

THE TIME OF THE REAPER

by Stephanie Bruford

(from *MASQUERADES '93*)

The Helper glanced casually around, making sure that no one was taking any interest in his activities. Stooping, he placed the bottle containing the newspaper cutting next to the drain opening and, straightening up, he tapped it lightly with his foot so that it tinkled down into the depths. Shaking his head, the Helper wandered back to his home, wondering what it was all about.

Jacob Wells was sitting at his desk, nose in a work roster, when a breathless; "Father, a message," woke him from his reverie. Looking up, he saw one of the children standing, panting, before him.

"Suzanne, I know you have not been with us long, so you will not know all of our rules yet. There is one very important rule you must learn right away." Jacob looked at her sternly.

Suzanne lowered her head dejectedly and wondered what she had done wrong. She always tried to fit in with these people who had been so kind, who had rescued her from the streets after her grandmother, her last remaining relative, had died.

"This most important rule is ... you must never, ever, run whilst carrying a glass object." If you fell, you could injure yourself quite badly, even fatally. Now, go to William ... and see if he has any soda pop left."

Suzanne glanced up at Jacob, saw the twinkle in his eye and her face lit up. Turning, she bounded up the steps, halted, turned back to Jacob and raised both hands. "Look, Father, no glass." She disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

Jacob chuckled. "Irrepressible scamp."

The thought of William and his soda pop maker led Jacob's thoughts onto Catherine Chandler, that being just another instance of her kindness, her thoughtfulness for others. Wanting to give the children ... and maybe some of the grown-ups, a treat, she had discovered that most of them had never tasted soda pop and so had turned up one day with, not one, but two of the machines and a whole cart load of supplies and replacement parts.

Jacob's smile at this reminiscence faded as he unfolded the bottle's enclosure and started to read. The article the Helper had circled was simple. A plea for information about a newborn child that had been lost in the vicinity of St. Vincent's Hospital 33 years before. It included a plain statement that the child was of *'an unusual appearance.'* There was no name, only a box number for replies. Jacob sighed. *'Did this mean trouble?'* Resting

his face in his hands, he wondered if he should show the article to Vincent and, if he did, what form Vincent's reaction would take.

Walking hand-in-hand with Vincent through the tunnels, Catherine gazed up at him and saw such contentment on his face, her heart skipped a beat.

"What is it, Catherine?" Vincent's voice was low.

"I don't know. I guess ... I'm so happy ... I feel it can't last. A sort of calm-before-the-storm feeling."

"YOU are becoming pessimistic." Vincent raised her hand and very gently kissed each finger. A surge of love through their bond made him blink in its intensity. "Catherine ... I think it is to ... alter? ... our relationship."

"Why? Isn't it perfect as it is?" Catherine could not hide her gamine grin, or the way her heart sang.

"No, Catherine." Vincent's heart caught the song and echoed its response. "Catherine."

"Yes, Vincent?"

"Know I love you."

Catherine moved to stand in front of him and, resting her hands on his shoulders. reached up and kissed him on his lips.

"I've known that forever, Vincent. You haven't fooled me for one minute." Linking her hands behind his neck, she pulled his head down and showed him her love with a deep, lingering kiss that sent lightning streaking through his large frame, making him gasp and shudder. Lifting her up with his arms around her waist, Vincent held her tight to him.

"Minx," he hissed in her ear. Catherine's joyous laughter echoed down the tunnels, lightening the hearts of everyone it touched.

Sitting at his desk, Jacob heard it and smiled. At least, whatever troubles came his way, Vincent had Catherine. She had proven herself time and time again; Jacob's fears that she would hurt his son were proving unfounded, thank God. Returning his attention to the article, Jacob wondered if Catherine would help, without letting Vincent know.

"You think it could have survived?"

"It's a possibility. Though where, God knows ... someone could have found it ... but to keep it hidden all these years!"

"It's probably dead. I mean, who would want to keep a freak like that? We'd have heard if it was in a sideshow or something. No, I think we can assume its' dead ... and even if it wasn't, how could it put in a claim?"

"We must make sure. If it's alive ... it's the only thing standing between us and ten million dollars."

"You're crazy! Nobody knows about it except us and ..."

"Yeah ... the old dame's lawyer, who is about to spread it all over the papers. When that hits the streets, there'll be claims coming out of the sidewalks ... IF it hits the streets."

"What do you mean? **Oh no, not that.** We were lucky last time. I don't want nuthin' to do with it."

"All right, chicken out. I'll find another partner. Maybe I'll do it on my own."

"You wouldn't dare! It's one thing knockin' off an old lady, how would you ... **OW!"**

"Shut your mouth! You wanna tell the world? Now get out, I got a lot of thinking to do."

"Ah, Vincent, Catherine, I thought I heard you coming. Come in, sit down. Would you like some tea? How are you, Catherine? Is your office keeping you busy?" Jacob fidgeted around, pouring tea, handing it out with trembling hands.

"Father, what troubles you?" Vincent's concern calmed the older man.

With a slight wave of his hand, Jacob replied, "I'm not sure, Vincent. It's probably nothing but ... you had better read this." He handed the cutting to Vincent. "I wasn't going to show you. I thought of asking Catherine's advice but ... neither of us could keep anything from you for long."

Vincent read the article through, handed it to Catherine, stood up and started pacing the room.

"Why? Why now? After all these years."

"I'll write ... if you like? I can use a box number too ... Vincent?"

"No!"

"Vincent. This may be the only chance to discover your origins. Isn't this what you've waited for?"

Vincent halted in front of a bookcase, his back to the room. Minutes ticked by in silence. Vincent raised his hand to caress the leather bindings of the books in front of him, the familiar feel of them seemed to calm him.

"Yes." It was almost a whisper. "Yes, you are right, of course." Turning to look at Catherine, Vincent asked, "How will you respond?"

"I'm not sure yet. But don't worry. I'll be very careful." Before Vincent could explain that he knew she would be, she had turned to Jacob. "Father, have you any ideas?"

"I'm sorry, Catherine, I have been sitting here trying to think but all that sticks in my mind is, what if this is a trap? What if Vincent is caught? I am afraid."

At this admission, Catherine rose and went to Jacob, putting her arms around his shoulders, resting her soft cheek against his wrinkled one.

"Don't worry. I will never let any harm come to him."

Vincent stood looking at the two people he loved most and his heart expanded with love that emanated from them, knowing that he was blessed, that it was for him.

Clearing his throat, he asked, "Is this a private party or can anyone join in?"

The laughter that followed lightened the atmosphere and they all felt relieved of the tension that had built up. Catherine looked at Vincent.

"Where on earth did you pick that expression up?"

"I must have heard it somewhere, probably from one of the children ... Catherine?" Vincent held out his arms and Catherine walked slowly into them, wrapping her arms about his waist as he enfolded her. Jacob raised his eyebrows but said nothing. Never before had they been so demonstrative in front of him.

Sitting at another, more sumptuous desk in a luxurious office not far from the park, an elderly man pressed a button on his intercom and said, "You may as well go home now, Eleanor, there's nothing else to do tonight. Have a good weekend and I'll see you on Monday." He listened to his secretary's answer, rubbed his temples with his fingertips and said, "Don't fuss. I know what I'm doing." He released the button and sighed, "I hope."

As he opened the folder that lay on the desk before him, he heard the outer door open then close as his secretary left. Sifting through the papers, his fingers closed around a buff-coloured sheet and pulled it out. Reading through it, for what seemed the thousandth time, he still could not quite believe what it told him.

He had loved Cassandra Reynolds since the day he had started work in the law firm that her father employed. He could remember that day as a shining, golden moment, the moment Cassandra had walked into the office with her father ... and she had smiled at him, Jonathan Wellsby, lowest of the low, most junior of the junior clerks. Since that day, Jonathan would have done anything for her, even to laying down his life.

Now this. He could not believe that Cassandra Reynolds, of all people, would take part in such an experiment. And to have, and reject, a child, no matter what kind of abnormalities it may have.

'Oh, Cassandra. What was in your mind, to do such a thing? Didn't you know I loved you; would have helped in any way?'

Locking the file away in the top drawer, Jonathan prepared to leave. Turning to switch off the light, he shook his head. *'If I was not allowed to help you, Cassandra, at least I will do what I can for your son. If he still lives.'*

Locking the door behind him, he wondered if there would be any replies to his advert in the morning; any useful replies. He knew, to his own cost, how many people sent crank letters to even the most innocent inquiry. Sighing, he went home, for what was, perhaps, his last peaceful weekend.

Catherine sat, legs crossed on Vincent's bed. Vincent had pulled his chair around and sat facing her. There were no words. Vincent reached out to pull Catherine's Sloppy-Joe sweater up from where it had slipped from her shoulder. His fingers came into contact with her skin. Cool as marble, soft as silk; he could not resist to caress her shoulder. Catherine rested her cheek on his hand where it lay. She sighed.

"What is it, Catherine?"

"What was I saying in the tunnel? I think your instincts are rubbing off on me."

"That is not all that I would like to *'rub off'* on you."

"Vincent!"

"Yes, Catherine?"

"You are not taking this very seriously. Why? I thought you, above all, would be ... wary ... of this inquiry."

"Catherine ... my ... instincts ... as you say, are telling me that there is no danger to our world Below. If there is

any towards me ... I cannot yet tell. Know this, whatever happens, if I find that I am of an ... animal ... origin, I will always love you."

"I know that, Vincent. But you cannot be an animal. You have a man's intelligence, a man's heart. You know this, Vincent, whatever happens, you will never lose me. Even if you tried."

"That we will see. Have you decided on your reply yet?"

"Yes. It will be difficult ... but I think I can find out who is behind this advert before they find out about us."

"How?"

"Oh, I have my ways. Actually, I have something better, how about a job at the District Attorney's office as an investigator?"

Vincent laughed. Catherine lunged forward to land on his lap. Curling up in his arms, she whispered, "We don't have to worry about it just yet. I can't do anything till morning, can I?"

Vincent sat cradling her in his arms, prepared to sit forever if he could keep her there.

"Well, have you decided if you are with me or not?"

"I suppose I am. After your phone call last night reminding me of my involvement in your last '*cap*er,' I have no choice, have I?"

"Oh yeah, of course you have. You could always go to the police and tell them all about it. About how you, sorry, we, helped a little old lady shuffle off her mortal coil. You never know, they might even give you a medal for it."

"There's no need for that, I'm here, aren't I?"

"Ye - es, I can see that. But what I'm worried about is if I can still trust you."

"Of course you can. Didn't I say I'd help...?"

"Okay, no need to panic. You worry too much."

"I can't help that. It's the way you've been looking at me lately. The same way you look at your ... '*victims*'."

"Ha ha. Maybe you should worry at that. Now let's get to work. We've got a lot to do."

Saturday morning dawned bright and clear. To Jonathan Wellsby, it would not have mattered if there had been torrential rain. He lay at the bottom of the area steps of his brownstone; barely breathing, blood trickling from his mouth and nose; indications of a fractured skull. With his housekeeper away for the weekend, he might have died there. It was only her forgetfulness that prevented that catastrophe. Realizing that she had forgotten the cake she had baked for her sister, she called in early to collect it while on her way to the station. Not losing her head, she did all the right things, calling the paramedics and the police before finally breaking down in tears.

"What makes you think it wasn't an accident?" the policewoman who had taken her in the kitchen asked.

"That gate is always kept locked. Ever since a child on a bike died down there." She sobbed into her cup of coffee.

"And you don't think he would have opened it for anything?"

"No. He doesn't even know where the key is anymore. He was only talking about it the other day. And anyway ..."

"What?"

"He's been getting threatening letters," Flora Madison replied with a look of guilt. "I found them in the trashcan. He'd torn them up but I ..."

"Pieced them together," the policewoman finished for her.

"Yes ... I know how it looks but I ... I've loved him for ten years. Ever since I started working here. He doesn't know it. I'd have to leave if he ever found out. You won't tell him, will you?"

"He won't hear it from me. Why did you read those letters? Do you usually go through his trash?"

"No! It's just that he'd torn them up. In all the years I've known him, he's never done that to any of his mail."

"What did they say? Have you any idea who they were from?"

"They were about some case he's been working on. What was it? Oh yes, the first one said; *'keep your nose out of the Reynolds case'* and something about what would happen if he didn't. There was no signature, but I've got a feeling that he knew who they were from."

"Why is that?"

"Well, it's obvious, if he didn't know, he'd have gone to the police. He must have thought that he could deal with them on his own. If I get my hands on them ..." She broke down again. "Mr. Wellsby has never hurt anyone - he's the kindest, most gentle man. He can't die, he can't."

The policewoman called to her supervisor.

"Hey Sarge, I think I'd better take her to her brother's. I'll see if she has anymore to tell us when she's calmed down a bit."

"Okay, don't bother coming back here. I think we've finished for now. I'll see you back at the precinct."

The policewoman turned back to Flora. "Come on, love, you won't want to stay here on your own. I'll take you to your brother's - you can phone your sister from there. Pity about that cake. Do you always stay at your brother's house on a Friday?"

"No, but Mr. Wellsby had kindly let me go early for the weekend so I could collect the presents for my sister. It's her sixtieth birthday, you know, and I can't even give her her cake" She broke into fresh sobs as they left the house.

Catherine looked up to see Joe Maxwell stalking towards her desk. "Hey, Radcliffe, got nothing to do? I've seen busier sloths."

Catherine waved her hand at the piles of paper littering the top of her desk. "Not so's you'd notice, Joe. What is it this time?"

Joe threw a folder in front of her. "This. Seems this lawyer suspected something wrong and didn't bother to tell us. He's in the hospital now, lucky to be alive."

"Where did you get this, Joe? Isn't it a bit soon to be searching his office? And why pick on Cassandra Reynolds? Didn't she die recently? I seem to recall reading about it in the papers. Wasn't she rich?"

"Do you want an answer to all these questions? Okay, first, that was in the briefcase which was found under his body. Two, if it was important enough for him to take home this long after her death, it'll be interesting to us. She died three months ago. And last, you can bet your bottom dollar she was, kiddo. Hell, she was even richer than you." Joe rose from the corner of the desk where he had been perched. "Get to work on this, Cathy, Seems it wasn't a natural death after all, and with that much money floating about..."

"Okay, Joe. I'll make a start on it as soon as I've finished this." Picking up the deposition she'd been working on, Catherine lost interest in Joe and his folder.

"As soon as you can, Chandler. If this guy dies as well, could be a double murder rap."

Her preliminary search through the folder brought to light a rough draft of the advertisement that had brought so much worry. *'So it was this Jonathan Wellsby who required information about Vincent. Had it any relation to the death of Cassandra Reynolds? Was Jonathan Wellsby's 'accident' connected?'*

It seemed too much of a coincidence. She must take care with this case, for Vincent's sake.

Delving into the folder again, Catherine came across a list of names and phone numbers. One of those names had been circled, the paper was deeply scored, so savagely had it been marked. Lifting the phone, Catherine asked the operator for a number.

When it had been put through, she said, "Hi, this is Catherine Chandler of the District Attorney's office. I wonder if you could help me? I'm looking into the death of a Miss Cassandra Reynolds and your name came up as a possible witness. I wondered if we could meet? Oh yes, I know it. Two o'clock? Yes, that's fine. I'll see you there then. Bye."

Vincent raised his head to wipe the sweat off his brow. Deep in the tunnels, he had been working for hours, sealing up a break in the wall.

"That should do it, Vincent. Be no more water through there."

"Yes, Mouse. We have done well. Thank you for your help."

Mouse squirmed with embarrassment. "No problem. Mouse not tell of accident if Vincent won't."

"I will not tell. There was no harm done." Vincent smiled down at Mouse's worried face. Mouse smiled back.

"Okay, good. Okay, fine."

They laughed together, an ill-assorted pair of friends. Suddenly, Vincent's head came up.

"Catherine," he breathed and started to run, up towards the upper levels. Mouse stood staring after him, mouth agape.

"Not okay. Not so good." He started chasing after Vincent but his short legs had no chance against Vincent's powerful long ones. Falling far behind, Mouse gasped, "Okay, tell Father. Vincent gone to help Catherine."

Pulling her coat collar up to ward off the damp cold, Catherine peered round, trying to make out any identifiable shapes through the swirling fog. *Where on earth had it come from after the beautiful weekend weather, only heaven and the weather forecasters knew.* All sound was muffled as she walked through the park, treading warily to keep to the path.

"I must be crazy. Why didn't I phone back and arrange another meeting?" Her breath turned to mist which blended in with the fog. A sudden instinct brought her round before she heard the footsteps behind her.

"Miss Chandler?"

"Yes," Catherine gasped in relief. "You are Miss Moran?"

"Sister Moran, if you don't mind. I was the old lady's nurse for the last five years."

"Good. Maybe you'll be able to tell me something about her. What she was like, her family, visitors, things like that. But we can't talk here. I know a small eaterie not far from the East gate, we could grab a bite and a coffee. If you'd like to?"

"Sounds all right to me. Lead on, if you can find your way."

Safely ensconced before a real coal fire, steaming mugs of coffee warming their hands, Catherine started her questioning.

"Can you tell me, what was the exact cause of Miss Reynolds' death?"

"Well," Sister Moran shrugged her shoulders. "Just old age is my guess. The doctor put heart failure on the death certificate. Gee," she gazed around her. "I never knew they still had places like this; it's kinda cute, you know."

"Yes, I like it. Wait till you try the food. It's got that real home-cooked taste. Now, were you happy with that verdict or did you have any suspicions? I mean, were you expecting her death or was it ... I don't know ... sudden?"

"You know, Miss Chandler, I'm glad you asked me that. I wasn't too happy about how quick she went. I mean, one day she was happy as a lark, doing her gentle exercises, going for walks and all, next thing you know, she's lying dead in her bed, the doctor's signed the certificate and she's off to the funeral parlour. For her age, you know, she was a very fit lady. But the doctor seemed satisfied so" she shrugged again.

"Did you voice your suspicions to anyone?"

"Hell no. I mean, what's the point? Who's gonna miss one little old lady, especially one who's gone a bit ..." she twirled her forefinger by her temple.

"You mean Miss Reynolds was insane?"

"No, not insane, just a bit ga-ga, if you know what I mean. That's why I was employed, to look after her. She got so bad towards the end, would you believe, she kept raving about having a kid years ago. Some sort of animal kid she kept on saying. Saying she'd dumped it and then start crying. I mean, who'd blame her for dumping it if it was like that. I would myself. I wouldn't want it back. No, I reckon it was just ravings, probably read it in a story once and got mixed up, thought it was her it happened to. Yeah, that's it, that time she nearly died thirty odd years ago. That's when her records said she started behaving odd. Must have really turned her mind. You don't suppose it was drugs, do you? These rich folk would do anything for kicks."

Catherine was thinking hard. *Had she actually discovered the identity of Vincent's mother?* Feelings of excitement flowed through her. She succeeded in hiding it from the woman in front of her. "You never know, do you? Did she ever marry?"

"No, not but there wasn't a few admirers hanging around. Flies round a honeypot I called 'em. Scads of money in there. Wonder what'll happen to it? There's no family. Unless her little animal boy is still around." Sister

Moran started laughing, pleased at her own joke. Catherine managed a smile.

Turning over to a new page in her notebook, Catherine asked for a list of all house guests and callers over the last six months before Miss Reynolds' death. Sister Moran seemed to have an excellent memory and reeled them off almost before Catherine could write them down. Both having eaten during their talk, Catherine put her pen and notebook away, paid the tab, and turned back to Sister Moran.

"Thanks for all your help, Miss Moran. Can I get in touch with you if I need to?"

"That's Sister. Yeah, I suppose you can. Which way you goin'? Maybe we can share a cab?"

"Sorry," Catherine smiled. "I'm walking. I'll be going back the way we came, through the park."

"Well, you be careful now, y'hear. Lots of bad things happen in that park."

Catherine belted her coat tightly around her, picked up her purse and bid a smiling farewell to Sister Moran. Outside the door, she shuddered, but whether in deference to the cold or the impression she carried of the Sister, she could not tell, only that she was pleased to be leaving her behind.

Carefully crossing the road, Catherine did not see her luncheon guest standing in the doorway, watching as a man who'd been waiting outside started to follow Catherine, then turning to go back inside.

The man followed Catherine across the road, trying to keep her in sight through the fog; he narrowly missed being hit by a Yellow Cab, whose breed of drivers seemed blessed with X-ray vision. Finally reaching the other side, ears ringing with the curses of the cab driver, he realized that he had lost Catherine Chandler. Casting about, through a sudden shift of the fog, he saw the bright yellow of Catherine's coat as she disappeared through the park gateway. Not knowing whether to curse or praise the fog, he turned in the direction Catherine had taken and was lost to sight as the fog closed around him.

Vincent was indecisive. Standing on one side of the barrier that separated their two worlds, he cursed himself for a fool, sensing she was near and in danger, needing to help her yet helpless to pass out into the daylight.

Making his mind up, Vincent touched the mechanism that opened the great door. Thick fog swirled through, between the bars that still separated him from the woman he loved. *Thank God*, he thought. There was still danger, though his instincts were jangling a warning, he would be able to leave the tunnels this time, for Catherine.

Catherine, sensing a movement behind her, turned to see a man bearing down on her. In his hand she saw a moss-covered rock. Nerves tingling, she glanced around to see if he was alone. All she saw was the fog. Grabbing her purse with both hands, she swung it into his midriff. Hearing a satisfying *'huff'* and seeing him sink to his knees, she turned and ran blindly into the fog. Finding herself crashing through the shrubs that lined the path, she fell flat and crawled under the nearest bush. Lying there listening to her attacker blundering about, she thought furiously. *'Was this a plain mugging or did it have something to do with her case?'* Grasping a fallen branch, flimsy as it was, she waited for him to come nearer. She knew she couldn't overpower him on her own, but if she could just incapacitate him....

She held her breath as he lumbered nearer; his breath still came in gasps from her blow. Then the sound of another, larger body racing through the undergrowth broke into her concentration. It was accompanied by a

growling intermingled with her name.

"Vincent?" She was horrified that he was out here in daylight, away from the safety of the tunnels. Scrambling up, she darted towards the sounds of a scuffle. The shrill screams of the man cut through the air as he realized what has got hold of him.

"Vincent!" Catherine reached him in time to clutch his arm, preventing him from dealing a death blow. Vincent, hand still round his captive's throat, looked down at her, the rage ebbing from his eyes as he realized she was unharmed.

"Catherine." Her name was a sob escaping from his lips.

"It's all right, Vincent. I'm not hurt." She looked at the man hanging terrified from Vincent's furry hand. "I want to talk with him."

Vincent lowered him to the ground but retained his hold. "Why, Catherine."

"It's strange that he should try to attack me right after my first meeting with what may prove to be a material witness. First we must move away from here, get you to a shelter. Come, the fog seems less thick." She was right, above them a hazy sun shone through the receding fog. "We must hurry. Do you know of a place we can take him?"

Vincent caught her meaning. Somewhere that this man would not recognize but also would not be able to find again. Somewhere with no connection to the tunnels.

"Yes, Catherine, I know of a place. Come."

Still gripping his charge around the neck, Vincent half-pushed, half-led him through the thinning fog. Catherine bringing up the rear, keeping a watchful eye out. At last they gained the relative safety of a hiding place that Catherine had never seen before. Resolving to question Vincent about it later, she now prepared to interrogate their captive.

Sister Moran looked at her watch. *'What was keeping that man? If this one simple task was beyond his capabilities, she would have to think seriously about getting other help.'* She sipped at her coffee.

"Will there be anything else, Miss?" The waitress was too well trained to comment on her customer's change of manner.

"No! Yeah. Give me one of them ... what do you call 'em ... English muffins."

"Yes, Miss." The waitress walked away to carry out her duty. Sister Moran looked at her watch again. *Damn that man. Probably lost in the fog...*

While Vincent lit a candle, picked from a cache in the wall, his captive stood quivering, facing Vincent and Catherine, his hands spread flat against the wall at his back.

"Wh ... what are you going to do to me?"

"Ask a few questions, that is all." At the sound of a cultured voice coming from Vincent's strangely shaped

mouth, the man gaped anew.

"You ... speak ..."

"We are not here to answer your questions. We want answers from you. Why did you attack me?"

Catherine's sudden onslaught confused the man.

"She told me to ..." He shut up immediately, remembering who had sent him.

"Who is she?"

The man kept his mouth firmly closed, obviously more terrified of whoever he was protecting than he was of Vincent. Changing her tactics, Catherine asked. "Who are you?" Still the man kept quiet. "Vincent, has he any identification on him?"

Vincent moved towards the man who cowered back, clutching his jacket to his chest, still not saying a word. Vincent took hold of the man's hands and raised them above his head, firmly gripped on one of Vincent's, while he searched through the man's jacket with his other. Pulling out a wallet from the jacket's inside pocket, he handed it to Catherine.

"This is all he has."

Gently lowering the man's arms, Vincent released his hands and stepped back. Catherine, meanwhile, had found a driver's license in the name of Richard Edwards, five hundred dollars, a letter in an envelope and a photograph of the man standing before her and ... Sister Moran, arms about each other, smiling at the camera.

"So, it seems as if it is to do with my case, Vincent," she showed him the photograph. "This happens to be the witness I've just been interviewing. Or is witness the wrong word?" She looked at Edwards who stared back, frightened but defiant. Turning back to Vincent, Catherine said, "Is this place safe to leave him for a few days? Just till he finds his tongue?"

"Yes, Catherine. No one comes here now, no one will hear if he cries for help. How long would you wish to leave him? There is neither food or water here and only one candle to stave off the darkness."

Edwards looked at Catherine, at Vincent, at Catherine again, not sure if they meant what they said, but scared to take the chance.

"You can't do that! I'd die!"

"Then speak."

"I can't." Edwards slid slowly down the wall, tears beginning to fall from his eyes. "She'll kill me."

"How do you know we will not?"

Edwards looked up at Vincent from his crouched position on the floor.

"I don't ... but I do know that she will. She's done it before."

"To Cassandra Reynolds?" Catherine spoke quickly before Edwards could clam up again.

"Yes. Oh God! What did you say that for?" He bent his head and started sobbing into his hands. "Go away! Go away, leave me alone then! I don't care!"

Catherine looked at Vincent. "What shall we do with him? I can't take him into custody, not now he has seen you. Besides," she looked down at the whimpering wreck on the floor, "We still need a lot of answers from him. Though, from what he had so far admitted, I know where to start my investigations."

"Do not worry, Catherine. There is a good friend and Helper who will watch over him until we need to speak with him again. There will be no danger from him."

Catherine looked up at Vincent and smiled. Edwards looked up at both of them with tear-stained eyes. *They weren't going to leave me alone?* Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, he came to his feet. "Are you going to let me go? I won't tell. Honest!"

"No, not yet. Not until you have told me all you know."

"You wouldn't let me go then, would you! I've seen him!" he pointed at Vincent. "You'll have no choice, you'll say. I know how women's minds work, you'll kill me, I know you will!" He threw himself at Catherine, only to be stopped by Vincent's strong arm. Collapsing onto the floor again, Edwards sobbed hysterically.

"Vincent, can you move him like this?" Catherine asked quietly.

"No, but I will have to wait till dark before I can leave this place. He may have calmed enough then. You are going?"

"I have to, Vincent. I have to get back to work or Joe will send the bloodhounds out after me." She looked at her watch disbelievingly. "It's still only four-thirty! It seems like hours since I left the eaterie. Which reminds me," she turned back to Edwards. "It was Moran who sent you after me? To kill me?"

"Yes," Edwards sobbed. "She wanted you out of the way if you seemed to know too much about the old lady's death."

"Then why did she tell me so much?"

"I don't know ... maybe she thought, as you were going to die ... it wouldn't matter. Anyway, she don't need no reason. She likes to hurt people, anyone, even me!" He lapsed into silence again, brooding on his sorrows.

Catherine pulled Vincent slightly away from Edwards and, kissing him gently on the cheek, took her farewells, bidding Vincent to take great care, then she was gone, out into the glare of the now visible sun.

Riding up the elevator to her office, Catherine was oblivious of the stares she was attracting with her state of dishevelment.

She was shaken out of her introspection when a loud; **"God, Cathy, you been down the sewers or somethin'?"** erupted from Joe, who was standing outside the elevator door as it opened. Catherine looked down at herself. Mud and leaves caked the front of her coat, staining the yellow to a deep umber.

"Hey, Joe, didn't you know that's one of my favourite pastimes? To tell the truth, I took a tumble in the park. Lost my way in the fog and fell in the bushes. I hadn't realized I was in such a mess."

"Well, you'd better go and clean up before you get back to work. Moreno's got a delegation from the '*Clean Up Our Streets*' contingency. You'll give the department a bad name looking like that!" he turned to enter the elevator. "Oh, Cathy, have you found out anything on the Reynolds' case yet?"

"Have I had time yet? Don't worry, I'm working on it." With a grimace of relief, she watched the elevator carry Joe from sight, then headed for the washroom to tidy herself up.

"She was my mother?"

"It's a possibility. We may find out more from Mr. Wellsby. His doctor says there is hope that he will be coming round soon. Seems there have been '*favourable signs*.' Whether he will be able to talk yet, Dr. Hamilton can't tell. There doesn't seem to be any brain damage but ..." Catherine shrugged her shoulders.

"Catherine is right, Vincent. A fractured skull in an elderly person can have unforetold effects. We must wait ... and be patient." Jacob rested his head on his son's arm.

Vincent looked down at Father where he sat in his chair and patted the older man's hand.

"Do not worry, Father, I have waited this long, a few more days will not matter ... Catherine?" Vincent looked up at her sharply. She laughed, a bit confused.

"It was only a thought. How did you pick it up?"

"It only matters that I did. You are not to go alone."

"To his office? I should be safe enough."

"Catherine, please do not go alone ... I feel ... danger." Vincent left Jacob's side and, putting his hands on Catherine's shoulders, pulled her to him. They stood facing one another, still, silent.

Jacob, watching them, felt alone, shut out of their world. For a few seconds his vision of them changed. Where two had stood, now stood only one, two halves come together to make one perfect whole. Shaking his head to clear his sight, Jacob heard Catherine laugh.

"Very well, Vincent, I will not go alone. I'll find the biggest, bravest policeman the department can offer to come and hold my hand."

Vincent growled. "***Not too handsome, I might get jealous.***" Laughing, they hugged each other briefly before breaking away as realization dawned that Jacob was still there.

"Father ... I am sorry ... We forgot ..."

"Hum ... yes ... well ... I'm glad that Catherine is not going alone, though I am not quite sure where she is not going alone to. Wait ..." he raised his hand to prevent Vincent's answer. "If there will be, as you say, danger, would it not be better for Catherine to go at night when you would be able to provide her protection?"

Vincent and Catherine's heads swivelled to look at each other before turning back to stare in disbelief at Jacob.

Before either could speak, a shocked "***Jacob!***" came from the entrance to Jacob's chamber. All three turned to see Mary standing there looking decidedly flustered.

"I ... I'm sorry, Jacob ... I was not eavesdropping," then with a touch of belligerence added, "I came to see if you were ready for your tea but I must say, ***that I think that idea - I'm sorry, Catherine - is one of the most...***"

Jacob silenced her with his, "***Mary!***"

A minute ticked by in silence as Jacob gazed down at a hole in his shawl, wondering where that one had come from. Finally, with a sheepish glance at them all, he raised his hands in a helpless gesture and said, "You are all quite right. The only excuse I can offer is that ... I wish no harm to come to Catherine. The loss to this community ... especially to Vincent, would be too great."

Catherine's hand tightened its grip around Vincent's fingers. He could feel the glow of happiness Jacob's words had instilled in her. He felt content in the knowledge that, at last, his Father had put into words what the community had long known, that Catherine was part of the family, the family that had opened its communal arms and welcomed her to its heart.

The policeman standing outside Jonathan Wellsby's office door reflected on his good fortune. Of all the officers in the station, Catherine Chandler had chosen him to accompany her. Nice easy job with the bonus of a beautiful lady to look after. Not that he wouldn't do a lot more for her if she asked. She always had a cheery greeting for him, always inquired about his wife and kids, even remembered their names. A real lady, that one.

The elevator doors hissed open. Turning his head, Sargeant Jordan watched to see who might come around the corner.

Standing by Jonathan Wellsby's desk in his inner sanctum, Catherine decided that, if there was anything concerning Vincent's birth, it would have to be in the locked drawer, the only one left to search. She had finished with the file lockers, there hadn't been much to go through. As Eleanor Baxter had explained, Mr. Wellsby was winding down his business prior to retirement. What was left, Eleanor herself would have to finish off, it being unlikely that he would be able to return to work.

Flipping through the bunch of keys she had obtained from Wellsby's personal effects, the third one she tried opened the drawer. It contained only one folder. *'CASSANDRA REYNOLDS----MOST PRIVATE,'* typed on the front. Picking it up with hesitant fingers, Catherine held it to her, eyes closed, before opening both her eyes and the folder. Soon engrossed in the contents, Catherine barely heard the sounds in the outer office. The smell of something burning caught her attention. Whirling around, she saw the first few tendrils of smoke snaking under the door. Cramming the folder into her purse, she ran and opened the door. Smoke billowed into the room, choking her. She fell to her knees, knowing the air would be clearer next to the floor.

Trying to remember the layout of the office, she crawled slowly forward, eyes stinging, mouth tightly closed against the fumes.

Why hasn't the sprinkler system come on? she wondered. *For that matter, where's the Sarge?* She quickened her pace, heading for where she thought the corridor door was. Her hand, searching for obstructions, came into contact with something hard, cloth-covered. *Well, I've found the Sarge.* Pulling herself up past the leg she had touched, she searched for his face, her eyes streaming from the smoke. Finding his head, she felt something wet, sticky, matting his hair. *Blood?* Knowing she couldn't help him by staying here, she crawled across his body, reckoning the door couldn't be far away. Locating it, she pulled at the handle. *Locked!* Standing up, she brought her purse up, glad she'd used the big one and banged it against the glass panel. It rebounded, nearly toppling her.

"Damn you!" she hissed.

She could feel the heat of the fire at her back as she tried again. This time the glass cracked. Hammering away with the corner of her purse, she managed to knock a hole in the glass then had to cover her face as the rest of it collapsed in.

Fresh air coming from outside made her realize how much smoke she had inhaled. Reaching through the gap, she prayed the key would be there. *'Thank God!'* Whoever had started the fire had obviously not expected her to reach the door, the key was there!

Hurriedly turning it, she pulled the door open then turned back to the Sargeant. She could see him now, the draught having blown most of the smoke through to the inner office. The fire itself burned brighter with the new influx of oxygen. Grabbing Sergeant Jordan by the shoulders, she tried to pull him to safety.

"Hell, Sarge, you'll have to lose weight!"

Getting a better grip on him, she was just about to try again, when two fur-covered hands came around her and pulled her away.

"I will take him. Leave this place, now."

"Vincent! Get out of here. Listen, there are people coming!"

Vincent took no heed of her words, instead picking up her erstwhile protector and carrying him out to safety.

"Please, Vincent, go now. I will come Below as soon as I can. Go!"

Gently laying down his burden, Vincent submitted himself to her pleas.

After one quick glance to see that his love had not taken harm, he raced down the corridor away from the advancing voices.

Catherine leaned back against the wall, her legs threatening to give way. *'Hurry, my love. Hurry,'* her thoughts winged after him.

"What the hell happened, Cathy? Jordan with a concussion, both of you nearly fried. You know, this is kinda gettin' monotonous ... You know it was started deliberately?"

"Yes, Joe. I did happen to get that idea. What happened to the sprinklers?"

"They'd been turned off, can you believe it? I thought nobody used that type anymore. **Who did it, Cathy?**"

The abrupt change of tone made her blink. "Why do you think I should know? Could have been a firebug getting his kicks."

"Radcliffe." Joe gave a fair imitation of a growl, sending Catherine's thoughts after Vincent, hoping him safe.

"Hey! I'm still here. And I'd like to know how you got Jordan out of that room by yourself. He's a hefty guy."

"I'm no feather-weight myself, Joe," she smiled.

Joe snorted, knowing she was hiding something. "Okay, Cathy, but you sure hide your muscles well. As to who the firebug was...?"

"I do have an idea who it may have been. Nothing to go on yet, though. Leave it with me, Joe."

"Okay, Radcliffe," he sighed. "But next time ... don't play with fire, huh?" She groaned at his joke. "Now, so you want a lift home? You should have a couple of days off, the doc said. You're lucky to have escaped with just smoke inhalation and that not so bad you have to stay in hospital. When I think of what might have happened ..." He shuddered, picturing this beautiful woman as a blackened corpse.

"Don't, Joe. It didn't happen. As you said, I was lucky. And yes, Joe, I would appreciate a lift home. Right after seeing if Jonathan Wellsby is okay. Have you sill got a guard on him?"

"Yeah, sure. C'mon then, he's only down the hall. I'd better come and vouch for you. Nobody, but nobody is getting near that old fella until all this is cleared up."

Vincent was waiting for her as she descended the ladder from her building's basement. She turned and went gladly into his arms. Looking up at him with a tear-stained face, she shook him, her small hands gripping his jerkin.

"Don't you ever do that again, Vincent, do you hear? I've never been so frightened..." she sobbed.

"What else could I have done, my love? You would not have left your policeman to burn."

"Of course not! I'm sorry, Vincent. I should have taken more care. If anything should have happened to you..."
She buried her face in his chest and his arms held her close, comforting her.

"You forget, my Catherine ... I have more to lose ... in you."

She tightened her hold around his waist and he could just hear her. "You'll never lose me."

He held her till he felt her sobs subside and her breathing return to normal. "Come now, Father wishes to make sure you are well."

"You told him?"

"I had no choice." Removing his hand from her waist, he raised it to show her the bandage that Father had insisted on wrapping it in.

"Vincent! You are hurt!" Is it bad? Let me see!"

"No, Catherine, it is not bad ... but if you remove the bandage I foresee trouble ... with Father."

"Oh. Is he angry with me? I promised him that no harm would come to you through me again."

"No, my love, he is not angry, how can he be? He is only grateful that we are both well."

"Well, come on then. I suppose I'd better let him lecture me and then I would just love a nice cup of tea. My throat is so sore!"

"May I suggest you rest it awhile? You should not talk so much if it pains you." Vincent ducked as Catherine swung her purse at him.

"Any more of that and you will not see what I've got in my purse. I'll shut up if you tell me how you got there and back in safety."

"Very well." As they travelled the tunnels, Vincent told her all about the basement entrance and the back stairs in the old building that they had been in, and how the tunnel dwellers had used that entrance for years without ever being seen.

"Ah, Catherine, my dear, come, sit down. What did the doctor say? You did see a doctor?"

"Yes, Father, I did. He said a couple of days rest and plenty to drink and I shall be fine." She walked across the room to where he stood by his large desk and took both his hands in hers. "I'm sorry, Father. I did not mean to expose Vincent to danger again."

Jacob sighed. "It was not your fault this time, my dear. We both know how headstrong Vincent can be, but even I ... did not expect him to ..."

"There is no question of *'fault'*, Father. If I choose to aid Catherine, it is nobody's *'fault'* but my own. The only thing that matters to me is for Catherine to be well. If I am taken ... the only danger will be to me. While I live, Catherine will be my main concern ... I will never bring harm to this community but ... if Catherine should die ... then I, too, will die."

"No! Vincent! You do not mean what you say, you can't." These tunnels are your home. These people are your family. Without them, you would have no place to go, no one to turn to. I love you, Vincent, with all that I am, with all that I will be, but don't you see, without these people, this place, there would be no us. You cannot turn from them, they need you ... and you need them. Look inside yourself, you know it is true." Catherine held him tight, willing him to understand.

"Catherine," she felt his claws under her chin, as he gently raised her head to look down into her face. "I do

know. Just as I know your love for me is real, as real as the sun I can never see. Your love is the sun to me. I do not wish to lose it."

"You won't, Vincent. You will never lose me, even if..."

"Even if what, Catherine?"

"Even if you wish to ... after you have discovered your legacy." Her eyes sparkled with tears. "Vincent, there is a letter from your mother ..."

"You have read it?"

"Of course not, it is addressed to you. What sort of wife would I be if ..."

"WIFE!" Jacob sputtered. "When did this happen? Why did you tell no one, what ...?"

"Father! Do not panic. We have not yet married. We were waiting for a solution to all this. Catherine, you have this letter with you?"

"Yes, I couldn't risk leaving it anywhere." She took it out of her purse and handed the sealed envelope to Vincent. "Father, would you like to come to the kitchen with me and ask William his ideas for a wedding feast?"

Jacob looked at Vincent standing there, the unopened letter held in shaking hands, turned to Catherine and said, "Certainly, my dear, and I think maybe, a nice cup of tea is called for. You sound a little husky. William does a nice up of herb tea that will soothe that for you."

Their progress down the tunnel came faintly to Vincent's ears. He gazed down at the envelope, reading the inscription.

TO THE SON OF CASSANDRA REYNOLDS

Slitting the envelope with a claw, his trembling fingers found the folded paper and drew it out. A feeling of excitement mingled with fear, shook him.

He groped his way to Jacob's chair and sat down quickly, fearing he would fall. Breathing deeply to calm himself, he opened the letter and started to read.

Catherine and Jacob sat at the big table in the kitchen, mugs of herb tea warming their hands. William, with his hands full of cookery books, joined them. "I never thought I'd see this day arrive. Wait till the others hear about this." His large frame quivered in his pleasure. "This'll be the best wedding ever. Everybody will want to be there. Dunno where all the food's gonna come from. Have you named the date yet?"

"Not yet, William. Slow down, it won't be for a while and, William, don't spread it around. We are not too sure it will happen. It all depends on Vincent's reaction to his mother's letter. Father, do you think I should have given it to him? It seemed the right thing to do."

Father reached out and patted Catherine's hand. "Don't worry, it is the only thing you could have done. He would not have thanked you for concealing it. This is something he must come to terms with himself. Now

drink up and we will have a look through these books that William so kindly brought us."

Vincent's eyes filled with tears as he gazed at the handwriting of the mother he had never known, how like his own it was. His eyes scanned the closely written sheets, frightened to go to the beginning, to read his origins. At last, he plucked up the courage and started.

To my only son;

How can I ask forgiveness? If you can only find it in your heart to believe how I have suffered for my wicked act in abandoning you, you may, just may, consider forgiving me. I don't know if this will ever reach you, or even if you would be able to read it. I don't even know if you still live. But if, by some miracle, you are reading this, I want you to know of my sorrow, my fears and my love. You will be indignant at a declaration of love from me, but nevertheless it is true. My son, the biggest mistake in my life was abandoning you. I have no excuse. Only my fear and ignorance. If I could try and explain. It will not undo what has gone, but it might help the future.

I wanted a child. As simple as that. I never married, but I wanted a child. I could have married, many times, but I was very rich and, from my earliest memories, I was told that men would only want me for my money. I was so lonely. I could have adopted a child. I should have, I suppose, but I wanted a child of my flesh. Part of me. Can you understand?

I was foolish. If I had known, I could have had a husband who loved me; had a family of my own. I didn't know. There was a boy, a solicitor's clerk. By the time I realized, it was too late. After I had you, I couldn't try and find happiness for myself. The guilt was too great.

I had heard of a doctor who was experimenting with what was called 'Virgin Births'. Nowadays they call it Artificial Insemination or Test Tube Babies and welcome it, but back then the Moral Guardians deemed it unholy. They condemned the practice, the doctor was hounded out of state, but not before I had the 'treatment.' I never knew what went wrong. He tried to explain, something about genes, blood types, experimental drugs. When you were born, I feared that he had used an animal to ... you understand? Whatever else you fear, you must know this, your father was human, YOU are human. Whatever caused your differences, there is no animal blood in you.

Now comes the hard bit. It was a difficult birth. I was frightened. I had never been with a man - I had no idea what was to happen. And then you came. How can I explain this? You were so tiny; so beautiful in spite of your differences. I held you. Then you were taken from me, so I could rest, they said. Later that night, I heard the whispers, Devil's Child, Witchcraft, Asylum. They assumed I was asleep; left me alone. I was so frightened. I got out of my bed and searched for you. You were in the cradle I'd bought you, in your nursery. It surprised me that they had put you there. I picked you up and heard footsteps outside the room. I don't know what happened then. All I can remember is finding myself outside in the cold with you still in my arms. I remember running. Not where I went. It was night but not dark because of the snow. I only had my nightclothes on, you were wrapped in thick blankets.

I must have passed out with the cold and exhaustion. When I came to, you were gone. I wandered about trying to find you and was picked up by a passing patrol car. They took me home, they knew who I was, of course. Everything was hushed up, for 'the family name.' I was ill for weeks, they thought I wouldn't pull through at one time. They told me later I kept calling for Jonathan. No one knew who I meant. I'm not too sure myself. It could have been my solicitor's clerk ... or it could have been you. I had made no conscious decision on a name for you, may be it was subconscious. I don't know. I did try to find you. I hired a private

detective, secretly. No one ever asked me what had happened to you. They must have thought I had lost all memory of you and didn't want to bring it back.

The detective traced my route that night, I don't know how. He found your blankets. They were in a pawn shop, would you believe? He thinks somebody found you, took your blankets and left you to die. It wouldn't have taken very long, he said. He told me that there was no hope, that you must be dead, that anyone finding a child such as I had described would either kill it or take it to the newspapers. So, you see, I abandoned the search, in effect, totally abandoning you. I have truly grieved. Please, my son, try to understand. Until lately, I believed you dead. I don't know why I think otherwise now.

You will have been in touch with Jonathan Wellsby for you to have received this letter. He is the only one I have faith in now. He would do anything for me; he loves me. He is the only one you must trust.

There is a nurse, calls herself Sister Moran. Keep away from her. She suspects about you. I fear I have been imprudent in talking of you.

I suspect this will be my last illness. I have made a will leaving all to you. Moran doesn't know about it. I believe she is after the money. If you are dead, I want the money to go to the people who need it the most, not Moran. Enough of such matters. If you are reading this, I hope you have had a good life and wish for you a better future. If you are dead, I will be joining you soon and, having written my confession down, will come to meet you with hope in my heart.

Remember, my son, alive or dead, I have always loved you.

In sorrow and hope

Your mother, Cassandra Reynolds

Catherine and Jacob, walking slowly up from the kitchen, heard Vincent's sobs. They looked at each other and quickened their pace. Jacob stopped in the doorway and let Catherine go in alone. She went silently to Vincent and, putting her arms around him, held him until his sobs subsided and his breathing calmed.

When she felt his arms snaking around her waist, pulling her tight to him, she whispered, "Vincent ...is it bad?"

She felt him shake his head. "No, Catherine, it is better than I ever dreamed." His voice shook. "My name ... should be ...Jonathan."

His body started shaking. Catherine thought he was crying until he lifted his head and smiled through his tears.

Bending forward, she gently kissed each tear away. "I much prefer Vincent." She smiled, happiness flooding through her, through him, his soul entwining with hers. Now there was no barrier. She gasped at the intensity of his feelings for her and he pulled her back down to him and kissed her with a passion she never thought possible.

"Ahem ... Am I interrupting anything? May I take it that you have had good news, Vincent?" Father stood just inside the entrance to his chamber, gazing with amused curiosity as Catherine and Vincent broke apart.

"Please come in, Father. Catherine and I will finish our ... discussion later ... in our chamber."

Jacob Wells raised an eyebrow at Catherine and said nothing. Catherine shrugged happily, also without words.

"Well, my boy, has your mother given you hope? By the looks on your faces, I see that question was uncalled for. Let me put it another way. Have you named the wedding day yet?"

With a laugh, Vincent said, "Do not worry, Father, you will be a grandfather one day."

"A grandfather? Vincent, I thought we agreed that you must never risk having children!"

"I will not be having them, Father. Catherine will."

Catherine choked on a laugh at the look on Jacob's face. Vincent's face was smug in the extreme.

"Vincent! This is no laughing matter. Don't you know how dangerous it could be ... Vincent, what exactly did that letter say?"

"Father, do you not know how private a personal letter is?" Vincent's side glance at Catherine made Jacob realize that he was being mocked. "Very well, if I am to have no privacy at all." With an exaggerated sigh, Vincent held the letter out to Father with one hand, picked Catherine up with the other, said, "If you want us, we will be in our chamber. Please knock before entering," and swept out of the room.

Arriving in Vincent's chamber, Catherine turned and went into his waiting arms. Time passed as they stood and held each other, each feeling the other's thoughts and emotions. There was no need for words. Lost together in the wonder of their happiness, neither at first heard the tap of Jacob's cane.

Only when he cleared his throat and tapped his cane loudly on the floor did they turn, as one, to the entrance.

"Yes, Father, what is it?" Vincent's voice was husky with emotion.

"May I enter, my dears?"

"Of course," Vincent's arm around Catherine's shoulders still held her tight to him. "Please, Father, come in and sit down."

Jacob came softly into the chamber, his eyes bright with unshed tears. He handed the letter to Vincent, who in turn handed it to Catherine. Jacob sat in Vincent's chair while the lovers sat on the bed.

"My dear Vincent, I don't know what to say. I feel, as you must, a little sadness, happiness ... and gratitude."

"Gratitude?"

"We have much to be grateful for, Vincent. Without this woman, your mother, we would not have you. And the fact that she wrote that letter, not knowing whether you lived, or if it would ever reach you, that shows such love, such a thoughtfulness, to let you know the truth of your birth. She regretted losing you but she never regretted having you."

Jacob's tears began their flow. As one, Vincent and Catherine left their seat and held Jacob and each other, tears coursing down each of their faces.

"Cathy! Hi! How's the throat?" Joe came over to where Catherine sat at her desk. "You know I called you but only got your machine. I thought you were supposed to be resting, huh?"

Catherine smiled. "I was, Joe, honest. I just stayed at a ... friend's. Tell me, how is Jonathan Wellsby?" she rushed in before he could pick up on her slight hesitation.

Joe's face broke into a grin. "The doc's report is encouraging. If Wellsby keeps on making progress, he'll be sitting up and talking by the end of the month."

"That's great, Joe, but ..."

"But what?"

"Can you see to it that any inquiries at the hospital get a different report? I mean, if they tried it once ..."

"Yeah, they just might try it again. Okay, Cathy. Good to see your smoke damage hasn't affected your brain. I'll get onto the hospital right away. No use taking chances even though we've still got a guard on him." Joe got up from his favourite perch, the corner of Catherine's desk, and had been put through to the hospital before he realized he'd forgotten to ask Cathy her suspicions of who the firebug was.

Catherine sat studying the two files she'd had pulled from the archives. One for Moran and one for Edwards, both cross-referenced to each other. Both thin, noting suspicious coincidences; nothing to take action against but enough to keep a wary eye on them. *How on earth did they get close to Vincent's mother with this against them? Surely they'd have been checked out first?* Catherine picked up her phone and started an inquiry of her own.

In an apartment not as luxurious as Catherine's, but much too expensive for the salary of a nurse, Evengeline Moran paced the floor, biting at her fingers. Stopping every now and again, she stared at the phone, willing it to ring. ***"Where the hell is that man?"*** He can't have been caught or I'd have been taken. He can't be dead, I'd have heard. What am I going to do? I can't even think straight till I know what's happened to him."

Flinging herself into a chair she cursed her stupidity in not making sure the Chandler woman was dead. Well at least she'd got rid of all the evidence. *You can't read ashes.* She started laughing.

Richard Edwards looking with lack-lustre eyes. Catherine felt a twinge of irritation. *Has this man no backbone?* she thought. *Another man would have fought to break free.* Instead of voicing these thoughts, she turned to the man beside her and asked, "How long has he been like this?"

"Ever since Vincent brought him along, Ma'am." The soft drawl together with his leather waistcoat and boots proclaimed his Texan origins. "He won't eat or drink an' if he couldn't help it, I reckon he'd refuse to sleep an' all."

"He hasn't spoken?"

"No, Ma'am, sure hasn't. Forgive me askin', Ma'am, but how long will you be wantin' him here? Can't say I'd relish having a dead body about the place."

"Until I get some answers from him, I can't risk letting him go. If you're really worried, I'll ask Father if there's a safe place that won't jeopardize any of the Helpers."

"That's another thing, Ma'am. You can't let him go. He's seen Vincent."

"Don't worry," she put her hand on his sleeve and smiled up at him. "We'll work something out about that."

"Miss Chandler?"

Catherine turned to Richard Edwards, shocked at the change in his voice. "Yes. Are you ready to speak?"

"Can you promise me that Evangeline can't get at me? It's been so long that I've been with her ... I'm scared of her, you know. I've been scared for a long time. If you can promise she can't get at me ... I'll tell you everything ... everything ... all those poor women..." His voice trailed off, then, "Can I have a drink, please? I'm so thirsty."

Jonathan Wellsby opened his eyes to an alien landscape. Blinking his eyes brought them back into focus and he realized that he was lying in a hospital room. Raising his head brought a stab of pain that caused a low moan to escape from his lips. From the corner of the room which the dimmed light of the lamp didn't reach, came the sound of a movement, quickly stilled.

"Who's there?" Did he say it or only think it? It didn't sound like his voice.

"Do not be afraid. I mean you no harm." The voice from the shadows soothed Jonathan's fears.

Gravel lined with velvet, yet so strong it gave him strength to ask, "Who are you? Come into the light, I can't see you."

"It is not advisable as yet. My appearance may cause you fear. My name is Vincent. I believe that you have been looking for me."

"Vincent?" Jonathan whispered. "Are you ... you are ... Cassandra's son?"

"I believe it to be so."

"And you have come to me? How did you know?"

"That can be explained at a later time. I have come because ... I sense danger. I have come to protect you ... in any way I can."

"Danger to me? Why should there be any danger? I have hurt no one."

"You do not know why you are here? Can you remember nothing?"

"I ... I had not realized. My head hurts. Did I ...? Of course ... I fell! No, that's not quite right. I was pushed! Now I remember. I was nearly home. I saw the gate swinging open and I went to close it. It was always kept locked. How did it come open? That's all I remember except ... hands on my back ... pushing ... seeing the area steps rising up above me..."

Jonathan stopped abruptly, putting his hands over his face. Feeling the bandages about his head and a tug on his arm, he looked up at the drip tube and followed it with his eyes up to the bottle hanging from the stand at the side of his bed; then at the heart monitor with its dot of light that beeped its way across the screen.

"I wasn't supposed to live, was I?"

"No."

Jonathan Wellsby looked slightly affronted at the brevity of Vincent's reply then, realizing it was his lawyer's love of speech that was piqued, his face relaxed into a slight smile.

"I am grateful for your honesty. I would be more grateful if I could see to whom I owe that honesty. Will you step forward into the light, Vincent? I promise I will not be afraid."

Vincent hesitated, then slowly took a pace forward, drawing his cloak more closely around his hugeness. Jonathan let out a gasp and sank further into the bed. Vincent stepped back, lowering his head.

"No, Vincent. Don't go. Please, come closer." Jonathan started to cry, tears glistening in the lamplight. "It's all been such a shock, you see. Finding that Cassandra had a son. Learning of its ... differences. Now ... waking up here," he gestured to the room, "And finding you here ... to protect me." His last few words were muffled, his eyes closed of their own volition. Vincent stepped close to the bed and put his hand on top of Jonathan's.

"Sleep now. We will speak later."

Jonathan grasped Vincent's hand, smiled, then slept. Vincent moved back to the corner and stood, hidden by a

screen and the darkness, patiently waiting.

A nurse in a white uniform walked briskly up the corridor toward the policeman who stood guard outside Jonathan Wellsby's room. Looking at the watch pinned to the breast of her uniform, she came to a halt in front of the policeman and waved the tray she carried under his nose.

"Medication for Mr. Wellsby."

"Sorry ma'am, I've got orders not to let anyone in except the doc."

"Tut, I know all about that but I gotta give him these tablets before I can knock off for the night. Come on, if I can get off early I might be able to see my kids before they go to sleep for a change."

"All right. I suppose it's okay. You sure he's got to have these tablets? I don't recall him having them before."

"That's cause he was unconscious before. It's what's on my list here, look for yourself."

"No, I guess you're right. Go on in, then." So saying, he opened the door for her and Sister Evangeline Moran passed through.

Catherine's arm snaked out and switched on the bedroom lamp. Flinging the covers back she climbed out of bed. The thought of Vincent's plan to guard Jonathan Wellsby kept her from sleep. Slipping on a t-shirt, jeans and sneakers, she flicked a comb through her hair, picked up her jacket and purse and headed out of the apartment.

In the car, the sleep that eluded her now threatened to claim her. The hypnotic effect of the windscreen wipers combined with the glitter of headlights through the rain, closed her eyes more than once. *Now I know how Janet Leigh felt in PSYCHO*, she thought. It was with relief that she pulled onto the hospital parking lot. After locking her car shut, she stood for a minute in the rain, letting its cold clean feel wash away her tiredness. Finally, with a shiver, she entered the sterile atmosphere of the hospital that had given Vincent his name.

A shaft of light crossed the floor as the door to Jonathan Wellsby's room opened. Vincent heard the murmur of the policeman's voice that receded as the door whispered shut. Soft footfalls replaced the silence. Vincent's instincts jangled a warning. Moving silently around the screen, Vincent stood in shadow and watched.

This was the woman that Catherine and his mother had warned him about, the woman that had already attempted the life of the elderly man who now lay helpless in his bed. How he knew it, Vincent didn't know, but he was sure.

A strange whispering sound interspersed with a mad chuckle came to his ears. He realized that it came from the lips of the woman in front of him.

Soon, words became clear. "Now don't you worry, my dear, Sister Moran will soon make you better. You'll soon be where you belong. Don't you know that all good boys go to heaven? It shouldn't take long, my dear. It won't even be painful. There we are, dearie, a nice syringe full of good clean air. One good air bubble in your vein to produce a nice fat embolism in your brain. D'you hear that, dear, I'm a poet and I don't know it."

She gave a muted giggle and stepped from the table where she'd placed her tray and moved to the bedside. In rubber gloved hands she held a syringe. To Vincent's eyes it looked more deadly than a loaded gun. As her hand reached out to grasp Jonathan Wellsby's arm, Vincent's hand came down on top of hers. Jerking round she glared at Vincent. She showed no surprise.

"So, you are alive. And just as ugly as I'd expected. Well, you won't be getting the money. I've worked too hard for it. You listening to me?" she ended on a whispered scream.

"I do not want the money."

"Liar! Of course you do. Why else would you be here? What would a freak like you do with it anyway? You can't have it, it's mine, mine, MINE! You hear, freak!" She pulled her arm from Vincent's grasp and raised the syringe. **"If you're dead, you can't claim it!"** She lunged at Vincent.

Leaving wet sneaker marks on the clean floors, Catherine moved purposely down the corridor towards Jonathan Wellsby's room. Digging her ID out of her purse, she asked the guard if Mr. Wellsby had regained consciousness yet.

"Well, Miss ... Chandler, couldn't really say, but the nurse in there with him might be able to help. Do you wanna go in? It's all right, Miss, I've had orders to let you in."

"Thanks, but I don't want to disturb the nurse" She broke off as a scream of rage from inside the room penetrated the door. Pushing forward, she flung open the door to see Moran attacking Vincent. Turning to keep the policeman from seeing inside she said, "Hurry, fetch the doctor for Mr. Wellsby!"

The policeman was gone and Catherine turned back into the room to see Moran kicking and struggling, her wrists caught high in Vincent's hands. The syringe lay smashed on the floor. In as few words as possible, Vincent told Catherine what had happened.

"All right, Vincent, but you must go. The officer is fetching help. I'll take care of her. Hurry!"

Vincent released Moran's wrists and stepped back. Moran immediately leapt at him, fingers bent like talons to rake at his face. Catherine took one long pace forward and brought her bent arm up so that her elbow caught Moran just behind and below her ear. Moran crumpled to the floor like a rag doll, narrowly missing the bed.

The window was barely closed behind Vincent's departure, when the door was open again flung open and the policeman entered preceded by the doctor.

"What is going on here? This patient is not to be disturbed." The doctor's eyes moved from his patient to Catherine and came to rest on Moran's inert figure. "Well!"

"This woman is to be put under arrest as soon as she regains consciousness. She is the person who made the attempt on Mr. Wellsby's life which landed him in here, and I have just caught her trying to finish the job." She turned to the policeman. "Will you call your precinct and have them send a couple of detectives over. The charges will be attempted murder and first degree murder on multiple counts."

The doctor turned from his examination of Jonathan Wellsby and stared down at Moran's body as though at an alien lifeform.

"I know it happens, but I never thought I'd ever be in the presence of a serial killer. It's funny, but she looks just like a normal person, doesn't she?" Without waiting for an answer he said, "By the way, Wellsby's all right, he's sleeping normally now. Should be awake by morning, if not sooner. Lucky for him you came when you did. Exactly why did you come at this hour, Miss ...?"

"Chandler. Catherine Chandler of the DA's office. I don't know. I had a hunch, maybe. I've been working on this case and..." She shrugged.

"I'm glad I'm not the only one to take notice of hunches," the doctor smiled at Catherine. "As soon as she's been picked up I'll treat you to a coffee, guaranteed to keep you awake, and we can exchange stories of hunches we have heeded."

"Now that's an offer I can't refuse!" laughed Catherine.

Jonathan Wellsby blinked, as his eyes took in the homely comfort of Jacob Wells' study. Unbelievable to think that he was so far under the city. Jacob himself stood and came forward to meet him.

"Mr. Wellsby, it is good of you to come. I trust that you are fully recovered and your journey has not tired you too much. Come, sit down, I have tea ready. I told Vincent that it was too much to ask of you..."

"Please, call me Jonathan, and yes, I am tired, but it is a good tiredness. It is three months since I left the hospital and I get so weary of being fussed over at home. My Mrs. Madison, you know."

"Yes, yes, I know exactly what you mean. My Mary, you know." They both chuckled, feeling a kinship. "Well, Jonathan, how much has Vincent told you of our life down here?"

"Pretty well everything, I should imagine. I really enjoyed his visits. It was very good of him to give up so much of his time for me, especially when I realized how he and Miss Chandler felt for each other."

"Call me Catherine, please."

Jonathan turned to see Catherine enter the chamber, closely followed by Vincent

"Ah, Vincent. I wondered where you had disappeared to. It was not very courteous to leave Mr. Wellsby to enter a strange place alone."

"I am sorry, Father, but I felt Catherine's presence in our chamber and..."

"Yes, I know, my boy. Welcome, Catherine. Come and join us and tell us your news."

Catherine waited for Vincent to seat himself then perched on the arm of his chair. After accepting her tea, she began. "As you know, this case being a cause celebre, a certain part of Moran's testimony has been picked up by the newspapers. That part being Vincent. The papers have had a field day, virtually ignoring the murders and concentrating on speculation whether Vincent does exist, or is merely a figment of a lunatic's imagination. I'm afraid I have had to commit perjury in a court of law. As I was the only witness to Moran's fight with Vincent, I was able to deny that he was there and, the fact that she is obviously medically insane, means that once all the papers print retractions of Vincent's existence, he will be safe again."

"What will happen to Moran? I mean, she can't be convicted for her crimes if she is insane."

"Correct. But, as she was fully compos mentis when she committed the crimes, she will be locked away in an

asylum for the rest of her days. With Edwards' evidence, we have found proof of seven similar cases where Moran nursed an elderly woman with no relatives and killed each one after forging a will in her favour. She used a different name for each of them, otherwise we might have got onto her before she could get near Vincent's mother. By the way, she told me that she had been with Miss Reynolds for five years. It turns out that she was with her for less than six months, after the former nurse died in an accident. I'm beginning to wonder if that was her work too. As for Edwards, once he started talking we couldn't stop him. It's quite common for someone who has lived in fear so long to break down and give evidence against themselves. Would you believe, he had a written record of everything, all the crimes they had committed. He had reason to fear Moran. If she had known about his diaries she would surely have killed him. I've never seen a man so happy to be convicted of murder. We have no need to worry what he might say. He knows that if he talks about Vincent, he'll be sent to the same asylum as Moran. If only..."

"My dear, you must not believe that you have failed. This woman is an evil, a cancerous growth that you have removed from the world. You have succeeded in saving the lives of other women that Moran might have battened herself on," Jacob reddened, conscious of his flight of fancy.

Catherine smiled at him. "I know, Father. I just wish that it had happened before Vincent's mother died. It would have been wonderful for the two of them to have met." She reached down and squeezed Vincent's hand.

Taking his cue, Jonathan Wellsby cleared his throat and spoke to Vincent. "I have done what you asked concerning your mother's will, Vincent. There are a lot of people, poor people, who will benefit a great deal from Cassandra's wealth. The city is deciding on either a plaque or a statue to honour its greatest benefactor," he added drily. "It was suggested that the money to be used should be invested in our schools but, you know the City Fathers." Jonathan shrugged then went on in a placatory tone.

"I know you had trouble down here before when treasure was discovered, but, if someone were to buy things, clothes, food, blankets, medicines, books; just necessities, would that be looked on with disfavour?" Without waiting for an answer he rushed on, "You see, Cassandra left a small legacy for me and, as I have more than I will ever need, I thought that she would not mind me using it to help all of those who love and protect her son."

Jacob reached out his hand to Jonathan, tears starting from his eyes. "My dear Jonathan. How very kind you are. Of course we would not be offended. If you are absolutely sure that is what you wish, we can only be thankful."

"I am sure, and I am sure that Cassandra would wish it too. When I discovered that I was in her will, I couldn't believe it. I didn't even know that she had made a will. Knowing that I couldn't benefit if I had drawn it up for her, she had seen another solicitor. She was such a kind, thoughtful person. I only wish that you could have known her." He sighed and looked at Vincent.

"I do know her, Jonathan. From her letter, from your talk of her. I am happy to be her son. Just as Catherine is happy to become her daughter. We would be honoured if you were to be our guest on that day." Turning to Jacob, he continued. "Father, we have chosen the time. If you will excuse us, we have many things to arrange." He stood, pulling Catherine with him.

As they left the chamber, Jacob spoke to Jonathan.

"I am so very grateful to Miss Reynolds. Without her, we would not have Vincent. Without her letter, Vincent would not be realizing his dream." He wiped away a tear. "Now, I must explain the custom down here." He and Jonathan engrossed themselves in talk of the forthcoming wedding.

Vincent and Catherine walked slowly, hand in hand.

"You have no regrets?"

"Only if I ever lost you."

Jonathan Wellsby stood and stared at the people who filled the Great Hall. So many, all with tears of happiness or faces wreathed in smiles for this wonderful occasion they were attending. The hall itself was decked with flowers, their scent accentuated by the heat of the candles that filled the hall with light. The deep colours of the tapestries that lined the walls made a fitting background for the glowing finery of the assembled guests.

Turning back, he bent a benevolent gaze upon the bride and groom. Standing in front of Jacob, Vincent's hugeness emphasized Catherine's frailness yet, strangely, they complimented each other. Catherine was radiant in her mother's wedding gown, close fitting white satin and lace, showing off her slender figure. A single red rose was held in her free hand. Her other hand was held by Vincent who looked magnificent in a black satin waistcoat over a white ruffled shirt. His hair flowed over his shoulders like a burnished copper waterfall. Black satin trousers and high black leather boots completed his outfit. In Vincent's free hand was a single white rose.

Jonathan sighed. *'If only Cassandra were here, she would be so proud. To see the love that flowed from everyone here for her son and his bride. If only she could know what a wonderful man her son had grown into.'* He blinked back a tear as the couple exchanged their vows.

As Vincent slipped the ring onto Catherine's finger, Jonathan felt a small hand slip into his. His fingers tightened around it. As Vincent and Catherine's lips met, Jonathan lowered his eyes to hide his feelings. Looking down, he expected to see his hand curled around a child's. There was nothing there. A warm feeling spread up his arm and invaded his whole body. He raised his head to see Vincent and Catherine looking at him with loving smiles.

The invisible fingers tightened in his. Cassandra knew, all right. Oh yes, Cassandra knew.

END