

THE RETURN

by Donna Boyko

CHAPTER ONE

He appeared to be in a fog, floating. Sometimes he was so hot he clawed at his clothes in an attempt to remove them. Other times he had to curl up in a tight ball just to retain what little body heat he had. But always, no matter what, there was that tight choking pain in his chest.

If this fog would just lift he could see where he was. He could smell water, and oil or gas. There was something else too, strong, pungent. He had smelled it before, but his mind just couldn't place it. There were other things too, a tinkling sound and shuffling noises. Was there someone else here with him? What did it matter? He was tired, tired of being tired, tired of trying to put it all together. All he wanted was sleep ... sleep.

He was in the fog again but it was brighter this time, and that awful pain was not so bad. The light appeared to be getting brighter ... brighter. His eyes flickered open and closed sharply. The light cut right through his skull, like hundreds of razors, making his head ache horribly. Maybe if he stayed still There, everything seemed to be better; ever so slowly he opened his eyes again. He was looking up at something above his head. It looked like cables woven together, to form some kind of netting. Then he realized it was the bottom of an overhead bunk, definitely a home-made concoction, crude but serviceable.

He could hear the shuffling again, it was coming from his left. When he turned his head the room pitched and spun, but finally settled, and the pain subsided. There were two more bunks, presumably just like the one he was lying in. There was also a doorway with a grey blanket (*the kind you get at the mission stores*) over it. It was swaying. Maybe a breeze or had someone just passed through it? There it was again, the shuffling noise, and more tinkling.

Where was he? He slowly raised his left arm. Oh, there was that choking pain in his chest! Slowly he looked at his hand, his fingers were smooth and well cared for, but there were tiny cuts all over his wrist and lower arm. He put his hand to his head and felt the roughness of what must have been a bandage. His head felt tender and bruised. His fingers travelled down his face. There was a beard, a moustache, each was of quite considerable growth. This did not seem to concern him, he had a feeling he always carried himself well. How did he know this? He could not even recall what he looked like. He felt tired again and his head was pounding. He heard the shuffling again, and felt a cool breeze. He blinked to try and stay awake. There was a shape, small but not childlike. He had not heard anyone.

He closed his eyes and a voice said, "Ah! This is good, you sleep now."

It was not English; it was Japanese. He understood it, but why shouldn't he? He spoke many languages, he learned that speaking many languages was essential to his business. *Business? What business? Too tired ... Can't think any more ... Sleep ... Got to sleep.*

When he woke this time, the room seemed to be dimmer and cooler. And there was that smell, the strong one. Incense! He knew! He recognized it! Jasmine! There in the corner of the other bunk, sitting with his back against the wall, was a small oriental gentleman, of undetermined age. He was wearing a grey plaid

flannel shirt (*much too large for him*) and green workdrill trousers. His dark eyes seemed to be looking straight through him, never leaving his face. The old man rose and walked slowly toward him. He did not really walk, he sort of glided. There, that was the shuffling noise, it was the old man.

As he drew near he spoke softly. "Do not be afraid, you have been badly hurt, but with rest, nourishment and patience you will heal. I am Tim."

There was a small smile at the corner of his mouth as if something amused him. He said he had been named after a character in a Dickens novel his father had read shortly after arriving in America. He was the youngest of seven sons, and had never been strong. This was his home. His brothers were all gone, only he remained.

Tim asked his patient if he would tell him his name. He opened his mouth to reply, but couldn't remember. He couldn't remember his own name. He couldn't remember much of anything *My God! What was happening?*

The old man seemed to sense his fears. "Never mind, you will remember. You have had a very bad time. Fever, talking, raving. But now I see you will be better. Here, drink this, it will make you feel better." The old man very slowly raised his head so that he might sip from the small china cup.

Mmmmmmm! It was warm and sweet and tasted of oranges.

"Thank you."

"So you speak Japanese?" Tim inquired.

"Yes. I learned it before my visit to Tokyo in '83. *What visit? Where did that come from?* The old man smiled again, knowing much.

"Rest now, it will come in time, do not trouble yourself so, it will come when it is time."

He went to move away but the stranger said, "Please stay, don't go. I don't like being alone." (*He had never admitted that to anyone before*) Again he had begun to remember something. "The clothes I was wearing when you found me?"

Tim nodded, and went through the door, returning almost instantly with some folded garments. They were more rags than anything. They were torn, burned and stained, but they had been of fine quality once. Under the top garment was a paper bag. In it was a Rolex watch, an expensive ring, with a B on it, a handful of change, tie pin and cufflinks all with the same B on them, and a piece of water stained paper, on which was written ***Compass Rose Pier 39?*** On his shirt was embroidered E.B. E.B.? Ernest? Everet? Eugene? Maybe he was Edward? Ed, was he an Ed? Tim's hands covered his as they began to shake.

"Patience, it will come. For now, we know your name begins with an E so I will call you Ebenezer after that Dickens tale. The one I was named after."

The man scowled, "Ebenezer?"

Tim, seeing his scowl said, "How about I call you Eb for short?"

Then the man laughed. Why not? for what was in a name. it was what you made of it.

He had done it once, he would do it again. *Do what?* Patience, he must have patience.

Tim returned to sit on the edge of the bunk. "Or maybe I might read to you?"

"Yes, I would like that."

So for the next hour or so, Tim read a very old Japanese love story to him, sort of an Oriental *Romeo and Juliet*. And slowly he drifted off to sleep.

The days passed and he regained more of his strength. He and Tim had grown accustomed to each other. Tim told him he had found him tangled in some ropes and refuse by the pier, close to his home. He was unconscious and had suffered what appeared to be a gunshot wound in the chest. Thankfully, it had travelled right through. His hands and face had been cut by shards of glass. When Eb inquired why Tim had not called the police or ambulance, Tim's only reply had been, "There was no need."

Eb had learned there was no sense in questioning Tim any further. He would state what he felt, and that was the end of it. Tim, he learned, was what would be referred to as a medicine man or wizard in his culture; beyond the blanketed doorway was his store of fine herbs and scents.

Every day, Tim tended to the injuries with the utmost care. His touch was that of a feather, fleeting, soothing, as were the herbs he applied to his chest, face and hands. His head didn't hurt too much anymore, unless he moved it too quickly. He was weak he knew, but he decided today was the day he was getting up. Slowly he rolled to his side, raised his right arm and looped his fingers into the cable of the upper bunk. He pulled himself up into a sitting position. He couldn't believe how he was sweating, just from sitting up. He had worked out in his gym regularly. *What gym? Where? Who the hell was he?*

Patience. That's what Tim said. "Patience." He had never been a man of patience - act now, that's how it was done. He sighed.

Slowly he eased himself to the side of the bunk closest to the wall. Using the bunk end he pulled himself up; his knees wobbled, but held. Cautiously he inched his way along the wall to the corner, now along the other wall. There was a bunk across from his. Looking around now, he could see the room was quite small. Only large enough for the bunks and one small night stand.

There again was the tinkling sound, it was really rather beautiful, a soft chime – water - quality, almost musical, like wind pipes, strange and peaceful. Carefully he moved around the bunk to the door opening. The smell of incense was stronger here. Steadying himself on the bunk end, he slowly raised his hand to push back the blanket over the door. There, in an even smaller room lined with shelves, was Tim.

When the blanket opened, and Tim saw his patient there, he did not rush to his side, merely nodded. "This is good, come join me."

He slowly moved over to where Tim was sitting on a large crate. Eb lowered himself on the crate. Tim handed him a bag, maybe two inches by three inches made of fine silk, decorated with small flower designs. Between them sat a wooden bowl filled with rose petals. Tim picked up a generous amount and placed them in the bag, then folded the bag in half and tied it with a gold cord. He then placed it in another wooden bowl on his other side. Eb followed Tim's example. When he was done Tim handed him another bag from the inside of the large pocket of his shirt. Silently and methodically they worked for maybe fifteen minutes. Tim then held up his hand and said; "That will do."

Now for the first time Eb looked around. They were not shelves as he had thought, but beautiful little boxes attached to the wall in a series of rows. There was a small table that held a two burner gas hotplate, a few pots, and an assortment of dishes and cutlery. Above this was a window that looked out onto a brick wall, and beside this was a door, leading outside, he presumed. There was another door on the adjacent wall.

Tim had followed his gaze. "Bathroom," he stated.

Tim had a chamber pan that his patient had been using until now. Maybe there was a mirror. Slowly he rose and walked to the door and opened it. There on shelves were supplies. Off to the right at the end was a convenience, and a rather large sink with wall taps. Most of the enamel had been scoured away. In a crate under the sink were towels. Everything was neat and clean, and there, to his right was a mirror. He was almost afraid to stand in front of it. What looked back at him was a man of mid to late thirties; he had a high

forehead, and fair but not blonde, shoulder length hair. There was a large faded bruise near his left ear, and his beard and moustache were in need of a trim. His eyes were pale blue with laugh lines around them. There were a few angry red lines on his face presumably healing cuts. All-in-all not really unattractive. He had been considered quite a catch, handsome, educated, well-to-do (*well to do at what?*) Patience, that's what Tim said. He looked down, then back up at himself and smiled. It seemed to light up his whole face. It had worked its charm before ... But he didn't know how he knew that!

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Tim standing in the door. He looked over at him now, their eyes met in a form of understanding.

He laughed. "I sure could use a shave."

Tim nodded and turned to the shelf beside him. He removed a cloth that was rolled around something, and handed it to him. He unrolled it to find a pair of barber scissors, comb and straight razor, soap, brush and soap cup. Picking up the straight razor he fingered the ivory handle and laughed.

"I've never used one of these before; afraid of cutting my own throat."

Tim motioned him to follow, and they returned to the room at the rear. Here Tim acquired a chair that he had not noticed on his earlier inspection of the room. He motioned for Eb to sit. Wrapping a sheet around him he set to work. One hour later he looked into the mirror again to see a neat and well-groomed person. But who was this well-groomed person? Who was he?

Every day as his strength returned he had stayed up for a few more hours. He sat and helped Tim with the bags, or mixed, whatever he could. On the third day a woman came to the shop and as the door opened there was the tinkling. It was a wind chime, glass tubes that danced as the air moved through them, making a flute-like sound.

One week later, he again decided that today was the day. In borrowed clothes, and slippers of Tim's he opened the door to the shop. Straight ahead was a brick wall, and some six feet to his left was more brick. Some thirty feet to his right was a street. Carefully picking his way through garbage and old furniture, he made his way to this street. To his right the street carried on seemingly endless.

Warehouse buildings. To his left the docks. Water! He knew he had smelled water. Slowly he ventured on. It was eerie, and the activity was astounding, coming, going, hauling, unloading. He was almost run over by a forklift driver, who shouted; "***Get out of the way, you stupid jerk!***"

Keeping close to buildings, he moved northward, until he saw a space between the ships. He looked both ways, and crossed as quickly as he could.

What awaited his eyes was breathtaking! The beauty of the New York skyline in the early morning. It had never failed to amaze him each time he looked at it, and he knew he had looked at it many times. He knew he was ... part of it. He knew ... somehow ... **HIS WAS HIS DESTINY.....**

CHAPTER TWO

Vincent sat in his chair, with his elbows resting on the arms, his fingertips together, and his chin resting on his thumbs. His gaze was on the cradle in front of him, which held his small sleeping daughter, Kathleen. Kathleen Margaret. Kathleen after her mother, and Margaret after Father's beloved wife.

She never ceased to amaze him. Her complexion of peaches and cream. Her hair blonde with strawberry highlights. Her eyes when awake were blue like his. She was truly a beauty, and she was his. There was a time he had feared he would never see her. But now like her mother Catherine, they shared a bond, it was

that bond, and Diana that eventually brought them together.

Vincent leaned forward and picked up the newspaper that Mouse had hurriedly brought him. It was only the front section, but that's all that was needed. Headlines read:

ELLIOT BURCH FOUND WANDERING WATERFRONT

The story went on to tell how Mr. Burch could not remember anything, including his own name, or what had happened to him.

Joe Maxwell, of the District Attorney's Office said that Mr. Burch had been believed to have been killed, in an explosion that destroyed the ship THE COMPASS ROSE a few weeks ago. Mr. Burch had been taken to a clinic upstate for observation. The paper was three weeks old. Mouse had found it on the floor of the Painted Tunnels.

Elliot was alive and well! Vincent owed much to Elliot, his life in fact. There were so many people he owed so much to right now. He must go to Elliot and talk with him. Soon.

Elliot had only been home a few days. He still tired quickly. Most of his memory was now back, although he still seemed to have lost a couple of weeks. Dr. Ricca said it was some kind of blockage. Something his mind did not want to remember.

"Maybe it was best not to remember," the doctor said. "Some traumatic experiences are best forgotten."

Joe Maxwell was not happy about this. He had grilled Elliot several times, trying to fill in the blanks. He really believed Catherine and the explosion were connected. Poor Joe, he wore his love for Catherine on his sleeve nowadays.

How could you not love her, Elliot thought. Everything about her was beautiful.

Hadn't he himself tried to find out who killed her? He had been relentless. He could not blame Joe now.

The study in his home was quite comfortable, but he missed the comfort of human companionship. He missed Tim. He had seen him only once since the policeman had recognized him on the dock, and he had not had time to thank him. A crowd of reporters were constantly on his heels. He must have Ray bring Tim to him so he could talk with him. He knew there was no chance of Tim accepting any money for looking after him. As Tim would have said, *It needed to be done*. But there would be some way he could show the little man his appreciation.

Elliot's patio doors were open to let in the night breeze. Suddenly, the opening was filled with the silhouette of a cloaked figure. Elliot did not feel afraid, he sensed somehow he was in no danger. He rose from his chair. The cloaked figure spoke his name. "Elliot."

That voice, it haunted his memory. Where had he heard it before? And then it happened. A kaleidoscope of memories. The carousel, the death of Moreno, the hotel fire, Gabriel, the ship, the gunshot, the explosion. The flood of memories was so great it caused him to stumble with weakness. Vincent was there to steady him before he fell to the floor.

Elliot looked up into the shadowy hood and whispered, "Vincent." That face, that hair; he remembered, he remembered it all. He remembered the disservice, and the injustice he had done to this man. "Vincent, I remember," Elliot whispered.

Vincent took his friend into his arms, and gave him a brotherly hug. When Vincent stood back Elliot said, "Come sit, join me."

Vincent drew back. He had never been comfortable indoors, not even in Catherine's apartment. If it had not been for the fact he feared Elliot would have fallen, he would not have come in this far.

Elliot sensed Vincent's discomfort. "Maybe we could sit on the patio?"

Vincent nodded. Outside he breathed much easier. The patio was much like Catherine's balcony. Oh, how he missed her. Elliot sat in one of the patio chairs and motioned for Vincent to join him. Instead Vincent stood, with one booted foot raised on the garden border and looked down on his friend.

"Are you well?" Vincent inquired.

"I've been better," Elliot replied.

"I have only recently heard of your return," Vincent stated.

"When we last met I feared we were both dead men. I was found and looked after by a man. A remarkable man named Tim," Elliot said.

Vincent tilted his head to one side. "I was also cared for by a remarkable person. Her name is Diana."

As the hour wore on each man related his story to the other and they had both fallen silent, lost in their own thoughts for a time. Vincent now paced the patio, trying to decide how to ask what he had come to ask.

He stopped and turned to Elliot and said, "I have come to ask another favour of you, my friend. After what happened last time I would not blame you if you refused me. I have the child. She is beautiful like her mother. What I wish is for her to see all the things I will never see."

Elliot opened his mouth to speak, but Vincent held up his hand.

"Please do not stop me. When Catherine died, she left all her worldly possessions to my father, Jacob Wells, to hold in trust. I would like to give this to you, in exchange for taking the child and raising her as your own. It is not that I do not want her to be part of my world, because she will always be a part of it. I want her to know both worlds."

Elliot placed his hand over his mouth, looked at Vincent and said, "I am honoured. I don't know what to say."

"Say yes," Vincent replied.

"Yes," Elliot said.

"Now Elliot, I have one more request. If you are not too tired, I would like to take you to my world. I must ask you to promise that you will never bring or tell anyone of this place. Many people, good people, have found sanctuary and peace there, it is their home. It is my home."

"I would never betray your trust, Vincent."

"Thank you, Elliot."

"Now, do I need to bring anything?" Elliot asked.

"A coat perhaps," Vincent replied.

Elliot grabbed his overcoat from over the back of a chair, just inside the study doors.

"Come, we will go," Vincent stated.

With Vincent leading the way, they left the house by way of the patio, crossing the lawn to the rear of his property. Just inside the gates near the street, they came to a manhole cover that Vincent lifted with the ease of a pillow. Both men stood looking down.

Elliot said, "Down there?"

Vincent nodded.

"Okay, you're the leader."

Vincent helped Elliot lower himself down. Once Elliot was down and to the side, Vincent easily jumped through the opening, landing with catlike ease. Taking one step up the ladder he reached up and slid the manhole cover back in place. Turning to Elliot he reached out his hand to indicate the way.

On they went, down, up, over, around, it seemed they had walked for miles. Suddenly Elliot stopped.

Vincent stopped and turned, inquiring, "Are you well? Is it too strenuous for you?"

"No, no, not at all. But that tapping, I've heard it for quite some time now. If you listen there is a definite pattern, like a code."

Vincent smiled. "You are right, it is people talking to each other. It is how we communicate. Come, we are almost there."

They walked on for another five minutes or so. Up ahead Elliot could see an opening in the wall, there was a soft light illuminating that part of the tunnel. All along there had been torches, and occasionally a light bulb.

As Elliot and Vincent entered Father's chamber, Father sat back, removing his glasses. Placing them on the desk in front of him, he reached for his walking cane. It was a beautiful cane, a gift from Vincent one Christmas. The handle was jeweled with crystals Vincent had brought back with him, when he had gone to the Crystal Cavern for the crystal he had given Catherine on their first anniversary. It seemed like only yesterday, but in fact it had been two years. Now Catherine was gone. Sweet Catherine. How he missed her. Would forever miss her.

"Father, this is Elliot Burch. Catherine's friend and mine," Vincent announced.

Father stepped forward to take Elliot's outstretched hand.

"Elliot, this is my father, he is the spokesperson of our community."

Elliot was amazed. His eyes could hardly take in all he saw. The room was filled with soft light, coming from hundreds of candles placed all over the room. The walls were lined with bookshelves of every size and shape imaginable. Where no bookshelves stood, the books were stacked on the floor up to a precarious height. There was a circular staircase to a second landing, which was also stacked with books. There were even books on the stairs.

The man who had risen to shake his hand was quite distinguished looking sixty-ish perhaps, hair lightly dusted with grey, as well as his beard and moustache. His grey sweater and muffler were well worn and had obviously been darned several times. His eyes shone brightly with intelligence, and his handshake was firm.

"Mr. Burch, welcome. Welcome to our home," Father said.

"Thank you," replied Elliot.

"Vincent, you should have told me to expect a guest," Father chastised.

As he looked at Vincent he lifted his eyebrow. Vincent smiled to himself, Father might be a little annoyed, but he was sure to understand.

"I was sure the sentries would have sent the message over the pipes that I was not alone," Vincent said lightly. Father scowled at being caught at such a game.

"Well, Mr. Burch, what brings you to our world?" Father asked.

Before Elliot could reply, Vincent answered. "I have asked him here, Father. I have asked Elliot to take Kathleen Above and raise her. And take her to all the places I can never go. All the places you have always told me of. Through her eyes, it will be as good as seeing them myself. And he has agreed."

He could see pain cross the old man's face.

"Are you sure, Vincent?"

"Yes, Father. I am sure."

"Well, Mr. Burch, do you realize the seriousness of raising a child? The time that must be spent in developing the mind, as well as the body?"

"Please Father, this was not Elliot's idea. It was mine," Vincent said.

Elliot now stepped forward. "Please ..." He stammered for a name.

"Call me Father, everyone does, it is sort of my title."

"Very well then. Father, I realize there are many things that neither Vincent nor I have thought of. But I promise you, she will receive the utmost care in all aspects of her life. I consider what Vincent has asked of me a great honour, and I will not let him down."

Silence pervaded the chamber. Father sighed audibly. "Very well then. I see I must relent."

"Tell me, Mr. Burch..."

"Elliot, please."

"Elliot, do you play chess?"

Before Elliot could reply, Vincent spoke up. "Perhaps another time, Father. There are things I would like to show Elliot first."

Father inclined his head in understanding. "Very well, maybe next time."

"I'll look forward to it," Elliot replied.

Vincent led Elliot back into the tunnels, slowly turning just long enough to tell Elliot, "Father is always looking for someone he can beat."

A little farther down the tunnel there was another opening. On entering the chamber they were greeted by a mature woman of unmistakable beauty.

"Mary, this is Elliot Burch. Elliot, this is Mary. She cares for all of us."

"Perhaps you would care for some tea?" Mary asked, looking at each man.

"Yes, that would be nice," Vincent answered.

Elliot nodded his agreement.

"I will not be long." Mary replied, as she darted from the room.

Vincent walked over to the large wooden cradle, bent down and raised the gurgling bundle into his arms. Turning back to Elliot, he smiled. "Elliot. This is Kathleen." Elliot looked into the blanket Vincent was holding. The face of the child was so angelic, it took his breath away.

"She truly is beautiful. Her eyes are the deepest blue I have ever seen." She gazed up at him and smiled. His heart melted. Vincent eased her into Elliot's arms, and stood back watching.

Like her mother, she has cast her spell, he thought, emotions rising like a wave.

CHAPTER THREE

SEVENTEEN YEARS LATER

Vincent and Father sat in Father's chamber. Both hunched over, elbows on the table, head in hands, deep in thought, as they studied the chess board before them. Suddenly Vincent's head jerked up. Father placed his hand over his son's and asked, "Kathleen?"

Vincent smiled and nodded.

"Your bond is truly remarkable. Where did you say their letter is from?" Father asked.

"Kathleen said that they would be motoring from La Havre just off the bay of The Seine, to Paris this week," Vincent replied.

"Ah, yes, Paris in the springtime." Father sighed, remembering the time he spent in Paris as a young man with his bride Margaret.

"They are on the Eiffel Tower. I can sense the thrill of her first sight of the city from such a great height."

Father was not surprised at this, as for the last seventeen years Vincent was always conscious of the emotions that Kathleen felt, the same as he had with her mother, Catherine. With Kathleen, there was more than emotion, there was a physical side too. He remembered once when Kathleen was six years old, Vincent woke up with a terrible itch, even though there was no rash to be seen, Vincent still complained of the irritation. Two days later, when Peter came down to the tunnel world to check on Jamie (*who was expecting she and her husband Michael's first child*) he told them that Elliot and Kathleen would not be down for their weekly visit, as Kathleen has one of the worst cases of chicken pox he had ever seen. She was covered with them, and they were having quite a time preventing her from scratching. Father went in search of Vincent to tell him of this news, only to find him soaking in the Mirror Pool trying to alleviate the itch. Putting two and two together, Vincent was quickly sponged down with calamine lotion, which seemed to offer him some relief.

There was another time when Vincent suffered what seemed to be a bruised tail bone, resulting from Kathleen's first riding excursion. He also remembered when he found Vincent in tears in his chamber, Inquiring why, Vincent told Father that Kathleen was extremely upset over the loss of her mother's book of sonnets, and her sorrow had been so great that it had overwhelmed him, until he shared her joy when it was found. Another time Vincent spilled his tea all over himself when Kathleen had fallen off her horse, and twisted her ankle. The latest was almost humorous, Vincent suffered an acute attack of the hiccups. Next day his head hurt terribly and when William placed his breakfast in front of him, he quickly left the table. It was later learned that Kathleen had decided to celebrate her graduation with her friend, and had been into Elliot's private wine cellar, and over-indulged in just a little too much wine. Oh yes, their bond was truly remarkable, no country, ocean, or continent could separate them.

"How much longer do you expect them to be away?" Father asked.

"Elliot said he could only be gone from his business for a month, but knowing Kathleen's persuasive ways, if she wants to stay longer he will deny her nothing. After all, this trip is a reward for her early graduation, to graduate with such high honours at seventeen is quite remarkable," Vincent answered.

"You miss her weekly visits," Father stated, knowing already how true his words were, as he himself missed her.

"Always, Father, always. She is my life, the hours we spend together, reading, talking, walking, is never enough. She is so knowledgeable in so many things, and so determined in her convictions."

"Almost stubborn?" Father asked.

Vincent nodded.

"I wonder where she might have gotten that from?"

"Catherine was always determined, Father," Vincent stated.

"Huh, like her father isn't," Father said with a smile.

Vincent gave Father a very wounded look, then laughed. "You are right, as usual, Father."

Vincent waited at the tunnel entrance, as she drew closer, he could feel her excitement at being back in New York. There she was, tall and slim, the image of her mother, her eyes dancing with lights, her hair swayed from side to side as she half walked, half ran toward him. Vincent's heart filled with happiness at the mere sight of her. He stepped forward to help relieve her of some of the many shopping bags she carried. As she drew closer to him she dropped her bags and threw her arms around his neck, hugging him with a force that belied her size.

"Vincent, I do believe you are more handsome every time I see you!" Kathleen exclaimed.

Vincent looked at her, tilting his head from side to side.

"And you are more beautiful than then last time I saw you, if that is possible."

Kathleen gave him a slight tap on the chest. "Flattery will get you nowhere."

Vincent, looking over Kathleen's shoulder at Elliot, who stood behind watching their greeting. He was also weighed down with parcels and, placing them down, he stretched out his hand to Vincent. Vincent untangled himself from Kathleen and stepped forward to take his hand, and drew the other man into a quick embrace.

"Old friend, it is good to see you," Vincent said.

"It is good to see you also," Elliot replied.

Kathleen, standing with her hand on her hips further down the tunnel shouted, "***Come on, you slow pokes. I must see Father!***"

Vincent and Elliot looked at each other, shrugged, and bent down to retrieve the parcels. Kathleen, now empty-handed, ran back, looped an arm through each man's and encouraged them to hurry up.

Kathleen entered the chamber first. She stopped and looked around. There, sitting in his favourite chair, a book open in his lap, was Father dozing. As light as a fairy, Kathleen danced over to Father's chair and knelt down beside it. She took hold of his hand tenderly in hers.

Father slowly opened his eyes and smiled at her. "Kathleen, my child, I didn't hear you come in."

With a wink Kathleen said. "You were so engrossed in your book, Father, you didn't hear me. What are you reading?"

"Three Hundred Days. The autobiography, by the great Irish Peace Activist Brigit O'Donnell."

Kathleen knew that Vincent and her mother had both befriended Brigit when she came to New York one year. She had been told that Vincent ventured Above that Halloween night, with the hope of meeting Brigit, to thank her for the inspiration her book had given him. He had gone to a costume ball and introduced

himself to her. Catherine - her mother - was also there; somehow the two women found themselves captives of a notorious terrorist, and that Vincent saved them both. She had been told that Vincent helped her mother many, many times.

Kathleen jumped to her feet, and hurried to the parcels that Vincent and Elliot placed on the steps. Father slowly rose to his feet with the aid of his cane. His leg had grown much stiffer as the years passed.

Moving to Elliot with an outstretched hand he said, "It is good to see you. We expected you back weeks ago."

"I should have been. My work has piled up, but Kathleen insisted."

With a knowing look Father cleared his throat and said, "Ah, yes. I understand."

Kathleen looked up from her bags with a scowl. "Well, he works too much! He needs some time off. Anyway Father, look what I have brought for you."

She handed him an assortment of travel guides; one from the Louvre, one about the history of the Sistine Chapel and on the bottom of all of this was an exquisite leather-bound volume of *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

"I hope you like it," Kathleen said.

"Like it? I am overwhelmed. This must have cost a king's ransom." Father fingered the pages, engrossed already.

"You deserve every penny."

Father embraced Kathleen and kissed her on the forehead. "Thank you, dear child."

"Now Father, I really must go and find Catherine." She turned to Elliot and Vincent. "It's okay, isn't it? I will not be long." Both men nodded. They had heard that many times before.

Catherine was Kathleen's best friend. Even though Catherine was three years older, they were nearly inseparable. As Kathleen hurried along the tunnel, she saw two lights bobbing up and down. It was Mouse, wearing his flashlight helmet.

"Mouse, where are you going?"

"Looking for Arthur."

Arthur was Mouse's pet raccoon, his second in fact. Arthur the first had once got loose in Father's study. She was not there at the time, but she had witnessed the aftermath. Just then, Kathleen and Mouse heard a crash coming from the area of the community kitchen, then the outraged roar of William. Mouse winced.

"Got to go. Must hurry. Big trouble."

Kathleen laughed. There always seemed to be trouble where Mouse was concerned. She remembered the story of when he had been found on one of her father's construction sites. He didn't know the year of his birth, his last name or the president of the United States. But he did know the name of his attorney, Catherine Chandler. The building her father had been building at that time was endangering the tunnel world, especially the Painted Tunnels. The tunnels were painted by Elizabeth. They were the history of the tunnel world and the world Above, in paintings. Her father stopped the construction, even though Burch Tower had been his dream. Elizabeth had even painted the tower on the tunnel walls. She remembered the day Vincent had first shown the paintings to her and her father, even though she had been a small child at the time, she could still remember the tears in her father's eyes.

There, just up ahead, was Catherine's chamber. She hoped she would be there. Catherine was shorter than Kathleen, and weighed a little more, but she was beautiful none the less. She had been born in the tunnels. Her mother, Lena, had been brought here by Catherine Chandler, whom she was named after. Lena died

tragically when Catherine was a toddler, when a family of vicious outsiders invaded the tunnels, terrifying, robbing and even killing some of the tunnel dwellers. Together, Vincent and Catherine made them leave, but how, she had never been told.

Catherine was sitting on her bed, working at her mending. Everyone in the tunnels had a job to do for the community. Catherine was good with a needle and thread, her stitches were fine and evenly-spaced, so her job was *mender, fixer*, as Mouse would say. Catherine looked up from her work and smiled at her friend.

"Bonjour, how was your trip?"

Kathleen hugged her. "It was wonderful. Everything was just as I imagined it would be. I've brought back hundreds of photographs. My father said he feared we might be charged with smuggling film. Here, I brought this for you."

Carefully unwrapping the present, trying to save the paper and ribbon (*for in the tunnels they are firm believers in the three R's; re-use, recycle, refurbish*) taking the lid off of the box, she folded back the tissue paper. There, lying in soft folds were the most delicate undergarments she had ever seen. There really wasn't much to them at all. There was quite an assortment of panties, bras and sleeping gowns all of the sheerest, softest pastels.

"This can be part of your trousseau. I'm sure Eric will like them."

Catherine blushed. Eric and Catherine were to be married next month.

Eric had come here as a boy with his sister Ellie. Unfortunately, Ellie died within a year, when a plague infected the tunnel world. Ellie died in Catherine's arms one night. Eric had been mad at Ellie for getting sick, and told her he hated her, he hadn't meant it. But when Ellie died, he withdrew into himself. Father suggested he write a letter to Ellie saying he was sorry. He did and together with all the tunnel community, burned their letters in a special ceremony. The ashes of the letters were caught in a swirling updraught in the cavern and were lifted up into the night sky. Eric always believed that Ellie had received his letter. So Eric and Catherine both orphans, found a special friendship, which had turned to love. Catherine told Kathleen she hoped to some day have a little girl, that they would call Ellie.

Catherine thanked Kathleen for the gifts; and hoped she would have the courage to wear them. She was not quite as bold as her friend. Many times Kathleen got them both into trouble, like the time they were caught skinny-dipping in the Mirror Pool, when they were supposed to be getting everything ready for Winterfest. Kathleen told her how she and her father had taken a horrendous ride in one of the infamous French taxis. Her father spent the rest of the day in his hotel room, sure his heart wouldn't take it. Something about not being that scared since Kathleen talked him into letting her learn to drive in his limo. She thought it great fun. She kept forgetting even though her father was terribly attractive and young looking, he was, in fact, in his early fifties. He had been shot once when he was younger. The bullet had gone right through him, he had not been hospitalized. Tim, a friend of the family nursed him back to health. Now he sometimes had spasms in his chest. When she asked him more about it, he would always become vague and change the subject.

The two girls sat on Catherine's bed talking and laughing for several hours about everything that had happened in the community, whilst Kathleen had been in Europe, until Catherine said that it was time for her to go and help Mary get the little ones ready for bed.

Elliot sat in Vincent's chair, as Vincent paced the floor. "Vincent, I'm telling you, it is time she was told. She is asking too many questions. I can't avoid answering anymore."

"NO! This is not the time," Vincent answered.

"But why? Are you afraid of something?"

Vincent stopped pacing and looked at Elliot. He spread his arms out in a shrug. "Yes, I am afraid! What will she think of me? Will she understand why I have denied her all these years? Will she know it was because I wanted her to have everything that I could not give her if she had stayed here with me? How will she understand I did not save her mother?"

"Vincent, you cannot blame yourself for what happened."

Vincent clenched his fists and raised them in the air, then threw them down in defeat.

"It's over, Vincent. She will understand. It's time Kathleen knew."

"Hi there. It's time Kathleen knew what?"

Both men looked at each other. Elliot slapped Vincent on the back. "It's all yours, Vincent," and made a hasty retreat from the chamber.

CHAPTER FOUR

Vincent turned and walked over to his table, put his palms down on the top and lowered his head.

Kathleen walked over to him, concerned. "Tell me, Vincent. Is something wrong? Are you ill? Is Father all right?"

Vincent raised his head toward the ceiling as if to gain strength. Sighing deeply he straightened, turned and gently took hold of her by the shoulders, easing her down into his chair.

"I have something to tell you. Please do not interrupt. It all began on April 12th, twenty years ago. I was walking in the park one night, when a van drew up and someone was thrown out of the back. As it sped away I came forward, and found a young woman. Her face had been slashed in many places, and she was bleeding badly. I brought her here, Father stitched her wounds, bandaged her, and covered her eyes. I talked and read to her, to help ease the pain and fear she was suffering.

"One day when I had gone to get her some tea, she removed the bandages, and found something that showed her reflection for the first time since her attack. That reflection also showed me. My appearance frightened her, and she threw the reflector at me, hitting me in the head."

Kathleen moved as if to rise, but Vincent held up his hand, motioning her to stay.

"Please stay - I must continue. I turned and left the chamber. But I remained just outside the chamber entrance. I heard her crying, but I knew she cried not for herself, but for what she had done to me. I returned some time later with her clothes to take her home. I pulled my cape over my face, so as not to frighten her again. As I knelt before her, she removed my hood and looked at me without repulsion. With great sadness I walked her back to the basement of her apartment building. As I went to say goodbye, she embraced me. I had never felt such feelings before. It was then that I knew that I loved her. There was a noise coming from the basement so I fled from her. And my feelings.

"It was eight months later before I saw her again. But there was not a day, or an hour, that I did not think of her. I felt her fears, her joys, her disappointments. It was as if we were one, connected by some unseen bond. How, I do not know? I just know that it was true. One night I went to her balcony, to see her one last time, a glimpse to store in my memory. But she heard me and came out. When she realized that it was me, she begged me to stay. I knew I had no place in her world, but I could not leave her. We spent that night,

and many more on the balcony. We helped each other through many trying times.

"Once when she had been shot, and I thought that I had lost her, my rage was so great, I felt I could not live without her. But she called out to me from her pain and my rage dissolved, knowing she was alive.

"Two years later, when I was very ill, she nursed me and brought me back from the dark side. She gave me the strength to go on. I had forgotten much, even her name, but I knew that I loved her. It was her love that helped to heal me. But our bond was gone. She told me it had been a special gift, and maybe now it was no longer needed. Perhaps it would be replaced in time with another gift, a stronger, more important gift.

"She disappeared for six months. I searched for her endlessly. But to no avail. I could not find her. One night I felt something, it was like our bond calling out to me. It grew stronger and stronger so I followed. It led me to a building and there I found her. She died in my arms moments after I found her, but not before she told me that we had a child, a beautiful daughter. That child was you, Kathleen, and now you and I share that same bond."

Vincent stood and watched Kathleen as a torrent of emotions crossed her face. He could feel them. He stood still fearing her reactions. She looked at him and said; " *You* are my father? But what about my dad? I mean, Elliot; my mother? They were married. I have seen the papers."

Vincent shook his head. "Forgeries, made for convenience. You will need time to think about all of this." Vincent lowered his head. "I will go now. You stay here. If you need anything, I will come back."

Vincent left the chamber, like a man in a dream. He walked straight ahead, going faster and faster, soon he was running, expending all of his energy, crashing into the walls of the tunnel as he ran, staggering from one side to the other. But he felt no pain, except the pain in his heart. Finally he stopped. Leaning back against the tunnel wall, with his left hand clutching his heart, he threw back his head and roared with the abandonment of a man who had lost his soul. As he brought his head down, the tears flowed freely from his eyes.

"I'M BACK!"

Vincent's head jerked up. There sitting with one leg pulled up, his hand and chin resting on one knee, with that evil smile on his face, was his dark side. A low growl came from deep in Vincent's throat. His lips curled up, his fangs exposed, every muscle and fibre in his body ready for action. **"I'LL SHOW HER WHAT YOU REALLY ARE. THEN SHE WILL HATE YOU,"** taunted the beast.

Vincent sprang forward, the two mighty foes joined in a force of unbelievable strength, each lashing out, roaring and tearing. The beast threw Vincent back against the tunnel wall with a force strong enough to break a normal man's back.

Suddenly there she was. His Catherine. Standing between them, smiling saying, "Remember love, Vincent. Remember love."

The beast behind her cowered in the corner and disappeared. Vincent straightened, and tried to take a step forward but fell to his knees. He shook his head to clear his vision, but when he looked up she was no longer there. His beautiful Catherine. She had saved him again. Placing his hands on his knees, with his head lowered, he wept again.

This was how he was when Kathleen found him.

"Vincent, are you hurt? Are you all right?"

She raised his head with her hands and looked into his tear-stained face saying, "I don't know how, but somehow I knew you needed me. I felt it. I followed that feeling through the tunnels. I heard screams and voices. What happened? Is this what you meant when you said that we have a bond? I have always felt

things when we were together. I knew what you were thinking about, but I thought that it was because we have always understood each other so well. It's true! You really *are* my father!"

Kathleen embraced Vincent lovingly. It was then that they both saw her. There, at the far end of the tunnel was Catherine, smiling at them. As the vision turned and disappeared, father and daughter watched, knowing that now they would go on together.

CHAPTER FIVE

Elliot sat across the chess board from Father, lost in memories. Memories of Kathleen's first tooth. The birthday when she received her water-colour set and painted a picture for daddy, using his blueprints for a seven million dollar project. How could he have been angry? She had done it with love, for him. When she was seven years old, dressed in pink satin and lace, cutting the ribbon to his new office building on Madison and 24th Street, she had been quite the little lady. She had always been so grown-up and brave. Even when told that her tonsils had to be removed, she had not whimpered or cried. But she had come to him in his study that night saying that she could not sleep, and wondered if she might sit with him for a while. They sat in his wing chair, not talking, just taking comfort in each other. This was where Tipps found them, both asleep, next morning.

She was his whole life. Not just because of a promise he had made to Vincent, but because he had wanted to. He couldn't imagine life without her, but now he would have to.

"Elliot, it's your move I believe, if that is not check and mate," said Father smiling. He loved playing chess with Elliot, for he was an equal opponent, especially when his mind was on something else, like work, as it must be today.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, I guess that is it. Sorry, my mind was elsewhere. I'm not much of a challenge today, am I?"

"That's all right. We all have our off days, some more than others."

Just then Kathleen and Vincent entered the chamber. Elliot looked at Vincent, who bowed his head in answer to the unspoken question. Elliot's gaze moved to Kathleen.

She bounded down the stairs to him, and planted a kiss on his forehead and exclaimed. "Oh dad, did Father beat you again? You really shouldn't let him win." She winked at him.

"I'll have you know, young lady, he is a very worthy opponent. But one can not win all the time. And as for letting me win. Well, I must remind you that I have been playing chess for quite a number of years more than your father, and I have acquired a more refined skill of the game."

Elliot looked from Kathleen to Vincent in confusion.

"Father, if you will excuse us, Elliot, Kathleen and I have something to discuss. We will leave you to enjoy your victory."

Back in Vincent's chamber, Elliot waited for an explanation. Vincent looked at Kathleen as she stepped forward and hugged Elliot.

"It's all right. Vincent has explained everything to me, and I understand. It was a marvelous thing that you did."

Elliot was even more confused now than he was a moment ago. *Why is she calling Vincent, Vincent? Instead of dad or father?*

Vincent, seeing Elliot's confusion stepped forward to explain what had happened.

"We have talked and decided that there is no need to change anything. Kathleen will remain with you to be your daughter, as the world believes her to be. You are as much her father as I am. We both feel very comfortable with this. But maybe you are not?"

Elliot's face lit up with his magnificent smile, and assured them both, that he was more than comfortable with the arrangements. Elliot opened his arms to Kathleen, and she entered into them, to receive an exuberant hug, swinging her off the floor, causing her to squeal with delight. Vincent smiled, rejoicing with them.

During the next hour, they discussed many things, questions were answered, this time without any hesitation. Kathleen learned many things about every aspect of her life. Both men loved her mother very much, neither of them denied this in each other's presence. She also learned that both men felt that they owed each other their lives. They were truly both remarkable people. Kings of both their worlds.

Now the discussion turned toward her and her future.

"I have decided to study law, so that I might follow in mother's footsteps."

Elliot and Vincent both gave their approval in her decision. They then immediately started to discuss which university she should attend. Elliot said that money was no object. Princeton, Harvard, Yale or maybe Radcliffe? Like her mother. Both men looked expectantly at her, waiting for her response. She took a deep breath and said, "City."

Elliot looked thunderstruck.

Vincent asked, "But why City, Kathleen?"

"Because I want to stay close to my two favourite men, and besides, their academic qualifications are more than adequate. Michael did just fine there."

"Well, I do believe she has made up her mind, and I know better than to try and argue with her. Vincent, anything you'd like to say?"

"It is her choice. I will stand by it," Vincent replied.

"Coward," Elliot stated.

Vincent chuckled. "Well, City it is."

"Look at the time, if we are to make our supper appointment, we had better hurry."

Elliot and Kathleen were having supper with Uncle Joe and Aunt Jen. Kathleen knew they were not really her aunt and uncle, she just called them that. Joe Maxwell was New York's District Attorney, her mother's old boss. Jenny had been her mother's best friend. Joe and Jenny had been married for sixteen years now, and had five children, three boys and two girls. She was sure Joe Jr. had a crush on her. He was fourteen. Cathy was twelve, Anthony and William the twins were nine and Marie was six.

They would have lasagna for supper, she was sure, for that was Uncle Joe's favourite, next to chocolate covered cheese balls, that is ... Ugh. Aunt Jen had learned to cook all his favourite Italian dishes, just like his mother made ... well almost. He was at least twenty pounds overweight, and his hairline had been receding more in the last few years, she had noticed. Aunt Jen never changed, bouncy curls and as slim as she was in her wedding photographs. All that running after the twins, she was not surprised. They were a wonderful couple, their home was so full of love, one could not help being happy, when with them.

Kathleen hugged Vincent. "Soon," was all she said.

Vincent closed his eyes and inclined his head in a brief bow, stepping back to allow them to leave.

Elliot offered his hand. Vincent clasped it firmly with both of his. "Until next time, my friend."

Vincent turned into the tunnels, but he did not return to his chamber, but turned north at the next passage. He followed this until he came to an opening that led to the boiler room of the Forber Mutual Trust building. Silently, he made his way to the elevator shaft. Here he pulled himself up the cables to the top of an awaiting car. He heard the door to the adjacent car open, and the mingled voices of the night crew enter the car. Swiftly but silently he stepped from one car to another. Holding his cloak back with one hand, he held onto the cable with the other, waiting for the car to rise. He had no fear, for he had ridden on the top of elevators all his life. Once he had snatched Catherine from the jaws of death, by pulling her through the emergency hatch, and had carried her up the cables, as gunmen below fired blindly through the opening at them.

The elevator had now stopped, although there was still another five floors to go. With ease Vincent pulled himself hand over hand up the cables. As he reached a recess in the wall of the shaft, he leaned over and threw the emergency lever, that allowed the doors to open. He swung himself through the opening and landed quietly on the marble floor.

Swiftly he emerged from the building through the nearest window. Easing himself along the ledge of the building he came to his chosen place. Here he settled his broad shoulders against the building, resting his elbows on his drawn up knees. Below him lay the lights of the city. She was out there somewhere. Happy he knew, for he felt it. She was one of those lights. He was here for her, as he had been for her mother. If she needed him he would come, for he was her beast, and she was his beauty.

From his cloak Vincent produced a small, leather-bound journal, opening it he began to write.

Dearest Catherine

How I miss you. How true those last words we shared were. Death shall have no dominion. For my love for you is as strong now as it was then, not an hour has passed that I have not thought of you.

I sat on the building top tonight, looking out over that sea of light, knowing she was down there somewhere. Catherine, our daughter is a true beauty, wise beyond her years. Like you she brought me back, gave me hope to go on. Through her eyes our dream will continue. Now she carries our dream.

The river of life we cross is swift, we are but a ripple in time, and like a ripple that starts small, it carries on to join, and form others. So are our lives like ripples upon the water, joining, growing and forming anew. Our dream will live on, for our love can not die. She is our love.

As Vincent closed his journal, he gazed pensively across the city, toward the light that was Kathleen's. Unknown to him, she herself sat upon her patio, immersed in the city's beauty; She too, was absorbed in her writings, sharing her innermost feelings with her diary.

Dearest Mother

I feel compelled to write this letter, even though I know you will never hold this in your hands and read it. But by plying pen to paper, my heart's truest feelings will be proclaimed. I love you even through I have never been with you. The one's you have left behind keep your memory alive. You must have been an outstanding person for so many people to have loved you, so deeply. It has all been explained to me, I understand

everything.

Sometimes I feel cheated, like I've missed something, then I sit back and ask, Of What? Wherever I go, you are with me. I have two fathers who love me. Mary and Father are like my grandparents, and Diana has always been there, when I needed some motherly advice. She has never tried to take your place, for no one could. She loves Vincent. You can see it in her eyes. But do we not all love him? She understands, he loves only you.

I promise I will do all that I can, to make you proud of me. I will always protect Vincent, as I know you would have, and did. I will keep your dreams alive. I will strive to make a difference. Even if it is for only one person, I will do it gladly. Always remember, my thoughts of you are loving.

With all my heart. Your daughter

Kathleen Margaret Wells Burch

CHAPTER SIX

Kathleen ran, confused and breathless. She was in a long corridor, turning here and there, trying to escape. But from what?

Further down the hall behind her there was a dog following. No, not a dog, but a white wolf. Its eyes red, and its paws pitched forward and alert, not chasing her, just following. She loved animals, she had a kinship with them. Why then, was she so afraid? Looking back at the animal, she discovered its mouth covered in blood and drawn back into a snarl.

Vincent woke with a jerk, he sprung instantly to his feet, his mind still conscious of the much too vivid dream. Sitting back on the bed he pulled the coverings around himself, the icy chill in the air was unnatural. Laying back on his pillow he recalled the dream, trying to decipher its meaning. Kathleen was safe, he knew that, for he could feel her.

The following night the dream returned, only this time the animal was running, chasing Kathleen just within feet of her, down the hall, and the next, just out of reach of her. She could clearly hear the growl of the animal, and smell its foul odour. Her limbs seemed leaden, but she forced herself to continue. There was an open door at the end of the corridor, if she could just make it. No, the door was closing. Just as she got there it slammed shut, she turned to see the animal spring. She screamed.

Vincent woke again, his body damp with perspiration, his heart racing. What did it mean? Why was this dream haunting him? He knew Kathleen was still safe so what was bothering him?

The dream returned night after night. Vincent, now afraid of sleeping, roamed the tunnels, his nerves stretched to the point of breaking. He had been short-tempered with the children over trivial matters. The next night the dream returned in full. Only as the animal sprang, Kathleen was able to open the door and step through it just in time. Frantically, she slammed the door shut and leaned against it, breathing heavily, considering her next move. When she stepped into the room, out of the corner of her eye she saw a shadow, through the frosted glass. She turned just as the window shattered, the great beast erupted through the glass, sending shards of glass flying. Covering her face with her arm for protection, she was thrown to the floor by the weight of the creature. As the beast drew back, Vincent saw what remained of his once beautiful Kathleen.

"NO...!" Vincent screamed.

Father rushed to the chamber, and found Vincent on his hands and knees at the side of his bed, hurrying to

his side he knelt beside him.

Vincent sat back on his heels, raising his hands, his palms bloodied, where his own claws had pierced his flesh.

"Vincent, your hands, what have you done? It's the dream, isn't it? The one that has you walking aimlessly through the night?"

"Yes... only tonight there was more. I saw the destruction of my one and only child."

"Good Lord, is she all right? Can you feel her?"

"Yes, Father. She is fine, she is sleeping."

"Well, at least someone is. This can not continue, you will make yourself ill, wandering the tunnels night after night. It is just a nightmare. Surely you are wise enough to tell the difference. Come, let me tend to your hands. We don't want to risk you getting an infection as well, then maybe we can get some sleep."

But sleep would not come. Not now. Maybe never.

The room was illuminated with soft light, the smell of cigarette smoke and perfume was prevalent. The conversations of numerous groups of people mingled with that of the soft music coming from the overhead stereo system. Standing next to her father in a Grecian draped gown, of the palest yellow was Kathleen. Her hair was pulled up into a more mature style, but nothing could take away her youthful beauty.

The auction was going very well, her father would be pleased, as he held one of these events every year at about this time. This year the charity was the *Make A Wish Foundation*; it could expect a handsome sum. This was also her first year as acting as hostess, and she was very excited.

He stood across the room, with a drink in his hand watching her, waiting for just the right moment to approach her. It had been damn difficult to arrange an invitation, as the event was closed to the general public. He was lucky having the connections that he did, a favour here and there could reap its rewards. Here was his opportunity, she was moving away from the group. Skillfully, he made his way through the crowd to her side.

"Miss Burch."

Kathleen looked up into the face of a fairly attractive young man. He was fair, pale complexion, brown eyes, but his smile, didn't look quite right; it appeared faulted, strained. She had the strangest feeling the hairs on the back of her neck were standing up. Something about him warned her to be cautious. She gave him a brief nod and smiled.

"Brandon Harrison, I'm here representing James Todd's office. You've got quite a turnout here. May I get you some refreshment?"

"No. No, thank you, Mr. Harrison."

"Brandon, please."

"Yes, there is a good turnout, my father will be pleased. If you will excuse me, I see someone I've been expecting."

"Yes, maybe we could go for a drink later?"

Kathleen wanted to scream **NO** as every nerve in her body was telling her to get away from this man.

"Perhaps later."

Brandon watched her cross the room out of his sight. *Perhaps soon, Miss Burch. Very soon.*

He sat on the bed couch in his crowded two room apartment. He had discarded his jacket and tie, his shirt was open to his waist, exposing his torso. Beside him on the couch was an assortment of newspaper clippings, some yellow with age. The top one read, **Max Avery found guilty. Charges pending** and a photograph of him with two policemen leaving the courtroom. The picture next to that one, was of a very beautiful woman, and a very attractive man, subtitled. **Assistant deputy district attorney Catherine Chandler, with star witness Elliot Burch.** They were the ones responsible for his father's death. Yes, his father, Max Avery. He had been forced to use his mother's maiden name – Harrison - as Avery had only brought him polite rejection. Chandler and Burch were responsible for the way he had grown up in poverty. Now he was going to make sure they paid. Well, at least one of them. Too bad her mother had been killed. He would have liked her to see what he was going to do. He held up another clipping, **Miss Kathleen Burch, beautiful daughter of Catherine and Elliot Burch.** *Little Bitch! Thought she was too good for him huh?* He'd enjoy using her. He might as well gain some pleasure from this, then he would destroy her. Lifting a bottle of scotch in his other hand he toasted the picture.

"Till we meet again, Miss Burch."

CHAPTER SEVEN

As Kathleen emerged from the lecture hall a gust of icy wind chilled her for a moment, strange for this time of year. It was eerie for the wind to feel so cold. Perhaps she imagined it. Raising her left hand so that she could see it from the light in the hall, she examined her first finger. Nope, not her imagination. There on the first finger of her left hand in the middle of the fingernail was the outline of a rosebud. Whenever she was cold or excited it would appear, a small pink rosebud. It was her special birthmark. Her dad had teased her about it and nicknamed her Rosebud. His little Rosebud would someday bloom into a beautiful rose, he told her. Elliot was a wonderful father, she was very lucky to have two fathers, for this is how she felt about both Elliot and Vincent. For she truly loved both of them.

There was that chilling wind again and, for some reason it made her uneasy. She raised her hand to her throat, feeling the crystal that Vincent had given her last week on her eighteenth birthday. He told her it had been her mother's that he had given it to her on their first anniversary. He told her that her mother had given him a porcelain rose. This had been her grandmother's. She had given it to her mother when she was little and told her that it was to remind her she was never alone. Her mother had sewn a leather pouch and put the rose inside it, and given it to Vincent, to remind him that she was always with him. He had shown Kathleen the rose that he still wore around his neck. He had fingered it gently as if it were real, and when she had looked up into his eyes, she could see their watery brightness. He still missed her after all these years. Now for some reason, just feeling the crystal at her throat made her uneasiness go away.

The night was beautiful. Her eyesight was almost as good at night as it was during the day. Her eyes weren't the only thing that was exceptional. Her hearing was extraordinary, she could hear nightlife moving all around her, things other people couldn't, like the scurrying of tiny feet in the undergrowth, the cry of a child on the fifth floor, the conversation of the people across the street from her. She could hear it all. She also

seemed to have a sixth sense about things that were going to happen before they did. Like stepping out of the way the last moment when she was in some form of danger, it had proven its self many times.

She loved walking at night, she felt a friendship with it. It reminded her of the poem by *Robert Frost - I AM ONE ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT*. She loved the classics. That was why she had looked forward to the lecture tonight. *Samuel Clemens -- Mark Twain's adventures*. It reminded her of her Uncle Devin. He was always travelling all over the world, gone more than he stayed. When she was small, he would thrill her with his stories. "Never be afraid to try," he'd say. "You can be anything you want, and go any place you want. South of Oz or North of Shangri-La. But you have to want it bad enough."

He had three scars on his cheek. When she inquired how he got them, he told her they had been a lesson, a lesson in love and trust. She asked if he had learned his lesson, and if so, why hadn't he had the scars removed? Devin told her they were a reminder that he never travelled alone. That his journey was not only for him, but for those he left behind. Vincent had once told her, when he and Devin were boys, they spent hours playing *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn*, and that Devin's dreams, had always included him.

Kathleen stopped, hearing something; her mind must be playing tricks on her tonight. Vincent and dad would be furious with her if they knew she was walking alone. She had begged Jason the chauffeur to meet her on the corner of Third and Maple. It was only a few blocks, the streets were well lit, and the night was so beautiful. As Kathleen came even with an alley, a hand reached out and covered her mouth, the other snaked around her waist, pulling her backwards into the black void of the alley. She struggled to escape him, he was surprised, she was very strong for her size, but soon he'd have her pleading beneath him. She'd beg for more, before he killed her. Kathleen sunk her teeth into the flesh that covered her mouth, biting till she tasted blood. Brandon let loose with a multitude of obscenities and jerked his hand from her mouth, grabbing her by the hair, he pulled her head back to whisper in her ear.

"You'll pay for that. Bitch."

As she resumed her struggles to free herself, he hit her, knocking her back into a broken window, the broken glass pierced her tender young flesh, slicking a line down her face along her left jaw. Stunned momentarily she ceased to struggle. Taking her now and throwing her to the ground he pinned her arms above her head, and with one mighty jerk ripped her blouse and undergarments open to expose her. His eyes devoured the sight before him as he groped her breasts and squeezed. Kathleen screamed in terror.

Vincent, just coming back from checking the outer perimeter of the lower tunnels felt Kathleen's terror. With head lowered and shoulders set the huge man raced through the tunnel. He entered the subway opening, just as the train slowed at the station. Swiftly and skillfully Vincent scaled the car to ride flat on top its surface. As the train built up speed the wind tore at his hair and mantle. His claws dug deep into the car's covering, to maintain his grip. His nostrils were assailed by the smell of engine fuels and heated metal. He had travelled this way for many years of his life. It had always exhilarated him, but not tonight.

Would it never reach the Fifth Street Station.

As the train slowed Vincent dropped down, disappearing almost immediately into the shadows, through the concealed opening, stopping only long enough to make sure it sealed.

Brandon now took his hand from Kathleen's breast, to raise her skirt, ripping her undergarments away, he proceeded to stroke her leg, marvelling at the smoothness of her flesh. Forcing his knee between her legs he parted them and moved to touch her inner thigh. She felt his desire through his pants' leg, her struggles only seemed to heighten his desire, bile rose in her throat, as his hands touched parts of her body that were hers alone.

An unearthly roar echoed through the alleyway. Brandon's body was jerked from Kathleen's. He seemed to

hover over her for a second, before he was hurled some ten feet away, into a pile of garbage. Kathleen pulled herself up into a sitting position, and leaned back against the building, using its wall as support. The drama that now unfolded before her eyes was that of a cloaked figure, picking Brandon up by his coat fronts and shaking him like a rag doll. She saw the fear in his eyes, but she felt no mercy. He had touched her and violated her body. She hated him, her hatred was manifested through Vincent. With one mighty swing of his arm the sound of breaking bones was heard. Brandon's head rolled unnaturally as Vincent threw him to the ground.

Vincent, rage subsided, now looked at his hands and turned to Kathleen. She stood white-faced, staring at him. She had never seen his rage before, it must sicken her, what must she think of him? He raised the hands to look at his claw-like nails, now stained with blood. Clutching her torn garments, Kathleen made her way to Vincent's side. Looking down at the mutilated body of Brandon, she turned and looked up at Vincent, who turned his head in shame.

Holding onto his arm for support she said, "Vincent, you saved me."

"I'm sorry. I am so sorry." Vincent lowered his head.

"Sorry for what? For saving me from being raped?"

"No, not for that. But for what you saw, for what these hands are capable of doing."

Kathleen gently took his hands in hers saying, "These hands are capable of giving, sharing and bringing joy. These hands are my hands, they are beautiful hands." She kissed them. "For they are my father's hands, and I love them, as I love him."

Just then Kathleen swayed and Vincent grabbed her to steady her as her head fell backwards. Vincent now saw the blood on her face and hair, that had run from the wound on her face. Kathleen's eyes fluttered, and she went limp. Vincent picked her up, carefully wrapped her in his cape, and carried her to the nearest tunnel entrance.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kathleen, in her dazed condition, smelled leather, candlewax and Vincent. She knew that she was wrapped in his cape. She always loved the smell of his cape, but why was she wrapped in it? It didn't matter, she liked it, it felt good. When she stirred in his arms, he looked down at her pale face.

"It's all right, little one. I'm taking you home. Home where no one can hurt you. I'll see to that."

Taking her home. As he had done so many years before, when he had carried her from the house belonging to Gabriel. Gabriel, who had killed his beautiful Catherine. He had wanted to kill Gabriel, but Diana had reminded him that the child was calling out to him. Later he had learned that Diana had shot Gabriel with Catherine's gun. Sweet Diana, she had done that for him, Kathleen and all the people of the tunnel world. He and Diana had a special relationship, even now. They both knew she would never replace Catherine in his heart. But, there was a special place for her there too. She never asked for anything more. Vincent knew she loved him. He wished he could love her in return, for she was an extraordinary person. In many ways she was like his Catherine, she never asked anything for herself, from him. Just to share his company seemed enough.

They were coming to the Hospital Chamber now. Mary was there waiting, for Vincent had stopped just long enough to tap out. **EMERGENCY. HOSPITAL. QUICK. KATHLEEN. TELL FATHER.** Vincent gently placed Kathleen on the cot that Mary had turned down. Father came forward with his bag, as he bent to examine

her, her head fell to the side, exposing the deep gash in her face.

"Good Lord, Vincent. What happened?"

"I will explain later. Please Father, her wound."

"Yes, yes. You're quite right."

"Mary, hot water. My gown, please. Vincent, I'll need you to help, my hands are not as steady as they used to be."

While Vincent and Father washed and prepared, Mary gently bathed Kathleen's face and neck. When she pulled back the cape, she found Kathleen's clothing torn and bruises forming on her shoulder and upper breast. Tears sprang to her eyes and old memories returned to torture her. She knew how Kathleen would feel when she awoke. How she herself had felt, after she had been ... she couldn't say it, even after all these years. If it hadn't been for Father, and all the others, she would not have been able to go on. Now she would be here for Kathleen, as they had been for her. She would help her cope with her feeling.

Father and Vincent worked silently and skillfully, stitching the wound. Father had taught Vincent everything he knew about medicine. Therefore, Vincent was now as much a doctor as Father had been, maybe even more so. His instincts seemed to guide him. Peter was always bringing the latest updates to them. Vincent would study each new item passionately, spending hours discussing the pros and cons of each new procedure. Yes, Vincent was as much a doctor as any doctor, all he lacked was a diploma.

Whilst Vincent and Father cleaned up, Mary and Jamie dressed Kathleen in one of the well washed, flannel gowns, used in the Hospital Chambers. Even with the bruises that had now formed on her face, she looked lovely. When Mary and Jamie emerged from behind the curtain, Vincent went forward to sit on the edge of the cot. Taking Kathleen's hand in his and stroking it very gently, he looked up questioningly at Father. Father placed his hand on his son's shoulder.

"It will take time. Her physical wounds will heal, for she is healthy. But it is the mental wounds that worry me. Let us hope that her young mind will not be scarred too much from the terrible ordeal she has just suffered. You must be here to comfort her. Our love is what will make her whole again."

Vincent stayed beside her, holding her hand, trying to reassure her. Hoping that she could feel his presence through their bond. He remembered the special times they had shared together. Elliot had been generous to the community Below. One of his many presents had been that of a small chest freezer, run by a very special generator, that was powered by a solar chip. This chip was charged, and stored with others, from sunlight, gathered from the reflections of the Mirror Pool. It was his treat to supply the tunnel children with a never ending supply of ice cream. On one of the occasions that Kathleen stayed overnight, she had awakened complaining of being hungry. On inspection of the kitchen, she and Vincent decided to have some ice cream (*ice cream being both their favourites*). As they enjoyed their treat, they proceeded to tease each other with spoonfuls of ice cream. Where upon they began to feed each other. Getting liberal amounts of ice cream on each other's faces. With all their silliness, they managed to wake Father, who came to the kitchen to find out what on earth all the noise was. Seeing the huge powerful man with the small girl on his lap, both of them with ice cream on their faces was quite touching, and heart-warming. They both looked at Father expecting to be scolded.

But he said, "Well, where is my bowl? Or have the two of you both eaten it all?"

This sent them both into fits of giggles, which spilled more ice cream.

His precious little kitten. That was what he called her. For as a child, when in deep slumber, she made a noise deep in her throat, that only he could hear, he called it her purr. "Come back to me, little one."

Elliot was like a mad man, running his hands through his hair, sitting only to jump up, to continue pacing the room. His usual neat attire had been forgone, his shirt tails hung out, his tie was loosened from his neck.

"Where could she be?"

He had been savage with Jason. It had only been his concern for Kathleen, that had caused him to lash out the way he had. He knew how much his staff loved her, especially his chauffeur. He also knew how persuasive she could be. Darn her. How many times had he warned her about her recklessness. He ran his hands over his eyes.

"Dear God. Please be well, Kathleen."

Just then there came a knock at the door. Tipps came in the instant Elliot barked out the command to enter.

"Sir, this was just delivered. I thought it might be important."

Elliot snatched the envelope from the tray, and ripped it open. The relief he felt when he read it was so great it caused him to laugh.

"Sir, I beg your pardon. Please, it it about Miss Kathleen? Is she all right?"

"Yes, Tipps. She is just fine. She is with a friend. It has been a long day. I think I'll retire now."

"Is there anything else you might require, sir?"

"No, thank you. I'll be fine now."

"Goodnight, sir."

"Goodnight, Tipps. Oh, there is one thing. Please tell the others."

Elliot turned and went through the other entrance to his study, down the hall, and into his bedroom. Upon entering, he turned and locked the door. Removing his tie and shirt, he replaced them with a warm turtleneck sweater. He opened a small box on the table and placed his hand flat on the screen inside. The wall panel in front of him slid noiselessly to the side. Elliot closed the box and stepped inside the wall. Once inside he placed his hand on another disc, this closed the wall entrance. Taking a vest from a hook on the wall, he continued down the stairs. Elliot had had this entrance to the tunnels put in years ago. The panel would only open for himself and Kathleen. It worked on a hand print analysis. Checking the pocket of his vest he made sure he had all he needed. A large piece of chalk to mark the way, flashlight and a small wrench, used for tapping out messages on the pipes. He was ready.

Some thirty minutes later, Elliot entered the lower tunnels. Here he was met by Vincent.

"Vincent, good to see you. I was surprised to hear Kathleen was here. She has an early class tomorrow morning."

Suddenly, Elliot realized that Vincent was strangely quiet.

"Vincent, what's wrong?"

"It's Kathleen."

"Yes, what?"

"She was attacked and I wasn't in time."

"Is she, she...?" The words were left unspoken.

"No." Vincent took a deep breath. "She has a deep gash on her face, and a multitude of bruises. All of which have been attended to."

"Anything else?"

"It's her mind we fear for the most. After what she saw."

"Well. What did she see?"

"She saw me kill a man. The man who attacked her. My rage was so great, that I forgot she was there. We fear she may go into shock."

"Did she say anything to you afterwards?"

"Just before she collapsed, she took my hands in hers and told me she loved me."

Elliot realized his friend's struggle. Blaming himself for something that was not his fault.

"Come Vincent, let us go. Perhaps she will not remember. Maybe it is not as bad as you fear."

They turned and walked down the tunnels, each aware of the other's apprehension. Waiting outside the Hospital Chambers, was Father. Noting the task before him as a difficult one. Dealing with Vincent was hard enough, but there was Elliot too.

In many ways they were much alike. Their love for Kathleen was above all else. She had awakened shortly after Vincent left to meet Elliot. Her vital signs were perfect, but she just lay there, staring straight ahead, giving no sign of recognition at all. The very thing that they feared most, trauma. How long she would be like this no one knew, an hour, a week, perhaps forever.

"Dear God. Help us."

As the two men approached, Father came forward. Vincent was the first to speak, sensing Father's agitation.

"Has she awakened? Is she well?"

Father's forehead creased. "Physically, yes. But what I feared most has come to pass. She is in shock."

Vincent clenched his fists. "It is because of what she saw. What I am capable of."

Neither Father or Elliot disputed this as they remembered the first time they had experienced it themselves.

"Come. Perhaps if you talk to her, it will help," Father offered.

Vincent drew back. "No, I don't think I should. I have done enough damage."

Elliot now spoke up. **"Yes, you will!"**

Vincent was taken aback by his manner.

"You have always told us to face our fears. Meet them head on. Now you meet yours. She is *your* daughter. She has your strength. I don't believe for one moment that this was brought on by what she saw you do. In fact you said it yourself, she told you she loved you. No, she is too wise, and understanding, and loves you too much to let this bother her. It was the attack. Kathleen is pure, she has never been with a man. This is what caused it. Now, come on, let's go. She needs us."

With that, Elliot sidestepped Father and headed for the Hospital Chambers. Taking a deep breath, Vincent followed. Father sent up a silent prayer that Elliot was right. Each man approached the bed from a different side. Elliot sat on the edge and raised Kathleen's hand and kissed it.

"Rosebud honey, I'm here. Can you hear me?"

Kathleen was propped up against a number of pillows. One half of her face was wrapped in bandages. Her one uncovered eye stared blankly ahead. Elliot turned to Vincent, and motioned for him to try. Vincent placed Kathleen's other hand between his two huge ones, and stroked it lovingly.

"Kathleen." Vincent's voice wavered, as tears filled his eyes. "Come back to us. We need you. *I* need you."

As Kathleen's eye closed one lone tear slowly travelled from the corner of her eye, to make its way down

her cheek. Other than this there was no response. As the night wore on many prayers were said. Only time would tell.

The young man slowly entered the Hospital Chamber. He was not tall, but quite muscularly built. His eyes were dark like his hair, which waved loosely to his shoulders. Masculine and handsome. Catherine sat beside the bed reading quietly to the form which lay in it. She looked up, smiled and motioned him forward. Making his way to the bed he looked down at the girl lying there. A sudden anger filled him, its hugeness surprised him.

Catherine slowly rose. "Excuse me, I have to check on the water in the boiler. If you need anything, just call."

His eyes never left Kathleen's face as he replied, he would. Kneeling down on the bed with one knee, he reached forward to smooth a few strands of honey flaxen hair from her face. Sitting back now, he took her hand in his calloused one.

"Kathleen, can you hear me?"

There was no response.

"I came as soon as I could. Please, Kathleen. Say something."

When there was still no response, he did not know what to do, or say. Then he remembered something Vincent had once told him.

"Say what was in your heart, for they are the truest words of all."

"Kathleen. Come back to us. Please come back to me. I need you. I've always been afraid to admit how much I cared for you, for fear you'd think me foolish. But Kathleen, I've always cared. You have always been there, in the back of my mind, playing havoc with my thoughts."

Raising her hand to his cheek, he closed his eyes and gently rubbed it. Then he placed a soft kiss on each fingertip. As he held her hand to his lips he felt her fingers open, to caress this face. He opened his eyes to look into the water blue depths. Her lips parted and she spoke one word.

"Luke."

He leaned forward cautiously. She raised to meet him, their lips touched in the briefest kiss.

Vincent felt Kathleen's return and hurried to the chamber, just in time to see the young lovers kiss. Holding back, he retreated so as not to disturb them. Waiting a moment, he cleared his throat and called out to Catherine, warning them of his approach. Kathleen looked up at Vincent, her one cheek prettily pink. She was aware that Vincent could feel her feelings. Stretching out her arms, she offered herself to Vincent. Taking her gently in his arms, he rocked her. She could feel his joy and apprehension. Stroking his mane and back she soothed him, telling him, it was okay. She was back. Everything was going to be fine, and how much she loved him.

Elliot emerged through the panel into his bedroom. He knew there was no use trying to sleep. His mind was too restless. Strolling over to his house phone, he picked it up and pushed the chauffeur number.

"Jason, get the car, now."

Going into his bathroom, he splashed water on his face and ran a comb through his hair. Returning to his room, he picked up his jacket, and went down to the front door. His limo was waiting just outside the door.

Jerking the car door open himself, he hopped into the back. Looking at Jason, he said "The docks."

Nothing else needed to be said. There was only one reason to go there. The slick white limo sliced its way through the early morning darkness.

The dusty rose of dawn was breaking as Elliot stepped from the car. He eased his way down the alley. He had offered Tim a shop, and quarters in one of his buildings. But Tim had declined, saying, "Why? I have all I need."

Opening the door of the shop, the ever present smell of herbs, and scents penetrated his nostrils. The sound of the dancing chimes teased his ears. The curtain slowly pulled aside, and there was Tim. Elliot bowed to his friend. Tim returned the bow.

"Come, let us sit. I will make some tea. You are troubled, I can see. Tell me."

Elliot related the story of the last twenty-eight hours. When he concluded, Elliot's voice cracked and tears flowed freely from his eyes. He covered his face with his hands.

Tim placed his hand on Elliot's shoulder. "Good, good, let it carry you away and bring you back. Be patient, my friend. She will come back to you, stronger than she was before."

Elliot looked up at Tim, knowing somehow, his words were true.

"Come," said Tim. "We will make Kathleen's favourite scent."

Time made all the oil scents, that went into the making of Kathleen's toiletries. Roses, lilac, lily-of-the-valley and carnation. All the fragrances of a springtime garden, after an early morning rain. They set to work together, rich man, poor man, shoulder to shoulder, friend to friend.

CHAPTER NINE

Damn, he hated being woken up in the middle of the night. The body must have been there three or four days, the stench was unbelievable. No matter how many times he had seen things like this, it bothered him. Maybe that was a good thing, for when it didn't, it would mean he didn't care anymore. Walking to the mouth of the alley, he stood there taking his time. Breathing in as much fresh air as he could, before he'd have to return. As he looked down he spotted an object that glittered like fire. Bending to pick it up, he recognized it. It was Kathleen Burch's crystal necklace. He remembered how proudly she had displayed it at her eighteenth birthday party just a few weeks ago, saying it had been her mother's. He remembered Catherine having it. But how had Elliot got it? Who knew? How did Elliot get half the things he did? Everything about Elliot was a mystery. Even right down to Kathleen. It was true the autopsy had shown that Catherine had delivered a child just hours before her death. But the way the child got from where it was, to Elliot was very suspicious.

He remembered Elliot explaining to him how he had received a ransom note shortly after he came home from the upstate hospital. The note, he said had demanded half a million dollars in return for the child. Elliot admitted he and Catherine were lovers, so he had not been surprised to learn about the child. Not wanting to take any chances, Elliot said he had paid the ransom. By having his men stake out the drop site, they had followed an Oriental woman to the east side of town. The child had been delivered later that night, by cab to his estate. Wanting answers to some questions, Elliot said he had approached the woman, reassuring her he meant her no harm, and that she could keep the money. He just wanted to know what had happened. She finally told him she could not leave the child with the man Gabriel, as he was evil. He had killed the woman moments after the child was born. For some reason Gabriel thought the child would bring him

something special. So she had stolen the child during the night. Later the next day she had learned that Gabriel was dead. She remembered Catherine had talked about Elliot. If he was the father, she was sure he would pay to get the child. She needed the money to get her family out of their country. That was how Gabriel had controlled her, by threatening her family.

Joe, skeptical of the whole story, had gone to the apartment on the east side to try to verify it. Only to find an empty apartment. Nothing, nothing at all remained of the prior residents. Joe had questioned Elliot further. To prove to Joe once and for all that the child was his, Elliot insisted that Catherine's friend and Doctor – Peter - do a DNA test, taking his blood and using the samples they still had of Catherine. The test was performed, proving positively that the child was Elliot's and Catherine's. How he had hated Elliot at that moment. How he wished the child had been his instead. But that was a long time ago. Now, he had his Jen, and no one could have asked for a better life.

But how had the crystal necklace shown up here? Just then, one of the uniformed officers came up from behind him. Quickly he put the crystal in his pocket. He would deal with this later.

That evening in his study, Joe sat in his favourite chair with his feet on the desk, holding the necklace and examining it. *Something's going on, but what?* Just then Jen came into the room, he dropped the necklace into his other hand. He did not want her to recognize it and ask questions he could not answer.

"Coming to bed?"

"In a minute. I just have a few more things to go over."

She came over and put her hands on either side of his face, and gave him a kiss on the mouth, looking aggressively into his eyes. "Don't be long."

Joe swallowed, let out a deep breath and said, "After that, how could I be?"

Reaching out, he gave her a swat on her backside.

"Now go woman, so I can get done."

Jenny yelped and bounced from the room. As the door closed Joe opened his hand, and stared at the necklace, deep in thought. The marks on the Harrison kid. He hadn't seen anything like that since the death of Moreno. Elliot had been there then too. In fact, he had been the prime suspect, until his witness had come forward. Now this. Something just didn't ring true. He was going to get to the bottom of it somehow.

"Joe, are you coming? A girl can't wait all night."

Joe jumped up from his chair and pulled Jenny into his arms, holding her tight. ""Got you, kiddo."

"Woo, you devil man."

They embraced as Joe turned out the lights.

"Joe, good to see you. Come sit. Coffee? Danish? Anything?"

"No, no thanks, Elliot. I'm here on business. Unofficial right now."

"Okay, Joe. What is it?"

"What do you know about this?"

Taking the crystal necklace from his pocket, he held it up.

As he reached out to take the crystal, Elliot replied, "It's Kathleen's. Where did you find it? She lost it last week."

Joe impatiently snatched it back.

"I know it's Kathleen's. It's one of a kind. I found it at a murder scene."

Elliot looked up sharply, saying cautiously, "A murder scene?"

"Yes, damn it, you heard me. A murder scene. Where's Kathleen?"

"What are you implying, Joe? She's in her room, she took a fall the other night in the bathroom. She fell through the shower stall. She had a pretty nasty cut. Peter came over to the house and put in a few stitches."

"I'd like to see her."

"I wish you wouldn't. She's kind of upset. You see, if it was her face that was cut. She is kind of self-conscious about it. If you could give her a few days so she can rest and adjust herself to it."

"Yeah, I guess so. But I still want to talk to her. Where was she last Thursday?"

"During the day she was in classes. That evening she went to a lecture at Eighth and Stoble. That was the last time she remembered having the necklace."

"I found it three blocks away."

"Well, there you go. She probably lost it walking back to the car."

"You let her walk in that district alone?"

"I didn't say she was alone. Jason, my chauffeur, was with her."

"Yeah, I guess that's it. Okay, tell her to hold onto it from now on. Next time she might not get it back. Tell her when she is up to it, Aunt Jen and I will be around to see her."

You're a smooth man, Burch. I don't believe a word of it, Joe thought to himself.

"Sure, I'll let her know. Goodbye, Joe."

"Give her our love."

When the door closed behind Joe, Elliot leaned on his desk top, and let out an audible sigh. "That was close."

Elliot rapped lightly and opened Kathleen's door a crack. "Kathleen, are you awake?"

"Yes, dad. Come in."

Sitting on her sofa by the window and the morning light bathing over her, she looked radiant. Even the small bandage would not mar her beauty. She was wearing a caftan, patterned with green leaves, edged with ivory-coloured lace. Her hair was drawn back with a small yellow ribbon. Her cheeks had returned to the rosy colour. She looked wonderful, considering what she had been through. Elliot crossed the room, and sat beside her.

"Your Uncle Joe was just here. He brought this."

He held up the necklace. She reached out to take it, but her joy was short-lived when she realized where it was found.

"What did you tell him?"

"That you lost it the night of the lecture, but you didn't know where."

"Does he believe you?"

"He seemed to. We'll have to be careful. He wanted to see you. I told him what we had discussed. He said he would be around to see you later, and sends you their love."

She didn't like lying to anyone, but what could she do? She had made a promise, a promise to her mother, that she would protect Vincent, with her very life if need be.

CHAPTER TEN

Whilst Kathleen stood in the front hall waiting for her dad, she tilted her head to one side and examined her face in the mirror. The lower part of the scar was hardly noticeable, it was more like a cat scratch, but the upper part was much wider and angry looking. Father said it was much deeper there, because that was where the glass had penetrated her face.

Elliot approached saying, "Don't worry, honey. We can have the scar removed. I shudder when I think of how close I came to losing you."

Turning to kiss her father's cheek, she said, "Now dad, you promised ... It's over. I'm fine. Besides, you're going to be late for your meeting, and I've got to get to class. Come on."

She had changed since the attack. Oh, she was still her bright and enthusiastic self, only now she seemed to have grown more mature.

Vincent had told Elliot what he had witnessed between Luke and Kathleen. He had never realized that Kathleen had cared for Luke. Now that he thought back though, Kathleen had spent a lot of time in the tunnels when they were working on the Maze. He had thought it was because Catherine and Eric were there. Now he realized that Luke was always there too. Fathers really were the last to know. He had much to be grateful for, to that young man.

As the limo curled its way down the drive and entered into the stream of traffic, father and daughter made themselves comfortable.

"Are you going to the concert tonight?" Elliot asked.

"Yes. Vincent, Diana, Luke and I are going. Are you sure you don't want to come?"

"Me, play third thumb? Not on your life. Besides, remember I'm more of a jazz and blues lover."

"You could always take Rebecca. I'm sure she would love to come."

"Matchmaking again? Don't you remember the last time you tried that? Saviel practically moved in. We ate bean sprouts and bran for weeks. I for one don't think my constitution could handle something like that again."

Kathleen giggled, recalling the episode. Just then the limo pulled up to her stop. Kathleen leaned over and planted a kiss on Elliot's cheek. As she opened the door she looked back and said, "Rebecca doesn't like bean sprouts."

Elliot swatted at her with his newspaper. "Love you."

"Love you, too. See you tonight."

Later that morning, back in her room, Kathleen remembered there was something she had once seen in the black box Diana had given her. It contained some of her mother's things that Diana had saved for her.

There was an odd assortment of things; a small doll, an owl mask, a collection of concert stubs, a swatch of

hair with ribbons and flowers woven in it. But that wasn't what she was looking for. It was something about a school for defense.

There it was! **ISAAC STUBBS NO FOOLING STREET FIGHTING ACADEMY 1414 LOWER BRIDGE STREET.**

I wonder if it's still there? she thought.

She grabbed the telephone directory. It was! Quickly she dialed the number, listening to the ring. Once, twice.

"Mr. Stubbs, my name is Kathleen Burch. I'd like to make an appointment for today at two pm. That's fine. See you then."

There, now all she had to do was wait.

At ten minutes to two, Jason slowed the limo down in front of a large brown structure on the lower east side. Turning to Kathleen in the back he asked, "Are you sure of this?"

"I'm sure, Jason. Park the limo here and wait, please. I don't know how long I'll be."

Slipping from the car, she quickly entered the building, going up to the third floor.

She found herself standing in a large room. Life-like dummies were set up at periodic points and chains hung from the ceiling. On the floor, bare planks were covered with gym mats. She was not alone. She could sense it. Someone was behind the screen. She could hear him breathing.

She looked to him like a vision from the past. He knew who she was. She was as beautiful as her mother. But there was also something special about her. The way she moved, sleek and cautious. No sense in trying to surprise her.

Stepping out of the hiding place he said, "Very good, Miss Burch. Never tell them where you are. Let them find you. Isaac Stubbs. I teach New York City street fighting and it ain't pretty. So, if you have a weak stomach, leave now."

"No, Mr. Stubbs. I'm here to learn."

"Lesson number one. It's Isaac."

Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and he could clearly see the angry red scar on her face.

"..... Because someone's hurt you. And no one's ever going to do that again."

"NO. NEVER AGAIN."

"Well, around here, you do whatever it takes to come out alive. Give me that earring of yours."

Kathleen quickly unhooked the earring, and handed it to Isaac.

"These things get bigger every year."

With one quick movement Isaac placed the glimmering sheath between his fingers and sliced the torso of the nearest dummy from throat to waist.

As the pebble stuffing filtered through the opening to the floor he said, "These things can kill, maim or blind him."

Kathleen looked from the dummy to Isaac, and said, "I'm ready."

"Okay, then. When do you want to start, Miss. Burch?"

"Lesson number two, Isaac. It's Kathleen."

"Okay, Kathleen." Isaac chuckled.

"Right now, Isaac....."

Kathleen dressed with great care, as she wanted to look her best. The black velvet gown she had chosen was very simple, and her crystal necklace added just enough to give it that special touch. She had pulled her hair back into a French braid, and tied the ends with a piece of black ribbon. In her ears she wore her diamond studs. She slipped her dainty feet into a pair of sensible pumps. She was ready. Looking at the clock beside her bed, she saw she had time to spare. Fashionably late would never do in the tunnel world. No one would be impressed. Running down the hall to the front door, she opened it and went down to the waiting limo.

Jason was there to open the door. She slid inside and Jason hurried to his seat, setting the car in motion to feed its way through the city streets. On the way, they stopped to pick up Diana.

She was dressed in a beautiful gown of emerald green silk. It's silkiness clung to Diana's mature figure. With this she wore an exquisite black shawl. Her hair was loose and full, framing her face, her make-up was light. The effect was breathtaking. Kathleen could never remember Diana looking so beautiful. Her attire was usually more conservative. The change was astonishing. Kathleen wondered what Vincent would think.

The limo dropped them off in the park, close to the concert area. Luke was there waiting for them, dressed in a black bolero-style tux, his masculinity was at its highest. Every nerve in Kathleen's body tingled.

Complimenting each lady on her loveliness, he asked if he might escort them to their seat. By-passing the concert stands, the threesome ventured deeper into the park. With caution, they looked behind them before they entered the drainage tunnel.

Waiting, just inside the gate to Below, was Vincent. He looked magnificent, as if he had stepped out of history. He might have sailed with Theseus. He wore a cream silk shirt, with a ruffled cravat, and fawn trousers. On his feet were a pair of brown riding boots, his cape was folded back over his broad shoulders. As he stepped forward to open the gate, his eyes rested on Diana.

For one moment their eyes met, and locked as something passed between them. Kathleen took the gate, breaking the spell. Diana lowered her eyes. She had felt it too. To dream ... for just a moment.

When they had all entered the tunnels, Vincent locked the gate and threw the lever that would close and seal the entrance. He turned to offer his arm to Diana. She took it and he covered her hand with his. Luke and Kathleen followed them through the tunnels, to the drainage gate just under the concert podium.

Placed on either side was bean bag furniture. The rips had been pieced and mended. Vincent helped Diana to sit, then joined her. Luke followed his example, Kathleen opened her clutch bag, and produced the evening's program that she had acquired earlier. They would be playing several works, by different composers tonight, she informed them.

Shortly, the music started. The first piece was *Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata*. Vincent could never listen to it without remembering Rolley. He had played it so beautifully. Mrs. Kendricks had likened him to a music box that just needed winding. Tragedy had happened, and Rolley left the tunnel world. Vincent also remembered the night he and Catherine had found him and how he had told Rolley that he could always, always come home, for there were those who loved him. Rolley had turned and fled, screaming, "**No, I can't!**"

But he had returned later, only to die shortly afterwards from the HIV virus. Such a sad, tragic life. Such a sad young man, like *Chopin*.

Kathleen remembered her first concert in this place, she had been thirteen. Vincent had brought her here to hear *Grieg's Piano Concerto*. She remembered how excited she had felt, how the music made her heart pound. At the end of the concerto it had started to rain. The thunder and lightning seemed to be the right encore to the performance. She had stood under the grate clapping her hands and looked at Vincent, he appeared sad for a moment. She thought it was because the concert was at an end, and it had been his favourite music. Shortly after, she had learned the truth of her parentage, Vincent told her how her mother had stood under that same grate once, when it was raining, and how she had reminded him of her, and how much he missed her.

As the night wore on one beautiful piece after another was played.

The final piece played was *Chopin's Fantasie Impromptu*, It brought tears to Kathleen's eyes. It was her favourite. When the final note had died away, father and daughter's eyes locked together across the space, and an unspoken pledge passed between them, for it was not the end, but the beginning. Tomorrow would come and whatever came, they would face it together.

For they were armed with Her courage, and Her love.

FOR WITH LOVE, ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE