knew: she was truly flesh of his flesh, blood of his blood, no matter that he knew nothing of where he had come from.

They turned toward the cavern entrance, Vincent walking slightly ahead. His shoulders were straight, his head was back, but he couldn't prevent his hands from clenching and unclenching as the memory of what he had done to those men began flooding through him. And he knew, deep in his soul, he would answer that Bond call whenever it reached out to him...and he would do what he must to

protect this woman. For they were connected in ways that defied understanding, truly one, no matter who else or what else might come into their lives.

Her hand brushed against his, stilling the clenching motion. He accepted the touch of her clean, white hands, just as she had accepted his bloodied ones.

Connection. Flesh and blood and soul and heart. Bonded, now and forever.

## **FLESH AND BLOOD**

### **Part 2**

**By Jo Fredericks**

“The brownstone sold,” the voice on the phone announced. “It took forever, but...it’s the Village, after all, and we got a good price.”

“I’m so glad, Claire. And again, I apologize.” Guilt over what had happened in the brownstone because of the favor she had asked for twinged in her stomach. Still, it wasn’t as hard as might be imagined to sell real estate in the city when someone had died in a house - even, as in this case, when the body count had been higher than one...or two. People did, after all, read the obituaries to find leads for apartments that might be opening up. Manhattanites loved a good location above all.

Catherine listened as her friend spoke. “You couldn’t have known, Cathy. It was just bad luck, especially with that weird break-in in the basement. How could you have predicted *that* would happen! And afterwards that police lieutenant wouldn’t release the house as a crime scene for nearly four months, so the contractor bailed. Then Craig decided to redo the original plans before finding another contractor, and the renovations ended up taking much longer than we expected. All that kept it off the market for well over a year. ”

Her friend went on for quite a bit longer, detailing offers that had been too low or had fallen through, her saga seeming to take nearly the same two years as the eventual sale of the brownstone. But Catherine felt she had to listen. It was the least she could do. Finally, Claire said, “Well, all’s well that ends well, as they say!”

“Shakespeare knew everything,” Catherine said brightly, the only one of the two of them aware that she was quoting Vincent.

Claire wound down and finally said, “Talk to you later! Bye!”

With relief, Catherine set the receiver back in its cradle. She hadn’t expected the call, or its length, and now she was late meeting Vincent at the threshold. She silently blessed the fact that she had a long cord on her phone so she could quietly get ready while listening to Claire. Still, the clock didn’t lie.

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As she descended the ladder, strong hands gripped her waist and turned her, setting her gently on the ground. A smile was already on her face as she looked up into the bluest, truest eyes she had ever known.

“I’m sorry. I got a call. It ran much longer than I expected.” Her words were muffled, spoken as they were against the firmly muscled chest she had pressed her face to. Strong arms nestled her closer, pulling her tighter still.

“You’re here now,” he rumbled, his hoarse half-whisper sending shivers of delight down her spine. Catherine dug her fingers into the suede and leather vest Vincent wore over his cream-colored poet shirt, the one with the complex knots at the throat. She loved the way he dressed. But there were drawbacks. Even burrowing deeply with her fingers, she never got near his bare skin.

“Come, we still have time before the concert begins.”

With regret, she loosened her hold and turned tunnel-ward. Vincent’s hand in hers was some consolation but she preferred the hug, and would gladly have stood there for much longer, even at the risk of missing the entire concert.

As they strode a bit more quickly than usual towards the Hub, Vincent asked about the telephone call.

“It was my friend Claire. I had asked to use her brownstone to hide Carol Stabler, the woman who...”

“Yes, I remember,” he said.

“She wanted me to know that the place had finally sold. She’d had quite a few problems, from the police not wanting to release the crime scene to renovation issues.” Catherine noted a sudden stiffening in Vincent’s arm, and she quickly concluded, “But she ended up getting a really good price for the place, so she’s happy.”

The silence after she spoke dragged on. Finally, she asked, “Are you all right?”

Vincent let go of her hand. His pace slowed until he stopped and leaned against the rock face of the tunnel. “That night...” He lifted his hands, turning them as he stared down at the deadly weapons they had been...that night.

She reached out and time seemed to spin backwards, for she grasped his hands just as she had done then. “I’m alive because you came for me, and you faced down men with guns. If the roles had been reversed, I’d have done the same to save you. I’d have done worse. I’d have done *anything*.”

His gaze shifted from himself to her. The look in her eyes was reinforced by what he felt through their Bond: intensity, determination, and fervent belief were there, flooding his senses...but most of all, there was love. How could he deny it when it literally filled his consciousness?

Those hands that held his now gripped his fingers painfully. Her strength was undeniable, as was her resolve. “I told you before, and I know you can’t have forgotten. These are *my* hands. I love them as much as I love every other part of you, inside and out.”

Disbelief still warred with her words, and he knew she could see it in his eyes. Her next words seemed to confirm that.

“Come with me,” she said, tugging on his hands, pulling him back in the direction of her threshold. “I’ve got things to show you.”

Vincent allowed himself to be drawn back the way they had come, curiosity dampening the expression of the thought that they would miss the concert entirely if they went in this direction. At the threshold, Catherine let go of him in order to grasp the metal rungs of the ladder into her world. “Meet me on the balcony,” she called over her shoulder before disappearing Above, leaving him no chance to argue. He did her bidding, his more circuitous route providing her with ample time to reach her apartment and throw open the French doors.

She was standing in her bedroom when he arrived. His hesitation to enter made him hover, but the impasse was quickly overcome when she reached across the threshold, grabbed one of his arms with both her hands, and tugged hard, pulling him inside. He was so surprised he offered no physical resistance, although his mind was already calculating how soon he could return to the balcony with a minimum of argument.

“Stay there,” she commanded, earning obedience but a raised eyebrow from Vincent. She shut the French doors behind him, cutting off his easy retreat. When she came around to stand in front of him again, she was already pulling off her leather jacket.

“Come down here, off the steps, please.” She made it sound like he had a choice, but he knew an order when he heard one. Stunned, he watched as her fingers went to the neckline of her blouse, buttons flying as she yanked the creamy silk garment off even as he descended the steps into her bedroom proper.

Catherine wore only a filmy bra beneath the blouse, her firm breasts filling it alluringly, and he dragged his gaze away from what he realized he had been staring at. As she unbuttoned her jeans, his breath began to hitch in his chest. What was she doing?!

After toeing her boots off, Catherine slid her jeans to the floor and kicked them away. He looked down at her bare feet, refusing to let his eyes wander higher, to the lacy undergarment that matched her bra – all that she was now wearing.

“Come closer,” she pleaded, for the first time since he had arrived actually asking for something instead of demanding it. His feet responded even while his mind was unsure, and he was within inches of her almost before he was aware of it.

“Look at me, Vincent...really look at me.” She turned her face to the side and pulled her hair back so he could see the scar along her temple, the stubborn one that had needed additional surgery – an operation which she had refused to get. *Stubborn scar...stubborn Catherine*, he thought crazily.

She turned back to him, held his face in both her hands and squeezed, demanding silently that he not move. Then she showed him her other scars.

Her flesh was not smooth everywhere, as he had always imagined in dreams. Certainly she was lovely in her near-natural state, but perfect? No. A bullet wound had left a puckered welt. “Courtesy of the gunfight on the docks,” she said, as if he could ever forget. She showed him other marks; some were evidence of encounters of which he was aware, and a few were scars that he had not realized she carried.

When she had pointed them all out, she stood before him, gently cradling his palms in hers, and said, “These hands...*my* hands...protected me. Could I ever *not* love all they are capable of?” Taking his hands, she moved them down to her waist, placing them there then patting them until he tightened his grip. When she was sure he wouldn’t move them, she lifted her own hands behind her back to release her bra. It slipped from her shoulders, sliding to the floor.

His sharp intake of breath was not solely because of her unexpected actions. In the midst of his shock, he saw one final scar – a small indentation from a puncture wound on her left breast.

“Shrapnel from the bombing, when I went to meet Shake.”

He hadn’t known. She hadn’t told him.

“I have bled, but I’ve survived. Because of your hands.” She moved closer to him, and his hands moved with her, still clasping her waist, even pulling her closer.

“Some day, I hope you will show me your scars, Vincent. Where you bled for me.”

She stroked his cheek with her fingers. "We have survived so much. We should celebrate that."

He hesitated, considering her words. She was so trusting, letting him hold her like this, as if he had a right to, with hands capable of so much harm... yet there was no fear in her.

Stepping back from her for a moment, he let his gaze sweep over her, taking in the myriad scars, the imperfections that marred her flesh yet did nothing to lessen her beauty. He knew his own body as an imperfect shell, something to be hidden, especially from her. Yet...perhaps she might find beauty in it despite its flaws.

He recalled how easily she had accepted his hands in the bloody aftermath of the incident at the brownstone. She had taken his gore-covered fingers gently in her own and washed the blood away, cleaned even his frightful fingernails with no loathing or trepidation. Was his body any worse than his hands had been that horrific night? Blood coursed through his veins but his flesh was clean.

And truly, he was hers. His heart, his soul.... If she claimed *all* of him, could he deny her?

His hands lifted from her sides to undo the clasp of his cloak. By the time the thick black garment had settled on the rug he was already releasing the catch of his heavy leather belt. He only realized she had begun helping him undress when his hands went to his throat to find her fingers already undoing the complicated knot at the neckline of his shirt. He left her to that, working instead on the metal fasteners that held his heavy vest closed. He peeled that off just as she tugged the shirt from his slacks and undid the last of its buttons.

Catherine's deep sigh startled him. It was not the reaction he had expected upon her first sight of his bare chest. She apparently thought he could handle the buttons on his jeans because she abandoned her efforts to undress him, instead using her nimble fingers to comb through the thickness of the fur-like body hair covering his pectorals.

What she was doing felt incredible - so intimate, yes, but paradoxically, so soothing. More than anything, he wanted to stop what *he* was doing and just revel in the feeling of her touching him so intimately, but he had some complicated undressing yet ahead of him.

As if realizing his dichotomy, Catherine shook her head to clear her thoughts and knelt to help him remove his boots and socks. He sighed as she then tugged his loosened jeans down over his slim hips, her fingers lightly caressing his bottom as she did so. He was still feeling the aftershocks of that touch as he obeyed the tap of her hand at his ankles, urging him to lift each foot so she could slip the now-crumpled jeans off each leg.

Not knowing how she would respond to the rest of him...although her reaction to his bared chest was reassuring...he stood with his hands at his sides, fists clenched, awaiting her judgment. It was not slow to come.

As Catherine gradually rose from her knees, she had time to notice each scar that was visible from his ankles to his thighs and upwards, along his stomach and his sides, until she lifted her head to take in the traces of older and newer wounds on his shoulders, his arms.... Her fingers trailed across each one, and her lips followed, counting with kisses all the damage his flesh had suffered.

Despite the intimacy, this was not a sexual exploration. Clearly through their Bond Vincent understood her intention: to revere his wounds, to honor the tearing of flesh and the loss of blood he had endured for her. It was humbling and thrilling in equal measure that she would do this.

And when her gaze finally met his, he knew what he needed to do in turn.

Gently, he lowered her to the bed, addressing each mark on her skin with a tender touch followed by a brush of his unique lips. He tried so hard to keep his actions as honorable and dispassionate as hers had been, but the scent of her, the suppleness of her skin under his hands, her soft sighs that met each of his kisses, made it clear that the moment was transforming...and that she was eager for what was to come.

As he met the scar on her temple with a kiss, she turned her head, capturing his lips with hers. Her arms slipped around him then, pressing him close, and he had no will to resist. All the pain they had endured, all the blood that had been spilled, all the scars they carried – they honored those sacrifices now, in a new way, with reverence and joy. And they knew they would endure.

They would share everything. Flesh and blood and soul and heart. Always.