

A Face In The Dark

by Edna Wilson

Far below the bustle of the New York city streets there lies a massive labyrinth of tunnels. At first, manmade of brick, then giving way to splendid natural stone with enormous caverns. An underground river thunders its way through, forming pools, with waterfalls plunging into deep ravines.

Over the last 30 years this secret place has been colonised by a group of people who, for one reason or another, find it impossible to live in the world Above.

Vincent is one of these people. Half man, half beast, trapped in this candlelit world by his appearance. That is, until he met Catherine Chandler, a beautiful woman whose life he saved. During her recovery a bond, stronger than love itself, developed between them and Vincent knew then, as he will always know, that she would change his life forever.

We find Vincent sitting with a group of children. He is reading to them from *A Tale of Two Cities* and their faces show how engrossed they are, Vincent's voice and eloquence transporting them back to the world of 18th Century France.

Meanwhile, outside Catherine's apartment block, just as she is arriving home from work, it looks like all hell has been let loose. The police are everywhere and sirens are wailing.

"What's the matter, what's going on?" Catherine asks a policeman.

"Aw, there's a bomb scare - 18th floor - everybody from that area is being asked to leave."

"I'm on the 18th floor."

"Then better find somewhere else to stay tonight, lady. Come back in the morning, if there's anything to come back to."

"Thank you, Officer." Catherine looks around her at all the chaos. What's the best to do? She could have gone to stay with her friend, Jen, except Jen had 'phoned just before she left the office to say she was going to spend the weekend at her sister's place.

Vincent. She would have to go Below.

With so many people milling about, nobody notices Catherine as she makes her way into the basement of her building. She has made this trip many times before, but as she descends the ladder, she still gets a shudder of excitement at the thought of seeing Vincent. He would know she was on her way. Would he be pleased to see her?

In the middle of a sentence, Vincent stops reading and looks up. Catherine! Something is wrong, he thinks, a worried look creeping into his deep set, pale blue eyes.

"Vincent no stop reading. Huh, something wrong, Vincent?" Mouse was tugging at his sleeve.

"Eh? Oh no, sorry Mouse. I'm sorry. It's Catherine, she's on her way Below."

"May be Catherine would read to us. Mouse ask, please?"

"Let me find out what's wrong first, Mouse."

"Okay good, okay fine."

Leaving the children, Vincent makes his way down long, familiar tunnels, vibrating with the chink, chink noise made incessantly by the pipes. These pipes, lining the walls, the tunnel people's only way of communication.

As Vincent enters, the man he calls Father - Jacob Wells - and Catherine, rise to greet him. "Look who's here, as if you don't already know."

Ignoring Father's remark, his gaze finds Catherine's eyes; deep pools of love reciprocating his own longing and desire. His heart aches, as it always does at the sight of her and slowly, gently, he pulls her towards him until her head lies on his chest and his arms surround her.

Eventually, she looks up into his eyes.

"Are you all right?" he whispers. "What's happening Above?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. There is a bomb scare on my floor - I have to find somewhere to stay the night."

"Then you must stay here, my dear. Vincent, go and see to it that the guest chamber is prepared."

Slightly alarmed, Vincent detaches himself from Catherine.

Hand outstretched as if to stop him, Catherine sees his distress.

"If it is going to cause a problem ..."

"No, no, Catherine. No problem. I'll be right back. Perhaps, Father, Catherine would like to continue reading to the children - I was disturbed."

"Oh yes. That would be nice."

"Come then, I'll take you."

As Catherine reads, surrounded by the children, Vincent stands in the shadows, watching how the children respond to her, their questions, her answers, all their laughter.

"I hate to break up the party, everyone," he states, as he slowly emerges into the candlelight, "but it really is time some of these young ones were asleep."

"Aw - nOOOO - Vincent - Catherine," they all clamour at once.

"I'm afraid it's time," says Vincent, looking round with authority.

"Yes, come on, you guys - I can read to you again, another time."

Slowly, reluctantly, they drift away, some kissing Catherine.

"Good night, Jamie, Samantha. Good night Emily-Anne. Good night, Mouse."

"Good night, Catherine - Vincent."

Mouse is the last to leave and as he reaches the archway he turns back as if to say something.

"Good night, Mouse," Vincent interrupts, just as Mouse opens his mouth to speak.

"Huh," says Mouse in disgust and stomps out of the chamber.

Vincent and Catherine laugh. He picks up the book from which she has been reading.

"*The Water Babies?*" he enquires, quizzically.

"Oh yes. The children wouldn't let me read *A Tale of Two Cities*. They said no one could bring it alive quite like you."

Slightly embarrassed, Vincent walks slowly to the bookshelves at the far end of the chamber and replaces the book.

Catherine sits, watching him. lovingly. The candlelight glints in his long honey-blond hair. Hair that frames his face like the mane of a lion.

Vincent returns to sit beside her. "You are very good with the children, Catherine. I was watching."

"I know," says Catherine, smiling at him and taking his hand. "They are all nice children and easy to get on with."

"But there was more, Catherine, a natural instinct. You should be surrounded by children."

"If I had wanted that, I would have become a teacher and not joined the DA's office."

"And what about children of your own?" He turns his head away from her and withdraws his hand.

His hand! looking down he sees gnarled fingers covered on the back with reddish-brown hair and inch long claws instead of nails. Hands made to kill - not to love.

"Yes, of course, I would like children, one day."

Vincent stands up, abruptly and walks away, keeping his back to Catherine and his head down. If only she knew how those words hurt him, knowing as he did that they could never be his children.

Catherine is standing behind him. She places a hand on his arm. "Vincent, I ..."

"No, please, Catherine," taking a step further away. "I think it best if I retired to my chamber ... I ... I don't like ... You shouldn't see me like this."

"Vincent, it's all right, come back. I understand your feelings."

"Do you?" he cries and, without looking back strides away, keeping his tear-stained face turned away from her.

"Father, may I talk to you, please?"

Father looks up from his book and sees Catherine standing in the entrance to his chamber.

"Why yes, Catherine, come and join me in a nightcap."

"Thank you."

Father pours a glass of hot milk and hands it to Catherine.

"And what has that son of mine been up to now, to upset you, uh?"

Rather hesitantly Catherine begins. "Well, he brought up the subject of ... children, but when I said I would eventually like children of my own, he got all upset and went to his chamber. I think he was crying."

"Ah, yes. Children. You do realise, don't you, Catherine, that children are out of the question for Vincent."

"W-e-l-l, no, not exactly. I thought it was possible."

"Oh yes. Theoretically, y-e-s. Morally, n-o. It would be quite irresponsible. He must never bring any more creatures into the world who look like ..."

Father turns away, his anger rising. "One is enough to look after, to protect ..." and then softly, "... to love more than anything else in the world. I know it is wrong, but I'm so selfish where Vincent is concerned. Children you say - he was talking to you about having children?"

"Well ... "

"Then you must go away, Catherine. You cannot go on seeing him. As much as it hurts me to say this to you, you must go first thing in the morning. Being under the same roof as you always has this effect on Vincent. How long he can keep his hands off you I just don't know. Don't you see how he could hurt you - how it would end for you both?"

Catherine shakes her head in disbelief, choking back tears. She can see the logic, but to forbid her to see him ... She knows Father has done this before, when Vincent had got emotionally involved with Lisa. But she had taunted him, led him on and when he had desired her, she had backed away in horror. Vincent, his animal instinct aroused, had attacked her, mercilessly.

That would never happen to Catherine. She was ready for Vincent, waiting for him to take the next step.

"... But ... but ... I can't live without him."

Father's anger was aroused again. "And Vincent can't live with you. He would hurt you so much that you would be repulsed and reject him. That rejection, coupled with the very act of what he had done would mean the end for Vincent, the end for both of you. I couldn't bear to lose him - I couldn't bear to lose you. At least this way you both get to stay alive."

Very upset, Catherine goes to the guest chamber and spends a very restless night.

Vincent also, is restless. He feels the ebb of Catherine's emotion and thinks it is he who has upset her, not knowing, that Father has 'banished' her.

Early in the morning, Vincent goes to the guest chamber. Catherine isn't there. Looking around he soon realises she has gone.

He seeks out Father who is having breakfast.

"Good morning, Father."

"Good morning, Vincent, you are up early."

"I was hoping to see Catherine. She left very early didn't she? She didn't even say good bye."

"Yes, Vincent - Catherine has gone."

There was a finality in his voice that made Vincent swing round on his Father.

"What do you mean - gone?"

"I mean I have sent her away, like Lisa, for your own protection."

Vincent thumps his fists on the table in utter despondency and disbelief. "Oh no - how could you?"

"I could and I have. I did think Catherine was different - "

"She is - "

"Yes. But it's you. All this silly talk about children. You are getting out of hand, Vincent, I had to take steps."

Vincent rises and slowly approaches Father with anger all over his face, lips curled back in a nasty snarl, animal fangs glinting in the dim light.

Father backs away - afraid. "Now, Vincent. I did it for your own good," he holds up his hand to ward off his son who appears as though he is going to strike him. "Don't hit me."

"Don't hit you!" Vincent spits out the words but lowers his hand. "Don't HIT you. And what do you think you have done to me? Sending Catherine away is like plunging a dagger into my heart. You have killed me just as surely. You must know, Father, I can live apart from Catherine, separated by our two worlds, but I can never live without her - NEVER!"

"Vincent ... I ..."

"I ... I DON'T EVER WANT TO SEE YOU AGAIN," and he storms out of Father's chamber, sobbing with anger, frustration, remorse and utter hopelessness.

He runs down the familiar tunnels emitting the most heart rending roars. All the tunnel people are aware of what has happened but they dare not approach Vincent in this rage.

He travels further and further down the tunnels, banging his elbows and his head on the jagged rocks. Deeper and deeper for miles, he goes, running blindly, unable to see for salty tears. Finally, he collapses by an underground river, utterly exhausted, distraught and unable to go any further.

One man has been watching Vincent's demise with great interest and can't believe his luck when he collapses here, almost outside his chamber.

John Pater had been Jacob Wells' best friend. Thirty years ago they had created the world Below, together. But gradually, to help him work, he cut himself off from the rest, until in the end he became quite mad and he was expelled from the community. He became known as Paracelsus, the Evil One.

Now he stands over Vincent, the torchlight glinting on the metal mask that covers the left side of his face. A wicked sneer plays around the corners of his mouth, as a devious plan takes form in his mind.

"Now I've got The Beast."

"And how do you propose killing him?" asks Tamara, standing behind Paracelsus and rubbing her hands in anticipation.

"I don't."

"You don't?" she asks in disbelief.

"No. For my plan to work I need the creature alive. You have that," pointing to Vincent's face, "so get to work whilst we have him here, delirious. He is in no condition to remember anything."

* * *

Eventually, Vincent recovers his senses. He splashes his face with water and drinks from his cupped hand. He looks about him, hardly recognising this part of the river. He slowly wanders away, at last coming to a part of the river he does know. There is where he has come, in his loneliness, all his life, whenever he wants to think. His secret place. He has kept a few books down here, hidden away and takes one out now. The first edition of Tennyson, given to him by Catherine. Making himself comfortable, he begins to read:-

*Me my own Fate to lasting sorrow doometh:
Thy woes are birds of passage, transitory:
Thy spirit, circled with a living glory,
In summer still a summer joy resumeth.
Alone my hopeless melancholy gloometh,
Like a lone cypress, through the twilight hoary,
From an old garden where no flower bloometh,
One cypress on an island promontory.
But yet my lonely spirit follows thine,
As round the rolling earth night follows day:
But yet thy lights on my horizon shine
Into my night, when thou art far away.
I am so dark, alas! and thou so bright,
When we two meet there's never perfect light.*

As days go by, Father is getting more and more worried. Word has been put out on the pipes, but there is no sign of, or reply from Vincent.

Catherine has shut herself in her apartment, 'phoned into work to say she is not well and taken to her bed.

An alarm bell rings on Mouse's board.

"Arthur again," ... but no, it isn't the pet racoon getting into mischief this time. It is one of the usual entrances used by the helpers from the world Above. A guard goes to meet Dr Peter Alcott, one of the helpers from the very beginning.

"I must see Jacob," he tells the guard.

"Follow me, please."

"Jacob, where is Vincent?" He bursts into Father's chamber, brandishing a newspaper.

"Hello, Peter - Vincent - I don't know - what's the matter?"

"This is the matter. I take it you haven't seen it?" and he hands the newspaper to Jacob.

The headline reads:

Lion Man Attacks Model

'A man, looking like a lion, last night attacked a twenty year old model as she was leaving a photographic session in Brooklyn.

Jade Starre was savagely assaulted and left bleeding outside the waterside studio, where she was later found by Mo Mavorsky, the photographer. Police are investigating but at the moment have little to go on except the model's description of her attacker:

Possibly Caucasian; six feet two inches tall; 210 pounds; wearing a black hooded cape and tall, tan, leather boots. He had long blond hair, a face (or mask) like a lion and very long nails, like claws, with which he inflicted the wounds.

A spokesman for the Police Department asked for the public to come forward with any information. He said someone with a costume like this hanging in their closet should be easy to trace'.

"I think you had better get him, Jacob."

"I only wish I could. Nobody has seen him for four days and I'm afraid it is all my fault. He was getting too involved with Catherine, so I forbade them to see one another, ever again. He stormed out of here in a furious rage, saying he never wanted to see me again."

"I see," Peter nodded slowly, thinking. "I take it you have searched the tunnels?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then I'll get the word out Above. See a few people. See if we can find him."

"Thank you, Peter, I would be most grateful."

As the Doctor leaves, Father buries his head in his hands.

The night is frosty with many stars and a large moon hangs low in the sky. A dark, hooded figure walks the quiet streets, keeping deliberately to the shadows, the hood of his cape hiding his face. Lost in thought, Vincent wonders aimlessly, his steps taking him, subconsciously to the alley around the back of St Vincent's Hospital, where, as a baby, he was found, wrapped in rags, left amongst the garbage.

Usually aware of all the city sounds and smells, he pulls up suddenly as he is confronted by a German Shepherd dog, snarling and growling.

His immediate reaction is to hiss, lips curled back, teeth bared.

"Radar, Radar, don't go on so, it's only an alley cat. Be quiet."

Vincent becomes aware of a pair of boots and looking up, slowly is horrified to find himself looking into the eyes of an elegantly dressed woman, around fifty years of age. Instinctively he tries to hide his face, but too late and then, gradually, he realises that 'Radar' is a guide dog and that this lady is blind.

She too, realises there is someone there - not just a cat.

"It's all right, whoever you are, Radar won't hurt you."

"I'm sorry, he startled me. May I help you in any way - are you lost?"

"I don't think I'm lost. I think I am behind St Vincent's Hospital - near to where they throw out the rubbish. Am I right?"

"Yes, quite right. But isn't this a funny place for a lady like you to be at three o'clock in the morning?"

"Oh dear, this is all too much. I knew it was a mistake to come - is there somewhere to sit?"

"There are some packing-cases over there; come."

"You have such a lovely voice - what's your name - what are you doing round here anyway, are you a tramp?"

"My name is Vincent and no, no I'm not a tramp. I'm having a little domestic trouble, I needed to get away to think. But you said you shouldn't have come, can I take you back home?"

"No. I have a car at the front of the building. My chauffeur is waiting. I am making a rather emotional visit."

"To here?" questions Vincent, looking around, rather puzzled.

"Yes," she nods slowly. "Do you mind if I tell you a rather bizarre story?"

"Not at all."

"Well you see, 30 years ago I was married to an up and coming politician, a few years older than I was, living in a beautiful home and expecting my first child. I had all the world at my feet, until the baby was born. It was a boy - and you have never seen anything so horrible in all your life.

Startled, Vincent stares intently at this stranger. "Horrible?"

"Yes. From the waist down, it was perfectly normal - but its upper half was excessively hairy. Its little hands had nails like claws and its face - it looked just like a cat - disfigured beyond human recognition. It even had teeth."

Vincent draws back, horrified and lets out an agonizing, quiet cry.

"You might well be shocked, my dear. He was a freak of nature."

"So what happened to him? Did the child grow up, or did he die?"

"I don't know really - I don't know...," she starts sobbing now.

Vincent gingerly puts his arm around her. "What happened?"

"Well," pulling herself together a little, "I couldn't bear to look at the child, let alone touch it, or feed it. I wanted to put it into a home, but my husband said that could ruin his career if anybody ever found out. That night, he brought the child here, wrapped in rags, so if it was found they would think it had been born into a poor family. We were hoping it would die and be gathered up with the garbage. We never heard anything else about the matter, so we presumed that is what happened."

Vincent opens his mouth to say something ...

"No, don't say a word - I am finding this very difficult and God knows why I am telling you. You could

be anybody - a policeman - I could really be in big trouble."

"That's all right, don't worry, I'm not going to tell anyone."

"You see, it's like a confession as far as I am concerned. I need to tell someone after all this time."

"I don't understand how you could do that to a little child - a baby."

"At the time, it was just like throwing out something we didn't want. I was a spoilt young wife, surrounded by everything beautiful. My child was like a beast, I had no feelings for it at all. But, as time went on and my husband began to climb the political ladder, I was left more and more on my own and I began to think. I began to wish I had him beside me, especially when I suddenly lost my sight. Divine retribution I called it. In my darkness, I was slowly consumed by guilt and every single day for the last 30 years I have seen his face, in that darkness."

Almost unable to speak, Vincent asks, "So why are you here now?"

"I'm dying - I have only a little time left. I had to make this pilgrimage, with the silly notion that I could perhaps die in the same place as my son."

Almost inaudible, croaking with emotion, Vincent manages to speak. "Your son is not dead."

"What? What do you mean he isn't dead? What do you know about it?"

Now he is incapable of speech and slowly picks up his Mother's hand and places it up to his face. Her fingers slowly, hesitantly, begin to explore his face.

"No! No!"

She then raises her other hand and feels his face all over, drawing in breath as she does so. "No, it can't be - it's impossible!"

She then stops feeling his face and hair and tries to find his hands. Rather reluctantly he lets her hold them, feeling the fingers, the palms and the nails. "Vincent? They call you Vincent?"

"Yes."

"Oh ..." She lets out a heart-broken cry, pulls him towards her and throws her arms around his neck. He very tenderly, shyly, puts his powerful arms around her and trembling with shock and emotion, buries his face in her hair.

* * *

In Catherine's apartment, the phone has been ringing, unanswered, all morning. Everything is in disarray. Clothes and towels draped over chairs; shoes left under the table; newspapers and mail unopened on the floor; dishes unwashed in the sink.

Again the phone rings and this time Catherine reaches over to her night stand and picks up the handset.

"Yeah."

"Catherine, that you? You sound awful. Are you okay?"

Catherine recognises Jen's voice immediately. "Hello, Jen, I'm sorry. No, I'm not feeling so good. Haven't been into work all week."

"I know. I just spoke to Joe, he's getting worried about you. Anything I can do? Would you like me to come over and we can talk?"

Despite her feeling miserable, Catherine has to smile. Trust Jen to know she needs a shoulder to cry on.

"Okay, give me an hour to tidy up the place. Looks like that bomb dropped right in here. Bye - see you soon."

Pulling on her robe and slippers, Catherine begins to tidy up the apartment. She throws her clothes and shoes back in the closet; returns two towels to the bathroom, taking a look at herself in the mirror as she does so.

"Not a pretty sight."

As she picks up the newspapers to put them down on the table, a 'photokit' picture catches her eye. It looks remarkably like Vincent. Suddenly, all her lethargy disappears and she flicks open the paper.

'SECOND HORRIFIC ATTACK BY THE LION MAN'

reads the banner headline.

Catherine never got dressed so quickly in all her life. She was ready and in the basement of the building in less than five minutes. Having descended the ladder she taps out her personal code on the pipes and Mary comes to greet her.

"Hello, Catherine, I didn't expect to see you."

"No, I bet you didn't. Take me to Father, quickly. Have you seen this?" and she hands the paper to Mary.

"Yes, we are all very concerned."

Although not an empath, like Vincent, she sometimes senses when all is not well. She knows now, that Vincent is not Below.

"Has there been any news of Vincent?"

"I don't think so, but you had better talk to Father."

Father is hobbling up and down his chamber. His arthritic hip is playing him up today. He carries the same copy of the newspaper that Catherine now flings on the table.

"Oh, so you have seen it."

"Yes, Catherine, I have."

"Where is Vincent? What has happened to him? What has made him do something like this?"

"Slow down, Catherine, I know you are angry with me and concerned for Vincent. Sit down and I will tell you what happened ...

"... So you see it is all my fault. I can protect Vincent, down here - keep him safe from the hate and harm inflicted by the uninitiated, Above but I cannot protect him from that which is rising in his own maturing body and soul. Those desires, that, if not fulfilled, finally envelop a man and turn into hate and aggression. I'm afraid I have been too selfish. I have seen it coming, but thought I could control him. Thought I could keep him for myself a little longer. Catherine, I am truly sorry. I see now he must have contact with you and I'm sure you will be able to handle him - if only it's not too late."

"You say Peter is organising a search - if you don't mind I will go and have a word with him, see if I can help."

"Catherine, be careful, don't put yourself at risk."

"I'll be all right."

"Let me know the minute you find out anything."

"Of course I will." She gives Father a hug. "Try not to worry too much. I'm sure there must be some mistake. Have faith in Vincent." She squeezes his arms to add impact to her words.

"If only I could think like you do. The evidence is overwhelming. It must only be a matter of time before he is caught."

"We'll see ... We'll see ..."

Catherine decides to return to her apartment, to get her purse, before going to see Peter Alcott. As she rounds the corner from the elevator, she can see a note pinned to her door. "Oh, Jen! I forgot all about you."

Detaching the note, she lets herself in and opens the envelope.

The note is not from Jen. It says, simply ...

'Meet me behind the hospital, midnight, tonight - Vincent'

Standing there, with the note in her hand she doesn't hear her doorbell ring the first time.

Then ...

"Oh, Jen," and Catherine collapses into her arms.

"Come and sit down, you look all in. I'll make us a drink and you can tell me ALL about it..."

"... So! There you have it, every last detail and you must never, NEVER, mention a word of it outside these four walls."

"Waaaw, Catherine. All this has been going on for two years, under my nose and I never suspected a thing? God! I must be slipping. You say Vincent is not capable of doing these things?"

"Oh yes. He's capable, all right, but I just don't think he could ever bring himself to do such things - without provocation. I had better go see Peter; see what he has organised."

"We had better go see Peter. I'm not letting you out of my sight. I know you said Vince wouldn't do these things, but I don't like the sound of that note."

"No, you're right. It's not like Vincent. But he probably just wants to see me; to reassure me he isn't a criminal."

"Catherine." Peter Alcott welcomes his dear friend, cordially. Having delivered Catherine as a baby, he has, literally, known her all her life.

"Peter, hello ..." and Catherine places a kiss on his cheek. "May I introduce my friend, Jenny Aronson. Jen, this is Dr Peter Alcott."

"Hi, Doc, pleased to meet you."

"Miss Aronson."

"I have just told Jen everything, Peter - about Vincent. I'm sorry, but I had to talk to somebody."

"I understand, Catherine. These are trying times for all of us."

"Is there still no news of Vincent?"

"No. He seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth. Someone must be hiding him, somewhere, or else we would have found him by now. I've even got the police involved - unofficially."

"The police!"

"Yes, a very dear, old friend of mind, Sergeant Barney Lerman, knows the whole story as well. You are not the only confidant, Jen," and he places a hand on her shoulder and smiles, gently, at Catherine.

Oh, Peter, I just got this note, pinned to my apartment door," and Catherine hands the note across to him. "I somehow don't think it is from Vincent."

"And what makes you think that? Is the handwriting wrong?"

"No - it looks like Vincent's writing, but ... well, I don't know ... just a feeling. In any case, Vincent

would have used the balcony door, not the door leading onto the corridor."

"We can't be sure, so you must keep this appointment. I will alert Sergeant Lerman and some of my men. If it is Vincent, we'll get him back, tonight."

* * *

In a house across the city, Vincent sits, reading to his mother.

Shea, the chauffeur, butler and general factotum, is putting away a bag of groceries. In a broad, Irish accent, he jokingly accuses Vincent: "You know, Mr Vincent, getting these groceries is the first job I've managed to do since you got, here and that's only because you won't go out of the house. I feel quite redundant. You've never left your mother's side for the past three days and nights. It's time you had a break."

"Yes, Vincent, we have tried to cram the last thirty years into the last three days and it's been just wonderful. But Shea's quite right, you do need a rest," and she squeezes Vincent's hand. "Shea, isn't the baseball match on TV tonight?"

"Sure is, ma'am. Wouldn't miss it for the world. And I get your drift. I'll introduce you, Mr Vincent, Sir, to the delights of the all American game. I'll explain the rules and tell you about all the players and ..."

"Have you got the popcorn, Shea?"

"Sure have, ma'am."

"Then we are in for a great time. Popcorn and Shea's commentary on the ball games on TV are the delights of my life. Help me up, Vincent, I want to get something from the bedroom. Won't be a moment."

Vincent wanders around the room and watches, wistfully, some children playing in the street. He examines the paintings on the walls and tinkles the piano keys, without sitting down at the keyboard.

"Here, Sir, I've made you a drink. Sit down, you look tired."

"Thank you. Yes, I've had rather a traumatic week."

"And you never did tell me what your domestic trouble was that brought you round the back of the hospital three nights ago," said his mother, returning to the lounge. She carries a large black deed box and places it on the table in front of Vincent.

"I had a row with Father, I mean Jacob Wells. He said I wasn't to see Catherine ever again."

"And why did he say that?"

"For my own protection."

"Poppycock! For his own protection more like. I think those people down there, despite their kindness and undoubted love for you, are totally selfish. They have protected you far too long. There is so much good you could do up here - helping people like me for instance - helping people with severe handicaps of all kinds. You have so much love and understanding to pass on to people not as fortunate as yourself."

"Mother. Please. It's impossible. If you could only see me, you would understand why people are so afraid of me. And I don't like hurting people."

"Shea's not frightened, are you Shea?"

"Certainly not."

"And believe me, son, I do know what you look like - teeth and all!"

"Mother, it's a dream. I would be totally lost up here. I've never played in the street - I've never seen a

baseball game - I've never watched television - I've never even eaten popcorn."

"You mean you would be in the dark - like me?"

Vincent hangs his head, sighing.

"For years Shea has been my eyes, just like Catherine is yours now, but I have learned to see in other ways too, and it's time you did the same. But we'll talk about that later. I have some papers here I think you should see and also this," and she takes out of the box a jewellery pouch and hands it to Vincent. "I would like you to give that to Catherine. From what you tell me she loves you as much as I do."

"You should give it to her, yourself. She would love to meet you, I know. I could bring her here."

"No," patting his hand, "There isn't time."

Vincent looks at his mother in alarm.

"It's all right. I just want to talk to you, then watch the game on TV."

"But mother, surely ..."

"Come. Open that box and let me go through the papers with you. There are things you should know."

Just before midnight, Catherine arrives, alone, by cab, outside the front of St Vincent's Hospital. The note has made her a little apprehensive, but with quickening step, she hurries down the alleyway. Just the thought that it might be Vincent is enough to bring a rosy glow to her cheeks in the frosty night air.

As she rounds the corner, she can just see, in the light cast by a solitary lamp, the hooded figure of a man, standing about fifty yards away.

"Vincent," she calls out and the figure holds out his arms.

Catherine begins to run - the figure remaining stationary, arms outstretched.

As she reaches the figure, Catherine stops, slightly out of breath and takes his hands. "Vincent. Oh, it is you. Thank God you're all right."

"Catherine, it's lovely to see you. I've missed you so very much."

Catherine looks up into his eyes and is met by a rather icy stare. But before she can think twice about that, Vincent slowly draws her towards him and takes her in his arms. She buries her face in his chest; she is so relieved that it is Vincent, all her questions can wait for a few moments.

"Mmmm," murmurs Vincent, as he strokes her hair and then slowly, deliberately, he places a finger under her chin and raises her face, at the same time lowering his own, until their lips are a whisper apart. Taking her face gently in his hands, he places a kiss on Catherine's lips. A kiss that lingers and lingers.

Catherine reels and staggers backwards, absolutely shaken. She has been waiting for his kiss for so long, but has not anticipated anything like the reality. His lips had been cold and heartless. There had been no passion in that lingering embrace.

"Vincent, I've got to talk to you. There have been two attacks on young women this last week and the description fits you. Where have you been?"

"That need not concern you, my dear. My God, you are beautiful. Come here."

"No, Vincent. We must talk."

"Don't say 'no' to me," and with a snarl ... "Come here!"

Without giving Catherine any warning, 'Vincent' grabs her arm, whips her around and pins her up against the wall. Catherine lets out an ear-piercing scream, completely bewildered by his behaviour.

That scream is her salvation because across the city, empathic Vincent hears it.

He is thoroughly relaxed, feet up on the sofa, eating popcorn from a large bowl and getting engrossed in the ball game. His empathic bond with Catherine means that, however far away she is, he will always know when she is in danger.

He suddenly sits bolt upright, sending the popcorn flying.

"Vincent, whatever is it?"

"It's Catherine, mother, she is in danger, I have to go."

"Wait a moment, I'll drive you."

"No thank you, Shea, I can get there quicker than you," and he is gone.

"Come on, Shea, you can drive me - follow him. Quickly now."

* * *

Vincent gets to the alleyway just in time to see a hooded figure draw a knife and threaten someone who is cowering on the floor - Catherine!

The figure becomes aware of Vincent's approach and turns round to greet him, pulling Catherine up in front of him and placing the knife up to her throat.

"I knew you would come, Vincent, to rescue your damsel in distress," and the voice no longer belongs to Vincent, but to John Pater.

"Paracelsus."

"Who else, my 'handsome' beast, could think up such a beautiful plan."

"What plan?"

"I kill Miss Chandler now; leave you with the body and the knife - which, incidentally has your fingerprints all over it - and there you are - the end of your lovely lady and the end of YOU, one way or another. They will either kill you, or put you in a cage where you belong, then, of course, without you, follows the downfall of Jacob Wells and all his 'World'. Like I said, beautiful ... isn't it? And so much more than I could ever have hoped for, all at once."

"It was you, wasn't it, attacked those two girls during the week?" asks Catherine, who is held so tight she can't even struggle.

"Yes, of course it was, but the Lion Man here, will get the blame. I believe the police are out looking for him at this very moment."

"The police? What girls?" says Vincent, looking around with alarm.

"It's all right, Vincent, really, believe me," cries Catherine.

Paracelsus pulls back Catherine's head with her hair and she lets out a shriek.

"Let her go, it's me you want."

"Not just yet," and he moves the knife to split open her blouse.

That movement is sufficient to send Vincent into action. He launches himself through the air like a lion pouncing on its kill. The force of his landing sends Paracelsus and Catherine flying, the knife clattering to the floor.

Paracelsus and Vincent roll on the floor, biting, scratching and kicking. Normally, Paracelsus would not be any match for the younger man, but somehow, tonight, with so much at stake, he finds inner strength.

"All right, you two, that's quite enough," and a shot rings out, the echo ricocheting off the high buildings.

Men appear, seemingly from everywhere and Sergeant Lerman stands at one side, directing operations, a smoking revolver in his hand. The two fighting men are finally separated and each held by three or four of Peter's men. The Sergeant approaches and stands in front of them, still wielding his gun.

"Well, well, what have we here?" looking from one face to the other. "Two peas in a pod and how to tell them apart?"

Paracelsus, using Vincent's voice again, appeals to Catherine - "Help me ... please."

Sobbing on the floor, Catherine looks up and shakes her head. "I can't ... I can't tell ... I don't know."

Peter helps Catherine to her feet.

"Perhaps Vincent could tell us where you and I first met? Yes?" He looks at the captives.

"You delivered her as a baby," replies the real Vincent.

"And how would you know that?" snarls Paracelsus. "It's their embarrassing secret. Have you been eavesdropping on private conversations?"

Vincent just shakes his head, then ...

"Perhaps HE could tell you, Catherine, what you were afraid of as a child?"

"Certainly," replies Paracelsus without hesitation. "Catherine was afraid of the dark - a little birthday candle could put it right."

"And how would YOU know that?" says Vincent, staring at Paracelsus in disbelief.

"Catherine told me when I delivered the Winterfest candle to her."

"That's right, I did," nods Catherine, "but which one of you knows what Vincent and I did after everyone had left Winterfest?"

"We danced," they both answer in unison, then look at one another in anger and surprise.

Once again, Paracelsus appeals to Catherine. "Don't you see. Paracelsus knows the answer to all these questions because he was at Winterfest too, remember?"

"Yes, that's right."

With a roar, Vincent shakes off his captors and grabs Catherine. Shaking her, fear in his voice, he implores, "Look at me - and just tell them I am the real Vincent."

"I don't know so much," says Peter Alcott, rushing to Catherine's aid and as Vincent is once more restrained he calls the Sergeant. "I think you can take this one away."

"No ... no!" growls Vincent and as he struggles, the roar is terrifying.

"Stop! Wait a moment. I think I can sort out this little charade," and Vincent's mother steps into the circle of light.

"Aw-yeah? And how would you be doing that?" enquires the Sergeant, looking bemused.

"Just let me feel their faces, please. I'm blind. I will know which one is my son."

"Your son?" shrugging his shoulders. "Be my guest."

Sergeant Lerman moves to one side and motions Patricia Sloane to take his place facing the two disheveled men. She places a hand on each face, her sensitive fingers exploring both foreheads, noses, eyes, cheeks and chins. Finally she stands back and points to the man on her right.

"That is the real Vincent, who could not have attacked anybody these last few days because he has been with me. My chauffeur will vouch for that." She then moves swiftly to confront Paracelsus and

with one deft movement reaches up and rips the mask from his face.

"Well, well, fancy that then. What an ingenious disguise." The sergeant is absolutely astonished. "No wonder you had us all confused. Okay men, take him away. There's a police van at the end of the alley."

"So, you win yet again, you horrible excuse for a human being. Just wait, one day I will quench my thirst for your blood," and John Pater is dragged off towards the van.

"Thank you, mother," and the two of them embrace.

Sergeant Lerman puts an arm around Catherine and together with Peter Alcott and Jenny Aronson they surround the couple.

"Catherine, did he hurt you?" and Vincent's embrace encircles both the women/

"No, I'm all right - and Vincent, I'm so sorry. I should have known. Your eyes should have told me."

"It's all right, Catherine," hugging her a little tighter. "It's all over now - so say hello to my mother."

Feeling Catherine's face and hair she nods her approval.

"You have excellent taste, my son," and she holds Catherine's face in both her hands. "Take good care of him, my dear, and don't let him be a face in the dark. He has been there too long." She kisses Catherine first and then Vincent, lingering noticeably longer with her son. "Shea, are you there?"

"Sure, Ma'am."

"Then take me home, I'm tired."

Patricia Sloane leaves the scene as dramatically as she had entered it and as the car slips silently away into the darkness, Vincent loses all sense of her. He knows he has lost her - forever.

As Vincent stares sorrowfully after the car, Peter Alcott offers the Sergeant his hand. "Thank you, Barney, that was a great job. This is Catherine Chandler and Vincent."

Shaking Catherine's hand he says, "You sure have got one helluva fella there, Miss. Do like his Ma said and take good care of him."

"I will."

"And you, Sir," taking Vincent's hand tentatively. "It's good to meet you at last. Peter has told me all about you."

Still gazing after the car, the Sergeant's words bring Vincent back to reality. "Really? Peter?"

"It's all right, Vincent," nods Peter, reassuringly.

"Then - thank you, Sergeant."

"Yeah. I'll be pushing off - see yah."

"And who is this?" says Vincent, for once not hiding his face from a stranger.

"This is my friend, Jen. She knows all about you too."

Vincent throws Catherine a reproachful look but before he can say anything, Jen explodes with excitement.

"Oh, Catherine, you wicked girl, why didn't I meet this hunk before - he's gorgeous," and she throws her arms around Vincent, much to his great surprise - and enjoyment!

"Come on, you three, it's time we went to tell Jacob all is well. My car is just around the corner. Can we drop you somewhere, Jen?"

In Father's chamber there is an emotional reunion between father and son.

"Vincent, can you find it in yourself to forgive me?"

"Forgive you? It is I who should be begging your forgiveness, Father, for threatening you and causing you so much pain."

"No. I was out of line. I should never have forbidden you to see Catherine. I know, now, that would never work." He continues, stiffly, rather embarrassed. "If Catherine would like to stay over the weekend, then she would be very welcome as far as I'm concerned."

Turning to Catherine, Vincent asks the question with his eyes and a slight inclination of his head.

"I'd love to, thank you, Father," and Catherine kisses him tenderly.

Walking round behind Father, Vincent places an arm around his shoulder and also kisses him - on the side of his cheek.

Emotionally overcome and motioning towards the exit, all he can say is, "Oh, just go, will you. Just go."

So hand in hand, they walk, leaving Father to fight his tears.

* * *

Alone at last, sitting side by side, Vincent tells Catherine the whole story.

"She seemed quite a strong willed, woman."

"You would have liked her, Catherine. She wanted you to have this," and he hands her the jewellery pouch.

"What is it?"

"I don't know."

Catherine opens the pouch to find a brooch, encrusted with diamonds and sapphires. Opening it up they look down on the faces of a man and a woman.

"Your mother and father?"

"Yes."

"Vincent - it's beautiful."

He puts his arm around her.

"Read to me, Vincent."

"All right - something from Tennyson?"

"Mmm."

Vincent brings the book and makes himself comfortable on the floor. He begins to read.

*O Beauty, passing beauty! Sweetest Sweet!
How cans' t thou let me waste my youth in sighs?
I only ask to sit beside thy feet.
Thou knowest I dare not look into thine eyes.
Might I but kiss thy hand! I dare not fold.*

*My arms about thee - scarcely dare to speak.
And nothing seems to me so wild and bold,
As with one kiss to touch thy blessed cheek
Methinks if I should kiss thee, no control
Within the thrilling brain could keep afloat
The subtle spirit. Even while I spoke,
The bare work KISS path made my inner soul
To tremble like a lute string, ere the note
Hath melted in the silence that it broke.*

Hypnotised by the words of Tennyson, the air electric with emotion, Catherine kneels on the floor, facing him and they gaze into each other's eyes, words now, totally unnecessary. Slowly - very, very slowly, they draw closer and closer, eyes locked in deep yearning. Catherine can feel his panting breath, her own heart pounding through all her senses. Her lips brush lightly across the end of his nose and are drawn towards his parted lips like a magnet. Suddenly, as though awakening from a dream, Vincent draws away, staring at Catherine almost in fear.

"It's all right, Vincent, I understand," and as he closes his eyes, she kisses the tips of her fingers and places the kiss softly on his lips. "Will you promise me something?"

"Promise you what, Catherine?" says Vincent, still in a world of his own, but opening his eyes to look at her again.

"That you will come to my apartment, sometime, to watch the ball game on TV?"

He definitely isn't expecting that and the surprise makes him smile, thus breaking the spell.

"Hah! Of course I will, but YOU must promise ME something."

"Oh yes, and what's that?"

"Promise me you will get in plenty of popcorn."

"I promise, I promise, bowls and bowls of it. Oh, come here, it's so good to see you smile."

But suddenly becoming serious again, Vincent pleads, in a husky voice ...

"Don't ever leave me, Catherine."

"Vincent, there is no way I could ever do that," and brushing away his hair, she takes his face gently in her hands. "Anyway, I have to carry out your mother's wishes and lead this face out of the darkness. To that - and to you - I dedicate my whole life."

END