

Nor Walls Divide

by Joyce Clarke

Chapter 1

Catherine gripped the edge of the conference table; her whole body rigid with tension and fear. Her face was set in a mask of protective denial, as she waited for Richard Osborne to close the door behind him, leaving her alone with her fearful thoughts.

Taking her weight on her hands, she began to tremble with the delayed shock of being presented with so much photographic evidence, of the killings she'd been witness to more than sixteen years before. Catherine knew the penalties for the perjury she had committed to protect the man she loved, but after all this time she thought the information she had withheld then, would die with her.

Richard Osborne certainly wasn't one of the dirty mac brigade. He was cultured, immaculate, and a very professional private investigator. He briefly explained, that his client's wish was to know her reaction to these photographs. Could she remember any detail, no matter how insignificant, that may shed new light onto the identity of a murderer who might be still at large.

As their conversation went round and round in Catherine's tortured mind, she struggled to figure out who would want to drag all this up again from so long ago. And why now? She remembered back to the fateful night of violence, that gave her to Vincent's arms and safety Below. A terrifying night, that was to mark the beginning of a love story the likes of which the world had never known. Her face softened into a smile, at the miracle of impossibilities that had stood the test of time; at Vincent's generous, unconditional love and encouragement, that had enabled her to remain a woman of both worlds.

Her apartment had long since been sold and replaced with a brownstone in Greenwich Village. During its renovation, the most up to date security system had been installed and a secure access had been connected to their tunnel system, through the basement.

Although Catherine's life could never be described as simple, she could not envisage any other. She had been promoted to Deputy D.A. since straight talking Joe Maxwell, had been sworn in as the now highly respected District Attorney of Manhattan. In many ways, the responsibilities Catherine now held, made it easier to maintain the sanctity of her private life. Her colleagues accepted her reluctance to talk about herself, as being a necessary part of her job. That was the name of the game in the seething metropolis of New York City, where people tended to mind their own business. It was often safer that way.

Now, in the empty conference room Catherine filled her lungs with air, exhaling slowly in an effort to compose herself. She needed to get home to Father, and warn him that there was someone Above rehashing old history. Someone who could be a threat to their safety. A threat to her own safety, as she acknowledged that once again she had been thrust into the firing line. Only this time she would not attempt to handle it alone.

* * *

Catherine arrived home earlier than usual and kicking off her shoes she went through to the book lined study, where she knew Father would be. Now well into his eighties, and reasonably fit, he had been persuaded to

move into the house three years before, after a particularly bad bout of bronchitis. Of late, Father spent little time Below, as the long walk was sometimes too much for him and laid him low for days.

She found him quietly reading in front of the open fire, awaiting her return from the office. She knew that he was well taken care of throughout the day, as Mary had worked out a rota system that ran on oiled wheels. Now he peered over the top of his spectacles, smiling in welcome as she entered the room.

"You're home early this evening my dear."

"Yes Father, I know. I needed to talk to you before Vincent arrives home."

He pulled the footstool close to his chair, patting it for her to sit beside him. Showing nothing but fatherly concern, he listened intently to the disturbing events of the afternoon.

"You seem hesitant about telling Vincent," he stated kindly, appearing not to grasp the seriousness of the situation.

Catherine looked haunted as she answered. "The memory of what Vincent was forced to do to keep me safe, is always painful for him Father. Even after all these years."

He leaned back in his chair, never taking his eyes from her face. "Yes, I'm well aware of that, but he should still be told. You can't cope with this alone. You don't know who, or what, you're dealing with here."

"I know."

Father gazed down at her, searching her face, feeling her distress. "You know, you mustn't blame yourself. Our community has survived all manner of perils for more than half a century. The danger of discovery will never go away. It's why we've been forced to be more vigilant now, than we've ever been in our history."

She abruptly turned away from him. "But I DO blame myself."

"Well don't." The tone of his voice showed her not the slightest recrimination.

"But it was ME he was protecting back then," she cried out in distress. "Every life he took was taken in MY name, and something must have happened to spark all this off again. Maybe I've been careless," she ended abruptly.

"Catherine! You don't really believe that?" His voice came over more shrilly than he had intended, and he modified his tone. "You know, we've had this conversation before, and I don't need to remind you, that Vincent, always has, and always will, do whatever has to be done to protect the people he loves. That's part of what Vincent is. However much distress it causes him. Or you. He protects all of us," he soothed.

But his words were wasted on her as her face contorted with all the wretchedness she felt. "But it doesn't help my shame, Father."

"Shame?" He queried. "I don't quite see how shame comes into it. Of course I understand how distressing it must have been for you in those early days," he answered calmly. "Any one of us would have felt the same."

"No. No," Catherine protested, as the guilt she had never previously acknowledged, suddenly surfaced, and, close to tears she tried to explain. "No, I don't think you do understand, Father. You see, I used to SHARE that with him. Part of me was, and still is, exhilarated by the part of him that's different. But when it began, all those years ago, did I subconsciously crave those dangerous situations, knowing that he would come for me." She paused to consider. "To give me some kind of perverse 'buzz' in being allowed to witness all of Vincent's primal rage?"

Father stared at her, nodding and shaking his head at the same time, in full understanding of all her pain, and the guilt of her admission. He also acknowledged, that they had all been guilty of expecting Vincent, to always be there for them. No matter how vehemently they protested otherwise.

They both turned, to the welcome sight of the man they protected, as he entered the room. Vincent threw his cloak over the back of a chair, and within a few strides, Catherine was enveloped into his arms, where they stood savouring the moment.

"Catherine," he released his hold. "I have felt your fear all afternoon. Tell me why?"

Moving away from her, he stood with his back to the fire, silently listening, as the reason for that fear was explained to him. Vincent was acutely aware of the trauma within her that, on this occasion his physical nearness had done little to assuage. Leaning against the corner of the mantle shelf, his concerned gaze rested on her face.

"Catherine. It seems that it's no longer safe, for you to be alone out there."

"I know." she stepped closer to place her forehead against his chest. "But what do you suggest I do, Vincent?" She raised her eyes to meet his worried frown. "I can't just run away."

"No. But I think for the time being, you should remain at home."

"I can't do that, either," was her insistent reaction. "Joe and I, are knee deep in that Sunderland case, plus at least half a dozen others. I have to go in tomorrow, to help him tie everything up for the weekend. We're in court on Monday." She winced with renewed shame, realising how pathetic her excuses sounded, compared to the very real dangers they might all be facing. "I'm sorry." She sighed in humbled apology. "But what do I tell Joe?"

"Maybe the truth?" Father suggested, but Catherine shook her head.

"No, Father. Good friend though Joe has always been, we've come this far without involving him. As District Attorney, it would place him in an impossible situation. It just wouldn't be fair, to compromise him like that." Her shoulders slumped in despair, and she sighed. "Truth is, Richard Osborne's client, probably has enough evidence already to place ME under suspicion. Not to mention, using it to blackmail me with."

"Dear God," Father cried.

"Have you been threatened with that, Catherine?" Vincent demanded.

"Oh no. Much too polite, to even mention the word." Shaking her head dejectedly, she added. "But I'm certain he could sense my fear."

They all stood in silence, pondering the situation, and Vincent offered a suggestion. "Maybe we should ask Elliot Burch, for help. He's always been there for you, Catherine, and we know he has the means to find out who Richard Osborne's mysterious client is."

She nodded her agreement, and Father endorsed it.

"Good. Then I think the sooner you call Elliot, the better. Invite him over here. There's no reason for Father, or me, to be involved at the moment, is there?"

Catherine shook her head, smiling lovingly at her husband, before leaning over to kiss Father's cheek. "And thank you, for being here for me."

"It was nice to be consulted, my dear." Turning his attention back to his son, he suggested. "I think, it would be a good idea for you to go Below, and send a message to Pascal. Alert him to stand by."

As Vincent left the study, Catherine reached for the telephone on the table at the side of Father's chair. About to tap out Elliot's private number, she was interrupted by the sound of someone ringing the front door bell. She replaced the handset, hurried over to the security wall phone and pressed the intercom button.

"Yes, who is it?"

"It's Richard Osborne, Ms Wells. I'd like to speak with you, if it's convenient?"

"You don't give up do you, Mr Osborne?"

"No. I never give up Ms Wells. It's what I do best. But in this instance I come in friendship. Please, may I come in?"

Catherine turned, to shrug questioningly at Father. He nodded his assent, and she pressed another button to release the outside door. "I'll see him in the sitting room. Tell Vincent where I am."

Out of habit, Catherine first peered through the small viewing window set into the sturdy interior door, before letting him in.

"What do you want, Mr Osborne?" she asked, unprepared for the unexpected warmth of his smile.

"I assure you, Ms Wells, you're in no danger from me. I'm only here to try and help you."

Catherine frowned, still unsure, but nodded and led him into her sitting room.

"Please, sit down." She gestured towards a leather wingchair, whilst perching on the arm of the opposite couch, watching him with some degree of apprehension. He placed his briefcase on the coffee table, and withdrew a very large well filled padded envelope, clearly addressed and ready to be mailed to Joe Maxwell, at the DA's office.

Dragging her eyes away, she gave Richard Osborne her full attention as a sudden thought struck her, and frowning she enquired. "Are you by any chance, here to try and blackmail me, Mr Osborne?"

"Good heavens no, Ms Wells. Nothing could be further from the truth. I took on this assignment as a small favour to a friend. On the surface it appeared to be little more than assessing a situation, and reporting back. However, even though it does show a certain disloyalty to my client, after leaving you this afternoon, I did a little research of my own to cover my back, so to speak."

"And what did you find?"

"Nothing that your father wouldn't have been proud of, Ms Wells."

Catherine frowned again at his mention of her father. "Who are you? What do you know about me?"

"It was the name that threw me, before I actually met you. You see many years ago, I was on retainer with your father's law firm, before he died. I knew you then, as Catherine Chandler."

He leaned back in his chair, and Catherine began to relax. She moved to sit in comfort on the couch, staring at him as he took a deep breath, and patted the envelope lying between them on the table.

"Ms Wells. I came away empty-handed this afternoon. My new instruction, is to mail this tonight just to see what it stirs up. I've no doubt every bit of it's circumstantial, or you'd not be where you are today. But the problem is, the contents of this envelope might be arranged in such a way, as to create at least an element of doubt in the mind of your boss. Maybe enough to instigate an investigation, and place you in a compromising position; putting all the details of your life under the spotlight. I believe that, to be the object of the exercise."

Catherine, knew all too well what the media could do, to anyone they sunk their teeth into. Her heart began to pound, as she watched him change his position in the armchair, before advising her further.

"I understand that you, and Joe Maxwell, are close friends?" She nodded, sensing no innuendo in his comment and he continued. "Well I suggest you get this to him first. Preferably tonight, and put him clearly in the picture. My client doesn't have a history for letting go, when she thinks she's on to something. I guarantee there'll be something else in the pipeline, when this fails to achieve the desired effect."

Catherine swallowed. "Actually, I was about to ask another close friend of mine to help me, before you arrived."

Richard Osborne raised his eyebrows questioningly, and for some reason she told him. "Elliot Burch."

"Hmm," he acknowledged. "I'm sorry, but you'd have been out of luck with Elliot. He's out of town until late tomorrow afternoon. I needed to see him myself, on some other urgent business. You see, he also hires my services from time to time." He fixed her with his steady gaze. "Take my advice, Ms Wells, and get in touch with your boss."

Catherine nodded, accepting his knowledge of Elliot's whereabouts. "But Mr Osborne, where does this leave you?"

He shrugged. "When I leave here, I'll go try to persuade my client to back off."

"But why should you do that for me?"

"Ms Wells ..."

"Cathy. Please."

"Cathy." He smiled in acknowledgement. "I'm only doing what Elliot would have done for you, were he available to do it. You have the same gift your father had, for forming strong friendships, but remember this is just a breathing space," he warned. "Don't waste it. Like I say, my client doesn't let go easily. I'll see what I can do, and get back to you. But contact Joe Maxwell, as soon as I've gone."

"I will, Richard. And thank you for caring."

After showing him out, Catherine was not surprised to find Vincent waiting for her in the sitting room. She flew into the welcoming safety of his arms, where they stood in silent embrace, until he finally spoke. "I heard most of the conversation, Catherine." She drew away from him, basking in his look of love and wonder, as he observed. "Do you know, it never ceases to amaze me, when the hand of friendship reaches out from the most unexpected sources."

"Yes," she agreed, "though I have often felt that we'd have never survived this far, if someone, somewhere, hadn't been watching over us, Vincent. And smiling."

"Hmm. Maybe you're right, but it is a terrifying thought, to know that some unknown tormentor is lurking out there again. Threatening all that we have?"

She held him close, nuzzling her face to his throat, to draw in the so familiar scent of the man she loved.

"Vincent," she mumbled into his chest. "All I've ever wanted, is for us to be allowed to live our lives."

"Yes," he sighed, "and it seems, we have no alternative now but to involve Joe." He paused. "I want you to know that Father and I trust you, to tell him as much as you think is necessary. You know best, how much Joe is capable of understanding."

Catherine, gazed up into his beloved face and nodded pensively. "Just hold me Vincent, before I have to go and make that call."

She released herself from his embrace, and moved over to the phone to tap out Joe's home number; only to be greeted by his familiar voice, on the answering machine.

"Damn," she whispered in frustration, grimacing up at Vincent as she waited for the pips. "Joe, if you're there pick up the phone. It's Cathy," but there was only silence. "Joe, I need to see you urgently; tonight. I'm at home."

Frustrated by the fact that nothing seemed to be going right, she replaced the hand set into its cradle, retrieved the large envelope from the coffee table, and they both returned to the study to join Father.

The need to know, what evidence had been unearthed from her past, overruled correct procedure. The two men watched without comment, as she opened the envelope and removed its contents. Vincent, became more interested in the expression on his wife's face.

"What is it Catherine?" he asked.

She sat back in her chair, somewhat disconcerted by what she'd found. "Vincent, these are all official police files. They're not even copies. Look, most of them are still dusty. It could be someone on the inside who suspects something about my past."

He acknowledged her observations, as rekindled memories he would rather have forgotten filled his mind. He pushed them to one side, and tried to be philosophical about it all.

"Well, Catherine, there's nothing more we can do about it at the moment, except hope for Joe to contact you sometime tonight. Meanwhile, I suggest we all have something to eat, and take our minds off this for now. Maybe watch a video?"

"Yes, well." Father eased himself forward, in an attempt to rise from his chair. "I had something to eat earlier, with Jamie, so if no one minds I think I'll leave you two to your video, and retire to my bed." He squeezed Catherine's hand. "Though a cup of tea would be welcome, when it's ready, my dear."

Vincent helped Father to his feet, and Catherine hurried before them into his bedroom, which adjoined the study. She switched on the bedside lamp, and turned the quilt down for him. Giving him a hug, she reassured him.

"We'll let you know if anything important happens during the night, Father."

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Vincent's appreciation of the luxury he now enjoyed, never ceased to delight Catherine. He had made her so much more aware of the many things she'd always taken for granted. It was the simple pleasure, of his being able to shed the many layers of clothing, that were such a necessity Below. This was one thing that contributed in no small measure, towards him overcoming the deep seated inhibitions about his physical differences.

Catherine had refused to live in a home without mirrors. At first, it had seemed cruel of her, to forcibly inflict Vincent's reflection upon him at every turn; but even Father had to agree, that it had helped his son to see for himself, that there was nothing terrible within him.

Now, these private times alone, were often spent luxuriating in the joys of touching, teasing and sensuously driving each other crazy with desire.

On this occasion, beset by their mutual tense anxiety, and haunted as they were by spectres from the past, their only need was to be together. Catherine, had changed into a comfortable cotton nightshirt, with red and white roses printed on the front. A towelling bathrobe was on hand to put on should Joe arrive. Vincent, remained in soft cotton blue jeans and T/shirt; with boots removed, he stretched out on the large comfortable couch and reached for her hand. She clambered over his body as he made space for her beside him, and they settled down to watch their video.

As a tender romantic scene was being played out before them on the screen, Vincent's free hand began to move of its own volition, beneath the thin material of her shirt. He gently cupped her naked breast, stroking the nipple with his thumb, warming to the pleasure emitting from her. Her head fell back to allow him access to her mouth; they kissed with practiced ease, each knowing exactly how to please the other. Vincent's hand moved to tease her other nipple, igniting an instant response. She smiled and moaned, her body answering his call, as she felt the urgency of his arousal against her thigh.

Neither could ignore the unexpected but desperate hunger that burned within them. She squirmed around in her confined space on the couch, pulling her shirt up over her head in wild abandon, to kneel beside him naked. Her hands tormented him unmercifully, whilst he wrestled with the speedy removal of his jeans and T-shirt. They had no need of preliminaries in their frenzied haste to be part of one another; as she suddenly found herself on her back beneath him, with her legs splayed up over his shoulders. Vincent took his weight on his arms as he sought entry, and she eagerly guided him in to fulfil her aching need. Again and again she

rose up to meet him, wanting every part of him, and giving herself completely to this man who was her life. As Vincent neared his climax, he growled quietly with every thrust, a sound that Catherine always found enormously erotic. He leaned forward to suckle each nipple, before reaching for her mouth. It was too much, and she pushed against his shoulders to gain a better grip on his arms, and drive him further within her, until at last they both cried out in their shared explosive orgasm.

Gentling down, still joined, from their dizzying heights, panting and bathed in perspiration, Catherine became aware that her knees were pressed into a none too comfortable position at either side of her chin. She blew into his face, a few inches from her own, and began to giggle breathlessly.

"I do hope Joe, doesn't pick this precise moment to ring the doorbell."

Vincent glanced down to view the somewhat restricted position she was in, chuckling, as he saw the funny side and agreeing. "So do I," before reluctantly reaching down onto the floor for her shirt to use as an emergency towel.

During the evening, Catherine left another message on Joe's answering machine, and finally just after midnight, exhausted by the events of the day she fell asleep. Vincent carried her upstairs to the master bedroom, and after settling her into bed he got dressed. Leaving his boots accessible at the side of the bed, he lay beside her, on top of the quilt, wide awake, and mentally recalling the many happy memories of the past reasonably uneventful years. Of the nights they had slept and made love in this bed. Yet another horizon that Catherine had opened up for him; secure in the knowledge that this was one part of her world in which he could feel safe. Now, once again, Vincent was being haunted by the fear that the peaceful haven they had created, was under threat from someone in Catherine's world.

He gathered her gently to him, overwhelmed by his need to just hold her close, and never let her go. She stirred in her sleep and nuzzled into the warmth of his neck. This was his heart's best treasure, within the circle of his arms. Whilst alert to every sound, his strong gentle hands smoothed her body, until at last he felt himself relax and drift off into a restful sleep.

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An insistent ringing on the doorbell brought Catherine to instant awareness. Vincent, already on his feet, was pulling on his boots. With a brief, "I'll be near," he went down the back stairs to a concealed hideaway at the side of the sitting room, where he could hear all that was said.

Catherine scrambled from the bed, pulling on her bathrobe, and made her way to the security phone on the landing.

"Yes, who is it?" she questioned into the intercom.

"Cathy? It's Joe. You all right in there?"

"Yeah. I'll let you in. I'm on my way down."

"Hi," she greeted him with relief, taking his arm and leading him through the hallway. "You got my message then?"

"I did. Would have been here sooner, but for the pile up two blocks back." Joe, had changed very little over the years. A few pounds heavier maybe, but it had helped him retain his boyish good looks, and with a full head of hair only touched by grey, he was the envy of many of his peers.

"What pile up?" Catherine frowned.

"A bad one. Four cars, and a shop window involved. You didn't hear anything then?"

"No. I sleep at the back of the house."

"Huh. Don't happen to know a private investigator, called Richard Osborne do you?"

"I know of him, yes," she answered uneasily. "Why?"

"Apparently, when the paramedics arrived they discovered this man Richard Osborne, had suffered a sudden massive heart attack. He'd died instantly behind the wheel of his car. Tangled with three other cars first, before smashing into a shop window. Fortunately the cars were parked and empty so no one else was hurt."

Joe frowned, puzzled by her shocked reaction, and the play of emotions as they flitted across her face.

"Something here I should know about, Cathy?"

She visibly shuddered, before she motioned him over to the couch. Curling her legs beneath her she sat opposite him, as with trained patience he waited for her to speak. The silence began to stretch and Joe lost his composure.

"Come on Cathy, talk to me. What's goin' down here?"

She felt as if she had been struck dumb. Didn't know where to begin, or how much to tell him. And Joe waited. Finally, she took a deep breath, and told him the only thing that sounded remotely plausible. "I think someone could be trying to blackmail me, Joe."

"With what?"

"Photographs maybe."

"Of you?"

"No, not especially. Truth is, they're all official police files, going back to just after I joined the DA's office. All of them are marked down as, unsolved multiple murders, from way back then; and they're not copies. Someone on the inside must have removed them from the archives."

Joe leaned forward, "Have you got them here?"

"Yes." She scrambled to her feet and went to collect them from her desk, leaving the addressed envelope behind for the moment. Placing the files on the coffee table, she watched as Joe leafed through the folders. He looked up at her. So? What's your problem? How does this affect you? At best, it's all circumstantial, so how exactly could someone use it to blackmail you?"

"I'm not sure." Her anxiety escalated, realising that her explanation was not going to stand up to Joe's kind of scrutiny. "Maybe blackmail is too strong a word."

"I'll not argue with you on that, Kiddo."

Even though Catherine was fast approaching her late forties, his familiar affectionate names for her were still in constant use. Neither would have had it any other way.

Now, Joe looked thoughtful, as he closed the files and put them back on the table. "Is there something here you're not telling me? Like who's dragging this up? And why now?"

Without waiting for an answer he chivvied her. "So refresh my memory. What's the connection, between you and these unsolved murders?" He fired questions at her one after the other, because he was only human; and sometimes the way she guarded her private life, frustrated him beyond belief.

Catherine took a deep breath, and tried to compose herself. "Okay, okay, Joe. It was such a long time ago, but as far as I can remember, I was either investigating the men who were killed, or, they'd been hired by the people I was investigating. Maybe it's someone out there with a vivid imagination," she suggested in exasperation. "A grudge thing maybe. Someone jealous of my wealth, and the fact that I don't really need to work."

"Right." Joe could accept that. "So, any name spring to mind, Cathy?"

"No, I can't imagine who it could be, and I'm not aware of any undue friction between me, and anyone in the office."

"No. From what I hear on the grapevine, you run a tight ship."

Catherine managed a wan smile. "Thank you Joe."

"Yeah well. But we're still nowhere on this, and where does this, Richard Osborne figure in it?"

Catherine told him of her first encounter with the now deceased, Richard Osborne. She repeated word for word, the conversation they'd had a few hours earlier. "He was trying to help me Joe. Warn me that I needed to watch my back."

She scrambled to her feet and went over to her desk, for the large envelope addressed to him. She smoothed it out on top of the files. "This, is why I left a message on your answer phone for you to contact me. Richard, had been instructed to mail this to you tonight, but he left it with me, and advised me to get in touch with you first."

Joe nodded. "That was more than generous of him." He silently acknowledged that its untimely arrival would no doubt have given him cause for thought. "My Mom's not been well. I stayed late," he explained absentmindedly, then without giving her the chance to reply, he commented wryly. "Seems like we've another body, indirectly connected to you, Kiddo."

She nodded miserably. "He was a good man Joe."

"Yeah, I'm sure he was, but Cathy, I have to ask, because you've always guarded your private life so fiercely. Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"No." She shook her head. "Nothing I can think of at the moment." Catherine knew she was postponing the inevitable, but she'd had quite enough for one night.

"Okay," he sighed, sensing there was more here than she was letting on. But he trusted her integrity, and would always give her the benefit of the doubt, as well as his total support. "Then we'll keep this conversation between ourselves, for the next twenty four hours. See if anything else crawls out the woodwork."

"Thank you, Joe."

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Over the years, Joe had learned to accept that their close friendship was all it ever could be. Confined to working hours, and of a platonic nature. He consoled himself with the fact that they had always worked well together, as a team; all soundly based on trust, respect, and an unspoken kind of love that asked no questions, but allowed them to be at ease and comfortable with each other.

It had taken Joe some time to come to terms with his feelings, after she suddenly changed her name to Catherine Wells, more than twelve years before. He would never forget their conversation late that same night, in a dimly lit silent office, as she shared a few crumbs of her private life with him; that she would be forever bound to the man whose name she had taken. The man she loved. A man called Vincent.

No one he knew had ever met this Vincent, and it was only Joe's strong belief that trust was a two way thing, that prevented him from investigating her movements. He could never, have betrayed that very trust and friendship that he held so dear; though it had never stopped him wondering about her. More especially, because Catherine had never produced any children. Finally he just accepted that this was the life she had chosen, and made a silent promise to be always there for her. Whatever happened.

Joe had never married; though he'd come close on a couple of occasions. Truth was, as had been painfully pointed out to him after his last disastrous relationship, Joe was already married to his job.

As he returned to his lonely apartment, and even lonelier bed for what was left of the night, he was even more convinced that Catherine held secrets close to her heart, that she would never share with anyone. Not even him. Even so, he knew for certain, that whatever she wasn't telling him, there had to be a reason for not doing so. And a damn good one.

Chapter 2

A few hours later, Joe returned to Catherine's brownstone to escort her into work; he was taking no chances with her safety. Both lacked their usual sparkle because of too little sleep, and shared a mutual relief that at least today was Friday.

Greg Hughes called in to inform Joe, that Richard Osborne's next of kin had been notified of his death, and that the pathologist had found nothing, so far, to suggest that he'd died of anything other than a massive heart attack.

Catherine, was having enormous difficulty concentrating on her work. Alone in her office, she jumped every time the telephone rang. Looked up at the slightest movement through the glass partition into the outer office, and lunch time seemed hours away. She couldn't even talk to Joe, because he'd been called to a meeting.

Mid-morning, Rita Escobar knocked and entered. Together with Joe and Catherine, she was the only long serving member to have survived the pace of the hectic DA's office. Apart from taking maternity leave to have her three children, she had always returned to the full time work she enjoyed, and was totally loyal to Catherine and Joe.

"Cathy, there's a lady out here would like to see you. A Mrs Richard Osborne."

Catherine frowned as she mouthed the words, "Richard's wife?" Then realising that Rita was still waiting she smiled and nodded. "Yes, all right Rita. Show her in."

Mrs Osborne was about Catherine's age. Casually attired in good quality sweat shirt, jeans and sneakers, with her auburn hair well styled into a short bob. She wore dark glasses, which she removed to reveal the ravages of her hours of crying, and little sleep. Catherine moved round the desk to clasp the woman's hand, both in welcome, and commiseration.

"Mrs Osborne. I'm so sorry about your husband's death. He was a good man; I wish I could have known him better."

"Thank you," she nodded. "My name's Diana. Diana Bennett. I go by my single name," she smiled, her lips tremulous as she released herself from Catherine's grasp.

"I'm Cathy. How can I help you? Please, come and sit down." Sensing the woman's unease, she waited for her to speak.

"Cathy," the woman acknowledged. "Richard and I have been divorced for many years, but have always remained on very good terms, mainly for our daughter's sake. Her name's Emily. She's seventeen years old, and unfortunately, she was born deaf. As you can imagine, we're both very protective of her, though she's spent most of her life in special schools. That's where she is now, up in Albany."

Her lips trembled momentarily as she added. "I'm driving straight up there, when I leave here."

Catherine moved from where she'd been perched on the edge of her desk, to sit in silent understanding beside Diana, as she struggled to regain her control, before continuing.

"Occasionally I ask Richard for his help, when I need some information off the record." She met Catherine's gaze. "You see I'm with the NYPD in special crimes. A Unit called the Two-Ten. " She smiled at Catherine's surprised expression, and reached into the back pocket of her jeans to withdraw a wallet. Showing her badge and ID, she continued to explain her reason for being there. "I specialize, you see ... I work alone on one case at a time, because it's what I'm good at. I also keep a very low profile, because it keeps me alive; but on this occasion, it was Richard's unexpected intervention, that has brought me here."

Diana pushed herself up off the couch and began pacing the floor, before turning back to Catherine. "My sister is a resident at Belle View Sanatorium; has been for several years. I try to visit her as often as I can, though some visits are better than others. Anyway, while I'm there I generally chat to whoever is able to hold a conversation; and of late, I've gained the confidence of a man called Stephen Bass."

"Stephen?" Catherine echoed in surprise. "Is he well?" Recollections of the past, and the sick, terrifying, man that Stephen had become, began to replay itself in her mind. She had to force herself back to the present, and to Diana's answer.

"Yes, he's as well as he can be, but like many of them in there he tends to ramble on; repeats the same bizarre tale over and over to anyone who will listen; or even to himself. She hesitated, as if unsure of how to word the rest of what she had to say.

"Go on Diana. What did Stephen tell you?"

"Well, last weekend, he seemed more lucid than usual; though like my sister, he can remember more of the past than what happened yesterday. Anyway he actually named names. He told me about a woman he loved called Cathy, whom he'd apparently been going to marry many years ago. He went on and on about an unnatural relationship she'd had, with a man who wasn't human; whose name was Vincent. He told me, that this 'creature' attacked him; he even showed me the scars. Stephen, also mentioned a reporter who once came to interview him. Wanted to know all he could tell him about this creature. His name was Bernie Spirko."

Catherine stared at the woman before her, and her stomach knotted in fear. The defensive shutters came down behind her eyes, as somehow she managed to calmly voice the words. "Exactly, why are you telling me this Diana?"

"Because Richard made some discreet enquiries, and discovered that this 'Cathy' he spoke of, is you. Of course, he had little trouble finding out who Bernie Spirko, was." She shrugged, apparently oblivious to the effect this was having on Catherine. "I was more than a little curious, so I had the files pulled from the archives, and asked Richard to make contact with you here, to observe your reaction to those photographs. It was nothing more than a hunch; but then curiosity is my middle name. Anyway, when Richard met you, and realised that not only were you the Deputy DA, but also the daughter of someone he'd known, and respected, many years ago; gallant man that he always was, he took it upon himself to return, and warn you what was going on."

Catherine didn't really know what to say for the moment; though certain that this woman meant her no harm, she held her silence; allowing Diana to continue without interruption.

"When Richard called at my apartment late last night, he told me in no uncertain terms, that I was being neurotic, and advised me to drop it. He said, it would serve no useful purpose to rattle your cage, on the ravings of a confirmed psycho."

Catherine, inwardly cringed at Diana's metaphor about cages, but calmly asked. "And will you? Drop your investigation I mean?"

"It was Richard's last wish. I can do no other." She swallowed hard as more tears threatened, struggling to compose herself, before continuing. "Like he pointed out, it was all circumstantial at the time, and nothing's

changed. I'd be grateful if you'd get those files back to the archives for me, and just forget about it. Truth is, it's all immaterial now."

Catherine frowned. "Why? What do you mean?"

Diana looked down at her hands, and drawing in a deep breath, she began to explain. "Richard, gave me an envelope last night; asked me to keep it safe. He made me promise, that if anything happened to him, I was to take it personally to Elliot Burch, or if he wasn't available I was to come to you."

"Go on."

"I've known that he was working undercover, for the past twelve months, and was onto something big. Last night when he came to see me, he was really unnerved. Scared even; and suspected they were onto him. Richard was a highly skilled professional. Always made absolutely sure that he wasn't being followed, before coming anywhere near my building. Anyway, he asked me to be his insurance, and I couldn't refuse him. Well, now he's dead, and I'll admit to being scared shitless. I need your help Cathy. Richard obviously trusted you, and Elliot's out of town."

"Okay," she nodded. "Tell me as much as you know."

"Well apparently, Richard had infiltrated a vast drugs empire, steeped in every kind of vice and corruption you could imagine; including a vast paedophile ring. I can tell you it made him sick to his stomach, what those kids were forced to endure. Some so young they didn't know any different. Richard, was well aware that if they found out who he was, they'd kill him."

"Was he working for Elliot Burch?"

"Yes. Apparently someone was screwing up several of Elliot's largest projects, and he'd hired Richard, to find out who it was. It was a pure fluke, that he stumbled onto something bigger than either of them could imagine. To give Elliot his due, he advised Richard to back off; to hand it all over to the big boys; but Richard insisted on seeing it through."

Catherine, was aware of Diana's battle to retain her composure as she continued with her revelations. "You see over the months he'd compiled a comprehensive list of names; times; dates; transactions; both human and 'monetary'; amounting to countless billions of dollars in untold misery. Some of New York's most prominent citizens are on this list, and deeply involved. Not to mention other notable figures from around the world. Pure Hell in a note book, Richard called it."

Neither of them needed any pictures drawn as to what this information was worth; and that this organization would stop at nothing, to keep it from coming to light. Diana unbuckled a money belt from around her waist, and unzipping it, produced the envelope. Handing it to Catherine she explained. "Richard hid his incriminating list deep in this bank's vaults. He was waiting for Elliot Burch's return this evening, for advice on how best to handle the situation." She grimaced. "Even two of Elliot's top men are involved."

Catherine sat reading the document, to assess what she must do. She looked up. "On its own this won't be enough for us to get into the bank vault, let alone the security box. But I can't see there being any problem getting a warrant." She slumped back against the leather couch, as the tension drained from her. The sudden realisation, that the fear for her own safety, and that of her family Below, were no more. She smiled inwardly with relief, knowing Vincent would feel it, and decided that she would go home at lunch time and tell him all that had happened; then at least they could relax.

She turned her attention back to Diana. "I think you're very wise, to disconnect yourself from this. Have you somewhere to go? Do you need any protection?"

"Yes, I have somewhere to hide, thank you. I'm a professional too. I'll go straight up to Albany when I leave here, to collect my daughter from school; I rent a cabin out there under a false name. It's quiet and allows us to communicate in peace. I can tell her about her daddy, and we'll cry together."

The sharp tap on her office window made them both jump, and Joe stuck his head around the door; his whole demeanour bristling with irritation. He nodded pleasantly enough to Diana, before glaring at Catherine.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but something's come up," he stated abruptly.

"We need to speak outside. Now."

She pulled a conspiratorial face at Diana in silent apology, before leaving her alone to step outside, where Joe was pacing. His tie was at half mast, with his hands stuffed in his pants pockets. That he was angry was plainly evident. "Joe, what's up?"

"I'll tell you what's up Radcliffe," he snapped back at her. "We've got a goddamn murder on our hands, that's what." She stared at him, waiting for the rest of his explanation. "Just got a message from the morgue, didn't I? And what d'ya know? They only discovered a very recent puncture hole in Osborne's neck that they missed the first time round. Cathy, the man was injected; probably by a dart gun; with some substance that brings on an instant heart attack. That's what they found," he barked at her. "And I want you, upstairs in my office in five minutes, with a full explanation of what the hell it is you're not telling me."

He spun round on his heel but she grabbed his arm.

"Hey Joe! YOU just hang on a goddamned minute here," she demanded, brooking no argument. "I can do a whole lot better than that. In MY office. Now!"

He glowered back at her, and Catherine could only imagine what was running through his mind; but he backed down, and followed her in closing the door behind him.

* * *

It was after three o'clock in the afternoon, before Catherine was able to collect the required warrant. Joe had insisted on accompanying her, and after hailing a cab they finally arrived at the bank, with little more than ten minutes to spare.

Fortunately, they received the personal attention of the man in charge of this prestigious bank's securities. Their joint credentials ensured that most of the formalities were waived anyway, and they were swiftly ushered through the back of his office, to a private elevator.

This was accessed by a keyed in number, which was apparently changed daily; then on down to the vaults, deep within the bowels of the Bank's foundations. It was one of New York's oldest banking establishments, and the bare concrete walls gave the impression of an underground parking lot. Heavy iron grills, floor to ceiling, sectioned off what appeared to be some half dozen prison holding cells; though these were not for prisoners, but to house some of the city's most priceless treasures. The background heating was minimal, sufficient to keep the atmosphere aired and free from mildew.

As they stood before one of two strongroom doors, they watched as their impeccably presented escort, tapped a multiple digit number into the computerized locking keyboard. He then turned the large wheel set into the middle of the great steel door, before hauling it open and leading them inside.

There were banks of green metal security boxes, varying in depths and capacities, down both sides of the vault, and reaching almost to the ceiling end to end. The remaining floor space was surprisingly spacious, with a table and chair close to the far wall.

The man quickly located the numbered box in question, and inserted his key; inviting Catherine to do the same with her key, turning them simultaneously. Once unlocked, she stood back allowing him to withdraw the box from its slot, and place it onto the table.

"There you are Mr Maxwell, Ms Wells," he glanced at his watch. "I'm afraid you haven't got very long. The time-locks will go on in five minutes for the weekend. If you're finished before I come for you just push the

drawer back in until you hear it click, then wait outside near the elevator. There's something I need to check on while I'm down here."

As soon as they were alone, Catherine opened the box to find a small, hard backed notebook inside. There was also a collection of valuable stocks and bonds, together with various items of jewellery, and gold coins. But it was the book they were interested in, and with Joe looking over her shoulder, they began to verify that it held the information that Richard Osborne had been killed for.

* * *

The man in charge of the bank's security, who had previously behaved so courteously towards Joe and Catherine, now stood motionless outside the strongroom door. His face was set into hard lines of cold determination, resigned to what he must do. He'd received his instructions, and was in too deep to risk losing everything. He figured that he would be able to enter the vault first thing on Monday morning; hide their bodies in one of the large storage crates; to dispose of them later at his convenience. Without further thought for their demise, he leaned his full weight against the heavy door, pushing it closed; then after swinging the wheel round, he tapped in the irreversible locking sequence for the weekend. With apparent calm, he entered the elevator to return to his office and go about his business.

* * *

As Catherine waited for Joe to slide the strong box back into its slot, they were startled by the sudden swish of movement behind them. Frozen in shock for the briefest moment as the strong room door closed to, they yelled out in panic, and raced for the door.

"Hey! You hold on a goddamn minute. We're still in here." Gripped in the throes of mind numbing fear, they heard the ominous metallic clunk of the locks, as they engaged against the vacuum seal. And then the lights went out.

"Hey! Damn you, let us out," they shouted and screamed the same expletives for all they were worth. Beating with their fists, and their feet against the unyielding steel, with a terror they could not contain. It was the pain in their hands that forced them to give up in defeat, and they reached out for each other in the absolute blackness. A cold fear of doom held them in its grip, with the terrible realisation that no one was going to answer their call.

* * *

Vincent was Below with his Friday afternoon reading group, although when Vincent was reading, it drew more than just the children to his chamber. Small rapt faces gazed up at him from the floor, where they sat cross legged. Several adults were seated round the table, listening to his reading of the ever popular '*Treasure Island*.'

Suddenly he stopped mid-sentence, snapping the book closed in his hand, and listening intently. "What's the matter Vincent?" One of the children asked worriedly, as he abruptly rose to his feet with but a single name on his lips. "Catherine." He scooped up his cloak, and without further explanation, he fled the chamber.

* * *

Joe felt as if he'd just been hit by a bus, and began to tremble uncontrollably. Shocked by the awesome blackness and total silence that surrounded him, he had tremendous difficulty in suppressing the overwhelming urge, to scream his head off. He didn't want to die. Not like this.

As the terror consumed him, he was unaware that Catherine had left his side; until he heard her screaming out her husband's name, somewhere in front of him.

"Vincent! Vincent! Vincent!" She cried out at the top of her voice.

The sound hurt his ears, and Joe knew that somehow he had to stop her. His legs felt as if they did not belong to him as he forced himself towards the sound of her terror, groping blindly before him until he'd made contact with her body. He grasped her shoulders, shouting and shaking her.

"Cathy! Stop it! Cathy! Stop it," before gripping her more fiercely; swinging her round to face him, and pulled her roughly into his arms. They just held on tight to each other, until their trembling began to subside.

Joe, still tremulous with emotion and fear, eased her away from him. Haltingly, he voiced the words he believed to be true.

"Looks like our numbers up Kiddo. Nobody who gives a damn, even knows where we are. Probably won't even be missed until it's too late." His voice fizzled out with a shuddering gasp, and he lowered his head to rest against hers with the immense finality of it all.

Catherine's single thought, was to share with Joe the light of hope she held within her heart. She knew that she was better equipped to cope under these conditions. She knew that she would have to contain her fear, and be strong for both of them. Easing him away from her, she retained hold of his arms and shook him slightly.

"Joe. Listen to me. Have you got your lighter in your pocket? I carry a flashlight in my purse, but we have to find it first, and I've kinda lost my bearings."

Feeling guilty for not thinking of the simple practicalities, he fumbled in all his pockets for the gold cigarette lighter he always carried with him, and which had once belonged to his father. His hand clasped the cool metal, and with shaking fingers he stroked a single flame of eerie light.

They located the table and found her purse. Soon they had the welcome beam of the flashlight, though it did little to relieve their trembling. She pushed him down onto the chair, and leaning back against the table tried to give him a thread of hope to cling to.

"Listen to me Joe. There IS someone who knows EXACTLY where I am."

"Oh yeah. Like who?" He sneered in disbelief.

"My husband. Vincent always knows where I am," she answered calmly.

"Oh yeah?" he repeated sceptically, because he didn't believe a word of it. "Well ain't that just great?"

Catherine recoiled at the bitterness of his reaction; quickly followed by an unexpected outburst of anger, as he shouted harshly into the distorted image of her face.

"So tell me Radcliffe. Just what good is your so called mythical husband going to be to us down here?"

Joe knew his behaviour towards her was totally out of line, but somehow he could not quell these feelings of resentment; long held frustrations that he'd never dared acknowledge. Now, he suddenly needed someone to blame.

"Jesus, Cathy, just face the facts will you," he cried. "The whole goddamn world, could know we've BEEN down in these vaults, but do you really think that bastard in charge of the bank's security, is going to own up to entombing Manhattan's D.A., and his top attorney?" He answered the question himself. "No way. Not with what we have on him."

He punched his right fist hard into his left palm as he continued with the hopelessness of his tirade. "He's going to say he saw us out. Put us into a cab himself. Have half a dozen paid flunkies on hand to back up his statement. We've just gone and walked into a goddamn snake pit, dammit; and before this weekend's out, we'll be snuffed out like a couple of Christmas candles."

Catherine understood all of Joe's anger, born of fear, and injustice. She also sensed that he was verging on hysteria, and she moved to draw him to her body, rocking him to and fro. She felt his arms go around her as he began to sob uncontrollably.

"It's all right Joe," she comforted. "It's going to be all right." She held him and rocked him, refusing to let go until at last she felt him begin to regain his control.

* * *

Vincent, entered a long straight section of smooth walled purpose built tunnel. A series of pipes protruded from the walls at regular intervals, curving downwards, to disappear through sealed drain holes in the rock floor; directly into the sewers below, leaving the sandy surface beneath his feet, dry and clear.

He could sense that Catherine was close. Her terror was almost tangible within him, as he tried to reach out to her, trapped as he knew she was behind this tremendously thick wall, underground. He moved silently along its length, listening, stopping, then listening again.

Satisfied, he delved into one of the deep pockets within his cloak, withdrew a piece of chalk, and marked the tunnel wall with a large cross.

Observing one of the sewerage pipes, situated just out of his reach to the left of where he stood; his logic told him, there was more than an even chance of it passing through to wherever Catherine was imprisoned, behind the wall. He took out his pocket knife and began tapping out a clear message, hoping his love would hear it, and be reassured that he was near.

* * *

They both started at the metallic sound from somewhere above their heads. "What's that?" Joe asked, as an inexplicable surge of hope coursed through his veins.

A half strangled sound of joy erupted from Catherine's lips, as she cried out. "It's Vincent."

"Vincent?" He frowned. "You're joking?"

"Would I joke at a time like this? Believe me. Vincent knows where I am." She looked up, scanning the space between the top of the security boxes and the ceiling with her flash light, seeing with relief, a short section of visible pipe cutting across the far corner, on its way out.

She grabbed his arm. "Help me with the table please. I need to get up there."

Joe didn't argue. This was definitely the time for clutching at straws. Eagerly, he took the flashlight and helped her onto the table. He passed the chair up as well, for the extra height she needed to reach the pipe. Holding the chair steady, and guiding the light, he watched in amazement as she removed her shoe, and began using the stiletto heel to send what was obviously a well tutored form of communication, along a sewerage pipe of all things.

Tapped out explanations and answers went on for a minute or two, with Catherine relaying most of what was being said down to Joe. Apart from the personal messages of love, she shared all Vincent's reassurances that he would get the help needed to break them out, through the tunnel wall.

Joe momentarily forgot his fear; bursting with questions as he helped her down and hugged her. "What can I say, Radcliffe?" He drew away. "Jeez. I'm sorry for being so damned cynical," he grinned sheepishly. "But now give. You can't keep all your goddamned secrets to yourself any longer; and anyway, just how the hell DID Vincent manage to make contact with you; down here?"

Catherine smiled patiently, and suggested that they make themselves as comfortable as possible on the floor. Joe agreed, and using their overcoats to sit on, and the wall as a back rest, she was at last able to tell him some of her long held secrets.

"Vincent and I share a very special, and unique bond. An empathic awareness. A connection, if you like. Though in him it's much more profound. He knows exactly how I'm feeling, wherever I am. Distance, is no barrier. Nor walls divide. Not even this one. We're always connected; whether within this city; or at the other side of the world. Whenever I've been in danger, he's always been there for me. Physically, or through our empathic connection." She paused, to allow him time to absorb what she had said; answering his next question before he'd even asked it. "The reason I've never been able to introduce him to you Joe, is the possibility that you might not understand. You see, Vincent is no ordinary man. His differences are such that they prevent him from taking his rightful place in our world. Sharing my life, as an ordinary man could." Her voice dropped to a husk of emotion, as she added. "So away from the office, I've made my life with him."

* * *

Vincent, sped swiftly through the tunnels, to meet up with the preliminary rescue party he had already alerted on the pipes. It was with some relief, he heard their hurrying footsteps echoing in the distance; stilling his pace as Mouse, Kipper and Jeffrey came into view; all eager to know the details of his frantic call for assistance.

Kipper and Geoffrey, had grown into fine young men who had never found any reason to leave the tunnels. Together with Mouse, they listened with mounting concern as Vincent spelled out the desperate situation they were up against. And they hurried along beside him, back the way he had come. It was fortunate that Catherine was as proficient as any tunnel dweller, in sending comprehensible messages on the pipes. A skill, that would now hopefully, help to save her life. And Joe's.

Mouse, who up to now had said nothing, suddenly stopped in his tracks, shaking his head from side to side. "Not good, Vincent. Take too long."

No one, was under any delusions as to what he meant by that remark. They were all well aware, that the bank's foundation wall would be a number of feet thick, and composed of reinforced pre-stressed concrete. They also knew, without being told, that the wall was their only means of entering the vault. Vincent nodded sombrely. "So we're going to need a lot of help, Mouse. Modern equipment?"

"Need explosives too," Mouse added, "and that could kill them anyway." Too late, the words were out, and Mouse looked stricken and ready to flee. They all tensed to Vincent's reaction, knowing how he must be sick with worry.

But he gripped Mouse's shoulder reassuringly. "It's all right Mouse. I know you didn't mean to cause distress. You only voiced what we're all afraid of. Now all we can do, is try; and pray God gives us the time we need."

* * *

They sat close, side by side, on top of their coats in the chill silent blackness; preserving the single flashlight for when they would need it. They held hands, out of a mutual need for physical contact, and Catherine shared with Joe, the part of her life that she'd never been able to share with anyone.

She had made the decision a long time ago, that it would be unfair to burden even her closest friend, Jenny Aronson, with such a secret. Nancy Tucker, had moved with her family to live in California. Sadly, over the years. as friends will, they had lost touch. Drifted apart to pursue their own lives. Catherine had often ached, to share her secrets with Joe; though grateful beyond belief that he respected her right to silence. Apart from the odd cynical remark, he did not delve too deeply into her life away from the office. And thus, Catherine had learnt to live with her aloneness.

Now, Joe listened in stunned silence, as Catherine revealed how she and Vincent, had met all those years before. About the tunnel world, where he'd been forced to spend his entire life without sunlight, beneath the city, because he was different. She told him about the community that Father had created, to keep him safe, and had since become her second home.

As expected, Joe did not remain silent for very long. "Let me get this straight, Radcliffe. You actually doubted my ability to accept some acute abnormality about this love of your life. Something that prevents him from being a run-of-the-mill kinda guy, and part of the rat race we all know and love?"

Catherine smiled, as she detected the natural cynicism of a native New Yorker. She also sensed his hurt rejection.

Hugging his arm, she attempted to reassure him. "Joe, if you only knew, how much I've wanted to include you in my life. You're my best friend, do you know that? You're always there for me; but it's NEVER been that simple; and it was a sacrifice I had to make. I just couldn't, take the risk."

"Why? What risk?"

"Because right at the start, it all seemed such an impossible dream. One that Vincent and I dare not have; because we thought a love like ours could never be." She drew in a deep shuddering breath, at the memory of that bitter-sweet time. Exhaling loudly, she wrestled with her conscience.

Joe remained silent; waiting in the darkness until she was ready to continue.

"For more than two years our love grew; despite all the insurmountable obstacles placed before us ... not to mention Vincent's misplaced encouragement, for me to go find someone else to be part of." She sighed. "And I did try."

"You mean Elliot Burch?"

"Yes. At the time, it seemed like the right answer; but we were cheating ourselves. In the end, there were no doubts. Vincent and I just had to wade through and overcome our lifetime's preconditioning; learn to face our fears; but it wasn't easy. Not for either of us." They sat quietly, and Joe gave her the time she needed to search for the right words. "You see, even though we could no longer ignore how deeply we loved, it took great courage, and complete trust in each other, before we became lovers in the fullest sense."

He felt her relax beside him, sensing that a tremendous burden had been lifted from her shoulders. He also sensed that she was smiling, as she confided the rest of her amazing other life. "In the tunnel world, Joe, all the traditional values are adhered to. It's a place that has been somehow, locked in time. Vincent and I, had a beautiful wedding ceremony, witnessed by the whole community. Just as binding, as it would ever be in our world; and to us, infinitely more so. And we try to live as fully as we can."

A strangely comfortable silence lay between them, before Joe spoke again. "You're one hell of a special lady, do you know that, Cathy?" His voice was filled with awe, and sincere affection, but without giving her time to answer, he dared to ask. "Just how different is he? He felt her hesitate, and squeezed her hand. "Tell me. I want to know." He waited, hearing her deep intake of breath.

"All right, I'll tell you. If Vincent was ever discovered out there, he'd probably be put in a cage, and sold to the highest bidder as a circus freak." She heard Joe's gasp, but went on. "Or he'd be strapped to some laboratory table, where they'd try to discover what makes him tick." Without mincing her words she added. "If he was ever captured out there, it would be far kinder to kill him, because he'd die anyway."

"Cathy! Surely you don't mean that?"

"Yes," she insisted sadly, "I'm afraid I do," she sighed. "It was a forlorn hope, that the world might change. That Vincent's differences, might someday become acceptable. But nothing changes, and I doubt now if it ever will." The regret weighed heavily in the sound of her voice. "To me, and to all the people who love him, Vincent is beautiful. All who take the time to get to know him, count his friendship as a privilege. But I'm afraid that you, will have to reserve judgement until you meet him."

Joe didn't answer, and Catherine shook him. "Hey. We're going to get out of here, do you know that?"

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I am sure." At that moment, as if to endorse her certainty, the sound of metallic tapping broke the silence. Catherine grasped the flashlight at the side of her, and scrambling to her feet she announced.

"Vincent's back."

* * *

Kipper volunteered to remain on site, to periodically reassure Catherine and Joe, that they were not alone. Mouse and Jeffrey returned home, to organize and transport the equipment they'd need, to at least make a start on the drilling; together with provisions for what promised to be a long night. After reassuring Catherine that he would get them out come what may, Vincent took a short cut, back to the brownstone. He had to inform Father of this life-threatening situation, before trying to make contact with Elliot Burch, praying that he would agree to help them.

* * *

Chapter 3

It was a few minutes after five o'clock, as Elliot entered his office and made straight for the drinks cabinet. Though still well able to turn a woman's head, Elliot was showing all the signs of a man past his half century, trying to come to terms with the fact, that his gruelling lifestyle was beginning to catch up with him. He'd been warned at his last medical check-up, to slow down. The trouble was he didn't know how to. He hadn't got time. He hadn't got the reason.

He poured himself a large scotch with a measure of soda, before moving to his desk to slump exhausted into the leather swivel chair. Glancing absentmindedly through the pile of messages, awaiting his return, he was startled by the sudden trill of his private telephone at the side of him, and he picked up the handset.

"Yes?"

There was an audible sigh of relief from the other end of the line, before a quiet but masculine voice husked, "Am I speaking to Elliot Burch?"

"You are," he answered, frowning in irritation. He'd endured a week of frustrating business negotiations, and was short on patience. "Just who is this, and how the hell did you get my private number?"

"My name's Vincent. Catherine's husband. She gave me this number. Is it safe for us to speak?"

Now it was Elliot's turn to pause in momentary shock, before voicing his first thought, none too kindly. "Well now. After all these years, you wouldn't be contacting me just to get acquainted. Let me guess. You need my help?"

Vincent recoiled at the other man's ill disguised sarcasm, but quietly answered. "Yes, I'm afraid we do need your help. Without it, I fear that neither my wife, nor Joe Maxwell, will survive the weekend."

Elliot drew in breath and held it before answering.

"Then, I apologise. You have my full attention. Talk freely, this line is completely private."

For the next few minutes he listened intently, to the brief, but precise outline of this desperate situation. Though distressed about his friend, Richard Osborne's murder, he instantly grasped the urgency and the dangers they were up against, both from above and below. Already, he was mentally logging the equipment he would need to draw from supplies.

"Hmmm," he pondered. "Just as a matter of interest Vincent, why exactly have you come to me, instead of alerting the authorities?"

"Because they would ask far too many questions, that we would be unable to answer."

"Catherine's secrets again?" he smirked, admiring this man's style.

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Vincent knew he'd found his helper, and he hoped, a friend. He hesitated before adding. "I've always been aware of your feelings for Catherine, and I apologise for making use of that knowledge now. But you see, we had nowhere else to turn."

"It's all right. You can relax. We both know I'd never refuse Cathy anything; and it does seem that she and Joe, have been put in this life threatening situation indirectly because of me. But don't you think, Vincent, that it's time I was trusted with some answers? Answers, that incidentally I could have made it my business to find out any time I'd wished."

"I agree. You do deserve to know the truth; but for now, will you accept that I am already trusting you, with everything in the world that I hold dear?"

"Yes, okay. I'll agree to that. Now where do we meet?"

* * *

His previous exhaustion forgotten, Elliot wasted no time. Within the hour he was driving cautiously through the opened entrance of a dark, almost derelict warehouse, in his Site Manager's, well-used, unmarked, pick-up truck. It was loaded with everything he could think of, and a few extras that he thought would come in useful.

He had changed into the garb of a typical building site labourer, complete with black standard issue duffle coat, and safety helmet on the seat beside him. Certainly no one would have recognised him as empire builder, Elliot Burch. Vincent had given him clear directions to their 14th Street entrance. Not chosen for its close proximity to the tunnel they would be working in, but because it boasted an archaic but still functional freight elevator.

Elliot's mind was alive with questions, not to mention apprehension, this being an area in which he did not relish hanging about alone after dark. He blinked his dipped headlights twice, as pre-arranged, and was more than a little relieved to see the answering signal from a flashlight. A lone figure stepped out of the darkness and approached his vehicle. He lowered his window. "Kanin?"

"Elliot." Kanin greeted with matching relief, as the two men shook hands through the open window. "Thank you for agreeing to help us."

"I'm glad I was able to do so, Kanin. Cathy and Joe are pretty special people to me too." A naked single light bulb was switched on by some unseen hand, shedding an eerie glow above the elevator grill. Elliot nodded. "I'll back up."

Zack and Mark were waiting in the elevator. Wasting no time, all four of them began manhandling the heavy equipment from the truck, onto two sturdy portable trolleys. They were all winded from their exertions, but Zack suggested parking the pick-up somewhere safe, until it was needed again. This met with Elliot's grateful thanks and he grinned.

"At least I won't be returning to find it stripped down to its chassis, and mounted on four piles of bricks."

Even by Elliot's standards, the cleverly concealed access into the tunnels was inspired. He quickly realised that this was a much-travelled and well-maintained route; smooth floored and clear of debris. Low wattage light bulbs shone every few yards, all powered from an ancient generator, Kanin informed him. His concern about the accessibility of his trolleys, loaded as they were with equipment, was unfounded. With two men handling each of them, they trundled along without too much difficulty.

Elliot couldn't help but remember back to a night so many years ago. The night his father had been murdered; because of him. The night he and Catherine almost died together; again, because of him. He remembered

clearly their mysterious escape, as she led him unerringly through a maze of underground tunnels, and through to Central Park. Now, at last, some of it began to make sense; though he found it hard to believe that Catherine would choose, to be down here in this drab dank darkness that he imagined it to be. He saw her as a woman with sunshine in her hair. Living in luxury. Dressed in beautiful clothes.

Further ruminations were abruptly halted, as Vincent strode towards them; some sixth sense, leaving Elliot in no doubt about it being any other. Nothing, could have prepared him for the reality that Vincent was, as he stood rooted to the spot, mesmerized by the undeniable power and noble grace.

Vincent, was unable to suppress a wry smile, at the expression on Elliot's face. There was no horror at their meeting; only the dawning of realisation.

"Hello Elliot. Thank you for answering our call for help so quickly." Seemingly oblivious to the man's close scrutiny he added. "We're about twenty minutes away from the site."

Elliot recognised his voice from their telephone conversation, but was unable to drag his eyes away from the face it belonged to. Suddenly conscious of the fact that he was staring, he found himself stammering.

"I apologise for my ill manners, Vincent." Then lowering his eyes, he shook his head in disbelief. "I had no idea." He didn't know what else to say.

No one moved, or spoke, but waited until Vincent quietly asked. "Elliot. Are you still willing to help us?"

The bearded man looked up to meet clear blue eyes, seeing for the first time all the naked fear of his possible refusal. He sighed. "Do you really think that I could walk away from this, when I have the means, and the knowhow at my disposal, to do something about it?" He didn't wait for an answer, but stated the plain facts. "The one thing I can't do, is to promise you any guarantees. There are too many unknown factors, and not too much time. But, I'm sure that with our pooled resources, we can certainly give it our best shot."

There was an audible sigh of relief from everyone, and Vincent visibly relaxed. They shook hands, in grateful acceptance and understanding, before leading the rescue party back along the tunnel, matching each other stride for stride.

* * *

Catherine and Joe had long since ceased all conversation; apart from the essential. Both were aware of the need to preserve what oxygen there was, and they sat side by side on top of their coats and jackets, quietly pondering their own thoughts, and trying to hold their fears at bay. Neither of them commented on the fact that they were now quite comfortable in their shirt and blouse. Catherine had found half a pack of mints in the bottom of her purse, and being the only form of refreshment they had, they were counted and metered out sparingly.

Had their situation been as final as it had first appeared to be, there was no doubt in Joe's mind; he'd have thrown caution to the winds, and declared the truth of all that Catherine really meant to him. And just maybe, with the desperation of their final hours, they would have drawn comfort from each other. Maybe, Catherine would have fulfilled a lifelong dream for Joe, and allowed him to make love to her. Yet he felt no regret for aspirations that could never be. His was the certain knowledge that her friendship and affection were far too precious, to risk their loss; and anyway, no one could be prosecuted for his private thoughts; however inappropriate.

At that moment, Joe was grateful for the all enveloping blackness; to hide his blushes of acute embarrassment, at these lurid fantasies that insisted on tormenting his senses. It was also a good thing, that Vincent's empathic connection, did not stretch to him.

The sudden metallic tapping sound, came as a welcome interruption to this train of thought, as Catherine whispered. "It's Vincent." They both listened intently to a long tapped out message, before she excitedly repeated it to Joe. "Elliot's here. He's helping them. He's brought in the most modern equipment, so there's

every hope that we'll be out before morning." She and Joe hugged each other with relief, before listening again. "He says we should sit in front of the door at the far end." She scrambled to her feet. "I'll climb up to the pipe and tell him we understand, then we can settle down and wait."

Joe helped her up onto the table, holding the chair steady as she climbed up, to tap out her coded reply; but was unable to resist a request of his own. "Hey, Radcliffe. Tell Elliot Burch, to get a move on will ya? I could murder an ice cold beer."

* * *

Elliot soon won over their trust with his efficient assessment of the situation; explaining in layman's language, the principles of setting up a controlled explosion in a confined space. He had to draw on his vast knowledge of builder's blueprints, to estimate the possible depth of the tunnel wall, which he knew would be considerable. There was also the added dangers, of trying to prevent the initial blast from breaking through into the vault. It made a lot of sense to them all, to break through the final section manually.

Elliot worked tirelessly alongside Vincent, Mouse and Kanin; guiding them through the first phase of the operation, using skills he knew so well in theory, but had only ever experienced second hand. Elliot's expertise, lay in the negotiation of business deals. Securing building contracts, and keeping thousands of men in work.

Mouse was in his element working with the new machinery, and Elliot realised there was much more to this rather eccentric man than met the eye. However, one thing that was glaringly apparent, even with these superior drilling machines and the high powered generator. Time was still their enemy.

The drilling continued incessantly, all through the night and most of the next day; Vincent keeping in close contact with Catherine, through their tapped out messages and empathic bond. In the tunnel they worked in shifts. As one team of workers took a few hours rest, another team took their place. Elliot and his appointed assistant Mouse, were on call every step of the way. Whether resting, or working, no one left the area, and William was there as always, providing them with plenty of drinks, light refreshments and his moral support.

Michael arrived from Above, filled with concern, having received word of the emergency from Pascal, through one of their helpers. Catherine was special to him too. Michael had left the safety of his tunnel home, as a young man, after winning a place at Brayfield College. Two years later, he decided to follow in Father's footsteps; entering Medical School, where he finally qualified as a doctor. Though he now had his own successful practice, with a small convenient apartment in Greenwich Village, he had returned Below; married Brooke, and the two of them were now the proud parents of two young sons. Over the past three years, he had gradually taken over the reins from Father, to become their community's doctor as well.

It was Brooke and Jamie, who volunteered to relay any news to Father, and they took turns to keep him company throughout the long waiting hours.

At last, late in the afternoon, Elliot was satisfied. All the costly machinery was loaded back onto the trolleys, to be taken down the tunnel out of range. Everyone was asked to clear the area, and take cover.

Vincent and Mouse remained behind with him, and, copying every manoeuvre that Elliot made, they began setting in the plastic explosive and detonators. A timing mechanism was to be used, pre-set, to allow them to get clear of the area before the explosion. They had already agreed that sixty seconds should be enough delay, but as Elliot gave everything a final check, before setting the timing device, Vincent suddenly sucked in a huge breath through his teeth, and clutching at his chest he gasped out in panic.

"Catherine! Catherine's in trouble!"

Elliot didn't question Vincent's uncanny outburst, he just acted upon it. "Okay Vincent. Mouse. Thirty seconds." He pressed the button on the timer. "Right. GO! GO! GO!"

They hit the deck on the count of thirty, as the noise and impact of the simultaneously set blasts swept past them, and the tunnel trembled and shook beneath their bodies. They protected their heads from the falling loose stones and grit as they held their breath and waited. The air, still thick with choking dust, as Vincent clambered to his feet, coughing and stumbling as he picked his way through the debris, back along the tunnel, to find the gaping hole the explosion had rent in the tunnel wall.

He was frantic; feeling Catherine's life force slipping away. Crying out her name over and over he forced his way through the opening; only to be met by a wall of rough brickwork. Elliot had done his job to perfection. There was little room for manoeuvre, but with a compulsion born of desperation he let out a mighty roar of primal rage, and flung his full weight against the brickwork, oblivious to any injury to himself. The bricks gave against his tremendous onslaught and he pushed through them in a maniacal frenzy, in his haste to reach his love.

Elliot, was close behind him with a powerful flashlight; his ears ringing from the sound of Vincent's outrage, in the confined space. He shone the beam into the vault and followed him through. It was like entering a suffocating airless sauna. Catherine was slumped across Joe's legs at the far end of the room; their clothes clinging to their bodies, wet with perspiration.

Vincent scooped her up into his arms, and protecting her body with his own, he shouldered his way out into the now fresher air of the tunnel, knowing that Elliot would take care of Joe.

Emergency arc lights were already being speedily rigged and switched on. Michael rushed forward, to wrap a thick quilt around Catherine, before lowering her to the floor between them. Vincent swiftly knelt beside her, to tilt her head back with gentle sureness. He held her nose between his thumb and index finger and pulled down her jaw. Without questioning Michael's instructions, he took a large breath from the proffered oxygen mask that the doctor held to his face, and, covering her mouth with his own, he began breathing life into her.

"Come on Cathy, breathe," Michael pleaded, as he held the stethoscope against her heart; knowing that he would have to take over if she did not recover within the next few seconds. He glanced over to see how Joe was doing, relieved to see that Mary and Elliot were taking care of him, and he was already showing signs of recovery.

Vincent took his third breath of clean oxygen, to blow gently into her lungs as Michael suddenly cried out. "Yeah!" as he heard her heart flutter into life, and begin beating steadily. "We've got her Vincent! She's okay. She's breathing." But Vincent already knew, and they gripped hands in mutual joy as Michael scrambled to his feet, to go and check up on his other patient.

Joe had recovered quickly, under his own steam, with the help of a few good inhalations of oxygen from one of two small pressurized containers, Elliot had the presence of mind to bring with him. Wrapped in blankets, and nursing a beaker of tea that William had just presented him with, Joe's hands were still noticeably trembling from the after effects of his ordeal. He wondered at the reality of his surroundings, as he was drawn to the scene being played out before him.

This, then, was the man whom Cathy had protected all these years. All, of what she had told him was true. They did share an empathic connection, and Vincent did know what she was feeling; across a city; across a continent. He glanced to the deep gaping hole, the explosion had left in the tunnel wall; and through to the vault beyond, that could have become their tomb. Her words echoed in his mind.

'Nor walls divide. Not even this one.'

Now, Joe nodded in complete understanding; of the immensity of all she had shared with him; and her reasons for never having been able to do so before now. His brain refused to function any further than that.

Other members of the community were beginning to arrive, eager, though apprehensive of what they might find. Their joy and relief was evident as they stood and watched, along with Joe and Elliot, in humbled fascination as at last, Catherine opened her eyes, to gaze up into her husband's beloved face.

"Vincent," she whispered. "You're here?"

His eyes swam with tears as he pressed her hand against his lips; kissing its palm. "You are my love," his tears spilled over. "Thank God you are so very much alive."

As Catherine cried out his name, they were in each other's arms, oblivious to their audience. Amidst smiles and sobs of grateful relief, they kissed away each other's tears. Vincent, so overcome by emotion, that he crushed her closer to him and voiced his pain. "I felt you go, Catherine. I felt you go."

"I know you did, Vincent. I know," she answered, holding him even tighter, echoing his pain.

Almost roughly, he cupped her head into his hands, and she could see for herself the depth of suffering, etched into his face. "I felt you go," he repeated, his voice thick, with all the desperation and fear he had endured. "I don't ever want to know that feeling again, Catherine. NEVER again." His tone had changed; tinged with an anger, born of love. "Promise me?" he demanded irrationally.

Tears welled up anew, and spilled down her face; overwhelmed was she, with love for her man. She drew in a ragged breath, before whispering tremulously. One of us will have to know that feeling again someday, Vincent."

"Hmm," he nodded, accepting the logic of that, and his face softened, to smile his own unique smile. "But not until we're very, very old, and very, very grey." He sighed, enveloping her in his arms again, where they both shuddered and groaned with the sheer joy, of just being together. Smiles lit the faces of the many who pretended not to be watching, but were unable to drag their eyes away.

Then Catherine gasped, as another thought struck her. Easing herself free from his arms, she began to look around. "Joe? Where's Joe?"

"I'm here, Kiddo," he answered her from a few feet away.

As he was being assisted to his feet, helped on with a warm quilted jacket, Elliot had moved away into the shadows, where he slumped against the wall, and closed his eyes. Though satisfied that he'd done all that had been asked of him, he'd never felt more alone in his life, and his physical exhaustion finally got the better of him as he slid defeated, to the ground.

Catherine disentangled herself from Vincent, to take his hands as he rose to his feet, drawing her up beside him to stand before Joe. She felt cold away from the warmth of his arms, and Mary passed Vincent his cloak, which he wrapped around her shoulders. He remained behind her, holding her steady.

"Thought we'd bought it that time, Kiddo," Joe stated, his voice filled with wonder, his eyes taking in every detail of the picture they made together.

She nodded. "So did I." Then her face creased into a smile that lit up her eyes. "But, we're still here, Joe Maxwell. Didn't I tell you we would be?"

"Yeah, sure you did, Cathy," he answered softly. He glanced up apprehensively at Vincent, before he dared to lean forward and whisper loudly in her ear. "Hey. You think your husband would object if I give you a hug?"

"No I'm sure he wouldn't," she grinned, "but I sure as hell will, if you don't."

That was all the encouragement Joe needed, and they hugged as friends will with all the relief that they felt. Smiling, she drew away from him to sway back against the safety of Vincent's body, feeling the possessive pressure of his hands on her shoulders, and the warmth of his love, just to know that he was there. She smiled, breaking the spell. "Well, now at last you two get to meet. Joe, this is Vincent, my husband."

"Yeah, well, I kinda thought it might be," he grinned good naturedly, "and I'm more than a little pleased to meet you, Vincent. Believe me, back there I held strong doubts that I ever would."

Vincent's left arm slid across the front of his wife's shoulders, as he reached out to grasp Joe's hand and welcome him into their world. "It's good to meet you too, Joe, and to thank you for always being there, for Catherine."

"My pleasure," he answered standing back, unable to shake the notion that it was all a dream; and yet he knew it was real.

Vincent spoke again. "We have considered the possibility of sharing our secrets with you, Joe, many, many times. It would have certainly eased the burden on my wife." Vincent chuckled. "Truth is, over the years we have come to know you here, almost as well as Catherine does."

"You got me at a disadvantage there. I had no idea at all." He began to relax, and winked cheekily at Catherine, before assuring Vincent. "There's no wonder this little lady of yours, has become such an expert at keeping me, and everyone else out there, completely in the dark." He met Vincent's amused gaze before he elaborated further. "I just knew there had to be a damn good reason, for the way she's always so fiercely protected her private life," he smiled back at Catherine, nodding his head in deep affection, and renewed respect. "I think I can safely say, Mrs Wells, that your husband is good reason enough."

"Thank you, Joe," Vincent answered for both of them. "And now, as you are not supposed to be in circulation for the rest of the weekend, please will you accept our hospitality at the brownstone? Father will no doubt be eager to see for himself, that you're both safe and well."

Joe blew out his cheeks. "I'm to meet your father as well? This sure is turning out to be one hell of a weekend." He grinned. "Thanks. I'd love to."

As Catherine was being hugged and kissed by Michael, and the rest of her delighted family Below who were all so relieved to see her safe and well; Joe approached Vincent.

"You know. Even with all that Cathy told me while we were holed up in there, I never really thought we stood the remotest chance of getting out alive," and he sighed loudly. "So what can I say to you? Thank you, just doesn't come close to being enough."

Vincent drew in a long breath, and exhaled loudly. "Tomorrow, Catherine and I will show you around our world Below. All we ask of you, Joe, is that you keep it safe. Always."

"You've got that anyway," he nodded.

"I never doubted it for a moment, but there is something else you should know. Although I could feel Catherine's fear through our empathic connection, and was able to locate exactly where she was; we, would never have been able to get you out in time, without the very generous help of someone else. Someone who cares as much as we do, and had the means at his disposal, to supply us with what was necessary to get the job done."

"Elliot Burch. Of course," Joe replied guiltily. He'd forgotten all about him. "He was here a few minutes ago. I wonder where he's disappeared to."

Catherine had overheard the end of their conversation, and came to her husband's side feeling equally guilty. "He can't be far away Vincent. We must find him."

* * *

Chapter 4

Elliot sat on the floor in the darkness, his head resting back against the wall. Now it was over, he felt suspended in a strange kind of limbo, and more exhausted than he could ever remember feeling in his entire life.

Elliot Burch, was a king in his world. He had created more wealth, than anyone could ever dream of. Attained more goals, than anyone could imagine. Nevertheless, all the dreams and goals he had realised, had never been enough. That elusive something, had always been somewhere just out of his grasp.

Odd, he thought, that he should find a reason to smile at a time like this; unable to rid himself of the concept that he was standing on the threshold of a new experience. Something that was out of his control.

There was no doubt that Vincent had made a lasting impression on him. He held no illusions as to the immensity of the trust, he now shared with Joe. Meeting this man who had always been such an enigma to both of them. Witnessing at first hand, a love that had survived without sunlight, had left Elliot feeling humbled, and in awe of it all.

He frowned, as his reverie was interrupted by the onset of an unnatural heat, that seemed to be rising up throughout the length of his body. Perspiring heavily, he felt suddenly disorientated, nauseous and slightly panicked by it all, though lacked the energy to do anything about it.

His chest began to feel tight and uncomfortable, and a suffocating sensation spread up to his throat, taking his breath. Gasping with the sharp pain, that gripped the middle of his chest before it passed through to his back, and spread across and down his arms. Even his jaws, teeth and ears were affected. He drew in large ragged breaths as he rubbed his back against the wall, in a futile effort to relax and kill the pain. But it didn't help. It only became more intolerable. Suddenly his chest was gripped again, as if in a vice that consumed the whole of his body. Elliot cried out a single strangled sound, before writhing over onto the floor, clutching his chest as the pain engulfed him.

* * *

Vincent's sensitive hearing picked up the sound, and he looked up listening. "Elliot," he murmured, before moving like a swift silent shadow. Joe, Catherine and Michael stared after him, as his figure disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel.

Barely seconds later, his voice was heard echoing back to them. "Michael Come quickly! We have an emergency here." The doctor picked up his bag and a flashlight. Mouse took the nearest arc light, and followed behind with Mary, towards the reverberation of Vincent's voice.

Catherine and Joe were about to follow them too, until William blocked their path. "Oh no you don't. I think you two good people have had enough excitement for one night. They'll let us know what's going on soon enough."

In the few seconds it took Michael to cover the short distance, Elliot had lost consciousness, and his heart had stopped beating. The doctor calmly assessed the situation, and with quiet efficiency went into action; thumping his fist over the location of Elliot's heart. Rhythmically he put pressure on, in an attempt to stimulate it back to life. Mary, trained by Father, snapped open the doctor's bag and quickly located what was required, and prepared an injection. Vincent and Mouse looked on, as Michael went through the same procedure again, counting as he went.

"One. Two. Three..."

Vincent dispatched Mouse to organise a stretcher with a couple of lightweight woollen blankets.

Suddenly, Michael shouted out. "That's it! We've got him. Okay, let's have some oxygen, Mary." He listened through his stethoscope to the somewhat uncertain heartbeat, that strengthened slightly with the input of pure oxygen. Satisfied he looked up.

"We're going to have to get him to the hospital chamber, as quickly as possible, Vincent. There's the likelihood that he'll suffer another attack."

As Elliot was carefully settled onto the stretcher, Catherine and Joe appeared at Vincent's side, their faces filled with concern.

Michael rose to his feet, to speak quietly to all of them. "Elliot's suffered a severe heart attack I'm afraid. Alone, he would most certainly have died. As it is, the next twenty four hours are going to be critical; and it could go either way."

"So you're taking him up to the hospital." Joe stated.

"It's not necessary. We've everything on hand Below, in our own hospital chamber, and it's much nearer."

"But..." Joe queried uncertainly, and Vincent gripped his arm in reassurance. "It's all right. Have no fear. Elliot will receive the very best of care with us."

"Let's just pray he's strong enough to pull through it," Michael added.

Kanin and Zack came forward to take the stretcher, with Mary walking alongside, monitoring Elliot's every heartbeat. Michael picked up his bag, observing the pale wan faces of Catherine and Joe, before directing his gaze to Vincent.

"As your doctor, I am ordering you to take your wife, and Joe, home to get a good night's rest. There's nothing you can do, and what I don't need right now are any more emergencies to deal with. I don't want to see any of you, for at least twelve hours. Is that clear?"

They all nodded meekly in agreement. "But you will let us know if there's any change," Catherine asked.

"You can be sure I'll get word to you."

* * *

Catherine had imagined, that in the safety of Vincent's arms, moulded to the familiar contours of his body, she would drift readily into an exhausted sleep. But sleep refused to come.

Vincent, ever sensitive to his wife's needs, clutched her head to his chest, smoothed her cheek with his thumb, and whispered over the top of her head. "Catherine. I can feel your distress. Is it the darkness that bothers you? Shall I light the bedside candles?"

She turned her head up to nuzzle her mouth to his throat. "How did you know?"

"Because I could feel all of your terror, when you were trapped in that vault. I could feel everything you suffered when you did; as I can feel now, that you're still lost in it."

"Hmm, yes I am," she murmured, as she left the soft warmth of his throat, to go in search of his lips where she clung and plundered his mouth, as if she was drowning. "Love me, Vincent. I need you to love me."

Smiling in amazement, he kissed her face. "I'll light those candles for you; but then I really think we should postpone the loving until you've had some rest, my love."

She pondered on that as he removed his arm from around her, to turn and light all three candles. They still preferred this form of lighting, as its gentle golden glow spread across the bed. Catherine's aching need for his touch, refused to leave her as she caressed his back, feeling him shudder, before he turned to face her. Naked, as they both were when they shared this bed, her hair cascaded out on the pillows. She smiled

adoringly up at him. "I AM resting Vincent." She moistened her lips, and smiled again. "I promise, I won't move an inch, if you'll just love me, please. I need you to."

"So do I," he husked, as all his love for this woman welled up within him, and he voiced the painful memory of what had almost happened. "Oh Catherine, I thought I'd lost you."

She held out her arms to him as she whispered, "I know you did. I thought I'd lost you too."

He knelt carefully astride her; leaning forward to take his weight on his forearms, and holding her head in his hands. Slowly, he began to kiss and caress every inch of her face, before moving on down to her neck, leaving trails of wetness with his tongue. She lay submissive and smiling, luxuriating in the feel of him, and the sensations he evoked in her. Her nipples were left glistening with wetness in the candle light, and he went lower, feeling the heat building within her. She parted her legs, to allow him access to where she needed him to be, and the touch of his tongue was as the lighting of a touch paper, setting her body alight with a myriad breathtaking sensations as she grabbed handfuls of his hair to pull his tormenting mouth away because she wanted him inside her. Guided by her desperate need that matched his own, they found an energy neither thought they possessed; and when at last they lay spent and satiated, Vincent pulled the quilt around them and they slept a contented sleep, safe in each other's arms.

* * *

Joe's sleep however, had been far from contented. He'd been plagued for the most part, by visual nightmares. Graphic replays, in technicolour, of men being horrifically slashed by some wild beast. He'd thrashed about, not knowing whether it was real, or imagined; unable to wake up, until the sound of rattling teacups brought him to consciousness, and he opened his eyes.

Mary, was sitting on the edge of his bed with her hand resting on his shoulder. Concern was written all over her careworn face. "Joe are you all right? You've been thrashing about for hours. Looks as if you've been doing battle with someone."

Her words sparked the memory of his nightmares, but Joe couldn't tell this kindly woman about the vivid pictures, still imprinted in his mind. He didn't even feel up to conversation, so he answered. "I'm sorry. I think it must have been delayed shock."

"Yes," she answered, smiling, patting his shoulder. "I can understand that. We all do. What almost happened to you and Catherine, must be everyone's worst nightmare."

He nodded. Mary accepted that he wasn't able to talk about it yet, and rose from the bed. "Well I've left you some tea. There's everything you'll need in the bathroom. Your clothes are clean and dry on the chair, so take your time."

She smiled. "Come down when you're ready." She turned back to him as she reached the door. "Joe. Don't keep this nightmare bottled up inside yourself. You're with friends. Please feel free to share it, with any one of us."

But Joe couldn't share it with any of them. His nightmares, had forced him to face up to the reason why Catherine had never been able to confide in him, about her private life. He realised now, that it had little to do with what Vincent looked like. That alone, would have made her apprehensive about telling him, but she'd have shared it with him nonetheless. Vincent's differences were not the issue. The fact was, that he'd used those awesome hands to kill many times. Brutally slashing men's bodies, and Catherine had condoned it for all these years. What did that make her? If not as guilty as he.

Joe felt sick with all the pain, anger and disappointment he felt. The betrayal by a much loved friend, whom he had trusted above all else. Now he'd been made part of it. Pledged to keep it secret.

He sat on the edge of the bed hugging his chest. Rocking to and fro. Not knowing what the hell to do.

* * *

In the master bedroom all was still. Mary had brought them some tea earlier, and had assured them that Elliot was holding his own. They had curled up in their large bed for what was to have been a five minute cuddle, and had drifted off to sleep again. Even in sleep, Vincent needed to feel her near as they altered their sleeping positions, and he reached out behind him to encompass her naked thigh; moulding her closer to him; and thus they had slept.

Now Catherine stirred. Hugging to his back, she nuzzled his shoulder, her fingers curling into the thick pale golden hair on his chest, and their legs entwined. Though floating somewhere between asleep and awake, Catherine's hand began to move with unintentional sensuality over Vincent's chest. Stroking and smoothing, before moving languidly down his body with no real conscious intent; until her hand came into contact with his more than lusty erection. A wide sleepy smile spread across her face against his back.

"Oooh Vincent. You ARE awake, aren't you?" She giggled, now fully awake herself.

He chuckled before answering her. "Yes well, if I wasn't before, I'm definitely awake now." Catherine could not wipe the expectant grin from her face, as she held onto what she had found. He eased himself over onto his back, giving himself completely to her tender ministrations. She knelt up beside him, allowing the quilt to fall away, and their eyes to feast on each other, speaking without words as she moved to sit astride him, smiling lustfully into his eyes.

"Well, we can't let all this go to waste now can we?"

* * *

Joe was in the study with Father and Mary, when they finally arrived downstairs. Catherine kissed and hugged Father, and squeezed Mary's hand. However, Joe's cordial, though very cool greeting, put Catherine instantly on her guard. She knew him too well, not to realise when he was uptight about something. Her sudden sense of foreboding, made it imperative that she find out what it was, before they took him Below.

Vincent soon became aware of his wife's unrest, and puzzled, he enquired. "Are you unwell, Catherine?"

"No," she smiled back at him lovingly. "I'm fine. Really." But taking advantage of this opportunity, she quickly added. "But I've just remembered something important that has to do with work. Do you mind if I steal Joe away into the lounge for a few minutes?"

"No of course not. I'll keep Father and Mary company, until you're both ready to go Below." But Vincent frowned. Something wasn't quite right.

* * *

In silence they crossed the main hallway, entering the lounge and closing the door behind them. Catherine, was very much aware of the atmosphere that could be cut with a knife. She didn't sit down. Nor did she invite Joe to do so. Turning to face him in the middle of the floor, she squared her shoulders ready to do battle.

"Okay Joe. Let's have it. Tell me what's bugging you?"

He stood staring at her, as if she was a total stranger. His unexpected sneer of contempt, came like a physical blow to her as he mocked.

"Bugging me? Yeah, I'll tell you what's bugging me. It sure don't take no brain, to see why the reappearance of those old files scared the shit out of you, does it?"

Catherine cringed. She'd been on the receiving end of Joe's anger before, but not like this. He would never have spoken to her like this. This was verging on hatred, and as he moved closer, she almost backed away as she felt his need to lash out. She stood her ground, accepting his pained verbal outrage.

"You've damn well betrayed me," he hissed through gritted teeth. "Betrayed BOTH of us, dammit, and all that we stand for. Jesus!" He cried. "How could you do it? How do you live with yourself? Protecting a multiple murderer for all these years? Beats me how someone like you could ever love such a man." He paused to catch his breath before scathingly adding. "Or whatever the hell he is. Or maybe it's the VIOLENCE that turns you on."

Joe regretted his added insults the moment he'd said them. Now all he wanted to do, was to get away from the sickening nightmares that had been driving him crazy for the last few hours. To block out the vision of those clawed hands, ripping through flesh, and all the blood. Just as his own father's throat had been slit mercilessly, on his way home from work; to be left bleeding to death by the side of the road.

Shocked by his bitter reaction, so totally out of character, Catherine calmly tried to defuse the situation. "Joe, for goodness sake, stop it. You know as well as I do, that I could never protect a murderer. Love a murderer. And Vincent could never murder anyone."

"Come off it," he almost snarled at her, as his face leered up close to hers, not allowing her to finish. "Who ya trying to kid? Remember I've met him. I've seen those hands of his, and those photographs say it all."

"DO they Joe?" she yelled back at him. "Were you there? Were you hell!" Spinning round in her anger, fists clenched, eyes blazing, she turned back to confront him with all the pain of her disappointment. "You've no IDEA what those photographs represent. You know NOTHING! NOTHING AT ALL." Her voice completely out of control, now her previous composure had snapped, and fear took over. "AND for that matter. What about innocent until proven guilty, Joe? Tell me that," she demanded, prodding him in the chest with her finger. "Go on Joe." She prodded him again and again.

"Tell me?"

He knocked her hand away angrily. "I'll tell you something, MRS Catherine Wells," he taunted with another resentful sneer, "As of now I'm putting you on suspension, until I've decided what action I'm going to take."

Catherine felt as if she was about to explode. All her previous instincts for keeping Joe out of her private life had been proved right, and it hurt like hell. She felt an overwhelming compulsion to hit him. Instead the shutters came down behind her eyes as she drew herself up to her full height and controlled her anger. Clenching her jaw, she fixed him with a cold unflinching stare, before and precisely informing him. "Joe Maxwell. I'll tell YOU, what action you can take. You can SHOVE your goddamn suspension as far as you can get it. Because as of now I QUIT."

She walked stiffly over to the hall door and yanked it open before turning to face him. "Now GET OUT! And when YOU have decided what steps you're going to take against me and mine, it will be YOU left with egg on your face, MR District Attorney. Because YOU will never find us."

Stiff backed and in icy silence, Catherine escorted Joe from the house. She was aware that most of his hostility had already dispersed, but she was too angry and frightened to care.

After returning to the lounge, she closed the door behind her, leaning against it for a few moments trying stem the flow of tears. She was fighting a losing battle as they spilled down her face, and she began to sob uncontrollably.

Until a sudden thought struck her. 'Where was Vincent?

Why wasn't he here waiting for her?' She dashed her tears away with her hands, and fled through to the study where she found Mary, alone and extremely agitated.

"Where's Vincent?"

"He's gone, Catherine. Father too. Vincent sensed there was something seriously amiss, when you left us on such a weak pretext. I'm afraid he heard the confrontation between you and Joe, but was too afraid to intervene."

Catherine nodded, "I'm glad he didn't, Mary." Fresh tears spilled down her face as she said." The two women clung together in the middle of the floor, then releasing their hold Mary added. "From all you've told us about Joe, truly we didn't expect him to react this way."

"No. I didn't either. But you never really know anyone do you?" The hurt and bitterness she felt could not be disguised.

Mary held her at arm's length and peered into her ashen face. You know we've always tried to see good in people, but Vincent didn't think it would be safe here anymore. Not even for Father. He said Joe could get a search warrant to gain entry into your home, and we could see all his old fears returning."

"I know." She nodded, hugging the older woman to her again. "I'm frightened too. Come on." She smiled a tremulous smile. "This is only a house. Let's go home."

* * *

Joe, felt totally numb as he wandered aimlessly along the lamp lit side walk. He shuddered, as the late autumn chill and misty drizzle began to make its presence felt, reminding him that he'd left his overcoat behind. He looked around hopefully for a cab, but apart from cars parked nose to tail along each side of the road, nothing moved.

Suddenly nervous of his vulnerability, for which he had no one to blame but himself, Joe had to admit that he had never felt so alone and frightened in his life. Catherine had always been there for him. Dammit, she'd just saved his life, and he'd gone and kicked her in the teeth. Now he didn't know who to trust, where to turn, and he daren't go anywhere near his apartment. Hell he daren't show his face. Period.

He was thankful that the incriminating notebook, that Richard Osborne had given his life for, was safe with Catherine and Vincent. Somehow, before Monday morning, Joe knew he had to find his way down to the inspection tunnel behind the bank vault.

The rain started to fall heavily, soaking him through, and he ducked into a doorway. Wet, confused and almost close to tears, he leaned against the door frame, cursing himself for being the worst kind of a bloody fool that he could think of. He could never remember having been so out of control. He hadn't even given her a chance; and what of Vincent?

As Joe's head began to clear and his common sense returned, he remembered witnessing the great respect shown to Vincent in the tunnel. The total acceptance of a love, that would never be allowed to survive in the real world. Catherine had told him, that all the traditional values were adhered to Below, so it followed, that these were the kind of people who would be unable to show that kind of loyalty, to a murderer.

Joe knew there was nothing for it but to go back and apologise. Beg their forgiveness, because his hysterical judgements and wild accusations had been way out of line. Probably the very reason that they'd never confided in him in the first place. Just what kind of a friend was he for God's sake, when the only excuse he could come up with, was that the trauma of the last thirty six hours had addled his brain. Now of course, he could remember Catherine explaining about their empathic connection. That Vincent was always there for her, whenever she was in danger. He could well imagine him going up against guns, knives, or anything else to protect Catherine. Joe could fully accept that that was the only excuse for violence. To protect your own. Wouldn't any man who was a man, do the same?

Guiltily, he recalled the day Catherine had first started at the DA's office. The way she'd always thrown herself into the most dangerous assignments, trying to prove herself. Somehow, she'd always gotten the job done, irrespective of the body count. Somehow, she'd always come away from her clashes with New York's lowest

life, unscathed. At least most of the time. His mind went back to another incident. The night she'd almost drowned, locked in the trunk of a car. He paled at the realisation that Vincent would have broken cover; travelled all those miles across country to Stoney Point, to get her out in the nick of time. Only to face all the dangers of returning to his tunnel home without discovery.

Joe shook his head in humbled admiration for both of them, as he took a silent oath. *'Kiddo, it takes some kinda woman, to keep a secret like that safe for all these years. I sure as hell don't deserve to count on you as my friend. I hope you can find a way to forgive me. God, I promise I'll never let you down again. Either of you.'*

As the rain eased off, Joe ran back to the brownstone. He leaned on the doorbell, but there was no reply. After a few minutes had elapsed with no response, he asked himself.

'All right, wise guy, now what?' But at least he was thinking straight, and at the sight of a familiar yellow cab, he flagged it down and climbed gratefully inside.

* * *

Chapter 5

Catherine packed a few clothes and toiletries into a small suitcase, before helping Mary to check each room to make sure that all was safe. Ever thrifty, Mary emptied the refrigerator and pantry of any perishable foods to take Below.

They both found it difficult, to ignore the persistent ringing of the front door bell, and Catherine switched on the security monitor that overlooked the outside entrance. Neither of them were really surprised by the sight of a very wet and bedraggled Joe Maxwell, looking up as if he could actually see them. Catherine hesitated for the briefest moment, before steeling her heart to this man. Was this then, the strength of their friendship she wondered? Was the sum total of the trust they had taken for granted all these years, not enough to be put to the test? In her heart, his behaviour only endorsed her long-held resolution, not to share her private life with anyone.

Abruptly, she turned off the monitor screen, still lost in her misery and disappointment. Picking up her bag, she crossed the room to make for the basement entrance, surprised to find that Mary had moved to block her exit.

"Catherine, listen to me," she appealed. "Don't you think, you're being just a little unfair on Joe? His reaction is only what you'd both expected all along, and you can't just walk away from everything you've worked for all these years."

"I know," she agreed without enthusiasm.

"Why don't you let him in?" Mary coaxed. "Give him the chance to apologise, and yourself the chance to explain."

"No," she shook her head adamantly, even though her heart was breaking. "I'm sorry, but I can't. Not yet. Joe went against everything he stands for. Everything he believes in, by condemning us both without a hearing. I'm sorry Mary, but Joe's just going to have to stew for a while." She dashed her tears away with her fingers, sniffed, and gathered up her bag. "Right now, my main concern is for Vincent."

"But Joe could be in danger out there," Mary persisted.

"Yes, well, he should've thought about that," she answered, more abruptly than she intended. Dropping her bag back onto the floor, she clutched this caring woman to her.

"Please, try to understand Mary. I don't want to talk about it anymore right now, and I promise you, Joe's more than capable of taking care of himself."

* * *

"Taking one hell of a risk aren't you, Mr Maxwell?" the dark haired young cab driver commented sociably through the rear view mirror, as he moved off down the road; following Joe's instruction to just drive anywhere.

Joe tensed at the unexpected sound of his given name, acutely aware of his vulnerability, and debating whether to go for the side door and jump for it, or to stay put. He stayed put, leaning forward to the opening in the perspex security screen, that separated the driver from his passengers; some instinct telling him that this young man was no threat.

Even so, he demanded. "Why? What's it to you? And who the hell are you anyway?"

The driver slowed, as a young couple, stoned out of their minds, staggered across the rain washed street in front of him. It gave Joe the chance to observe the young man's keyed up alertness, as he gripped the steering wheel. His eyes never still, he took in every sign of movement around them, before he picked up speed and answered the question.

"Well," he glanced yet again into his rear view mirror. "Since I spent the best part of Friday night, and most of Saturday, helping Vincent, Elliot Burch, and many more of my friends Below, to blast you and Catherine out from a slow death inside a bank vault; I would say Mr Maxwell, that I've a vested interest in your safety." He grinned. "My name's Tony, by the way. Tony Ramos. Catherine and Vincent helped me, when I was just a kid on the streets. When no one else gave a damn."

Joe was struck dumb, and Tony took advantage of this as he continued, smiling at the stunned look on Joe's face. "So let me guess. You thought about all you'd seen, and had been told. You jumped to the wrong conclusions about Vincent; Catherine told you to go to hell, and marched you out the front door. Then, when you'd cooled down, and realised you'd behaved like a first class nerd, you went back to try and apologise?"

"Yeah. Somethin' like that," he drawled, grinning, warming to this man's good natured turn of phrase. "My name's Joe by the way."

"Joe," he nodded in acknowledgement. "So, I take it you're willing to go back and grovel for your sins, and wrong assumptions about Vincent, and your Deputy DA?" He grinned through the rear-view mirror in understanding, before adding. "This, is exactly why you've never been made a part of Catherine's life. Not because she couldn't trust you, but because she worried about placing you in a compromising situation."

"Hey Kid. How come you know so much?"

"Because, we all watch out for one another, and fiercely guard the only place that's safe for Vincent to live. A lot to take in all in one go. Kinda blows the mind don't you think?"

"Yeah. You can sure say that again."

"And that's why, they'll understand your reaction and accept your apolo ... OH SHIT!" Tony cried out, blasting on his horn for all he was worth, and yelling to Joe. "Hang on tight. We're gonna hit this crazy sonofabitch!" He swung his steering wheel over before slamming the brakes down hard, only to collide with what appeared to be an unmarked armoured security van, that had shot out from nowhere straight into his path.

"DAMN!" He thumped the steering wheel at the jarring sounds of crunching metal, and steam hissing up out of the radiator. Breathing heavily and muttering curses profusely, he switched off his ignition, released his seat belt, and turned around.

"Hey, you all right back there?"

"Yeah I think so. Cut my hand. Nothing serious," then as he glanced forward through the windscreen, he tapped Tony's arm and pointed. "But I sure don't like the look of these two muscle bound heavies."

The two men approaching, appeared decidedly well armed and dangerous. Unable to disguise the trace of fear in his voice, Tony murmured. "Looks to me, as if our luck's just run out."

"Yeah. Looks that way; but no heroics, Tony," Joe stated quietly. "Let's just try and stay alive."

* * *

Even before they arrived in the inhabited section of their world, Catherine couldn't rid herself of an overwhelming sense of loss. She refused to acknowledge it, putting it down to delayed reaction from their traumatic weekend.

While Mary headed for the kitchen, Catherine went in search of Vincent and Father. She called in at the hospital chamber on the way, figuring that they might be there; but was surprised to find that the only occupant was Elliot.

Though still pale and drawn, he looked perfectly content, within these rock walled surroundings; resting comfortably, and propped up on pillows in the narrow hospital bed.

"Hello Elliot," she murmured, smiling with relief at the joy on his face, as she approached his bed. "Where is everyone?"

"Kanin and Michael, have gone to settle Father for the night," he replied, as if he was a long time member of their community. "Apparently, the old man was really upset. Not to mention exhausted. Just what's going on Cathy?"

"Have you seen Vincent?" she asked worriedly, without answering his question, as alarm bells began ringing in her head.

"No, he didn't come in here. I just assumed he'd returned to meet you."

She shook her head, forcing a cheerful smile as she reached to clasp his hand. "Well, you look much better than the last time I saw you. Really scared us all back there, you did."

"Yeah," he grinned, not at all fooled by her smiles.

"It was a pretty hairy experience for me too. I'll tell you, Cathy, I really thought I'd bought it."

She perched on the edge of his bed, her false air of cheerfulness evaporating. "Thanks for being there for us, Elliot." Her bottom lip trembled as she added. "Joe and I wouldn't be here at all, if it hadn't been for your help."

He sighed and nodded. "It felt good to be asked. But tell me? Do I detect some conflict between you and Joe?" She nodded her head miserably. "He jumped to all the wrong conclusions. Made some terrible accusations against Vincent, and myself. Dammit, he condemned us out of hand, and we ended up yelling at each other. It was awful. Not like Joe at all. I'm afraid I over-reacted, and ordered him to leave."

"Oh dear," he replied knowingly, "and now you're worried about him?"

"Yes of course I am. I should have tried to make him understand, Elliot. At the very least, I should never have thrown him out. "

"Hmm. But true to form, eh?" He squeezed her hand to take the sting out of his words, forcing her to look at him. "Cathy, I remember a young lady DA who, on occasion, was inclined to jump to the wrong conclusions herself. Especially when it concerned me. Can't imagine why." He shook his head, chuckling quietly. "She'd storm in with both guns blazing, and I didn't stand a chance." His eyes sparkled teasingly in the candle flames, as she blushed to the roots of her hair, nodding guiltily.

"I did, didn't I? Thank you," she answered in all seriousness. "I needed to be reminded of that."

He nodded in agreement. "Well then, don't be so hard on Joe. He didn't get to where he is, by seeing things in the many and various shades of grey, that I often have to, just to survive."

She drew in a deep breath. "You're right, of course." She smiled wanly, changing the subject.

"I suppose you'll soon be fit enough to go Above, to finish your convalescing in a luxurious, centrally heated nursing home?"

"Now why would I want to do that? Armed guards outside my bedroom door. The press camping out down the hallway. Nah, I'd much rather stay here, if that's all right with you?"

Her eyes opened wide in astonishment. "YOU are full of surprises, Elliot Burch." He grinned at the genuinely pleased expression on her face. As she rose to her feet, she reassured him. "You must know you're welcome to stay as long as you wish." Catherine knew no one would argue with that, after all the help he'd given them. "Is there anything I can get you, before I go find Vincent, and see how Father is?"

"No thanks, Cathy. I'm fine, but tired. I think I'll take a nap."

Catherine left him, to make her way to Father's bed chamber. She found him snuggled into his quilt, fast asleep, and snoring quietly. Satisfied, she turned and went in search of Vincent; though she was still troubled by an uneasy dread, at his not having come to seek her out, now she was home. Anxiously, she made her way to their chamber; only to find it cold and empty. Her panic mounted as she rushed blindly out through the narrow exit, colliding with Kanin, who had been coming to find her. She gasped, as he held her steady.

"Hey, Catherine. It's me, Kanin."

She looked up into his concerned face; her eyes frantic. "Where's Vincent?"

Without answering, he led her gently back into the chamber, pushing her down to sit on the edge of the bed, whilst he pulled up a chair to sit before her.

"Catherine," he leaned forward, resting his splayed hands on his knees, and shaking his head in despair.

"Whatever it was Vincent overheard between you and your boss, it really knocked him off his axis, that's for sure. I answered his call for assistance, to help get Father Below. Couldn't get a word of explanation out of him, except that it was no longer safe for any of you to remain Above. Frightened the life out of Father, I can tell you." Kanin hesitated again before continuing. "As you know, Vincent and I have always been pretty close, but during the return journey, I could feel the change in him. It was almost as if he was systematically walling himself up, so's nothing could touch him. When we arrived Below, the last and only words he uttered, were. 'Tell Catherine I love her, and to do whatever she must do.' Then he left."

She sat in distraught silence, knowing it was true, and almost drowning in her sense of guilt and loss. "He's shut me out, Kanin. He's gone to where I cannot reach him; I have no sense of him." She began to tremble, as loud shuddering sobs engulfed her, and she cried out in her anguish. "But what am I supposed to do without him? Vincent is my love. My life. He's everything to me. TELL ME, KANIN?" she wailed, gripping hold of his jacket. "What am I supposed to do?"

He had no answer for her, except to hold her close, and rock her to and fro whilst she cried.

* * *

The street lighting in the immediate vicinity, had been smashed and put out of action. Most of the windows and doors were shuttered and barred, and no sane person would have dared to venture out to investigate the strange goings on, in the blacked out street. The cab's radio phone had been damaged on impact, and though still able to receive incoming calls, Tony could not make himself heard. They were on their own, with no option but to obey their malevolent abductors, as they climbed fearfully out of the cab at gunpoint, to stand nervously in the beam of the headlights.

The men stood more than six feet tall, built like tanks, wore ski masks, and carried automatic weapons. With no warning, Tony was grabbed, and held in a vice like grip, with the gun's muzzle pushed up under his chin: He was forced to watch, sick with terror, whilst Joe was being thoroughly searched; handcuffed; and then slammed against the back of the van. His persecutor unsheathed the blade of a knife, and held it against his neck.

"So tell me, Joe Maxwell. How did you, and your Deputy DA, get out of that bank vault?"

Joe felt the cold steel against his throat and hardly dared to breathe; but he mustered up all his courage; met the man's eyes with a steady gaze, and spat out the words. "Why the hell don't you just go and ask that sonofabitch bank security man how we got out the goddamn vault." Joe saw stars, as the knife's ornate handle was suddenly swiped against the side of his head, and he slithered to the floor, as blood began to pour down his face.

Ignoring Joe's injury, the man tied a blindfold round his head, and hauled him bodily into the back of the unmarked security van. Tony cringed in sympathy to his cries of pain, as he thudded onto the unyielding metal floor; before the doors were closed and fastened.

As they turned their attention to him, Tony silently prayed that the life he loved so much would be spared. His heart rate escalated, pounding in his ears, as Joe's aggressor approached him. Then without warning, he was released; his legs almost gave way from the shock, and he found it impossible to move even if he'd found the courage. Tony, had no doubts at all, that if he'd attempted to run, they'd have killed him without a second's hesitation.

"Hold out your hands," the man ordered, and Tony did so; unable to prevent their tremor, as what looked like two police badges, and a civilian ID card, were counted into them. He held his breath, waiting for his next instruction.

"You value your life, Tony Ramos?" The man asked.

"Yes," he answered, swallowing hard, as new fears loomed before him and he nervously stammered. "How do you know my name?"

"We make it our business to know who we're dealing with, gypsy boy." The implications of his words were both threatening and far reaching, putting Tony on the defensive, as the man continued. "Now. You will take the proof of who we hold hostage, and bring us Catherine Wells, with all the information that was so carefully collected by the late, Richard Osborne." The man stepped closer, his eyes glinting menacingly from behind the mask, and Tony felt the close proximity of the second man behind him.

"Do not imagine you can out manoeuvre us, Mr Ramos. We have eyes and ears everywhere. Any man who attempts to betray us, pays with his life. We already hold Diana Bennett, and her very delightful seventeen year old daughter. Now we have Joe Maxwell."

The man paused, as every vestige of forced politeness evaporated. He pressed his rifle to the base of Tony's throat, before spelling out the consequences. "You will bring the woman back here, with all the information, by 23.00 hours tonight. The alternative is that your friends will die. Then, we'll come looking for you, and Catherine Wells." He thrust his face close to Tony's, chuckling lecherously. "On the other hand, maybe we won't kill them all straight away. Maybe, we'll keep the little virgin daughter alive, for our own amusement; and maybe the mother too."

As Tony ran down the street, the sound of their depraved laughter sounded in his ears.

* * *

Diana was startled into awareness, by the rattle of keys in the lock of the heavy wooden door. Stiffening in panic, she took relief from the fact, that Emily was still asleep beside her, as the door crashed back against the brick wall. She saw a man, being held upright between his two captors. He was blindfolded, and she could see

he'd been badly beaten. His knees were buckling beneath him, as they propelled him roughly forward into the room, where he collapsed like a rag doll, unconscious on the cold stone floor.

"Company for you ladies," one of their jailers announced leeringly, before he slammed the door behind them on their way out, and locking it again.

She let out a sigh of relief, as the sound of footsteps faded down the passageway. Scrambling from the mattress, that provided their only comfort, in this large decaying storage basement, she cautiously approached the prone body on the floor. She'd heard his head make painful contact with the concrete, and knelt beside him to remove the blindfold. She took off her jacket, and fashioned a pillow to place beneath his head, before she eased him over onto his back. His face was covered in blood from an injury to the side of his head. A large angry bump was already raised, and discolouring on his forehead. She drew in breath, her lips formed an 'ooh' before her jaw dropped open in shocked recognition.

"Joe Maxwell?" she whispered in disbelief, at the man she thought she had sent to his death, with Catherine Wells.

Bemused, trembling, and desperate for help, she looked over to her daughter. But Emily was still curled up in the corner, facing the wall, locked in her own silent nightmare. Diana rose despairingly to her feet, to fetch a beaker of bottled water. She wet her handkerchief with some of it, and began to bathe the blood from his face, and around the deep wound at the side of his temple. Good fortune of a sort was with her, as Joe began to regain consciousness, and within a few seconds, his vision had cleared sufficiently for him to recognise her.

"Diana Bennett?" he whispered frowning. "Where the hell are we?" He looked around, and began to rub his wrists where the handcuffs had bitten into the skin; at the same time he recalled all of what had gone before. Gingerly, he eased himself upright, holding his aching ribs, and leaning on one hand to take in what he could see of his surroundings, before his head began to spin and throb. He sat more squarely, drawing up his knees to rest his head on his arms, as it threatened to explode.

"Are you all right?" Diana asked worriedly.

"Dunno. I'll tell you in a minute," he mumbled.

She waited until he looked up again, before answering his question. "I'm not sure where we are. We were brought here blindfolded as well; but it's obviously some kind of abandoned storage basement. I got the distinct impression, on the way in, that it's somewhere in Chinatown."

"Hum," Joe acknowledged, peering over her shoulder. "Is that the extent of your accommodation?" he asked, referring to the mouldy mattress on the floor in the corner, with two upturned tea chests close by.

"That's it," she shrugged, "and the 'plumbing' consists of bottled drinking water, two tin beakers, and a bucket. It sure ain't the Waldorf-Astoria, but you're welcome to share it. Come on, I'll help you up."

Joe sighed with relief, as he lowered himself onto the mattress's modest comfort. He rested his back against the wall and guzzled the beaker of cool water, Diana had given him. He was also grateful for the single naked light bulb, which hung from the centre of the cracked, and cobweb shrouded ceiling. Joe hated spiders, but his recent experience of being imprisoned in the dark, was not something he was eager to repeat. Right now, all of that was the least of their worries, as his eyes came to rest on the young woman, curled up with her back to them, on the furthest side of the double mattress.

"And this is Emily?" His voice caught, with the hopelessness of it all.

"Yes. She's gone through her own kind of hell, Joe. Even if we get out of this alive, it'll be a long time before she recovers from what they almost did to her. She's deaf you know."

"Yes, I did know," he answered, trying to imagine the girl's fear. "Cathy told me. She told me everything. Seems like a lifetime ago."

"Yes," Diana answered, her heart thumping loudly in her chest, tense with confused emotions, overwhelming guilt, and unanswered questions. She sat cross legged facing him, as she waited for him to meet her eyes.

Tentatively she asked. "Will you tell me how you got out of that vault, and did Cathy get out too? Is she safe?" Her face began to tremble and contort as she haltingly confessed. "I HAD to tell them where the information was, Joe." She began to sob, stammering out what she had to say. "I was forced into telling them all I knew, about the information Richard had been killed for, and who was going to collect it." She paused to catch her breath, as the next words almost choked her. "If it had just been my life at risk Joe, I'd have told them all to go to hell, and let them do their worst. But they threatened my daughter, and I had to stop them."

Her whole body shook as she mentally relived the horror, while her daughter lay unmoving, within her own private prison of silence; unaware of what was taking place on the mattress behind her.

Joe's heart went out to them both. Held at the mercy of people, whom he knew were devoid of all humanity. His whole body ached, from the treatment he'd just endured himself at their hands. But this was the least of his worries. Right now, he could see that Diana was spiralling out of control, and he had to snap her out of it. Leaning forward, he gripped her shoulders; shaking her roughly as he shouted her name.

"Diana. Listen to me," but she continued to sob loudly, unresponsive to his demands. "DIANA." He shouted again as he held her face in his hands, not intending to be so harsh, and he ignored his own pain as his head began to throb. At last her whole body shuddered, and he adjusted his position as she collapsed into his arms and cried.

It was some time, before she finally calmed down, and, drawing away from the comfort of his arms, she stared into his face. Her eyes were like large watery pools, that locked with his, in an unspoken acknowledgement of understanding; and something else that they were not yet even aware of. Right now, Joe sensed that they were both in need of some verbal reassurances.

"Diana. Listen to me," his voice was little more than a soothing whisper. "You did what you had to do, to protect your daughter." He lowered his hands to clasp hers firmly in his, before he added. "Who amongst us, would have behaved any differently? Sure, Cathy and I would almost certainly have perished in that vault; but we didn't." He paused, to consider how much he should tell her. "Somehow, Cathy's husband, knew she was there, and he went to Elliot Burch for help." His eyes smiled at her look of pleased surprise, and he continued to explain. "Anyway, with Elliot's knowhow and modern equipment, and lots of friends to help out, it took just over twenty four hours to blast us out through the back wall. I tell you, Diana, it sure was one hell of a close call; but we both lived to tell the tale." Joe hoped she wouldn't pick holes in his explanation; to ask questions that he really didn't know how to answer. He'd already decided to say nothing about Elliot's dice with death. They had quite enough to worry about for now.

"So what went wrong?" Diana wiped wet tears across her face with the back of her hand, oblivious to the dust and dirt already smeared from previous crying. "How come you're here now?"

He shrugged and sighed loudly, releasing her hands. "I went and blew it didn't I?" His shoulders slumped, and he felt every ache and pain in his body as he admitted. "I behaved like a first class asshole." All the self-disgust sounded in his voice as he berated himself. "Instead of accepting, and being grateful, for the fact that we'd survived," he grimaced, "I questioned. I ridiculed. accused. I damn well condemned out of hand, the very man who'd saved us. I said some unforgivable things, Diana; about Cathy's husband; and quite rightly she threw me out the door. If she'd been a man, she'd have punched me out. I dread to think, how Vincent would have reacted had he heard us. I didn't even have the guts, to say it to his face."

"Vincent?" Diana questioned, her face incredulous, as pieces of her original jigsaw suddenly fell into place. Just hang on a minute here. You're telling me that Vincent really exists?" and without waiting for his answer, she demanded. "So tell me; what's he like?" Joe wasn't allowed to get a word in, as she answered her own question. "So there really is a man who's not quite human, and that's the reason Cathy couldn't say anything.

Right?" The pitch of her voice had risen quite a few notches, as her questions and summations rushed out in shocked amazement.

"You got it in one lady; but I'll tell you this. Whatever anyone might have told you about Vincent, he's a darn sight more human, than the rest of us put together; and that's a fact," Joe informed her guiltily, before adding. "I just hope I've done something right this time, and put these monsters off, going down into the inspection tunnels behind the bank vaults." Purposefully he waved any further questions as he asked one himself. "So tell me Diana, just how did they get to you?"

The sudden return to the reality of their situation, caused the tears to well up inside her anew. She swallowed hard, to batten them down, before she attempted to speak. "They must have bugged my car somehow, while I was in with Cathy on Friday morning. They were waiting for us, inside the apartment I rent up in Albany." She sat silently, examining her fingers.

"Go on Diana," he encouraged. "There's no need to draw me any pictures, unless you feel up to it. Just tell me as much as you can."

She took in a deep breath, and combing her hands through her hair, she began. "I work in Special Crimes, and like you, Joe, I see things that no decent person should ever have to see. The atrocities, that one human being can inflict on another, defies the imagination. But when it's your own daughter, that they threaten to do these things to When they threatened to force me to watch, as four men gang raped her." She shook her head, as the bile rose up in her throat, and drawing in breath she continued. "I had no choice; I sang like a bird; knowing I'd have to live with the consequences."

"Diana." He placed his fingers beneath her chin, and raised her face, forcing her to meet his eyes. "You did what you had to do, and you've survived. Both of you. That's the only thing that matters."

"Have we survived Joe?" She asked, fearfully. "I'm not so certain." Her shoulders slumped in defeat. "You can be damn sure, they'll not have finished with us yet, because that information's still in circulation."

"Yeah. Cathy's got it," he sighed in despair. "And there's an even chance they could get to her, through a friend I've only just met. Tony Ramos. He's like family to Vincent and Cathy, and you can bet they'll use him, to draw her out."

Joe eased himself into a more comfortable position, and related to her all that had happened, since he found himself alone on the street, with nowhere to go; ending with what he hoped, were words of wisdom and hope.

"Diana we don't give up. We don't play heroes. What we do is hang on, and try to stay alive."

* * *

Even though she knew that Pascal was standing by in the Pipe Chamber, for news of Vincent, Catherine spent several hours wandering the tunnels alone, whilst the rest of their world slept. She visited all the places she knew of, that Vincent frequented when he felt the need for solitude. She cried out his name, only to hear the reverberation of its echo in the vast empty Chamber of the Falls.

In anguished desperation, she shouted. "Damn you, Vincent. I'm scared too, and I need you here with me." But after the echoes had died, there was only the sound of emptiness, and the hypnotic rushing water of the falls.

Finally, she returned to her lonely bed, but though exhausted, sleep did not come. She tossed and turned, her mind in turmoil. Even the gentle amber glow from the half-moon window gave her no comfort, as her soul cried out to him. Consumed as she was, with the pain of knowing he was alone out there; tormented by fear and in self-imposed exile; somewhere in the blackness of his world.

At last she gave up torturing herself, and sitting on the edge of the bed, she pushed her feet into her cosy slippers and reached for her night robe. After she'd straightened the quilts, she made her way to the hospital chamber, knowing that if anyone was awake, that's where they'd be; checking through the night to see that their lone patient was all right.

Catherine pushed back the heavy drapes, not in the least surprised to find Father sitting beside Elliot's bed. She knew he needed little sleep, and even with his great age and impaired mobility, Father would not be deterred from the habits of a lifetime, in this world he had created.

Elliot, was beginning to look more rested, now his chest pains had been brought under control. Even so, he had been given strict orders from both Michael, and Father, to remain in bed for a day or two more; just to be on the safe side.

"Hello, my dear," Father greeted.

Elliot's observance of her distressed state, puffy eyes, and the fact that she seemed to have aged her beyond her years, prompted him to pat the edge of the bed for her to sit down, before enquiring. "I take it you couldn't sleep either?"

Catherine shook her head, unable to speak, and almost on the verge of tears again. But she didn't want to cry in front of Elliot.

Father reached out his gnarled old hand to clasp hers affectionately. "Give him time, Catherine. We both know Vincent will come back to us, my dear."

She nodded wistfully, unable to answer. Father directed his next remark to Elliot, by way of explanation. "All his life, my son has gone into the depths of our world alone, to cope with his fears and anxieties. Though I have to admit, the need hasn't been so great for many years, thanks to Catherine." Smiling, he squeezed her hand. "Sometimes, Elliot, he'd be gone for days, and it's still the only way he knows of finding his equilibrium, before he returns to us, the Vincent we know and love."

"Yes," Elliot answered, nodding sombrely. "Lying here I've tried to imagine what it must be like for him. Forced to live the way he has, in fear of anyone discovering his existence. But in an odd sort of way, I have some understanding of that, because of who I am. More to the point, what I've become. I too, am forced to live under close security. Forced to travel with an armed escort, or risk going incognito. So you see Jacob, I do know something about being a prisoner of circumstance." He paused, and frowning, glanced at Catherine. "But I suspect, there's more than Vincent at stake this time, isn't there, Cathy?" She nodded, as an icy shiver of fear ran down her spine. Elliot pursed his lips, and voiced his thoughts. "Joe's got to be in tremendous danger out there. If he's seen, someone will almost certainly have a contract put out on him; and if he's made to talk; well that means you could all be in danger."

"Then I'm glad that at least Joe wasn't brought here; to where we live," Father added.

"And they'll never find me, Elliot," Catherine assured him."

He nodded, as he gazed at her in admiration, and respect. "You must love him very much, Cathy," and Elliot knew, without the slightest doubt, that he was vastly understating the obvious.

Her eyes brimmed with tears as she sobbed. "But I should be with him. It's where I belong. Not each of us afraid, and suffering alone."

The old man grimaced, "I'll not argue with that, Catherine, but maybe he felt that everything was so out of his control this time. Maybe he felt it would be safer to go away from us all. He'd know you'd be cared for, and Vincent also knows you have the strength and the courage to cope."

She was about to dispute that, when a sound in the passageway, outside the chamber, distracted them. Catherine was on her feet, her stomach doing somersaults in expectant anticipation, as she called out his name. "Vincent?"

A head appeared around the drapes. "No sorry. Mouse."

Father beckoned him in impatiently. "Come on in, Mouse. Come in. Has Vincent been located yet?"

"No," he answered, apprehensively edging into the chamber. "Vincent not want to be found. Not even by Mouse. Found someone else though."

The drapes were pushed aside again, to reveal an extremely agitated Tony Ramos; a tall attractive dark eyed gypsy; but as he came into the light, Catherine saw the naked fear in his eyes.

"Tony. What's wrong?" she asked, already sensing that she wouldn't like the answer. He had held a place in her heart, since he'd turned her life upside down as a young orphaned boy, surviving by his wits on the streets of New York. He'd been banished in the gypsy tradition, for a crime of which his dead father had been wrongly accused. She and Vincent had helped him to clear his father's name, and regain his rightful place within his family.

Without answering her question, Tony silently emptied his pockets out onto the counterpane. Catherine stared in dismay at what she saw. Her hands began to shake, as she almost reverently picked up Joe's distinctive District Attorney's badge and ID, intuitively knowing, before she'd even looked, that the second badge belonged to Diana Bennett. The third item was an identity pass, to a private college for the deaf up in Albany, that belonged to Emily Osborne. It showed a photograph of a very pretty young woman, with long bright auburn hair, and large expressive eyes like her mother's.

She could almost taste her fear, as she stared up at Tony, waiting to hear his explanation. Meanwhile, Elliot and Father picked up and examined the badges for themselves; but it was Elliot, who dared to state the plain facts.

"Three down. One to go," and he fixed his gaze on Catherine, before adding. "I've no idea who we're up against out there; but one thing's for sure. These creeps are going to be more than a little inquisitive to know how you, and Joe, escaped from being snuffed out in that vault."

"Yeah," Tony nodded with equal foreboding, "they were. And Joe told them in no uncertain terms, to go ask their man at the bank."

"So what's happened to Joe?" Catherine demanded, her face stricken.

"We were ambushed, driving up Canal Street, corner of Baxter. When I picked him up outside the brownstone, a few minutes earlier, they must have been on to us even then." He very briefly related the rest of their ordeal, before coming to the point. "I'm sorry, Catherine, but I seem to be the go-between here. My instructions are, to deliver you, with all this information they're quite prepared to kill for. We're to be at the corner of Canal and Baxter, on the edge of China Town, by eleven o'clock tonight. Or they threaten to kill them all."

"Oh God," Catherine whispered, her stomach knotting in fear. She was all too familiar with the kind of mentality, of the low life they'd have to face. This was the more nauseating aspect, of what she and Joe had to contend with every day of their working lives. She shook her head in consternation. "I can't allow you to be involved in this, Tony. It isn't fair. You have no idea what these monsters are capable of, and it's me they want."

"The hell I don't," he answered angrily, his dark eyes blazing. "I'm not a goddamned kid anymore Catherine. I know life on the streets better than most, and if you think I'm going to let you go out there alone, you can forget it." He bristled at her with indignation.

Catherine sobbed in tearful relief, her face creasing into a smile of gratitude. "I'm sorry Tony. Thank you, and I am relieved you're coming with me. But I have to warn you; compassion isn't their strong suit. These monsters will do whatever they have to do, and will play all their nasty little games."

There was no need for further elaboration as Father whispered. "Dear God," seeming to shrink before their eyes. Tony stood gritting his teeth, his fists clenched by his sides. Even Mouse, still the most naive of them all, hovered nearby looking very frightened.

Elliot, was prompted into making his own observation. It might be a good idea, to try and seal off the tunnel section access to the bank vault, just in case they don't buy Joe's explanation."

"Mouse already done it," he reassured him, nodding his head, and hopping from foot to foot in his own inimitable style; thrilled at thinking the same thought as the famous Elliot Burch. "False walls. Alarms. Booby traps. Extra sentries. No one gets through without I know."

"Good," Elliot nodded, well pleased, "and you must feel free to use any of that equipment I brought down," he paused, to cautiously enquire. "Just how many other entrances do you have to cover down here?"

Mouse studied for a moment, before answering. "Five. Always clear and patrolled."

Father suddenly roused from his troubled reverie, to expand on that. "At one time Elliot, there were literally dozens of entrances down into our world. A whole network in fact, and we could be accessed from virtually any part of Manhattan. Over the years however, there's been such a dramatic increase in the number of transients, and the poor and homeless of New York, forced to exist underground, I'm afraid they began to encroach on our territory. We had no alternative, but to seal and abandon many of the old tunnel systems. It's made our world smaller, but all very necessary to ensure my son's safety, and our own."

Elliot nodded, awed, and impressed by these revelations.

Catherine sat motionless. She had long since gotten out of the habit, of racing headlong into dangerous situations, without thought for her own safety; or Vincent's. Back then, she'd unwittingly taken it for granted, that he'd always be there to protect her. But now their life had settled into a more peaceful plain, her fears were overwhelming. She had so much to lose, and no sense of Vincent. Her dread of his being too far away to reach her in time, weighed heavily; but she accepted that using herself as bait, was their only hope for any of them coming out alive.

She hugged Father to her, feeling the tremor within his frail body as he responded to her need. Words were unnecessary, as she kissed his face and released him, to turn and clasp Elliot's outstretched hand. "Be safe Cathy," he husked.

She met his eyes and nodded, before making for the exit. "Come on Tony. I'll go get dressed, then we'll leave via the park entrance."

* * *

Deep in the subterranean world, a lone figure sat in the velvet blackness, like some mythical beast from ancient times. One arm rested on a raised knee, to hold Catherine's rose in his long clawed fingers.

Within this sunless, barren haven of his world, Vincent had given vent to his anger. Allowed the beast within him, to be released in full measure. In this place, there was no one to hear. No one to be frightened by the might of his roars. This was the safety valve he'd always needed, to do battle with his terrors and demons; to purge them from his soul, until such time as they would almost certainly rear up, and haunt him again.

Vincent, had covered a far greater distance than he had intended, though the ferocious rage, and panic stricken fear that had brought him to this unpeopled place, was at last beginning to subside. His thoughts were gradually becoming more lucid, soothed by the sounds of some nameless underground river, swirling along to who knows where beneath his feet. He suddenly gasped, clutching at his chest, conscious of

Catherine's overwhelming need of him; as their empathic connection became more clearly focused, and her acute feelings of dread held him in its grip.

"NO!" he cried out, baring his teeth in anguished remorse; realising now, how selfishly he'd behaved in running away. With a renewed strength of purpose, he hauled himself to his feet. His place was at home, by her side; protecting not only his beloved wife, but the whole community against whoever might be threatening their safety.

He'd barely taken one step, when another wave of fear seized him and her name escaped his lips; repeating itself endlessly around the uncharted cavern, and on into eternity. Vincent moved, in swift and absolute certainty of where his feet were taking him; powering himself, without thought for respite, towards the accelerating beat of Catherine's heart.

* * *

Chapter 7

It was raining heavily, and the sounds of a storm raged some distance to the north of the city. They'd left their cab on Canal Street, two blocks away from the corner of Baxter, and made their way warily along the deserted rain washed sidewalk. Catherine was well protected against the weather, in trench coat and head scarf, over soft cotton jeans and a sweater. Tony was less so, in jeans, T/shirt, and short leather jacket. The rain plastered his hair to his head and ran down his neck; but it didn't seem to bother him.

He was quick to recognise the shape and stance of the two men that approached; armed as before; the hairs began to prickle on the back of his neck. He glanced nervously over his shoulder to see two more men, equally menacing, crossing the street behind them. He clasped her hand.

"They're here Catherine."

"Yeah," she answered, fearfully clutching his arm.

Neither of them held onto any illusions that they'd be allowed to just hand over the note book, and walk away. Catherine certainly had no intention of concealing her fear; she just prayed with everything in her, that Vincent, wherever he was, would be able to feel that fear and be there for her. For them all.

The men surrounded them and boxed them into an alleyway; lit by a vehicle's dipped headlights, parked a few feet inside it. One of the men, who was apparently in charge, addressed Tony.

"You have behaved very wisely, Tony Ramos. You are now free to go."

Tony stood his ground; meeting this killer's eyes; recognising his voice from their earlier confrontation; and he quietly insisted. "I'm with the lady."

The man acknowledged his wishes with a curt nod, and turned his attention to Catherine. "You have the information with you?"

"Yes." She removed the incriminating notebook from her pocket with trembling hands, and handed it over.

He held her gaze, as he pushed the book into an inside pocket of his fatigue jacket, and took an exaggerated deep breath, before he informed her.

"Mrs Wells. I thought you might like to know; our security man at the bank has been dealt with, for not carrying out our instructions. His body should be washed up in the East River, sometime within the next few days."

Abruptly he stood to one side to brusquely issue an order to his second in command; a giant of a man. "I want them searched, one at a time; you know the form; and the lady first, of course. Then we'll take them to join the others."

The giant of a man stood before Catherine; his dark eyes glinted menacingly through the holes in the ski mask. She shuddered, gripped by a fearful panic; knowing there was no escape. He holstered his automatic hand gun, and snarled his command.

"Give me your raincoat."

She didn't argue as she clumsily unfastened the belt and buttons, and handed it to him. He checked all the pockets, before he ran it through enormous hands, to feel for any other concealed solid objects.

"Scarf," and he snatched it from her, shaking it out, before throwing both items onto the puddled tarmac, to the right of where she stood.

Meanwhile, Tony was being forcibly held, oblivious to the fact that it had stopped raining; more concerned with not throwing up in revulsion and terror, as he intuitively knew what this brute was about to do to Catherine. He watched the man lace his fingers through her hair, which she still wore shoulder length and loose. Watched, as her face contorted in fear, recoiled from his touch, before he released her, and stepped back. Tony closed his eyes and began to tremble; knowing there would be more to come, and didn't want to see it. He swallowed the bile that rose up into his throat, as he heard this monster issue her with an order.

"Right lady. Drop your pants."

"No," she whispered in horrified terror as her mouth went dry; her eyes large and swimming with tears.

"You bastards," Tony cried out, seeing stars as a clenched fist smashed into his face, and his head was dragged back painfully by his hair. He had no alternative but to watch, as the blood began to pour from a cut high on his cheek bone.

"Drop your pants lady," the man repeated threateningly, "or I'll strip you where you stand!!"

Catherine swallowed, whimpering, as she heard the sound of safety catches being released, as automatic weapons were directed straight at her. There was no escape, and no alternative, because whatever happened now, she had to try and stay alive ... whatever they did to her. Unable to hold any part of her body still she struggled to obey, and released the button and zipper. A strangled sob erupted from deep within her, as she was ordered to step out of them, and turn to face the wall; hands high; legs spread. Unable to hold back her terrified sobs, and tears of shame, she felt his hands inside her sweater; under her T-shirt; snapping her bra, to free her breasts, as his hands moved lecherously all over her naked body.

"Oh God. Please. No." She begged, as he went inside her panties, to feel intimately between her legs; and she began to struggle, consumed with panic, as the man's fingers cruelly invaded her body, and she was overwhelmed by hysteria. As he thrust and gripped her so painfully, she screamed out in agonized shock; only to have her head dragged back by her hair, as he hissed close to her ear.

"You make one more sound like that, lady, and we'll all take turns with you here and now on the tarmac, until your own mother won't recognise you, and you'll never want another man again."

She bit into her bottom lip, until she tasted blood, as she swallowed her terrified screams at the harrowing rape of her body.

Abruptly he released her, and she collapsed to her knees on the tarmac, grazing them badly, but unaware of the pain. The man towered over her, and she shuddered and cringed in terror, cowering against the wall. But he refrained from touching her again.

"Just get your clothes on, lady," he sneered before standing back.

Blindly, she reached for her pile of clothes; covering herself, as she scuttled away on her torn knees, out of the beam of light; hauling herself upright against the wall, she stepped shakily into her trousers; hoisting them up, and clutching them to her, before vomiting at the side of a refuse bin; as the men looked on with indifference. Catherine knew she'd be shot down like an animal, if she attempted to run.

By this time, even Tony was trembling uncontrollably, though refusing to allow the well of tears to spill down his face. He cried out in angry protest, as he was flung against the wall. Hands high; legs spread; the bile rose up into his throat, threatening to choke him, as he too was subjected to the same intimate indignities, leaving him numb with shock and shame.

They were permitted no contact with each other, before being handcuffed, blindfolded, and pushed up the alley way, where they were manhandled into the back of the empty van.

Left in the dark, with no means of protecting themselves against the metal interior, the vehicle took off at speed to its destination.

An indeterminate amount of time later, they arrived badly bruised, disorientated, but still alive.

* * *

Vincent, in full flight, was suddenly brought to his knees by the force of Catherine's abject terror. He threw back his head to roar in unmitigated anguish, as if his very core was being ripped from his body. As he sat back on his heels, chest heaving, eyes wide and staring, he inclined his head, and seemed to listen intently. So keen was his connection, he could feel the whole gamut of her terrified emotions, as her soul cried out to him for help. His stomach heaved at her torment and pain, as he tried to reach out to her; to tell her he was with her; and to beg her to hold on. With a mighty roar of unfettered rage, he clambered to his feet and raced on, unerringly, through the darkness of his world.

Joe and Diana, had spent the last few hours talking about anything, that would help to keep their fears at bay. They discussed their work, their lives, and Emily. Related their successes, disappointments and of course, put the world to rights. Laughter seemed incongruous in their desperate situation, but laugh they did. They also discovered a bond of friendship, forged out of suffering and fear. Their mutual need to touch and be close, could not be ignored, and neither saw any reason to deny themselves this need. For now, it was enough. As to their future? This was an unspoken promise, put on hold. To give them hope to cling to.

Emily, was still curled up facing the wall; shutting out the nightmare in the only way she knew how. Periodically, Diana would crawl over, to try and comfort her; but apart from accepting the occasional drink of water, she was totally unresponsive to her mother, and to anything around her.

At last, through sheer exhaustion, Joe and Diana made themselves as comfortable as possible, and drifted off into an uneasy sleep, beside Emily. Close, in each other's arms.

* * *

As Vincent neared the inhabited sector, he was met by Kanin and William, both of whom appeared about to explode with fearful anxiety. Briefly, they told him of the decision that Catherine had been forced to make, to try and save her friends. Horrified, Vincent hung his head in distressed shame, and overcome by his sense of guilt at running away, he realised that, with hindsight it would have been far better had he just stormed in, and confronted Joe, back at the brownstone. That way, he could have at least, tried to dispel the man's justifiable anger, and assumptions, that Catherine had betrayed him.

He slumped against the wall, and held his head in his hands; clenched, and unclenched his jaw, with the pain of knowing that he'd left everything he held dear, so vulnerable. But this spell of self-pity, lasted only moments, as he roused himself, shook his shaggy head, and reached for their shoulders.

"Tell Father, that all will be well," he maintained, as he turned to disappear down the tunnel in a swirl of cloak.

* * *

It was the rattle of keys in the lock, that disturbed their fitful slumbers. Startled, they disentangled themselves and scrambled up from the mattress. Joe gripped her hand, to still their fearful apprehension as they stood, tense and motionless; waiting; their eyes riveted onto the door.

A man, followed by a woman, were thrust unceremoniously forward into the basement. Dazed and uncertain, they stood just inside the threshold, and for a moment their cut, bruised, and haunted faces, were unrecognisable in the dim lighting. The door was slammed shut, and locked behind them, and the sound of departing feet had faded, before Joe found his voice to whisper. "Jesus."

He and Diana approached, sickened by what they saw, and Joe murmured apprehensively. "Cathy? Tony?" before giving way to his emotions to cry out. "Just what in the hell did those inhuman bastards do to you, for Christ's sake?" and he reached out, to gather Catherine into his arms, only to have her shrink away from his touch, and step backwards in fear.

Joe was appalled by her reaction. His throat constricted, as his imagination worked overtime; filled with thoughts of what they'd probably done to her.

"Awe come on Kiddo," he pleaded, "it's me; Joe ... hell I'm sorry for sounding off at you the way I did; I could've cut my tongue out, and you should've punched me in the nose." He paused in despair, knowing all of that was past, and immaterial now. He glanced at Tony; unable to believe the change in him either; and noted the dried blood down the side of his face. "Tony. Speak to me, for Christ' sake," he begged, stepping forward to shake him by the shoulders; but the younger man stared vacantly back at him.

"Joe," Diana whispered, taking his arm to gain his attention. "Give them time. They're in shock. Come on, let's see if we can get them to sit down. A drink of water might help."

Moving like automatons, they allowed themselves to be lead across the floor. Catherine, stood and trembled beside the chest; she refused to lower herself onto it. They were not to know that she was in terrible pain and discomfort; badly bruised, from the hard cruel hands of the man, who had mauled and violated her body.

Tony lowered himself gingerly onto the second chest, to drink thirstily from the beaker offered. He began to tremble with delayed reaction, and Diana took the beaker from him.

Catherine meanwhile, stood ramrod straight, in an almost trance like state; her familiar inner glow snuffed out; demoralized by all she had endured.

Suddenly, Tony expelled a loud shuddering sob and shook his head in despair. In a voice that was barely coherent, he told them. "We don't have much time. They'll be back soon, and I'll tell you, we ain't got a prayer, unless Vincent gets here in time."

"So where the hell is he then?" Joe demanded angrily, as he paced up and down; his voice raised in desperation. Again, he reached out to take hold of Catherine, but her terrified reaction, forced him to drop his hands, and he stepped back, mortified.

Diana, who had been standing to one side observing their exchange, gently appealed to Tony. "Tell us about this unique bond, that Catherine's supposed to share with her husband?"

Tony sighed, as the change of subject helped to calm him down, and he was happy to enlighten her. "There ain't no suppose about it, Diana," he explained, using her given name, because he knew it could be no other. He met Joe's anxious gaze. "The problem is, Vincent overheard all those threats and accusations you made against him; before Catherine chunked you out of their home. He'd no idea of the dangers that were in store

for us. His only fears, were for the safety of his world; and for Catherine, should you have carried out any of your threats."

"Jesus!" Joe spat out, colouring guiltily.

The young man continued, ignoring his outburst. "He left Mary to wait for her, fled the house, and took Father with him, back Below. Then, he disappeared into the depths of his world; where no one's been able to locate him since."

"Dammit, he'd no need to do that," Joe cried out. "What the hell did he think I was going to do, for Christ's sake?"

"Vincent only acted on the things he'd heard you say," Tony explained patiently. "He can't afford the luxury of taking that kind of risk; and he did it as much for Catherine's sake, as to protect his own hide." Talking, had helped Tony to gain some control, and his voice was beginning to sound more normal as he expanded further. "You must realise, Joe, that her life wouldn't be worth a plumb nickel, if certain people out there discovered who her husband is."

Joe's shoulders sagged, and he nodded, gazing in affectionate understanding at the traumatized woman before him, as Tony spelled out the final scenario. "After they'd taken you hostage earlier tonight, my task was to deliver their ultimatum ... that you'd all be killed, unless I returned with Catherine, and the note book. So, you see, she had no alternative, but to set herself up as bait; with Vincent as our only hope in hell."

As they silently mused on that thought, Tony rose to his feet, and moved over to stand beside the mattress. He was about to ask about Emily, when the sound of approaching footsteps was heard beyond the door; and their mutual fear, seemed to rise up like an almost tangible thing. Only Catherine and Emily, appeared to be unaware of what was going on.

Joe and Diana, held each other close for a moment, before drawing Tony to them.

"Well people, it looks like the local Mafia's back,." Joe stated flatly. "I suggest we all pray to any God out there, who might be listening."

The door slammed open against the wall, and a short, rotund man entered the basement. He looked totally out of place, in white tie and tuxedo, with a dark overcoat draped around his shoulders, his bald head almost shone in the dimness. He was followed by the same four well armed bodyguards; three of whom had stood by and watched, whilst the forth had performed his demoralizing, physical atrocities on Catherine, less than an hour before. As they deployed themselves around the room, the last one in closed the door, and pocketed the key.

Puffing on a large cigar, the squat little man, who had made no attempt to disguise himself, imperceptibly indicated that his men remove their ski masks. The ominous implications of this gesture were abundantly clear; skilfully engineered to increase the feelings of dread, and helplessness, in the minds of his hostages.

As he moved forward into the light, both Joe and Diana drew in breath, on recognising Louis M. Demarkos ... renowned cutthroat gangster, who had dabbled in all manner of perverted and criminal activities, long before he could afford to pay someone to manicure his fingernails, every day. He'd also been a thorn in Joe's side, for the best part of fifteen years. He'd bought and paid for, the best defence attorneys; terrorized, or greased the palms of the jurors; in fact, did whatever it took, to successfully squash every conviction that the District Attorney could throw at him. Louis M. Demarkos had always managed to walk away free, and smelling of roses; with some unfortunate, set up to be the fall guy. Demarkos, had perpetuated his reign of terror, with his highly polished boots firmly anchored, behind the pulse of his vile and corrupt empire. A man so perverted, he got most of his kicks, from witnessing other people's suffering.

"Well now, Mr District Attorney," Demarkos mocked, as he swaggered across the floor. "It seems, that at last I have you all, at a very distinct disadvantage. Wouldn't you agree?"

No one answered, and Joe gripped Diana's hand more firmly. Tony, never took his eyes from the still form of Emily on the far side of the mattress. So fragile and defenceless, it made him want to weep. Catherine hadn't moved; her face was chalk white and set like stone.

"Hmm," Demarkos nodded, smiling, unperturbed by the marked lack of response, but anticipating with mounting excitement, the psychological power he held at his fingertips. He moved, to stand in front of Catherine, untroubled by the fact that she stood head and shoulders above him.

"Your lady assistant, doesn't look at all well, Mr Maxwell," he remarked, before reaching up to smooth his stubby manicured fingers down her cheek. She reacted positively, for the first time in that room, to shrink away in revulsion; hate and disgust reflecting in her eyes.

"My, my. Most unfriendly my dear. But never mind," he leered, "my men enjoy a woman with spirit."

The innuendo of his words, caused them all to pale and shudder, with fears they were struggling to contain as they prayed for their lives to be spared.

Suddenly Demarkos' whole demeanour changed, as he nodded abruptly for his men to carry out a prearranged instruction. They moved in without warning; Tony and Joe were gagged with wide sticky tape; their hands tied behind their backs, before being forced down to sit against the far wall, where their ankles were bound. Demarkos meanwhile had moved over to the bed and stood scrutinizing the girl. He almost drooled over her slight form, and long auburn tresses splayed out behind her. As he beckoned to one of his men, Diana panicked, and began to sob out uncontrollably.

"Don't hurt her. Please don't hurt her.

Demarkos turned, his face thunderous as he ordered. "Silence those bloody bitches!"

His command was carried out without finesse, as both Catherine and Diana were held; their mouths taped up; and he returned his full attention to Emily, heedless of the four pairs of terror-stricken eyes, filled with hatred, and burning into the back of his neck. Smiling lasciviously, in anticipation of what was to come, he informed the man at his side.

"The virgin, I will have for myself. Sedate her and take her up to the limo. Wait for me there." He adjusted his overcoat, before he turned to face the rest of his men, and their frightened captives. "I promised you the women; and you can do what you like with the men." He chuckled.

"I'll just sit here, and watch your fun for a while. You all know the form; just leave no one alive when you've finished."

Gagged, and unable to verbally release her hysteria, Diana watched impotently as cruel fingers dug into her arms, stilling her flight. Forced to watch, as her terrified daughter was held down, and injected with some tranquillizing substance; tortuous thoughts of what Emily would almost certainly be forced to endure filled her mind; and she began to have doubts about whether she would ever see her alive again. Her thoughts about the horror and degradation that she and Catherine were imminently destined to face, caused the room to spin; her legs turned to jelly, and as she slumped against the man's hands like a rag doll, the darkness claimed her. The man swore at her and shook her furiously, before angrily dumping her onto the single tea chest, where she promptly slithered to the floor.

Catherine wasn't fairing much better; gripped as she was by equally cruel fingers, and consumed by fears that defied the imagination. Every nerve in her body screamed for surcease, as her soul cried out in despair for Vincent; and the incessant pain and discomfort from her lower abdomen, was making her feel nauseous, and the room began to swim before her eyes. For her, it was a state of being only marginally preferable, to being dumped onto the unyielding tea chest, so, she gritted her teeth, closed her eyes, and quietly did battle with her hysteria.

Their fate seemed sealed, as Emily was carried unconscious from the room; the door slammed to and locked; and leaving all their hopes, at their lowest ebb.

* * *

Vincent entered the decaying warehouse through a defunct ventilation shaft. He made his way through the dank and litter strewn store rooms and passageways like a silent shadow; homing in with unerring accuracy, to the spiralling terror that was drawing him ever onwards to its source. Gripped by all of Catherine's desperation and aloneness, some sixth sense stilled his urge to call out her name as he moved along the dimly lit passageway. Suddenly, he heard the sound of a door being unlocked up ahead. He flattened himself into a recess as light spewed out; then as the door was slammed shut again, a man strode towards him, carrying the body of a young woman in his arms. She was dressed in jeans and sweat shirt, and Vincent deduced, from her long auburn hair that hung down over the man's arm, that this must be Diana's daughter. Silently he prayed that she was only unconscious.

As they passed by where he stood, Vincent drew in breath and held it, before letting out a low guttural growl, that resonated menacingly in the confines of the passageway; a terrifying sound that had the desired effect, and the man froze in his tracks.

As the growl developed into a feral snarl of gnashing teeth, the hair on the back of the man's neck stood erect; sweat broke out between his shoulder blades, to trickle down his back. Even whilst paralysed by fear, he'd retained hold of the girl, without being conscious of doing so, and closing his eyes tight, he waited with baited breath, for the expected searing pain of claws and teeth to tear into his flesh. But nothing happened.

The sounds abated slightly, as Vincent moved forward to stand majestically in front of him; his teeth were bared; his growl still vibrated in his throat with every breath he took, and curiosity, got the better of the man, as he dared to open his eyes. Vincent saw the expected cold sweat of fear and abject terror written on his face. But on this occasion, he used it to his own advantage.

"Place the girl onto the floor," he commanded, "and lay your weapons down."

The man's eyes widened in stunned disbelief at the sound of Vincent's voice, and without taking his eyes from his face, he began to lower Emily shakily to the floor.

In the way of all cowards, as he straightened up he began to blubber and plead. "Don't hurt me mister, or whatever you are. Don't hurt me," and transfixed with terror, he removed his hand gun, knife and the automatic rifle slung around his back, and placed them on the floor. "I'll do whatever you say, mister," he whimpered, kicking his weapons away from him, as his legs turned to jelly and he sank to his knees still begging. "Please don't hurt me."

"How many are there like you in that room?" Vincent asked, indifferent to the man's fear of him.

"Three," he stammered, "and the boss; but he'll be no problem." He bowed his head and tensed, fearing that his end was at hand; but then, to his utter amazement, this strange being before him spoke again.

"What would you do, if I let you go from this place with your life?"

The man looked up at him, blinking his eyes rapidly as an incredulous relief washed over him. "Mister, I'd run like bloody hell and never stop. Just don't let them in there come after me."

Vincent nodded. "Then go, and don't ever return."

* * *

Catherine's heart suddenly skipped a beat, thrilling to an overwhelming sense of awareness that Vincent was near. She raised her head slightly, as if listening; hardly able to suppress the tremendous relief and joy that washed over her. Then, without any warning, her captor released his hold, and the steely resolve to remain on her feet evaporated, as she sank, still fully conscious, to the floor. The man nudged her with his booted

foot, before making some lewd remark about how soon she'd be dancing to his tune. Catherine blotted out everything around her, focussing her mind on this shimmering, almost tangible bond of hope.

As two of the men roughly manhandled Diana to the centre of the floor, the third man picked up one of the tea chests, and placed it against the wall. This, was to serve as a ringside seat for Demarkos; where he could view the crude depravities in which his men took pleasure, to satisfy their salacious and perverted minds. Diana remained in a trance like state, as her hands were tied in front of her with one end of a long length of rope. The other end was then thrown over a large hook, embedded into the wooden crossbeam of the ceiling, and pulled taut.

Catherine made a weak and futile attempt to kick out at her tormentors, as they forcibly removed her trench coat in one swift uncompromising operation. After her wrists were tied, she too was dragged unceremoniously across the stone floor; the other end of her rope tossed over a second hook, and she was hauled to her feet. They both made strangled sounds of protest as their arms were yanked sharply up above their heads, and they were left suspended by their wrists; their feet barely touching the floor.

The three sadists stood back and grinned in hideous satisfaction, and Demarkos nodded his head with glee at the women's vulnerability; totally at the mercy of his men.

Catherine allowed the full gamut of her emotions to surface, knowing that Vincent was somewhere close by. Yet, she couldn't deny her fear of what she was bringing him to; of the risk to his own life; forced to do battle with these three vicious brutes armed with guns and knives; one of them larger and more powerfully built, even than he.

Diana was almost catatonic with fear; her vulnerability more profound than her worst nightmare; and across the room, Joe and Tony sat, powerless to do anything; afraid to watch; sick with horror.

The three inhuman barbarians began to strip to the waist and strut their muscular physiques. They piled their clothes and weaponry on top of the mattress, certain that they wouldn't be needed until later. They laughed and leered; drooled with lustful expectations, as they each unsheathed scalpel-like clasp knives and began taunting their captives. They tugged at their clothes; sliced through belts, buttons and material. Attempted to peel them layer by layer, as they laughed and jeered lewdly. For them, there was no rush, as they savoured their game of cat and mouse; using the foulest language, they described in glorified detail what horrors they had in store for the women.

Suddenly, their perverted persecutors froze where they stood. Knives clattered to the floor, as the most horrendous bloodcurdling roar of primal rage vibrated through the basement. Demarkos sat, paralysed by the sounds, and his cigar fell from his lips. Almost simultaneously, the door crashed in off its hinges, and Vincent filled the room with his heart stopping physical presence, and the ear-splitting sounds he brought with him.

For these degenerate tyrants, there was no escape from his lethal teeth, claws, and tremendous strength that seemed to be everywhere, as he allowed the beast in him to rule. Flesh was shredded and torn, as screams of agonized terror echoed around the basement to accompany his ferocious roars. Main arteries were punctured and slashed; strong men reduced to gibbering screaming wrecks on the floor, as their life force drained away. Vincent's final kill was delivered with a single blow, as the last man alive, in panic stricken terror, scrambled onto the mattress to locate his gun, before croaking out his final breath.

Vincent spun round with a snarling roar at the sound of movement behind him, to swoop onto the departing dwarf-like Demarkos, like some giant bat. His clawed hand caught and ripped the jowly flesh of his face, as this master perpetrator sank screaming to the floor, as he frantically tried to gather his flesh together and stem the flow of blood with his hands.

His chest heaving, Vincent turned, swishing his cloak around with a sweep of his arm as he surveyed the carnage. His eyes still blazed in a face wet with perspiration, and it took him only four strides to reach Catherine's side. Taking her weight, he eased the tape from her mouth in one swift but gentle movement,

before voicing a single word. "Catherine." Then he wrenched the rope from its moorings and lowered her down onto the floor.

"Vincent," she whispered tremulously, gazing up into his beloved face. "You came."

He was unable to utter a word, and without taking his eyes from her ashen face, he reached across her, picked up one of the knives that had fallen close by, then severed the rope that bound her wrists. At last he released the pent up sob of remorse that had been churning within him, and he gathered her into his arms.

"Yes, I came," he husked into her hair, "but how can you ever forgive me, Catherine, for leaving you so alone."

She drew away from him, to smile wanly into his face; her eyes filled only with love, and tears; and placing her fingers on his lips she silenced his distress. "There's nothing to forgive my love. All that matters is that you're here now; and that we're all alive. But please, Vincent. I'm all right. Go and take care of Diana and the others."

He nodded reluctantly, conscious of her physical pain as if it were his own. He clasped her hand to his mouth and kissed its palm, before climbing to his feet and moving to Diana's side.

He could sense that she held no fear of him, as he silently took her weight, freeing the ropes, then lowering her trembling body to stand on the floor. Once freed from the ropes that bound her wrists, she tore the tape from her mouth, and collapsed into his arms until her tremors began to subside and she felt more able to stand unaided.

She met his concerned gaze; her eyes brimming with tears; and in a voice thick with emotion, she told him, "You'll never know how glad I am to meet you, Vincent. Thank you."

"And thank you, Diana, for not being afraid of me." He inclined his head to smile his own inimitable smile, before telling her the only thing she really wanted to hear. "Your daughter is safe. She's asleep on the floor, just down the passageway."

Her mouth dropped open, and her face lit up, as she cried out in jubilation. "She is?" Then her tears of relief spilled over as she hugged him in wordless thanks. Standing back, she took the knife from his fingers. "Now you go see to Catherine. I'll go and cut Joe and Tony free."

As Vincent moved back gratefully to kneel beside his wife, Diana paused mid stride. Her attention had been drawn to the wounded Demarkos. She watched, in silent fascination, as he shrugged off his overcoat, struggled to his feet and clutching his face tottered unsteadily towards the doorway. She sneered in contempt, at this excuse for a man, as ultimate feelings of revengeful satisfaction filled her mind, and blotted out any thoughts of mercy.

"Oh no you don't, you scumbag sonofabitch," she murmured under her breath. "You're not going anywhere, ever again." And gritting her teeth, she altered her stance, to release the blade like a professional circus knife thrower. She retained her poise, as she watched it wing its way across the room and find its target; deep into the back of the infamous Louis M Demarkos; and he howled out in pain, before he staggered forward on to the floor, clutching uselessly at his back.

Vincent looked up at the disturbance, before he glanced round questioningly at Diana.

"It's all right, Vincent," she assured him, smacking her hands together as if cleaning off the filth.

"Everything's fine, now there's a few less sadistic perverts to stalk the streets of New York."

He raised his eyebrows at her, and nodded sombrely, because what she'd said was true. He cast a cursory glance, at the short prone body on the floor in front of the doorway, then turned his full attention back to his wife.

Diana searched around, and quickly found a second knife. In moments she was on her knees beside Joe, to ease the tape from his mouth. He grimaced in pain, as it tugged at his new growth of beard, but their eyes met, to share in their silent but mutual relief. Suddenly, he began to chuckle nervously, as the terror of the past few hours drained away; and he grinned at her.

"Nice bit of wrist action back there."

She sat back on her heels, and without taking her expressive eyes from his face she quipped, "You think so? Bet you can't believe how much pleasure it gave me, Joe, just to put that slug out of OUR misery?"

He nodded, and held out his bound wrists to her, eager to be freed.

"You bet I can believe it," he answered, and as the ropes fell away, they were in each other's arms, holding tight, as if they'd never let go.

Tony smiled indulgently, and waited patiently, whilst Joe husked emotionally into her hair.

"Jesus, Diana. I thought I'd never know this pleasure again." They pulled apart and grinned knowingly at each other; all the unspoken possibilities written on their faces. She handed him the knife, by the handle.

"Here, Joe. You look after Tony while I go fetch Emily." Reluctantly she dragged her eyes away from his; ruffled her hand affectionately through Tony's hair, then scrambled to her feet and left them alone.

Across the floor, Vincent struggled to come to terms with Catherine's condition, as she trembled and sobbed in his arms. He was devastated by the fact, that, even with their empathic connection, this nightmare had been allowed to take place; that he hadn't been there to prevent it; until it was almost too late. He apologized, over and over for not being there for them, as he held her gently to him, rocking her to and fro.

"It's all right Vincent," she sobbed; and for her it was, now she was safe in his arms, trying desperately to give him some peace, as she repeated, again and again. "It's all right, my love. You're here now, and we're all safe."

Gingerly, she tried to ease herself into a more comfortable position; unable to bring herself, to tell Vincent what that monster had done to her; seriously doubting his ability to come to terms, with such a vile assault on her body. She wasn't even sure of her own ability, to come to terms with it, and hoped Tony would keep quiet; at least for the moment. She nuzzled his throat.

"Hey, can we just go home?"

He nodded, accepting her forgiveness for now, but disturbed more by what she wasn't telling him, as his blue eyes lovingly searched her face. He removed his cloak with one hand, and spread it out onto the floor, before he lowered her gently on top of it, and enveloped her into its folds.

Joe and Tony helped each other to their feet and hugged in blessed relief. Joe had resigned himself to the fact, that he'd have to face Vincent sometime; and sooner rather than later. As Tony hurried away, to help with Emily, he made his way across the body strewn floor. He stood silently beside Vincent; awed by the infinite gentleness of these same clawed hands, that minutes before had torn men's bodies to shreds. He didn't speak, until Catherine had been cocooned inside the cloak, and Vincent had risen to his feet, with her in his arms.

"How's she doin'?" Joe enquired nervously, unable to meet his eyes.

"I'll live Joe," she answered, her small hand moving the dark material from in front of her face.

Joe sighed loudly, his voice thick with emotion. "You don't know how glad I am to hear it Kiddo; and we've all got you to thank for that, Vincent." He paused uncomfortably, and swallowed hard. "What can I say to you? Sorry, doesn't even begin to make up, for all those terrible accusations I made, against you and Cathy. Don't know what the hell got into me, going off half- cocked the way I did."

"Joe." Vincent breathed out loudly through his nose, inclining his head to smile in sympathy at the other man's distress. "We all make mistakes. We all say, and do, things in the heat of the moment; and I, was just as much at fault for running away. It would have been far more sensible, had I intervened, and helped to make you understand."

Catherine wrapped her arms more securely around Vincent's neck, before adding.

"You see, that was partly the reason, that we never felt able to share our life with you, in the first place. For fear of how you would react. Plus, the fear of you being placed in a very compromising situation."

"Yeah well, the stupid thing about it was, it all made perfect sense the moment I was out on the street, and realised I'd behaved like a complete idiot. I'll tell you, Cathy, I've never felt so alone in my life." He reached out his hand to her. "Friends?"

She smiled affectionately into his face, clasping his offered right hand with her left. "Friends, Joe. Always."

Vincent nodded, happy that their friendship had endured, but apprehensive about Joe's reaction towards him; and it was with some degree of caution that he enquired.

"What action will you take, Joe, on the events that have happened here, tonight? On all the bloodshed, and all the death ... at my hands?" He paused, before he added. "And what of those files, that link me to all of it?" Unwavering, he met Joe's gaze.

"I'll tell you what we're going to do, Vincent."

They all turned sharply, towards the sound of Diana's voice, as she re-entered the basement, closely followed by Tony carrying Emily in his arms.

"We're going to make damn sure, we clean up all the evidence of us ever having been here," Diana spelled out, "and we're going to leave this pile of scumbags, to whoever finds them."

She stepped forward, to purposefully stamp her foot in the middle of Demarkos' back, and wiped the knife handle clean with the sleeve of her sweat shirt, then, she moved back to await Joe's comments.

Joe, met Vincent's eyes, and nodded. "Okay," he nodded, his face reflecting the seriousness of their pact.

"I'll go along with that, and you're right. It certainly wouldn't do, for the NYPD to find any of our fingerprints amongst this little lot."

Diana bent over Demarkos' body again, and hauled him over to search through his pockets. She found a small note book, and held it aloft. "Is this Richard's note book, Joe?"

"You bet it is," he grinned with relief. "Now at least, Richard's murder wasn't for nothing, and we have all the information we need, to nail some of New York's low life to the wall." He paused, frowning, as another thought struck him. "You know, Vincent. I think I can swing enough clout, to get that bank vault put out of bounds for twenty-four hours. Do you think you could arrange to get the hole sealed up?" He grinned. "You never know, with a little bit of luck, and good management, no one need ever know anything, but what I want to tell them."

"Thank you Joe." He smiled down at Catherine, before answering. "No, I don't foresee any problems, rebuilding the vault wall, and we do have, Elliot's, expertise to call on. But, there will be the slight problem, of releasing the poor unfortunate man left inside to do the plastering."

"Don't worry. I'll work something out."

"Yes, I'm sure you will," he paused. "But, I must ask, Joe. Are you SURE, that you will be able to live, with the decisions that have been made here tonight?"

"You bet your sweet life I will."

Chapter 7

It was with mutual feelings of immense relief, that they finally vacated this place of torture and death. Gladly, they followed Vincent, through the labyrinth of tunnels, back to the safety and comforts of the brownstone. There was little conversation along the way; thoughts of food, hot showers and comfortable beds drove them on. The journey passed without mishap, apart from a short unscheduled detour, along a deserted street in the pouring rain; but no one minded. They were free, and alive, and even the rain felt wonderful.

Throughout the journey, Vincent had been very much aware of the mounting tension within his wife, even though she had appeared to have fallen asleep; her head on his shoulder, close to his face. He was grateful for the lack of conversation from the rest of his companions, and accepted that his troubled questions would have to wait until they reached home.

Sleep, was the farthest thing from Catherine's mind, as she replayed the horrors of the past few hours; dreading the moment that she would have to remove her clothes in Vincent's presence ... and witness his pain, his justifiable anger, and his guilt, at the sight of her brutalized body. Truth was, she felt unclean, in a way that washing would never erase. How could she possibly allow any of it, to touch her gentle husband? Catherine knew, that metaphorically speaking, her thoughts were a contradiction in terms. Hadn't Vincent just slaughtered the monsters responsible, without a second's thought ... and hadn't they had all compounded his actions, with relief and gratitude?

Vincent wasn't fooled for a moment, by her false air of cheerfulness, when they finally arrived home. He stoically accepted her assurances that she was fine; that she just needed to take a long soak, alone, in a hot tub. He was left with no choice, but to pace up and down outside the bathroom door in worried frustration, as he listened to every sound from within.

In another bedroom, Emily had regained consciousness, though still somewhat drowsy, from the after effects of whatever drug she'd been injected with. It had taken them some time, to convince her that she was safe, and that their ordeal was over.

Tony had surprised them all, with his extremely polished command of the sign language; introducing himself with flair; and putting Emily at her ease with good natured humour. Once she'd been settled onto the comfortable divan, both Emily, and her mother, were more than happy to accept his offer, to sit by her bed and watch over her until morning.

At last, Diana followed Joe, into the second floor sitting room, and closed the door behind them. They stood, facing each other, just a few inches apart, and it seemed the most natural thing in the world, for them to draw together in a gentle first kiss of, as yet unspoken, love. Diana, was the first to break the kiss, and she grinned into dark brown eyes almost level with hers.

"Do you know, I'm not too sure if I've the energy to pursue this any further, Joe. To be honest, all I want to do right now, is get out of these filthy clothes, and into a hot shower."

He made an exaggerated sigh as he held her gaze, and carefully chose his words.

"Dare I hope for a rain check, for when you do have the energy." He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

She giggled, and kissed his mouth. "You'd better believe it, Joe Maxwell." Then lowering her eyes she added. "Unless of course, it's all just wishful thinking on my part."

"You know it isn't," he whispered huskily. Then just to endorse that statement, he clasped his hands behind her head, moistened his lips, and again claimed her willing mouth. Their arms snaked around each other, as the kiss deepened, leaving them breathless, and eager for more. Joe released her, and puffed out his cheeks

as if to cool himself off. "Wow. I think maybe you'd better go first, and have that shower, while I make us some coffee."

"Tell you what," she suggested, daringly, "I've a much better idea. We could always put the coffee on, and go share the shower."

The only sound in the room was the ticking of the clock, and Diana, wondered if she'd perhaps been too bold. But Joe, reached for her hands, forcing his eyes to meet with hers, as he admitted to the loneliness of his life.

"Do you have any idea how long it's been since I've made love to a woman?"

They remained close, though their hands had fallen to their sides, and she answered his question with a confession of her own. "Joe. I think you should know, that I don't sleep with any man, unless the love part is a two way thing." Her voice dropped to almost a whisper, as she added. "And I haven't known that pleasure, for years."

He closed his eyes momentarily, unable to believe he'd found a kindred spirit, as he too, confessed. "Me neither. For exactly the same reason." Then, floundering slightly, he grinned sheepishly, and corrected his choice of words. "I mean with a woman."

Diana giggled. "I'm relieved to hear it, Joe," she teased, their faces flushed to these intimate declarations as they gazed at each other expectantly. It was all so new, and moving so fast. They felt like teenagers; yet they were both aware it was the events of the past hours, that had brought them to a closeness, seldom found in many lifetimes; and they weren't going to waste it. Coffee was forgotten as, with nervous anticipation, they helped each other out of their clothes, before Joe reached for her hand, and led her across the floor, towards the bathroom.

In the master bedroom, Vincent, was beside himself. He could feel all of Catherine's pained distress, but had promised not to enter the bathroom unless she called him. He knew there were things she wasn't telling him, but was loath to press her, until she had rested. After what seemed like an eternity, the bathroom door opened, and she came out looking scrubbed, deathly pale, and dressed in cosy pyjamas. She went willingly into his embrace, but he was still very much aware of the tension within her. He gathered her up into his arms, forced the fears from his mind, and resting one knee on the edge of the bed, he lowered her gently onto the pillows, to cover her with the quilt. His eyes never left her face, as he moved to kneel on the floor beside her, and, drawing her hand to his lips, he watched, as she drifted off almost immediately into an exhausted sleep.

Vincent was restless, his mind in turmoil with so many unanswered questions. He decided that a quick shower and a change of clothes might help; but it didn't. What he really needed was someone to talk to, and wished that Father, was in the house. He made sure that Catherine was sleeping soundly, then, he left the bedroom, to make his way along the landing. He tapped quietly on the third door along, entering, to find the room dimly lit by a small bedside lamp.

"Tony, are you awake?" He whispered.

"Yeah, come on in," Tony welcomed, as he pushed his blanket aside, and made to eject himself from the depths of the armchair.

"No, don't get up," Vincent whispered again, keeping to the shadows until he was certain that Emily was asleep. Then he realised that there was no need for quiet, and moved into the light. He lowered his large frame onto the edge of the divan bed, and leaned cautiously over her.

"How is she?"

"She's peaceful enough now, though it's hard to imagine the terror she must have suffered; especially not being able to hear what was going on."

"Hmm," Vincent acknowledged, understanding these fears all too well, and shook his head in despair, before he remarked. "How could anyone, even think to hurt her? A girl. So defenceless." He glanced up, to smile in affection at the younger man. "And she is so beautiful, isn't she?" He saw the blush of colour stain Tony's cheeks, and not wishing to cause him further embarrassment, he added. "I'll ask Michael to take a look at her in the morning."

They sat, in companionable silence for a few moments, before Vincent, quietly aired his troubled thoughts.

"Tell me. What happened to Catherine, out there tonight? I understand you went with her."

"Yes. I refused to let her go alone."

"I'm grateful. Thank you. But, tell me what happened?"

"Has Catherine said anything?"

"Nothing. But her pain is tearing me apart, and I can feel her reluctance to share any of it with me. It's like nothing I've ever known. We've never withheld secrets from each other."

Tony combed his hands through his thick dark hair. Unable to repeat to anyone, what had happened out there that night. Sighing, he met Vincent's worried gaze.

"I'm sorry. I can't tell you. Catherine, will have to tell you herself. It wouldn't be right coming from me." He drew in a deep breath. "All I will suggest is that you get Michael, to check her over as soon as possible."

* * *

Vincent waited for him, out on the landing, as he paced up and down; listening at the door innumerable times, to the muffled sounds from within. At last, the door opened, and Michael came out; his expression tense, and filled with ill-disguised anger.

"So tell me," Vincent demanded, bristling with agitation.

The doctor took his arm, and led him to a nearby chair. "I think you'd better sit down."

Vincent dragged himself free. "Just tell me," he insisted.

Michael shifted his weight, unsure of how his long-time friend would react to what he had to say. There was no easy way to do it, so he just spoke the words.

"Catherine, has been brutally raped." His jaw clenched, with the horror these few words invoked, before he continued. "I'm afraid she's refused to give me any of the details, Vincent. I just hope she'll be able to share it with you, when she's feeling stronger."

Vincent, didn't seem to be listening, but stood immobile, and stared at some point on the far wall.

Michael was having great difficulty in remaining detached, but he stated his diagnosis. "I'm afraid, she will suffer considerable discomfort for some time; due to the extensive bruising; both internally and externally. There is some light bleeding, though it's only superficial," and without pausing for breath, he added. "I'll arrange to do all the usual tests myself, at the clinic."

Vincent's blue eyes stared out unblinking, until he suddenly roused himself. He shook his shaggy head, refocussed his gaze onto Michael's face, and made no attempt to mask his distress as he drew in a tortured breath.

"But she will be all right?"

"In time," he nodded. "Yes. Though she'll need a great deal of help, and support from you."

"She has that, always."

"Of course she has, but you must go easy on her. We both know her physical scars will heal; but when a woman is abused in this way, it's the emotional scars, that cause the most pain."

Vincent sighed, and inclining his head, he rested his hand reassuringly onto his friend's shoulder. "Michael. Thank- you for being here for us. I do appreciate, this hasn't been easy for you either; but I do have one great advantage, over the ordinary man. I know exactly, how my wife is feeling; be it emotional, or physical. I also know she will share her pain with me, as soon as she feels able to talk about it."

"Yes, I'm sure she will," and he shook his head in wonder. "You know, Vincent? Your empathic connection to Catherine, has never ceased to amaze me. Truth is, I've always been envious of it; and I know I'm not alone with that. To be so close to the one you love ... that's the kind of a miracle, that dreams are made of. And yes, I do realise you're the last person I needed to give advice to, especially when it concerns Catherine. But I wouldn't have been doing my job, if I hadn't done so."

"I know that," Vincent nodded. "And I, wouldn't have expected anything less from you. But now, if you'll excuse me, I must go to her. And I'd be grateful if you would look in on Emily, before you go"?

* * *

Anxiously, her eyes followed his movements across the floor, as tears welled up inside her and spilled down her face, and she reached out to him, to sob out his name. He sat on the bed and gathered her gently to him; unable to stem the flow of his own tears as he kissed her face. As he made himself more comfortable, their emotions overwhelmed them, and they clung to each other as if they'd never let go.

At last, when they'd both began to feel calmer, Vincent nuzzled the top of her head, to gently ask. "Can you tell me, Catherine, what they did to you?"

She raised herself up on one elbow, to study his face. "You wouldn't want to know," she answered tremulously, shaking her head.

"Catherine, I can't leave you alone, with all of this. You must, allow me to share your pain," he coaxed. "All of it." But there was no answer, and he altered his position, to take her face into his hands. "Catherine, I want to know," he pleaded. "The only way we're going to be able to come through this, is, if I know. Only then, will I be able to help you."

"I know that," she nodded, as her face crumpled into tears again, and she haltingly explained. "But I just don't feel able to, Vincent. Not yet." She trembled. "It was too awful. Too painful, for me to even put into words."

He shuddered, with all the untold anguish, that this nightmare had caused, and, studying every minute detail of her face, he nodded sadly. "I understand." He kissed her forehead, wiping a tear away with his thumb, as he repeated, "I do understand. There is no rush. Just rest now," and he drew her back into the safety of his arms.

But Catherine, was too distressed to rest. She could feel all the tension within him, as she lay with her head against his chest, listening to the loved and familiar beat of his heart. She knew her husband better than anyone; knew, that he would still be reliving the horror of the bloodbath, hours before. She wanted more than anything, to try and give him some peace.

"Vincent," she whispered, pushing herself up on one elbow again, to lean across his chest.

"Yes?" he answered, gazing in worried adoration into her face.

She tugged at the arms that enveloped her, until she had hold of both his hands. Then, she drew them up her face and kissed each palm in turn, to press the clawed fingers against her face, close to her eyes in unwavering trust; because she knew they would never hurt her. He scrutinized her face, awed and wondering at her actions as she kissed the tip of each finger, before meeting his gaze.

"Do you remember how terrified you used to be, about hurting me with these hands?"

"I do remember. I believed that these hands, could never give you love."

The corners of her mouth turned up into a smile. "Hmm," she acknowledged, with a slight nod of her head. "But you don't believe that any more, do you?"

His face softened with love. "No," he shook his head.

"Not anymore."

She stretched up to kiss his mouth. "Vincent. You do know, how much I love you?" He nodded; there was no need for words; and she continued. "And, that I know better than anyone, how much you're suffering right now?" He nodded again. She took a deep breath, her lips trembled with apprehension, as she searched for the right words.

"Vincent. I could only ever imagine, the hell you must have suffered; growing up with the fear of physically hurting those you love." She clutched both his hands beneath her chin, and nuzzled his knuckles, before gazing up into his face. "But you know that to me, these hands are the most beautiful, gentle, caring hands in the whole wide world. Yes, I know, they are capable of taking life; but Vincent, these hands, are incapable of deliberately causing pain, to another living soul; just for the sheer hell of it. Just to humiliate, demoralize and rule by fear. You would never dream of taking anything that wasn't freely given." She frowned, as her face took on a haunted look before she added. "When, I feel able to tell you what that man did to me, I want you to remember, what I've said. I want you to remember, that you killed him with these hands, and feel no regret for having done so."

Her trembling escalated, as the memory of it all came flooding back, but with fierce determination, she continued with what she wanted to say.

"Just be glad Vincent, that you ARE different. Just be glad, that you WERE able to kill them all; because there was no other way."

She paused to catch her breath, and Vincent waited, sensing there was more.

"Joe and Diana, now know the truth of who you are," she husked, smiling into his eyes, as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "They've witnessed YOU, and all that you are, and believe me, they're just as thankful and relieved as I was, that you were there, and able to do it."

She kissed his lips, then pulled away. "Don't you know, it's because of YOU, that we're all still alive?" She paused, and waited; but he didn't answer; so she nodded her head in encouragement. "I want you to promise me, Vincent," she implored, as she clutched at handfuls of his hair to gain his full attention, before starting again. "I want you to promise me, that you will not wallow in any self-recrimination, for ANY of what you were forced to do. Ever."

Again, there was no response, so she tugged even harder at his hair than she intended to; but he didn't seem to notice.

"Vincent," she insisted. "Promise me."

He stared at her, as he weighed the logic of her words for a moment; then, his face softened, and he smiled. "I promise."

* * *

WEEKS LATER

Joe, Catherine, and Diana, left the Court House in triumph, surrounded by the noisy euphoria of the press. Joe, acting as their spokesperson, made a brief statement. He declared, Richard Osborne a hero, for his brave persistence, in collecting all the invaluable information, for which he had been subsequently murdered. He emphasised, that this alone, had been instrumental in the successful smashing of a vast network of vice, and corruption. He reassured them, that many of the perpetrators had already been arrested, and detained without bail; and he promised to stop at nothing, to see that justice was done; that they would be committed to serve a long prison term behind bars.

However, no one clung to any false delusions. The people of the press knew for certain, that on the city's streets, other unscrupulous empires would already be in the making, to take their place. The only real crumb of comfort, for both the press and law enforcement, was that, District Attorney, Joe Maxwell, had been seen to be doing something, to make New York a little safer. A little cleaner. Until the next time.

They walked arm-in-arm down the steps of the Court House, and out into the cold grey day. It was already beginning to snow as Joe hailed a cab, and, laughing with excitement, they piled inside to head for the brownstone. This was a special day for all of them, in more ways than one, and they didn't want to be late.

Joe and Diana, Emily and Elliot, had all received personal invitations from Vincent and Catherine, to attend Winterfest. This, was an annual celebration, unique to the tunnel world, where they would be formally welcomed into the community. When candles were delivered by the children, on the eve of Winterfest, these four newcomers, shared in a mutual feeling of standing on the threshold of something very special.

Elliot, had returned Above, after spending almost three weeks Below recovering from his heart attack. But this was a very different Elliot Burch. He had no intention of taking up where he'd left off, with the lavish emptiness of his life before. He'd found friends Below who sought out his company. Accepted him, as he was, and gave him no quarter, just because he was rich. To them, he was just Elliot, and for the first time in his life, he'd found peace within himself.

That Joe and Diana had fallen in love, there was no doubt, and more than anything, they wanted it to be for ever; but, for the first few weeks of normality, they shared a mutual apprehension that something might go wrong; that the bubble might burst. They had both been through the pain of rejection, and broken relationships before, but as their doubts faded, they began to relax and enjoy one another.

Emily, had warmed to Joe straight away, and somehow they found no problems in communicating. With her mother's consent, she had quit her special school, and had taken to spending much of her time Below, where the pace of life suited her. She found a tolerance, sadly lacking in the world Above. Here, she discovered the warmth of friendship; and a special friend in Vincent. Tony's increasing visits, both to her home Above, and when she was Below, had not gone unnoticed. It wasn't only Vincent, who sensed the stirrings of another tunnel romance.

As for Tony, he knew for certain, that he'd met the woman of his dreams. He also knew he'd have to exercise tremendous restraint. Emily was someone special, and he wasn't about to blow it, by rushing in like a bull at a gate.

* * *

Now, in the black stillness of the Great Hall, a lone flickering candelabra shed its gentle glow onto the tabloid of a medieval Lord, and his Lady, cast back from these ancient times. They stood a foot apart, gazing into each other's eyes, as they listened to the silence.

"Can you hear it Vincent?" she whispered.

"I hear it," he answered, his eyes drinking in her beauty that for him, would never dim with time. He drew her close into his arms, and they began to waltz to the music in their hearts; their bodies moulding together as they swayed in the silence of the vast empty hall.

Catherine smiled, as she felt his more than welcome arousal against her, before a small growl of apology erupted from deep within him, and he tried to put distance between them; but she held him fast.

"It's all right," she reassured him, pressing against him invitingly with her hips, as she amorously teased his mouth with wet sensual kisses. "This, is my Winterfest gift, to you, with love," she whispered close to his ear.

As she returned to her sensuous exploration, he dragged his mouth away; his face incredulous; his eyes, riveted onto her lips that glistened wetly in the candle light.

"Catherine. Are you sure? Are you sure you're ready?"

"I'm more than sure, Vincent," she nodded, her eyes sparkling. "I want you ... to make love to me," she husked, "and, I'm only sorry that I've had to keep you waiting so long."

"Oh Catherine," he answered, overawed by her concern for him, though his rising passion evaporated, with the nightmares that flooded in; bringing with them the untold guilt, and painful memories that they conjured up. A shadow passed across his face, as he confessed his innermost thoughts.

"Catherine," he repeated, his voice thick with emotion. "I almost lost you twice, within the space of a few days," and he swallowed. "Know this, my love," he declared solemnly. "The damage, that man could have done to you, just doesn't bear thinking about ... but, even if we were never, able to fully make love again ... the only thing that matters to me in this world, is having you here with me ... by my side."

So touched was she, by his impassioned declaration, for a moment she was unable to speak, but swayed against him, close to tears. Then, gazing into his beloved face, she gently kissed his mouth with tremulous lips, before making her own emotional reply.

"Oh, my love, you know it's just the same for me, don't you?"

"Yes, I know it."

Their eyes met, swimming with tears, but smiling now, as their nightmares were banished, and two hearts rejoiced to the wealth of all that they shared, and could go on sharing; until their emotions overwhelmed them both, as his mouth claimed hers, and they devoured each other with a hunger that could no longer be denied; until breathless and ecstatic, they pulled apart. Catherine, her face flushed with desire, grinned seductively up into his face.

"Tell me something, Vincent," she purred.

"I will tell you anything, Catherine," he husked, as his lips parted to show his wet tongue visibly moving, poised and impatient to kiss her again.

And Catherine was consumed by an overwhelming urge to ravish him right there, on the floor of the Great Hall. Giggling at these erotic thoughts, she took hold of both his hands, and began to pull him along.

"Tell me, Vincent. Why are we standing here?"

* * * * *

FROM CATHERINE TO VINCENT

If ever two were one, then surely we.

If ever man were lov'd by wife, then thee.

If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.
I prize thy love more than whole Mines of gold,
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that Rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee give recompence.
Thy love is such I can no way repay;
The heavens reward thee manifold I pray.
Then while we live, in love lets so persever,
That when we live no more, we may live ever.

Anne Bradstreet