

*All That Matters*



Combs

*A Story of Catherine's Return*

*Sally Wright*

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To paraphrase a writer more gifted than I could ever hope to be: May the Dream live forever unwithered.

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## Introduction

The death of Catherine Chandler quite literally shattered me.

I have learned only in retrospect how closely I identified with her struggles and joys, how deep was my psychological enmeshment with her unfolding life, how dearly I held, in my own heart, the love she shared with Vincent. This story was begun the day after I wept through "Though Lover's Be Lost," conscious that something very beautiful was gone from my life.

I couldn't let her go.

I have been told by those who have previewed this work that the early chapters, segued tightly into the on-screen events of early Season Three, are painful to read, even though Catherine is alive. Some wounds are so deep that they defy the best of reparative intentions.

I would not, for all the world, take anyone back to "TLBL" without purpose. My desire was to construct a story so connected to the events of Season Three that it would actually be what occurred, had we only seen the rest. To this end I bent my efforts, weaving the threads of the story as we watched it take place with my own, personal view of what happened, trying to loom it all together with as much love and care as unknown hands once loomed the tapestries in the Great Hall.

I hope in some small measure I've succeeded. Be well.

Letters of Comment are welcome.

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The long wait was almost over. He slid open the gleaming doors of the steel cabinet and extracted from the overflowing shelves a small bottle filled with milky fluid. Tipping the vial with one hand, he took up a clear glass syringe with the other and expertly inserted the tip of the needle into its porous cap. With the precision and purpose which had once earned him top honors at Johns Hopkins Medical School and had later propelled his ascent through the treacherous ranks of organized crime, he filled the syringe and then meticulously compressed it until the tiny jet of spouting fluid assured him that the instrument was ready. So innocuous, he mused in contemplation of the now-empty bottle. And so lethal. Within minutes after the birth of the child, the woman would be dead.

The quick, barely perceptible tread of rubberized soles on linoleum alerted him to the approach of the others. Time to ready himself for the birth and--when it was over--the death. His normally expressionless face grew thoughtful as he considered the symmetry of it. Birth, then death. The universal, inexorable cycle of human destiny. How deep your understanding is, whispered the small, admiring voice inside him which he knew to be his mother's. How profound your comprehension of the inescapable ambiguities of the human condition.

The door opened to disclose the nurse--a silent Oriental woman with the efficiency of a robot and the features of a sarcophagus--and her captive, a small woman, slightly bent, he knew, to ease the unrelenting backache of her full-term pregnancy, her features half-hidden by a spill of soft, light brown hair. Almost immediately, she straightened in a movement which, had it not been so ridiculous, could almost have been called defiant. Something stirred in him as the woman brushed the hair back from her face, thin and drawn in spite of her condition, and met his gaze. The suffering in her eyes was endless, but so, unbelievably, was the strength. Tragic, whispered the voice inside him. How poetic. How moving.

At the outset, he had not thought to question Gabriel's motives in this matter. Nor had he attempted to hide the revulsion and contempt he felt for this sick, benighted female who, like her mythological sister Pasiphae, had taken her disgusting pleasure in consorting with the creature that was not human. But the woman's fortitude had been truly astonishing. She had resisted every effort to elicit information--every attempt to wrest from her the names, dates, and places which, in the course of her legal investigation, she had undoubtedly memorized. Even the drug injections ordered by Gabriel had



had no effect, although the dosages had been dangerously potent. Daily she had been probed, prodded, tortured with every means of subtle psychological brutality Gabriel's twisted mind could devise. Yet the slowly diminishing light of hope in her eyes had somehow defied translation into fading will. In fact, her own recognition of the futility of her plight seemed somehow to fuel rather than destroy her defiant spirit. And slowly he had begun to see her, not as Pasiphae, but as a helpless Desdemona, caught in the madness of Othello's jealous rage, or Andromache, trapped in the merciless judgement of the embittered Greeks. He knew these myths, and others like them, well. Their memorization and constant recitation had been the warp and weft of his early childhood, the fabric of his most terrifying nightmares. Each time his mind left the binary logic of medicine to flit over his boyhood, he could smell the rot and decay of the huge house, could feel his mother's soft fingers gradually tightening around his throat, could hear the frenetic thrashing of his bound hands as he gulped for air. They suffered as I have suffered, the voice inside him whispered. As you must suffer, my son. Nobly. Tragically. But I will leave a spark of life...

As he mentally wrenched himself away from the now-iron grip of those imaginary fingers, a germ of an idea began to form in his mind. The woman was courageous. She deserved a small boon---one that he, with his superior medical knowledge, could bestow. He could administer a drug which would allow her a few brief hours of coma before enveloping her in death. Of course, there was no real hope. That monstrous brute, probably crashing through walls this very moment in a rapid frenzy to rescue its mate would have no way of knowing, for she would look dead to all human eyes---even those of a physician. And as the coma grew deeper, she would die. At most, she would live an additional 24 hours. He had no desire to save Catherine Chandler. Too many years with too many evil men had killed anything resembling humanity within him. But he would pay tribute to her dauntless bravery with this tiny dispensation. And no one---least of all, Gabriel---would ever know. A spark of life. Yes, whispered the voice. How fitting. How compassionate.

He glanced speculatively at the steel cabinet and then across the room. The nurse, her stiff back to him, was watching the woman as she slowly climbed onto the table. He moved purposefully to the cabinet, selected another vial, and quickly filled a second syringe. Done. His actions had been unobtrusive enough to appear normal, even to the sharp-eyed Oriental. Relieved, he placed both syringes in the cabinet and returned to the table. Gabriel would order him killed with a cool flick of the fingernail if this slight deviation to the plan were discovered. He shuddered slightly at the thought of reading his own death sentence in those pitiless eyes. But both syringes were now filled. He would postpone the decision until later.

PA-BOOM! The insistent throb of the bond pounded through



Vincent's head, its every measured beat echoing the cadence of his own frantic pulse. Heedless of discovery, his characteristic caution Above thrown to the winds, he raced on, his heart, mind, and will bent on a single desperate purpose--to find and save the woman he loved. He crossed Broadway, headed up Seventh, veered right on Forty-ninth, and sped furiously up Sixth Avenue. PA-BOOM! PA-BOOM! The call was louder now, to the left. PA-BOOM! PA-BOOM! Its thousand-decible thumping was like a heartbeat that surged through every cell in his brain. PA-BOOM! PA-BOOM! PA-BOOM! He wheeled abruptly. Then he stopped, his lungs drawing in huge gasps of air, and stared up at the towering monolith of granite and jet-black glass, outlined in ominous splendor against the cloudless night sky.

Years later, Vincent could still remember every second of his terror-filled, last-minute effort to recover Catherine. The long, excruciating months of fruitless waiting seemed to coalesce inside him to a single sharpened spike of feverish dread and he burst through girded walls and tungsten steel doors as if they had been fashioned of paper. He moved swiftly through the sub-basement, following the call through the tangle of water pipes and heating conduits to the floors above. Hurry, hurry, hurry...he kicked fiercely at a door which blocked his path and heard it fall with a metallic thump after he leaped through. A high-pitched, electronic whine signaled to his sensitized ears that he had tripped off the sentinel alarm throughout the building, sending a warning to what was probably a battalion of armed guards. Hurry, hurry, hurry...his first human adversary stood before him and he let out a huge, rage-filled roar as he struck. The man's hastily snatched weapon, a piece of lead pipe, fell to the floor with a clatter as he slumped, lifeless. A second man raised a ready arm to strike a blow, but he was felled immediately by a vicious swipe of Vincent's right elbow and doubled over with a broken collarbone. Hurry, hurry, hurry...a third guard watched the stairwell, but he was no match for the howling fury that was Vincent, grabbing him by his face to lift him high off the ground, and then breaking his neck with a quick, snapping crack.

Second floor. In the corner, Vincent spotted the monitor which communicated his presence to the demon above, and he jerked it from the wall with a violent twist. Another flattened door led to a narrow stairwell, and he bounded up the steps to the fifth floor three at a time. Behind him, he heard the footsteps of what seemed to be a horde, and he turned to find three guards leveling wicked-looking automatic weapons at him while they continued to climb, obviously seeing that he was weaponless and closing in for a certain kill. He waited until the first man was directly below him. Then, quick as thought, he picked him up and hurled him, a human missile, at the other two, moving on even before they tumbled down the stairs in heap. Hurry, hurry, hurry...a second group appeared to his maddened eyes and this time it was himself that he catapulted onto them, snarling and slashing in frenzied despair as he felt Catherine's fear and pain cut through his own body, felt her deep and driven



need for him swamp his senses. Would he ever, ever reach her?

Shaking with foreboding, he finally reached the floor which led to the first of the major communication consoles. Hurry, hurry, hurry...he flew through the glass doors with a loud, tinkling crash and quickly dispatched the man behind the multiple-screen console. PA-BOOM! PA-BOOM! The call thundered again, urging him relentlessly upward. A rapid glance out the exit door told him he had come to the upper levels of the building, an area whose entrances were undoubtedly heavily guarded. But he had no more time for hand-to-hand combat, rewarding though it was to his wounded, seething psyche---he flew around the building in a mad dash, spotted a fire escape ladder, and began a panting hand-over-hand up the rungs. Almost there...almost...

Another conference room stood, lights blazing, at the top of his climb. He rushed into it, unthinking, intent only on following the call which grew louder and more desperate with every passing second.

"Catherine!" he roared at the top of his lungs.

"Catherine!" No answer. But some force within him swelled as he felt her agony and he screamed as his knees buckled underneath him, mortal terror spreading through his body to lick with deadly menace at his very soul.

There. It had been a difficulty delivery, an unnecessarily hasty procedure compelled by Gabriel's stern demand, but it was finished, the tiny creature wrapped in a rough woolen blanket. It looked amazingly like an ordinary human, but he knew that it was not--its tiny fist had grabbed at one of his fingers in a display of visual-motor coordination extraordinary for a neonate, and he could swear that there was a greater-than-usual perceptual capability in that unfocused tourmaline gaze. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the woman's arms raised beseechingly toward the child as she made small keening noises in her throat. He handed the tiny burden to Gabriel, whose arms tightened around the boy in a gesture of vicious possession. God help the child, he thought, abruptly shaking off a fleeting association to his own mother. She had been nothing like this tyrant.

"Please..." the woman's voice was nothing more than a whisper, but the intense longing in it was palpable.

Gabriel ran one thin finger along the baby's cheek.

"Perfect," he said, with a cold finality that the woman caught and suddenly understood.

"Please..." she said again, reaching out with trembling hands.

The distant glance of his superior raked over the woman. "Enough. Finish it off...quick." The commanding voice, measureless in its cruelty, sliced through the air like a knife. It was the voice of one who brooked no delay or argument, and his will wavered uncertainly as he handed the child suddenly thrust into his arms to the waiting nurse. How dare he disobey?

"No..." breathed the woman, as Gabriel and the nurse, still clasping the blanketed baby, turned to leave the room.



She watched with horror as the door shut behind their departing backs with a click. Her head drooped, and the tears she had held from their sight for months welled up in her anguished eyes. "No..."

He opened the cabinet door to stare at the filled syringes. The malevolent command in Gabriel's words still rang in his ears, powerfully evoking an image of the remorseless man he served. His hand hovered momentarily over the first syringe, and he reached down to lift it out. Admiration for the woman notwithstanding, he had no wish to endanger himself. If Gabriel's omniscient eyes ever discerned his actions, that implacable voice would pronounce a similar swift doom on him.

But the voice of his mother, branded into his soul for decades, was stronger. I will leave a spark of life... Inwardly quaking at his own temerity, but finally decided, he grabbed the second syringe and turned to the woman.

Their glances locked. Her eyes, huge with misery already, widened as she looked down at the glittering needle and then back at him.

"What is it?" she asked numbly.

He made a vain attempt at reassurance as he moved aside the sleeve of her gown. "You won't suffer. I promise."

She looked up again, her eyes frozen with fear. And in that moment, the final, crushing injustices of losing her child and then her life became the culminating blows to her brave spirit. Despair, long held at bay through sheer effort of will, finally won out. In her terrified face, he saw the last flicker of hope slowly grow dim and extinguish.

The injection took only a moment to administer to the woman whose features were now immobile in a numb mask of shock. Intent on getting out of his medical garb and onto the waiting helicopter, he did not hear her whisper as she slowly closed her eyes:

"Vincent."

Directly below her, Vincent straightened from the bent position he had unconsciously assumed only seconds before, when the communicated convulsions of Catherine's final throes of childbirth had driven him nearly to his knees. A whirling sound overhead spoke unmistakably of a helicopter hovering nearby, and he sprinted up the final two flights of stairs which led to a huge rooftop helipad. A waiting craft stood, poised for takeoff.

"Catherine!" he screamed, as it rose into the air. A face in the window turned to look at him, eyes narrowed. In an instant, he knew it was the man responsible for it all---her capture, her suffering, her fear. The machine rose further, zooming impossibly out of his reach. Again. He had failed again. But now he knew the face of the man behind it. He stared at the features, branding them into his heart, searing them into his blood and bones, that he might hunt and hound this man like the implacable Furies of Hell until she was returned to him, until...

"Vincent," the whisper of a voice behind him caused him



to whirl. A pallid ghost of Catherine stood drooping at the top of the stairs.

"Catherine," he choked. A terrible emptiness and frustration smote his heart. The image would vanish, he knew, would transmogrify into nothing as it had in a thousand tortured dreams. But incredibly it remained.

He stared. This haunted visage could not be hers--Catherine had been taken away in the helicopter, maddeningly removed once more from a rescue that was seconds away. He still felt the insistent pull of the bond from far above. Yet before Vincent could sort out the discrepant messages hurtling to his brain from his heart and his eyes, before he could make enough sense of the conflicting information to act with his customary swiftness, the realization roared through him that this WAS Catherine standing before him. And his heart burst with a wild hope as he ran and caught her in his arms. The long months of anguished waiting vanished like smoke when he touched her, thrilled to his soul by her nearness. They were together. It was all that mattered. All that would ever matter, as long as life still coursed within him.

"Vincent," she whispered again, and he breathed her name.

But something was dreadfully, sickeningly wrong. There was no strength in her limbs, and even as he pulled Catherine to his breast, he felt her slipping from his embrace, sliding like a formless rag doll to the ground. She wanted to speak, he could see it in her eyes, wanted to talk to him, but her lips could form no words. And as he lowered her to the ground, cradling her in his arms, Vincent was suddenly slammed with the heart-stopping, stomach-churning truth. They would not leave Catherine behind. Not unless they were finished with her. Not unless--the thought came unbidden, and even as he struggled to hurl it away from him, he knew that it was so. Not unless she were dying.

The monumental effort it had taken Catherine to open her eyes showed a room empty of the menacing figures which had populated her waking world and sleeping nightmares for so long. Slowly, as one walking through viscous liquid, she had climbed off the table and limped to the door. He was near...she could feel his heartbeat as she felt her own. She had to reach him, had to tell him about the child before it was too late. The decisive nod of Gabriel's head had told most of the story. She had only minutes, maybe seconds to live.

Gasping, she had summoned up the last shreds of consciousness within her, pushing away the wall of oblivion with every last ounce of strength in her failing body. If she could only reach the rooftop, she would feel again the strength of his arms and see the love blazing from his eyes. And if her last glimpse on earth were of him, then she would know, beyond thought, beyond reality, that death could not kill their love. If she could only see him again, she would know that what they shared was deathless. Crawling, she had inched up the stairs.

The sight of him standing there on the helipad, his broad



back to her, had filled her with a joy so penetrating that for a moment, it had dimmed all else.

"Vincent," she had called weakly. And he had whirled as she called his name, had run to her side, pressing her to his breast as her limbs, suddenly unable to support her, gave way.

Now he was there, holding her close, breaking her fall with his solidness and warmth, as he always had, before the evil had wounded them so cruelly. Before they had no time left to love each other. Before the clock had run out.

No, she thought from her stupor. She still had now. She had told him once, when he had murmured that they defined their relationship by minutes and seconds, that they must learn to measure it in a different way. And she did that now. For now was all she had left.

She tried to smile at the stricken face above hers, but the gesture ended in a grimace as she felt the poison stealing rapidly through her veins. There was even less time than she had thought. The words she needed to say died on a tongue with no strength left to form them, and she struggled to push them out the resisting numbness of her mouth.

"We loved...there is a child..."

His tortured eyes held hers. "A child?" she heard him whisper, as if from a great distance, and she bent her head in the merest movement of a nod.

"He's beautiful." With those words, she passed the responsibility for their son's safe-keeping into his loving, stalwart heart. He would find their son. He would take him to the tunnels and read him Great Expectations and watch over him as he grew to manhood. He would never rest, never give up the quest, she knew, until their child was safe.

"Catherine." The anguished word sounded from farther off now, and her gaze slid from his face as she marshaled the last of her ebbing will. From somewhere deep within her, she found the strength to lift her hand and reached up to touch his face. Her fingers rested on his cheek, caressed it, felt the tears that fell. God, how she loved him.

"Though..." She had to continue, had to let him know. "Lovers...be...lost." Praying, she waited. There was nothing left in her now.

He understood. Before her eyes and senses failed her completely, she heard the words straight from his heart to hers, a limitless, soaring, hope-filled promise:

"Love shall not."

And death shall have no dominion.

Vincent stared mutely at the still face of his beloved as the world slipped off its axis and careened madly into darkness. Time leaped from its perpetual, metronome measure and began to warp and twist in grotesque, surreal distortion. How long he sat there, bereft of all his faculties, Vincent had no idea. The cradled form in his arms was a slender, tenuous thread to sanity, and he held it as a drowning man holds a lifeline.

His gaze rested achingly on the face which had haunted



his every thought and dream for seven months. Catherine. And in his madness and despair the bond seemed to burst its limits until there were no boundaries between them, until he could feel every nuance of emotion in her spirit, until he had no thoughts save those to which she gave form and substance. A chilly gust of night wind tugged at his hair. She would be cold. Catherine must not be cold. He wrapped his cloak about her tightly, and in his delirium she whispered a tender thank you. She must be petrified after all she had endured. His hand caressed her cheek as he murmured soothing words of comfort, and he imagined that she relaxed in his arms from his tender ministrations. She might be frightened by the dark. He cradled her as he would a child, rocking her back and forth in his arms and humming a low, wordless lullabye. And he surrounded her with the warmth of his love as the night slowly waned toward daybreak.

But somewhere in the pitch blackness of the night the truth began to penetrate with a numbing cold that swept over his soul. And though he tried with everything in him to deny its immutable encroachment, though he floundered against the shattering message of reality with all his strength, it could finally not be denied. He pulled Catherine to him fiercely, as if her presence could somehow protect him from the knowledge of her loss, but the hand he touched was cruelly lifeless. He held her face in his hands and begged her to look at him, but the eyes which had held a love so changeless and enduring that it had often left him breathless now remained closed.

Far away to the south, on the East River, a lone tugboat sent forth a long, low blast of its horn, and the sound was like a death-knell in his heart. And he lifted his head and roared out again and again, spewing forth his despair and pain and infinite grief across the silent reaches of an indifferent city, its vast expanse of space unequal to the task of holding all the agony of his lacerated being. Dimly, through battering waves of pain that crashed without relief against his consciousness, another line of Dylan Thomas surfaced, haunting, mocking: do not go gentle into that good night/rage, rage against the dying of the light. But the awful, irreversible truth was that, for all his raging, he was still powerless to save Catherine. The night had come unawares, and had wrenched her away from him---wrenching the life from his heart as well, and leaving it a bleak and bitter wasteland.

Mummy-stiff, like a huge, hulking puppet of the night, he finally lifted her in his arms and began the long walk back to her apartment. His plodding, mechanical strides took him through darkened streets where sodden scraps of paper lay plastered to the ground and sprawling letters of graffiti adorned the walls of silent buildings. Halfway there, he found he could not bear the weight of her cradled lifelessly in his arms, and he shifted her to face him against his breast, pulling her hand up around his neck, as if they embraced. He did not think, or feel. He merely put one foot in front of the other in rigid, automatic motion, forcing his limbs to act because they still



had one purpose left---to carry Catherine home.

No cars appeared on the deserted streets, though he would not have noticed if they had. Only long habit had caused him to lift his hood up over his head. What good was caution, if he could no longer employ it to keep himself safe so that he could see her again? What purpose did it serve to hide, if hiding only led him back to the endless shadows of life without her love?

The climb to Catherine's balcony with her body on his back, arms secured together to keep her from falling, was the longest and saddest journey of Vincent's life. So often, he had begun this effort with a singing heart, knowing that others would have considered it an extraordinary feat, but conscious only of the fact that he would cheerfully have climbed for miles, just to see her and be with her. And he would grip the stone bannister with one strong hand and heave himself over the edge, waiting. And she would come to him...

The terrace doors were unlocked and he paused in the doorway as he opened them, surveying the bedroom where she had slept and dreamed, and awakened to his tapping. The room looked so serenely undisturbed that he almost turned to look for her in the shadows. Perhaps this was the blackest of nightmares and he could shake it off like the night terrors he had had as a child, suffocating him with fear and horror until his overloaded mind forced him awake, shaking still, but safe in his own chamber with the clattering sound of distant subway trains orienting him, calming his panting sobs. Perhaps he could awaken and dash madly to find her in this tranquil room. Perhaps...

He carried her to the bed and laid her gently upon it, his hand wildly reluctant to remove itself from where it was curled under her neck. Reaching up, he pulled her arm tenderly down from where he had again placed it around his shoulder in driven, stubborn defiance of reality. Enfolding her hand in his, he bent close and coaxed an errant lock of hair from her eyes, letting his hand rest lightly on her head. Catherine, he thought, aching. If I can only stay here forever, hovering over you, then surely you can shield me as well from the unending agony that awaits me if I leave. The thought of entering a world she no longer inhabited was absolutely unthinkable, and he clasped her hand in both of his as if to reassure himself that he need not consider it. Detachedly, he registered the fact that his stunned disbelief was, mercifully, acting as enormous, psychic dam that kept his grief in check, allowing only a few trickling tears to seep through to the numb flesh of his face. Instinctively he knew that if he acknowledged, he would go mad.

Again he had the curious sensation of having slipped the bounds of ticking time, for the daylight which, hours later, filtered slowly into the room caught him unawares. He stared at her and looked away, shuddering. The light played over her delicate features harshly, highlighting the whiteness her motionless lips and the pallor of her skin. Begone, he thought stupidly. Leave me to the darkness, which holds no world but the two of us. That the sun should be rising today, that the



world should rumble on, that people should live and breathe and laugh, struck him as appalling, monstrous. Did they not see that all the universe had turned to purposeless, drifting dust?

Finally, the increasing brightness of the day could be ignored no longer. He had shunned the coming of dawn for so many years that his body registered its presence on the glinting fur of his fingers, even as his mind rejected the deeply-ingrained warnings such a realization evoked. He was not safe here, whispered some remnant of long-held caution. It was time to go Below.

The knowledge thrust at the wall he had unconsciously erected to keep his suffering within endurable limits, and another tear escaped through the barrier to trickle heedlessly down his cheek. To leave her now seemed unbearable, and he trembled as the white-hot agony seared through his benumbed mind, knowing that this was the beginning of the ceaseless waves of sorrow to come. He knew, then, that he would be utterly unable to leave if she had not mentioned the child---that he would guard her body, raging in wounded fury at whoever tried to take her away from him to be buried, until they chained him, or killed him, or both. His heart was dying within him. The uncaring humans he had avoided for a lifetime could inflict no greater pain than the one he carried now---would always carry, until his bones withered to ash.

He bent over her, his hair falling around her face. With a bittersweet stab of nostalgia, he suddenly remembered the night they had almost kissed on the terrace, when the thorn had pricked her finger and he had lifted it to his lips with a passion that found an immediate, answering echo in her...now, her lips were so still...so still...

He kissed them tenderly, his mouth caressing hers, hoping she could feel the warmth of it in whatever orbit she now lit with her presence, wishing desperately that the avenging gods who had scourged his existence would grant him one split-second of clemency to feel the lips of a living, breathing Catherine under his. He could construct a lifetime of memories on one such moment...

His throat constricted in sorrow. "While I live, you live," he choked. "With me, in...me. Always." Hopelessly, he bowed his head.

It was time. He looked at her again as the heartache settled into his being, a dead weight, and rose. Two weary strides took him to the terrace and to the world beyond, where she now lived only in his dreams.

Suddenly he paused, his actions suspended in mid-step. What far-off feeling called to him feverishly, bidding him return? He whirled, confused, his face suddenly lighting with the merest shred of anticipation. It died abruptly as his gaze ran over her still form on the bed. Catherine had not moved, or called to him. She could not. With a pang, he realized he would probably be having such fantasies for the rest of his life.

"Always," he whispered, resting aching eyes on her face. He turned, and in a moment, was gone.

Slowly, he made his way through the ochre duskiness of the tunnels he had traversed in such frantic haste the night before. Beside him, the pipes clanked softly with the messages of activity beginning below, and overhead the morning trains rattled on their rails, signaling the rush of human traffic in the city. Two worlds---one which had always been his home and another he had touched, briefly, through her. Now, he belonged in neither. As surely as the sun now rose above, driving him away from Catherine, he knew he belonged only in the cavernous nothingness of the farflung, desolate tunnels, destined to move through them forever like some restless, undead spirit, seeking her face and calling her name.

Heedlessly, his footsteps carried him to an ancient bridge spanning a huge abyss, improbably ceilinged with the blackened, vaulted arches of a once-bustling 1920's subway station. He halted halfway across, looking down past the two planked suspensions which bisected the enormity of the drop and into the well of gaping space beyond. For a brief moment he considered plunging into the oblivion of that beckoning void, for his will to live suddenly seemed as precariously perched as the drooping subterranean moss clinging to the damp underbelly of the swaying bridge. Sanity and his deep, natural reverence for life took hold; but not before he realized how very easy it would be to let go. And even as his mind rejected the sudden, flexing motion of his body he felt the tide of his grief rise again, felt the breakers of agony crest and wash up over him until he was drowning in a sea of pain. For a long moment he stood silently, turning to look behind him at the path of his dragging trek homeward and ahead, to the long, sad journey through a life she would not share. Then his roar echoed through the chamber, filling it with the wild, primordial sound of his mourning---an inarticulate expression of sorrow as broad and bottomless as the yawning pit.

The morning foray into Sophocles had done nothing to curb Father's anxiety, and he had finally given up to sit, staring, at the words on the page in front of him. He had been up for most of the night, waiting...

He sighed with relief as Nathan appeared in his doorway, bearing a folded note. Surely, this was the news he was so eager to hear. Vincent had rescued her, of course, and they were both now safe in her apartment, the awful nightmare over. It had always been the course of things, in the past.

"Thank you, Nathan," he smiled at the small messenger and



quickly opened the missive.

Its contents were brief and tragic. In the terse lines, he read of the destiny he had prayed so desperately that his adopted son be spared. The long and furious efforts had failed. Catherine was dead.

His eyes blurred with tears---for her, for Vincent, for them all. He, more than anyone, knew how little good it did rave at the vagaries of fate. But this was different. Hers had been such an incomparable, valiant soul. And she had loved Vincent so much. So completely.

He found his son sitting motionless in his room, hands folded, staring at nothing.

"Vincent," he said.

No answer came from the still figure. He limped closer, sighing heavily. He had not easily accepted this impossible love of theirs. His natural prejudice against wealthy topsiders and his deep fear for the welfare of his son had caused him to huff and pant in disapproval whenever Catherine's name had been mentioned at first. But the reality and consistency of their relationship had chipped away at his displeasure bit by bit, until he had found himself as caught as everyone else in the unusual but ardent romance. Secretly, he had acknowledged to himself long ago that Catherine was more, somehow, than Margaret had been--dearly though he had loved her. And as he had watched them together this year past, he had become convinced that theirs was truly a transcendental love---able to rise above the laws of probability and physics, as he had once told Vincent. And seeing his son reach out to claim the heart of a woman who loved him, not in spite of, but because of, who he was, had been soul-satisfying indeed. He had always been so quiet, this son of his. So ready to accept the burdens life placed on his uncomplaining shoulders. With Catherine, Vincent had learned he had the right to dream, and finally, to love.

But now he was paying the price. Father sighed again, for he knew his son. The measure of his limitless love was also, horribly, the measure of his grief. Even now, the numb anguish on his face was frightening to behold. Life was exacting a steep payment for the shining season of happiness it had given Vincent. And would exact it for a long time to come.

His voice came, haltingly.

"I....found...Catherine last night." The simple words quivered with torment. "I stayed with her, but the dawn..." his head bowed, and the tears which had been stayed through the long night now began. Father sat beside him silently, clasping his arm, helplessly conscious that no effort of his could still the grief pouring forth. The days when he could pull the golden head onto his shoulder and soothe the sensitive, sobbing youngster were no more. Vincent was a man now, with a man's terrible and unremitting anguish over the loss of the woman he loved. And there was absolutely nothing Father could do to help him bear it---except to be there. He shook his head in frustration, knowing from his own experience of loss how little such a thing could do to ease the sorrow of a raw and wounded heart.



~

Joe Maxwell was asleep on the couch when the call came, the files of the case spread around him in scattered piles on the floor. He'd been up half the night looking for that one elusive lead in the minutia that he had somehow missed---the one bit of information he'd overlooked that could tell him where the answers were. As the harsh ring of the telephone interrupted his nap, he lifted the receiver and cradled it against his body, less intent on answering than on resuming his interrupted sleep.

"Yeah?"

"Joe, it's Rita." The tenseness that permeated Rita Escobar's voice slid him toward wakefulness. The next words sat him bolt upright. "They found Cathy. In her apartment. You'd better get over there."

"Tell me, Rita." He closed his eyes, mentally bracing himself.

"She's dead, Joe." Rita had been Cathy's friend, too, and her tone wavered as she struggled to control it.

His hand clenched tightly around the phone as the message sank, ravaging as it traveled, into his bones. "Thanks," he said quietly. His frantic, exhausting search was finished. Cathy Chandler---his ally in a hundred legal wrangles, his conscience, his trusted friend---was gone. Whatever menace he had been fighting from afar, battling through leads that twisted in labyrinthine confusion and then went dead with no warning, had won. It was over.

He was suddenly consumed with the desire to get to her, a deep need unconstrained by reason or logic. He flew into his work clothes, running his fingers hastily through uncombed hair. Ten o'clock was a fairly decent traveling time in the city, a brief window between the heavy morning and noontime traffic, and he was able to make good time to the elegant highrise on Central Park West where Cathy Chandler had lived. He clutched the steering wheel with both hands as he spun around the corners, fighting to resist the cold dread that gripped him at the sight of the police vehicles clustered, neon lights flashing, at the entrance to her lobby.

He located his DA identification badge where he'd jammed it, in the pocket of his raincoat, after John Moreno had informed him he was suspended. Pushing the elevator button to the Seventeenth floor, he leaned against the wall and closed his eyes as the machine whooshed quietly, quickly upward. The tears came out of nowhere, then, and he had to struggle for control as he stepped out.

The small, plush corridor was crowded with elderly women clucking and whispering, and as he brushed past them he saw the locks he had insisted Cathy place on her door after the incident with the apartment watcher. The sight of them nearly undid him. He had been so worried about her that night. And she had come to him, her best friend, and choked through trembling lips "Take me home?" He had never felt so close to Cathy as he had then.

At the door, a uniformed policeman checked his ID and let him pass. And he was okay through that, and through the sight of hordes of homicide squad personnel---forensic experts,



detectives and policemen, who were collecting evidence and snapping photographs with practiced efficiency. But the sight of her body on the bed, visible only from the knees down, made him suddenly want to clutch at his stomach to keep from retching violently. He'd heard the police dialogue at the scene of a crime a hundred times. But now they were talking about Cathy, and it was hurting far, far too much. He locked his eyes quickly on her terrace window to avoid a fresh wave of tears, and inhaled. Faintly, he heard Special Investigator Bill Harrow's voice from the bedroom, instructing the policemen to bag her hands. A sound behind him made him turn his head, and his staring eyes focused on an ambulance gurney being wheeled in by two officers.

For Cathy.

And he was responsible.

He faced the facts unshrinking, as was his wont. Cathy Chandler had been kidnapped and murdered because she had had the notebook he had given her. She had been inescapably marked for violence and death from the moment he had opened his battered lips and told her about the book. He should have known that Cathy would view any injury to him as an injury to her as well. She was like that; she would place herself in the forefront of the danger to find out who had harmed him, and why. He should have been warned from before. The storm of unwelcome memories stung him like biting pellets of hail as he heard again his own fourteen-year-old voice:

"They're selling drugs to the elementary school kids, Dad."

"Who, son?"

"Jose Guiterrez and Scooter Davis. And they're putting pressure on the little kids to buy. I saw them with some third-graders today."

"Have you seen them talking to any adults, Joey?"

"Yeah, I followed them to the basketball court around the corner from the school."

"You're a born cop, Joe, but want you to stay out of this from now on. He's a dangerous man. You understand, son?"

"I guess so."

"I mean that. The police will handle this. Now tell me what he looks like."

"He has dirty blond hair, real curly---almost kinky. He wears wire-rim glasses and he has alot of pimples. He had on blue jeans and a red sweat shirt."

The voice of his mother, younger by twenty years.

"Where are you going, Joe?"

"Over to the school, Stella." I'll be back in half an hour."

"But you're off duty."

"Third graders, Stella. They're eight years old. Six years younger than Joey. It can't wait."

His father patting him on the shoulder, murmuring something, and the quick click of the closing door. Two hours later, the buzz of the doorbell. And two policemen, looming in the entrance.

"Hi, Joey...your mom around?"

"Yeah...where's Dad?"

"Is your mom around, Joe?"

His own voice, deafening in the sudden silence.

"MA!"

His mother's frightened, white face.

"Yes, officer?"

An endless moment's hesitation.

"There's been a knifing at the schoolyard, Mrs. Maxwell. Your...husband was arresting a pusher when two fourteen-year-olds cut his throat from behind. We lost him. I'm so sorry."

His mother's thin, hysterical screaming. His horrified glance at his own face, aghast, in the hallway mirror...the face of the fourteen-year-old who was guilty of the death of Joe Maxwell, Sr.---just as surely as if he'd pulled the trigger himself.

Joe raised an unsteady hand to his face as the memory of that moment passed in him and through him, bringing with it the familiar, crushing weight of the guilt he'd carried since then. He had told Cathy about his father's death, but not the other part. Not his role in it. And now she was dead, too. Because of him. The knowledge punctured like a bayonet, finding the old wound deep within him and gouging that one, too, releasing the anguish that had lived for decades unrelieved. He had given his father the information that had led to his death. And he had given Cathy Chandler the notebook that had led to hers.

Somehow, he was going to have to find a way to live with that.

Another stark, obscure tunnel, little different from the last, save for the traces of mineral deposits which glowed faintly on the rugged walls, telling him he was far below ground. How many miles had he walked since this morning? Impossible to tell. Or to feel anything but the perfunctory necessity of keeping his limbs in motion. He had been moving for hours.

"Vincent," Her voice, clear and unmistakable, sounded so close by he started and pivoted abruptly, visually canvassing the dimness.

"Vincent---where are you?" The empty tunnel behind him revealed nothing to his searching eyes, and he expelled a long breath as the sudden tension in his muscles relaxed into the familiar dull lifelessness. It was another moment like the one on her terrace---when he had, for a heartbreaking instant, imagined she was still alive.

His eyes dispassionately examined the small crawl space to the left where a random shaft of sunlight had somehow traveled the long passage down into the earth to shine in a single undiluted beam. It reminded him suddenly of the column of light in her sub-basement. The one she had always passed through to return Above. Was she standing on the other side of some supernal light now, loving him still, despite the cruelties of a fate which had separated them? His was a



spiritual nature, and now he wanted so desperately to believe.

For it had been so new, this feeling of complete and utter worthiness she had given him. So serendipitous and unexpected, like a dream---too deeply felt to bear the threat of articulation, but somehow, realized by her, fulfilled by her all the same. Catherine had known that it was far easier for Vincent to love others than it was for him to love himself. Even her last words had been a gift, a testament to the fact that their love was worth everything she had, and was. Though lovers be lost...

The memory of the words cut him so deeply he gasped, and reflexively clamped an iron lid on his reverie. He could not feel, just now. To feel, even for an instant, was to place himself below the epicenter of an earthquake...to be rent apart, annihilated, erased out of existence.

Slowly, he shifted his weight, and willed his exhausted body to plod onward.

Joe Maxwell sat at the counter of the tiny diner at 82nd and Columbus, an untouched cup of steaming coffee before him. He had known immediately that the only way to deal with the feelings almost overwhelming him was to fly into action, and had wasted no time. Under the counter, his foot tapped an impatient rhythm as he listened to police investigator Nick Becker.

"Bruises on her wrist and, uh," Nick consulted a small pocket notebook. "At least one needlemark on her left forearm."

"What kind of needlemark?" Joe queried.

"The autopsy's scheduled for tomorrow. We won't know until then," Nick explained patiently. It was reasonable, Joe knew. In fact, it was as quick as anything was ever done in New York, where the backlog of homicides often exceeded the number of experts who could be called upon to perform autopsies, causing numerous delays all along the investigative chain. Someone would be working overtime on this.

"Who's doing it?" Joe asked. He knew he was pushing, especially in light of his current suspended status, but he didn't care. Joe was well acquainted with the doctors in the medical examiner's office, both by name and by personality. He'd be damned if he'd let some pompous, condescending jerk work on Cathy.

"Dr. Marx."

The answer eased the pressure in Joe's chest a little. Steve Marx was a good coroner and a decent human being. He also owed Joe a favor. Maybe he could be talked into giving out some privileged information, even though DA involvement in the autopsy was glaringly illegal.

"What else?" Joe took a brief, nerve-steadying sip of coffee.

Nick signaled a negative to the waitress holding a fresh pot above his cup and again consulted his notebook. "One set of prints and no evidence of forced entry from the balcony. But no prints on any other doors."

"What does that mean?" Joe pursued relentlessly.

The investigator shrugged helplessly and snapped the notebook shut. "It means I haven't found anything on the other doors yet." Give a tired cop a break, his tone suggested. Joe wasn't about to. This was Cathy.

"That's it?"

"Um hmm...until we hear from forensics."

"What about the prints on the balcony?"

"They're checking."

"Nick," Joe leaned forward earnestly. "As soon as you hear something I want to know about it."

"So you can do what?" The police investigator's voice sounded frustrated, more from the puzzling enigma of the case, Joe knew, than from his own persistent inquiry. The buzz of a beeper sounded on Nick's hip, and he reached around to silence it before continuing.

"Joe, you gotta realize this is not your normal homicide."

Joe set his cup of coffee carefully on the formica counter.

"Look, just do your best," he said.

"I always do my best," Nick replied. "I also know my limitations." He spread his hands in a regretful shrug. "All I'm saying is, I think you might want to check out some other alternatives."

"Like what?"

Nick concentrated, with ostensible intentness, on unwrapping a toothpick. "Ever hear of a unit called the 210?" he asked suddenly.

Joe nodded. It was not a unit he'd often had dealings with, given the broad scope of his litigative responsibilities, but he remembered he had the number scribbled down somewhere under the piles of work on his desk blotter.

"Yeah, special crimes, right?"

"There's a woman on it---Diana Bennett." Joe's doubtful expression must have communicated that the name didn't register, for Nick added, "Remember the Beserra case last month?"

Joe remembered. A triple homicide, spanning five states. And no discernable leads. He nodded. "Yeah, sure, I remember."

"Bennett was the one that dug out Tony Hernandez."

Joe eyed him questioningly. "I thought that was the Bureau," he said.

Nick shook his head. "Bennett. See, I gotta catch whatever they throw on my plate. But she gets to pick and choose. She's got this special arrangement." His emphasis on the last words was ironic, but unmalicious.

"Why? Because she's 210?"

"Because she's good." The praise was understated, typical of the kudos given by the NYPD personnel. And on the force, one of the last bastions of male chauvanism left in a largely progressive metropolis, "good" in reference to a woman meant very, very good indeed.

"How come I've never heard of her?" Joe queried sceptically.

Nick smiled briefly. "She doesn't like her name in the papers," he said.

"Why not, Nick?"

The policeman looked at him. "I don't know---why don't



you ask her?" The words and the glance told him pointedly that Diana Bennett's name was the best he could do under the circumstances, with a case that had no admissible evidence and few solid leads. Neither spoke what they were both thinking---that it would all be pushed into the background as soon as next week, to make room for the next unsolved homicide.

"I gotta go." Nick rose. "Hey, take care of yourself, Joe, okay?"

Joe nodded. "Thanks, Nick."

"And Joe," the investigator paused in the process of throwing his raincoat over his arm, and looked at Joe intently. "Do what I told you, okay?"

The address that the 29th precinct watch commander had given Joe for Diana Bennett, policewoman extraordinaire, was a nondescript highrise on the lower East Side. Joe dismissed his taxi and headed into the lobby to locate the ubiquitous call box he could use to signal his arrival. His earlier phone conversation with the woman had been far from encouraging---in fact, she had refused outright to take the case. He wanted to know why, and didn't plan on leaving until he had an answer. Firmly, he leaned on the buzzer.

"Hello?" came the crisp voice he remembered, plainly annoyed about the interruption.

"Hi. It's Joe Maxwell, we talked this morning." No answer. He waited for a long moment and then said questioningly "Hello?"

The measured voice spoke in clipped tones. "I told you I couldn't do it."

"Look, I have no place else to go," he returned heavily. Diana Bennett was going to be a difficult sell, but she was his last hope. And while he would never plead for himself, he had no compunction about pleading for Cathy. "Please?"

Again, a long silence which made Joe wonder if she had moved to another room to dismiss his unsolicited presence. He pressed the buzzer again. "Hello?" he said.

"Fifth floor," came the resigned voice. Joe harbored no illusions about the exchange. She was bringing him upstairs to get rid of him once and for all. Only he wasn't going to dismiss that easily.

The ancient elevator creaked and groaned in protest as it rose slowly upward. This building was certainly a far cry from Cathy's. But then, he had always known that Cathy was Old Money. One of the things about her that had impressed him from the beginning was that she hadn't thrown the fact around. She had been a class act all the way---intelligent, hard-working, honest, compassionate, loyal, and, at times, incredibly gentle. And totally feminine. A far cry from this Bennett woman. He could just picture the face that went with the voice. Diana Bennett, he was positive, was as homely as she was efficient--and about as relentless as a Marine drill sergeant. He grimaced slightly.

And almost gasped in astonishment at the lithe figure standing, arms folded, at the fifth floor apartment entrance. Though her posture was militant and her face unyielding, he

could see enough through the metal gate to realize that Diana Bennett was beautiful. A hit-you-right-in-the-eye kind of beauty, with wide-spaced blue eyes and a long fall of titian hair pulled severely back from her face. The effect was flattering, rather than otherwise; the fact that she was dressed in a baggy sweater and jeans also did nothing to dim her loveliness. Joe was immediately reminded of the two other women he had met who had had this singular effect on him. Cathy, of course, in her trim black suit, the first day she had appeared in the DA's office, blue-blooded resume in hand. And Erica Salvan, the Proctor and Brannigan attorney who had wowed him as soon as he had set eyes on her. Suddenly, he longed to draw back the grate.

"Where did you get my address?" the wary voice pulled him quickly back to reality.

"From your Watch Commander," he admitted.

"You call in a favor?" she asked. She was sharp, this woman. Disassembly would get him nowhere.

"Yeah...a big one."

"You realize this is completely unfair of you," she said levelly.

Joe prided himself on being a fair man, and the accusation stung. "All I'm asking you to do is take a look at something," he urged.

"You're asking me to set aside one case for another and I can't do that," she insisted.

He stepped closer, and eyed her through the gate. "Not even for one day?" he asked tersely.

In answer, she opened the metal door and stared at him. He had been right about her beauty. But there was something else about her---an intensity, a restrained, watchful vigilance that fascinated him. He'd be willing to lay odds that no man had ever penetrated her armor-like reserve. Diana Bennett might be stunning, but she was about as warm as a sub-zero icicle.

"Let me show you something." She made a wide gesture to the wall behind her which was filled with tacked-up newspaper clippings, photos, and old blotter reports.

"This is where I've been for the last four months," she explained, turning to the wall and pointing to a photo. "And this is Sally Rogers." The photograph showed a laughing girl in the jumper of one of the city's Catholic middle schools.

"She's ten years old---grabbed waiting for her mama outside the school." She paused, staring at the photo, and continued. "Every third Sunday the guy sends her parents something---a lock of hair, a piece of clothing, a shoe...yesterday a package arrived with a small finger inside."

Joe bowed his head. So Sally Rogers, a kidnaped 10-year-old, was the reason Diana Bennett would not take the case. The very good reason.

He heard her say softly, "The lab says she's still alive." She looked up, then, and asked, "What can I do for you, Joe Maxwell?" Her eyes said, don't expect me to look for a dead person's murderer when I might be able to save a little girl from this. He had to hand it to her. Her priorities were well



set. He'd do the same in her shoes.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bother you." His words were sincere, and they drew a small smile from Diana.

"Sometimes I push too hard," she said, as if in apology.

"No. I was wrong to come here." He moved to the elevator, ready to depart. But not without regret. Something told him that Diana Bennett would be the right choice for this case. The only problem was that Sally Rogers needed her more than Cathy right now.

To his surprise, she followed him, leaning against the door jam as he closed the folding gate.

"Was she important to you?" she asked slowly.

He nodded. "We worked together. But it was more than that."

"Romantic?" It was a question he could have expected from someone as intuitive as Diana Bennett, and one he did not shrink from.

"Friends." He wondered where the line of questioning was leading, and decided to wait. He sensed that Diana did nothing without clear, pre-determined purpose.

"And you asked to head the investigation. Don't tell me, let me guess." Her slender fingers sketched an eloquent gesture in the air. "The trail went cold fast. And you blamed yourself. And then you worked harder and harder until all your other work suffered."

"I was suspended," he confided in a low voice, still wincing at the memory. For a moment, she looked as if she really understood.

"And then you began to dream about her, and your mind took these illogical leaps," she continued. "And you followed absurd leads and intuitions and pretty soon," her voice tightened, "you couldn't think of anything else."

He nodded in amazement.

"That's why I only work on one case at a time," she concluded.

He stared at the beautiful police officer. Diana Bennett was chock full of surprises. "They're all like that for you?" he asked.

She nodded, her eyes on his. "Yes," she admitted, and turned away, as if she had revealed too much. But Joe, fired by her obvious dedication and keen deductions, had shoved aside the gate and entered the room again.

"Let me ask you something," he began. "What do you make of this? A woman is violently kidnapped. Six months later she turns up dead in her own bed. Only she wasn't killed there. She was murdered someplace else and then brought there. Up seventeen flights of stairs with no witnesses." He could see that it was too much information, spewed out without any clarifying context. She shook her head.

"I don't know," she said dismissively. But he'd learned her rationale for doing this business. And suddenly, he wanted her to know his.

"Nobody does," he said. "And in three weeks, nobody's going to care. And that's why I came here." He jerked his head toward

the bulletin board. "I hope you find that girl," he said as he stepped toward the elevator. This time he closed the gate behind him and began the descent. He did not know that Diana Bennett stood there, motionless, for a long time after he left.



Stephen Marx, M.D., stood stiffly in the dissecting room of the New York City Morgue at First Avenue and Thirty-First Street. It was five-fifteen, and the hordes of forensic pathologists, interns, and technicians who usually populated the warren of rooms designated as the autopsy area were gone for the day, fighting for standing space in the crowded uptown subways or coaxing battered vehicles through the crush of snail-crawling, homebound traffic. He was alone, elbow deep in his third autopsy since morning, and bone-tired.

For the tenth time that day, he cursed the idiotic laws that regulated the jurisdiction of medical examiners in New York City, laws which remanded every Manhattan homicide from First to Sixth Avenues to his sole purview. "Compelling legal implications" was the reason cited in his contract, and he tried hard to honor it. But it was sometimes difficult to manage the heavy load of autopsies scheduled by the NYPD with so little assistance, and he hated falling behind. At the moment, he would have welcomed a job offer from somewhere like Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, or any of the other cities which reported a scant two homicides a month. In fact, at the moment he'd settle for some assistance right here in his own morgue---a night-shift medical student or even a reasonably bright clerk to get a jump on the paperwork. No hope in sight, he thought disgustedly. Another ten o'clock tuna fish sandwich and a quick scanning of the Times before he had to go to bed to face another day of this.

As always, the mental grumbling gave him a renewed energy to continue the work he actually enjoyed, and he bent over the cadaver again. Preliminary inquiry on the body he now dissected had suggested bismuth poisoning---a highly unusual murder weapon. He had half-hoped the intake would reveal that the victim had suffered long-term exposure to bismuth in an industrial work setting, a common accidental cause of such fatalities---in which circumstance he could relinquish authority and pass the case to one of the army of rotating Bellevue interns for completion. No such luck. The man had been a Wall Street commodities broker with a two million-plus stock portfolio, a condo complex in Palm Springs, an Aston Martin, and some unexplainably shady connections with a powerful coterie of heroin dealers in a nouveau riche section of the Village. Steve made a wry face. Today, he had autopsied a shooting death in a bizarre homosexual domestic dispute, and the remains of a strangled transient. Sometimes, it was hard to believe there were decent people left in the City. Especially when all he saw, day after day, were

the bodies of the victims coughed up by the indifferent rivers running adjacent to Manhattan Island or left to decompose among putrid, back-street garbage cans.

The telephone jangled suddenly, jolting his tired nerves. Damn. He'd lose the momentum of his concentration if he answered it. For a moment he considered letting it ring, but his inherent sense of duty won out. Peeling off his surgical gloves, he reached for the phone with one hand while seizing the opportunity to massage his aching neck with the other.

"Marx here."

"Steve, it's Nick Becker." The homicide squad members were on a first-name basis with the morgue head physician. The younger ones jokingly called him "Doctor Death", an eponym he bore with equanimity. After all, it was true.

"Have another one for me, Nick?"

"Yeah. Body of Cathy Chandler from the DA's office. Found this morning. Morphine injection."

"Why so long getting it here?"

"Tough case, Doc. We've been huntin' for clues for hours. It's like looking for a paper clip in a Madison Avenue garbage scow."

"Okay, Nick, send it over. I'll be here."

"Right. Joe Maxwell's coming too." The pause at the other end of the line told Steve that Nick was waiting for his conflict-of-interest protestation. The District Attorney's people were supposed to stay clear of the actual autopsy process until the cause of death had been verified. Well, he'd be the last one to raise a fuss. He owed Joe Maxwell a big one.

"Was Joe a friend of hers?" he asked interestedly.

"Yeah. Good friend."

"It's okay, Nick. He can come over. Just don't spread it around. It's one hell of a policy violation."

"Thanks, Doc." Nick's voice sounded relieved. "Joe's been hit pretty hard. And he's a good guy."

"It's okay," repeated Steve. There was no need to tell Nick the particulars---that Joe had once saved his career by keeping the evidence of one of his few mistakes away from a bloodhound press---but he was well aware of what a "good guy" Joe Maxwell was.

Musingly, his thoughts returned to the information Nick had given him. So Joe was friends with Cathy Chandler, the attorney who had been kidnapped months back and had finally been found, dead. He had met the woman only once, in passing, when she had come to the morgue to ID an abused wife. Her lovely face had streaked with tears at the sight, and he had been impressed by her compassion. Rumor had it that Chandler was the wealthy daughter of an uptown corporate attorney, an East side debutante who had spurned the good life to race around town as an underpaid assistant DA. Not many people in this city--especially with her background--took on work like that. Or cried over the death of a stranger.

And now she was coming to the morgue to be autopsied. He expelled a long, weary breath. There were too few good people left in the city. And the awful things always seemed to happen



to them.

Her body was finally ready to be released to the morgue by late afternoon. Joe sat in the front seat of the ambulance as it threaded its way through the jam of rush hour-vehicles, wearily glad the laconic driver showed no inclination to volubility. The entire sequence of events since morning seemed one long, ghastly nightmare, and he doubted he could even open his mouth to answer a question.

What a travesty that it had all come to this---a body to be shipped to the morgue. Strange, somehow, that the whole awful business of her death seemed so unfinished. He felt a nagging, pervasive sense of something amiss which he knew was unrelated to either his exhaustion or his grief. The feeling persisted, overriding the greater sorrow he had felt about Cathy's death. Why was he so troubled by a sensation of error? Was it that Diana Bennett had refused to take the case, valid though her reasons had been? Was it that he now felt at the end of a protracted investigation with such searingly personal overtones, with no solutions left to attempt?

"You have a heart like his." Her last words to him, spoken seven months ago, sounded so clearly in his ears that he jerked his head up, listening. You have a heart like his. Like whose? He would never know now, but it had obviously been a compliment of the highest order, for her eyes had sparkled with tears when she said it, and he had felt her earnest, loving sincerity. God, how he missed Cathy. How he wished he could have found her before it was too late.

Joe had been in the autopsy room of the city morgue the previous week, and about a score of times before that, but never had the sight of the sterile porcelin dissecting tables lurched at his stomach. He stared at them, barely noticing the white-jacketed, waiting figure.

"Hi, Joe," a voice said sympathetically.

Steve Marx. He had been glad when Nick had told him that Steve would be doing the autopsy. It should have been easier to think of Steve handling her body than someone else. Oddly, it didn't feel that way at all. It felt distinctly off-balance and erroneous, like the ride there, and again he wasn't sure why.

"Steve. Thanks for waiting."

"It was the least I could do." Steve paused. "She was a good friend of yours, wasn't she?"

Joe nodded. "Yeah," he said absently. His glance fell on the instruments on the far table, honed in on what looked like a small circular saw.

"What is that thing?" he asked abruptly.

Steve followed the direction of his glance. "Don't torture yourself, Joe," he said softly.

"But what is it?" he asked insistently.

"A dissecting saw," Steve sighed. "Joe, we have to gather the clues...left in her body to help find out who did this to her."

"Yeah, right," Joe replied, his eyes still locked on the saw. Why did it make him shudder inside?

"Can I see the body again?" he asked. He was well aware that, as a member of the District Attorney's staff, suspended or not, he wasn't supposed to be on the premises until the autopsy was finished, and then only to pick up triplicates of the paperwork. But Steve went to the body bag without hesitation, unzipping it all the way down. Joe stepped up to the table.

"When are you going to do it?" His voice, even to his own ears, sounded strained and preoccupied.

"Tomorrow morning, first thing. I'll give it...her...the best I have to give, Joe. I promise."

The hastily-amended sentence struck Joe forcibly, making the loyal promise in the words somehow glaringly irrelevant. Everybody thought of her as dead except him. To the police, she was a case to be solved. To Steve, she was a body to be autopsied. Even to Jenny, who had sobbed in his arms that afternoon, she was a friend to "make the arrangements" for. Why was it so different for him? He was seized with an incomprehensible urge to look at Cathy's face one last time. Why? To read something there? What could the face of a dead woman tell him?

He knew as soon as he moved the vinyl back, disclosing her white countenance---knew what he could read there, even in death. And it made no sense at whatsoever.

You have a heart like his. The words echoed of her, the woman who had mirrored in her phenomenal casework and her life his own desire to see real justice served. The two of them had triumphed so often, he had begun to feel that they were an invincible team, that his office was a tiny corner of the city where truth and moral courage mattered. So often, she had confronted him, encouraged him to give expression to his own strong instincts to leave a mark for good in a city gone awry with crime and apathy.

You have a heart like his. Like whose? It no longer mattered. Cathy Chandler lay on an autopsy dissecting table, dead.

THAT was what bugged him, he realized suddenly. His heart just couldn't believe his eyes. It was rejecting her death as inadmissible evidence. Of all the bizarre, fantastical notions. He wondered if he were finally losing it.

"Steve, do you have a stethoscope?"

His friend stared at him in bewilderment. "Somewhere in the back. I'll use it tomorrow. It's procedural. Why?"

"I don't know why." He really didn't, not for the life of him. Except that she had said "you have a heart like his."

"Get it, please, Steve."

"Joe, I know how much you cared for her, but..."

"Care, Steve. Care. Present tense. I care. Get the stethoscope, please."

Steve Marx shrugged. "If it'll help you face this, okay, Joe. But I guarantee you it won't pick up the sound of a heart that isn't beating."



A heart that isn't...a heart like his. The second message was, unbelievably, canceling out the first. Inwardly, he groaned. Only a demented person would listen for a heartbeat from a corpse. The pressure of the investigation must have gotten to him. It was the only explanation for the crazy notions that were doing somersaults in his mind. Sternly, he willed composure into his jittered nerves as he watched the medical examiner leave the room and re-enter, stethoscope in hand.

"I'll let you listen, Joe, if that's what you'd like," said Steve. He means he'll humor me up to the point where we're listening to nothing, thought Joe. Then he'll slam her in one of those refrigerator vaults and tomorrow...tomorrow the funeral arrangements he'd engineered with Jenny would unfold and by evening Cathy would be lying in a quiet grave behind Saint Cleo's. His throat tightened.

"But it might be better if you...JESUS!" The sudden sharp exclamation rooted Joe where he stood.

"What?" he shouted hoarsely, scarcely daring to interpret the electrified expression on Steve Marx's face, but wildly, somehow, hoping...

"I thought I heard something," Steve gasped. Her heartbeat, Joe knew suddenly, irrevocably. "No...it must have just been a...there! I heard it again!" He paused, straining to listen. "Again! Great God Almighty! It's a faint heartbeat!"

"You're sure?" Joe burst out, pounding the dissecting table with his fist. "You're sure, Steve?"

"Listen!" Steve thrust the stethoscope at him, tangling his hands with Joe's as the two of them fixed the instrument in his ears. With hands that shook, he placed the bell against her chest.

"An occasional flutter," he said breathlessly. "You'll hear a muffled, occasional flutter." But Joe wasn't listening. He was too busy focusing his already-riveted attention on the tiny transmitters in his ears and feverishly repeating every rote prayer his Catholic upbringing had once mandated he memorize.

Then, miraculously, he heard it. The whisper of a heartbeat. Lightly and unevenly it sounded, reaching to him through this incredible sixth sense, the heart like God-only-knew-whose that connected him to Cathy. He had been blindingly, astonishingly right. Cathy was still alive.

But there was no time to rejoice. For hard on the heels of his bounding relief came the message that time was running out. Cathy was poised on the edge of death, and ready to go over the brink. Crazy though it was, he reached mentally for an estimate, and it came. She had about ten minutes to live. He tore off the stethoscope and stared at Steve.

"Where's the nearest hospital?" he queried feverishly.

"Bellevue. Half a block up. The emergency room entrance is on this side of the street. I'll get a car to come around, but we have to hurry, Joe. She's not dead yet, but she will be soon. That's the faintest living heartbeat I've ever heard. She doesn't have much time."

"I'll carry her then," burst out Joe, tense and frantic.



She was not going to die, not Cathy. He picked her up in his arms, flinging off the body bag as he hoisted her. Ten more minutes, he thought desperately. Just hang on for ten more minutes, Cath.

"Wait for me, Steve," he flung over his shoulder as he ran from the room with his precious burden. In an instant, the sound of his racing footsteps had disappeared.

Steve stared at the empty body bag, which, seconds before had held the remains of Catherine Chandler. Of all the preposterous, incredible happenings. He had never seen anything like this. It almost defied reality. No...it did defy reality, the whole crazy sequence of events. It was almost as if Joe had known, from the beginning, had sensed...

"How did he know?" he whispered slowly to himself. "How in heaven's name did he know?"

And at that very instant, far across the city, Vincent heard her voice.

Unable to stay away from the place where he had last gazed on her face, he had been pulled back to her darkened apartment. It was a mistake, he knew, for she would not be there by now, and the apartment's emptiness would only accentuate his sense of excruciating loss. But he had no choice. He simply could not stay away.

He climbed slowly to her terrace, heaving with fatigue when he reached it, and paused a moment to recover his strength. The stress was taking its toll on him physically, he realized dully. He needed to get Below soon, where this vulnerability would not matter. He was so careless now, so indifferent about taking the customary precautions Above. It hardly seemed to matter anymore. Nothing did.

He opened the door to her bedroom and stood gazing in as the night wind blew the gossamer curtains against his chest. The sight of her chalked outline on the bed, drawn by the police to indicate the position of her body, wrenched at him cruelly. But again he had that sense of Catherine hovering in the room, a fleeting but definite perception of her presence that was even stronger than before. His eyes searched the shadows carefully. The experience of returning was not at all what he had expected. The weighty agony was unlifted---but he was wonderingly conscious that, somehow, despite the pain she still felt very near. Then he spotted the book.

Great Expectations. It lay on her bedside table, a treasured volume he knew she had kept close at hand and savored often. He picked it up, turning carefully to the lines she had chosen to read to him the night of their first meeting on her terrace, when their message had been such a breathtaking gift. And as he read, her voice seemed suddenly to waft through the night and through his suffering senses, lilting and tender, as clear as if she were standing there: "and as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her."



But he had only an instant to absorb her voice and her strangely vivid presence. For barely had he begun to realize the extraordinary nature of his sensations when a grating sound outside the door warned him that a foreign key was turning in Catherine's lock. He snapped the book shut, despairing. At that moment, he would have given everything he possessed to remain there, caught in the mysterious connection that seemed for all the world like a resurgent echo of the long-vanished bond. But unknown danger lurked feet away from him, and he must surrender the priceless moment to gain the safety of the world Below. Sighing bitterly, he flew up the tiny steps and out into the night.

Joe was mortally certain that someone would ask him what the hell was going on, but New York was a city where unusual sights were commonplace, and he was accorded only a few startled glances from passersby as he sprinted the long half a block to Bellevue hospital. Cathy's limp body seemed to get heavier with each frantic step and his lungs were aching after the first thirty yards, but he wasted no time resting. Fear and a deep, certain sense that hesitation would be fatal lent swiftness to his feet. He could collapse when she was safe.

A huge sign pointed to the side entrance marked "Emergency", and he veered left without slowing his stride. The winding tarmac ended at heavy glass doors flanked by two ambulances and standing unhelpfully closed. Not a soul was in sight.

If someone could just come up and open those doors, he thought desperately. But there was no need. His foot triggered the electric eye and they sailed open, allowing him to burst through at full tilt. The sight of that lighted, busy hospital corridor was the sweetest vision Joe had ever seen.

"Emergency! Emergency!" he shouted. He felt a moment's frozen fear. If New York's hospitals were anything like its streets, he might yell his head off for days before someone came to his aid. He wondered frantically what he should do next.

He didn't have to wonder long. A middle-aged night nurse in green scrub clothes came quickly up the corridor. Joe felt like kissing her--and probably would have, if time weren't running out. Blessedly, she sized up the situation in an instant.

"I need some help here," she said sharply to a small group of chattering people that Joe, in his haste, had rushed straight past. The group--containing two orderlies and another couple of nurses, scattered instantly and with purpose. One of them seized a gurney standing against a wall twenty feet away and rolled it under Cathy's body. More people appeared in the hallway as he laid her on it, and two of them began wheeling it rapidly through the nearest doorway.

Panting with exertion, Joe followed them into a small emergency room bristling with medical machines and already crowded with people. No one asked him to leave, and he realized thankfully that in the general hubbub his presence inside the door was as yet unnoticed. Which was just as well, all things



considered. His role was over now, but he'd be damned if he was going anywhere until he knew Cathy would make it. He made himself as small as he could and watched with bated breath.

One man, obviously the physician in charge, put a stethoscope to Cathy's chest and listened closely, while around him the others hovered busily. To Joe's left, a nurse held Cathy's arm, tying a rubber-tubed tourniquet above the elbow with practiced efficiency before slipping a needle into the vein of her left wrist. IV, thought Joe, eyeing the bag of clear solution dangling from the bright steel pole above her and accessing the correct name from late-night re-runs of Marcus Welby, M.D. He almost laughed at the idiocy of his source, but stifled it just in time. He couldn't draw attention to himself. Not when her life hung in the balance, and he didn't know which way the dice would fall. Live, Cathy, he willed her. Live.

A second nurse peeled the paper off the adhesive surface of several small white circles and attached them, wires trailing, onto her chest and shoulders. Joe's gaze followed the cables and noted briefly that they hooked to a flat connection which then fed, through a thicker cable, to a monitor box sitting on a shelf above the bed. EKG, he thought. And when the nurse adjusted the monitor dials to show an erratically spiking green computer line, Joe was no longer laughing at his television-derived medical knowledge. Thanks to Marcus Welby, he knew what that spiking line meant. Cathy's heart was still beating. He hadn't been too late.

But barely had the sigh of profound relief escaped his lips when he saw the nurse taking Cathy's blood pressure shake her head. He looked at the EKG monitor for reassurance, but almost simultaneously it halted abruptly, reverting to a single flat line. Do something! he wanted to roar. He was acutely conscious that he was completely out of his element, and that his ravings could only impede the rescue efforts. But she looked so small and sick, lying there. So close to death. Impossible that she could survive this far only to die when help was so near.

"We're losing her." The clipped, tense tones of the doctor reached his ears as he watched in horrified helplessness. He pressed his trembling hands together, hard, and waited.

"Let's start a Code Five." The doctor ripped off the stethoscope and placed one palm over the other on Cathy's chest. "Get me some adrenalin," he ordered briefly.

The words were barely out of his mouth before a nurse was breaking a small ampule and pulling the solution up into the largest syringe Joe had ever seen. Meanwhile, the physician had begun a hasty CPR. He counted the time under his breath as Joe, agonized, counted with him. Come on, Cath. You can make it. You can do this. Come on. He winced as the rhythm was interrupted for the insertion of the needle into Cathy's chest. Apparently, the adrenalin was injected directly into the heart muscle.

The medical personnel continued to buzz around her still body like angry bees. A second doctor tipped her head back,



angled her jaw, and a fed white, crescent-shaped tube down her throat. Holding the tube in place with his left hand, he began squeezing an attached black bag the size of a football, timing the squeezes with his own breathing.

He's breathing for you, Cathy, thought Joe. Come on. You can do that for yourself. Come on, Radcliffe. But the only response was the the jump of the EKG line, registering the touch of alien hands which forced her heart to beat, stopping abruptly when the pressure stopped.

"What happened to this woman?" asked one of the doctors.

"Drug injection," supplied Joe from his corner, hating to call attention to himself but realizing that no one else had the information. "We don't know what," he finished helplessly. "Massive overdose, meant to kill. I pulled her from the morgue ten minutes ago. The police thought she was already dead."

The two doctors exchanged glances, and one briefly nodded. "Let's shock her," he said. Joe tensed. It was a desperate effort, he knew, to use the defibrillators which would shoot a current of electricity into her unresponsive heart. He watched in numb fear as the powerpack was wheeled up to the bed and the paddles placed on her chest.

"It's powered up and ready, Doctor," said the nurse who had first seen Joe enter the hospital. She looked over at Joe but said nothing. Good thing, he thought fiercely. He wouldn't leave now if they forced him at gunpoint.

"Stand clear!" the doctor said sharply, and everyone backed away. His thumbs hit the triggers and a sound like muted gunshots echoed in the small room as Cathy's body jolted violently off the bed. Tears ran unnoticed down Joe's cheeks. To see her like this, his brave, beautiful friend.....live, Cathy, he cried inside. Live.

Nothing. No response.

"Let it power up and we'll give it another go," the doctor said.

"What about injecting that new cardiac drug?" asked the second doctor.

"Let's try it. Let's try anything," he muttered, looking at Cathy's wan face. Joe knew what that meant. The doctor himself was worried. Somehow, he had to get a message from his head into hers. He had always scoffed at mental telepathy, and it was an indication of his desperation that he resorted to it now. But the events of the evening had convinced him that some greater power in the hidden reaches of the universe was at work to save her. And for her sake, he would willingly suspend his disbelief. It had worked so far.

You got yourself this far, kiddo, he urged. Got yourself pulled out of the morgue by a crazy assistant DA who has a heart like his. Like whose, I don't know, but he needs you. He loves you. If you can't come back for me, come back for him. Come back to him, Cathy.

Almost directly below the hospital, in a tunnel black as night, walked Vincent. His head was swimming with pain-soaked

images of his beloved that he could neither avoid or ignore, and the dimness around him pulsed with the memory of her whispered last words.

Though lovers be lost, she had said, waiting for him to carry the thought onward, trusting in his strength as hers had failed.

Love shall not. Shall not ever, ever be lost. His love, his Catherine. Unbelievable that he could call Catherine his in death as he never could in life. But the pull to claim her as his own was so strong, so palpable in spite of the crushing pain...

"It's ready, Doctor." The nurse's words drew Joe abruptly out of the trance-like state he had effected to communicate with his dying friend. He watched anxiously as the paddles were again placed on her chest and triggered to send forth that wrenching shock. How much of this could the her body stand? Not much, he knew. And he felt the blackness closing in over her, felt her letting go even as he struggled to hold her with the force of his will...

"And death shall have no dominion." The words rang off the walls of the darkened passageway as Vincent, prodded by some sudden, driving force, cried them aloud. He was wonderingly conscious that for a moment they stemmed the blackness utterly, echoing and re-echoing as they did into the expanses of the tunnel that even his sharpened night vision could not penetrate. It's because they're true, he thought passionately. Because they're so very, very true...

Above the ground, in the narrow brightly-lit emergency room, the EKG blipped suddenly.

"YES!" shouted Joe exultantly. His Giants Stadium voice made everyone in the small room jump nearly as high as Cathy had.

"It's not over yet," cautioned the doctor, watching the EKG intently. But the spiking continued in regular, rhythmic pattern, as if fueled by the many pairs of eyes which watched its luminous course. And as the rhythm pulsed on, moment after moment, a collective sigh of relief went up from the group.

There was no doubt about it. Cathy Chandler's heart was beating on its own.

Yes, Radcliffe, thought Joe, leaning heavily against the wall for support, torn between wild laughter and nearly uncontrollable tears. Oh, yeah, honey. You did it. You made it. Welcome back, Cathy. Welcome back.



Once Below, Vincent found that his only refuge, again, was to keep moving. And so he prowled, one clawed hand curved around Catherine's copy of Great Expectations while the wracking emotions warred within him endlessly.

It was too much---the shattering grief that felt too laced with hope, the agony that pressured his senses to accept the reality of her death while its very intensity made her seem near enough to touch, to hold...

Enough. Catherine was in another place---he dared not think of her as dead---and he needed to face that terrible truth unshrinking before the weight of it obliterated him. No...death had no dominion, and she lived. He knew she lived, for he had felt her presence clearly, many times over. She was gone and if he continued to look for her around every corner, he would become insane. No, he WAS insane, to think that he could forget her for even for a moment...

Within him, the battle raged on.

Hesitantly, he turned away from the passage which led to the barren solitiude of his own chamber and into the one which led to Father's study. He had not sought company at all, had even told Mary to keep his beloved children away lest they become frightened by the depth of his grief. But Father would be waiting. And he was no stranger to sadness. He was spun steel, a survivor who had come to terms with his own suffering while still retaining the ability to suffer with others. A strong man, and a loving one. Vincent desperately needed that strength and love now.

Father sat in his customary battered wooden chair, a comfortable relic of dubious origin that Mouse had unearthed from one of the vast city dumps and presented with a flourish on his last birthday. The ubiquitous Virgil lay open on the table, unperused. His spectacles were off, and he was staring sorrowfully at the flickering candle-shadows cast by the tunnel community's most economical source of light. He looked exhausted with worry.

Vincent entered the chamber slowly, reaching unsteadily for the rude railing Kanin had constructed to aid Father's limping progress up and down the stairs. The slender rod groaned under his weight as he bent over it. He heard Father's voice speak his name, and felt him move closer.

"Come here and sit with me," Father said gently. His feet, still at last, seemed unable to respond. He moved down the stairs like an old man, and seated himself heavily. His body felt unused and dilapidated. His heaving heart did not feel

at all.

"Father," he choked, feeling the tears start again under his parent's loving, anxious gaze. Father's hand reached up under his hair to warmly clasp his neck.

"I know you are in great pain," he said simply, earnestly. "Try to tell me."

Vincent shook his head, fingers caressing the binding of the book he held. "This pain...I can not endure."

Father nodded, and moved his other hand to cover his son's. "But you will."

He expelled a weary, despairing breath. "I can't find my way through it," he said. Because there is no way through it, he thought. No way through the darkness of a life without her.

"You must allow it to pass over you."

"Father, it's crushing me." The words were the bitter cry of one unresigned to his joyless destiny.

"Let it crush you," replied Father forcefully. "Let it carry you away. It will bring you back."

He sighed, heartsick. "Not this time."

"Yes it will, Vincent." Father's voice was rife with remembered pain, and fresh sorrow for his suffering son. "I know this grief. The one thing you must not do is to turn away from it...to deny it, what you feel. The enormity of it all...is your love for Catherine. And that," he added "is to be cherished forever...never to be forgotten. It is her gift to you."

Vincent's haunted eyes rested, unseeing, on the variegated, shadowy contours of the rough-hewn walls.

"I don't think I have the strength to accept it," he whispered.

"Oh yes, you do," Father's eyes had misted over, but his voice was clear and sure. "You had the courage to love her, and you have the strength now to honor her. And you have me beside you. I know this path." His arms closed around his son as he pulled him close. Let me comfort you, his embrace said. Let me show you that you are not alone.

Against Father's shoulder, Vincent closed his eyes and wept.

"Get her up to Intensive Care right away. And be sure to keep the ambubag in place until she's hooked up to a respirator." The physician who had just left Cathy Chandler's side looked over at Joe and smiled. "Look's like you called this one pretty close," he said.

Joe nodded, somewhat shamefacedly. "You all must have thought I was a lunatic busting in here and screaming."

"Forget it. I hope when I get ready to go somebody cares that much for me. Looks like she's out of danger, at least for now."

Joe put out his hand. "Joe Maxwell, District Attorney's office. I owe you, Doctor," he said thankfully.

"Bill Faber. No, you don't. Things look better than they did a few minutes ago, but they still aren't good. Your friend isn't dead, but she isn't conscious, either. And we don't know



how her body will react to that unknown drug. She may be in a coma for days, or even weeks. There's just no way of predicting how this will turn out."

"She'll make it." There was no hint of doubt in Joe's voice. "She's a fighter all the way."

"Well, I'll give you that one, Mr. Maxwell. All in all, the prognosis looks alot better than when you arrived."

"You're telling me." Joe grinned, then sobered quickly. "Look...can you keep this quiet, and tell your staff not to mention anything about it? This woman is a really decent human being, but she got in with the wrong crowd." Carefully, he spun out the story he had hastily concocted moments before. "Her father is a big-shot Manhattan attorney famous for anti-medical litigation. I'd hate to have the people who saved her drawn into a long legal battle." He detested lying to the man who had just saved Cathy, but any mention of her name could cause a storm of press coverage that would lead the killers right back to her. He was gambling on the Bill Faber's abhorrence of time-consuming and costly malpractice entanglements---a hazard faced by even the finest physicians, who invariably came out deeply resentful of their pyrrhic victories over lawsuit-hungry patients.

He had gambled correctly. The young doctor looked at him with something approaching horror and lifted his hands defensively. "Don't even tell me her name," he sputtered. "I don't want to know, and neither does my staff. We never had this conversation. I'll brief the team and the hospital director, and get Accounting to send the bills directly to you. As far as we're concerned, we saved the life of Jane Doe. And we'll keep taking care of her. But keep Bellevue out of the mess, okay?"

Joe nodded. "Thanks, Doctor. I'll see to it that you're protected. Just don't let a word of this get out."

"Damned right I won't. Those stupid attorneys, slamming good people just for the sake of their hotshot reputations. Are you sure you can finesse this?" Clearly, Dr. Faber was worried about his own reputation now, and Joe barely suppressed a smile.

"It's okay, Doctor," he said reassuringly. "You saved my friend. You have one of those stupid attorneys on your side now."

It was not, he reflected, going to be so easy to convince Steve Marx that he had to autopsy another Cathy Chandler.

Joe had been over the facts at least ten times during his slow walk back to the morgue, and he had always butted up against the same irrefutable conclusion.

To keep her safe, he had to keep her dead.

Catherine Chandler was officially deceased. The system kicked in quickly in murder cases, and the blotter reports were probably already out. Even the newspapers would have the information by late this evening, allotting far more than the customary column-inch of obituary space---for Cathy was a victim and an assistant DA, and, he suspected, most newsworthy of all,

a debutante heiress. Luckily, the obit columns in the New York papers were so extensive that there was never room for photographs, a boon which lessened the possibility of recognition by the hospital staff.

By tomorrow morning, the word would be out on the streets. Joe was aware of the absolute and often misguided faith the public placed in the scions of the press. No one would question the information. And Cathy would be safe.

It was a staggeringly simple concept. The question was, could it be pulled off? Would Steve be willing to risk his career and medical license for someone he had never met? Could he even be expected to?

He had to. For Joe knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the consequences of his refusal. Whatever infinitesimal sliver of Fate had saved Cathy to be rescued by his split-second hunch in the morgue, whatever circumstances had brought her to where he could see her face and remember her last, heartfelt remark to him, they were aberrations to someone's deadly master plan. By a blinding stroke of incomprehensible good fortune, Cathy was alive. But she wouldn't stay that way if the news of her rescue got out. Her captor was nameless, but his network of malevolence was stealthy and far-reaching. He had high-level plants in both the judicial system and the police department---henchmen who had meticulously obliterated the trail of the investigation with a thoroughness that was frightening. The villain would stalk her relentlessly. Sooner or later, he would find her.

And no power on earth could save her then.

He sighed. Viscerally, he felt the wisdom of his plan, even if it massively extended the perimeters of rationality. Gut instincts had served him well up to this point, and he was going to keep following where they led. He was going to save Cathy, even if he had to risk his own life.

And Steve Marx was just going to have to be his accomplice.

"No," said the distraught medical examiner, staring at him in shocked amazement. "No and no and no. Impossible. I won't even consider it. You don't even understand what you're asking."

"Yes, I do," Joe said insistently. They had been at it for over an hour, and if Steve Marx was less outraged than he had been at the beginning, he was no less intransigent. He had listened patiently after his first sharp outbreak of protestation, had even asked a question or two, but his answer had not changed. It was illegal, unethical, immoral, and dangerous. It would land them both back-to-back jail terms. Not to mention that it would cost him his medical license, his career, and his sole source of income.

At least he hadn't mentioned his reputation, Joe thought wearily. He had expected just such an indignant barrage of protestation and pretty sure that, faced with Steve's decisions, he would have said the same.

Only one thing kept him at it. He was rock-bottom certain of the imminent danger to Cathy. And so he hammered it home



again.

"What the hell's gotten into you, Joe?" Steve asked wearily. "I already told you no. God knows, it's taken the patience of a saint to just sit here and listen to this. I can't believe you're asking this of me."

"I am," Joe fired back. "I'm asking for her. Look," he leaned forward, intense conviction in every line of his drawn face. "Two hours ago, you were ready to sign a death certificate on Cathy Chandler. Well, I'm telling you that this thing she got involved in is so big and so monstrous that she'll be dead within twenty-four hours if word gets out that she's still alive."

"People already know, Joe." It was Steve's newest argument, designed to keep his friend-turned-lunatic at bay. "The whole ER staff at Bellevue knows, for God's sake. You can't keep that hidden."

"They're keeping a lid on it----I told a small fib about massive medical litigation."

"Listen to yourself. I can't believe you. Lying and threatening and trying to get me to substitute---let me get this straight---another goddam body..."

"She's worth it!" Joe shouted. "She's a great human being, and my friend, and they kidnapped her and probably tortured her and tried to kill her and she was an INNOCENT, trying to do some good in the world, trying to make a difference, like my Dad..." he was choking now, out of control and not caring at all, spilling out the rage of his helplessness over Cathy, and the acute, penetrating guilt he still felt about his father. To him, they were so profoundly connected. Steve just couldn't see. No one could see. And because they couldn't, Cathy would die all over again.

There was a long, pregnant silence in the autopsy room. Overhead, the garish fluorescent lights droned faintly.

Steve spoke quietly. "What about your father, Joe?"

"Nothing."

"I'd like to know."

"I gave my father a lead on a high school drug operation and it got him killed. I gave Cathy a notebook and it got her kidnapped," he said briefly. He was suddenly, ineffably weary. It was no use. He had done all he could. Word would get out. Well, he would guard her round the clock if need be. Maybe he could hire some men.

"I could check the unclaimed bodies vault."

Joe stared. "What did you say?"

Steve shrugged. "The unclaimed bodies are sent to New York University to be farmed out to the medical schools for gross anatomy dissection." He hesitated. "If there's one about her age and height, I could get started on it tonight so that nobody was the wiser by tomorrow morning."

"Why?" asked Joe.

"What do you mean, 'why' Maxwell? Haven't you been ramming this down my throat for over an hour? You're a damn good attorney. Wear your victims down to a nub until they're too worn out to fight anymore."

"I know," Joe said slowly. "I've badgered you to death to get you to put your career on the line for someone you've never even met. I guess I can't even believe you're agreeing. So why?"

"One, I have met her, and I was damned impressed. She cried over the death of a woman she didn't even know. Two, I owe you my career, which you saved only three years ago, and I like to square my debts. Three, I think I believe you when you say they'll kill her if we don't. Four, I think we can pull it off or I'd never even think of doing it."

Joe grinned. "Now you sound like an attorney, Steve."

"Don't try to suck up to me, dammit. I still can't believe I'm even giving this the time of day, much less getting involved." He gave a loud, exasperated snort.

"But you're willing."

"Crazy as it sounds." He paused, and continued slowly. "You know, there's been something fishy about this whole thing from the beginning. Like you know something the rest of us don't. Like you're getting messages from the damned ionosphere, or something, telling you how to keep her alive. And that's what makes me think we can pull this off."

"You'll have to go over to the hospital to give her an examination--it's the only way to make your autopsy consistent with the police report," said Joe. "I've got the whole file here. I'll go with you. Would anyone know if you substituted one of the unclaimed bodies?"

The medical examiner shook his head. "I'm the signature authority. We should be able to get through that part without hitch." He looked up at the ceiling, and said soberly, "I guess I was really convinced about a half an hour back, Joe. But it's frightening, and dangerous, and it risks everything I hold dear."

"Not everything," said Joe softly. "You hold human life dear. Or you wouldn't be doing this."

Steve chuckled wryly. "That's a funny thing to say to a man who's spent his whole life with cadavers. Come on. Let's go scout out the possibilities. Then we'll take a look at your friend."

In the end, he had accompanied Steve only to the door of Cathy's room, to be shooed off brusquely by the medical examiner.

"I'll take it from here. There's nothing else you can do. Go home, Joe."

"You'll start the autopsy tonight?"

"Hell yes." In his apprehensive state, Steve was rapidly increasing his use of profane expletives. "It's the only way cover our wide-open backsides."

"You're sure the body we picked will work?"

"No. I'm not sure of anything. Get out of here, and let me do the job you roped me into."

"I owe you a big one, Steve."

"You got that right, Maxwell. I'm going to be expecting favors from you for the rest of your natural life."

After a few hastily snatched hours of exhausted sleep,



Joe was up, dressed, and headed for the city morgue. The traffic was heavy, but for once he was glad. It gave him more time to think.

The events of the night before seemed so implausible in the revealing light of day that they almost seemed dreamlike. But he knew one thing for sure. Cathy was alive. It made his heart surge with gladness, and he felt somehow that a ponderous, ancient weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He gave a quick thought to the anonymous female transient, dredged from the murky waters of the Hudson, who now wore a toe tag bearing the name of Catherine Chandler. Ironical that a nameless, lifeless soul would be called upon to play such a key role in Cathy's rescue. A drug addict? Alcoholic? Prostitute? Probably all three. The books were full of entries like hers, the human refuse of a city grown too crowded and frantic to notice, too aloof to care. At least this gave her death some meaning. At least she had a name, even if it wasn't her own.

He paid the taxi driver, went inside, and hurried downstairs as Steve Marx abruptly exited the autopsy room, barreling down the hallway like a fugitive on the run. Apparently, the night of clandestine body-switching had taken its toll. He looked decidedly unhappy. Joe followed him eagerly.

"Dr. Marx? Tell me, what did you find?"

"Maxwell, I'm not supposed to talk to you." Steve's voice was uncharacteristically harsh, even given the circumstances, and Joe paused for a moment in confusion. Then he turned to a woman's voice calling his name, and found out why.

Diana Bennett was coming toward him in scrub clothes and a surgical mask.

Oh no, he thought, heart sinking. In the activity of the night before, he had completely forgotten the woman he had asked to investigate the case. The last thing they needed right now was a skillful detective sorting through the evidence. She must have given his already jumpy confederate the scare of his life.

"What are you doing here?" In his dismay, Joe had inadvertently grabbed her arm, and she looked at him in surprised annoyance before pulling away.

"I'm working," she said, as if it were obvious. Careful Maxwell, he cautioned himself. She's sharp, savvy. Play this very cool.

"What about Sally Rogers?" he queried, hoping his tone sounded natural.

"We lost her...and the suspect killed himself." Diana moved through a swinging doorway to a larger autopsy room, and after a moment's uncertainty Joe followed her. He had no idea what was coming next. No wonder Steve had been so unnerved.

"Look, I'm sorry about Sally Rogers," he said. Anything to divert her. It didn't work.

"Joe, sit down," she replied, ignoring his comment entirely before pulling up a chair and seating herself on it backwards. The sunlight shone on the rich red-gold of her hair. She looked very beautiful and very, very professional. Just what he didn't

need.

"I need to know some things."

Mentally, he braced himself. "Sure," he nodded and sat to signal his readiness. He hoped it looked authentic.

But her first comment took him off guard. "At the time Catherine Chandler disappeared, was she seeing anybody?"

You have a heart like his. "Seeing anybody?" he asked absurdly.

She nodded impatiently. "Was she dating anyone, involved?"

Maybe I could tell her I don't need her on this anymore, Joe thought wildly. But he knew that would never do. It would only make someone as sagacious as Diana more suspicious. Well, he'd just have to lie his head off.

"Not that I know of." He could not tell her about Cathy's comment to him. It moved Diana too close to Cathy, and too close to the knowledge that she was still alive. He seized on a small crumb of remembered information and tossed it out.

"We found some notes in her apartment from some guy named Vincent."

She jumped on it with the ferocity of a Doberman. "Did she ever mention him to you?"

Joe shook his head in denial. "She was real funny about that stuff." At least that was the truth.

"Okay, and besides this guy Vincent, was there anybody else?"

He gave his best rendition of a man searching his memory.

"No," he said finally.

"Okay." Diana cleared her throat and slid her chair back, evidently rituals she performed when she was really getting down to business. Damn her and her meticulous attention to detail. Well, he just had to get through it.

But again, she non-plussed him. "I want you to clear your mind. Now I'm going to ask you a question and I'm interested in your very first response. No thinking, I just want you to respond."

Right, lady, he thought. Inwardly, he cursed himself for ever contacting Diana Bennett. So intent was he on this vigorous self-castigation that he almost missed her question.

"When you remember Catherine Chandler, who makes you jealous?"

He looked at her indignantly. "What do you mean, who makes you jealous?" What was she driving at? He rose from the chair to move away from those probing eyes.

"You were in love with her." The flat statement was such an accurate assessment of his early feelings for Cathy that he was flabbergasted. Diana Bennett was amazingly intuitive.

"Now did she ever look at anybody, mention anybody, and out of nowhere you were jealous?"

"Cathy Chandler was my friend," he shot back.

"Cathy was pregnant."

This time his reaction was genuine. He stared at Diana in open-mouthed astonishment, mind whirling in confusion. Had Cathy been pregnant? Had Steve discovered it in his late-night examination of her, and written the information into the



scenario? Or had the other body given up some secrets of its own, which then had to be worked into the already complicated maneuver of substitution? He had absolutely no idea what to say next. Helplessly, he waited for a cue.

"Autopsy says she delivered a child less than an hour before she died." Joe drew a shaky breath as Diana continued. "Then they injected her with morphine. Now whoever did this kept her alive just long enough for her to have the baby."

"She never said anything to me," he muttered, shaking his head.

Diana made a brief gesture with her expressive hands. "I'm just throwing out the possibility here, but what if all this has more to do with the baby than with the case?"

It was all moving too fast. Even having Diana standing in the morgue made Joe so nervous he could feel the cold sweat around his shirt collar. If she dug in the right places there was very little he could do to keep the truth from coming out. His only hope lay in keeping her focused on events as she knew them. He took a deep breath.

"Look, I gave Cathy a piece of evidence. First she turns up missing, then she turns up murdered. There's a connection there."

"Of course there is a connection there, but you have to keep your mind open to the fact of the pregnancy." Diana spoke as if explaining the case to a particularly dull and stubborn child, and he found himself, in addition to everything else, hotly resenting her tone. "What this could mean..."

"I don't--" he caught himself just in time and leaned back against the cool steel of the refrigeration vault to regain his composure. "I don't know what it could mean." Truer words were never spoken, he thought savagely. She had him by the short hairs and there was nothing he could do but pray to get through this in one piece.

"Well, consider it Joe." Her voice punched out the lines in irritation. "This could be the piece that makes everything fit." She arose from the chair emphatically. "I need to know who the father of that baby is, who might have wanted that baby. I need to know who made you jealous."

A handsome face rose inadvertantly before his eyes. He had to admit it, she was good. He had been jealous, now that he remembered back...he bowed his head. Diana Bennett saw too much. A disconcerting habit---and one he was sure didn't win her any popularity contests.

"Elliot Burch," he said reluctantly.

"Okay." Diana sighed.

"He wanted to marry her."

"How long ago?"

"Right after she came to work for us," he admitted. "She turned him down."

"Well, did they stay in touch?"

"Yeah. But I can't believe Burch would have anything to do with this."

"You're positive?" Her tone implied that she trusted his judgement and he didn't reply. For a moment he considered

blurting out the entire story to Diana Bennett, for instinct told him that she was far more compassionate than she seemed. But someone close to Cathy had betrayed her profoundly. Someone still would. At the moment, the only person he could trust was himself.

Elliot Burch stared through the silk curtains that showcased the floor-to-ceiling window in his penthouse office. For the past day-and-a-half, he had moved through the suddenly empty sphere of his existence without a single rhyme or reason that he could name. That she was dead was unbearable. But that she would never again touch his life with the caring and honesty that brought out the best in him was the worst pain he could have imagined. Now, no one in all the glittering, gracious world he inhabited gave a tinker's damn about him. With Cathy gone, there was no one left who cared. Not a single, solitary soul.

But he would never tell this arrogant policewoman that. And the suave urbanity which had been his shield against so much pain in life came quickly, automatically to the fore.

"So, you think I had something to do with Catherine's death," he said smoothly.

"You know who did?" said Diana Bennett, in a voice which neither confirmed nor denied his words.

"No." If only he did. If only he could avenge the woman who had responded to the goodness within him he hadn't even known existed.

"You gonna find out?"

He turned. "I suppose. If you do your job." It was time to end this interview before she fired any more questions, and he moved purposefully to the door. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you anything more."

"So am I." Diana had taken the hint and risen. But she still had one more salvo. "How'd you feel about Vincent?"

He could sense some painful revelation coming, and tensed. "Who's Vincent?" he asked casually.

"The man she'd been seeing for two years."

It cut, still, to finally hear his name, even though she was dead.

"We never discussed him," he replied, deadpan.

"Did you ever meet him?" Lord, she was persistent.

"Nope. Listen, I've told you everything I know." Now get lost, Diana Bennett, he thought. Get out of here and leave me alone with the memory of the woman I loved.

"I don't believe you have, Mr. Burch," she said levelly. "But I would appreciate you telling me the truth about one thing."

"What's that?" he asked in polite dismissal, resisting the urge to shove her unceremoniously out the door.

"I want to find him, too." Diana sounded sincere, and maybe she was. But he didn't want the police involved in his private search for Cathy's killer. This was personal.

She handed him a business card. "Call me. At least tell me whether or not I'm lookin' for a dead man." She shouldered



her coat and brushed past him in the hallway. He heard her mutter disgustedly as she went.

"I hate wasting my time."

And what am I going to do with my time now that she's no longer around to believe in me, he thought bleakly as he closed the door. What am I going to do with my life?

Joe finally caught up with Steve Marx at the coffee shop around the corner from the morgue. The medical examiner eyed him balefully.

"You didn't tell me Bennett was going to be nosing around," he said.

"I didn't know," Joe said defensively. "She said she was working on another case."

"Another case, my eye. She hung over me like a vulture. I still can't believe she didn't catch on."

"She gave me a workout, too. About a pregnancy. Is it true?" Joe queried worriedly.

"Cathy was pregnant, Joe. Delivered right before being injected. I caught it in the examination last night. I would have called you if Supercop hadn't been breathing down my neck all morning."

Joe leaned back, frowning. The news was disturbing, for it meant Cathy's child was out there somewhere in the hands of someone unscrupulous, and that bothered him a great deal.

Well, he'd just have to deal with one crisis at a time. At least Diana had been way off about his feelings, for he felt no personal sense of anguish over the fact of Cathy's pregnancy. But then, Diana hadn't seen the look in her eyes when she had said "You have a heart like his." When she had told him, with far more than words, just how desperately she was in love with someone else.

He pulled his thoughts back to the present, and grinned widely at Steve.

"Diana doesn't suspect. No one does. You just pulled off the con job of the century."

"You sure about that? She had this really intense look on her face. Rambo right before the kill."

Joe thought for a long moment, then shook his head decidedly. "Nope. Her questions to me were all about the autopsy she thought you performed on Cathy Chandler. Lucky break for us, huh, Steve?"

"Lucky for me. You're getting all the medical bills from my nervous breakdown, Maxwell. And I do mean all of them."

Joe laughed suddenly. "You're on. I'll forward them to Cathy when she wakes up."

"You should be going."

Vincent and Father stood before the antique mirror, their reflections staring soberly back at them. Parent and son could not have looked more disparate. Father was wearing the thirty-year-old topsider garments he had again pulled from the musty depths of his armoire and which, thanks to the capricious evolutions of fashion were almost back in style. Vincent was

clad in the ornate remains of a French and Indian War costume coat, culled from a dumpster behind Schubert Alley by the fanciful Samantha, and handed over to Mary for the necessary letting out of seams. The brass buttons and looping chains shone faintly on his chest, emphasizing its broad expansiveness. His face above the coat was grave, and infinitely sad.

"Yes, I know." Father straightened his suit one last time, and turned to grip the shoulders of his tall adopted son.

"Vincent, I don't like leaving you behind."

"You must," Vincent said simply. "To be there for me." And to be there for Catherine, he thought. She had loved Father. Catherine had taken all of them to heart---Mouse, Jamie, Mary, William and the others---as if they were family. All of them were making the sorrowful journey Above to bid her a loving farewell. But Catherine had loved Father especially, because he meant so much to Vincent.

"I will." Father's voice resonated with his own grief over Catherine's death, and Vincent knew that the time had finally come to tell him the rest.

"Father," he said earnestly, taking the older man's arm as they walked together to the doorway. "There is something I must tell you before..."

Father stopped, and looked at him. "Tell me now," he urged.

Vincent hesitated. The revelation was so new to him still, the re-discovery of Catherine's message about their child. For days, it had been buried under the merciless weight of his anguish, unthought and unrealized. Then, it had surfaced just when he had needed hope most, when the Dark Beast had attacked him in the tunnel. Now, he clung to the knowledge with all his strength. His son was Catherine, in the world. Their child, born of love, was the part of her that he would never lose.

Catherine's child...and his. And he wanted Father to know, wanted him to hold the knowledge through her funeral ceremony.

"Catherine left me a child."

"A...a child?" Father said weakly.

"A son." Vincent's voice throbbed with heartache, and a new, bittersweet pride. "She said he is beautiful."

His father stared in wondering amazement. "Vincent, dear God, I..." he stammered, overcome.

Vincent looked away. "He was taken from her," he said painfully. "Now I know that he is alive and I must find him, bring him home." His voice hardened in quiet resolution. He did not say it, but surely Father would know: the search was now his reason for living.

And with a decisive expression which somehow made his face seem very similar to Vincent's, Father nodded firmly.

The coffin was a pristine white, blanketed with the vivid red roses Catherine had loved. The service, planned by Jenny, was simple but beautiful. The mute sorrow in the small cemetery was palpable.

Joe knew only about a third of the people there, but he noted carefully that the other two thirds seemed to have come from every conceivable walk of life. Again, he was



reminded of the many times Cathy had neatly dodged questions about her personal off-duty time. He wished he knew the stories behind some of these stricken faces. Whose heart had she compared his to? It could have been any one of a number of people there, but he sensed not. And if not, then why wasn't the man there to mourn her supposed passing? He was the one person Joe would have spilled the whole crazy story to, the only one he could trust. And he wouldn't know him from Adam.

At least the autopsy had gone without hitch, and the closed casket ceremony as well. Jenny had believed his story that it was Cathy's wish. And he had received an unexpected burst of good news when he had sorted through her personal papers with her friend.

Not surprisingly, Cathy had left a will. The fortune she had inherited upon her father's death had mandated that legality. It was news to Joe, however, that the document designated him as executor. He and Cathy had seldom discussed money, and he had always assumed that her personal financial matters were handled by her father's accountants and attorneys.

But it was the name of the beneficiary that had caused him to grin hugely---and then hide the smile from the tearful Jenny. Cathy had left the bulk of her inheritance to a shelter for the homeless, Saint Regina's, on Houston Street near the Bowery. All of New York knew about the sisters of Saint Regina's. The recent recipients of a huge, anonymous donation of antique gold and jewels, they had immediately channeled the entire sum into programs for the city's indigent---a move which had made the humble shelter the talk of the genteel antiquities world for months. It had been laughingly dubbed "Mother Teresa's" by more than one envious collector.

He would visit the sisters of St. Regina's that afternoon, right after he went to the hospital. People with that much integrity should be able to comprehend his story and keep Cathy's inheritance safe for her eventual return. Maybe the nuns could even be persuaded to hide her when she got out of the hospital. She would need a safe place to heal.

Now---if it were only as easy to find the man she loved. Where the hell was he, anyway?

The darkness folded around him like a shroud, wrapping him in a veil of misery so penetrating that it was agony to even draw a breath. In the stillness, his sorrow seemed a living thing, deep, enduring, and utterly immutable. His companion for life now, this awful need that clawed at him---his fate henceforth, just as surely as his fate before had been the love. Would he change it, if he could? Never, a thousand times, never. A moment of Catherine was worth a hundred lifetimes of what came after. It had forever lifted him out of the pale shadow of his existence, transformed him beyond expression. Like the rose he held, the symbol of their love, it was eternal. And his mind whispered his thoughts to her, praying with all his being that she could hear:

There was a moment, when the way was new...and I was afraid to hope. You put your hand on mine...and nothing had ever felt

like that to me, like your touch. I wanted to weep...you turned and looked at me...your eyes were filled with dancing light...and I was bathed in your warmth. And I believed... in that moment that, even for me, all things were possible. In that moment...in your light...I felt what it is to be beautiful.

How many lives were touched by you? How many lives were transformed by your courage to give, and to love? How many became beautiful in your light?

We promised always to share the truth, always. But Catherine...there was a truth beyond anything, beyond everything I had ever known, ever dreamed. It was the truth of all you gave, of all you sacrificed for me. The truth of your love humbled me, silenced me. And the truth I could never share with you...was the truth of how deeply I loved you. I will remember. I will remember every moment...every word, every look, every touch. Our love lives. It will live forever. Nothing will destroy this. Love does not die. You're safe. You're safe now. Sleep, my love...

...and above him, in a room touched caressingly by the tranquil afternoon sunlight, Catherine slept.



# 5

Three months later...

Twilight deepened into darkness as the great city slowly settled into nightfall. The stars glowed, incandescent, kindly sparing from their light the grit and refuse of the poorer sections of Brooklyn and Queens. The moon's pale crescent gleamed softly over the massive towers and buildings of Manhattan. Another day was over Above.

Far below the city, too, in a forgotten place, the candle-lights extinguished one by one as the Tunnel folk, done for the day with the unceasing work of maintaining their small community, prepared for slumber. Theirs was the rest of the weary, for they had labored long that day to preserve the safety and seclusion of the world they inhabited. But any one of them, if asked, would have counted the unremitting labor a small price to pay for the safety and protection the world provided. And if scores of faces turned wistfully to one chamber where a lone light sputtered in the darkness, it was to be expected. For they loved Vincent, and his pain was felt by them as well.

He sat at the rude table, pen in hand, his powerful body relaxed into the stillness that was his characteristic posture in moments of contemplation, writing. The pages were heavy with his elegant cursive script, and the faint scratching of his pen served as a muted counterpoint to the soft staccato of the pipes, infrequent now as the Tunnel world slowly sank into repose. His thoughts flowed easily, quickly, onto the blank expanse, as they had for weeks past, ever since he had begun writing them to Catherine.

It was a new phenomenon, this addressing of the myriad thoughts in his journal to her, borne partly out of his deep need to communicate with her as he always had, and partly out of the realization that the bond they had shared was still somehow intact. He had no empirical rationale for this sensation. Nor, it seemed, did anyone else. Father, ever the scientist, had shaken his head in bewilderment when he had first mentioned it. Mary had murmured in sympathy, looking ready to cry, and he had changed the subject to spare her, and himself.

Oddly, it was Pascal who seemed to offer the best explanation---which was essentially, none at all. He had nodded his head knowingly, and said simply:

"The pipes."

"What do you mean, Pascal?"

"It's hard to explain, but...every so often I hear things. Strange things, Vincent."

"Messages?"

"Um hmmm. Like once I took a message I could have sworn

was from Old Esther, a year after she died. 'All is well', she said. I couldn't believe it. I raced down to her chamber and found Ho there, as usual. I...I never told anyone. It seemed too crazy," Pascal paused. "There've been other things too, other times. I don't know."

"More things in heaven and earth?" Vincent quoted softly.

He nodded hesitantly. "I think so. Maybe it's just my feeling for the pipes, but at times they almost seem alive to me."

"Perhaps they are imbued with the humanity of the those who speak through their lengths," Vincent reflected.

Yes. And assuming that you could argue, philosophically of course, that "humanity" as you call it, doesn't end with death, then perhaps the pipes don't always abide by our physical laws," Pascal added. "Communication can be an incredible thing. Almost transcendental."

And so he had fallen easily into the habit of writing to her at the day's end, conscious that it eased his heart somewhat, hopeful that she heard. After the first few lines, he could almost bring her into the shadowed room with him, for a brief time...

The day is finished and I reach for you now in the silence of my thoughts. Jacob is sleeping peacefully. As I look at the tiny form of our young son, nestled in his blankets, I am struck anew by the fact that I have so much more that I could ever have dreamed before you came into my life. I have the memory of a love without equal--the memory of you. And I have Jacob, the child of my heart and yours, the hope renewed, the Dream reborn. My heart is filled to brimming with love for him.

And yet---and yet, there is no rest for me, Catherine. No cessation of the grief I feel. I have had to mute its messages for the sake of Jacob and the others whose love for me is a responsibility as well as a blessing, but its intensity never flags. Never do I become at home with my pain. Just when I think I have gained some hold over its grip, some semblance of acceptance of my fate---the agony begins again, so sharply stabbing that I must brace before it mutilates me. I cannot resign myself to the fact that you are gone. I look for you around every bend, see your loving eyes in every woman's face. And the mourning never ends.

I cannot help it that my spirit is so rebellious, Catherine. I cannot help it that I wish you back so bitterly. Dreams undreamed, and moments unshared---they haunt me. You died in the arms which never, except once unremembered, had the unspeakable bliss of holding you in a lover's embrace. I wanted to so desperately, but the wanting seemed unworthy of you. I did not dare to dream that deeply.

Did you? You must have, though the very thought of it amazes me. You stayed with me through the madness. You reached for me---pressed your body to mine, loved me away from total despair. And now that I have gained some distance from the nightmare which eclipsed my humanity then, I ponder. And for



the first time, I wonder if I was not the one who encased our love so tightly in self-restraint that it was unable to fully flower. For I know that you kissed me, and held me with longing. You must have, Catherine, or I would never have been able to touch you in return. Only the sensation of your desire, speaking to me through the bond, would have given me the courage to reach for you after years of denial. Only your wish to expose it could have unlocked my most secret, aching need---to love you, with my hands and lips and body, as any man loves the woman he treasures above all others. I have hungered so to love you, Catherine.

But you alone know what happened in the cave. You alone carry within you the memory of the moment we touched. I have only visions, uncertain images of an experience so sweet it thrills me beyond imagining each time it flits over my senses. Even now, as I strive to remember what I cannot, the echoes of the memory make me shiver with...passion. I must say the words I forbade myself to speak while you lived: that I wanted you with a yearning so deep it frightened me.

I...I wanted to be your lover, Catherine. I tremble now to even whisper the words, but I did. I wanted to caress you with hands so reverent that you could not fail to see how utterly incomparable you are, how cherished, how dearly held. I could not help but adore you, my love. You shined so bright against the darkness that you lit even me.

I would give anything to possess the full recollection of the night you came to me in love. Anything.

The tormenting images came to me again last night, as they did before Jacob's rescue. Stronger, as real to my mind as if they inhabited actual time and space. I saw myself, stalking expectantly through a shadowland, sepulchral in its comfortlessness, murky and bitingly cold. A presentment of dire foreboding possessed me, pushing me onward though the dread twisted ferociously at my heart. Around me, lost whispers echoed like the voices of the damned. In the dream, I knew that Jacob was safe in the tunnels. But it was you I sought, Catherine. You I fought against losing---a second time.

Am I mad? Am I fighting for control in a world which now holds nothing for me but the memory of the love we once shared, and the tangible proof of that love in the person of our son? I do not know. But our connection has returned, and the bond is unbroken again. I can feel your heartbeat, Catherine. It is as my own.

Diana was here tonight. I wish you knew her, my love, and I wish you could tell me how to be with her. In the trauma of recovering our son, and later, the terrible threat to Father's life, she has been wonderful indeed. There is something so authentic between us that it always pleases me to see her. And I have much to thank her for---far more than I can ever repay.

But the way she looks at me. I could hardly credit the idea, until Father pointed it out, troubled, and then Rebecca. Diana begins to care for me, I think. I have never known a friend I thought more worthy of love, and yet what she asks

with her eyes is so impossible that I push it away from me abruptly, giving it no space to exist. I am terrified of hurting Diana, for she matters to me----yet her glances tell me that she begins to hope our friendship will deepen, and that can never be. The heart she seems to want is gone---it left my possession the moment I met you, and remains with you still, wherever in the wide universe you are now. Help me, Catherine. Show me how to treat Diana with care and gentleness, and to hold her vulnerabilities in gentle hands. Love is not so plentiful anywhere in the world, that it should be received with odium. And yet, I cannot offer to her what has always been yours. I cannot even conceive of wanting to love another. Ever.

Three months have passed since I held you in my arms. Three lifetimes, Catherine. I miss you in every split second and every square inch of my life.

Sighing deeply, he put down the pen. The candle flickered low, so depleted of wick and wax from many such evenings that it was almost out. Vincent got up from the chair and strode softly across the room to the cradle in the corner. Jacob was slumbering soundly, his chubby fist cradled lightly against his face. For a moment Vincent gazed at his son lovingly. Then he turned, and made his way to his own, lonely bed.

Far above, in the silent hospital where Catherine now lay, a white-robed doctor entered Intensive Care to make his rounds.

"Good evening, Dr. Martindale," said the crisp night nurse on duty at the desk.

"Evening. How is the patient in 812 this evening?" he asked. She was not surprised. He often asked that question. In fact, the whole floor had been roundly pulling for the woman called Jane Doe, who, after a long, decremental slump in vital signs, had suddenly surged back from the brink of death three weeks ago.

"Still in a coma, doctor. But her blood pressure is up a little today, and her heartbeat seems even stronger than yesterday."

"Did Mr. Maxwell call?"

"Yes. I relayed your message that she appeared to be improving. He was quite happy." Together they moved down the long corridor to 812, where the slight form of a beautiful woman lay unmoving on the bed. The doctor felt her pulse and opened one eye to peer into its depths.

"Hmmm. Damnedest thing. I never saw a patient whose coma course was so chartable. Most people go into a coma, then they either come out of it or die. Not her," he said, mystified.

"It was unusual, wasn't it, Doctor?" she agreed. "The way she seemed to be losing ground day after day, inching toward the grave. And then her condition turned around, just like that."

"Strange," he muttered. "Do you remember anything unusual about her stats that day? Anything that could account for the sudden shift?"



"I never made it to work that day, Dr. Martindale. There was city-wide blockade from First all the way to Lexington. That raid on some big drug kingpin, remember? The streets were barricaded by the police for hours."

"Hmmm," he acknowledged, barely listening. The recovery of the woman would just have to be chalked up to the miracles of medical science. It was, after all, a state-of-the-art operation they had in the ICU.

"She'll be out of the coma by the end of the week, the way she's going," he predicted. "Make sure someone calls Mr. Maxwell tomorrow. I want her out of Intensive Care as soon as she's ready, and discharged the moment she's fit to travel. But make sure she's fit to travel." At the nurse's questioning glance, he leaned closer.

"Anti-medical lawsuits are her father's specialty," he said in a low whisper, as if the woman on the bed could hear. "Rumor says he cleared over a million in that Harlem hospital pediatric business."

The nurse pursed her lips and nodded. "I'll have Mr. Maxwell called first thing in the morning, Doctor," she promised primly.

It was not unusual that his dream that night would be of her, he thought later. Fleeting, chimerical illusions of Catherine often slid through his sleeping world to evaporate into fitful wakefulness that kept him tossing for hours. But this time, she was so vivid he could feel the blood pounding in his ears. This time, she was real.

She stood before him in shimmering green, the soft fabric of the dress falling in supple folds around her body as she moved closer. Her eyes, huge and alight with love, gazed with studied concentration at his face. They were alone, in the silent enormity of the Great Hall. Alone, and excruciatingly conscious of each other.

It was Winterfest. All evening, through the jubilant celebration, they had held at bay this intense yearning to be together, as they moved laughingly among friends and loved ones in merry revel. More often than not, they had been separated as they were pulled this way and that by people eager for their time and attention. And they had given it cheerfully, knowing that their moment together would come. But sometimes, for their thoughts would drift constantly to each other, their glances would catch. And the room would dilinesce around them, merging away into nothingness as their eyes held. Once, she had lifted her fingers to her lips and kissed their tips, holding the kiss out to him across the crowded, noisy chamber. Only the strictest of self-discipline, then, had kept him from striding to her and seizing her in his arms. He had known that his feelings were evident for all the world to see in the darkened cobalt of his eyes. And hadn't cared at all.

Now, as she stood before him in the dim torchlight of the vaulted room, she spoke in hushed tones.

"Listen. Can you hear it?"

"What?" His voice was low and thick as he offered his







portion of their ritual.

"The music. You can hear it if you try."

Her swaying movement into his arms was as natural as breathing. His huge hand clasped her waist; their palms interlocked. Lightly, gracefully, they began to move to the ghostly, tinkling melody. But this dance was different than any other. It was a prelude to a more compelling fugue, a whispered promise of greater joys to come.

The music ceased. Confused by his powerful need for her, pressing for expression, he moved slightly away.

"My humble thanks, Catherine," he said with a courtly bow.

"Could I request another gesture of appreciation?" she queried breathlessly.

"Anything." My heart, my soul, my being, he thought. Hands light as butterfly wings rested on his shoulders.

"A kiss," she whispered daringly. Mind whirling dizzily, he stared into the luminous pools of her eyes, opening himself fully to the feelings rushing now through their bond. Catherine wanted his kiss. No...more...impossible as it seemed. She longed for it.

His gaze dropped to her lips, infinitely soft and warmly inviting. His heart slammed furiously in thudding rhythm, driving and purposeful. He bent his head slowly. But as he did so, the accusing spectre of Lisa rose suddenly before him, and he remembered with a shocking start who he was and what he was about to press to her mouth...and he averted his head with a sharp, swooping movement, abruptly severing the sensual intimacy of the moment. He could feel the dull bronze color flooding his face. Humiliation sliced through him like a rapier blade as he shook his head in wordless despair.

"Vincent, what is it?" she asked worriedly. Then, after a long moment. "Tell me." The hands on his shoulders grasped him more firmly. "Whatever it is, we can face it together."

He could barely bring himself to articulate the source of his shame, so often had he pressed it down into some isolated place in his soul, lightless and unseen. It was only the call of the bond, telling him of her deep, inchoate disappointment, that gave him the courage, though he was still stinging with the memory.

"My lips, Catherine," he whispered, feeling a bone-deep vulnerability that even her caring presence could not erase. "They're not beautiful, like yours. They're so...ugly." He almost spat the word, so ashamed was he of the inadequacy of his offering. In the ensuing moment of silence, he almost suffocated with embarrassment. I should never have gone near her tonight, he thought fiercely. Never touched her when I felt so giddily out of control, so filled with helpless yearning.

Her voice, deep with feeling, interrupted his bitter self-recrimination.

"You have a lot to learn, Vincent, about what beautiful is."

He lifted his head to stare at her incredulously. "They don't...frighten you?" he asked huskily.

She leaned into him, her face upturned like some rare, delicate flower.

"They intoxicate me," she whispered. And with a great, bounding leap, his sore heart knew the truth of her words, and his shame melted away into the flickering shadows of the Great Hall as if it had never been. To actually kiss Catherine, to give free reign to the craving that was in him, washing over him now until his entire world was defined and measured by her waiting lips...

Trembling with eagerness, he touched his mouth to hers. To his delirious joy, he felt her suddenly strain against him urgently, and powered buoyantly by her response, he soared, completely unfettered, into the moment...kissing...kissing...

.....and it was as if the taste of Catherine suddenly erased a lifetime of things yearned for and missed---the carousel rides he had never had, the shafts of sunlight he could never stroll in, the unexplored reaches of a world whose boundaries he was forever forbidden to cross.

The shared kiss, tremulous with tenderness, made up for it all.

But she was fading, fading away from him, even as he gaped in horror and reached urgent, grasping hands to keep her near. In frenzied desperation, he screamed her name, clutching at her vanishing image...

...and found himself grasping for her in the empty, inky gloom above his bed. He was alone in his chamber, newly wakened, her kiss still burning upon his lips.

"Catherine," he whispered brokenly, and felt the bottomless choking, grief rise to engulf him once again. "Can you hear me? Can I reach far enough to send you my words? I love you. I love you. I love you."

Slowly, she opened her eyes. The darkness felt unfamiliar, and even without light she could tell that she was not in her apartment. A jumble of tubes seemed to be growing from her body, foreign and disconcerting in her present state of disorientation. She lifted her arm slowly, and the plastic cord of an IV brushed against her skin. Carefully turning her aching head, she looked around. Outside, somewhere beyond her vision, a light burned---she could see its brightness in the crack beneath the door. All around her, now becoming faintly visible as her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, were the accoutrements of modern technological medicine. There was no doubt about it. She was in a hospital.

How in the world had she come to be here? Catherine grappled back through the scattered images of her now-returning memory, but could find nothing. Had she been in a car accident? She didn't think so. Had she had a heart attack or stroke, like her father? Had something happened at work? The question brought Joe's name to her searching mind. She would ask Joe when he came to the hospital. He'd come to see her, she was sure. So would Jenny, and Nancy. So would...

Her mind hit an absolute blank. Nothing. Zero. A complete wall. Who had she been thinking of? No matter. God, she was



tired. She felt like she could sleep for a thousand years, Slowly, her lids lowered, and she slid into slumber.

Her dream, drifting through her consciousness from some far-off niche of long-forgotten reminiscence, was of the sweetest, most haunting voice she had ever heard:

"You're safe. You're safe now."

And anyone entering the room at that moment would have seen Catherine Chandler's wan features come arrestingly to life in what was, unmistakably, a warm, loving smile.

She slept.

When Catherine next came awake, it was to the sensation of gripping pressure on her left upper arm. She squinted, and slowly focused on a white-clad nurse leaning over her, watching the wavering needle on the gauge of a blood pressure instrument.

"One-ten over ninety," she said encouragingly, unwrapping the instrument and patting Catherine's forearm. "We'll have you out of here in no time."

It was welcome news, but it failed to address the pressing question of why in the world she was here in the first place. Before she could open her mouth to ask, however, the nurse was paged from the main intercom and hurried out. Catherine stared at her retreating back, stymied. How long would she have to wait before she got some answers?

"Cathy."

It was a voice she recognized immediately, and she swivelled her head toward it. Joe Maxwell stood on the other side of her bed, watching her eagerly.

"Joe," she murmured, reaching out her arms.

He came forward and took her hands in his, pressing them tightly.

"Boy, you sure gave me a scare, kiddo," he said, and Catherine had a momentary, fleeting impression that their positions had once been reversed---that she had stood over him like this. Where? The thought dissipated rapidly into the beginnings of a monstrous headache.

"We almost lost you, Radcliffe," Joe said worriedly, his hands still gripping hers.

"Almost lost me?" she repeated slowly. "What happened?"

"You don't remember?"

Mentally, she reached back. Nothing. The wall again, that uncompromising mental block which solidly obstructed the knowledge she sought. She had no earthly idea why she was in the hospital.

"No," she said, shaking her head slightly. "What happened to me, Joe?"

"You were given a massive dose of curare, Radcliffe. It paralyzed all the motor systems in your body and damn near killed you. You've been in a coma for three months."

"Three months?" She didn't seem to be able to do anything but repeat his last phrase, she thought, like Echo with Narcissus. Holding her arm carefully still to lessen the sudden throbbing of the IV needle, she looked around, seeking some point of recognizable orientation. There was none.

"I've been here for three months?"



"A little over. Can't you remember anything?"

She thought for a long moment. No. She definitely couldn't. Where the memory should have been was a gaping blank in her recollection. A complete tabula rasa. She shook her head slowly.

"I can't," she said helplessly. "There's nothing there. Why can't I remember, Joe?"

"Don't worry about it, Cath. It'll come. Just concentrate on getting your strength back." He grinned suddenly, that boyish, flashing smile Catherine remembered so well. "I'm so glad you're okay."

She gazed at him. She knew Joe Maxwell, and knew the depth of his loyalty to his friends. "You've been watching out for me the whole time, haven't you?"

"Well..." he looked away, embarrassed. "You were in pretty rotten shape."

"Thanks, Joe," she whispered. "I'm not sure what I'm thanking you for, but thanks."

"It's okay, Cath."

"The work must be piling up," she said faintly, and was rewarded by his laugh.

"Radcliffe, you don't know the half of it," said Manhattan's newest District Attorney. "I can't wait to get you back on the old treadmill. But not yet. Just rest. Get better."

She nodded. The tiredness was stealing over her as it had the night before, prodding her to close her eyes and forget the more disturbing aspects of the conversation. Valiantly, she struggled to hold open her heavy lids, but Joe saw the gesture and intercepted it.

"I'm going to leave so you can get some sleep. I'll be back tomorrow." He bent over her and gently kissed her cheek. "Is there anything I can get for you, Cathy? Anything you need?"

Her mouth mumbled an answer she was too tired to process. What had she said? She frowned. There it was again, that frustrating mismatch of cognition and memory. No matter. She would remember when she woke up. She gave Joe a brief, grateful smile as she slipped into slumber.

Joe straightened. Thank God. Finally, after months of soundless fighting, she had overcome the physical effects of the overdose and was really beginning to recover. At last, Cathy was getting well.

The conversation had been disquieting in one respect, though. Cathy had lost a part of her memory. She was obviously still traumatized psychologically, and in no shape to be questioned. He should probably even consult with her the doctors about how much he should reveal, since he wasn't sure how amnesia worked or what the dangers were.

At any rate, she couldn't tell him anything right now---maybe wouldn't be able to for quite awhile. And there was so much left unanswered, like the part about the baby. Joe was really worried about that baby.

Well, it would just have to wait until she was better. There was nothing else he could do.

At least Cathy had remembered her love for the classics. He had barely caught the words---a Candy Striper in the hallway had been wheeling a clattering mail cart past the door at that very moment---but he made a mental note to stop by a bookstore on the way back to the office.

He could be wrong, but he thought she had muttered something about the last chapter of Great Expectations.

Vincent had been awakened from his fitful dozing by the hungry wail of his young son, and sat cross-legged on the tangle of bedclothes with Jacob on his lap. The infant was sucking enthusiastically on the rubber nipple of an ancient glass bottle which had probably, Vincent mused, been around the tunnels long enough to have served as his own container for nourishment. Eyes closed, mouth moving rhythmically, Jacob was a picture of placid contentment. His tiny hands rested lightly on the bottle.

He did not, however, display the ineffectual flexing motions characteristic to most young babies. Vincent noted with paternal pride that Jacob's hands were actually propping up the unwieldy meal, pulling it further into his mouth to catch the last drops of milk and pushing the glass away when it was empty. His motoric capabilities were phenomenal, his arms and legs abnormally strong. One day, he would possess an enormous physical strength.

But it was his eyes that held Vincent in thrall. Curiously, they stared out at the world and the adoring man who held him, now in avid interest, now in sober contemplation, now in undisguised delight. Vincent had always loved babies and young children, but his feelings for Jacob were so profoundly tender and so enmeshed in his constantly-relived memories of Catherine that they were impossible to articulate adequately. His statement to Diana yesterday had captured only a part of it, he thought. There was no earthly way to express it all---how Jacob's waking cry could banish the haunting images of grief, keeping at bay for a time the pain that was never farther from him than his own looming shadow.

The days he could live through, thanks to Jacob. Only the nights---when Jacob was asleep, and the images rose, unbidden and aching tender---were unendurable.

He pushed the pain away from the daylight and the precious moment of communion with his child. It would surface again to wrack him, soon enough. Jacob needed him now, and he must be fully present in this moment for his sake.

"I wish you could see him, Catherine," he crooned softly, bending to kiss the cheek that nuzzled slightly against his, and fighting back the tears that stung his eyes. "I wish you could see our son."

It was the unmistakable cry of a newborn infant that sent Catherine into horrified wakefulness, clutching the sheets around her in a spastic convulsion of terror and dread. God, the gut-wrenching agony of it, the unbearable, incomprehensible certainty that her soul was being ripped heartlessly from her



body while smiling strangers looked on...the pain...

What...was...happening...to...her...what...

"Whoa, there. Hold on a minute." Dimly, she heard the voice of a nurse, speaking in a tone at once alarmed and authoritative, but she was unable to link into any human connection through the sensations which filled her. The anguish---utterly foreign---rocked her senses until she thought she would go mad if it continued another second. This is hell, she thought, gritting her teeth to keep from screaming. I'm there. I'm in it. The absolute, brutal clarity of it assaulted every nerve ending. If only...if only...what? Who? Who in the world was she reaching to, to keep from splintering into a million shrieking atoms?

It ended as suddenly as it had come, spinning back into the psychic oblivion from whence it had emerged. The sudden halting of it frightened her almost as much as its genesis, and she gasped as the hospital room and the concerned face of the nurse gradually emerged from the churning chaos of her thoughts. Great, shuddering sobs began to rack her body suddenly--sobs from deep within her that she was powerless to either fathom or quell. Slowly, she buried her face in her pillow to succumb to them because she had no choice.

"Is that a baby?" she moaned piteously into the depths of the pillow. She could feel the nurse's hand on her shaking shoulders. The wrong hand, her tortured mind whispered. The utterly wrong hand.

"Yes. One of the nurses brought in her newborn to show him off to the staff," came the cautious answer.

"A...a boy?"

"Why, yes, it is." The answer stunned her like a sledgehammer blow, and she reached again, instinctively, for the comforting presence which had no name and no face, and could not be felt...

"A...a newborn," she gulped. She felt it begin anew then, that awful sensation of losing herself, of slipping headfirst into a vat of acid torment. What in God's name was happening....

"I'll get her to take him out," she heard the nurse say quickly, and then lifted her head to watch numbly as the woman left the room. Slowly, the infant wail receded into a distant part of the hospital. It was over.

She burrowed deeper into the bed, utterly unravelled. Whatever had happened to her before she had awakened in the hospital, she was sure now, had been terrible beyond thought. It had ripped her apart, and scattered the tortured remnants of her soul into oblivion. And after the nightmare she had just lived through, Catherine was certain that she wanted those lost pieces to stay lost forever. She never wanted to remember whatever it was that had hurt so profoundly.

She would do everything she could to keep from remembering, as long as she lived.

"Vincent? Vincent? You okay? You alright?" Mouse's frantic voice penetrated through the onslaught of powerful feeling that had sent Vincent reeling from Jacob's crib to a

nearby chair.

"I'm...alright, Mouse," he said with difficulty. The sensation of sudden panic was still so vivid and bewildering that he shook his head to clear it. It felt like...no. It couldn't be. But even as his mind denied the knowledge, he knew. Catherine. The bond.

"Something wrong?" Mouse queried again, grasping his friend's arm. Overhead, the Number 4 midday sped by, clanking as it traveled. For a moment, neither spoke.

"No. It has passed, Mouse." Vincent saw the relief in Mouse's innocent eyes, and allowed himself to be urged into a glass of water hastily fetched for him from the communal kitchen. He drank slowly, more for Mouse than for himself. If only water could relieve his thirst, he thought longingly. Or mere food assuage his insatiable hunger for her...

"Still need her." There was no question in Mouse's voice.

"Yes."

"Still miss her."

"Always," said Vincent.

"Still...feel her?" They had not discussed this particular subject, but Mouse had been too long in Vincent's acquaintance not to be able to sense his friend's ever-present preoccupation.

Vincent sighed heavily.

"Yes, Mouse," he whispered painfully. "I do."

The next time Joe was able to get away from the piles of depositions on his desk was the following morning. By that time, Cathy had graduated to a regular room three floors down and painted a cheerful sky blue. The only machine in it was a television set.

She was also sound asleep.

He entered quietly and seated himself in the chair at the head of her bed. Through the window, he could see a collection of pigeons clucking placidly around the human traffic in a park across the street and on the television, Robin Leach expatiated soundlessly over a mammoth collection of Faberge eggs, his arm gesturing grandly to his opulent surroundings.

Joe gazed at Cathy in the silence of the room, noting with approval the flush of color in her cheeks. She was looking better already. Well, he'd just stay a minute before heading to the jail. He crossed his long legs out in front of him and looked idly at the TV set. Did Cathy have any Faberge eggs, he wondered absently. He remembered seeing a collection of some sort in her apartment, but wasn't sure. Jenny had boxed up all her things. It wasn't the kind of item Cathy would talk about, or even mention. She had almost gone out of her way to downplay her wealthy background. That was why he had always loved to tease her about it. Because it hadn't mattered at all to her.

Or had it? He still had precious little information on her private life. Diana Bennett had been no help on that score at all. As much as he valued Diana's investigative talents, she had come up with zilch on Cathy except for that strange story of Vincent the protector. And that, he was convinced,



stretched credibility past the breaking point. It had just been too wild to swallow whole. Then, when he had started getting more curious and asking for evidence, Diana had clamped up like a vice. In fact, she had acted strangely over the whole course of that investigation. What little information she had produced had been pure conjecture, and when it had looked like she was finally onto something, she'd suddenly reversed her whole hypothesis.

Cathy sighed, diverting Joe's thoughts momentarily. A glance at the clock told him his visit would have to end soon, brief as it had been. He had to take a lengthy deposition on the latest serial homicide at 12:30, and the jail was a good twenty minutes away.

She stirred and muttered in her sleep, tossing her arm restlessly off the edge of the bed. He was struck again by how small she seemed, and how undefended. Joe had had ample evidence of Cathy's stamina and spirit, but the sight of her lying asleep like that seemed to emphasize her vulnerability and moved him to an affection that was fiercely protective. Reaching over, he gently took her hand.

He almost wished a moment later that he had never attempted the gesture.

He saw her smile suddenly---a tender, alluring smile---and felt her rub the back of his hand in an unmistakable stroking caress. With none of the unintelligible mumbling so characteristic of sleeping speech, she uttered a single, totally comprehensible word that startled him out of his composure for the rest of the day.

"Vincent."

Vincent?!? Joe stared almost indignantly at his sleeping friend. The name from Diana's wild stories...the phantom figure who, according to her, had appeared out of nowhere to guard Cathy and then returned to hiding. The man they could not even locate, much less question.

Not that Joe hadn't tried. He had queried everybody even tangentially connected with the case. The name had evoked only blank stares. And some of those people he knew had information--like Elliot Burch and that exasperating man with the British accent who had popped up twice...

He phoned the office and told Rita Escobar to fill in for him at the jail, cutting through her vociferous protests with the terse injunction:

"Just do it, Rita. Put the other stuff on the back burner. I don't trust Amy with this." He knew Rita was exhausted. He also knew that for three months, she had been picking up the slack for Cathy's less-than-adequate replacement, a self-involved young woman whose much-publicized plans for judicial fame did not include the inconvenient particular of overtime effort. But Rita was just going to cover for her one more time, and he'd soothe her indignation when he got back. Just now, he needed to get away to think. And to figure out just what questions Cathy's one-word revelation had answered.

He left the hospital and crossed the avenue to the small,



park, barely hearing the cries of street vendors hawking cheap watches and pungent-smelling incense. Pacing slowly along its tiny, littered dimensions, he turned over in his mind every fact he knew about the kidnapping. For about the thousandth time.

Not that the effort had ever gotten him anywhere, he thought wryly. The case had so many loose ends and unexplained mysteries that it taxed his frustration tolerance to the limit. But Cathy had just called Vincent's name, and that could only mean one thing.

He was no fantasy figure. He was the man she loved.

In fact, if his suspicions were correct, she had carried his child---the child whose whereabouts were still unknown. The police had found no trace of the baby during the raid, but an empty crib had been discovered in the chamber adjacent to Gabriel's bedroom---ample evidence for assuming the fiend had taken Cathy's child. Intuition now told Joe with near-certainty that the child was Vincent's, as well. Like he had told Diana, Cathy Chandler was the sanest person around. She wouldn't go around calling out in her sleep for a casual acquaintance.

No, he was right about this, he was sure. He had only seen that expression on her face one other time---when he had watched her nodding and smiling through the tears that had threatened to spill as she had said softly "you have a heart like his." She loved Vincent, and the child she had carried---the child Gabriel had abducted---had been his.

Moreover, Diana had been protecting the secret of Vincent's identity. She knew far more than she had ever let on. Just how she had finally tracked down Cathy's illusive lover was unclear, but he was willing to bet it dovetailed perfectly with her sudden claim that Vincent was a mirage. He could still remember how angry he had been that day, how baffled by her unexplained reversal. She had probably been hiding the knowledge of Vincent's involvement from that point on.

Why? The question remained disturbingly unanswered. Diana had to be protecting him from...what? The law? Had he been responsible for some of the killings? Probably. Joe had always suspected as much, even after her cover-up story, and had wanted to nail him as a murder suspect. But Cathy's one word had changed his attitude on that. He didn't know Vincent, but he did know Cathy. If she loved the guy, then he was decent. She wouldn't care that much for someone who wasn't, no matter what he offered. Look at how offended she'd been by the less-than-ethical maneuverings of Elliot Burch.

It was too bad he couldn't just go back to the hospital and get the whole story from Cathy. Well, he could at least listen closely for anything she might say that would shed more light on the facts of the case. And he could talk to her doctors---see if there was anything they could do to help her regain her memory. He'd sit back and watch for a few days and maybe fit a few more sections of the puzzle in.

And if what he thought was true, he was going to have a good long talk with Diana Bennett. Because apparently, he wasn't the only player in this little drama who had been hiding some



colossal secrets.

"Can you tell me what happened up in ICU?"

Catherine had been waiting two days for someone to ask her that question. One couldn't very well carry on as if demon-possessed in a crowded hospital ward and then expect the incident to go unnoticed. Trouble was, after forty-eight almost-straight hours of thought on the subject, she still had no answers. She was beginning to wonder if she really wanted them, after all.

Her interrogator was a motherly-looking woman of late middle age, the starched crispness of her uniform and manner strangely at odds with the soft contours of her face. She looked as if she really wanted to know what had happened. She was also one of the few people in the hospital who hadn't called Catherine "Jane" or "Miss Doe", as if that ridiculous generic appellation were her given name.

"Why didn't you call me "Jane", like everyone else?" asked Catherine irritably. After two nights with no sleep, she was frustrated and exhausted.

The woman laughed, a spontaneous, hearty sound. "You'll have to excuse us," she offered. "We see so many people coming through here we tend to forget the more subtle aspects of humanitarian treatment. Bellevue isn't exactly your friendly neighborhood clinic." She smiled again, and Catherine, almost reluctantly, found herself responding.

"My name is Catherine," she volunteered. She stopped suddenly.

"What?" asked the woman alertly.

"I...just always introduce myself as Cathy. I don't know why I used my full name just now."

"Maybe I can help you find out." The woman extended a friendly hand. "Cheryl Clancy. Psychiatric nurse."

At the words Catherine felt her hackles rise defensively. Did they think she was a mental case? Even if she was having some sort of psychological problem, it wouldn't help to be prodded just now. Belatedly, she realized that her thoughts be showing in her expression, for the woman was eyeing her keenly.

"Look, I apologize for my bad temper. I...I've had alot to deal with."

"I know who you are, Miss Chandler." The words were so quietly and kindly spoken that Catherine felt the irritation drain from her again. She liked this frank, friendly woman.

"You do?" she asked gratefully, and was rewarded with another warm smile. "Then maybe you can tell me, Mrs. Clancy. I seem to have lost some pieces of myself."

"Cheryl." The woman briskly drew up a chair. "I've known who you were since the beginning, though I've wisely kept my mouth shut. I was in ER the night Mr. Maxwell brought you in. I saw you first."

"Do you know what happened to me?" Catherine asked politely. She was supposed to want to know, wasn't she?

Cheryl Clancy shook her head. "Only that you had been given

a massive drug overdose and were almost dead," she said. "We had to code you to keep you alive." She paused reflectively. "One minute I was doing a psychiatric intake on a guy who said he wanted to jump out a tenth story window, and the next I was watching your EKG and holding my breath."

Catherine felt a sudden surge of gratitude. "Thanks, Cheryl," she said sincerely. She was lucky to be alive. That much, at least, she knew.

"No problem. I'm glad I could help." She looked at her patient squarely. "Now..."

"You want to talk about the other day." Involuntarily, she tensed.

"That and a few other things. It's okay, Catherine. I won't press where you don't want me to."

"Okay," Catherine sighed. "I'll give it a try."

"Selective psychogenic amnesia," said Cheryl to Joe Maxwell the next morning, as they both stirred cups of steaming cafeteria coffee. She had called him as soon as she arrived at work for the day and he had come at once. Her first comment to him--- that she had known the Catherine's identity all along from an old picture in the newspaper---had freed up the discussion considerably. As for Joe, he felt a profound sense of relief in talking to this sympathetic woman about it. He had been carrying it alone for so long.

"In spite of what you see in the movies, it's a lot more prevalent than the generalized type, where people forget even their names," she explained. "It always begins suddenly, following severe psychosocial trauma. Sometimes the stress involves threat of physical injury or death. Other times, the person may have been in some intolerable life situation that they couldn't escape from. And then it can come from some single event that is so debilitating that the mind just trip-wires a partial memory loss. From the way Catherine is reacting, I'd say in this case it involves all three."

"Why?" asked Joe absorbedly.

"Because most amnesiacs display an indifference toward the memory disturbance. Catherine clings to it. She is dead-set against remembering. Clinically, I've never seen anyone who reacted quite this way. It's almost as if her mind is sending her messages that she should not recover those lost recollections. The cost, for her, would be too great." Cheryl took a sip and continued. "Usually, Mr. Maxwell, recovery is rapid and complete. But I just don't know."

"But even the worst cases do usually recover, right?" Joe quieried hopefully.

"Yes, barring any other psychological complications," Cheryl agreed. "But this is different. She was a pregnant woman, tortured, brutalized, threatened, exposed to every conceivable psychic and physical threat. Danger was coming at her from all sides, and it never let up the whole time she was in captivity. The fear for her child---not to mention herself---must have been petrifying. Now, she's actively avoiding the whole process of mental reorganization. Not at



a conscious level, of course. This all occurs at some deep, profoundly buried level of the psyche that modern science hasn't found a way to access. The unconscious, Freud called it."

"But don't other people with amnesia act this way at first and then remember?" Joe persisted.

"Somewhat," Cheryl admitted. "But she's different. There's none of that purposeless mental drifting that normally accompanies amnesia---and eventually allows for the memories to surface. Like I said, something in her is actively fighting the return of those memories." She hesitated. "Something happened that frightened Catherine Chandler almost to death. I wish to God we could come up with the antidote to that sort of thing. What a boon for humanity, huh? But it doesn't exist."

You have a heart like his.

"It does for her," Joe said, almost absently. "His name is Vincent."

"Who is Vincent?" Cheryl asked interestedly.

"Now that's a hard one to explain," Joe said with a grin. "Because he seems to have vanished from the face of the planet." He sobered suddenly. "But she loves him---desperately, I think. I heard her call out to him in her sleep. He's the father of the child that nobody can find either."

"Find Vincent." Cheryl said suddenly.

"I've been trying to---for months," Joe said defensively. "What's the hurry now?"

Cheryl leaned forward. "Think of her, Joe. Think of what she went through as if you were her. Cathy was damaged so profoundly that she was cut completely adrift from the memories of her own experience. Memories of someone she loved. But he's calling to her. And he can cradle the part of her too frightened to integrate her own lost part of herself."

"Maybe she needs psychiatric treatment," Joe suggested.

Cheryl hooted good-naturedly. "I can tell that you haven't met the love of your life yet, District Attorney Maxwell," she said teasingly, and then frowned. "Psychiatry isn't the answer here. I've been in this business long enough to know that most therapists are too frightened of being close to people to really help them. Our lives aren't shaped by the people who pass through them, Joe. They're shaped by people who care deeply about us." She stood up. "Don't find her a shrink. Find her Vincent. He'll take care of the rest."

Two weeks later...

It held Catherine's attention like the last scene of an Oscar-winning movie.

She stared down at it fixedly from the third story window where she stood. The people---suited women in Reeboks, businessmen with leather attaches, wild-looking adolescents hoisting cadence-thumping boom boxes---surged by beneath her vantage point, oblivious to the pale, beautiful face outlined in the small window.

Absorbed in the object that held her attention, she hardly noticed the colorful human panorama except when it blocked her line of vision. That thing...it reminded her vaguely of somewhere...someone...

"Miss Chandler?" The questioning voice of a young nun floated from the doorway. Catherine turned her head.

"Hello, Sister Mary." She smiled a greeting at the woman and beckoned her in. All of the nuns at Saint Regina's had been kind during her two-week stay, but Sister Mary had been especially thoughtful, bringing in old books for Catherine to while away the hours with, or stopping by to chat before evening prayers.

"I just came to bring you some fresh linens. I took yours off the bed this morning while you were in the garden."

"Thank you," said Catherine, taking the clean sheets. "You beat me to it. I know that Thursday is linen day, but it slipped my mind somehow."

"You have alot to think about, I know," said the nun shyly. She walked over to the window and looked out at the passing throng.

"It's endlessly fascinating, isn't it?" she asked in her soft voice. "Watching all those people passing by, wondering what their lives are like, who they love, what they dream."

"Yes, it is," Catherine agreed. It was only natural for Sister Mary to assume she had been watching the ever-changing New York street parade.

She said nothing about the fact that her eye had been caught and held by something else. The young nun, nice as she was, would probably think Catherine was crazy if she admitted what she'd really been watching for the past two hours. Maybe there was something wrong with her, after all.

Because she couldn't think of a single, earthly reason why she had just spent the entire afternoon staring at the bursts of steam curling upward from a dirt-smudged subway steam vent.

She was sitting in the small patch of carefully-tended





greenery the nuns optimistically called "the garden", enjoying the late afternoon sun, when Joe arrived.

"Joe," she exclaimed gladly, rising with her arms outstretched in welcome.

"Radcliffe." He crossed the small distance and enveloped her in an enthusiastic one-armed hug.

"You're off early---no crime in New York today?" she teased as he released her.

"I'm the boss now, Cathy. I can take time off whenever I want to," he boasted.

"Ha! You probably left early because you're going to be up all night on a stake-out."

"Yep. I work even longer hours than I used to." He admitted mournfully. Then he brightened. "For you," he said, drawing from behind his back a huge bouquet of merrily bouncing lilacs and presenting them with a flourish.

Catherine buried her nose in the purple depths, sniffing delightedly. "They smell heavenly, Joe. I'll put them in my room."

"Two weeks at Saint Regina's and you're looking better and better, Radcliffe." He smiled as his eyes ran appreciatively over her slight figure.

"I feel good," she said lightly. "Another week or so and I'll be able to put it all behind me."

From the corner of her eye, she saw Joe frown, and she tensed inwardly. In the weeks of his constant visits, Catherine could always sense when the topic of her memory loss was on the tip of his tongue, and she had grown adept at side-stepping it. She had never, after that first day, asked him what had happened to her and she knew it bothered him.

"Can you really put it behind you, Cath?" Her head jerked up.

"Yes." The flat word was meant to discourage him from further questioning, but Joe pursued.

"Don't you want to know just what it is you're putting behind you?"

"No. I mean..." for a moment a mightily longing seized her to take her trusted friend's hand and allow him to lead her back in time. But the fear was far more powerful, and snuffed out the desire almost the moment it was born. She reached a tentative hand to touch a fragile bloom of the bouquet she held, then halted it, mid-gesture, and curled her fingers protectively inward.

"I'm sure," she said firmly.

Joe opted to walk home---a sure sign, given the distance of hot, crowded pavement he had to traverse, that he was worried.

Wait, Cheryl Clancy had advised him. Give her a few healing weeks and see what happens. She's been through a tremendous ordeal. Don't push it. He'd followed the advice faithfully, never bringing up the subject of her kidnapping, her baby, her near-death---or Vincent. In fact, he'd steered clear of any topic which might potentially jolt her back into fear and pain. Elliot Burch's disappearance had not been



discussed, for she hadn't brought him up. He didn't even know if Cathy remembered Elliot. Come to think of it, her recollections of other friends showed some effects of the amnesia also. She had spoken affectionately of Jenny, wanting to know when she could contact her. But she hadn't mentioned Peter Alcott, the family friend she had seen frequently before her capture. And that was strange. Peter, being a physician, should have been one of the first people Cathy wanted to see.

And another thing bothered him. He had caught her, in the moments of infrequent silence she permitted between them, sometimes breaking off the shared interaction to stare sadly into space. The lost, hungry look in her eyes would go straight to his heart then, until he was ready to pour out everything he knew. But she would start, and turn her eyes to his and he would realize the moment had passed. And in the sudden, pregnant stillness she would laugh---a light sound whose musical timbre could not disguise its forced, hollow quality. And then he knew, in the strange place of knowing that had somehow urged him to save her in the morgue that night, that Catherine Chandler was not happy.

True, she had regained her life and health, amazing in light of the circumstances. But she had not yet regained her soul. He knew it, and at some level, she did it, too.

And until she got back whatever it was she had buried, he would be visiting only a shell of the woman he had once known.

"Vincent. Oh, I see you have just bathed. The work is finished, then?"

Vincent peered up at Father through the damp fall of his hair and nodded tiredly as the older man entered. "The tunnel is clear again," he said. He, Mouse, Cullen, and several of the others had been laboring all night to clear a cave-in blocking access to the Tunnel community's largest coal supply. Fuel Below was scarce and dear, and the bituminous cache which kept out the bite of winter when the storms raged overhead had to be preserved at all costs. For forty-eight straight hours, Vincent had led the others in clearing the debris and shoring up the tunnel walls with odd lengths of salvaged timbre. He hadn't slept in almost three days, and his overworked muscles throbbed with fatigue.

"I've checked on the other men---they're all settling down for a well-deserved rest," Father said, as he leaned his weight on the writing desk. "Can I bring you anything?"

"No, thank you. Jacob is sleeping in Mary's chamber, so she'll bring him in later." Father looked as if he were settling comfortably for a long chat on the tunnel project, and Vincent added, as tactfully as he could "I was...hoping to get an hour's rest before he awakens."

"Oh, well, yes. Don't let me keep you up. Unless you'd like me to fetch you a cup of tea." Father eyed Vincent hopefully.

Vincent shook his head. "Another time, perhaps?"

"Yes...alright." Father had taken the hint and turned to go. "Goodnight, Vincent."

"Goodnight, Father." Vincent tried not to sound dismissive, as if he were sending Father packing, but as he settled wearily back onto the bed, he acknowledged that he was hard-pressed not to do just that. Because for two days, he had wished desperately that he could be alone.

Then he could go to sleep, and maybe...just maybe...dream again of Catherine.

He did.

He was carrying her in his arms through the tunnels deep beneath the Serpentine, ancient passages forged decades past by rivers long forgotten. Bits of mica, embedded in the walls, glinted like fairy dust, and ahead the sound of rushing water gurgled. He was alone with her in an enchanted world, his stride steady and full of spring, his eyes laughing, his heart full.

"Where are you taking me?" she queried breathlessly.

"You will see," he answered, bending his head to skim her hair with his lips.

"Mmmm...that feels wonderful." He felt her contentment as she rubbed her head against his mouth like a happy puppy. She was feather-light in his arms, and looked as carefree as a child.

"It's beautiful here, Vincent." She stared in wonder at the glistening walls.

"You bring beauty to this place...to any place, Catherine," he said softly.

Perhaps it was the magic of the moment, or the gift she felt his words to her had been. She looked up, suddenly, her eyes darkening, and he read in her uncensored expression not only love, for that was there too, but something else that struck him so significantly that he stopped dead on the path and stared down at her, pulses leaping. The way she was looking at him...it was almost as if...no, it was, there could be no mistaking this...

He had long known that a single flash of desire in her eyes would spark his own response into immediate, searing flame. For months he had pressed down the sweet urgings he had convinced himself he had no right to express, or even feel. And although he had told himself repeatedly in the lonely watches of the night that her love was more than enough for him, he trembled now. Trembled, and scarcely breathed.

She spoke slowly, her voice low with the same emotion he saw in her eyes. "I told you, Vincent," she said, drawing out the words as if caressing every one. "That you have a lot to learn about what beautiful is." She paused, and added softly, "And I don't care if we ever get to where we're going. As long as you're touching me."

He inhaled sharply. "Do you like it, Catherine?" he asked hesitantly. "My...touching you?" Impossible, no matter how many signals she sent him about her own longing, to leave off his astonishment at this wondrous situation----or to keep his mind from spinning dizzily from the implications of the moment. That he should even be holding her, speaking to her like this, defied logic, possibility, even fantasy. Only his deepest,



most furtive dreams had allowed the tiniest space for this longing. Yet now...

"I can't get enough of it," she said simply, with a long look that caused his heart to somersault in his breast. He didn't care where they were going, either. If only he could carry her thus forever, with this feeling bursting through him, and the trusting, proud look in her eyes as she beheld him. He hugged her, hard, and ordered his suddenly clumsy feet to move.

They passed a small rill in a huge, echoing cavern. Easily, Vincent shifted her weight to hold her more closely against his breast and began to traverse the rippling water.

Something snapped in her then, at his slight protective gesture--he felt it, felt the moment she splintered through the perimeters that had always kept her emotion in check. And he felt, as if in a dream, Catherine trailing her lips to the skin of his neck, releasing as they travelled his own swell of suddenly unconstrained ardor...

Softly, she began to kiss and nuzzle him there, and as his pulse beat a frantic response he felt her rising, budding urgency as well. Sensuously, tenderly she feathered his neck with light kisses, catapulting into the stratosphere the boundaries they had tacitly set. Even her kiss at Winterfest, heady though it had been, had not prepared him for this moment...this soul-quaking moment, when her acceptance of him was so absolute that it found a natural expression in a physical intimacy that turned his bones to water, and made him literally unable to stand.

Unsteadily, he bore her to a sequestered nook in the rocky surface of the cavern wall, and held her on his lap with his powerful arms crushing her close. What now? What now? The words pierced through the dreamy lassitude stealing along his veins from her continuing assault on his senses. He wanted nothing so much as to give himself up to the bliss of the moment. Frenzied, his mind lunged for the rationality that had always served as a stringent buffer against the emotion that consumed him, but he could not find or remember its precepts. There was only the feel of her...dear God...the need for her...

She stopped. He felt her reach up to touch his face gently and in question, heard his own voice, deep with passion.

"I don't want to frighten you," he murmured, answering her unspoken question as he so often did. "I feel..."

"Unsure?" Catherine probed gently.

"No," he said, caressing her with his eyes before dropping his head. How could he communicate the experience of his lonely childhood, the dawning recognition he had felt then of the absolute immutability of his apartness, even as she beckoned him with lips that said it did not matter? How could he retreat into isolation that had always been a necessary component of his emotional survival when his whole soul cried out to respond to her?

Because he was Different. True, Father and the others loved him, and he had attained a real measure of peace about who he was and what gifts he could bring to existence. But



also burned into his psyche were the gasps of horror that always came at the beginning, the cringing away, the fear. Before others came to know him, they thought him more animal than man. And though he had accepted the reality of that fact long ago as something he could not change, he still felt the sting of every new exposure. That this love would lay him open to the depths of his soul was something he had always understood---even welcomed. But that he could reach out and truly claim Catherine as his own was something else again. At the most primal level of existence he doubted himself---and doubted he was worthy of the woman he loved so completely.

For he was different, and he knew it, even if she did not seem to care. His innate gallantry compelled him to remind her, though it would take from him the precious right to touch and kiss and caress her the woman he adored.

"Unworthy," he said finally. "I feel unworthy." His shoulders sagged. "I am different, Catherine. It is my charge, by the love I bear for you, to remind you of this. Even when you...forget."

He heard her sigh and looked up to see tears in her eyes. She knew. And she understood. He realized with surprise that she had sensed much of his thought. The bond was growing stronger, then...still stronger...

"Vincent," she said carefully. "I don't want to trivialize what you're feeling or what you think you've always know about yourself. But you've always said that you're a part of me without really acknowledging the other half of that equation. I'm also a part of you. We're halves of the same whole. Never say that you're unworthy of me, or of what we share. Never think it. You are more worthy than you could possibly imagine."

"But the differences, Catherine. Can you bear them?"

"I love them, Vincent." He shuddered convulsively as he thought of the violence, the force of his dark side, and he was suddenly certain that their special synchrony on this day had led her thoughts there, too. Impossible that she would not see and draw back. And how could he petition for her understanding, lightly though she dismissed his other unconventionalities, when he had never understood or accepted that ravening part of himself?

But he had reckoned without Catherine. He felt her fingers under his chin, turning his face to where he could see the clear conviction shining in her eyes.

"All of them," she said firmly. And as she spoke he felt her words penetrate cleanly to some long-hidden spot of tight hurt deep inside him, and gently ease the pain away. Strange and miraculous, this marvelous feeling of healing, of an agony he hadn't even known existed until this moment. In one loving phrase, she had reached within him to the darkness he harbored. And she had not recoiled or fled. She had loved.

His heart suddenly overflowed with gratitude for her, and he wrapped strong arms tightly around her as his lips found their customary spot on the soft crown of her head. But in his own unfolding experience he had temporarily forgotten the passion so close to eruption, and he spun crazily back into



it now the full measure of her acceptance became clear. Wordlessly, she began to move in his arms, turning her body so that it fit more tightly into his. Lifting her head with a look that made him suddenly shiver, she pulled his face down to hers and slowly began kissing wherever her lips made contact. She kissed his eyes, his cheeks, his mouth. Thrilling, he felt her hands begin delicate, stroking motions on his arms and shoulders. Even then, some warning voice whispered and he fought the lightning upsurge of passion her actions evoked, fought to retain his hold in the ecstasy of the moment. Still she wooed, moving her body against his.

"Catherine!" he exclaimed hoarsely, a mixture of excited delight and consternation in his voice. "You push the limits of my endurance....you....oh!" His words trailed off in a gasp of as she moved her fingers to the fastenings on his cloak and opened it, rubbing the silk of his shirt against his tingling skin and then undoing it gently so that she could lower his head to kiss his chest. His senses reeled crazily; dimly, he felt his control slipping away from the force of her loving onslaught.

"Please, Vincent," he heard her whisper longingly. "Please love me."

For a fleeting moment he grasped at a last semblance of resistance. He would not, could not---but Catherine's words electrified him even as he struggled to resist their spell. Unable to withstand the almost unbearable pleasure of her caresses, he flung his head back, inadvertently allowing her even greater access to his body. Her lips were everywhere, branding him with tender kisses, claiming him, searching for his mouth...he could deny her no longer. His long battle for suppression of desire was lost, swept away in the overpowering reality of their shared love. Blindly, he lowered his head. Their lips met and clung, his moving over hers lightly as a whisper, reverent and tender. He needed no practice in the art of lovemaking. He had been born to kiss and caress her alone. And though his knowledge of her body had been limited to the long embraces which had left them both aching, his knowledge of needs was as near to him as his own heartbeat. He knew what would please Catherine.

Still, her response to him was so swift and untrammelled that Vincent gasped. He opened his mouth to speak her name, and her lips parted under his; a melting, fiery sweetness consumed him then, and even as his arms pressed her closer, he felt that it was not enough, could never be enough. And the kiss deepened, dizzying and passionate and endless.

It was Vincent's final undoing. Effortlessly, he floated into the mindless enchantment of touching, loving, tasting Catherine. He had loved her for so long, so long. He leaned back against the rock, pulling her with him, finally free to return kiss for kiss, caress for caress. His huge hands moved over her as he murmured her name, pressing his lips to hers hungrily as if he could never get enough. His entranced senses registered the fact that her body's urgency met and matched his, and in his joy at her responsiveness he did things hitherto

undreamed of. He rained kisses on her cheeks and eyes, and then swooped to capture her lips again, as if his mouth could scarcely endure separation from hers. His palms outlined her face urgently, cupping it closer, framing it, running his fingers through her hair, not tentatively, as he had always touched her, but masterfully, as if it were his right. And when he finally lifted his head to look at her, he no longer hid his eagerness and desire. Her lips, still swollen from his kisses, breathed his name.

"Vincent..."

"Vincent."

It was Mary's hand on his shoulder, shaking him gently, that demolished him.

"Catherine?" Unthinkable that he could have been dreaming. He had felt her. His body still throbbed from her touch. She was near...so very near...

"Jacob is awake and his bottle is ready, so I came in to wake you." The prosaic words rapidly shredded the remnants of the sweet illusion he fought in vain to preserve. Even as he struggled to grasp the precious threads of it and weave the magic anew it vanished, departing into the yearning unconscious which had summoned it.

He was awake, in a universe where the only tangible evidence of Catherine Chandler was the inscription on a cold tombstone and the terrible longing in his heart.

"You were having a nightmare, Vincent," Mary said hesitantly. "You...spoke Catherine's name."

Heavily, he lifted his himself to a sitting position and stared at Mary in the dimness.

"Not a nightmare, Mary," he said, fighting the raw craving that gripped him like quicksand. "A dream. A most...wondrous dream, so perfect that..."

He didn't continue, but she knew. So wonderful that he didn't ever want to wake up.

"Hold on a minute and let me think."

Joe could tell from the long silence at the other end of the phone line that Cheryl Clancy was re-evaluating her stance.

"You still there?" he asked impatiently.

"Yeah." In the background he could hear the various noises of a busy hospital ward---intercoms buzzing, nurses calling to each other---but still Cheryl did not speak.

"You say there's been absolutely no change? Use your heart as well as your head, Joe. Have you noticed even the slightest difference in her demeanor?"

"It's hard to explain, but---"

"Don't try to explain it, Joe. Just tell me what you feel."

"Hey...I'm not the one who needs the help here."

"I didn't say you were," came back the crisp reply. "But sometimes we feel changes in our loved ones that we can't articulate. So tell me what you feel, and I'll try to help you sort out what's going on with Catherine."

"Okay, Doc." He played the cord of the phone nervously.



Before this whole thing with Cathy, he had been a purely rational being. Now, he was doing all sorts of things he couldn't have imagined before---like pouring out his feelings over a telephone to a middle-aged psychiatric nurse. But she was onto something, because he had had feelings of...

"No real connection," he said suddenly. "She hugs me, she's glad to see me, but something is bothering the hell out of her. She's not herself. She's like a caricature of herself...a mannequin or something." He closed his eyes and thought some more.

"And she's getting worse." Now that he had said the words, he was sure of it. Her laugh was different now, less frequent. Her eyes were troubled more often.

"You're sure?"

He nodded, decisively, though she couldn't see. "I'm sure," he said.

He heard her take a deep breath. "Okay," she said slowly. "That changes things. If she's deteriorating, she needs a confrontation. Not a tough one, you understand. Just a nudge."

"How in the world do you give someone with amnesia a nudge?"

"Tell Catherine you think she needs to look back. Tell her you're worried about her. Tell her you think she's turning her back on too much. See how she reacts. And call me."

"When should I do this?"

"As soon as possible. This evening, if you can."

"Do you think it will help?"

At the other end of the phone line, he could hear Cheryl Clancy sigh. "I don't know, Joe. So much of this territory is uncharted by the precise sciences. Exact results can't be guaranteed in life like they can in the laboratory. But like I said, our lives are shaped by the people who love us. And you love your friend. So go with that."

"That's not exactly reassuring," Joe interjected dryly.

"Maybe that's the only thing that's reassuring, Joe," she corrected with unwonted gentleness. "Maybe that's the only thing we have."

"You come to comander me for the stake-out?" Catherine kept her voice carefully casual, but her hands were shaking. Joe never visited two times in one day. And he had never come in with such a set, determined look on his face. He wanted to talk. And when Joe Maxwell wanted something, he was bull-headed enough to usually get it. She remembered that much, at least.

"No, Radcliffe. I came because we need to talk." Bingo. He was facing her squarely, and looking her straight in the eye. The message was impossible to mis-translate.

"No." She could hear the flinty edge that her fear lent to her word. She disliked having to thwart the friend who had done so much for her, but he had to be made to realize. The subject was closed.

"What are you saying 'no' to, Cathy?" he burst out. "You don't even know what's back there."

"I know enough," she said clearly. Inside her pockets,

her fingernails suddenly dug into the skin of her palms. Why did he have to bring this up today, after the crazy afternoon she had spent staring like a lunatic at the steam vent?

"I don't think you do."

"I know enough." She gritted her teeth to emphasize her words and to keep her lips from trembling. The Menace was close...so close now, waiting to dismember her as it had in the hospital...

"Cathy..."

"NO!"

"Yes! Listen to me, Cathy. I know that terrible things have hurt you, almost killed you, but you have to go back. You have to face the awful fear. You have to move through it and beyond it."

You have the courage, Catherine. From an indistinct haze of misfiled memory, the words softly asserted themselves. Great, she thought, panicking. Now she was hearing voices, on top of everything else.

She looked up at him, knowing that the terror she felt was exposed on her face, feeling vulnerable and scared, and as unready for his answer as she was for her own sudden asking of the question.

"Why?" The pleading word hung in the air.

Joe looked at her a moment, as if gauging what to say next, and then spoke.

"Because Vincent is back there, Cathy."

Her reaction was immediate and automatic, flying from her lips as a lightning neuronal connection suddenly activated itself in her unknowing brain. Without thought or hesitation, she said quickly, convulsively:

"Thoughloversbelost."

She stared at Joe confusedly. "What did I just say?" she muttered dazedly.

"You said 'though lovers be lost', Radcliffe." Joe slowly parsed the phrase out for her, into words that now made sense as the refrain of a Dylan Thomas poem she had heard a thousand years ago, in high school. She had no idea what they seemed so monumentally significant, or why the fear they evoked was suddenly almost suffocating. But it was something to give a wide berth to, that fear.

"I can't, Joe," she said heavily. "I know what you're trying to do, and I appreciate all you've done, but believe me, I can't. Not now. Not ever." She straightened, and looked at him steadily. "Not ever," she repeated with finality. "And if you plan on asking me again, then don't come back."

A tentative knock on the door awakened her from the exhausted sleep she had fallen into, after Joe's quiet departure had sent her slumping to the bed in a paroxysm of weeping.

"Catherine, are you alright?" A concerned Sister Mary hovered in the doorway. "You missed dinner and I was worried."

"No, I'm fine." She wasn't, but the nuns at Saint Regina's had enough to deal with. They didn't need to add her panic attacks to their many worries.



"You...had a visitor while you were sleeping," said the nun. Catherine's heart sank. Not Joe again, she thought dismally.

"Joe Maxwell?"

"No, this was a young man, rather informally dressed, wearing a New York Mets baseball cap. He was quite insistent about seeing you."

"A New York Mets cap?" Catherine asked, puzzled. She was certain no one but Joe knew she was here.

"Um hmm. Seemed quite distressed when Sister Angela told him you were sleeping. He mumbled something about not having time to wait."

"I don't know who it could be."

"Well he certainly put the Vespers choir in an uproar. They were walking past when he suddenly grabbed a prayerbook from Sister Sarah, and said he needed to write you a message. And he did....in the flyleaf of the prayerbook! Sister Sarah was quite scandalized. But I gave her my book so I could bring the message to you." She held out the faded blue book.

If only this bizarre day could be safely over. Weird visions, unknown messengers, Joe stampeding in to confront her like some tent-show revivalist...

"Thanks, Mary," she said tiredly. She said good night and shut the door firmly. No more visitors, tonight or ever. She didn't even want to read the stupid message. Where could she go to be free of this insanity? The islands? Monte Carlo? Would she still feel so beleaguered and fragmented on the bleached stretches of a sun-drenched beach?

Yes. A small, hushed voice inside her whispered that running away was not the answer.

Well, she would think it through tomorrow. Whatever was snagging at her attention could wait until then. Defiantly, she turned out the light and threw herself onto the rumpled bed.

But the book beckoned her even as she determinedly turned her mind to other thoughts. Finally, she switched on the light in exasperation and picked it up, yelling "What? WHAT?" as if the book were a person who had annoyed her repeatedly. And she flipped open the cover.

Written on the flyleaf, in soft charcoal pencil, so thick that the letters were blurring slightly across the page, were the words:

"Of things that are not and should be."

And on the facing page was a quickly drawn sketch that held her suddenly, irrationally spellbound.

She recognized it instantly as one of the landmarks of her childhood and more slowly as the bumps on her arms warned of far greater import yet unknown.

It was an artist's rendering of the drainage tunnel in Central Park West.

After which cryptic message, it was, of course, impossible to think of anything else. Catherine sat up until dawn, feeling more and more desperate, until she finally discharged her pent-up energy through a full-scale cleaning of her room and tiny

balcony. When she had finished she was exhausted, and she sank down on the bed with the thought that she had finally outstripped the unsettling events of the day. But the sleep she sought eluded her for hours and, when it finally came, was dark and troubled.



The Great Falls had always provided Vincent with a comforting sense of nature's changelessness, and it was there that he found himself strolling to soothe his tumultuous emotions the following evening. In his arms he bore his infant son. They would watch the tumbling water together, he thought, until its music lulled his child to sleep. Perhaps it would alleviate his own moodiness, as well.

He seated himself comfortably on a rocky outcropping worn smooth by many visitors and held Jacob cradled so that his eyes could catch a glimpse of the sparkling run. Almost from birth, Jacob had been fascinated by the glint of the subterranean water and now his eyes widened with interest. Quietly, peacefully, father and son gazed at the ageless beauty of the waterfall and listened to its calming music. Slowly the evening wore on; Jacob's eyes drooped.

It was a happy spot, thought Vincent, musing. Here he had come with Catherine after the death of her father, and had listened, breathless, to her low admission that she wanted to remain Below. And here, later, he had urged her to return to her own world, when the first awful spasm of grief had passed. Had it been the right decision? He had been certain, at the time. If he had been more selfish, she would be alive today. But would their love have remained as pure, tainted thus by his demands? No, he decided. And yet...

"Vincent." Father's brisk voice interrupted his reverie, and he looked to the entrance to see Father standing there, the muted earth tones of his clothing blending with the umber walls behind him.

"What is it, Father?" He could sense the worry--no, he thought, adjusting automatically to the empathic vibrations reaching him--concern, emanating from his adoptive parent.

"It's Eric. He disappeared after dinner and hasn't returned. It's quite late and I'm getting a little alarmed."

Vincent rose. "Jacob has fallen asleep. If you'll take him, I'll check on Eric. Are the other children all accounted for?"

"Yes. That's the strange thing." The children tended to travel in pairs or trios, especially when they moved to the outer perimeter to play hide-and-seek, or the tunnel version of neighborhood kick-the-can. Eric, when he wasn't with Father or Vincent, could usually be found in the company of Geoffrey, his particular friend, and Naomi, a precocious five-year-old whose courage matched her propensity for mischief.

"Do Geoffrey and Naomi know where he is?"

"Naomi's asleep, believe it or not. And Geoffrey hasn't seen him since dinner."

Vincent was already pulling on his cloak as Father spoke. "I'll find him. Don't worry."

Father nodded, eyes turning to his grandson, and Vincent moved off through the passageway. Eric was an intelligent child who had developed a strong sense of caution and responsibility after a frightening accident in the old Maze. He was probably off alone by choice.

Vincent's theory proved correct. He found the boy just outside the Central Park entrance, hands clasped around small, denim-covered knees as he looked absorbedly at the night sky. Vincent smiled to himself, noting the oblivious expression on the young face. With his huge spectacles and grave, studious expression, Eric resembled nothing so much as a wise old Talmud scholar---if his miniature proportions were disregarded.

"Eric?" he called softly.

Eric turned his head. "Vincent," he said. "C'mere."

"What is it, Eric?" He approached the child and squatted beside him.

"Wait with me," said Eric, his eyes behind their glass frames fixed on the heavens.

"I will." Vincent never thought to ask what they would be waiting for. It was obviously important to Eric, and he would reveal the reason in his own good time. "But first I must tell Father that you are safe. He has been very worried."

"I'm sorry, Vincent." The boy was sincerely apologetic. "I just lost track of the time. This is so important."

Vincent nodded. "It seems to be," he agreed. "I'll be right back, and then we'll watch together."

Entering the culvert, he picked up a rock the size of a baseball and lowered it to the pipe which traversed the long tunnel to the south side of the community, blending there with a snarl of other pipes to feed, like a small creek, into the larger river of metal which led to the enormous pipe chamber. Pascal- he signaled to the Pipemaster.

Vincent- came back the quick acknowledgment. It never ceased to amaze him that Pascal's expertise in tunnel communication was so finely tuned that he usually recognized the signaler from the subtle resonations on the pipes. Vincent, himself an adept sender and receiver, had tried without success to learn the same skill before giving it up as hopeless. Obviously, it was a gift granted only to Pascal---perhaps in tribute to his lifetime of devotion to the work they all depended so greatly upon.

Tell-Father-Eric-safe. Back-later. That would tell Father several things---that Vincent had found Eric, that he had an ostensibly good, albeit unknown, reason for going off, and that Vincent would bring him back when the business was finished.

A second rapid acknowledgment told Vincent that his message would be sent to its destination, and he turned. But as he did so, the thought came hurtling at him: this was where Catherine had stood so often, waiting for him. Perhaps she had used that very stone. Perhaps she had tapped with it on



that very place on the pipes. He shook his head in despair. It would serve no purpose to torture himself with wondering, now.

Sighing, he moved out of the tunnel and over to Eric. The boy had not shifted position at all, although the night was growing colder and a wind from the north had lowered the already chilly temperature by several degrees. What engrossed the child so?

"Eric," he began. "If you sit on my lap we can share my cloak and then you will be warmer. The wind is strong. You might catch cold without more covering."

The boy nodded, still preoccupied, and moved into Vincent's lap without speaking. Soon they were settled comfortably together, gazing upward in companionable silence.

"You know what we're looking for, don't you, Vincent?" He spoke as if the issue were not in doubt.

"Why no," said Vincent gravely, his tone implying that although he did not, it was obvious that he should. It was this empathy that pulled the children to him so confidently, making them certain, even before the telling, that he would take them and their small concerns seriously.

"Two shooting stars, one right after the other," breathed Eric.

Vincent looked at him. It might be possible, he reflected, on this clear night, to see one shooting star, if they waited. And if they were very, very lucky, and waited still longer, they might see another. But two in succession was something he himself had never seen, and doubted that he ever would.

"Why must we look for two, Eric?" he asked.

"Because Ellie said so."

So that was it. The boy still missed his sister desperately. Vincent had sometimes awakened during the night to hear his stifled sobs, and had gone to rock the diminutive body until it relaxed in sleep. Undoubtedly, this star-watching was some childish ritual from their years together.

"When did Ellie tell you this?"

"Last night," Eric responded absently, his neck stretched taut as he leaned back for a better view.

"You mean, in a dream?"

"Sort of. Only she wasn't all shady and stuff."

"And she told you to look for two shooting stars," Vincent pursued. Eric, a prosaic youngster, was seldom fanciful. But as he knew himself, night spectres could be extremely potent motivators.

"To wish on."

"To wish on..." Vincent persisted.

"To bring Catherine back." The words jolted him painfully, all the more so because of Eric's conversational, matter-of-fact tone. Would that it were so easy, he thought miserably.

He took a deep breath to stem his own pain and said gently:

"But Catherine is gone, Eric."

"I know," Eric replied solemnly. "That's why we need a real hard magic to bring her back. Two shooting stars. Ellie told me."





This had gone far enough. It was well past Eric's bedtime, and the weather during their baffling dialogue had grown colder still. The boy should be in bed, and he should be in his chamber with Jacob, holding his son, trying to still the anguish that rose again like a flood at every thought of her, every mention of her name...

"Eric," he began.

Eric gave his full attention to his friend at last.

"You can go, Vincent. I know my way back." And I'm not going to budge, said the child's dark, uncompromising eyes. With the moonlight tipping the cowlick that tufted up at his hairline, Eric looked absurdly young; but Vincent knew determination when he saw it, and he softened.

"Alright." He ran an affectionate hand over the boy's head. Father had Jacob, and he had nothing remaining undone of his plethora of daytime tasks. "We'll stay for awhile."

"Til we see them," Eric insisted.

Perplexed, Vincent said nothing. He had the distinct impression that Eric fully intended to remain until his anticipated sign appeared. He was certain that if he shouldered the boy bodily and carried him inside, Eric would acquiesce compliantly---and then scuttle back out again the moment his back was turned. Well, he would sit for an hour. Maybe the boy's persistence would dim as the night wore on.

The child's body was a warm weight against his chest and legs, his hair stubbly against Vincent's chin. His own son would be old enough for this in a few years, sitting in his lap like this. Urged on by the dreams of Catherine so acute in his memory, he allowed himself, for a moment, to drift resistlessly into fantasy...

"Look, Daddy, the whorls of the Andromeda Galaxy."

"I see, Jacob. Who taught you the word 'whorls'?"

"Grandpa. I read it in his book on astronomy and didn't know what it meant, so I asked him. He said spirals. You know," considering, "they sort of look like the arms of a spider."

"You're right, they do."

A figure approaches in the shadows. The years have done nothing to dim her rich, lustrous beauty. The starlight touches the crystal around her neck, drawing out the fire in its heart. She hugs her still-small son, smiles a greeting to him over the tousled head.

His happiness is undiluted and complete. He hoists Jacob, crowing with delight, onto his shoulders and the three of them move through the tunnels to home. Together, they pile onto the bed for the begged-for story and then kiss Jacob goodnight, leaving him to his untroubled descent into drowsiness. Hand in hand, they stroll to the adjacent chamber.

"He has your laugh, Catherine. Remember the concert in the rain?"

Her eyes glow up at him, misty with memory. "Schubert's Unfinished Symphony. How could I ever forget that night?"

"I was so in love with you I ached. I lay awake for weeks, remembering."

Smiling pleasure, and her swift movement into his waiting arms. "Why Vincent, you never told me that."

"I didn't tell you everything in those days."

"Like what?"

"Like how much I wanted you."

"But you can tell me now."

Her warmth, her scent, are hypnotizing. After all this time, he still trembles like a moonstruck schoolboy at her touch. He lifts her, carries her to the bed, places her on it gently, mutters "Catherine." He moves his lips to hers, presses more fully as their kiss gains length and intensity. His hands outline the slender column of her neck. She moans, and the sound sends him on an arcing trajectory of desire...

He collided with reality again, startled, when his ears, vigilant and keenly sensitive to distant sound, picked up a fragment of shouted conversation somewhere to the west of them. The voices were walking parallel to their position, his mind registered, about three hundred yards away. There was no cause for alarm. But an hour or more had passed since he had first discovered Eric, and it was more than time to go in.

"Eric," he said, in a voice firm enough to tell the child he meant business. "There are other people in the park tonight. We must go in now."

"Just a few more minutes," said the pleading child. But he had been more than patient with this strange and stubborn whim. Indulgence of the children's wishes sometimes had its limits.

"No," he said, emphasizing his answer with a slight lifting of his arms, giving Eric the hint to rise. It didn't work. Alright Eric, he thought, it seems I must carry you to your chamber tonight and stay with you there. Grimly, for he hated doing battle with any of the tunnel children, he shifted his weight and rose with the boy in his arms. His legs, cramped and stiff from their sitting position, balanced the extra weight awkwardly. Vincent took a step to steady himself, and as he did so looked up.

What he saw in the heavens then was so incredible that, years later, he still had trouble believing it was no fantastic dream. To the left of the sky, in the faint swath of light that was the Milky Way, a huge supernova suddenly exploded, trailing through the night like some brilliant celestial firework, increasing many thousands of times its original brightness. He felt Eric strain in his arms and then struggle out of them, shouting excitedly "Look, look!" as a second shooting star appeared, immediately behind it, sending out a flaring brightness---and then, unbelievably, a third. Vincent gasped in wonder and turned to Eric. But before he could speak, the boy batted his hand hard on Vincent's elbow and shouted:

"Three! She sent us three! Quick, Vincent, make a wish! Before the magic disappears!"

Perhaps it was Eric's compelling persistence, utterly certain in the face of his doubt. Perhaps it was his own fanciful visions of what could have been, if only he had been



able to save her. Or perhaps it was the inexplicable nature of the phenomenon he had just witnessed---too rare, his heart whispered in a space beyond rational knowing, to be coincidental. For a brief, shimmering moment his mind relaxed its grip on the world as he knew it, and he was again existing only in that moment on her terrace when she had pulled at his hand, saying urgently "no, don't leave" and the love in her eyes had poured over his hungry heart like a golden flood. In that moment, and in the two years after that, he had believed wholeheartedly in miracles. The hell of her capture and death had crushed such a notion between the twin burdens of shattering grief and unrelenting guilt. But now---for an instant---he believed again, and he allowed his heart to soar upwards, unfettered by harsh reason, into a light and airy space where anything was possible, and he whispered like a child:

"Please...bring her back to me."

1:47 a.m. Catherine's eyes focused on the glowing digitals, unclouded by remnants of sleep despite the lateness of the hour and the fact that she had just at this moment awakened. Had she heard a tap at the window, or had she been dreaming? She looked out onto the balcony, where a moment before she had been certain someone was attempting to signal her. No one was there. It had been one of those crazy dreams that felt so real right before waking. She rose to a sitting position and listened intently. No sound disrupted the silence.

Still uncertain, she reached for her robe, knotting it around her as she stood. It wouldn't hurt to check the doors and windows. New York was full of crazies.

A quick inspection reassured her that the doors were locked and the windows shut tight. What was bothering her then? Mystified, she looked again at the balcony door she had just tested. An indefinable urge whispered over her, calling to her strangely, beckoning her outside. She shook her head to dispel it but it persisted, fluttering over her more strongly as she turned back to the bed. After a moment's consideration, she pulled on a pair of slippers, unlocked the door, and stepped out onto the terrace.

The sky was ablaze with stars, the night wind fresh and bracing. She leaned against the stone ledge, wondering still what curious psychic tug had brought her out here, but glad nonetheless that she had come. The heavens, unmuted by the glow of finally extinguished city lights, were beautiful---too rare a sight, in Manhattan, to miss.

Her eyes were suddenly pulled to the left side of the starry vastness. And as she watched, breath catching, three shooting stars erupted, one after another from the blackness, streaking illumination in phantasmagoric succession through the heavens. It was a fantastical display, hanging suspended in the sky like a mammoth necklace of farflung diamonds before it dimmed and vanished, leaving her filled with a sense of premonition and wonder.

She became conscious, only slowly, that her body was tingling, though she had no idea why. Life had been decidedly



strange since she had awakened in the hospital room and she was getting used to bizarre sensations. But this was different; it felt more familiar. Where had she known this before?

Her mind tackled the problem logically, flicking backwards through a Rolodex of remembered moments. She had it---the Christmases when her mother was alive. The feeling had been fainter then, but it was still the same, that sense of being on tiptoe with anticipation, of not being able to wait for the joy that would surely come. She identified it again with her first experiences of seeing her father after her frequent trips abroad or to the islands, before he swept her off her feet in a bear hug.

So the feeling was associated with seeing someone she loved--strongly, its intensity suggested. More strongly than anyone she had ever known.

She closed her eyes, shutting out her other faculties to tune in more clearly to its call. The feeling grew stronger then, as if her mind were recollecting through a tactile medium the shards of a life it would not yet permit her to piece together. It grew within her with such force that she shivered. And then she felt something else.

It was the embrace of a lover.

Even before she felt the soft wool covering a strong shoulder and the gentle clasping of loving arms pulling her close, she knew what it was. But such an embrace---it filled her to satiation with peace and comfort, surrounding her, warming her with another's deep and unwavering commitment. It was heaven, this embrace.

It was also incredibly passionate.

The hands---large, tender hands---caressing her back were tentative. Why, she wondered wildly. Why did he touch her so hesitantly when she throbbed and ached for more? Why could she not give in to the almost overpowering desire to taste with her lips what she felt with her body, and to know more of the one who held her than she did?

Her eyes flew open. There was no doubt about it. No one she could remember, in a lifetime of admirers, had ever made her feel so deeply complete, or so alive. Her lover. The one Joe had spoken of, named Vincent. She stared, puzzled, at the left corner of the balcony. Had they kissed in a place like this? No. She was suddenly sure of it. Her lips would communicate that, she was certain, would burn now as the memory forced its way through her one recollecting sense. But her hand...

She felt her hand lifted, felt the wild, tumultuous tumble of her response as a deep voice said tenderly "Catherine, your hand." His lips pressed against her fingers in a caress that blazed up her arm and through her entire body---and, as if there in that quondam moment, Catherine felt her shadow lover sense her suddenly rampant desire and press another--and yet another--stinging kiss on the tiny wound before interruption intruded, bringing suffocating disappointment to her and to him.

She trembled with the sheer, haunting beauty of the lost moment just revealed to her, and looked again at the corner



of the balcony. There had been a rosebush in a similar-appearing place, she recalled, seemingly out of nowhere. Its presence had been the catalyst for the instant she had briefly touched. What other priceless memories of her connection to him, undreamed of, were hidden behind the impenetrable barrier of her amnesia? And where, in all the world, was the one who had meant so much?

She slid down against the concrete and maneuvered her body into a comfortable sitting position. The night chill was more penetrating now, but she was unwilling, even for a moment, to leave the place which had provided her with a link to him. Perhaps the balcony would provide other clues as well, if she were patient. Perhaps she could feel his arms enfolding her again.

He stood, staring despairingly at the sky, willing back the flash of cosmic grandeur that had so filled his heart with hope. Gone. It was gone. The illusion of a moment only, like the memories that visited him with such bitter and compelling poignancy.

"I told you!" Eric said, beaming. Vincent looked down at the excited face. Doubtless, the world of a child was not so plagued by the grittier realities of existence. Somehow, through the grief and loss which had visited his own life, Eric had maintained the childish resiliency that enabled him to still perceive mystery and magic in the universe. With all his heart, Vincent envied him. That part of his own psyche had died forever, with Catherine.

"It was beautiful, Eric. But we must go in now."

Eric looked up at him with his owl's eyes. "It's okay if you don't believe it, Vincent. Even with the proof of three. It's okay."

Vincent smiled in spite of himself, at the child's consoling, almost patronizing tone.

"Is it?" he asked, almost involuntarily.

Eric nodded firmly. "Ellie warned me it's hard for grown-ups. Even you."

Especially me, thought Vincent dismally as he shepherded the excited boy toward the tunnel entrance. Especially for me, Eric.

The balcony would give up nothing else. She sat there until dawn, feeling more and more empty, until she knew what she had to do. She slipped inside, and padded quietly down the hall to the pay telephone.

"I'm ready."

At the other end, she could hear Joe let out a sleepy whoop of delight.

"You're sure, Radcliffe?" "You're positive?"

She inhaled deeply. "I felt him tonight, Joe. I felt Vincent. I don't know who he is, or where, but I know what he means to me. And I have to find him."

"I'll help you, Cathy. I promise. I know someone...well, there are ways."

Tears gathered in her eyes. "You're the best, Joe. The best there is."

"Think so? How 'bout telling that to Diana Bennett?"

"Who?"

"Never mind, Radcliffe. Go back to bed."

She laughed softly. "Go to bed, you mean. I've been up all night. But I have a feeling I can sleep now, Joe. I think I can sleep just fine."



"Diana."

Joe closed the door firmly to shut out the din and clatter of the ever-hectic DA bullpen. The importance of this task notwithstanding, he had put it off as long as he could. Now, with Cathy pleading longingly for Vincent, he could postpone it no longer. He wondered briefly if Diana sensed anything of what was coming.

"I want you to get a message to Vincent that I need to see him right away." Hands on his hips, he eyed somewhat belligerently the red-headed police officer he had summoned to his office moments before. He was expecting resistance on the subject of Vincent. He'd come up against it time and again with Cathy, before she'd been captured. He'd poke around to find out where she was going or who was escorting her, and she'd toss off an innocent, evasive reply guaranteed to disarm the most persistent of investigators. There was apparently something about Vincent that kept everyone who knew him in some sort of cloak-and-dagger mystery. Not this time. The stakes were too high for secrets.

He was ready for the telltale averting of her eyes. "Don't look away," he said vehemently. "I know you know where he is."

"Why do you need to see him?" She was hedging, Joe knew.

"It's important," he said briefly. "Even an emergency. That's all I can tell you."

"Is it about Cathy Chandler?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me." Her chin jutted out in defiance, the furthest a police officer could push it with the acting DA and not get a blistering heel-locking for professional insubordination. "I worked the case."

Joe shook his head. "No way," he replied firmly.

"He's had enough pain!" Diana exclaimed suddenly. Joe stared at her in amazement. An emotional display of any sort, even a small one, from the perennially cool Diana was totally out of character. Unless---he looked at her more closely, noting the revealing flush that had suddenly tinged her beautiful cheeks. Uh-oh, he thought. First Cathy, now Diana. Who was this Vincent, anyway, to cast such a spell over women like them?

"Have you got something going with him?" he asked suddenly. Diana looked down and began fingering a small crystal paperweight on his desk, its slight movement casting a faint spectrum of diffracted rainbow colors along the wall.

"No," she said finally. "We're just friends."

Joe eyed her dubiously. Maybe you don't know you've fallen

for this guy, he thought morosely. But it's written all over your face. There was no time at the moment to examine his own feelings about that revelation, which he suspected held some fairly keen disappointment. What was important was that Vincent's relationship to Diana now posed some serious issues for Cathy---issues he intended to have resolved before consigning his friend to Vincent's care. It also made clear the necessity of letting Diana in on the secret.

"Cathy Chandler is alive," he said suddenly.

"WHAT?" The face that so seldom mirrored her inner feelings betrayed Diana for the second time that day. She stared at him, shocked.

"Alive---as in, she never died."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just what I said. She never died."

"Joe," Diana rubbed slender fingers against her forehead in confusion. "I am totally clueless here. What is going on?"

Joe hesitated, feeling suddenly ashamed of the subterfuge which had kept the earnest police investigator totally in the dark. Diana didn't just look surprised. She looked dazed and disoriented, as if the floor had suddenly shifted underneath her and she was groping for a solid place to stand.

But it had been for Cathy's safety, he reminded himself stubbornly. Much as he had wanted to trust Diana, he hadn't been sure of anyone after Moreno's betrayal had come to light. The need to keep Cathy safe from harm had been real and pressing.

So, however, was the current need for explanation---especially in light of Diana's obvious feelings for Vincent.

"I still can't believe it went down this way," he began slowly. "But somehow, I think Gabriel's plan got sabotaged. Because she didn't die from whatever they gave her. She went into a deep coma." He leaned closer, the tightness in his voice betraying his attachment to the privileged, wealthy woman who had become his close friend.

"She was in that coma at the morgue. She wasn't dead, Diana. I found out and took her to the emergency room at Bellevue. Just in time."

"What about the autopsy?" The now-shuttered look in Diana's eyes did not betray her feelings. They could be anything, thought Joe, given the crazy tangle of events.

"Fixed," he admitted. "It was the body of a transient, discovered the night before. Steve made sure he started before anyone came in from NYPD. You gave us some hair-raising moments with your investigation," he said feelingly, then stopped, and swallowed.

"I'm sorry, Diana. Maybe I should have told you. But I couldn't trust anybody. Not after Moreno."

She made a quick gesture. "It's okay. I wouldn't have trusted anyone either." She paused to move slowly across the length of the room, then turned to meet his eyes with her characteristic, level gaze. "What you did kept her alive, you know. Gabriel would have killed her." It was Diana's absolution, and her code. You do what you have to do.

"That's why I did it."



She studied him for a long moment. "How did you know?" she asked quietly.

He shrugged in answer. "That's the incredible part of it. I didn't." Jamming his hands in his pockets, he contemplated the bustle of human activity outside in the bullpen as if it could provide some clue to his rescue of Catherine Chandler.

"Don't laugh, okay?" Joe's tone betrayed his embarrassment that what he was about to reveal was odd enough to strike those with less sensitivity as humorous. "I just kept hearing her voice, from eight months ago."

"Saying what?" Diana's tone sharpened slightly with the query.

Saying 'you have a heart like his.' So...I pulled her from the morgue."

"A heart like Vincent's," she murmured, as if that explained everything, including the deepest puzzles of the universe. Diana, attractive as she was, looked astonishingly beautiful with the wave of emotion which swept over her face, and Joe had brief, rich glimpse, like an unusually clear snapshot, of what love did to a woman like Diana Bennett. And felt an odd, twisting pang that it was for someone else.

"Yeah, I guess so. No, I know so. She was...pretty involved with somebody." That was a massive understatement, considering the fact that Catherine and Vincent had had a child together, but he hated to see the pools of her eyes cloud over with his words, hated to see the shut, blockaded look return to her features, more noticeable now, as if she were bolting down door to her soul. He sighed.

"I'm sorry, Diana," he said again. She seemed to sense that his words were not just about the case, and the decisive swerving of her head told him that Diana knew she'd revealed far more than she had intended. "It's a long story, and one I'll be glad to tell you sometime. But right now I have to find Vincent. Cathy came out of the coma with amnesia. I think he's the only one who has any hope of bringing her back." And I think I'm beginning to understand what that might take away from you, he added to himself. But her next words, spoken very low, surprised him.

"They couldn't kill her," she said slowly, gladness, even triumph, building a muted crescendo in the inflection of her voice. "They couldn't kill Catherine." She said Cathy's name with the quaint formality of another era, and Joe wondered briefly if this was something else she had taken from the apparently mesmerizing character named Vincent. He was also conscious of feeling a profound sense of relief. If he read the situation accurately, Diana was stepping back without a murmur, ready and willing to aid in returning Cathy to health and happiness. Clearly, it was the right thing to do, but it was a course of action not without sacrifice for the beautiful woman who faced him, and he felt a surge of admiration for her emotional generosity. A lesser woman would have been more grudging. It made the distant Diana more human somehow--and also, he realized suddenly, infinitely more desirable to him.



"That's why I need to see Vincent," he concluded.

"Yeah, Vincent." The words seemed to seal and lock the feelings lurking below Diana's outer facade, as if she now had a firm grip on the mandate to deny their expression. But Joe was aware of them roiling unspoken beneath the surface of her calm, and he heard the slight quaver as it crept into her voice.

"He'll be...transformed, Joe. Transformed." Dammit, everytime she spoke his name she looked like a newly-awakened Sleeping Beauty---all soft and alluring and unprickly. I'm available, he urged silently. Stop chasing after Vincent. Look at me like that and I'll fall at your feet.

But life had taught Joe Maxwell that opening his heart wide could invite in the deepest injury imaginable, and it was a self-induced set-up, pure and simple, to long for a woman in love with someone else. Time to punt, Joe, he thought. No chance for yardage this down. Maybe Vincent could give him a few pointers sometime, since he was so all-fired successful with incredible women. He'd have to remember to ask.

"I can't wait to meet this guy." He opened his hands in a gesture which spoke ever so slightly of flirtation. "Every beautiful woman in town seems to think he's terrific."

But Diana ignored the cue, or missed it. He hoped it was the latter. "He goes every night, late, to the drainage culvert in Central Park. It's where he used to meet Catherine. It's sort of...a pilgrimage for him. You can find him there tonight." She paused, then said slowly, "He can bring her back Joe." It was a statement of absolute faith in Vincent's abilities. "I know he can."

Who's going to bring you back, he asked silently, feeling an inexplicable yearning for another glimpse of the vivid beauty of Diana's love-lit face. But she was already martialling her thoughts to provide Joe with the simplest access to the underground if Vincent failed to appear, and did not see his searching look.

Joe stood nervously in the sepia gloom of the huge drainage culvert in Central Park West, his toe making quick, splashing taps on the water-covered cement. The culvert, he knew, was one of the many entrances to the tunnels which led to the city's vast water main, its presence in the park largely irrelevant to a system whose frequent breakdowns required repair and maintenance in the more populated areas of the city. Its circumference opened into a small, damp room lined with cinder-block and perforated with other huge holes---one accessing another culvert and a second, covered with iron grating, sealed over with a sheet of heavy steel. It was from the other drainage tunnel entrance, thought Joe, that Vincent would approach---although he couldn't fathom the rationale for this obscure meeting place. How in the world had Vincent and Cathy come to chose this as their trysting-spot?

A loud grating noise drew Joe's startled glance to the steel-sheeted tunnel opening. The plate was a door, he saw with stunned surprise, and it was sliding open. He ducked quickly back into the south tunnel, his mind whirling with the



many puzzling facets of the mystery suddenly explained by the scraping sound of the underground door. So Vincent---for it must be Vincent who was approaching--lived down there. It accounted for many unanswered questions over the months. The real question, though, was why.

Joe heard the faint metallic click of the iron grate as it opened, and the protesting groan as it swung free on rusty hinges. A light tread sounded, and the whisper of rustling cloth. The steel portal slid shut again, and Joe was alone with this new visitor to the chamber, a silent and unnoticed spectator to his purpose there.

For a moment the room was completely still. Then Joe heard a long skidding murmur, as if some heavy weight were sliding down the length of the wall to sink to the ground. Another moment's silence, where Joe was sure the sound of his own breathing gave him away. Then, without warning, a muffled, gasping burst of sobs. They resounded in the faintly lit chamber, noticeably building in intensity, an accelerating tidal wave of inconsolable, bitter grief. It could be none other than Vincent. Joe peered around the edge of the tunnel into the gloom.

What he saw almost made him lose his balance, though a moment ago it had not seemed at all precarious. A huge figure was huddled in abject misery against the wall. His feet and legs were encased in knee-high boots of soft leather, secured with thongs ending just below the powerful thighs. His form, covered with a cloak of soft woolen material, draped expansively over a massive, muscular chest. But it was the face, half-hidden in the shadows, that caused Joe to gape open-mouthed in astonishment. For it was not a human face.

He looks like a lion, thought Joe in stupefaction. A long spill of red-gold hair fell below Vincent's shoulders, framing a visage that was distinctly leonine in its features. Brows swooped sharply upward from eyes so deep-set they remained hidden in the semi-darkness, and hair grew, close-cropped, on his nose and the strong profile of his jaw. Vincent lifted his head and a pool of light played over his features, throwing them into bas-relief against the dark wall, further confirming to Joe the evidence of his astounded eyes. Vincent was something other than human.

And he was the one person in all the world who could help Cathy. Of all the strange situations I have ever been in, thought Joe, this really takes the prize. He took a deep breath, and stepped into the room.

At the noise, Vincent lowered his head abruptly, his body tensing in expectant alarm. He uttered no sound as he moved, swift as thought, into a still, coiled crouch which Joe sensed was his customary and immediate response to imminent danger. Almost like an animal, he thought, awed again by the suppressed but obvious power in the waiting figure.

"Vincent," he said. Then, "Vincent, it's Joe Maxwell. I'm sorry to intrude...on your grief. But I need to talk to you. It's important."

Vincent's combative posture changed, and he rose to his



feet. With an agile grace seldom seen in large men, he closed the distance between them. He towered over Joe, no midget himself at six-one, by a good five inches.

"Catherine's friend," he said in a deep, quiet voice. Joe nodded, embarrassed by his intrusion into Vincent's private, unhealed sorrow. The tears still lay in glittering tracks on his strange face. Joe knew how he would feel if some stranger caught him sobbing his heart out. He hesitated awkwardly.

But surprisingly, Vincent took no offense. "She spoke of you often," he said softly, his eyes searching Joe's. The look was not deliberately intent, but Joe could sense, intuitively, that Vincent saw far more than most. What manner of a creature was he, this unusual, prescient figure who examined him with such calm, yet compassionate scrutiny, even in the midst of his own interrupted bereavement?

Slowly Vincent extended his hand, a gesture of trust and acceptance. Joe reached for it and shook it, though he was decidedly unsettled by the feel of fur around his fingers, and the curved claws which lightly raked his skin. The slashing deaths, he thought, another answer clicking into place. But it was difficult for him to imagine this sorrowful figure lashing out without good purpose. For some reason, he trusted Vincent instantly. He wondered if it had been like that for Cathy.

"I am...not what you expected." There was a hint of amusement in that mellow voice, and Joe gave a quick nervous half-laugh.

"No. I guess you're not. I was expecting someone more..." he faltered, wishing he had never started what was surely an incriminating sentence.

"Normal?" asked Vincent calmly, and Joe suddenly grinned. For someone with his other-worldly looks and physique, Vincent was amazingly comfortable in his own skin. And somehow, his acceptance of his own differences put Joe remarkably at ease.

"Sort of," he admitted. He paused then, unsure how to begin. "Diana told me I could find you here," he said.

"Diana," Vincent mused. "I didn't know Diana knew about my trips here. Still, its not surprising." His deep-set blue eyes were thoughtful. "There is very little that Diana misses."

His tone was casual, even familiar, and Joe was suddenly reminded of the host of questions still remaining to be answered before he told Vincent about Cathy---namely, queries about Vincent's current relationship with Diana. Obviously, he knew her well. Both his reaction and Diana's indicated that. But Joe had spent the two previous nights piecing together Cathy's sparse remarks about her personal life before the kidnapping, and had become convinced that she loved Vincent deeply---a feeling which, judging by what he had seen tonight, was just as fervently returned. But he needed to be certain. After all Cathy had been through, Joe wasn't about to plop her in the middle of a situation that could be...well, complicated. Not without getting a sense of the relationships first.

"How well do you know Diana?" he asked. No sense beating around the bush. It wasn't his style, and it didn't seem like Vincent's either.



"She has been a wonderful friend," Vincent said. He sighed heavily, and looked out into the culvert. "Without her help, I could never have rescued my son."

"Cathy's child is safe?" Joe asked eagerly.

"Yes," Vincent responded, his voice breaking slightly. "Our son is with me Below. Thanks to Diana. She led me to Gabriel, helped me to find Jacob, helped me bring to justice the men who men who..." his head drooped "...killed Catherine." Not our kind of justice, Joe realized with a start. But a more primordial, absolute justice that resonated in his own heart. He had been viciously glad, when investigating the carousel deaths, to see that Moreno had gotten the ending his betraying soul deserved. Inhumanly glad.

But Vincent was still speaking of Diana. "She has something of Catherine's loving heart." And Joe wrenched his avenging thoughts back to the present.

"Vincent," Joe began. "I know I really don't have any right to ask you this, but do you love Diana?"

"Yes," came the unruffled reply, and then, gravely, "What troubles you about my answer, Joe?"

"I thought you loved Cathy," he said, with sinking spirits.

"Love Catherine? She is the beating of my own heart. I did, and do love her. With all that I am, or ever could be."

"But how can you love two women?" Joe asked in exasperation, conscious of the fact that his voice sounded stubborn and insistent, like a child's, but unable to help it. For Cathy's sake. Maybe even, he thought, as Diana's luminous face rose before his mind, for his own.

"Because I love them so differently." Vincent's head tilted to one side as he studied Joe with that still, probing gaze.

"Joe, your questions puzzle me."

"I know they do. I'm not trying to give you a hard time after all you've had to bear. But please explain to me, Vincent, how you love them differently."

And please understand that this is an important request, he added silently. Vincent, as if sensing that inquiry were somehow quite momentous, considered it meditatively. Because he's not the kind of person to ignore someone else's need, Joe thought suddenly, even if he doesn't understand it. His respect for Vincent went up another notch.

"I love many people," said Vincent, gesturing to sealed door he had passed through to enter the chamber, as if bring into his answer the people who lived on the other side. "I love Father as my father, and Devin as my brother...and I love Diana as my friend."

"And Cathy," said Joe with intensity. "How do you love Cathy?"

The voice was very low, and permeated with the weight of long torment. "I love Catherine as my world," he said slowly. "I love her endlessly, beyond distance of space or lapse of time. How do I love Catherine?" he paused, eyes filled with so much tortured yearning that Joe could feel it twining around his own heart.

"To the ends of the universe and beyond."

"But can you not live again---someday?" One more answer, to make perfectly sure. Although he was sure already.

"I live for my son. He is extraordinary. So much like Catherine. And I live for my memories of her." The voice grew thin, as if stretched too tight. "So many memories, Joe. So many precious moments that spangle my very existence with light. I will always live for my dreams of her." He looked away, unshed tears lacing his voice. "Death cannot kill what never dies," he whispered.

Joe took a deep, excited breath.

"She's not dead, Vincent. She's alive." A light rain had begun to fall outside and the words penetrated the dripping air with the clearness of a bell. Before him Vincent froze, a giant form cast in marble. Joe spoke again. "Cathy is alive."

The sudden roar of anguish knocked a year off Joe's life. He jumped back from the maelstrom that was Vincent, raising furred arms to shield his face like some colossal, injured animal as he uttered a low, guttural growl. Fangs, thought Joe fleetingly, incredulously. I don't believe it. He has fangs.

But he was curiously unafraid.

Vincent spoke, agony in every line of his form and face. "She called you her friend," he choked out. "Why do you mock my sorrow?" He turned away, as if to hide from Joe's undeserving eyes the misery of his wounded heart. "Go," he said dully. "Please. Come no more."

Joe put his hands on Vincent's shoulders and forced the massive, unresisting figure to face him. "Listen to me!" he shouted, his words echoing in the vaulted chamber, ricocheting off the walls and into the world beyond. "Cathy isn't dead! She's alive!" He halted suddenly, fearful of discovery from the outside that would bring alien eyes into the space he needed to articulate the unlikely truth, sending Vincent back into his world forever in solitary desolation.

"It's true," he said quietly. What explanation could he offer that would penetrate the fog of grief surrounding this suffering soul?

Something of his earnestness must have permeated, for Vincent's eyes lost their glaze of anger. "I saw her die, Joe," he said brokenly. He spoke with the voice of one too early old, one whom the living of life had marred irreparably, leaving only bewilderment and measureless pain.

"You saw her go into a coma," Joe returned excitedly. In the space of an instant, he saw Vincent's attention rivet on him so sharply that his own muscles went taut with tension. That was the way to reach him---just pour out the truth, feelings and all. His voice in the damp room resounding with conviction, he spilled forth the story in a rapid, breathless jumble.

"I thought she was dead too, and I took her to the morgue. But I kept hearing her talking to me from a year ago, saying 'you have a heart like his' meaning you, and it meant alot to me when she said it, and because of it, something in me wouldn't let her die. So I got her to the emergency room and...that's all."

He closed his eyes.



Vincent stared at him in mute, stunned disbelief.

"Joe..." he whispered, shaking violently, "Joe..."

There's one more thing," Joe added. "She has amnesia. She's blocked it all out. She doesn't remember the kidnapping, or Gabriel, or anything about her life with you. But Vincent," he said movingly, "I said your name to her and for half a second, something gelled and she said..."

"What?" The word shivered in the humid air.

"Tho' lovers be lost. I swear to God, Vincent. That's what she said."

The mighty figure shuddered before Joe like a leaf in a storm. Vincent's mouth worked soundlessly; his fingers clenched and unclenched in rapid, convulsive movement.

"Love shall not," he gasped, and Joe saw as the realization roared through him, saw him absorb the words in a dizzying wave of crashing, pounding comprehension as he sagged weakly against the wall. The eyes he lifted held the most unprotected and tortured expression Joe had ever seen.

"I want so very..." his voice was scarcely audible, so filled was it with emotion. "...very much to believe you," he whispered. "It is impossible...too miraculous to consider...yet only Catherine could know....to say the words...branded in my heart. Love shall not. Joe..." Vincent stiffened and suddenly gripped Joe's shoulder so hard its owner winced, his eyes piercing the gloom and, it seemed, Joe's very being. "You would not toy with me. You would not say this to me for purposes of your own. If you do" the deep voice shook with hope unlooked for, too beautiful and terrible to acknowledge. "I will die. You will have crushed the life from me forever."

Joe's answer was swift and sincere. "She trusted me Vincent. You can, too." With a trembling cry, Vincent staggered back.

"She lives. Catherine...Catherine...lives." He wept deeply, in enormous, gasping sobs, his head leaning against rough concrete, his face hidden by the long fall of his hair, massive shoulders heaving. Transformed is too pale a word, Diana, thought Joe, deeply moved. I can't find one to describe what is happening to this man, right in front of my eyes.

"Only Catherine could know those words, right Vincent?" Joe asked triumphantly, not even noticing that he was repeating Vincent's statement almost word for word. He felt like bawling openly, or jumping up and down.

"Only Catherine," Vincent echoed, eyes blazing with such joy that they lit the tiny room like twin meteors. He straightened, singularly transfigured. Lines of fatigue and pain erased from his face as if they had never been. Power and energy radiated from him like a magnetic force. His expression was alight with wonder.

"I have felt her presence so strongly in these past few months," he said reverently. "But I believed that it was because I wanted so desperately for her to be near. And now..."

"And now you know it was Cathy you felt," said Joe, gripping the outstretched hand that closed around his in a heartfelt

clasp. "She's coming back, Vincent. Tomorrow night."

They talked for a long time after that, the shadows flitting around them like ebony butterflies as the night waned on. Vincent was clearly mindful of the fact that Joe had a job to get up early for the next day; yet he was so pathetically eager for news that Joe found himself brushing aside the suggestion that he leave to get some rest. Besides, it was good to tell someone all that he had maneuvered and plotted to bring Catherine to safety, good to watch Vincent's expressive eyes flash excitedly as he told the story. He found himself relating not only the events following her capture, but also the awful fear that had clamped around him like a vice when he had first seen her body, and the urgent call of her remembered words telling him she wasn't gone. Finally, inspired to even deeper confidence by Vincent's quiet empathy, he told, haltingly, of the the guilt he had felt since his father died.

"I couldn't save him, Vincent, after I told him about those kids," he said soberly. "And Cathy's situation took me right back there. I was the one who got her involved in the first place."

"You risked everything to save her life, Joe," Vincent reminded him softly, and Joe glowed with pleasure.

"She's worth it," he replied with a grin.

"In saving her life, you have saved more than mine," Vincent said simply. I can never repay you, Joe. Never. The debt is too great."

"Just bring her back," said Joe. "That'll be payment enough. I...I guess I'd better go. It's almost morning."

Vincent nodded. "Tomorrow night, then. I'll meet you here." He took a long, shaky breath. "I'll meet Catherine here." His face lit again with that intense expression of ineffable joy, so vivid and real that Joe was struck again. No wonder she loves him, he thought suddenly, watching the play of emotion cross the unusual face, completely forgetting his earlier reaction to Vincent's appearance. He knew he would not soon forget this extraordinary encounter, where he had been shown an unforgettable glimpse of the power and passion of the lovers whose lives were somehow inextricably woven with his own. The question trembled at the back of his consciousness with faint, unanswered persistence: could such a thing ever be possible for him?

"Tomorrow, then," said Joe, wringing Vincent's hand again as he turned to go. Goodnight, Vincent."

"Joe," Vincent's deep voice was tentative, as if he feared to enter where his presence might not be welcome.

"Uh huh?" Joe half-turned back to answer.

"I wonder...." he paused.

"What, Vincent?"

"What would your father have said about your decision in the schoolyard that day?"

Joe stared at him. "Do you know, I have never asked myself that," he said slowly, conscious of the pain simmering again below the surface of his answer, waiting to inexorably condemn



the boy he once was.

"Sometimes our grief can be so great that it blinds us to the most important questions," Vincent said softly. "You have saved Catherine's life, and given mine back to me. Can you see the question now, and answer it in your heart?"

Joe's mind whirled, and focused with sudden, stark clarity on a montage of images his blame-ridden memory had convinced him he had no right to claim. The pain rose unbidden---but it was stunted by the new sense of peace and freedom he felt tonight, and for the first time it did not overwhelm him as it always had. He heard his father's quick steps in the hallway, heard him say "It was an old woman, Stella. He attacked and beat an old woman. I can't let it wait until morning." He saw, as if it were yesterday, the fury in his face as he watched a mother cruelly slap a four-year-old in the supermarket, saw him loom over her with a police badge as he warned her that he had her address and would be watching her from now on. And he felt, again, the hands on his shoulders, felt the words penetrate his now-listening heart:

"There should be more human beings like you in the world, son. I'm proud of you."

I'm proud of you. The phrase curled around his insides, the legacy of his decision that day, the message of a man who had known, at the outset, the awesome cost of caring in a dangerous world, and who had, in his last words, praised his son for doing the same. His tears welled, signalling the surging of remembered grief, painful, but at last unshackled by the pressing weight of a lifetime of bitter guilt. Even if his father had known the outcome of that day, he would still have made the same choices.

"He did say it, Vincent," Joe gulped. "I was just never able to hear it before. He said there should be more people like me in the world." He felt that calm, compassionate gaze search his face.

"A very wise man," said Vincent quietly, as if he had known the answer to his question all along. "Goodnight, Joe."

Vincent grasped the cables with one strong hand as the elevator in the Faber Trust building whirled and clicked into motion. Head thrown back, eyes shut tightly, he felt the first upward thrust of the machine through his whole body, lifting him to the top floor of the universe...Catherine. Instinctively, he had known that the tunnels were too confining to contain his rejoicing, that only the heavens could hold this most exhilarating moment of his life, when all the world was brilliantly starlit and dazzling with breathless hope. Arriving at the top, he leaped lightly off the elevator and onto the roof. Below him stretched the city, a vast panoply of lights stacked and sprinkled in the maze of darkened streets and avenues. And above him was the open sky, a black eternity pierced with a million points of prodigal, scattered glitter, stretching into forever.

"Catherine," he whispered, in a joy too deep for tears, too indescribable for other words. His heart reached out to

her, feeling her nearness with a great, bounding throb, knowing it as a manifestation of the bond returned. She had said it would. And he, poor doubting soul, had turned her comment aside impatiently, grieving the loss of their special empathic connection like a child in a tantrum. She had known the bond would return. She had known that death would not conquer. Catherine had known it all.

He tipped his head back, opening his eyes to the starry expanse and his heart to the happiness surging through him, coursing through his veins like lifeblood. The stars winked back, each pinpoint the dot of another exclamation, writing his ecstasy in cosmic punctuation across the face of the night.

"You're right, Eric," he whispered, thrilling. "Wishing stars work. Once-upon-a-times exist. There is magic, wondrous magic, still, in a world I thought grown cold to dreams." His heart was full to bursting and he pressed his hand over it, feeling again that strange, faint stirring which had told him all along, though he had ignored it repeatedly, that hers was beating somewhere near. Never again, as long as he lived, would he ignore those unmistakable messages. He wondered if she were looking up at the stars tonight, finding in their magnificence the first dim, misty echo of what once was, and now, incredibly, breathtakingly, could be again. He wondered if his happiness could pass through the fragile, pain-clogged filter of her mind, recalling to her senses the whispered memory of a love that would not die. And he doubted the presence of miracles no longer.

"She lives," he breathed.



# 10

That same evening...

She was never quite sure afterward how it happened, though she knew the night before had been the catalyst. One minute she had been lying on the bed thinking wistfully of Joe's promise and the fact that almost twenty-four hours had passed with no word from him. And the next he was escorting her through an apricot pinwheel of stained glass (right this way, Radcliffe) to the disconcerting spectacle of herself on display, and she realized with surprise that she was dreaming.

She thought at first that she had been persuaded to serve duty as bridesmaid for yet another debutante friend. The configuration around the alter was familiar---the weighty solemnity, the air of long-cherished ritual. Then she saw that she was not in a church. She was underground, in a chamber with high, uneven ceilings carved from bedrock and illumined by the glimmering splendor of a hundred flickering candles. A slight Oriental girl stood in the bride's position, holding the hand of a solemn young man, while in front of them an Oriental elder in ceremonial robes intoned softly "Let your courage to love serve as an inspiration to all those who climb the highest mountain and cross the great waters in love's name."

But Catherine was not playing her role correctly in her dream, looking demurely on. She was gazing back and upward, at a figure across the room.

A figure who took her very breath away.

Not man, nor beast, but a gloriously virile combination of both, like a hero out of ancient lore he appeared, unforgettable and utterly mesmerizing. He stood among the hushed onlookers, towering splendidly over the tallest of them, arms folded in a quiescent stance that yet bespoke strength and power in every line.

What century did he walk out of, Cathy? What storybook?

The improbable question skittered fleetingly through her mind in the jumbled images of the dream, words of another man and another place, but now, somehow, appropriate. His clothing, muted in color, buff and earth tones, was the well-fitting backdrop to the cascade of ruffles rippling down his broad chest. His hair lay in a gleaming, red-gold mass upon his shoulders.

His eyes were locked on hers.

Those eyes...those haunting, wonderful eyes made the flesh rise willingly on her arms as she shivered under their gaze. At once nakedly adoring and intensely passionate, they caught and held her in their fathomless blue depths as they whispered the secret of love at last laid bare and the achingly sweet promise of tenderness yet to experience. She was powerless

to move her gaze from those eyes...and so she let him see all that she felt, and all that she wanted to give him, and she sensed his need flare upward in response until she was desperate to still her body's shaking. God, she wanted him...

The scenes shifted, like television channels flipped through with the flick of a remote, flashing for an instant before vanishing forever...the picture dissolved, coalesced...

She was in a long, twisting tunnel, the uphill sending drafty messages to her uncovered hands and face. Ahead of her jutted a rocky outcropping which blocked from her sight the next unlit and echoing chamber. She was alone and exhausted and very, very afraid.

The booming clamor of the roaring was all around her, a frenzied and bestial thunder made ear-splitting by the subterranean acoustics which magnified its sound. As she stepped forward, it seemed to settle like lead in her blood and bones.

But she did not pause or falter.

He is my life, Father. Without him there is nothing.

It seemed she had known this irrevocable fact since the beginning, when she had first beheld the face so unlike her own or any other. That they would meet and love, despite the dictates of a world with little compassion or understanding for their uniquely beautiful story, that they would persevere in that love, regardless of what chances and ills should befall their fragile joy.

That to give him all she had was what she had been born to do.

He is my life, Father. Without him...

"...there is nothing." The words thrummed through her sleep-fogged consciousness until she realized she was speaking them aloud---to wakefulness, and the small, spare room of peaceful St. Regina's, with every muscle in her body yearning to be back within the dream.

Because no matter what the danger, he was there.

Unless she could find him here.

The flash of inspiration hit her, then, and she almost tumbled from the bed as she reached frantically under it. The prayerbook was there, where she had tossed it vexedly the night before, when she had not understood its message. Her knuckles brushed its flat contours in the darkness and she lifted it up and opened it, switching on the light hurriedly with the other hand. For a moment, she stared at the blurred, sooty sketch.

Then she flung the book onto the bed, and quickly began to dress.

Catherine!?! The knowledge ripped through him like a lightening bolt splitting the darkness, galvanic, magnetic, vibrating along every nerve ending. He sat bolt upright from the leaning position he had assumed against the outthrust of masonry, tears of rejoicing still wet on his face.



But Joe had said...

No. He had promised himself as he sat there, so shaken with happiness, that he would never again question the soul-linking channel of the bond. Catherine was alive...and awake.

And she was headed for the tunnels.

Thrilling with the contact as he never had before, embracing it wholly, he could feel every scintilla of her confusion and urgency, all tumbling at him through the mysterious interconnection they shared. Fear...love, and longing.

But no recognition. Incredibly, she was coming to find what she did not yet know. Because even without knowing---she loved. That...oh yes, that...he could sense.

His Catherine.

He was up and off of the roof before the realization had even fully formed in his ecstasy-drenched mind.

"You sure about this, lady? It ain't too safe around here." The taxi driver's fearful glance into the shaded foliage clearly conveyed his opinion of her sudden nocturnal foray into the depths of the park.

It was gloomy, she acknowledged to herself, with the trees overhead blocking even the faint light of the stars. But the need which gripped her could not be silenced by the shadows lurking on-up ahead, nor even by the nameless, pervasive fear which was her constant companion these days. She could handle the shifting night-shadows. If there were muggers stalking the park tonight--well, she would handle them too. She was suddenly certain that she could.

The deeper fear she would ignore as long as she was able.

"I'm sure." She paid the driver hastily and watched in silence as he drove slowly off. Then she turned to the culvert.

The opening was dark and drear, made more formidable by the dense vegetation which framed it for ten yards out. But it was, unmistakably, the scene of the drawing. Her unknown artist had even sketched the dipping crownvetch on the dingy walls, and the mesh garbage can out in front. It spiked the darkness she contemplated now, a bizarre wire sentinel brimming with MacDonald's bags and plastic Coke bottles.

She took a deep breath and moved resolutely forward.

She knew this place.

The sight of the small, cinder-block enclosure hit her like a shock wave, as she halted to stand, stock-still, just inside the opening.

The whisper of the memory which housed her knowledge, inscrutable and unconnected, edged in and out of her thoughts as her hands explored the wall to her immediate right. Following an inchoate urge, she bent low until her fingers found the joiner of floor and wall, traveled along it slowly. A rock the size of her fist met her hand. She lifted it and stared, with dark-adjusting eyes, at its rough shape.

I used this, she realized, feeling a tiny quake of excitement. I used it to signal on the...

Pipes. Even as she turned and made out their striated lengths along the wall she knew of their purpose. Deep inside, the panic rose again with the knowledge that she was moving dangerously closer to recall, but she shoved it down to connect the indefinable shapes of the recollections which pulled at her mind and heart.

Her eyes searched the gloom as she struggled to single out and nail down at least one capricious memory. What was her strongest, truest feeling about this place?

As before on the balcony, when she had shut out other sights and sounds, so now did that same effort bring the knowledge forth. It whispered over her, grew stronger, then leapt up like a living thing, taking form and dimension of its own until she was gasping at the sweetness of it, drenching her where she stood.

Here. She had met him here. She had waited for him, watched in impatient hope, until he had appeared, mantle swirling, from...

There. The shape of the huge, circular portal was recognizable now, the doorway to a hidden, guarded world. She closed her eyes, feeling again the bounding rush of emotion that was the joining of their bodies in a lovers' close clasp.

Who? Who was he? Think, Chandler, she cudgeled her sluggish mind, think...

No, whispered the low voice inside her reaching thoughts. Feel, Catherine, feel with your heart.

And she felt again, as she had before, what it was to be in his embrace. The warmth, the absolute rightness of it, the slow-kindling excitement, running like a hidden stream under the sustaining closeness of their connection. Her tears formed, fell, in a sudden flood, as the realization swept over her of how deeply she had loved, and how dear price she had paid, these past weeks, to keep the fear at bay.

He is my life, Father. Without him, there is nothing.

Suddenly she could not bear the emptiness of the room which no longer held him, the searching of the heart which would not recognize his face. In words made thundering by the force of her emotion, she cried out, convulsively:

"Where are you? Where are you?"

He raced toward the tiny room, panting, his whole being focused on the pumping action of his arms and legs which would get him to the door. If only it were not a hallucination, born of his deep need for her and his unassuaged mourning. If only she were really...

Nearer, dear God, nearer now...

The hidden entrance loomed ahead, at the far end of the tunnel. He flew to it, and lurched to a stop. For one sickening moment, he was sure he had imagined it all. He could not possibly be living this moment...running to Catherine...waiting for her to split his world wide open with an unimaginable miracle...

Trembling violently, he reached up for the lever.



~

"Where are you?"

The only answer was the whistle of the rising wind outside. She swallowed hard to fight back the tears, feeling more bitterly alone than she had ever felt in her life. Then they poured out anyway as she folded to the floor in a huddled, miserable heap.

He felt his palm make contact with the wooden handle, gripped it hard, and jerked it down. The door slid open to reveal a bent, sobbing figure.

Catherine.

He would have known her had he been deaf, or sightless, or a century dead. It was Catherine.

He half-fell into the room as his knees buckled uselessly under him, shaken beyond belief as the joy ignited his blood and pumped its fiery message along his veins and arteries to his sore, broken heart. Catherine. Alive. Eight feet away from the soul her death had shattered, from the arms which had never, without holding her, felt complete.

Eight feet away from him.

So intent was she on her own misery that she failed to hear the gentle sliding of the door. Nothing. There was nothing of him here except her empty expectations and the bittersweet knowledge that they had once held each other close, on this spot. She drew a deep, shuddering breath. The trip, then, had been a failure. Random memories, scattered and incomplete, were the only happiness she had left, unless Joe could somehow find him. Tonight, in this forlorn and empty chamber, that hope seemed a million miles away. If only she could, just once, hear his voice. Slowly, she bowed her head; the coldness of the damp cement seemed to chill her very soul.

"Where are you?" she moaned.

"Catherine." There was a deep, aching tenderness in the whispered word, and it soared through the darkness like a phantom symphony.

She rose, gasping, eyes sweeping over the walls. And saw, eight feet away, a huge shape, deep in the shadows and unmoving.

"Don't be afraid," the low, panting voice continued, and paused, as if unbearably moved. "Please...don't be afraid."

Him. It was him. Her lover was here, now. Helpless against the barrage of sensation the reality of that loving voice evoked, she stood ecstatic and shaking. She had come here to find him, and he had miraculously appeared.

"You," she breathed. Without another thought, she moved to hurtle herself into his waiting arms...

The fear bit so cruelly and unexpectedly that she let out an inarticulate cry of pain. In the magic of the moment, she had forgotten the Menace. It exacted a terrible price for her forgetfulness, catching her brutally up and dragging her to the edge of the abyss.

"Catherine!" said the alarmed voice of her lover, from several steps closer. But the terror was back with her now, and would not relinquish its hold.

"No!" she screamed. The crushing agony was so close. If he moved nearer, she would perish utterly. He stopped, mercifully, a few feet away, as if reading her very thoughts. But as he did so, she could feel his love for her, emanating from his being in boundlessly deep waves. And she wanted only to run to him, no matter what the cost. She loved him. If the destruction reached her in spite of that truth, she would have at least moment in the haven of his arms.

And she would know that what they shared was deathless.

"Please...who are you?" She could barely speak for the shivering.

There was a long pause, and then: "Vincent."

"Vincent," she murmured, as if dreaming, and added again, in a gabbled, reflexive rush: "Thoughloversbelost."

"Love shall not," choked the voice from the darkness.

"And death shall have no dominion." His words held all the depth and timbre she had unknowingly omitted from her own. But they did not still the inexorable skulking of the Menace as it moved closer, now shadowing even her lover.

"Catherine," he cried. "What is it? Tell me."

"The Menace," she burst out.

"My love," he said urgently, and she heard, even through her horror, the change in the low voice. "Is he...a part of me?"

"No!" she cried immediately. "Don't you know? Can't you see him? He's...killing me...and smiling." Her teeth clenched, hard, over the reality her words brought to the evil presence, moving ever closer.

"I see him in your terrified heart, Catherine," he said swiftly. "But he is not real."

Real? Of..course..it's...real. In a flash, she was again in another time and situation, face contorted in fear, hands raking the air as she and the one she loved battled the demons of an earlier time. Together they had survived, for he had saved her. But nothing could be gained by clinging to that hope, for this was so much worse than the other, than any other. He could not save her now. Nothing could. Screeching, she turned to flee.

"Catherine!" The force of his cry stunned her out of the panic which shot momentum into her flailing arms and legs. He was calling to her...

She whirled. "I can't come to you!" she shouted. "I'll die!"

The musical voice flowed over her terror-stricken heart like balm. "Then I will come to you, my love."

"Don't move!"

"I am not moving, Catherine." He was not. He was standing before her, still as a statue, reaching out with his voice alone. "I feel your fear, Catherine. And your despair. But know this, for I have learned it only this night: this man who has wounded you so--this Gabriel--is not as strong as our love. Nothing is."

"He's stronger than anything."

"No!" His voice had risen again in its urgency. "Evil cannot live here----it cannot conquer what we have, what we



share. Our love lives. And it's all that matters.

Our love is all that matters. It's worth everything. She had a sudden, almost blinding mental image of running headlong into the strength and safety of his arms, in the dark, at this very tunnel entrance, a lifetime ago. When their love had hung in the balance, and he had attempted to free her, to find another path than the one they walked together, and another love.

For her, there had been no other. There never could be.

Our love is all that matters. It's worth everything. With every fibre of her being, she clung to those offered words and the safety they promised. The Menace raved closer, but still she stood, made tensile steel by the long-ago vow. Everything. Closer still the evil came, its ghastly form hovered malevolently overhead, reaching to pull her down into death and disintegration.

"Everything!" she shouted, resisting the darkness with all her might. For a moment, it seemed she had won, and was free to to run to the one she loved. Then she slumped on the cold floor in a dead faint and knew nothing more.

"What do you mean, she's gone?" It had been a rough day fighting the tangled and apathetic bureaucracy of New York's ponderous judicial system, the only bright spot the promised glow on Cathy's face when he announced that he was taking her to Vincent. Then he had arrived back at the office to the message that she had disappeared. The alien face with its wonderful, piercing eyes rose in his imagination. What in the world would he tell Vincent?

"She left in the middle of the night, Mr. Maxwell. No one saw her go, and no one knows where she went. We'll keep looking. Please let us know if you find out anything." He hung up with a weary sigh. Where on earth could Cathy have gone?

"Bad day?" The cheerful voice of Bennie, the lunchtime sandwich vendor accosted him from the doorway, as he looked over in surprise. "You need a special delivery. Pastrami on rye." He waved aloft a fat sandwich.

Joe looked at his watch. "It's five o'clock," he said. "You're supposed to come at noon."

"I did, but I didn't have this then." He plopped down the sandwich purposefully.

"Well, I'm not hungry now."

"Do yourself a favor and open it at least, Mr. Maxwell." Bennie winked good-naturedly from the doorway and departed.

"Bennie!" Joe called after him. What was the matter with the guy, anyway? He stared, exasperated, at the food. The last thing he wanted right now was a stale, leftover...

Then he saw the small piece of folded paper protruding from the layered fronds of lettuce. Curiously, he unwrapped the sandwich. The folded paper was a note.

"Catherine is Below," it read. "Please come to the entrance as soon as possible." It was signed "V".

"Two lunches today, Joe?" Rita Escobar approached his

desk with a mile-high stack of depositions.

"Take over, Rita," he ordered without preamble, as he grabbed his jacket and hurried out the door.

Joe had expected to see Vincent waiting in the shadows of the entrance, but he was met instead by a wiry fourteen-year-old who introduced himself as Zach.

"This way," Zach gestured, as he tripped the secret lever to the sliding doorway. "Vincent sent me because he doesn't want to leave Catherine, even for a minute. He told me to guide you down."

"How's Cathy?" Joe asked hurriedly. Doubtless a teenager wouldn't be the greatest source of information, but maybe he would know something.

From ahead of him, he saw the boy shake his head. "Not good," he called back over his shoulder. He led Joe down the rocky inclines of three narrow, zigzagging passageways, talking animatedly all the way.

"Wait!" Joe finally put a hand on the boy's shoulder to halt him. "Tell me everything you know" he urged. "What's going on?"

"Like I said, she came in the middle of the night to the tunnels," Zach explained patiently. "And Vincent met her here."

"How did he know?" Joe was puzzled. Cathy might have had a memory prompt which had guided her footsteps to the tunnels, but he distinctly remembered telling Vincent that she wouldn't be there until the following night.

"They have this connection," said Zach. "It's hard to explain, but they can tell things about each other, somehow. And he just knew."

"Oh."

"Vincent could tell she was trying to remember, but she was really afraid." Zach was turning out to have a surprisingly complete story, for an uninvolved party. "And then Vincent told her that their love was worth everything, and she shouted 'Everything!' and keeled over. Cold. When she came too, she was like a robot. No words, no movement. Nothing. So Vincent carried her Below, and told me this morning to get a message to you. It just took a while," apologetically. "Bennie's wife was sick."

"What's going on now?"

"Well, the council---and just about everybody else---is gathered in Father's chamber. That was another reason to get you down here. Vincent told us you saved Catherine, and that we could trust you."

"Who's we?"

"See for yourself." During the latter part of Zach's narrative they had moved side by side through several more, twisting tunnels, and Joe now saw a lighted opening up ahead. He stepped cautiously through the entranceway to find himself in a rock-carved chamber, crowded with people.

Not exactly the kind of people you'd find on the streets of New York, he recognized immediately, unless you wondered into the middle of a Renaissance festival or a Mardi Gras party.



All of them were clothed in old, piecemeal garments variegated and worn. They looked like extras from the street scenes of Les Miserables. And they were all staring openly at him.

"Who the hell is that?" came the loud comment issuing from a massive man to the left.

"William." A slender woman admonished him with the word as she stepped forward and held out her hand in welcome. "It's Mr. Maxwell, from the District Attorney's office. He's a friend of Catherine's." Joe took her hand, tentatively, and shook it. "I'm Mary. Welcome."

"Can he be trusted?" The man asked again, suspiciously.

"Vincent sent for him," offered a pretty blue-jean clad girl of seventeen or eighteen, as if that answered the question. Indeed, it must have, for the man called William said no more. Joe stood uncertainly beside Mary, wondering where this crazy case would lead him next. Alice's rabbit hole? Middle Earth?

"Vincent is with Catherine. Father will be out soon, and then we'll get started," said Mary to Joe, by way of explanation. The words only increased his confusion. He seized on the nearest question of hundreds arising, and asked politely:

"Who's Father?"

"I am." The voice came from behind him, and he spun around to see an oddly familiar figure entering the crowded room.

"You!"

"Mr. Maxwell." The man limped toward him, acknowledging his presence with a slight twinkle of his tired eyes. "We meet again. I only wish it could be under more...pleasant circumstances." He paused. "We're very grateful for all you've done for Catherine, believe me."

Joe nodded without speaking.

"And now we need to discuss what happens next," continued the brisk voice more loudly, in the tone of one accustomed to leadership. "Zach, will you get Peter? He should be here for this."

"What about Vincent?" piped up a dark-haired, dark-eyed girl of eleven or twelve.

"He will not leave Catherine," said Father, and a few people around Joe nodded, as if they understood this well.

"Where he belongs," muttered a young man with a round thatch of blond hair.

"Yes, Mouse, I...think he would agree with you," replied Father. "Still, there are things to discuss, in spite of how" he paused, voice softening "very happy we are to have Catherine return to us. She is very sick, and she needs help." Ah...Peter, come in," he called, beckoning with his hand to an entering figure. "Please...you have a place in this."

With a shock, Joe distinguished in the semi-darkness the form of one of Manhattan's most prominent obstetricians, Peter Alcott. He was running into the whole world down here. Who would come through the tunnel entrance next...Mayor Koch? Donald Trump? The name brought another ambitious real estate developer to mind---Elliot Burch. He was suddenly certain that Elliot had known Vincent. Had he been protecting him, in the jail where he refused to speak? Not for the first time, Joe

felt a flash of something like regret over Elliot's death. Perhaps Cathy had been right, and there was some good in his scheming head after all.

"Well, well," Peter Alcott had stopped before him, smiling. He shook Joe's hand, hard. "It seems you've pulled off something of a miracle, Joe." The people around them fell silent as Peter spoke. "Autopsy, death certificate, coroner's report, not to mention a body. I don't know how you cut through all that red tape to save her life, but I'd love to hear the whole story sometime."

"I had some hairy moments," Joe admitted. "Do you...uh," he leaned closer, his voice lowered. "Do you...live down here too, Peter?"

"No." Peter Alcott chuckled. "But sometimes, I wish I did."

"How is she, Peter?" asked Mary worriedly.

He shook his head. "No change. No communication, no gaze, no facial expression. She stiffened when I examined her, but that was it. Catherine is...not herself."

"Sounds like autism," muttered Father gloomily.

"What's autism, Father?" asked a small, bespeckled boy.

Not for the first time, Father considered the remark of a small child carefully.

"It's a sickness that babies and children get, Eric," he explained. "Where they don't talk to people, or smile, or acknowledge the existence of others in any way."

"Do only babies and children get it?" pursued the child.

"Well, yes."

"Then Catherine can't have it. She's a grown-up. She must have something else," he concluded matter-of-factly.

Joe saw Peter catch Father's eye. "I'll field this one, Jacob, if I may." The sight of the impeccable Peter Alcott bending to address a raggedly-dressed child was one Joe filed away to re-examine, later. "Eric," he widened his glance and raised his voice to the room. "All of you...we don't really know what's wrong with Catherine. She seems to be displaying many of the classic symptoms of autism, although," with an acknowledging nod to the boy, "Eric has accurately pointed out that Catherine is not a child. But the point is, in her condition, we don't know of the danger she poses, to herself or to others."

"We think Catherine should be above, in a hospital," added Father. At the collective murmur of disapproval from the crowd he shrugged defensively. "I'm sorry...I know you all love Catherine and Vincent. But this is a medical problem. And Peter and I, as doctors, need to determine the best place for Catherine."

The blond boy named Mouse pushed through the crowd, uncowed, apparently, by the combined expertise of Father and Peter.

"Best place is with Vincent," he said, firmly.

"Is it?" Father asked intently. "Can you be sure? Can any of us be sure, when she is in this state? I only want to do what is best for her, Mouse. You know that. That is, of course, providing I can persuade Vincent to let her go. But



I'm counting on all of you to help me."

"Why not let Mr. Maxwell speak?" Mary suggested suddenly. "He's been with her more than any of us." For the second time in the past hour, Joe found himself the focus of fifty pairs of unfamiliar eyes.

"Yes, please, Mr. Maxwell. I'm forgetting. You have been with Catherine all this time. Please tell us what you think."

Joe cleared his throat awkwardly. "Look, I'm no doctor."

"It doesn't matter," spoke up a soft-voiced, balding man from the stairwell where he was seated. "Just tell us what you think."

"Think..." he hesitated. Everybody was looking at him like his words would be straight from the burning bush, and he didn't have the faintest idea what to say. Because he hadn't really thought at all, with Cathy, he'd just felt and reacted and cared.

Cared. He had it now. It was so simply, really, where Cathy and Vincent were concerned. And he spoke with confidence as the words came to him. "I think our lives aren't changed by the people who pass through them. They're changed by the people who love us." He would thank Cheryl later, he thought, for articulating the truth he had always known, deep down. "And if there's anything I know about Cathy, anything that I've seen over the past months, it's how much she wants to be with Vincent. I think she should stay here. She belongs here. With him."

A soft spatter of spontaneous applause sounded from the assemblage. The bald man on the stairs who had asked him to speak nodded, eyes on Joe, tapping into his open palm with a length of lead pipe. Mary let out a long sigh, and Mouse looked triumphantly over at Father, as he slapped a grimy hand of approval on Joe's white-shirted back.

"With Vincent," he agreed, beaming. The matter, it seemed, had been settled.

Joe saw five minutes later that there had been no need to discuss it, after all.

He knelt in front of her, curiously like a knight of old bending before his lady. One furred hand held a bowl of steaming soup while the other ladled its contents to her lips.

"Here, Catherine." The deep voice was infinitely tender, and resonant with emotion. "You must keep up your strength. Eat, my love, and soon you will be well again." The vacant eyes showed no expression as Catherine Chandler mechanically opened her mouth, a life-sized robot obeying its programmed commands. A drop of soup dribbled unnoticed down the side of her mouth. Vincent wiped it away gently.

He'd never let her go anywhere, thought Joe with certainty. Never in a million years. He felt a sudden flash of sympathy for the powerful figure kneeling before the lifeless mannequin that was Catherine Chandler. Vincent, after all he had hoped for, must be going crazy.

"I'm sorry, Vincent," he said awkwardly, putting a hand on the massive shoulder. What else could he say to the one

who had already suffered so much?

But he was again surprised, as he had been many times this strange day. Vincent looked up with eyes that were radiant with hope.

"Yesterday, Joe...she said my name," he whispered in fierce gladness. "Catherine...said...my...name."

Then Joe knew suddenly that he didn't need to worry about Vincent, or Cathy. Vincent was, Joe surmised, himself again now, the self that Diana and probably Elliot had never seen. For Cathy was alive, and he knew it, and it was more than he had ever hoped to have, this side of the grave.

He had the strength, it seemed, for the both of them.

Joe could only hope it was enough.



Through the long, dark days that followed, Vincent never left her side.

He became adept at sensing the rhythms of her body, as he had once sensed the rhythms of her heart. He alone knew when she was hungry, when her muscles wanted exercise, when the constant, inward effort of maintaining the protective wall of solitude made her exhausted enough for sleep. And he alone could issue the soft-voiced commands that somehow accessed compliance in her uncomprehending motor systems, though her vacant eyes gave no evidence. Catherine Chandler was locked somewhere deep within herself, and when she would come forth again, if indeed she ever could, was a subject the entire community puzzled over unceasingly amid the chores and cares and simple pleasures of their own lives Below.

For Vincent, it was a time of waiting and watching and straining to decipher the subtle physical and psychological messages that Catherine unwittingly gave off. It was found early on that he, with his special link to her, was the only one able to accomplish such fine-tuned discernment. He was the one who caught the nearly imperceptible stiffening she displayed when Father attempted a rudimentary program of physical therapy with her, and forestalled him. And it was he who noticed the merest flicker of distress in her eyes when Peter, visiting her, mentioned the word "hospital."

When it became clear to Vincent that he was the only person who could fully ascertain Catherine's inner state, he would not allow others to attend to her, even for the brief sequences he had previously absented himself to visit and play with his son. Mouse and Cullen, at his request, moved his bed into Catherine's chamber, so that he could be with her day and night. Zach took his daily reports to Joe. Mary now brought Jacob to the door, and Vincent went out to be with him, for in this one issue Father's opinion had held sway---he was worried, after hearing the ICU incident, that the sight of Jacob would spark further deterioration in Catherine. Vincent, of a somewhat different turn of mind, was sufficiently ambivalent to agree to keep his son away, for the time being at least.

And so he hovered near, and guarded, and kept her safe as well as he could---though he had no way of knowing how successful he was, for her eyes never flickered a message from the fortress of impermeability that surrounded her heart. He steadfastly believed that Catherine was gradually moving toward healing from deep within her psyche, and that she would come to life again when she was ready. To contemplate anything

else was unthinkable. And so he spent the hours with her, talking to her, carving her small gifts out of wood, playing chess games with her while he discussed the merits the moves she had made through his hands and his wits. And he read to her, endlessly, from the books the children fetched at his whispered requests, Dickens and Thoreau, and the simple, melancholy verses of Emily Dickenson, the sharp, discordant cadences of Sandburg. He read her Dumas and Twain and Thackeray, and then switched to well-beloved children's classics for a change of pace, William's The Velveteen Rabbit, and Grimm's Fairy Tales. Sometimes when he read in the evening hours, he could hear the children gather softly outside the room to listen, their cautious footsteps and adjuring whispers the only two-way dialogue he heard all day.

It was during this period of watching and waiting that Vincent felt he truly touched within his own heart what it was to love Catherine. Always before, he had assumed that his love for her encompassed his entire being, but he found reservoirs of feeling within himself that he had previously been ignorant of, and he pondered over them even as he rejoiced in the extra measure of empathic strength and support he was now able to give to Catherine. He wondered if the strange, almost mystical sense he had that she would someday be well again stemmed from their still-unremembered union in the cave, and if what had happened there was responsible for the sense of peace and unwavering purpose he felt now. Certainly, those brief few days between his rescue and her capture had been the happiest in his life before now, plagued though they had been by the ominous sensation that he could no longer access her feelings through the bond. He and Catherine had shared something profoundly connecting in that dark time, so vivid to his memory still that he could close his eyes and live again the hauntingly tender moment listening to Mozart under the Park. Perhaps that memory was fueling his optimism now. Or perhaps he just wanted her to get better so badly that his mind was closed to grimmer possibilities.

Whatever the case---the waiting went on.

"No change?" Father's eager glance accosted Mary as she moved through the doorway to his chamber with a stack of faded blankets.

She shook her head. "No change."

"It's been ten days, Mary!" His voice shook with the suppressed frustration of a parent useless in the face of his child's despair. At his words, Mary walked over to him, her face creased with sympathy.

"I know you're worried," she ventured. "But if this is any help to you, I believe you're giving Vincent what he needs right now."

He made a small, frustrated snort. "What he needs...dear God, I wish I could be sure what he needs...what they both need..."

"Father," Mary's tone was timid and self-deprecating as always, but her next soft words plugged him like buckshot.



"What they need is for you to stay out of their way."

He stared at her. Frank words, these, from the woman whose tact under the often-difficult conditions of tunnel living was legend---and from the person who had consistently been his most stalwart ally.

"Mary?" He sputtered questioningly. "I rather thought you'd, well, um...you'd..."

"Sympathize with you?" Her voice was as loving as ever. "I do. But support your opinions at the expense of my own? I don't think so, Father. Not any more."

"Why not?" It was out before he could pull it back, his need to feel listened to and valued.

"Jessica," she said, unmaliciously but firmly. Before he could stammer a reply, she added reassuringly. "But don't ever worry about losing my support, Father," she headed for the door and turned back with a conciliatory smile. "Because alot of the time, I think you're right."

In the end it was Father who saw the first hint of a change in Catherine.

He had come to the doorway to see them, still pondering Mary's words, and looked in upon a bittersweet and touching spectacle: Vincent, brushing Catherine's hair.

She sat, motionless, on a long-legged stool that had once graced a seedy bar on lower Forty-Second Street, a locale whose frequent and destructive brawls provided a constant source of repairable furniture for the unparticular denizens Below. Her slippered feet were tangled in the rungs like a child's, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes devoid of feeling. Behind her stood Vincent, his face intent, his expression infinitely tender. In one huge, clawed hand he held a hairbrush, and he moved it through Catherine's hair gently, smoothing with his palm the static strands which rose from the tumbling mass. He was silent, and seemed so wrapped in the moment that Father, peering in from the doorway, swallowed hard. As a lifetime student of the human condition, he had never seen anything approaching the devotion of his son for this woman.

Unless had been hers, in return, for him.

"Vincent," he called softly. Vincent looked up, bemused, and reluctantly put down the brush.

But as he did so he turned away from her, and Father saw what he did not. In only a fraction of a movement, Catherine's head jerked toward him and back, and Father saw one small hand uncurl as if to reach to where he stood. And was it not the merest flicker of recognition in her eyes? He could not be sure. He thought so. He gestured excitedly to his son, and pulled him out the door as he neared.

"Her head followed you as you moved, Vincent. Her hand uncurled." He clasped his son's shoulder and said gladly.

"She's getting better, Vincent. It's working."

Only the sudden, flaring brightness in his son's eyes told him how hard it had been for Vincent to live on hope alone. "You saw this?" he questioned excitedly. "You saw Catherine move and look to me?"

Father nodded in answer, looking to Catherine and back again to his son. "Have faith, Vincent," he encouraged. "Your love will win, in the end."

"To doubt that, Father," he said soberly. "Would be to doubt my reason for existence."

"You look exhausted." Mary's face in the dimness of the candlelit chamber was a welcome sight, and as Vincent rose stiffly to greet her he was conscious that she was, in fact, right. Catherine had been asleep for nearly two hours. He had been unwilling to close his eyes, after Father's observation, lest he miss some important milestone in her recovery. And so he had sat, and looked at her, and dreamed, wondering if Pygmylion had felt such yearning hope with his beautiful Galatea, before the gods had rewarded his devotion by stirring her stone form to life.

"I'll sit with her for a minute. Why don't you go down and hold Jacob? He's awake for some reason."

Vincent started guiltily. His only regret in the ordeal had been how little time he had had to devote to his son, though he had managed every moment he could.

"Could you, Mary? I haven't seen him this evening." He'd left her so seldom that it somehow seemed unwise, but he did not want the day to pass without at least a few moments of contact with his son.

"I'll only be gone a moment." He nodded gratefully to her, and with a long, studying look at Catherine, in which he judged it would be alright this once if he hurried back, moved through the passageway. Mary seated herself in his empty chair.

Neither of them saw Catherine's eyes suddenly open wide in alarm as her hands slowly clenched into tight, balled-up fists.

Jacob greeted his father with a soft coo, moving his arms in rhythmic frenzy to signal his delight. Vincent lifted him from his crib and jiggled him gently. A spate of nonsense syllables greeted this action, for Jacob was a baby who loved to be held, and was vocal in expressing his appreciation. His eyes, a deep, pure blue, like Vincent's, but huge and almond-shaped, like Catherine's, gazed at his father's face.

"Yes, she is better, Jacob," Vincent said. And as he had once felt his own strength flow into Jacob's sick, frail body in those black moments before both were free of Gabriel, so he now felt his own certainty reassure his small son. Catherine would come home to them. She would once again hold the baby she thought she had forever lost...

He looked around, spying in the corner a faded, overstuffed easy chair that he had once lugged with a reluctant Mouse down through the narrow tunnels from a Morningside Avenue dumpster. Tiredly, he settled his weight into it with Jacob in his arms, glad now to have taken the trouble. The depths of it seemed to welcome him like down, beckoning him to rest for just a moment. He leaned his head back...



He could hear her agonized screaming even in his dreams. It tore through his heart as he awoke, causing his fingers to shake furiously as he leaped from the chair and put Jacob in his crib. In three fast, running strides, he was out of the chamber and hurrying down the passageway to the nearby room where Catherine had been sitting motionless for countless, endless days.

"I was just opening my mouth to call you," shouted Mary. "It started not three seconds ago." That meant he had heard her, he thought rapidly, before she had even begun to scream, her erupting panic finding its way to him through the mystical connection of the bond.

The dim light of the candles revealed little save a huddled, raving figure thrashing about the bed. Vincent quickly lit a kerosene lantern, almost burning himself in his fear and haste, and held it high above his head.

What he saw was a shocking sight. Catherine was alternately tearing at the makeshift covers with her teeth and screaming at the very top of her lungs. Her eyes were huge and staring wildly, and even in the semi-darkness he could see that she was ghastly pale. She cowered when he ventured closer, the piercing screams halting for a few brief seconds. Then they continued at an even higher decibel level, a strident and unnatural caterwauling loud enough to wake the dead.

Vincent stared at her in tormented helplessness. The sight of Catherine in such anguish clouded his senses until his own mind was numb with pain. Fiercely, he battled to hold off the dread that assaulted his own senses through hers, but he was utterly unable to do so. Catherine's sharp terror, combined with his own deep fear of losing her, froze him momentarily as he stood.

"Vincent?" Father's voice, alarmed, echoed in the passageway, and Vincent turned his head to see him approaching the doorway with Rebecca and Jamie hard on his heels.

"Stay with Catherine---make sure she doesn't harm herself," he shouted.

"Where are you going?" Jamie shrilled, her eyes riveted on Catherine.

"I'll be back. Just stay with her." He brushed through the distraught quartet and headed up the corridor. To where? Where could he go to find his way through his own raging panic, to the answers which would help her? He needed someplace where he could focus his turbulent thoughts, someplace where the enormity of her agony did not render him powerless. Instinctively, his footsteps turned into the tunnel which led to the Central Park drainage culvert. To the quiet there, and the sense of Catherine that the place evoked. There she had run to him, hurling herself into his arms so long ago. And there she had come to him ten days before.

He reached it, panting in exertion and near-panic, and slumped against the wall. He could still hear the cacophony that was Catherine's voice, pulling him back to the room. But he steeled himself against it forcibly, fighting to resist its piercing call. Pressing his back up against the wall until



he could feel the bite of each bulging mortar ridge, he drove his reluctant mind into calling up an image of her, as she had been before the torment her life had become. Catherine. His Catherine. Immeasurably, incalculably loving. Unwaveringly steadfast. Impossibly beautiful, with a profound, soul-deep beauty which had nothing to do with her face or body, but everything to do with who she was, who she had been...

"Not who she was, who she is," he said aloud to the gloom, staring intently at the tunnel opening, where her light step had sounded so often, making his very heart sing for joy. He had mistakenly assumed since the night of her return that she was different, and now realized that this assumption, born from a deep desire to protect her, had blocked his ability to understand the nature of her trauma. Catherine was the same. But the events of the past year had damaged her psyche until she had been forced to speak in a series of unrecognizable languages. Listen, not to the words, but to the message, he suddenly recalled from some far-off treatise by Freud. Catherine's loss of memory had been a message. What? Probably that she was psychically overloaded, unable to deal with the pain of recollection. Her silence had been a message as well. And now her screaming was a message. But what could have caused such devastation?

His mind rapidly catalogued the events of her capture as he knew them, searching for the illusive key that would mitigate the despair pounding for entry into his own consciousness. Her kidnaping and captivity? No, her spirit was strong enough to endure the imprisonment of her body. The loss of him? He didn't think so. Her words of parting on the roof had been the affirmation of a truly enduring love, too powerful to be overcome, even in death. What, then?

"What? In God's name, what?" he shouted, hammering his fist against the wall in frustration, feeling as powerless and vulnerable as a baby. There had to be some piece he was missing, some link that would stave off the torment now threatening to crush them all---him, Catherine, and Jacob...

Jacob. The realization roared through him, and as it did so, he was off, racing down the passageway. Of course. The loss of her son, her beloved baby boy, who had been torn from her body and handed to a monster...her last link to love, to hope, to him...

Jacob had fallen into a sleep so sound he barely grimaced as his father lifted his tiny form from the crib. His chubby fist reflexively reached for the fold of his cloak as Vincent wrapped him with quick efficiency and cradled him against his body for protective warmth against the tunnel's chill. Catherine's screaming was, if possible, even louder now. There was no time to waste.

A group of figures huddled silently inside the doorway of Catherine's room. He pressed through them quickly, intent only on reaching her. Most fell back at his approach, but one did not. Father clutched at his elbow, stopping his progress with a shout of warning.



"Vincent, what are you thinking of?" he exclaimed above the din.

"Father, trust me," Vincent shouted. "Only the loss of Jacob could cause her such agony."

"You cannot hand Jacob to her now!" Father's dignified voice was high-pitched with alarm, and it came out as a wheezing squeak that Vincent would have found amusing in any circumstance but this. "She might hurt him...even kill him."

"No!" Vincent's voice thundered so loudly that the small assemblage collectively jumped. "It is the loss of Jacob that harmed her, killed her. Only his return can bring her back!"

"Dear God," said Father. It was only a whisper, but Vincent heard it between the screams as Catherine paused to fill her lungs with air. The thought that he might be wrong rose like a dark mist before his eyes. To jeopardize the safety of Jacob, his one remaining connection to the woman he loved better than life, his incalculably precious son...he inhaled sharply, and approached the bed. Catherine's eyes were glazed with fear, her arms swinging in wild, delirious abandon. Closing his eyes momentarily to summon the strength and sending a fervent, anguished prayer heavenward, Vincent thrust Jacob to Catherine's chest. Her hands clutched the tiny bundle fiercely, shaking it. No, Vincent thought, despair welling like a black cloud to overwhelm his senses. No, no...and just as he began to wrench Jacob away from her, the cacophony halted abruptly into a silence more deafening than screams, and Catherine, suddenly still, lowered her head and focused sightless eyes on her baby son.

She heard the screaming from far off, from the other side of some fathomless unbridgeable chasm which cleft her soul in two, eviscerated her, tore from the depths of her being some nameless, limitless reaction to the horror which had no beginning and no ending, only a circling vortex of infinity. And before her very eyes, the Menace gained form and substance as it rose to enormous height, hovering over her with sinister malevolence and threatening eternal doom. It struck, and she sank like a stone, falling, falling into the abyss, drawing her last breath, fingers spasming frantically...

Our love is all that matters. It's worth everything.

...and her grasping hands found a warm, breathing bundle of cloth and she clutched it with the last shred of hope in her dissolving soul, pulled it to her, held on for dear life...

...and her eyes slowly came into focus, staring incomprehensibly at the tiny, wide-eyed infant in her arms. A baby...no, her baby, her son, she knew it, oh dear God, she thought, gasping, if this is a dream I hope I never, ever wake, and if I can conjure my son, perhaps I can conjure Vincent as well, and I'll live here forever in my dream and never ask for anything else, please, please, please...

...and she lifted her head and there he was, standing before

her, mythic and powerful, his heart in his eyes, shining like a vision from Paradise.

"Vincent." The hoarse whisper was all she could muster as she drank him in through every pore, but it was enough. With a cry he caught her tightly in his arms, and enfolded her and her son in the unutterably safe protection of the only world she had ever wanted since the day they had met a thousand years ago...the world of his embrace. Instinctively, she shifted her baby in her arms as her head sought its home on the solid expanse of his shoulder. She heard him speak her name, over and over, felt him convulsively mold and outline her with his hands, as if in terror that she would vanish if he lifted even a finger from her shivering skin. Below her ear, she could feel the hard beating of his heart as he held her pressed fiercely against it, his lips wildly kissing her hair and her hot, wet eyes.

"Catherine, Catherine," he said, again and again. It was the voice that had haunted her through the weeks of unknowing, and now, as the before and after of her life fused into one continuous and unbroken reality, she took it in deeply, inhaled it, that low, melodious voice that was his alone in all the world. She would never, as long as she lived, get enough of that voice, or of him.

Finally, she was anchored enough by his tight hold on her to risk lifting her head. His eyes, oceans of loving blue, met hers.

"Tell me that I never have to wake up from this dream," she said, in a voice so raw it sounded little like her own. She looked at the child in her arms and back at the one whom reason dictated had been lost to her forever, on the desolate rooftop where death had claimed her...even as she had struggled to tell him that their love could never be lost.

His huge hands, trembling, cupped her face. Tears streamed down his cheeks. "It is no dream, Catherine. You are Home."

"Home? With you and our son, Vincent? It can't be. I was dying...I know I was. That's why I said...it's a dream, I know it is. Just don't let me wake up Vincent." She was sobbing now, clutching the rough weave of his vest in helpless horror. "Please God, don't ever let me wake up."

"Catherine." His arms instantly pulled her close again, driving away the darkness that swirled to engulf her. "Trust me, Catherine. No dream feels like this. You have come back to me, through the most frightening, impossible odds. You are Home."

"And our child," she asked in a piteous voice. "This is our child?"

"Jacob. I named our son Jacob, Catherine. After Father." The ineffable joy in his voice grounded her, oriented her spatially and temporally to the world she was certain she had forever left, the son and lover she had never thought to see again, in this life.

She and Vincent and Jacob. Home.

The tears flowed freely then as she laid her face against her son's and let them come, washing over her like a baptism,



deep and healing and redemptive. Free. She was free at last. Free of the twisted mechanizations of Gabriel, free of the ever-present terror for her unborn child---and free of the crazed and hopeless longing for the one she loved better than life. She was home.

It was a long time before she finally realized there were other people in the room, looking tearfully on at the blissful reunion. Through the gloom she could make out the still, imposing figure of Father, the slight form of Mary, the tousled blond thatch of Mouse, standing next to an anxiously-waiting Jamie. Pascal was there, and William, beaming a welcome, and a sleep-tousled Laina. Even the children were present on this most momentous of occasions---Samantha and Kipper and Geoffrey, an excited Naomi clutching the hand of a grinning, wide-eyed Eric. In a teary daze, she greeted them, and felt their rejoicing as they came forward one by one to hug her tightly and welcome her home.

"My dear, dear Catherine," was all Father said, but it was so obviously heartfelt that she felt a warm leap of love for him, and asked in a cracked whisper:

"What do you think of your grandson?"

He smiled in response and said softly, "I think he's beautiful, like his mother." And she turned to see Vincent lifting Eric, one-armed, to grip him in a fierce hug.

"Tell Ellie thank you," was all he said, but she felt the words were important and she filed them away to ask Vincent about later...all the while conscious of the unspeakable rapture of the light weight now dozing peacefully in the crook of her elbow, and the steadiness of Vincent's strong arm, keeping her pressed so closely into the warmth of his body that she could feel the corded play of muscles as he moved.

Father attempted to hustle the others out soon after that, as if sensing their need to be alone. The children wanted to hug Catherine again in parting, and the adults as well, until another half-hour had passed and the crowd of well-wishers reluctantly allowed themselves to be shepherded along. Simple people, the tunnelfolk, but with sensitive spirits that deeply felt the love of Vincent for his Catherine, and rejoiced heart-felt with her return. Their excited voices drifted backward as they left, planning a festival never to be forgotten.

In the sudden silence, Catherine felt her heart swell to bursting. Unable to bear the joy of the choices available, her eyes drifted dreamily from Jacob---breathtaking miracle---to Vincent, and riveted. Then she would remember her son and move her eyes back to him, to find them held there, ecstatic and glowing. Vincent's gaze never left her face.

"This must be Heaven," she breathed finally.

"Yes."

"I am never going to leave you again," came her promise, shakily.

"Never."

"Say that again, Vincent."

"Never, my love."

"Are you sure this is real?"

"Very sure."

She looked wonderingly at Jacob. "Vincent, he's so beautiful. I remembered he was beautiful..." she bit her lip and looked at him with huge, vulnerable eyes. "They wouldn't let me hold him," she whispered.

"Catherine," he said painfully. She could tell that he was aching, from the agony that memory brought her. "That evil man is dead, Catherine. He will never harm you or Jacob again."

"He's dead?" Relief swept through her like a sunlit stream. She gave a half-laugh that ended in a sob. "He's dead," she repeated slowly.

"And you...you, Catherine, are alive." The deep voice wavered as it spoke. Something in its inflection pulled her from the shadows of her own past, and she looked at him closely then, noticing for the first time the drawn lines of long suffering etched into his face. Wordlessly, she touched his cheek.

"Did you think I was dead, Vincent?"

"For four months," he whispered with difficulty. He looked at her with the expression of a child frightened beyond imagining. "I..."

"What, Vincent? Tell me."

"I...did not know such unending darkness could exist."

She lifted her head to rest against his. "So much heartbreak," she sighed, thinking only that he must have grieved unendingly, and that she had been the cause. He must have caught the thought and the sadness surrounding it, for he burst out suddenly:

"No, Catherine! It was you who suffered horribly though a nightmare I could not save you from! Oh, Catherine!" he cried in anguish. "Can you ever forgive me for not finding you in time?"

"Hush, love," she whispered quickly, lifting shaking fingers to his lips to still the blame they uttered. He, like she, had deep wounds that only time and togetherness would remedy. But she would see to it that they were healed. Oh, she would see to it.

"There is nothing to forgive. Nothing. Never say that, never think it. Didn't you save me from a living death? Didn't you watch over me, and feed me, and brush my hair?"

"You knew?"

She nodded. "From a great distance. I couldn't move, from the fear. But I could feel it thawing, slowly, until the screams came, and you handed me Jacob. I was powerless to help myself, Vincent," she emphasized. "And you never gave up."

"I never would have."

"You saved me."

"Catherine," he breathed, his eyes clear and untroubled again, shining only with exultation. They had been standing, the three of them, in the small semi-circle of light gleaming from a battered copper lantern, and he drew her now into the shelter of his arm to lead her to the bed. She climbed onto it, Jacob still held tightly in her arms, and scooted over.





Vincent moved onto the bed beside her, and immediately enfolded her again in a close embrace. The candle by the bedside, burned to a nub through the long evening, sputtered slowly to a spark and then died. In the soft dimness, she lifted her hand to caress his cheek. He took it feverishly, and pressed it to his lips again and again.

"I love you," she said. He heaved a great, shaky sigh.

"Is it possible to die of happiness?" he asked, in a tone which clearly conveyed his thoughts on the matter. She laughed gently, wonderingly conscious that she hadn't heard the sound of her own laughter for over a year. And just because it felt and sounded so wonderful, she laughed again.

"What a beautiful sound your laughter is," he murmured.

"I was just thinking of shooting stars."

"You saw them?" he asked in surprise.

She nodded against his chest. "At Saint Regina's. And I remembered the night I bought the rosebush, when you almost kissed me. It's what made me start to remember. Oh, Vincent!" she gasped suddenly, turning to stare at him wide-eyed, arms tightening around Jacob. "What if I hadn't? What if I hadn't stepped out onto the balcony?" The awfulness of that thought could scarcely be borne.

"It was not a possibility, Catherine." His low voice stilled her panic, gentled it away.

"You mean...magic," she ventured.

"Mmmm...I think so." That Vincent, the most rational of intellectuals, could offer such a statement suggested other stories to be told, when the time was right. But she was suddenly unspeakably weary.

"I'll have to tell Joe," she murmured sleepily, cuddling Jacob closer. "He did so much, Vincent. He got me to the emergency room. I'll never know what possessed him to do that."

"He told me, Catherine. He heard your voice from a year ago, saying, I believe, 'you have a heart like his.'"

"Why, Vincent!" She was suddenly alert again. "That means you saved me in the morgue, too! Through Joe!"

He looked at her in surprise. "I thought nothing of it," he said. No, she thought readily. He wouldn't. He would give full credit to someone else, seeing them as more deserving, when it had been his own strong spirit which had set her rescue in motion all along. She was suddenly, wildly joyous. And then the thought struck.

"Do you know Joe?"

He laughed softly. "Yes. I know your friend. He has become mine, as well." His voice sobered, then added.

"A true friend. Deserving of much happiness."

"Diana doesn't think so," she said absently, thinking of Joe's comment, and then shaking her head at its irrelevance. But Vincent's voice rose in interest.

"Diana? Joe cares for Diana?"



"Uh huh, I think so. Whoever Diana is."

"She is also a friend deserving of great happiness," he replied, so sincerely that she lifted her head from his chest to look at him.

"A lot has happened since I left, hasn't it?" she teased tenderly.

"No, Catherine." He strained her to his heart in sudden fierceness. "Only that I recovered our son. Other than that, nothing. No joy, no hope, no light. An eternal darkness of missing you, and forcing myself to go on. For Jacob. When all I wanted to do was...die."

"It is over, Vincent." Her hand tightened on his.

"Yes," he said, so low that she could barely hear, and then, "Yes!" again, more joyously, as miraculous reality asserted itself. He looked down at her tenderly. "You should sleep, Catherine. You've been through such an ordeal."

"Only if you promise me I'll wake up to you and Jacob." Again she fought down a vestige of the terror which had gripped her, but it was less now, slowly receding like the horror-washed images of yesterday's nightmare. She was here---truly here, in the tunnels, with Vincent and her son.

"Always." Involuntarily, she relaxed. "And now, will you sleep?"

She looked longingly down at her baby. "I want to hold him all night. But what if I squeeze him too much?" she asked worriedly.

"Mouse brought his crib to the door. You can put him right beside the bed, where you can reach for him whenever you want."

At her nod of assent he left the bed and went to the entrance, stretching outside it for the wooden crib. He moved as if to take Jacob from her, but she shook her head.

"No, that's all right, I can do it, Vincent." Carefully, she rose. "I never saw a baby so beautiful," she crooned, kissing the soft face lightly. Their son. She would be there to love him, to see him grow, as she had once been certain she could not...tears of happiness dimmed her eyes. Gently, she placed him in the crib and covered his small form snugly. Then she hung over him tenderly, blowing him a last kiss goodnight.

"Jacob," she sighed happily. "I don't want to stop holding him, Vincent. I don't think I ever will."

"A preoccupation he is not likely to grow tired of," Vincent said quietly. "He needs you as much as I do, Catherine."

The words sent a sudden, shivering ripple of longing through her as her thoughts shifted. For the first time since her return, she had been out of the circle of Vincent's arms. Two minutes, at most...and it felt an eternity. Three feet away was far, far too much. She raised her eyes to his.

"Do you need me, Vincent?" she asked, opening wide to the yearning which was flooding her, knowing that he felt it rise through their bond to echo his own long-denied desire.

She flew the two short steps to his arms, and he crushed her so tightly against the length of him that she could scarcely breathe. Somehow, it didn't seem nearly tight enough.

"I have so much to say, but I can't find the words," she



sobbed against his neck.

"Shhh...your heart is finding them, Catherine. I hear them. You need not speak."

"I love you endlessly...endlessly, Vincent."

"And I you, my love."

"And I missed you," her voice broke. "Oh, God, I missed you so much."

He lifted her then, and carried her to the bed. She felt the mattress give as he moved the weight of both of them onto it, heard the springs gently creak as he gathered her against him. His hands molded her back and shoulders to him, moving over them urgently to extract the greatest possible tactile sensation from the closeness they shared; his lips rained desperate kisses on her hair and forehead as he held her close.

It was all Catherine needed to be set on fire. The long months of agonized missing, the unmitigated longing for one touch, one embrace, one look. And now he held her, kissing her with the passion she'd always dreamed of, even before the dark time when dreams of him were all she had had to keep hope alive. Wildly, she arched against him, lost in their sudden intimacy, spinning ever more deliciously into it as his hands and lips roamed over her eagerly. She had no volition on earth save to move her own lips closer to that caressing, assaulting mouth. She tipped her head up, and his kisses fell frantically on her eyes. Up, and they spilled over her nose and cheeks. Up, and unbelievably, finally, their lips met.

At the first touch he gasped, and drew back, shuddering, as if he had no right, his mouth hovering an infinitesimal distance from her own. But in her now insatiable craving for the kiss and the blending it would signify, she gave a small, aching moan that was his undoing--for how could he resist the tempest that stormed in both of them, on this most miraculous of nights, urging them to oneness? His head lowered, and, in a gesture fated since their first meeting, or before, his mouth claimed hers.

There has never been a kiss like this, she thought, as her exploding senses spun dizzily adrift and into a whirling maelstrom of love and desire and unbearable sweetness. Dimly, she could feel his racing heart, and knew from afar that Vincent was as out of control as she was. It was a timeless, dimensionless moment--the physical concretization of a love that had long ago left the constraints of the world behind to wing, breathless, to the Heavens. It was the final, irrevocable Homecoming. She wanted it to go on forever.

After a long time, Vincent lifted his head.

"Catherine," he moaned in stunned wonder. She felt his shivering delight through the bond, and through the lips that immediately sought hers again, as if, once having tasted her, he could not bear to ever stop. Yes, Vincent, she cried joyfully inside. Yes, my love. Take what is yours, what you deserve. And then she was utterly unable to think at all, as she soared, free-falling, into the feel of his mouth caressing hers, his hands stroking her in ways he had never dared before, and his



body, at long last, contouring her own all along its length. How many lifetimes must she live, to satisfy her craving for him? Not enough, never enough.... Trembling, she moved her lips to his eyes, fluttering tiny kisses along his lashes.

"Catherine, I...I" he stammered. "There...are no words..."

"Shhh...your heart is finding them, Vincent. I hear them. You need not speak."

"I love you endlessly...endlessly, Catherine."

"That's all that matters. For you, for me, for Jacob. It's worth everything."

"Everything."

She moved to press her lips to his again, but he stopped her with unsteady hands, smoothed her tousled hair.

"Catherine...I am not myself tonight...I"

"You mean you have not always loved me like this?" she asked shyly. How deeply soul-satisfying, to be here with him as she was now, punctuating her words with hands that stroked his heaving chest.

"Ah, Catherine." He pulled her tight against him and said raggedly "always, always, I have loved you like this, but it was on the inside of me, controlled, not on the outside, where it showed..."

"Show me more, my love. And let me show you."

He captured her roving hands with a muffled exclamation, caught them against him. "Catherine, I am quite mad tonight," he said hoarsely. "Ecstatic, grateful to the depths of my soul, love-crazed, on the inside and the outside."

"So am I." Even now, she yearned to the point of aching for his touch.

"Then you must listen, no..." Unable to help herself, she had reached to his shirt and was slowly undoing the lacings as she rubbed the worn wool of it against his skin.

"It's like the dream I...oh...Catherine." Her name was sigh of surrender, as if he could not, for the life of him, ask her again to cease. She felt his capitulation and his eagerness, but the victory was less sweet somehow, for the fact that she had unwittingly engineered it, and she stopped. Tonight of all nights, she wanted nothing he could not wholeheartedly give.

Her pause had provided him with the moment he needed to muster his resolve. Strong, loving hands gripped her shoulders.

"You have been through so much. You have only just returned, to Jacob, to me. You are exhausted, depleted. If I...if we...touch again, I will not be able to stop."

"I want you to not be able to stop, Vincent."

"Yes." His swiftly indrawn breath. "I know that, tonight. I feel it. But how can I be certain that it is what you would choose, otherwise?" There was a gritty purpose to these last words, as if the relinquishing of intimacy after her low admission was something he could barely bring himself to do. And Catherine was suddenly certain that he did not yet remember the night in the cave.

"You don't remember, do you?" she asked seriously.

He bowed his head. "Images, mostly. Vague and uncertain."

But I remember you, Catherine. Loving me with everything you had, everything you were. I remember that. It saved me."

"Like you saved me, tonight."

"Catherine...it is bitterly difficult for me to deny you anything."

"No, you're right, Vincent." And he was, she realized. He needed time to move beyond the limits he had so sternly set for himself. She needed time to show him that he could, with her. And they had it. All the time in the world.

"We have the time," she said simply, conscious, as only one so endangered can be conscious, of what an unimaginable gift that time together was.

"I have no doubt it will be the most exquisite journey of my life," he whispered, raising her hand to his lips and kissing it so ardently that she wanted to fling herself against him again. Instead, she said:

"Just promise me that the day will come when you don't stop."

His response was immediate and fervent. "I promise."

"Sealed with a kiss?" she asked hopefully. Promptly, he obliged, so thoroughly that it was she who now pulled away, to gain the much-needed equilibrium. Vincent was showing evidence of becoming as passionate a lover as he had once been restrained. And she needed only the smallest look or touch send her spinning.

"Catherine, with what you do to me...what you make me feel, long for...yes, I promise with all my heart."

"Then, on that day..." her voice was very low. "I'm going to love you and love you and love you, Vincent."

His warm breath fanned along the sensitive lobe of her ear.

"Then...we will love each other, Catherine. I promise that, as well."

Was that music she heard, wafting through the chambers and underground corridors, come to rest on his words? Perhaps that was only in her heart. She would figure it out tomorrow, if she wasn't walking into walls in a happy daze after coming back to life and being greeted with a beautiful son and Vincent's erotic lovemaking. Come to think of it, she'd probably be walking into walls for the next lifetime, at least...

She was suddenly, completely drowsy.

"When I wake up, Jacob will be here," she murmured sleepily.

"Yes."

"And you...you'll be here, Vincent."

"Always, Catherine."

She breathed a small sigh, replete with happiness. The drowsiness was greater now. She felt his lips on her hair and his voice, as if from a great distance---that voice which had never left her, even in the Darkness.

"Sweet dreams, my dearest love."

"Mmmmm. Of you." She murmured her reply through the fog of exhaustion that surrounded her. She could hardly wait for tomorrow.

A new life. A new beginning. A new dream---even better. Smiling blissfully, she slept.



## EPILOGUE

The light of the moon had long ago waxed in the world Above and was waning toward daybreak when he thought of sleep. For nearly the entire night he had held and watched over her, touching the tumbled hair in awed elation, moving his hands gently over her in a light, wordless caress. He would not have disturbed her for all the world, but he could gauge the depth of her sleep by the amount of her restless movement, and that was less, when he was caressing her. Somehow, the tender touches were reaching her, even in her dreams. He marveled bemusedly that her need to have his hands on her was a perfect counterpoint to his own compelling need to feel her body thus. But he accepted it, as yet another miracle on this night that was like no other.

If he stayed awake a few moments longer, he could feast his eyes on her still.

That she was here---truly here, was a wonder that could hardly be believed. He stared down, fascinated, at the woman he held, feeling a surge of emotion so powerful it was physically palpable. As if the very atoms of his body somehow had more weight and substance, he thought suddenly, lifting his hand to flex it, feeling the solidity of muscle, bone and sinew as never before. As if life, long dormant, were returning to his heart and body.

And the kisses---how could he sleep now with the enchantment of her kisses still thrilling him so? The sudden throb of excitement that surged through him at the thought was as heady as it was unfamiliar, but he welcomed this, too, unfolded to its intoxication. He could scarcely believe what had happened. The touch of her lips had paled those poor dream-kisses to insignificance, he thought rapturously, able to lightly dismiss what he had long cherished because his heart had other, greater memories to treasure and re-live. Nothing in life had ever enthralled him like the taste of Catherine.

He felt a sudden, urgent need to speak the now-prophetic words aloud.

"Thou...lovers...be...lost.." His arms tightened around his love, lips skimming her hair as his eyes rested, misting, on the dim, tiny outline of their sleeping son.

"Love shall not." The word cried out for emphasis, soft though it had to be to keep from waking Catherine.

"And death shall have no dominion." She had known it all along. His Catherine, back from death and now resting sweetly, so sweetly, in his arms. The joy was too profound to waste, even for a second.

He would wait a while longer before sleeping.