

MUCH ADO ABOUT VERY LITTLE

by Catherine Edwards

(from Great Expectations 1993 CONZINE)

"I'm a sentimental idiot," Catherine chastised herself as she swung down the slim ladder to the cavern floor. A quick duck into an alley and down a perfectly ordinary manhole had shaved precious time off her pilgrimage to uptown New York. She walked through the shaded silence of Below and smiled at her own whimsy.

Sentimental, true. Idiot - not necessarily, she defended herself. After all, weddings are *supposed* to be sentimental, aren't they? Especially weddings of old friends who were madly, passionately in love ...

Vincent would appreciate the irony - better than anyone - that love sometimes bloomed in the most unexpected places, for the most unexpected reasons. Out of a genuine concern for Catherine's welfare and happiness, two old friends had conspired to keep the single mother blues from getting her down - and found each other in the process. It seemed too good to be true, but if Catherine Chandler had learned anything these past few, magical years, it was that happy endings don't defy any of the laws of nature, and have a blessedly common tendency to manifest with the slightest encouragement.

Shopping, which she had come to regard as something of a chore, was a genuine delight when the gift in question, and the recipient of said gift, was as special as Jenny Aronson. Jenny - getting married in a week! It was hard to imagine, and the sense of wonder and serendipity surrounding it made Catherine giddy. She felt like turning cartwheels, but settled for skipping merrily for a few lengths, her bags swinging crazily with the movement. Heedless of her cargo, Catherine hurtled round the corner, startling a couple on a quiet walk in the far tunnel reaches. She didn't even attempt an explanation, waving merrily at Johann and Donna as she passed, but kept on going toward Vincent, and Jacob, and home.

The phone had to be here somewhere -he could hear it ringing. Joe Maxwell found the cord and followed it through the sheaves of paper on the desk to its source, answering it in the middle of the sixth shrill ring.

"Maxwell, Deputy D.A.," he said into the phone before it had quite reached his ear.

"Pop quiz," the voice on the other end of the line said immediately. "What eminent city official has just stood up his fiancée in the enticing atmosphere of Monk's deli and bate emporium on the corner?"

He looked at his watch and started violently. "Oh, geez, Jenny," he said apologetically. "I had no idea it was so late ..."

"If you don't know what time it is, it's later than you think," Jenny teased unmercifully. In the quiet, Joe could hear her smile. He smiled back, imagining the doe-brown eyes dark and twinkling with humor, her cheeks flushed prettily.

"Hang on, sweetheart," Joe said, shouldering into his coat. "I'll be there in a minute."

He reached for his car keys and realized they were still in his suit jacket - which was still on the back of his chair. He shouldered out of the coat, into the jacket, and tried to slink the coat over his shoulders Dick Tracy style.

"I should remember that never works," Joe thought absently, while he started the whole process over.

Running for public office had taken a large slice of Joe's life, but he was determined that the work itself wouldn't suffer while he was out promising that the work wouldn't suffer while he was in office.

"Wait," Jenny said hastily. "Don't rush over here just to meet me for a sandwich. I'll catch a tax ..."

"... to my place?" Joe said hopefully.

"Well ..." Her voice was doubtful. "You've probably got a boatload of work, and I really meant to go over this new grant proposal before the meeting ..."

"Bring it with you."

"Oh, but ..."

"Please? Come over tonight. I can't promise you neat, but I'll shovel you out a place on the couch and pour you a cup of bad coffee. I'll bet there's even some pasta in the fridge."

"The pasta in your fridge has gone past the point of no return - right into rigor mortis," Jenny laughed, then, "Are you sure? I mean, it's not like I don't see you - on the TV, in the newspapers ... You're sure I won't be in the way?" She trailed off, waiting for his answer.

His voice was very solemn. "I can promise you the phone won't bother you."

"I'll see you soon."

Catherine peeked around the corner of the door and smiled at Vincent. She was breathless from her skipping, and her hair fell around her shoulders in appealing disarray. She stuck her lower lip out and blew the wisps back from her eyes.

"I was skipping," she said solemnly. "Am I too late for supper?"

Vincent smiled. "Not quite," he said. He stood and made as if to take the packages from her hands. She dropped them onto a chair and stepped forward, lifting her arms to his neck and standing on tiptoe to kiss him enthusiastically, still exhilarated from her trip.

Vincent returned her kiss with interest, pleased to see her in such a light mood. The marriage of her friends had been a source of great pleasure to her, and he found her joy in their union contagious. Reluctantly, he pulled free and steered her down the shadowed hall. Catherine slipped an arm around his waist, loving the warm solid feel of him against her side, and beamed up at him.

"Jacob's with Father?"

"Mm hmm," Vincent murmured. "I wanted to wait for you, so Father graciously consented ..."

"As if we could stop him," Catherine interjected.

"... to see that a reasonable proportion of the food on Jacob's plate ends up *in* him - not *on* him."

Catherine chuckled. She loved the fact that Jacob could spend his days in blissful security with his Father, Grandfather and greatly-extended extended family while her work called for her attention. Her friends praised her good fortune at finding a "nanny" who was so willing to work unusual hours, but

few of them envied her role as a single parent.

"If only they knew," Catherine thought with a smile.

She marvelled, not for the first time, at the way the cares and troubles of the day slipped away like an old skin when she stepped Below. She felt curiously light, reborn and redeemed in the love of her family. She could bask in that love for the rest of her life and never care what the world thought.

"And how was your day?" Vincent asked, feeling her deep contentment and exhilaration over the wedding to come. "Did you find a gift for your friend?"

"The day was long, but I found something perfect for Jenny," Catherine said happily. "I must have gone to a dozen stores before I found the right thing. But it's beautiful and ... oh! Do you remember me asking you if anyone knew of a store that carried ..."

Their voices were lost in the hush of the tunnels, drowned by the stillness of the thick stone walls, as they walked toward the sound of food and good friends and family.

"This is a wonderful idea," Jenny said with a sigh. She looked around the diner fondly, picking up the strains of a blues song from the radio blaring in the corner. "No one will think of looking for us here."

"I thought solitude might be appealing right about now," Catherine said with a rueful smile. "How are you holding up?"

"From the campaign - fine," Jenny said promptly. "From the wedding plans - frantic. That's why this was such a good idea - everything that isn't done by now probably won't *get* done, but I've gotten pretty philosophical about it. Did I tell you I heard from Nancy?"

"No!" Catherine cried eagerly. "Is she coming?"

"No - she can't. Cathy, she's in Paris studying photography."

At Catherine's incredulous look, Jenny giggled. "Really - she won a scholarship for women going back to school to study the arts. She'll be in Paris for another two weeks, then come back to finish her studies. It's what she always wanted."

"I can't believe it."

"Believe it - it's a bona fide happy ending. Speaking of which, how are things with you?"

"Good," Catherine said emphatically. "Life is very good. Work is, well, work - everything's crazy because of the campaign, of course - and one of our interns just accepted an offer to go and fetch coffee for one of the big firms downtown, but the rest of my life seems ... peaceful." It was a word she'd once thought permanently stricken from her vocabulary. Catherine smiled, biting her lower lip. "At least, as peaceful as life ever gets with Jacob."

"He's so big now," Jenny gushed. "I can't believe how well he's walking already."

"I know, and into everything. I have safety-latched everything in the apartment except my purse." She didn't say anything about the rocking horse that Cullen and Vincent had painstakingly constructed, for it would never grace a room in the world Above. She didn't mention the new, shorter passage from the east outpost to the common chamber, or Mouse's moderately-successful attempts at installing a cooling system in the great kitchen. Those things weren't a part of Jenny's world, and Catherine couldn't share them, no matter how much she longed to do so.

"How's house-hunting?" she asked. "What have you found?"

"We've found we're too busy to be house-hunting," Jenny said matter-of-factly. "When the campaign is over, we'll look. Joe's going to move in with me for a few months - then we'll see."

"What - you're not moving into *his* place?" Catherine said innocently. They giggled like schoolgirls, glad for the camaraderie.

"You know, it's funny," Jenny said slowly. She watched the tea swirl in the bottom of her mug as though she could read her future in the leaves. "When we met, I never even considered Joe was the one who ... I mean, that we could ..." She bit her lip to stop her rambling and smiled before starting over. "I just didn't *expect* to fall in love with him, Cath. He was just your boss, your friend - *my* friend. I never imagined, with all our differences ...

"Joe took me to my first hockey game. I watched almost all of it through my fingers. When I took him to his first multi-million-dollar art exhibit, he did pretty much the same thing. But - I feel so alive when I'm with him, like I'm seeing everything for the first time because I'm seeing it *with* him. Does that make any sense, Cathy? Do you know what I mean?"

"I know," Catherine said softly. She thought of Vincent, and the gift of seeing she'd received from him. "Believe me, I know."

"And I know that this *is* the right thing - the real thing, because underneath our skin, we're alike - we're the same. All that angst turned out to be ..." She groped for words.

"Much ado about nothing?" Catherine prompted.

Jenny nodded emphatically. "Yes! Just manufactured excuses - barriers that we imposed on ourselves. Falling in love with Joe was just so ... unexpected." Jenny made a rueful face. "You have to admit he's not exactly the sort of guy my mother expected me to bring home."

Catherine smiled. "Your mother would want you to be happy."

"My mother wanted me to marry Lenny Kaswaski."

There was a startled pause. "You're making that up," she accused.

"I'm not. Honest - she thought he was wonderful - class valedictorian, business major. I understand he's a millionaire - with three kids and three ex-wives."

"Four, I hear," Catherine said merrily. "And I think that pretty well blows his chances for a parental seal of approval. Your mother would have liked Joe - I know she would have. She'd think Joe was wonderful because he makes you happy."

Jenny smiled, her dark eyes glowing under long lashes. "Oh Cath," she said softly, "he really does."

"Boy, Radcliffe, you sure can pick 'em." Joe glanced bemusedly around the diner, taking in the less-than-posh decor. His sudden appearance startled them both, and they looked up guiltily.

"Sorry I'm late. Hi, honey." He bent to kiss Jenny's upturned lips quickly, then quickly again. She slid over in the booth to make room for him while he aimed a kiss at Catherine's cheek and got a mouthful of hair for his trouble.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" Joe asked her solemnly. "You look an awful lot like someone who *used* to work in my office ..."

"One day," Catherine defended indignantly. "I took off one vacation day in the past four months and ..."

The waitress arrived, interrupting the familiar banter long enough to take orders, then left them to their squabbles. Before the argument could start again, Catherine produced two exquisitely-wrapped presents from the bag at her feet.

"Gifts for both of you," she beamed. She thrust one at Jenny and the other at an openly suspicious Joe.

"Radcliffe ..."

"Cathy - you shouldn't have."

"At least wait till you open it to decide," Catherine sniffed. "*Then* if you don't want it ..."

Jenny made short, tidy work of the stiff white paper, the frothy white bow carefully collected and tucked away, while Joe and Catherine looked on in bemused silence.

"I never know what to expect from you," Jenny accused, carefully removing the tape with an expertly manicured fingernail. "Your gifts are always so ... Oh, Cath, it's ... it's ... I can't believe how gorgeous it is."

She reached out tentatively and touched the shimmering pool of fabric, admiring the tiny tucks and delicate lace of the nightgown. "Oh my goodness - it's silk! And there's a robe to go with it and everything." She lifted it from the box by the thin lace straps and let it flow from the careful folds. It was the most beautiful, beguiling nightgown that Jenny had ever seen.

Joe cleared his voice carefully. "Are you, uh, sure that isn't *my* gift, Radcliffe?" he began.

Jenny blushed and shot him a warm, teasing look. "Mother tried to warn me about Italian boys," she said lightly. "Now it's your turn. Open your gift."

"I'm a little afraid to, after that," Joe admitted frankly. "No his-and-hers stuff, Radcliffe," he said sternly. "I'm strictly a cotton underwe ... a cappuccino maker? Really?" He looked at Catherine quizzically, puzzled by her beaming face and knowing look. "Why are you looking at me like that, Cathy? Is there underwear in this box?"

"I would never buy my boss underwear," she retorted, mustering as much dignity as the situation warranted. "It's really a cappuccino maker. I think that's precisely what the new district attorney needs in his office."

"Don't start counting your chickens, Radcliffe," Joe said sternly. "The election is still six weeks away, and I'm not exactly burying the competition. Besides, if you think I'm going to be easier on you if I get elected ..."

"*When* you get elected ..."

"Okay, when I get elected, then ..."

"Oh, I get it, Joe," Jenny interrupted suddenly. "Our first date."

"Huh?"

"Our first date. The first time that we went out, you took me out for cappuccino. We talked half the night - until the cafe closed at two. That's it, isn't it Cath?" She turned to Catherine for confirmation.

Catherine nodded serenely, pleased that Jenny had recognized the significance of her gift. She and Jenny had chronicled the major events of each other's lives since preschool - from scraped knees and awful sixth-grade crushes to professional troubles and the deaths of parents.

"First dates are important," Catherine said simply.

"It's great, Radcliffe. I love it." Joe leaned across the table and managed to plant a kiss on her cheek. "It's all your fault, you know. Without you, that first date never would have happened." He turned and smiled at Jenny, his eyes bright with emotion. "That date was the best thing that ever happened to me."

Joe raised his glass and they toasted, glasses tinkling merrily.

"To first dates," Catherine saluted. Jenny smiled, and her eyes spoke volumes to her childhood friend. She lifted her glass to join the others. and her toast was simple.

"To friends."

The night was finally theirs. Catherine had tucked a drowsy Jacob into his bed, crooning until his dark lashes flickered shut and he slipped into slumber. While Vincent worried the worn pages of the Bard, Catherine went to shed her public self and its accoutrements and make the transformation into wife and lover.

"Vincent?" Catherine's voice sounded clearly from the other room, but something in her tone made Vincent pause and start to his feet. She'd been restive since her return from Above, imbued with some suppressed excitement which he had put down to anticipation of the wedding. He wondered now if it were something more.

"Catherine, is ..."

"I did something sort of silly today," she said hesitantly. "I don't know what got into me but, yesterday, when I was out shopping with Jenny - feeling giddy because of the wedding and ... I saw a lot of, um, interesting things that I thought might ... um ... well. I went back today and ... bought something for myself."

Vincent's anxiety faded and he settled back in his chair. "You know that how you spend your money is entirely up to you," he reassured her. "What did you find?"

"It's not very practical," Catherine said doubtfully. "In fact, it's not practical at all, and I really had no intention of buying anything like this, but I ..." She stepped into view, modelling for him. "Do you like it?"

Vincent's first thought was that there wasn't much of it, followed immediately by the second - that what *was* there was sheer. He couldn't seem to think of anything to say, and the room felt suddenly warm. He was on his feet, the book on his knee forgotten, as though it had never been.

Catherine stood before him shyly, wondering what his reaction to this bit of sheer fancy would be. Her hair fell softly across her shoulders, shading her face a little, and she bit her lower lip to hide her nervousness. The look on his face told her that her trepidation about his reaction was completely unjustified. *How* she came to Vincent was less important to him than the gift of her presence. That knowledge moved her almost more than she could bear.

"You look ... lovely," Vincent said, his voice a soft, sibilant whisper in the intense quiet of the room. "Like an angel - like the answer to a prayer I've half-forgotten." He took a deep breath and held it, as though he couldn't seem to get enough air, and the desire in his blue eyes sent a shiver of pleasure down Catherine's spine.

"You were the answer to all my prayers," she said huskily. "Everything I needed, everything I could ever want."

He was beside her in an instant, gathering her into his arms and pressing her sweet form to his chest. Catherine let out a shaky breath, holding onto him with all her strength. The intensity of her desire almost overwhelmed her, and she drank in the sight of the love in his eyes, as though her very life depended on memorizing every beautiful line and curve of his visage.

Vincent reached out tentatively and ran his thumb across the high arch of one cheekbone, down the smooth, pale column of her throat. The thin straps of the gown only emphasized the creamy lushness of her shoulders, the unbelievable perfection of her skin.

"What a miracle you are," he murmured, lost in the emerald depths of her eyes. "Living on the threshold between our worlds to carve a place for me - a place for us."

"If I can't have you in my world, Vincent, I'll make a new one - a world that we can share. The life we have together is more important to me than anything - than everything." Catherine turned her face up to his, and her eyes were bright and resolute. "I love you, Vincent, and I belong with you. Wherever you are - that's where I'll be. Nothing in your world or mine could ever change that."

Her lips were very close to his. It was no effort at all to bend and taste their sweetness, drawing her slight form closer. Her arms slipped around his neck, tangling in the thick golden tresses, and she felt the deep, quickened thud-thud of his heart against her ribcage. Every sense was singing, and Catherine knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this - this was what she lived for - the single perfect moment of certainty found only in Vincent's embrace. She could feel that certainty humming along the bond, binding them, drawing them ever closer.

In one swift motion, Vincent swept her up into his arms, carrying her the short distance to their room. The world and all its cares were forgotten. Tonight, at least, there would be no barriers between them.

Joe leaned back in the tiny booth and stretched his arm across the orange vinyl. Jenny leaned back against him, turning her face up to his. Her eyes were dark and languid, infinitely serene, and she smiled at him in a way that made everything right with the world.

"You know, I never told you this," Joe said thoughtfully, his mind's eye focused on some absent problem, "but I've always had a hunch that there was a man in Cathy's life - one particular man."

"Mm hmm," Jenny said thoughtfully. "I know what you mean."

"I've thought about this for a long time and - I think I know who he is."

She turned to stare at him in surprise. "Who?"

"I mean, I don't have a name or anything, but I'd bet you that Radcliffe is dating somebody who is so deep underground that nobody knows his real identity."

Jenny's brow wrinkled in consternation. "You mean ... someone undercover - a federal agent?"

"Why not? You know Cathy - straight as an arrow. She threw over Burch when it even looked like he might be a shady character. Not that I'm knocking the guy."

Elliot had given generously to Joe's campaign, and it had forced him to re-evaluate his opinion of the man. Joe was thoughtful for a moment, pondering. "And you know, she gets a lot of tips she won't - or can't - explain. I've always wondered about that."

"I don't know," Jenny said thoughtfully. "I mean, I guess I just never thought of her as someone who wanted that sort of life - living apart, never quite knowing what the future holds."

"Maybe she *doesn't* want that sort of life," Joe offered.

"I'm not following you."

Joe smiled wryly and pulled her closer into his side. "You can't always choose who you fall in love with, Jenny. You should know that." He let out a heartfelt sigh. "But it's too late now - you're stuck with

me. The warranty's expired and they won't take me back. You'll just have to keep me - for better or worse."

The glow in his eyes made Jenny's heart beat a little faster. She stretched up quickly and kissed him on the corner of the mouth. He turned in time to catch it full on the lips, surprising them both for an instant.

"For better or worse," Jenny murmured, "I'll take my chances."

For a moment, the temptation to get lost in those big brown eyes was overwhelming, and Joe wavered. Jenny dropped her lashes, suddenly demure, and played with the empty teacup.

"You know, you might be right, Joe. I had a dream once - not like a sleeping dream, but like the kind you have when your mind wanders off for a moment ... when Jacob had his first birthday party. Everyone had gone home, and I was helping Cathy with the dishes in the kitchen when Jacob started crying. She went to check on him and while I was standing there with one hand in the soapy water, I got the clearest impression that there was someone else in there with them. In my mind, I could see Catherine standing by the crib - holding Jacob and rocking him a little, and - I know this is weird because she lives on the eighteenth floor - but I imagined someone coming through the window and standing with them. He went to Catherine and put his arm around her."

"Who was it? I mean, who did you think it was - in the dream?"

"That was the strangest part. I felt like I knew him - I felt like I had seen him before, but I couldn't see his face. He was tall, and he must have been wearing a coat, or something big like a cape." She looked at Joe doubtfully. "I know it sounds silly, because I didn't actually see anything, but ..."

"No, no," Joe said hastily. "That would make sense. I mean, he couldn't exactly go in and out the front door, could he? They'd have to have some way of keeping the relationship a secret." He was silent for a moment, thinking. "Geez, Jenny - she might even be married and we wouldn't know it."

"Oh, Joe - do you think so?"

"I don't know, but I do know there has to be someone - someone we don't know about." He fixed Jenny with a look. "She didn't exactly find Jacob under a cabbage leaf, and you know as well as I know that - despite the rumor mill - he's not Elliot Burch's son."

"No," said Jenny quietly. "I'm sure about that."

"Well, whoever he is - he's big. Once, when I was over at her place working on a case, I saw an enormous sweater hanging on the back of her bedroom door." Jenny shot him a bemused look. "Not that I was looking, mind you," Joe added hastily. He felt a hot flush creep up his face.

"Of course not," Jenny murmured. She reached over and covered his hand with hers. "I've always thought it was sweet - the way you look out for Cathy. Lord knows I try, but I always have the impression that she's two steps ahead of me and one step ahead of danger."

Joe nodded emphatically. "She's got quite a track record. I think it's a good thing there's someone else - I mean, *if* there is some mysterious man in her life ... looking out for her." He shot Jenny a devilish look and squeezed her hand in return. "I mean, we can use the help, right?"

Jenny laughed and nestled against his side. Joe lifted her hand to his lips, kissing the tip of each finger softly. "Ms. Aronson," he said softly, "are you still sure you want to marry a tough kid from Brooklyn with a big mouth and a small salary?"

"I'm sure I want to marry the tough kid with the big heart."

Their eyes met suddenly, and there didn't seem to be anything left to say. They smiled and - hands

clasped tightly - walked out into the night.

Catherine snuggled into the warmth of Vincent's shoulder, pressing her face against the rise and fall of his breathing. Their lovemaking had been the perfect complement to an already wonderful day, and she was filled with drowsy contentment. Overhead, the muted clang of pipes sounded occasionally, signalling that all was well.

"I remember how strange that sounded to me," Catherine murmured.

Vincent ran his hand idly down the line of her back, lingering on the smooth curves, the enchanting hollows.

"What sounded strange?" he asked.

"The pipes. I was just remembering how strange and out-of-place the pipes sounded to me when I first came here. Now they seem comforting - like background music."

"It's the music of this world," Vincent said lightly. Her silky limbs were tangled with his, and her breath stirred the soft, springy curls on his chest when she spoke. The sensation lulled him, reassuring him of her presence. "It's the sound of safety - of home."

Catherine sat up suddenly, propping on one elbow to gaze down at him. Her forehead wrinkled in consternation, and her green eyes were wide with surprise.

"It *is* the sound of home, Vincent," she said slowly. "Even though I work and sometimes live Above, that's the sound I associate with home. That's the sound I associate with you - with Jacob. It makes me feel ... connected, despite the distance."

"Yes. And the differences."

"Yes." Catherine was silent for a moment, thinking. "Jenny was talking today about how their lives had intersected so unexpectedly - like an accident, like a miracle. She said that if it hadn't been for me, she never would have met Joe, never had the chance to get to know him, to love him. It's true, Vincent - their lives would never have crossed if it hadn't been for me. And I wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been for you."

"I still can't believe it," she whispered. "I can't believe we ever found each other."

"Our lives," Vincent said softly, "are inescapably intertwined with the lives of those we love - the ones who share our dreams and hopes. Who can say what one step could have prevented our meeting, their discovery of each other - their love? Loving someone means taking the risk that their life *will* have an impact on yours - that their concerns and passions will become important to you."

Catherine smiled and bent to kiss the sensitive hollow behind one ear. Her lips were velvety soft, feather-light and teasing.

"Your passions are *very* important to me," she whispered. Tenderly, she nuzzled his neck, and Vincent felt the drowsiness evaporate from his muscles.

"Are they?" he murmured. Catherine nodded - he could feel the teasing tickle of her silky hair against his neck. He turned her in his arms, his eyes deep and luminous in the dimness. Her slim arms twined around his shoulders, pulling him down to her.

"Very important," she insisted.

For a moment, Vincent stared into the emerald depths of her eyes, lost in the love and desire

mirrored there. Then his mouth quirked into a wry smile.

"Do tell."

He bent to her, moving to cover her lips with his own.

The wedding was small - vows, an exchange of rings, a lingering kiss - but the reception was enormous. The small gallery glittered with luminaries from the political, artistic and social worlds in no particular mix. The place seemed packed to the brim with well-wishers.

Joe, determined that their wedding not become a scenic stop-over on the way to the D.A.'s office, was nonetheless surrounded by an impressive array of political figures. Mingling unselfconsciously with this bevy of public persons, were a number of well-known celebrities from the art world. Jenny, lovely in a silk lace suit, a sedate veil of netting shading her dark eyes, greeted everyone with tact and aplomb, making introductions with ease.

How easily she fits into his world, Catherine thought. For a moment, her heart was pained, thinking of Vincent; then she smiled at her own foolishness. *It only looks easy*, she reminded herself, knowing how hard Jenny worked to make it look effortless. Catherine shifted Jacob in her arms, looking him in the eye. He had sat through the brief ceremony solemnly, as though taking in every word, and was being wonderful in spite of the crowd. There was no denying that Jacob was a social creature, but this crowd was enough to overwhelm even Catherine. She caught Jenny's eye with difficulty and managed - with awkward, one-handed signals - to convey her intent to sit out from the crowd for a moment. Sitting felt good, and she fought the urge to shed her shoes and rest her aching feet.

She overdid the eyes down, and was caught quite unaware when someone touched her on the shoulder and kissed her cheek in a far from unfriendly manner. Indignation, exasperation and humor warred on her face for a moment, but at last she smiled, shaking her head in consternation.

"Elliot!" Her eyes told him that he had overstepped, but he smiled irascibly and murmured a less-than-honest apology.

"Cathy - how lovely you look." He bent to kiss her cheek again, but she dodged him deftly and fixed him with a no-nonsense stare. He retreated with a smile and a twinkle in his eye.

"Hello, Elliot," Catherine said politely. "How are you?"

"Well. And yourself?"

"Good."

"I'm glad to hear that." His eyes lingered on her full lips for a moment before turning to Jacob. "And who might your charming escort be? A little young, isn't he?"

"Elliot, you know my son Jacob. Jacob, you remember Elliot. Can you say hello?"

Jacob displayed one of his rare, shy moods and buried his face in his mother's puffed sleeve, giggling a little when he peeked out.

"He's beautiful, Cathy. He looks more and more like you every time I see him." Elliot's gaze was soft on Jacob's dark hair, and his eyes, for a moment, were unreadable.

"I'm afraid he acts more and more like me, too," she admitted. "He's very impatient and strong-willed."

"Surely not," Elliot murmured.

In spite of herself, Catherine laughed. She liked Elliot - it was impossible not to - and they had a

history together, if not a future. The ties of grief and fear and loss had bound them together on too many occasions for her to act as though he weren't a part of her life, however little he understood of the life she'd chosen.

"As usual, you're charming and impossible. It's been a long time. How are you, really?"

"I'm really fine. I've been traveling for several weeks now - backing for the next project, you know - but the foundation's been laid for our new complex on the East Side. They're ready to start above-ground construction, so I'm home for a while. Everything's been pretty ... quiet."

Catherine doubted his definition of quiet, but she didn't push it. "I'd heard you were back in town. Joe told me that you'd made a contribution to his campaign."

Elliot nodded, eyebrows arched in amusement. "I'm going to like having him in the D.A.'s office. He's ... not afraid to say what he thinks."

"No," Catherine said immediately. "Self-expression isn't one of Joe's problems." She eyed Elliot slyly. "Why? What did he say to you?"

"Our good Mr. Maxwell thanked me for my support and told me that he would, quote, 'be all over Burch Enterprises like a bad rash,' unquote, if I so much as thought about stepping out of line."

"That sounds like Joe," she said with a smile.

It was Elliot's turn to nod, his dark eyes twinkling with humor and something else. "That should keep me on my toes," he said easily. "I'm looking forward to dealing with him."

There was a momentary break in the line of well-wishers, and Joe had a straight-line view of Catherine, chatting easily with Elliot Burch, a dark-headed Jacob balanced on one hip.

Elliot said something and she laughed, smiling warmly. Joe had seen that smile before, and it only reconfirmed his suspicion that Elliot Burch was permanently relegated to the "Friend" side of Catherine's social register. He wondered what sort of man could make you forget a mogul like Burch - a man who seemed to have everything to offer - wealth, charm, an excellent tailor.

Somewhere else, Joe thought absently, there's a lucky man. And whoever he is, he's got it all over Elliot Burch.

It was time for goodbyes. Attempts by the happy couple to duck out quietly were thwarted by overly conscientious guests, and Joe and Jenny ending up fleeing through a shower of birdseed.

Catherine joined the well-wishers near the door, holding tightly to Jacob's hand in the crowd. At the last second, Jenny stopped her headlong rush for the car and hugged Catherine enthusiastically. Catherine returned the crushing embrace, tears pricking her eyes.

Jenny pulled away and smiled, radiant through her tears.

"Someday," she said softly, "you'll find someone wonderful - someone who will make all your dreams come true. And Cathy, when it happens, just remember that nothing is more important than the things that bind you together - nothing." She squeezed Catherine's hands tightly. "There's someone out there who's perfect for you - maybe someone you never even dreamed existed. I know it."

Wordlessly, Catherine nodded, her throat tight. "I know it, too," she managed at last.

Then Jenny was gone in a cloud of lace and perfume and birdseed, leaving Catherine clutching the bouquet as the tears streamed down her face.

Vincent was waiting for them just inside the Central Park entrance. Jacob said, "Daddy," and made a

half-lunge for his Father. Vincent lifted him easily from Catherine's embrace. They'd come straight here from the reception, instead of stopping by the apartment to change, and little bits of birdseed still clung to her hair and to the rich lace collar of her dress. Her hair was pulled back in a soft bow, revealing the fine, clean line of her jaw, the creamy texture of her skin. Jacob had shed jacket, tie and most other articles of unnecessary clothing the second they had stepped into a cab.

Vincent stretched his other hand out to Catherine, letting her curl her slim fingers around it and step close before he spoke.

"How was the wedding?"

"It was wonderful. Joe's whole family came. And Jenny was the most beautiful bride." She felt the familiar prick of tears against her eyelids and ducked her head into the comforting bulk of his chest.

"Mommy cried," Jacob said solemnly.

Catherine laughed, dabbing at her eyes. "I told myself that I wasn't going to cry and get all puffy and red-eyed for the reception, but when I looked over at Joe and *he* was crying, well ... I just lost it." She turned her tear-stained face up to his. "Oh, Vincent - they're so happy together. It's like something out of a fairy tale. I've known Jenny Aronson my whole life, and suddenly – today - she's not Jenny Aronson anymore. She's someone else, someone in love, with a whole new life stretched before her."

Vincent curved his free arm around her shoulders, steering her toward the heart of the tunnel world. Catherine leaned against him, wrapping her arms more tightly around Vincent's waist as they made their way home.

"Jenny told me something as she was leaving. She said that someday I'd find someone wonderful – someone ... who would make all my dreams come true."

Vincent smiled, eyes twinkling merrily.

"And what did you tell her?"

"I told her that I knew she was right." She shot Vincent a look. Her lashes were dark, damp with her tears, but her eyes were bright and teasing. "Her ... timing is just a little off - that's all."

Vincent laughed appreciatively and bent to press a kiss on the burnished top of her head.

She gave his middle a final squeeze, wiping away her tears on the back of one hand. "I'm very glad *your* timing wasn't off," she said simply, gazing up at him. "I'm very glad you found me when you did."

This simple statement of faith required no answer. Vincent hefted Jacob in one arm and wrapped his other firmly about her slim waist. They followed the dim, familiar pathway until they saw the lights of home.

Jacob was asleep by the time they reached their chamber doorway. Catherine took him easily from Vincent's arms, marvelling at the sweet cherubic face and dark touseled hair. In his suit today, Jacob had looked less like a baby than a very small person, and the thought that he would one day grow up and take his place in the world sent pangs of pain and pride through Catherine's heart. They had so short a time, it seemed, before the ebb and flow of time erased the pictures of the past, creating new ones in their wake.

Jacob - walking and talking; Joe and Jenny - settled into marital bliss; Elliot - happily building the latest and greatest - even Nancy pursuing her photography with a passion she'd almost lost. The wealth of feeling Catherine had from being a part of so many lives almost overwhelmed her. So many happy endings out of so much diversity! It seemed too much to take in all at once. For a moment, she stood in the doorway and watched Jacob sleep, comforted by the sweet rise and fall of his chest. With a smile, she turned and stepped into the glass-stained light of their room.

"How beautiful you look, standing there in the candlelight." Vincent's voice was hushed, and he stood half in the shadows.

Catherine smiled, and the golden light played softly with the strong planes of her face. "The candlelight is kind."

"The candlelight is candlelight," Vincent said softly. "You are kind, with a heart that's generous beyond measure. The love you give - the joy your life brings to others, is boundless - without measure."

He closed the distance between them in two short strides, reaching for her. Catherine leaned into his embrace without hesitation, resting against his bulk while he held her tenderly. He smelled faintly of leather and musk and the soft, soapy scent of Jacob's baby shampoo, seducing her senses with the warmth and familiarity of home. Her arms crept around his waist beneath his vest, loving the sturdy, unshakable feel of him beneath her slim hands.

"I love you so much, Vincent," Catherine murmured against his chest. "I love the life I have with you - even the parts of it I can't share." She looked up at him and smiled. "Even the parts of it I can't explain. The differences don't matter ... nothing matters when I'm with you."

His arms molded her closer, and his voice, when he spoke, was rueful. "It can't be that easy for you."

Catherine looked up suddenly, and there was no trace of coyness on her face. "It's not easy," she said simply, "but the hard parts are just smoke and ashes - they're not important. It's ..."

"Much ado about ... nothing," Vincent finished. Catherine caught a hint of a smile in the half-light, his white teeth gleaming.

"At least," she said softly, "about very little indeed."

END