

## WHATEVER HAPPENS...WHATEVER COMES

By JoAnn Baca

“He’s changing.” Anna stood in the entryway to the newly created common room. The man she had addressed without preamble was startled, his deep contemplation of the tea in the chipped mug before him interrupted. He turned to her.

“He’s always been...mercurial, my dear.” Standing, he gestured for her to sit in the empty chair beside him.

She stood her ground. “No, Jacob. It’s different than his usual behavior. You would admit it if you weren’t so stubborn.”

His eyes narrowed. He didn’t like to be addressed so imperiously, especially by a woman. “I know you disagree with my assessment of him, but as I have said before...”

Anna waved one hand, dismissing his next words. “Yes, yes, you’re a doctor. That doesn’t make you infallible...as I thought you would have realized when treating Grace.” It was a low blow and she could see the effect of it on his suddenly stricken face. But she was beyond caring about his feelings...or his ego. “You are not, however, a psychiatrist, and that’s where I fear we are all at a loss.”

Her years in nursing had proven to her that doctors, in whatever field, liked others to believe they had comprehensive knowledge that they very often lacked, and living with John and now Jacob was more proof of that. John was acting more and more strangely, but Jacob’s loyalty to him seemed to exceed even hers as a wife. Jacob could be stubborn on any subject, of course, but about John particularly, she had no idea why Jacob would not entertain even the possibility that John was mentally unstable.

“Listen, this child is not safe with him. It may seem more convenient for you to have me, as a nurse, care for the poor creature. And I suppose, having

stumbled upon him, I do have that duty, which I have gladly taken on. I love him like crazy, so it's no trouble. But John has been acting increasingly strangely...and you know it."

Jacob leaned back in his chair. He considered her analysis and, although he didn't like to give her the satisfaction of seeing that he was changing his mind, albeit grudgingly, he was beginning to realize that she was right. His good friend John Pater had changed from the rather arrogant, self-aggrandizing but brilliant leader of their community in recent weeks.

Even before the odd child had appeared like a late Christmas present, wrapped carefully in rags but then apparently discarded on a heap of hospital trash behind St. Vincent's, John had begun transforming into this Paracelsus person, the alchemist's name he had adopted and insisted he be called. Jacob had considered it mildly eccentric to take on a different name than the one the man had been born with, but did that make John...Paracelsus...crazy?

Yet in the weeks since the boy had been in John's care – well, in Anna's care, with John overseeing her medical attention to the child – there had been a transformation in the man that had made Jacob increasingly uneasy. Several reports had come in of John being seen stalking through the tunnels, mumbling to himself, gesticulating as if in an argument with someone, yet he was always alone. He had begun assembling a laboratory, even breaking into a hospital lab where he had once worked in order to retrieve a microscope and other equipment. When questioned, he had no satisfactory answer as to why.

His efforts should have been directed towards the health and welfare of their community – scavenging for food, tools, and furnishings to replenish their meager supplies. But he had abandoned all pretense of foraging. He had even begun giving orders to others instead of cooperatively deciding upon courses of action. And he shouted down attempts at protest. Most in the community just did as he asked, taking the easiest course, so as not to enrage him further by arguing.

John's behavior had been tolerated up to now because so many of his ideas for improving their lot below the city streets were brilliant, but now those ideas

had dried up. He was no longer concentrated on the community, but only on his laboratory...and on the child.

Anna, who saw it all first-hand and up close, was right.

Sighing, Jacob finally nodded. It nearly killed him to ask, but he had no answers of his own. "What do you suggest?"

Taking that as concession, Anna finally entered the chamber and sat down. She gazed deeply into Jacob's eyes, holding his attention as she said, "Banish him."

"What?!" He half rose from his chair, astonished at the abrupt and draconian advice she had offered. "Ridiculous! How would we even do that?! He..."

"Send him away, Jacob. Far from here. Far from us. Far from the boy." Her eyes blazed. "I caught him today taking blood from Vincent."

Confused, Jacob shrugged. "He's a doctor, he..."

"Three vials?" She shook her head. "Please, give me some credit. I know what's normal and what isn't. He doesn't need three vials of anyone's blood, let alone an infant's, unless he's planning experimentation."

Jacob was shocked at the suggestion. "Nonsense!" he sputtered. "Ridiculous!" But even as he said the words, he realized that the presence of all that stolen laboratory equipment now made sense.

Anna leaned toward Jacob. "Do something about this. Now, Jacob. Bring it to the others, make a plan. Or I will." She waited for his reaction and when it didn't come quickly enough, she added, "Take Vincent, at the very least."

The thought suddenly struck him and he said it aloud. "John will be furious."

She shrugged. "Of course. But this is necessary."

"He'll blame you." Jacob considered how volatile John had become, how short-tempered. But the fact that Anna would bear the brunt of John's anger meant that he and others could perhaps mediate between them, calm John down, and

bring about a peaceful solution to their problem. Banishment? The woman had only said that to get his attention.

“All right, I’ll take the boy.” He stood. “I’ll make room in my chamber, move Devin in with the other youngsters for a while.”

Anna drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Her eyes were troubled despite Jacob’s words. “I’ll get him now.” She stood to leave the common room. At the doorway, she turned and added, “Don’t give in to his demands to return Vincent to his care. Promise me, Jacob.” At his nod, she left.

Anna must have already prepared things for a quick removal to Jacob’s chamber. She was already waiting for him as he came down the passageway after leaving the common room. Everything that he needed to care for Vincent was in a bag over one arm; the child was slumbering in the crook of the other. Jacob accepted the boy from her and she set the bag beside his cot.

Just before she turned to go back to the chamber she shared with John, Anna paused. She opened her mouth to say something, but then seemed to have second thoughts and pressed her lips closed. She stared at him as he fussed with settling Vincent into a basket. When he looked up, surprised to find her still there, she finally said, “Whatever happens, whatever comes...know that this is the best solution.” She gripped his arm as she repeated, “Whatever happens.”

He nodded, but his brow was furrowed as he wondered at her strange choice of words. He would never forgive himself for not asking her why she had uttered them. Because in a few days it was too late: Anna was dead.

But she must have known.