



FORTRESS

On A

TRANQUIL

BEACH

Written
by
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Part 1 – Fortress on a Tranquil Beach

The Return

"Just what I need," Catherine muttered, tossing the manila folder from her lap onto the coffee table and pulling a terrycloth robe on over her pajamas.

The day had been hectic, so hectic that the sound of the first knock on her door had not broken her concentration. It had taken a second, more insistent pounding to attract her attention. Hours of wading through legal briefs and an upcoming morning deadline had left her tired and irritable. Playing the graceful hostess was not uppermost in Catherine's mind as she jerked the belt to her robe tight and reached for the doorknob.

"Who is it?" she said, a hint of her annoyance obvious in her tone. "A friend," Came a quiet, low voice. 'A friend...' Catherine thought to herself, feeling her annoyance rising. 'As if I had only one.' She set the latch chain in place and pulled the door open the merest fraction of an inch. She could scarcely believe who she saw standing in the garish light in the hallway. She quickly threw the latch aside and flung the door wide.

"Devin!" she cried, a smile quickly erasing all signs of weariness and anger. She embraced him warmly and felt his arms move around her shoulders and draw her close. There was a brief impression of more than casual greeting in his embrace, in the length and gentleness of it, but before she could be sure of her feeling, he pulled away from her and stood, his hands on her shoulders, a wry smile lighting up his face. She barely noticed the three scars remaining on his left cheek. She did notice that he looked tired, haggard. His eyes retained their sparkle - that radiance which spoke of a life spent roaming the world, of seeing much but committing to nothing, but there were new elements to his eyes now; a hint of sadness, of defeat. It was the closest Catherine had ever come to seeing Devin beaten.

"How ya doin', Chandler?" Devin said softly. His voice retained much of its insolence, its youthful nonchalance. But now, there was a gentleness to his voice, a child-like quality which seemed to be seeking comfort and reassurance from her. He sounded almost like a brother.

"Come in," Catherine said, watching as he gathered his various pieces of luggage together. He moved past her quickly, tossing his bags beside one of her sofas and pulling off his black leather jacket. He threw the jacket down on the sofa, then flopped unceremoniously on top of it, rubbing his eyes softly.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asked, concerned.

"Got any very strong coffee?" Devin asked, pulling his hands away from his eyes but leaving his hands pressed to his cheeks.

"Best in town," she answered, smiling.

"You mean that seedy little coffee shop on Ninth Avenue is marketing its own coffee now?" he asked, an impish grin crossing his face.

"No," Catherine shot back from the kitchen door. "I sold them my recipe!" She smiled at Devin quickly, then turned and vanished through the door, the sound of Devin's chuckle growing, then fading in turn as the swinging door quickened its pace, then stopped.

In a matter of minutes, the apartment was steeped in the aroma of an exotic South American blend. The fragrance alone swept the remnants of Catherine's melancholy mood aside, leaving her alert and invigorated. She placed two white porcelain mugs on a wicker tray, along with a small creamer filled with milk, some sugar, spoons and napkins. The steam rose from the mugs, wafting past her face. The

delightfully sweet smell and gentle warmth rising around her made Catherine feel as if she were back home in Connecticut, surrounded by loved family, safe from harm. She marveled that something so simple could evoke such strong feelings. She swept out of the kitchen and into the living room, setting the tray on the table between them and offering Devin one of the steaming mugs. Devin took the mug into his hands, cupping both around it and gently lifting it to his lips. Catherine smiled to herself as he took several rapid sips, pausing barely long enough to notice the milk and sugar. He looked up at Catherine, saw her smile, and laughed softly at himself. He took a final sip, then placed the mug gently on a magazine lying on the table, careful to avoid setting it near the polished wood.

"You could teach them something about coffee down on Ninth Avenue," Devin said, looking at Catherine expectantly.

Catherine waited. She understood Devin well enough to know that, while he rarely came back to New York without good reason, he never divulged his reason without prodding. She could see from the condition of his luggage that his time away from the city had been spent in many places. The cases were frayed, dust-covered, worn to near uselessness. Yet he had returned with more than he had departed with three years earlier. It seemed obvious to Catherine that, whatever his reasons for being there, for once he was not running away from anything.

"How are things with you?" he asked, a little too casually.

"Surely you didn't come all this way to ask that," Catherine said. "What's going on, Devin?"

He stood up slowly and walked towards the balcony doors. Catherine set her mug down next to his and followed. He pulled the doors open slowly and walked to the brick wall, placing his hands against the top and staring out over the park. Catherine pulled her robe tighter against the blast of chilly air. She remained silent, giving Devin time. She remained in the doorway, leaning against the jamb.

"You know, when I left this city, so many of these buildings weren't here. You could walk in the park at night without fear. You could walk into a dirty, dingy diner at two o'clock in the morning, get a cup of coffee for a quarter, then sit through hours and free refills and just listen to the people. Actors, punks, waitresses, panhandlers, freaks, cops - you could see it all. The stories you could amass by just sitting and listening." He turned to face Catherine slowly, leaning back against the balcony wall and crossing his arms against the cold.

"I could have stayed in the tunnels, gotten a good job above, taken advantage of the best of both worlds. I could have helped Father and the others when times were bad, when there was sickness. I could have helped Vincent..." His voice trailed off quickly.

"Your life was above," Catherine said softly. "I understand why you left."

"No you..." Devin started, but stopped when he saw Catherine's smile. "Yeah, I guess you would understand. To know that there were all those wonderful places that Father read about... told us stories about every night. I went to sleep with thoughts of those places filling my head. I couldn't stand not to see them!"

Catherine walked slowly to the parapet, Devin turning to face her. "We all understand that, Devin." He remained silent. "Vincent didn't need your help. He needed your love and your friendship. Those things gave him the inner strength he needed, for the time when you wouldn't be there. You did more for him than any of the others."

Devin seemed to consider her words, but his sigh and his slow retreat from the balcony without answering her was far more eloquent an answer than she could have hoped. He settled back down

onto the sofa and took another sip of coffee. Catherine stood in the open balcony doorway, her arms folded.

"How are Vincent and Father?" he asked.

Catherine started. "You haven't been to the tunnels yet?" she asked, dumbfounded.

"No..," Devin said, then understood the importance of his words. "I mean, I haven't had time..," he blurted out, trying to recover, but it was too late. Catherine's look of shock and surprise eclipsed his words.

Deep below the city, Vincent stood with Pascal beside a maze of tarnished pipes. Pascal moved his hands over the silent metal, occasionally tapping a pipe with a small hammer. The faint echo which answered his tapping was swallowed up by the thickness of the air in the chamber and the dampness of the fine mist which covered the walls. In the silence which followed, Pascal placed a stethoscope against the pipe and listened intently. Seconds ticked by, but no sound was heard in the chamber. He looked up at Vincent and shook his head slowly.

"It's too damp in this part of the tunnels," he said, sadly. "Too much dampening of the sound. We can't use these pipes on the network." Slowly, he pulled the plugs from his ears and stood up.

"Can we build around this section?" Vincent asked.

"No way. It's nearly solid rock in all directions. This pipe is so old, I doubt if it could last much longer. These walls may not last long enough to make the effort worthwhile."

"Well, the runners may argue with you about that," Vincent said, smiling. "We can't very well leave such a large part of the city with no means of communicating with us. Perhaps Mouse can..."

Suddenly, Vincent fell silent. His face changed from amused to inquisitive, then to concerned. He quickly grabbed his cloak and turned to Pascal.

"It's Catherine. Something is wrong. I must go above," he said quickly. He was gone before Pascal could answer.

Catherine sat down slowly, looking at Devin with surprise. "You've been gone for over three years, Devin. Father and Vincent speak about you constantly, wondering what you are doing, wondering where you are... how you are. And you come here before you go home?"

Devin looked at Catherine pleadingly with a look which acknowledged her accusation, but which contained within it the seeds of an answer, a justification. Catherine knew that Devin never accepted pity from anyone, never sought justification for his actions from those he did not love or respect. Now it seemed to Catherine that he was after something from her, something only she could supply him - yet something he could not find the words to ask her for openly, honestly.

"What's going on, Devin?" She asked, insistently. Devin looked down, clasping his hands together. He did not answer. Catherine knelt down in front of him, taking his hands in hers and softening her tone. "Are you in trouble?" He shook his head quickly, turning away from her but not breaking her touch. "Are you afraid to tell me?" Devin's eyes met hers slowly. He did not shake his head. "Devin, let me

help you... please...," she said softly.

Devin seemed to look past her, at a sight of his own conjuring, a sight she could not possibly see in his eyes, but which she felt in the ferocity with which he drew her to him. He buried his face on her shoulder, sobs racking his body uncontrollably. Catherine held him tightly, comfortingly. She had never seen him lose control, seen him trapped by an emotion he could not name. He made no move to leave her embrace. She did not let him cry alone.

Vincent's pace had been hurried, but not frantic. He had sensed only a deep concern, an apprehension that normally did not require haste. Suddenly, he was overcome by a wave of sadness which he had never felt before. The strength of it sapped the strength from his legs momentarily. He steadied himself against a tunnel wall, shaking off the effects slowly. He quickened his pace now, certain that Catherine needed him desperately.

Catherine slowly lowered Devin down onto the sofa, lifting his legs off the floor and pulling an afghan from the other sofa and draping it over him gently. His tears had stopped, but Catherine did not press him for an explanation. She knew there would be time for that later. She pulled the afghan up to Devin's shoulder, making sure he was comfortable, then moved a lock of his hair back away from his eyes. He made a movement to speak, but Catherine placed her index finger against his lips, silencing him.

"Later. Get some sleep now."

Devin nodded slowly, then closed his eyes and nuzzled himself into the cushions. Catherine gathered the remains of their coffee together and took the tray into the kitchen silently. She washed out the mugs, dried them, and put them back on their hanging rack. She quickly cleaned the kitchen, then quietly turned out the lights in the kitchen and living room. The sound of her bedroom doors closing made Devin stir, but he did not awaken.

Changing into silk pajamas, Catherine hung up her clothes and took a copy of "Walden" from the small bookcase near her bed. She knew that she would be unable to fall asleep easily. She lay on top of the bedspread and opened the book to the bookmark, placing it on the bed beside her.

She had read only a few pages when she heard a familiar sound outside the window. A shadow fell across the curtains of the window, and she placed the book face-down on the bed and ran to the balcony doors, opening them slowly so as not to disturb her guest.

"I knew you would come tonight," she said, sensing the reason for Vincent's appearance. "Please don't worry, Vincent. I'm all right."

"What was it then?" Vincent asked, his hand barely touching Catherine's shoulder, guiding her unconsciously away from the chill of the wind which surrounded the balcony suddenly.

Catherine walked slowly to the sheltered corner of the terrace, her glance involuntarily moving to the darkened windows leading to her living room, then turning quickly away and moving out over the city.

"I had a visitor tonight."

"Who was it?" Vincent asked.

Catherine looked at Vincent reluctantly, her lips pressed together, betraying the turmoil she felt. She knew that no matter how painful the truth might be, to lie to Vincent would be even more unbearable.

"Devin."

Vincent looked at Catherine, a look of disbelief crossing his face, then replaced quickly by concern... Is he... here?" he asked, his glance falling on the darkened window behind her.

Catherine nodded, then motioned to the dark window beside her. Vincent moved to open the door, but Catherine's hand fell on his and stopped it before it reached the handle.

"No, Vincent. Let him sleep. He was exhausted when he got here."

Vincent slowly withdrew his hand and walked to the balcony wall, the wind sweeping his long hair past his eyes. Catherine could discern nothing in his gesture or in his reactions to the news. She felt no strain in the silence between them, but she knew that his mind raced with all the questions she had decided to leave unanswered.

"What did he tell you?" Vincent asked after several long moments, his voice low.

Catherine put her arm around his shoulder gently. "Vincent, all I can tell you is that something is wrong, something has happened in Devin's life that he couldn't bring himself to tell me." Vincent looked at Catherine, searching her eyes. "Maybe he needed to let some of the emotion out before he saw you. All I know is that he wouldn't explain. I didn't press him."

"Why would he feel he couldn't come home?" Vincent asked, unable to mask the hurt and betrayal in his voice. "There's nothing he could do or say that would make us turn him away," Vincent said, shaking his head slowly.

Catherine put her hand on Vincent's other shoulder and turned him to face her, her eyes never leaving his. "Vincent, there are things we can tell strangers that we can't tell those we love. Sometimes there's great comfort in emotional distance, impersonality. We can't always be open with those we're closest to. Don't blame Devin for being afraid."

"I don't blame him. I want to help him."

"When he needs our help, he'll ask for it. Don't offer more than he's ready to accept."

Vincent took Catherine's hand in his own, holding it gently. He pressed her fingers to his lips softly, his head inclined in acceptance. Catherine stroked his hair gently with her other hand, then pressed her forehead against his head. They held each other for a long time, finding comfort in each other's presence, in each other's touch.

Morning brought a dull grey curtain of mist and drizzle that enveloped the city. The light that filtered into Catherine's room was muted, casting only a hint of a shadow on the walls and floor. She was unsure of what had awakened her, until she sat upright in bed and inhaled deeply. The familiar smell of coffee wafted in through the louvres of her bedroom door. With each breath she took, sleepiness receded further. In minutes, she was wide awake. She pulled her robe on and opened her bedroom doors.

The living room was immaculate. The sofa cushions bore not a hint of a wrinkle. Devin's bundles were stacked neatly against the wall beneath a long table, out of sight. The afghan blanket was neatly folded and draped over the cushions of the loveseat. Catherine's work from the night before was stacked neatly on the end table, a marble ashtray atop the papers to keep them in place. The smell of coffee was stronger now, drawing her to the kitchen almost involuntarily. She pushed the door open expectantly.

"Devin..." There was no sign of Devin in the kitchen. A carafe of coffee was brewing on the counter, the pot nearly full. The butcher block table was set with two place settings. Fresh, white linen napkins stood inside crystal water goblets and silverware sparkled next to her most exquisite porcelain china. The sight of the beautifully set table made Catherine feel better.

Catherine headed for the front door to get her morning paper. As she opened the door, Devin emerged from around the hallway corner. He was carrying a small white paper bag and his whistle filled the corridor. He saw Catherine, stopped short, and smiled broadly.

"Halt!" he cried, freezing Catherine in her tracks. "I'm doing everything this morning." He raced forward, picked up the newspaper from the floor and eased Catherine back into the apartment. Kicking the door shut behind him.

"Devin, what are you doing?"

"You seem to forget I was a master chef at one time."

"Yeah, for six days."

"It would have been longer if I had known how to make Crepes Suzette," he answered. "Damn orange butter..."

Devin threw the newspaper onto the loveseat and swept into the kitchen, Catherine following. While he poured ice water and coffee, Catherine observed his movements closely. He moved with the ease of someone who had lived in this place for many years. He pulled a container of milk and a stick of butter from the bag, along with two fresh tomatoes and a can of Parmesan cheese. He instinctively opened the correct cupboard door, took down a mixing bowl, and cracked several eggs into it. He added the milk, water, and butter rapidly, mixing it thoroughly. "Where's your..."

"Bottom cupboard, next to the stove."

He found the frying pan quickly. "Thanks." In minutes, the eggs were scrambled, the toast was warm, the tomato and cheese were chopped, and the smell of fresh omelets filled the kitchen. He piled their plates high, tossed the pan into the sink, added water, then flopped down in a chair. He picked up his water glass and held it towards Catherine.

"To you, Cathy."

She picked up her glass and tapped his gently, her smile matching the joy the high-pitched ring of the goblets brought to the moment. No thought of the previous night interfered with the moment, and Catherine was determined to let the moment last as long as Devin wished. His entire bearing was happy, upbeat, with not a trace of despair or sadness in his face. She took a bite of her eggs, while Devin buttered a plate of toast.

"This is delicious," she said. "You should have stayed with cooking."

"I owe it all to William. He could take a few simple things and create such wonderful meals. Of course, he usually ate more of his work than any of us!" They laughed easily together.

"What have you been doing since you left?"

He looked up at her, but she was smiling. She kept her voice light, subdued. She did not want him to feel pressured to explain. He smiled in return, in understanding. "Many places, Cathy. Most of them alone." He saw Catherine's look of concern and guessed its cause quickly. "Charles and I saw a lot together, too. I made sure he had a stable world of his own before I left him."

"Where is he now?"

"Sheep ranch in Wyoming. He works for a blind writer, tending her garden and taking care of her stock. It's a beautiful spread, isolated and wild. There's no one to taunt him, to make him feel like a freak. He protects her and she reads to him, shares his discovery of poetry and fiction and drama. I stayed until he felt strong and secure enough to take care of himself and her without my help. I watched him come to life in the space of a few months. It was a wonderful thing to see."

"I'm glad," Catherine said. She had always been concerned that Devin's decision to care for Charles had been a risky one. She was happy that he had kept his word to his friend and to Father -that he would see to it that Charles find a happy life for himself, far from the past cruelties his affliction had caused him. "Then where did you go?"

"Nepal, Everest."

"Did you make it?"

"No. I got as far as the base camp, but it was just too rigorous. You have to train for years to even think of climbing Everest. I don't want to spend that many years on any one thing."

"You should have been a travel agent."

"They only send people to those places, Cathy. I've been there."

"And after Nepal?"

"La Paz. Then Switzerland, New Zealand, Iceland, Arizona."

"You've been busy. And after Arizona?"

Devin paused slightly, almost as if his next words would betray him. "After Arizona, here. New York City."

Catherine rose, taking their empty plates to the sink and setting them carefully on top of the frying pan. She ran some water to cover them, took the carafe from the coffee brewer and poured them each a fresh cup of coffee.

"How long will you be staying this time?" She asked casually.

Devin blew on the coffee to cool it, then took a sip. Catherine waited. "For good."

Catherine moved to the table quickly, sitting in the chair next to Devin, looking at him in disbelief.

"You're coming home - below - for good?" She asked happily.

"In a way. I've seen as much of the world as I need to see, could ever have dreamed of seeing. I'm tired, Cathy. I'm coming home." There was joy in his tone, but some small out-of-the-way corner of her mind took note of a trace of sadness as Devin spoke, as if the decision was not entirely his. She let the feeling go, concentrating only on the expectation of the return of a loved one to a family who loved and missed him.

"Vincent will be so happy," she said, then added cautiously, "...and Father."

"Yeah. The prodigal son returns," Devin said, shaking his head. "Better late than never."

"We need to celebrate! Why don't we walk below?"

Devin nodded. They stood together.

Catherine put her arms around him and hugged him affectionately. "Welcome home, Devin," she said. She felt his arms tighten around her, his voice soft and low. "It's good to be home," he said, and she felt certain that he had pronounced the last word differently than he ever had before, as if he finally understood what home meant.

The midday sun had failed to bum off the thick layers of mist and fog which hovered over the city. The shafts of skyscrapers seemed to tum from deep grey to tan, then to beige before vanishing in the low clouds. A light drizzle coated the sidewalks with a dark, spotty shadow, a dark accent that grew lighter close to the buildings and beneath the canopies of restaurants and exclusive apartment buildings. People walked a little faster than usual, their collars turned up against the late autumn chill.

Catherine and Devin walked slowly across Fifth Avenue and headed into Central Park. The bare trees on the outskirts of the park offered a little protection from the rain, the drizzle accumulating on Devin's leather jacket, giving it a fresh sheen. Catherine pulled her scarf over her hair, tying it absentmindedly under her chin. They walked slowly, only an occasional jogger passing them on the nearly deserted walking path.

"We could go back for an umbrella," Devin said, wiping the accumulated water from his jacket sleeves, then from his hair.

"No. I like the rain," Catherine answered.

"I heard about your father. I'm sorry."

"Thanks. My friends helped me get through it. Especially Vincent."

"I heard you spent some time in the tunnels."

"A couple of days. I was completely lost. It was a struggle at first, accepting the loss. There was so much I had wanted to say to my dad before..." She trailed off, looking at Devin. "I didn't get to say everything. Vincent and Father were wonderful. I nearly decided to move below permanently. "

"What changed your mind?" Catherine looked at him oddly, a smile spreading slowly across her face.

"I know... I know... who am I to ask that question," Devin said sheepishly.

"It's okay." Catherine answered reassuringly. "I just wasn't ready. I didn't want to use the tunnels as a place to hide from the world. I'll know when the time is right. I still have a lot of things I want to do above."

"So did I."

Catherine took Devin's arm with her own. "Did you get to do everything you set out to do, Devin?"

He looked at her briefly, then stared straight ahead, thinking. He did not answer quickly or off the cuff. He could tell Catherine was serious. "I got to see everything I read about and visit all the places I heard about. There's a difference."

As they approached the drainage tunnel, Catherine noticed Devin's pace slow slightly, as if he were hesitant to go further. She moved in front of him, blocking his path, placing an outstretched hand against his chest to stop him.

"Devin, I need to tell you something. Vincent already knows you're here."

Devin looked at her as if he didn't quite believe her, but his smile vanished when he noted that Catherine did not smile in return.

"How?"

"Vincent came to the balcony last night, just after you fell asleep." Devin looked aghast now. "You didn't send for him..."

"No... yes, in a way...," Catherine began, but knew it sounded absurd. "He felt something was wrong, Devin, so he came. Call it intuition."

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing. I explained that you were exhausted and that I had insisted that you sleep. He didn't want to disturb you. He promised not to tell anyone you were back until you came to the tunnels."

Devin seemed relieved. "Was he hurt that I came to see you first?"

"I don't think hurt is the right word. He was confused. We both were."

"I was tired. I needed to see someone who knew me, but who wouldn't pressure me with a lot of questions. At least not right away."

Catherine understood what Devin meant - knew that had he gone to the tunnels late at night, without notice, in the emotional state he had been in, that Father and Vincent would have been relentless in their questions.

"You mean there's more to your being here than homecoming?" Catherine asked.

"Call it that."

They ducked together into the drainage pipe, walking the short distance to the main junction, jumping from side to side to avoid the puddles of water and waste that lined the bottom of the pipe. Recent heavy rains had washed away the accumulation of summer, leaving behind a wonderful hint of dead

leaves. As they neared the junction, Devin's pace slowed perceptibly. At the main gate, Devin walked to the cement wall and looked at the names engraved there. He finally located his and Vincent's handiwork. He ran his hand over the fading letters, his touch gentle. Catherine reached for the switch to open the door, but Devin turned quickly, grabbing her hand.

"Not yet," he said softly.

Catherine withdrew her hand slowly, but her gaze never left Devin's face. "You can't put it off, Devin. Besides, there's nothing for you to worry about. You're home."

"I just wish I felt like I was home."

Suddenly, the silence of the chamber was shattered by the sound of the door rolling open beside them. Devin sprang back at the unexpected sound. Catherine did not move. The junction was illuminated by an unearthly orange glow that shone through the opening, the glow increasing as the door slid open wider. As the door ground to a halt, a shadow appeared behind Catherine. Vincent's form emerged from the light. He stopped behind Catherine, looking past her at Devin, his eyes bright with welcome. Catherine stepped aside slowly, then put her hand on Vincent's arm and guided him closer to Devin.

"Devin," he said, simply, his arms reaching out slowly, invitingly. Devin hesitated a moment, his eyes never leaving Vincent's face. Then he moved forward and fell into Vincent's arms, his own arms wrapping around Vincent's back. They stood like this for several long moments, Vincent's fingers pressing deep into the leather of Devin's jacket - Devin's arms clinging to Vincent as a drowning man would cling to a life raft. Catherine stood by them, silent, her face solemn.

Devin slowly broke their embrace, but kept his hands on Vincent's shoulders. "Hi, big brother," he said, affection replacing his surprise.

Vincent smiled, then drew Devin towards him gently. He kissed him on the forehead. "We've missed you," he said, circling Devin's shoulders with his arm and cradling him to his chest. "Welcome home."

Devin reluctantly pulled away, looking towards Catherine. "Did you arrange this?" he asked.

"I knew you were coming," Vincent said. "I've been here since morning."

"And Father?"

Vincent shook his head slowly, looking at Devin intently. "Father knows nothing of your return. None of the helper's saw you above."

"Your network is slipping."

Vincent shook his head, laughing slightly. "You're not a threat to us. Besides, you would know how to avoid the watch points."

Catherine stepped beside Devin, putting an arm on his shoulder casually. "I have to leave. I've already missed one deadline this morning."

"I haven't gotten you in trouble...," Devin began.

"Don't worry. I think I can come up with a new excuse Joe hasn't heard before." Catherine turned to Vincent slowly, her face seemingly unchanged to Devin but revealing a great deal to Vincent. Her voice dropped slightly. "I'll see you both this evening."

Vincent acknowledged her unspoken sentence by nodding once, his eyes saying to her what everything he wished to say in words. "I'll send two of the boys for Devin's things."

"Devin's things are in the living room." Catherine turned to Devin, kissing him quickly on the cheek. "Thanks for breakfast." She turned and headed for the park, turning only to look at the two of them from the pipe opening. She waved quickly, then turned and disappeared into the blackness.

Devin turned to Vincent, noting the expression on his friend's face. "She's quite a woman," he said, lightly.

"Yes," Vincent said solemnly, the depth of feeling in his voice hitting Devin like a gust of wind. "Come," Vincent said, putting a hand on Devin's shoulder and guiding him into the tunnels.

Catherine burst into the office, her hair wet and plastered to her forehead and neck, her clothes damp, her briefcase covered with rivulets of water. The morning mist had turned to steadier rain. She had made the mad dash home, showered and changed, then sped to work in the rain. Every bone in her body ached from the exertion, and even without benefit of a mirror, she knew that she looked every bit as harried as the last hour. She dropped her briefcase on her desk, peeled off her raincoat, and headed for Joe's office. She knocked twice quickly, then burst into his office without waiting for a reply.

Joe was immersed in files, stacks of papers spread over his desk and computer console. A thick stack of legal briefs perched precariously on his in/out basket. Catherine's entrance startled him, his left arm flying out and knocking the stack of briefs to the floor. Catherine stopped short, then instinctively bent down and began gathering up the papers.

"Sorry Joe," she said, flashing a smile and trying to smooth over her lateness. "Let me help you with this."

"Nice of you to join us," Joe said, but he stopped short when he saw Catherine's disheveled condition. "You look like you missed the dry cycle."

"Very funny." Catherine placed the gathered papers in a less precarious position on his desk and sat on the edge of the desk, careful to avoid dripping on any of the papers.

"Well?" Joe said, leaning back, his fingers intertwined behind his head. "Or did you fall down one?"

"I had a visitor last night. He was unexpected." Joe sat up attentively, but Catherine crossed her arms and glared at him. "Not that kind of visitor."

"Anyone I might know?"

"Just an old friend" Catherine answered.

"And he showed up last night? Without warning?"

"Yes. He's been away. Last night was his first night in the city. I couldn't very well tum him back out into the street."

"What's he doing in New York? Vacation? Business?"

"He didn't say," Catherine said, heading for the door. "Well, I know I'm behind for the day, so I'll leave you alone."

"You'll have the Mecklenberg depositions transcribed and broken down by five, right? "By four," she shot back.

"Hey Chandler!" Joe said quickly. "You never told me this guy's name!"

"I know!" she answered, disappearing around the corner as Joe's office door slammed shut behind her.

The walk from the main junction had been leisurely, Devin's pace slower than Vincent was used to and his conversation just as subdued. They had walked through the Hall of Voices, but the rain and wind above had silenced the echoes in the chamber. Only the rush of the wind and an occasional roar, as if from distant thunder but from a passing subway train, broke the stillness. Their steps were muffled as well, the dampness absorbing the sound before it could reach the stone walls around them. Devin would stop occasionally and look around intently, as if trying to remember something important, something from his childhood days in the tunnels. Vincent did not force conversation, knowing that Devin would choose the moment to speak. There was no strain in the silence between them.

Devin stood at the edge of the trail, the force of the wind blowing his hair straight back from his face. He spread his arms wide, allowing the rush of cool air to pass over him, through his clothing, as if it were the only force holding him upright. He leaned his head back, his eyes closed. To Vincent, it appeared as if he might bring his arms together and leap off the edge into space, diving into the murky depths, oblivious to all save the glorious feeling which filled him.

Vincent stood by, silent, enjoying seeing Devin so content. They had played here often as children, either hiding and seeking among the clefts and outcroppings, or else quietly eavesdropping on the secrets of a city, echoing around them relentlessly. They had heard the distant echoes of laughter, acrimony, indifference, joy, even affection from this perch. The random sounds of the subways and alleyways of New York had been one of their earliest, most effective teachers.

"I love this place," Devin said, his head still held back, his arms outstretched and his body assaulted by the gale.

Vincent laughed. "We learned much in this place."

"I remember some things we learned here that Father spent days trying to make us forget!"

"Well, children will hear those words eventually. Especially in New York," Vincent answered.

"I think Father felt we would never hear some of the things we heard from here. I still remember the night I asked him what...." Devin caught himself, lowering his arms and backing away from the edge of the cliff. He looked at Vincent and shook his head slowly, smiling. "Poor Father. There was nothing in the classics to help him with us."

"Us?" An impish voice asked.

Devin shot an accusatory glance at Vincent. "I remember you asked some pretty embarrassing questions before Mary asked you to bring your queries to her first, before going to Father. She was... how can I say this tactfully... better prepared to know what certain modern expressions meant."

"She did live thorough a turbulent time, didn't she?"

"Indeed." Devin started walking deeper into the tunnels, Vincent at his side. "Does she still have a crush on..."

"She still loves him, yes," Vincent answered gently. "She just can't find the courage to tell him."

The walk grew easier now, the slope of the tunnel flattening out, the walls widening slightly as they led into the main network. Pipes traced pathways along the tunnel walls and ceilings now, faint echoes reverberating around them. Devin ran his hand along one of the pipes, walking slower now.

"Maybe I should warn the sentries not to spread the word that I'm here," Devin said, picking up a rock and standing near a pipe. Vincent's hand stopped him.

"Father is teaching today. No one will disturb him." Devin dropped the stone. He looked at Vincent carefully. "Chandler tells me you were topside last night." Vincent nodded truthfully. "How did you know to come above? And why to Chandler's place?"

Vincent measured his response carefully, trying not to reveal more than Devin was ready to hear. "I felt that something was wrong with Catherine. I wanted to see if she was all right."

"What did she tell you?"

"She told me you were exhausted from your trip."

"And..."

Vincent understood that this was how Devin initiated serious discussion, by pulling the verbal door open a crack and inviting the listener to slowly push the door wider.

"And that there was something wrong."

Devin nodded slowly. "Wrong word. She didn't know last night." He turned to face Vincent. "I want to come home. For good."

Vincent stood looking at Devin for a long time, unable to read anything more in his words than a sincere desire to return home. Yet it was unlike him, so contrary to his personality and his past statements about life underground that he couldn't make himself believe it fully.

Devin saw the doubt and moved closer, taking Vincent's hands in his own and looking deeply into his friend's eyes, his voice solemn, unanswerable. "I want to come *home*."

Vincent placed a hand on Devin's cheek, covering the scars of childhood, his touch gentle, welcoming, healing. "You are," he said warmly.

"I long to talk with some old lover's ghost, who died before the God of Love was born. I cannot think that he, who then loved most, sunk so low as to love one who did scorn. But since this God produced a destiny, And that vice-nature, custom, lets it be, I must love her that loves not me."

Father looked up from the book expectantly. The children clapped excitedly, their excitement breaking through in a flurry of raised hands, each begging for acknowledgment.

"Yes, Samantha?"

"It's very pretty. But what does it mean?"

Father sighed. He realized suddenly that he should, perhaps, have selected a slightly less complicated poem. "Well, the author is saying that he laments his dilemma of loving one who does not love him in return. The writer longs for a past time when love was different, always returned by the object of one's affection."

"But why did he use the word vice-nature when he talks about custom?" Corey asked innocently.

"Well...", Father began, searching for a suitable reply. He was suddenly aware that the children were looking past him, towards the chamber door. As he began to turn, Samantha was out of her seat, heading for the door in a childlike burst of enthusiasm. "Devin!" she cried, brushing past Father and running into Devin's outstretched arms.

Father looked on in disbelief, while the other children gathered around. Some of them knew Devin, others did not, but all were driven by Samantha's enthusiasm in their welcome of the newcomer. Vincent stood silently behind Devin, allowing him to greet the children. He looked at Father briefly, noting his surprise. When Father looked at Vincent, his glance was inquisitive. Vincent simply nodded slightly and smiled, his expression telling Father that, so far as he knew, there was no reason for concern.

Devin stood up slowly, surrounded by the children. He looked at Father for a moment, then opened his arms wide, smiling. They embraced warmly, the pain of three years separation slowly passing from Father in the silence. Father stepped back slightly, his eyes brimming, his voice low. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to be back," Devin answered, smiling broadly.

The children were pressing close, their excitement finding expression in their nervous shuffling from foot to foot and their suppressed desire to crowd around Devin and listen to his stories. Samantha seemed the most possessive, trying to stay close to him and at the same time restraining the others. The older children knew that Devin's stories of faraway places were every bit as exciting as the tales Father read to them. And he had actually been there!

Devin put his arm around Father's shoulder and led the way out of the chamber. The children moved to follow, but Vincent intervened and held them back with a simple sweep of his arm. Some of the children were disappointed, but Vincent shushed them quickly, herding them back into the chamber. "I will finish your lesson. Take your seats."

The sounds of youthful disappointment echoed around him as he stood in the chamber doorway and watched Devin, his arm still around Father's shoulders, walking slowly and talking softly with the man who loved him most and understood him least.

"That was your final mistake," Devin said, closing in on Father menacingly. He grabbed his rook and propelled it down the rank, placing it deep in Father's territory. "Check!!"

Father looked the position over, sighing heavily. "You've been studying," he said, looking at Devin with undisguised respect. "Your game wasn't this strong the last time we played."

"I spent four months with a Soviet grandmaster two years ago. I taught him how to take a decent photograph and he taught me how to demolish Father at his favorite game. Until now, I always thought he got more out of it."

Father looked at Devin, feigned anger on his face. "Are you saying that beating me like this was worth the effort?"

"Of course." Vincent laughed softly behind him. Devin turned and eyed him expectantly. "Don't laugh. You're next!"

Father smiled to himself, knowing that even with his newly acquired skill, Devin would find Vincent a worthy opponent. "I look forward to that game with great anticipation." Deliberately, Father pushed a pawn to the attack, leaning back to allow Devin time to consider the new threat. While he studied the board intently, Vincent and Catherine entered the chamber together, Samantha trailing behind them.

"The children put your bags in your chamber," Catherine said, taking a seat between them. Vincent moved to stand behind her, studying the chessboard intently. "I think they were planning to wait for you to come and unpack. Somehow, they got the idea that you brought them presents."

"Then I'd better hurry, before they find them!" Devin answered. He stole a quick glance at the board, swept a Knight forward past Father's ineffectual pawn, pulled one of Father's bishops from the board, and muttered "Mate!" He was gone in an instant, leaving Father aghast, Vincent and Catherine amused.

"It seems you can't find a worthy opponent," Vincent said, careful not to sound too condescending.

"Well, what do you expect? He's been gallivanting around the world with grandmasters! I never claimed to be that good." He looked at Catherine craftily. "Perhaps I could interest you in a game?"

"No. Vincent tried once. I can't seem to match the moves to the pieces, especially the knights. Besides, I was never any good at games, even as a child. I always preferred a good book."

"Well, we can't fault you for that," Father said, returning the pieces to their original places. "Was Devin any trouble last night?"

"I was surprised. I felt sure he would come here first. Something is troubling him. Did he tell you that he's come back for good?"

"Yes. I was surprised by that."

"Perhaps he was just afraid we wouldn't believe him," Vincent said. "He's still a little afraid of you, Father."

"He needn't be. He knows I support him in whatever he chooses to do. I don't want him to be afraid of me." Father rose and stood looking down at Catherine. "Did he say that to you?"

"No. There was nothing in his words to make me believe he was afraid... not of you. But he did lose himself for a moment, in my arms. I had never seen Devin cry before last night. Perhaps it was happiness over coming home for good, but..."

"But you don't believe it was?" Vincent finished. She shook her head slowly, deliberately. "Perhaps I should go and talk with him. Ask him straight out," Father suggested.

"No. He wouldn't tell you. Not unless he was ready. I think he might tell Vincent... or me."

"Or both of us," Vincent said softly. "Perhaps together, we could find out what's troubling him."

Catherine nodded. "I'm willing to try." She stood up, taking Vincent's hand and walking with him towards the main chamber passage. At the door, she turned and spoke to Father. "We'll talk to him. Don't worry."

They found Devin looking through an old bookcase next to his bed, a small stack of volumes already pulled from the shelves strewn across the bedcover. Catherine sat in an old chair next to the bookcase, while Vincent knelt down to study the books Devin had chosen to read. He picked two of the larger volumes up, studying their spines closely.

"A Tale of Two Cities" he said softly. "I should have known." He studied the other book carefully, the title barely discernible through the wear of many years. "Camille?" Vincent looked at Devin with mild surprise. "When did you acquire your love of plays? You always hated Shakespeare's."

"Dumas I can understand," Devin said easily. "And I don't *hate* Shakespeare."

Catherine joined Vincent at the bed, picking up the other two books. "Collected Works of Thomas Gray." She read the title of the smaller book and laughed aloud. "The House At Pooh Comer"? Catherine looked at Devin, who was sheepishly trying to avoid her look of amusement. "Don't be embarrassed. My mother and I spent many hours with Christopher and his toys."

Devin stood up, taking the books from both Catherine and Vincent's hands and placing them on the table next to his bed. "A little simple reading never hurt anyone. Besides, one has to travel light. There wasn't much room for books. I could only take two or three at a time. It's wonderful to have such a selection again, and the time to take advantage of them."

Devin took one of his bags and tossed it on the bed. He unlatched the straps and began sorting out various items of clothing. Catherine moved to get another of the bags, while Vincent moved to sit in the chair by the desk. No one spoke for several moments. "So, which one of you is going to ask it?" Devin said suddenly.

Neither of them replied. Catherine looked to Vincent expectantly and he nodded in agreement with her unstated declaration. He stood slowly and walked to Devin's side. "We're not going to press you. You'll tell us what you want to tell us, when you're ready."

Devin turned to Vincent, his face different now, angry. "You don't believe the only reason I'm back is because I wanted to come home?"

Vincent looked surprised at the anger in his friend's face. He did not reply for several seconds. Finally, he forced a smile, trying to lighten the mood. "Yes, I do. I know how happy you must be to be back with those who love you."

Devin's features softened slightly. "I'm sorry. It's just that whenever I come back here, everyone acts like it's some kind of religious pilgrimage on my part." He reached down for another satchel. "I won't be needing these again," he said, emptying the bag and throwing it in a corner next to the bed.

Catherine reached for a smaller, squarish bag, but Devin immediately grabbed it. "Sorry, Cathy. This one is private," he said, putting the unopened bag into a chiffonier standing on the opposite wall. "All

my skeletons are in there," he said jokingly, turning back to them. His motion carried him too far, too quickly, and he stumbled against the chamber wall. Vincent rose and went to him quickly, helping Devin regain his balance. It had been over in a moment, and Devin's voice assumed a nonchalant cant as he sprang to his bed, pulling his jacket on quickly. "Let's walk to the Catacombs!" he said, the excitement of a child breaking through, pushing their concerns away, permitting no questions. And no answers.

"Get down from there!" Vincent said, moving towards Devin quickly. Devin had jumped up onto a low, irregularly shaped stone wall whose closer side bounded a seldom-traveled pathway deep inside the tunnels and whose far side vanished in a drop of undetermined depth, the dampness and cool air in the pit combining to form a permanent layer of mist over a hundred feet below. Children, forbidden from this portion of the tunnels, naturally had crept silently down to the burial chambers and tossed stones from this precipice. No sound or echo of stone hitting stone had ever been heard.

Vincent grabbed Devin around the waist and pulled him back to solid ground. Devin laughed gaily, running ahead of Vincent and Catherine. One final set of stairs separated them from the burial chamber.

"I'm surprised we haven't met Narcissa yet. She always hangs around these old graves," Devin said, anxious for his friends to catch up to him. "I miss her warped view of the world."

"Narcissa sees the world through a special pair of eyes," Vincent said.

"That's why I like her," Devin answered, starting down the stairs.

"Be careful. These steps can be slippery," Vincent said.

Devin seemed not to have heard, for he bounded down the chiseled stone steps two-at-a time. He nearly lost his balance once, but gained his footing at the last moment, landing at the foot of the stairs with a thud. Vincent took Catherine's hand and guided her carefully down the steps.

Ahead of them, a solid wall of stone rose from the darkness, its face marked with regularly spaced squares. Each square consisted of a name and a year of birth. Most of the squares also carried a year of death. The newer squares were free of the brownish-green moss that covered the older squares. Some of the squares were covered so thickly that the names and dates were nearly illegible. A series of seven squares at the very top of the wall were so old that only fragments of names were still visible.

Devin climbed an outcrop of stone beside the wall, his fingers moving over the closest marker at the top of the wall. "It's even harder to read than it was the last time I was here," he said. "Has anyone ever figured out who is buried here?"

"No. You can't make out the year of birth or death. Just that it was before 1794. That's when the crypt next to him was sealed."

"And the last letter is 'X'. A strange letter for a name to end with."

"Maybe no one knew who it was and marked the sarcophagus with an 'X'". Catherine offered helpfully.

Devin looked at her, amusement softening his features. "Sort of like 'X' marks the spot?"

"The letter is well to the right of the dates. It has to be somebody's name. It's one of the great unsolved mysteries of the tunnel world, our first ceremonial death," Vincent said.

"Sort of like our 'Tomb of the Unknown Soldier'," Devin said. "When we were kids, we used to make up stories about who it was and how they came to be buried here."

"What were your stories?" Catherine asked, smiling.

Devin leaned back against the outcropping, brushing the moss and dirt off his hands with short, sweeping movements. He looked at Vincent, waiting.

"Devin always felt that one of the Caribbean pirates hid his treasure in these tunnels and met his end at the hands of his crew. They buried him in the deepest tunnels they dared explore. I always wanted to believe that a great Viking explorer and warrior found his way to these shores, only to be killed in battle with the Indians who were here centuries before him. As a tribute to an opposing leader, the Indians buried their victim in this great hall. Then war broke out between local tribes and the victors overran the island, but never discovered the entrance to this world. Centuries later, the tunnels were rediscovered, and the new leaders entombed their dead next to their noble predecessor."

Catherine looked at Vincent, her face attentive. "I think you're both wrong," she said.

Devin jumped off the outcrop quickly, flexing his knees as he hit the floor, then brushing the dirt from his hands. He stood up quickly and moved to his friend's side. "She doesn't like our stories, old buddy," he said, putting his arm around Vincent's shoulder.

Vincent put his arm around his friend's shoulders in return. "Catherine has always had a vivid and active imagination," he said. "An imagination that allows her to enjoy the creative words of others." He turned to Catherine, his tone respectful. "All right. Who do you think is buried there?"

Catherine sat on the bottom stone step behind her, facing the wall, studying it intently. She closed her eyes and gently threw her head back, the muscles in her neck taut, her hair catching an occasional ray of light and glistening in the muted grey of the chamber. After several moments, she opened her eyes and looked at her companions. "Thousands of years ago, a great explorer from the underworld chiseled out these halls to allow his true love safe passage to the sunlit surface, a place she had heard of in legend and longed to share with her true love. The powerful ruler of the underworld heard of the explorer's efforts and, also loving this woman, ordered him to stop. The explorer refused, determined to see his true love safely to the forbidden world of light. The ruler did not have the power to forbid our explorer his task, but he decreed that the closer he came to the world of sunlight, the harder his task would become. As the explorer grew closer to the world above, the stone became harder and harder, until the final tunnel was barely wide enough to allow him to pass, and seemed made of rock as hard as diamond. Just as the explorer's final desperate blows opened a shaft to the surface and a beam of sunlight fell upon him, his strength failed him, and he fell to his death."

Catherine stood and walked to the stone wall, stood briefly looking into the mist below, then turned back to her attentive audience. "His true love found him, broken and lifeless, at the foot of these stairs. As a final tribute to her love, she spent the final days of her life hewing this flat wall from the stone, ordered his body entombed at its highest point, then leapt from this stone wall to her death."

In the sudden silence which filled the chamber, Vincent and Devin exchanged a glance of wonder, insolent in its camaraderie. Devin stood up and studied the rock face, then walked to the edge of the precipice and looked down. He turned to look at Catherine, then at Vincent, his movements slow, measured. Finally, he looked up and nodded his head approvingly. "I like it."

Vincent looked at Catherine lovingly. "What a beautiful story. You have a wonderful sense of fantasy."

Devin walked to the wall slowly and placed his hand against one of the squares. The name "GRACE RIORDEN" was clearly visible. The inscription "1916-1954" stood out through the moss that had started its reclamation of the stone. Devin was quiet now, the youthful gaiety replaced by an emotion that Vincent could not discern. Catherine walked to Devin's side, looking at the stone sadly. "I understand what you're feeling," she said softly, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I miss my mother too."

Devin looked at her, and Catherine was struck by the pain she saw in his face. "I didn't think it would be quite this hard, seeing this place. I've never been back here since Father told me about Grace." He looked at Vincent, shaking his head sadly. "There aren't even any pictures of her. All I have is Elizabeth's tunnel painting and Father's descriptions."

"As little as that is, it's more than I have," Vincent answered.

Devin nodded. "Yeah. I know."

Devin knelt down to the lowest level of markers. There were several blank squares, freshly hewn. The freshest marker carried the name "JOHN PATER" and the inscription "1911-1988". He had been entombed here, over the objections of many Tunnel Council members, at Father's and Vincent's insistence - a final acknowledgment of his contributions to the society he had founded, then betrayed. Devin ran his fingers over the marker closest to the wall, directly beneath his mother's memorial. "This is where I want to rest," he said softly.

Vincent moved behind him, kneeling and placing his hand on Devin's shoulder. "There are only a few spaces left. You know the laws. There are so many in our world who are older than you are." He shook Devin's shoulder playfully. "You'll outlive all of us."

"That's what I always thought," he said, moving away from Vincent. He stood back, his glance taking in the entire wall, his face as blank as the stone. "Used to think."

"What are you saying?" Vincent asked, his concern obvious.

Devin appeared lost in thought. It was a few seconds before he permitted himself to speak. "I started having problems in Iceland. Shortness of breath, cold sweats. Headaches." He looked at Catherine, his tone controlled, even. "I thought they might go away when I got to Arizona. You know, warmer climate, fresh air." She nodded. "Things only got worse. I started having pain in my joints and muscles. Nothing seemed to help. It was a month before I got up the courage to see a doctor."

"What did the doctor say?" Vincent asked.

"It's not what the first doctor said, Vincent. It's what the two specialists I saw afterwards, said." Devin turned away from them so as not to see their looks of concern. "Both agreed."

"It's not serious, is it?" Vincent asked, looking at Catherine painfully.

Catherine shook her head, her concern obviously as deep as his. It was apparent to Vincent that she was hearing this for the first time as well. She walked slowly to Devin, her voice near breaking. "Devin, it's not...you're not..."

Devin lowered his head slowly, then turned to face his companions. His face was drained, his features losing their sharpness, his eyes a little too clear. He looked deeply into Vincent's eyes, his glance more eloquent than words. He slowly nodded his head. Without breaking his glance, he reached into his shirt pocket and handed Catherine a folded piece of paper. She unfolded it slowly, then glanced down

at what was obviously a medical report. One word stood out over the hundreds on the page. In a box labeled 'PROGNOSIS', typed in contrasting red ink, was the word 'TERMINAL'.

"I'm sorry, big brother," Devin said, his voice finally breaking. He knelt down in front of Vincent, his arms reaching out for support, for comfort. Vincent took hold of Devin, his mind reacting to what his friend's eyes and Catherine's silence already told him. He narrowed his glance, searching Catherine's eyes for some sign of uncertainty, some glimmer of hope. There were none. Her face was as eloquent as Devin's, sadness permeating her features, her eyes brimming with tears she was unable to stop. She walked to the stone wall behind them and turned her face away, the sound of her sobs mingling with the sound of the wind. Looking down at Devin, Vincent could only force a single word past his tightened lips.

"No."

He drew Devin deeper into his arms so as not to let him see his own tears, now falling on the leather of Devin's jacket. He clung to his friend with ever-tightening movements of his arms, drawing him closer, as if he could will his own life force into the body of one he could not afford to lose.

The Request

Catherine sat quietly, concentrating on the thick stack of papers in front of her. The lamp on her desk threw dark, angular shadows over the wall and window shade behind her. She had barely noticed the gradual departure of her coworkers, their number slowly diminishing through the afternoon, then more quickly as darkness fell. Joe had stayed behind until well after seven o'clock, but he had stopped by her desk hours before and admonished her to go home. She had thanked him for his concern, but found that the work helped keep her mind occupied. She knew that the days ahead would be difficult. As difficult as it had been for Devin to tell them of his illness, she knew that it would be even harder for him to confront Father. For all his bravado, his devil-may-care attitude about personal relationships, Catherine knew that he needed people in his life, however fleetingly. The price he had paid for his independence was estrangement from his fellow men. No matter how much he claimed to need no one, his return to New York, his flight to spend his remaining time with those who knew him, spoke of some small part of his soul that remained lonely, desperate to be comforted. To be sheltered.

The last time she had looked at the clock facing her desk it had read 9:00. Now she looked up, startled, to discover that it was after midnight. She threw her pencil down and leaned back in her chair, stretching her hands over head, intertwined, and tensing the muscles - reveling in the pleasure she felt rush through her upper body. She kept the muscles tensed for several long moments, then let them fall behind her head, her eyes closed, feeling the rush of blood to her arms and shoulders.

Catherine opened her eyes and drew her arms up and over her head, then pushed her chair away from the desk quickly. She rolled back to the window and looked out over the block. Traffic was light and the number of pedestrians lighter, the rain having kept many people inside. 'Getting a cab should be a joy.' she said, sighing. She knew that it might be a long wait for a ride home.

She was so caught up in locking the files away and gathering her things together for the trip home that the sound of the office door opening did not register. Catherine pulled her raincoat on, pulled her briefcase strap over her shoulder, and turned to search for her umbrella. She started when she saw the man standing in front of her desk, the sound of her 'Oh' echoing off the office walls, filling the room.

"Must be an interesting case," he said, eyes laughing and arms crossed.

Catherine had caught her breath and flopped back into her chair, having instinctively pulled her briefcase to cover her chest. "Joe!" she finally got out through her gasps of relief and anger. "Please don't sneak up on me like that!"

Joe plopped down in the chair next to her desk. He held a half-eaten bag of peanuts. Smiling, he extended the bag towards her.

She looked at him with mixed feelings of anger and helpless affection, then tentatively reached forward and took a handful. She popped them into her mouth one-at-a-time, chewing them quickly, her savoring of the flavor reminding her that she hadn't eaten in over twelve hours. She held her cupped hand out, looking at Joe expectantly. He tipped the bag, emptying the remains into her palm. In one motion, she put them in her mouth, threw her briefcase onto her desk and raised her feet to the desktop.

"Why are you here?" she asked plaintively.

"Had a date tonight. I forgot my raincoat when I left earlier." He looked down at his drenched clothing. "Bad call, huh?"

Catherine looked at him, shaking her head over his frazzled appearance. "I take it your date decided to end the evening early?"

"Nab, she cancelled. Headache or something." He noticed her look of disbelief. "I know, I know. She's too young for me."

"She's too unavailable for you," Catherine said, half-joking.

Joe stood up quickly, reaching for Catherine's umbrella and handing it to her. She knew he was sensitive about his latest love interest, but they both knew that it was destined for failure. Still, Catherine understood Joe's dislike of being alone, his need for human companionship. In so many ways, he was Devin's opposite.

"You want a ride home?" he asked.

Catherine was grateful for the offer, but she sensed that Joe was going to press her for information about her visitor. She had promised Vincent to be extremely careful when discussing Devin with anyone else, but it would be difficult to keep Joe in the dark. She knew that to refuse his offer would make him think there was something to hide. "Sure, thanks," she answered, forcing a smile and taking the umbrella from him. She gathered her things together again, turning off the desk lamp rapidly so that Joe could not see the concerned look on her face.

The ride home was uneventful, traffic having thinned after the rush hour and never built again for the night's theater offerings. The rain had kept many people home this night. They spoke little during the ride, Catherine preferring to offer nothing beyond the expected pleasantries. Still, she could not be rude to Joe. He had gone out of his way to see that she got home safely. "You want to come up for coffee?" she asked, half-expecting him to refuse.

"Sure," he said eagerly.

He found a parking spot near the front of her building, his front bumper only a few inches over the violation line. He leaped out and held her door open, shielding her under his umbrella and escorting her to the door quickly. The worst of the rain had passed now, but the drizzle that had replaced it was whipped by the wind into thick sheets. By the time they reached the overhead awning and safety, they were covered with droplets of water.

On the slow ride to her floor, they shed their coats and shook them vigorously, the excess water covering the paneled walls and floor. Joe struggled to close his umbrella in the confines of the elevator without administering a lethal blow to his companion. Catherine pulled a tissue from her purse and wiped her face, then handed the small package to Joe. By the time they arrived at her floor, they had removed almost all traces of their run through the mist.

As the elevator door opened, Catherine thrust her hand into her purse absentmindedly to search for her keys. Joe followed at her elbow, shaking the water from his hair. As they rounded the corner, Catherine drew up short, the dark shape of a man standing in her entranceway. Joe crashed into her, nearly losing his balance.

"Devin!" Catherine said quickly, then stopped and closed her eyes in anger and dismay. In the surprise of seeing him so unexpectedly she had forgotten to use the only name Joe had ever heard him use. In the silence that reigned in that moment, she looked at Devin, her eyes filled with apology.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't doing anything tonight and I thought I'd stop by to see you. I didn't know..."

Joe had recovered enough of his balance to recognize Devin and to register Catherine's exclamation. He looked at Devin, his mouth sliding into an easy smile but his eyes wary, suspicious. "Jeff!" he said in recognition, extending his hand. "Jeff Radler?"

"Hi Joe," Devin said quickly, clasping Joe's hand in his own and shaking it vigorously. "Good to see you." He turned to Catherine quickly. "I'll call you, okay? Goodnight."

Before either of them could answer, Devin rushed to the stairwell and bounded out the door.

Catherine struggled with the key to her apartment door, finally finding the right one and thrusting it into the deadbolt. She threw the door open, then stood back politely, allowing Joe to precede her into the darkened living room. She turned the lights on as she followed him in, tossing her briefcase onto a chair by the door and peeling off her raincoat rapidly. She hung the coat in a small closet by the door, placing the umbrella in its stand next to the chair.

"How do you want your coffee?" she said quickly, staving off the moment as long as possible.

"I'm not thirsty now."

Catherine sat on one of the sofas, Joe waiting until she was seated before sitting down himself. He unzipped his windbreaker, but did not remove it. He looked around the apartment nonchalantly, his gaze slowing when he looked towards the bedroom, then returning to Catherine. "So, where is he staying?"

"He's staying with some family here in the city," she answered evenly.

"What's Jeff up to these days?"

"Jeff..," Catherine answered, slightly confused for a moment, then she regained her mental footing, but Joe had caught the moment. Catherine caught his glance and smiled faintly, knowing at that moment that Joe knew he had caught her. She shook her head several times, then looked at Joe openly. "His name isn't Jeff."

"I knew that," Joe said, his tone infuriatingly superior.

"You knew?" Catherine gasped. "Before I..."

Joe put his hand up, silencing her quickly. "I wasn't sure until just now that you knew, but when you blundered over his name... that told me everything I needed to know. I suspected his name was an alias when he resigned three years ago. When I checked his credentials out, I found out that the real Jeff Radler is alive and well and teaching law at a small college in New Mexico."

"You never said anything to me about investigating him."

"Why frighten you? I figured you were angry enough at him for having misrepresented himself and for stealing the Aringer brief out from under you." Catherine looked at Joe with a menacing look. "All right, when I gave him the Aringer brief. His credentials were that good, Cathy. I felt he would do a better job."

"He did," she answered, a hint of respect and admiration in her voice. "You were right."

"And I didn't know you and he would become friends outside of work," Joe continued, his glance more a question than a statement of fact. "He didn't seem like your type."

Catherine saw through Joe's pretense easily and debated whether to let him remain ignorant of the true nature of their relationship or to be as honest as she could permit herself to be, without revealing too much. "We're friends, Joe. Nothing more."

"Now it's my turn to be a little offended."

"Why?"

He looked at her intently, surprised that she did not understand the reason for his anger. "You said a minute ago that you were surprised I didn't tell you I checked him out professionally. Why shouldn't I be surprised when you don't tell me about the friendship you have with him personally?"

Catherine knew he was right and she chided herself for allowing herself to be bothered by Joe's reluctance to share his professional confidences with her, but she had no real excuse for keeping Joe in the dark about Devin on a personal level. Joe was one of her best friends and that implied certain freedoms one could take with personal matters. Joe owed her nothing as far as his professional investigations went. She owed him at least her knowledge that the man who had misled him and nearly blown a major case against a serial child molester was, in actuality, one of her best friends. She felt badly that she had not shared with Joe more of her friendship with Devin. She suddenly remembered the night she had made the first, tentative steps towards telling Joe about Vincent - the horrible emptiness she felt over being forced to stand by helplessly and watch the man she loved fall apart. Joe had been wonderful that night, allowing her to gain some measure of comfort and camaraderie from him - and hiding from her his disappointment that the dream of someday taking their friendship to a more serious level was dying before his eyes. She knew that she had hurt him in her quest for comfort, but he had remained steadfastly loyal, supportive of her. She owed him more than a simple apology.

"I know I should have told you, Joe," she answered, consciously trying to measure her words against her promise to Vincent. "We just didn't communicate on this one. I thought you would forget about him and you thought that I was professionally jealous." Joe nodded. "All I can say is, the friendship didn't really begin until after he resigned." She leaned forward, her next words emphasized more by her drawing closer to Joe than by any change in her voice. "Joe, Jeff had to resign because I found out about him."

Joe was taken aback, his features assuming a look of shock, then disbelief, then acceptance. He slowly nodded his head, as if he had just discovered the final piece to a difficult jigsaw puzzle and could now push it into place. He leaned back slowly, spreading his arms across the back of the sofa, his eyes transfixed on the ceiling. He did not speak for a long time, as the unanswered questions he had been carrying with him for so long finally found their answers and he tried to make sense of the situation. Finally, he looked at Catherine, his face composed, calm, accepting. "Damn. You gave him the chance to resign gracefully and get out. That can only mean one thing, Cathy. He must be important to someone important to you."

Catherine smiled and nodded, amazed at Joe's powers of perception in such a personal matter. She realized suddenly that she had given him far less credit than was his due in matters of personal involvement. She knew it took someone who understood the power of affection and personal integrity to grasp that we make exceptions for some that we would never make for others. "He is."

"He who?" Joe asked.

She knew that she was approaching the limit of what she could divulge to Joe without endangering her friends, but she felt she owed him as much as she was comfortable telling him. She also trusted Joe more than anyone else above. "His real name is Devin."

"Devin what?"

Catherine looked at Joe pointedly, her voice dropping to a monotone. "Devin," she said, the finality in her tone cutting off all further attempts at prodding.

"And how did you find out about him?"

Catherine knew she must tread softly here. She could never explain to him that he was the illegitimate son of the ruler of an underground world many stories beneath them. Nor could she tell him of her following Devin to the carousel that night so long ago, then tailing him to the drainage tunnels, of his uncovering his and Vincent's names etched in the cement blocks, of Vincent and Father's angry confrontation over the child who's identity had been kept secret for so long. She had been honest with Joe when she turned in the Aringer brief, giving Devin credit for a job well done. Joe had never quite believed her story that the work on the brief was entirely hers. Now she would have to betray Devin's good work, make him appear less capable in Joe's eyes. She silently hoped Devin would forgive her rewriting of his past - again.

"The night I first raised questions with you about his competence, I confronted him at his hotel. He admitted his deception to me on the condition that I let him think of a believable cover story and help him finish the work. I saw no need to destroy him. He was desperate to prove to himself that he could do the job. I knew that we could work together and hammer out a brief good enough to keep Aringer in prison. We did just that. He concocted his resignation story later."

Joe seemed to believe her story, his glance never leaving her face but no sign of disbelief appearing as she spun the tale. "And you became friends after he left the office?"

"Yes. By the way, what did he tell you the day he resigned?"

"He never told you that?" Joe asked, surprised.

Catherine shook her head. "And I never asked."

"He said one of his parents was dying."

Though Catherine made no outward move and her face remained immobile, Joe felt that his words hit her in some manner he could not explain. "What could I say? I accepted his resignation without question. But I made a mental note to check up on him after he left. His work was a little rough."

"We did it in one night. I had no time to polish it," Catherine heard herself saying, grateful that the icy coldness she felt enveloping her was not reflected on her face or in her voice. A saying of her mother's sounded in her mind, something she had been told many times as a child. 'Never lie about death. It will come to claim you.' She had never lied about death to anyone in her life, her mother's admonition staying with her. "Besides, it did the job."

"So why is Devin back in New York?"

"I don't know. He hasn't told me yet. I'll be seeing him tomorrow night."

"What's he been doing since he left?"

"Odd jobs," Catherine answered, her mind still numb. "He's actually been to some really interesting places in the past few years."

"Maybe we can get together while he's here?" Joe said simply, as a gesture of friendship.

The thought frightened her deeply. Joe was good at reading people and Devin was a master of the dropped hint. She didn't know how far Joe would go in his subtle interrogation of Devin, nor how much Devin would give Joe to chew on. She knew that Devin respected Joe, but she knew he was unaware of Joe's tenacity, his gift of setting his sights on a single task and relentlessly moving towards it, overcoming every obstacle. His gift of insight, matched with his ability to access records all around the world, left Catherine fearful of accepting the offer. She knew only that to deflect the offer would leave Joe even more suspicious, more determined to learn all he could. She fixed a smile, her lips pressed together. "I'll ask him. Don't you think he might be a little hesitant about seeing you again?"

"Why? He knows that I know the truth about his first name. Hell, I'll even call him 'Jeff' if you like."

"No, Joe," Catherine said. "If he agrees, we do it honestly." Joe nodded.

"Sounds fine to me. How about Friday night?"

"I'll get back to you to after I see him tomorrow night, OK?"

Joe stood up and stretched, then started zipping his windbreaker. "Okay. He can even pick the restaurant. I'll buy."

Catherine followed Joe to the door, standing aside as he pulled it open slowly, quietly. He turned to her, grinning. "Thanks for being honest with me, Radcliffe," Joe said, bringing his half-clenched hand to her chin and supporting it for a moment, then flicking his finger up slightly, affectionately. "See you tomorrow."

Catherine closed the door quickly, then sank back against it, relieved that she had kept her promise to Vincent but deeply guilty over having lied to a friend. And having been thanked for it.

Devin awakened with a start, a cool rush of air moving over his bed. He could feel the chill on his naked arms lying at his sides on top of the bedspread. He pulled the bedcover tighter around him, forcing his body down into the warmth of the mattress and drawing his arms underneath for protection. He never remembered his chamber being this cold before. He shrugged, telling himself it was the unfamiliarity with the tunnels that fed his chills. He ignored the thin layer of perspiration that covered his arms and chest.

After a few minutes, he could detect the faint sounds of metallic blows echoing through the tunnels beneath him. He knew these sounds well, the distinctive impact of metal on metal. He remembered the months it had taken he and Vincent and Elijah to hew out the chamber in which he now slept, his pride at achieving the ritual passage into tunnel manhood staying with him for many months afterward.

When a young man reached the age of twelve, he and his closest friends were chosen to construct his personal chamber. It had taken him little time in selecting the spot for his chamber - a matter of a few meters separating his chamber entrance from Vincent's. The chiseling had taken the three of them over seven months, Vincent's incredible strength and endurance trimming a job which usually took over a year. As the sounds echoed faintly around him, Devin found himself wondering who was doing the

work and which of the children was moving up from the nursery chamber and into adulthood. He made a mental note to find out when he saw Vincent.

"Hi, Devin!"

The sound was shrill, nearby, and definitely feminine. Devin slowly inched his head out from under the fort of blankets he had built about himself and peered over the quilt. There, standing perfectly still, aggressively innocent and holding a tray of food in her hands was Devin's nemesis.

"I should have known," he said; sitting up and running his hands through his hair quickly. He rubbed the remnants of his daydream from his eyes and quickly snatched the covers back around his shoulders.

"Vincent said you were back."

"And you couldn't wait to tell me how much you missed me?"

Jamie set the tray of food on the bed, close to Devin. "Like I'd miss a toothache."

"Obviously Vincent didn't say anything about how showing respect for your elders."

Jamie pressed the empty tray to her chest, like armor. Her arms crossed defiantly, she fixed him with an icy stare. "Since when do you give people lessons about respecting their elders? Or don't you practice what you preach?"

"Devin's practices are his own. And he doesn't preach." The voice came from behind Jamie, filling the chamber, its tone authoritative and accusing.

Jamie turned and looked at Vincent angrily. "You always stick up for him," she muttered, rushing by.

Devin looked after Jamie, sighing loudly and shaking his head. "I guess I have a lot of bridges to mend?"

Vincent walked to the bed and sat down. "Jamie still sees things in black and white. I'm afraid she has yet to discover the grey of adulthood"

"I almost envy her."

Vincent pushed the tray towards Devin casually. "Please eat something." Devin shook his head quickly. "You must keep up your strength."

"For what?"

"For yourself, of course."

Devin pushed the tray away, sliding out from under the covers and pulling on a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt. He jerked the belt tight around his waist and sat in a chair near Vincent, planting his feet in front of him and crossing his legs. He rested his head on against his bands and his hands against the cold, damp stone. "Just myself? Don't you mean for Father, too? And for you?"

Vincent shook his head sadly. "No. Not for us. For you."

"Yeah. I should take care of myself so I can savor my final days... maybe live another three months instead of two. After all, I should be as healthy as possible physically while I'm disintegrating mentally."

He fixed Vincent with a glance empty of all but anger and resignation. "Nice try, old buddy. But that's not how I'm gonna do this."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you talk to Father about..."

"No!" The sound and fury of the word rang through the room, through the tunnel outside, the force of it overpowering Devin. He sat up quickly, rushing to Vincent's side on the bed. Vincent avoided Devin's glance, his face down turned. Devin put a hand on his shoulder, but Vincent could only shake his head sadly. Finally, he looked up. "Devin. I can't." His voice became softer, pleading. "You can't."

"Yes I can, buddy."

Vincent looked deeply into his friend's eyes, searching for some hint that there were some words he could speak, some argument he could use that could divert Devin from his plan. "There must be other ways..."

Devin shook his head slowly, his lips assuming a half-smile of compassion and gratitude. "Even if there were, none of them would be my way. No, big brother, my mind's made up. If Father won't listen, then I'll ask Catherine."

"Catherine? Devin, you can't!"

Devin stood up and walked slowly towards the door, turning at the last moment to look at his friend. "Who's going to stop me?" He turned quickly walked out, allowing no answer.

Father sat hunched over a large map of part of the tunnel system, looking for a way to join two ancient passageways. The distance between them was short, but the dampness of the stone and the sound of running water had made both he and Mouse cautious. To break into an underground spring or waterway could flood important passages to the south. Yet, a simple cut of less than 50 feet could shave over a day's journey from the central chambers to the underground food gardens. All of Mouse's expertise in geology and Kanin's in stonemasonry would be required to come to the proper decision.

Father glanced up at the sound of someone approaching the chamber. He unfolded his glasses and slipped them on quickly.

Devin stuck his head into the chamber quickly, as if to see if he were interrupting. "I never could sneak up on you," he said, bounding down the rusty iron steps and walking quickly to the table. He grabbed the nearest chair and placed it next to Father's. "Am I interrupting anything important?"

"Not at all. We're thinking of joining two of the southern tunnels," He answered, unfurling the map and indicating the spot to Devin.

A long, thin whistle filled the chamber. "You can't do it there." Devin said, shaking his head.

"Why?"

"Too much water right above those tunnels."

"You don't think the walls would hold?"

"You're well out from shore, beneath New York Harbor. You want to risk it?"

"But those tunnels have been there for centuries. We've had no problems before."

"But for centuries, there has been vibration over those rock layers, years of ship propellers and heavy machinery building tunnels beneath the East River, decades of the Staten Island Ferry engines less than 100 feet overhead."

"Still, perhaps we could tunnel downward enough to leave sufficient..."

"If you tunnel downward, how will the children move the food carts up the incline? And what will happen when the city of New York decides to build the ManStat Tunnel?"

"The what?"

Devin laughed. "Sorry. A holdover from my days as a copy writer. That's my naming idea for a traffic tunnel between Manhattan and Staten Island."

Father rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I'm surprised you didn't go far in that profession."

"I did. All the way to upper management. Unfortunately, you know how it is when they do background checks."

Father nodded slowly. He knew that awful feeling full well. "Then I suppose we will continue to have to haul our fresh vegetables the extra mile through the southern tunnel." The disappointment in his voice was evident.

"Certainly not." Devin said, looking at the map casually.

"What do you mean? What alternative is there?"

"Why not cut your connecting passageway here... closer to the main chambers and beneath solid rock instead of water?" Devin pointed to a spot on the map that no one had considered before.

The passageway would have to be almost 300 feet long, no small engineering feat. Father looked at his son as if he had lost his mind. "You can't be serious?"

"Sure. The stone there is much softer, since there's a thick sand layer just inside this fault here..." Devin pointed to a spot on the map. "The tunneling would take no more than five months. You'd be protected from any engineering flight of fancy from the folks upstairs. And you can avoid any risk of tunnel failure."

"Why didn't Kanin or Pascal tell me these things?"

"Maybe because neither of them spent the hours I have in those tunnels. I know that section of the tunnels better than anyone."

Father made two marks on the map, indicating the spot where Devin had indicated the passage should be constructed. He then rolled the map, bound it with a leather string, and returned it to its slot in his wooden organizer. He walked back to the table, stopping only to pour himself and Devin each a cup of tea from a still-warm kettle. Devin took the cup from Father and took several easy sips, then pushed the cup aside.

"How are you feeling?" Father asked.

"You mean can I feel myself getting weaker... and weaker..." Devin slowly slumped in his chair, gradually allowing his limbs to go limp.

"Devin, please!"

"Come on, Father. You're a doctor. What's your prognosis?"

"I think you should see a specialist above."

"I did, Father. I've seen two specialists. Same cheery facade, same euphemisms, same story. No amount of talking about it is going to matter."

"But there are things you can do for yourself."

Devin stood up quickly, turning away. "Sure. I can pump my body full of chemicals and watch as my system comes unglued. I can let them use radiation." Devin turned to look at Father steadily. "Remember why you're here, Father? Why I'm here? Are you seriously asking me to do willingly what you accused others of doing in secret?"

"But those men weren't..."

"Weren't dying of cancer? Right, they were healthy. And the radiation you warned them about as a killer... you think it's suddenly going to become a healer?"

Father shook his head bitterly, looking at Devin with a look he knew only too well. "What I would want for you is different than what I would want for... for..."

"For a stranger?" Devin walked to his father and put his hands on his shoulders, his look grateful, tender. "I understand how you feel. I'm not your son now. I'm a patient." He pulled his father into an embrace. "But I'm a patient you can't cure" He felt the pressure from his father's embrace tighten. It was a feeling he had sought all his life. He returned the pressure, then pulled away and looked at Father, smiling. "But you can help me."

"How? You resist everything I've said might help you."

Devin walked back to the table, placing his hands on the top to support himself. "You still have contacts above. Medical contacts."

"Yes," Father answered anxiously.

"You can get any drug you need for medical purposes?"

"Yes"

"Drugs to ease pain. To bring comfort."

There was some purpose to Devin's words, some goal towards which he was moving, however slowly. Father had never known Devin to beat around the bush before - in fact, at times he had been almost insulting in his forthrightness, his disavowal of all pretense at the carefully chosen word or delicately phrased request. Now, he seemed reluctant to ask for what he wanted. It almost seemed that he

wanted Father to guess what he wished for, to guess, acknowledge, and grant Devin's wish - without the need to talk, consider, or approve.

"Yes, there are such drugs. I can get them."

"Drugs to end agony?"

"Yes"

"To end the despair of waiting for something that can't be avoided. Can't be overcome." Devin looked at Father, his features hardening into a countenance that could stand against any weapon used against it. "To end a game I don't want to play."

Father looked at his son, aghast. He could find no words to answer him.

"A simple mercy killing," Devin said, the words filling the silence with a chill that overcame the finality of the meaning behind them. "Clean, quick..." The terror in Father's eyes did not deter him. "Painless."

"Devin... please... I can't..."

He moved to his father, his face softening slightly. He knew the pain he would face in the days ahead would pale compared to the pain he was inflicting on the man seated before him. He knelt next to him, looking up into the eyes consciously averted, already filling with tears.

"Please, Father."

He looked at Devin, his face drained, pale. He could not answer; merely shake his head, his mind numb.

"Please." He repeated.

Devin drew Father into his arms, his body shaking with the sobs of the man he held. The pain he had wanted to be spared filled him. Whether he helped him or not, he knew that the most difficult task he faced was behind him.

Catherine walked briskly through the naked desolation of Central Park, weaving between trees and small clumps of bushes, her strides lengthening as she approached the drainage tunnel. She had to avoid large stretches of muddy water, the remnants of an afternoon downpour. As she approached the tunnel, the muddy, swiftly-moving water prevented her from casually walking along the edge of the waterline. She had to walk higher on the sloped surface, using her hand to steady herself against the side of the culvert. As she neared the junction, she sidestepped the main drain basin and entered the higher tunnel. It was drier here, an easier walk. She reached the junction in seconds.

She rounded a corner and reached for the concerned trip lever. As she grabbed hold of the lever, she felt a hand take her shoulder. She whirled and brought her arm up, ready to defend herself.

"Isaac taught you well," Vincent said softly.

"Vincent!" Her voice came in gasps "You frightened me. I thought I was followed." She looked at Vincent earnestly. "Is anything wrong?"

Vincent nodded, turning towards Catherine. "It's Devin."

"Is he... in pain?"

"

"No, not yet. At least not physically." She looked at Vincent, not understanding.

"Devin has made a request of Father."

"What?"

She could sense the difficulty Vincent was facing in trying to explain. Normally, she could discern the meaning of his words easily, what lay behind his pauses and silences. She had never seen him this reluctant to seek her advice or ask for her help.

"Vincent, tell me."

"Devin has asked Father to euthanize him."

Catherine was still for a long time. She did not answer him. Vincent looked up in time to see her thoughtful look, and the slow nod of her head.

"I understand."

"You think Father should agree?"

She put a hand on Vincent's arm, rubbing it gently, reassuringly. "I can't decide for Father." She moved her hand to his chin, turning his face towards her. "I can't decide for you. All I can say is that I understand how Devin feels. The desperation. The fear." She hesitated, "The resignation."

"But to give up without trying anything, without fighting to stay alive..."

"You can't accept that?"

He shook his head violently.

"Vincent, what if I were dying?"

He looked at her, his expression unchanged.

"What if there were no hope..."

"There's always hope."

"No, Vincent. There isn't... Sometimes, no matter what we try or how much we deny or how hard we fight, we lose."

"Then you think he should simply give in without a fight?"

"Vincent, Devin doesn't have much time left. How would you have him spend that time? Laying in a hospital bed, tubes stuck down his mouth and nose, needles constantly poking him, IVs pumping him full of chemicals? Cut off from us? From you? Do you honestly think he could fight living like that?"

Vincent shook his head sadly. "No."

Catherine put her arm around his shoulder, pulling him closer to her. "Let me speak with Father. Maybe I can convince him."

"No!"

The fury in Father's voice filled the library chamber, startling them. Catherine had never seen him so angry before. Vincent sat to one side, silent, determined not to intervene.

"But Father..."

"Catherine, I refuse to discuss it."

"Have you discussed it with Devin?"

"No."

"Well, that's certainly fair."

Father glared at her, rising to his feet quickly and confronting her. "You have no right..."

"I have every right!"

"Oh? And when did you acquire the right to discuss medical decisions about my child with me?"

"Father, please..." Vincent began, but Catherine silenced him with a glance. She turned back to Father, solemn and controlled.

"I acquired the right to discuss Devin the night Vincent came to me pleading with me to spare him from exposure. The night I brought your only child back to you at the carousel to give you a second chance. The night I watched him bring Charles back from the edge of despair, watched him become a man in front of my eyes."

Father's anger had eased. He looked down at the table, avoiding her accusatory stare. She walked closer, her words hitting him like fists. "Last night, when he appeared at my door, frightened and alone."

"Catherine... I'm sorry..."

She put a hand on his shoulder, her anger spent. "I am too." She kissed him gently on the side of his head, then circling him with her arms from behind the chair. He took her hands in his, kissing one of them gently.

"I am too," Came a voice from close by. Devin stood silhouetted in the chamber door, the light from the corridor making his features indistinguishable. There was no anger in his voice. He walked forward, out of the shadows, and sat on the top stone step cut into the entranceway. He looked at Catherine gratefully. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"The vote of confidence earlier."

"Oh," she replied.

"It meant a lot."

"We're all proud of you," Vincent said softly. "You must know that."

Devin stood quickly, placed his hands on either side of the railing flanking the steps, and glided down the short incline playfully, like a child. He landed with a thud at Vincent's feet. "I know, big brother. I always thought that's what I wanted to hear from you more than anything else." He turned and looked at Father intently. "From both of you."

"I've always been proud of you, Devin."

"No you haven't." Father moved to speak, but Devin cut him off. "In hindsight, maybe you admired me or envied my independence - but I don't think you really were proud of what I did."

The silence acknowledged the truth of his words. "So, I guess I'm on my own with this one?"

Vincent spoke first, his words measured, cautious. "How can you say that. You know we want you with us for as long..."

"For as long as I live?"

"Yes."

"Well, that'll be quite a sacrifice on your parts."

"Devin, be fair," Father said suddenly. "You know we only want what is best for you."

"Just as long as it corresponds to your view of what's right for me, right, Father?"

"I'm a doctor. I don't take life. It is my job to see that life is prolonged as long as possible."

"No matter what the cost?"

"Yes. I took an oath"

"Right. I keep forgetting. A two thousand year old oath, first uttered at a time when death couldn't be predicted weeks, months ahead of its arrival."

"I remain bound by its words. I am honor bound to do no harm."

"And what harm is done by refusing to act?" Vincent said softly, sensing a dangerous tone to the voices of his friends.

"Less than it would do to me to take my own child's life from him!" Father answered, defiantly.

"Why do you assume there would be no harm to me if I consented to this?"

"No one is asking you to administer any fatal drugs, Father," Catherine offered. "Only to help Devin acquire them."

Father stood, his glance taking in everyone in the chamber. "I'm sorry. I cannot condone the taking of

life one moment before it absolutely must be relinquished. I can ease the pain and slow the onset of symptoms. But I cannot be a party to the death of my son."

He walked to Devin slowly, his movements unsteady despite his cane. "I treated you differently as a child, trying to hold you to a higher standard than I held the other children... even Vincent. I know now that wasn't fair. I've tried to make up for that. I know that I helped drive you away from these tunnels, and I will do everything I can to atone for my shortcomings. But I cannot do this." He moved to the chamber door, head down. He paused and turned back to Devin. "Please don't hate me, Devin. Because I love you very much." His composure failing, he turned and left the library, the sounds of his walking cane meeting stone fading slowly in the silence.

No one spoke. Vincent moved to Catherine, their looks resigned. Devin kept his face towards the door, then slowly turned to face his friends, shaking his head sadly. "Every time I come back here, I end up being the villain."

"Father doesn't mean to hurt you. He just doesn't understand," Vincent said. "I'll go speak with him." He turned to Catherine and smiled, accepting her nod as her promise to try to calm Devin. He took her hand, squeezing it affectionately, then swept up the metal stairs and out of the chamber. Catherine sat down wearily, watching Devin, silent... waiting.

"What good can he do? He doesn't understand."

"Yes, he does."

Devin whirled, looking at her hopefully. "Did you..."

"I explained it to Vincent as best I could. You can't expect him to understand completely. He's never seen what cancer does to a person - especially anyone he loves."

Devin chuckled to himself, shaking his head wearily. "Vincent has never seen terminal cancer, yet he understands -he sympathizes. Father has seen the ravages firsthand, yet he won't do anything to prevent it" He turned to Catherine, his face dark with equal parts amusement and despair. "Makes a lot of sense."

"No, it doesn't, does it? I wish I had the words to convince Father."

"That he's wrong?"

"That no one is completely right. That some situations are beyond right and wrong... there's just different roads to the same destination. I don't see that it matters how you get there. Father does."

"Do you support me, Cathy?"

She looked at the man who stood before her, his demeanor expectant - searching for her support of his decision, something she never thought she would see Devin driven to. She hesitated to answer, but something her mother had told her as a child filled her mind, pushing all her rationalizations aside. 'Grant your greatest exceptions to those you love.'

"Yes, Devin. Were I in your position, I would probably do the same thing."

"Good," he answered, and Catherine suddenly felt she had fallen into a trap. "I want you to talk to someone for me."

"Who?"

"Peter Alcott."

"Devin, Peter is my personal physician. I wouldn't feel comfortable going over Father's head."

"Father is not my physician," he answered. He pulled the diagnosis sheet from his shirt pocket and fumbled for a business card in his wallet. "This is my personal physician. Have Peter call him, if you want." He extended the papers to Catherine, waiting.

She looked at the papers intently, then at Devin's face. His look was serious, determined, his eyes saying that if she truly believed what she had said, she would have to grant his request. Slowly, she extended her fingers and took the documents from him. He seemed surprised for an instant, but the feeling was gone before she could fully grasp it.

"Thanks, Cathy."

"Don't you think you should talk to him too?"

"Peter and Father are old friends. He's never been overly fond of my decision to leave the tunnels. He'll listen to you."

She nodded, knowing that Peter would never countermand Father's wishes in a medical matter regarding a Tunnel World citizen. "I'll talk to him, see what I can do."

"Father must not know."

She had made the exception - she knew she must see it through. "I understand," she answered.

Devin came to her and put his arms around her, his embrace all the thanks he could muster. She returned the affection, the papers in her hand rustling against Devin's back.

Vincent caught up to Father well down the tunnel, Father having slowed his pace at the sound of the approaching footsteps. He stopped to catch his breath and to try to think of the words he could use to convince a man he knew to be intractable.

"There's nothing you can say, Vincent. My mind is made up."

"Just like that? No discussion, no debate, nothing?"

"The matter is not debatable!"

"Father, this isn't some stranger we're talking about here. This is your son! You can't keep punishing Devin forever."

"I'm *not* punishing him. I'm trying to..."

"You're trying to control him, as if he were still a child. It's almost as if you think you can keep him here by making him dependent on us."

"I *want* to *help* him. To *care* for him."

"You can't undo the past, Father. Whatever guilt you feel over Devin's upbringing can't be washed away by standing firm in this."

Father slumped against the tunnel wall, leaning against his cane for support. It seemed to Vincent that he had touched some vulnerable part of his defenses. "Vincent, you and he are asking me to condone suicide - to provide my only child with the instruments of death by his own hand. But if I do that, it will *not* be by his own hand. It would be *my* hand." He glanced away, his voice distant, filled with remorse. "I drove him away from here. I tried to force him down paths I wanted to see him follow. I could never accept the fact that the only road for Devin was that of a drifter, a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none. I wanted more for him."

"What Devin found was enough for him."

Father seemed not to have heard. "I failed him as a Father, Vincent. I failed him as a teacher. I will not fail him as a doctor."

"Is there nothing I can say to change your mind?"

He shook his head sadly. "No." Vincent turned, then stopped when he felt Father's hand on his arm. "Please tell Devin I will do all I can for him. I want him here with us."

"Yes, Father," Vincent answered hopelessly heading back down the tunnel.

The walls of Peter Alcott's waiting room were a cheery light pumpkin color, the soft pastel walls filling the office with a warm glow. There were several large green plants, their leaves a healthy, vibrant green - the light from the open windows reflecting off their smooth fronds and casting deep shadows across the room. The sounds of the receptionist's word processor seemed muted, absorbed by the thick afghan carpet and the thick sunrays. Catherine sat, thumbing through a travel magazine her dark mood lifted somewhat by the comfort of the surroundings and the brightness all around her, a glow that seemed to block out despair, that spoke of hope, of light, of joy.

A buzzer sounded somewhere near her. The receptionist picked up the telephone, spoke quietly for a moment, then replaced it in its cradle.

"Miss Chandler? Dr. Alcott will see you now."

Catherine tossed the magazine back onto the table, gathered her purse and coat in her hands. She headed down the hall and headed straight for the office she knew so well. It was the first time she ever approached that office door with apprehension.

Peter turned at the sound of the door opening, smiling broadly and rising to greet her. She had not seen him in several months. He looked well, tan and fit, his graying hair framing a handsomely lined face and piercing blue eyes.

"Thanks for seeing me on such short notice."

"Don't be silly. I always have time for you, Cathy."

She seated herself opposite him, leaning back in the comfortable leather chair. "I'm afraid this isn't a social visit, Peter." She sighed heavily. "I wish it were."

"Are you all right, Cathy?" he asked, deeply concerned.

"No, I'm fine." She searched for the right words "Has Father told you Devin is home?"

"Devin, back in New York! That's wonderful!"

"He's been back for two days now. He's home for good."

Peter's face darkened. "He's going to remain in the tunnels?"

She nodded, knowing that Peter understood Devin as well as she did. "What's wrong, Cathy?"

She opened her purse and pulled the tattered sheet of paper from it, handing it to him silently. She waited patiently while he read the complete report. She knew he had seen the diagnosis immediately and was using the time to read the sheet to compose himself. When he finally looked up, his eyes betrayed sadness and helplessness.

"Does Father know?"

She nodded.

"Vincent?"

Another nod.

He handed the paper back to her, his eyes down. "I will see Father tonight. How is he taking it?"

"Not well," she answered. She hesitated, then looked at him intently. "There's more."

"He has months to live, Catherine. How can there be more?"

"He asked Father to obtain drugs to... to..."

"Suicide?"

She nodded silently.

"I'm sure Jacob refused. I know how he feels about the idea."

"Yes. Devin pleaded with him. It did no good. They fought."

"They always do." He shook his head, sadly. "How does Vincent feel about this?"

"He was against it, at first. Now he wants to do whatever is best for Devin. He's reserving judgement."

Peter listened intently, picturing the personalities involved and doubtless envisioning the confrontation that must have occurred. Catherine was certain that he did not suspect the reason for her visit, at least not yet.

"What can he do if Jacob refuses?"

She looked at him intently. Suddenly, Peter's face changed. His eyes widened appreciably, seeming to

take in not only her presence and the room, but the medical diplomas hanging behind her, the medical cabinets on the far wall, filled with instruments and drugs. Now he understood.

"He wants me to prescribe the drugs?"

"Peter, I promised I would ask for him. He doesn't feel comfortable asking you himself. You're too close to Father."

He looked down at the desk, silent. "Did he think I wouldn't refuse you?"

"Probably. He may be playing on our friendship, Peter." He looked up slowly. "He's desperate now. He has no other recourse."

"How do you feel about it, Cath?"

She sighed deeply, tired of arguing, tired of justifying herself, tired of being caught in the middle of a dilemma she bore no responsibility for.

"I don't pretend to know what's right or wrong here. I only know what Devin wants and what Devin will probably go through if you refuse." She looked at him, her glance hardening. "He will suffer terribly, won't he?"

Peter looked at her directly, openly. He nodded slowly. "And what does he face if he comes above for treatment?"

"There is no treatment for his cancer, Cathy. We would keep him on a drug regime of painkillers and immune-builders for as long as we could, but he would literally waste away to a coma, then die."

"Does that sound like Devin? Is that what you think he would want?"

He shook his head. "No. It would destroy him mentally."

"He wants to spend his final days with his family and friends. And when there is no hope for mobility, for a life free of pain without medication, he wants to be able to make his own decision to move on. I don't see anything wrong with that, Peter." She leaned forward, her arms resting on the desk, one atop the other, her voice steady. "I don't think you do either, do you?"

He stood, turning towards a huge mahogany bookcase behind his desk, lit from within and filled with books on medicine, psychology, philosophy. He looked at them for a few moments, then turned back to Catherine, his hands on the back of his chair. His voice clear, calm, decisive.

"I've been a good doctor, Cathy." She nodded solemnly. "I've done everything I could to ease my patient's pain, to calm their fears. I've even cried with some of them - when I felt I was as powerless as they were."

She nodded slightly, understanding.

"I've been taught that my most important obligation was to do no harm. That's what I've always tried to do. But how to interpret the word harm has always been the most difficult problem. Most doctors would say that to help kill is to do harm. I don't know, Cath. It's so easy to stand to one side, safe, healthy, protected - and tell someone who faces certain death what is right or wrong. But I really can't make myself believe that that's what my oath is supposed to mean. Most people look at the word 'harm' in that oath and assume it was meant to guide the doctor. Maybe it isn't. Maybe the patient

should be the one to determine what 'harm' is."

Catherine looked at her friend, her thoughts racing. She had feared he would give in to her request in spite of his personal convictions. She had wanted his full support, both moral and professional. Now she knew she could not consent without both.

"We ask for consent to draw blood, to take out an appendix, to replace a heart valve. We get permissions for everything from the food we serve them in the hospital to the drugs they take under our care. Yet when someone asks for our help to end their suffering, we draw back, afraid. We're awfully good at asking for consent and damn slow to give it."

He sat back down, looking at Catherine gently. "I've known you for over thirty years. I delivered you, watched you grow, heard about your first step - your first words. I watched you overcome an obstacle that would have shattered most other women. I consider you my friend, someone I would confide in - trust my life to. If you were asking me to do this for you, I would consent without a moment's hesitation. I wouldn't want to watch you suffer, not ever. How can I impose that sentence on you? Or Vincent?"

He paused for a moment.

"Or Devin."

He reached forward, taking a pad from next to a stack of books and scribbling on two small pieces of paper. He wrote brusquely, not looking up at her. He finished quickly, his signature barely legible on each of the forms. He tore them off of the pad roughly and handed them to Catherine.

"Different pharmacies. Different days. Call me when you have both of these filled. I will tell you what to do."

Catherine took the prescriptions, stuffing them into her purse, her eyes never leaving Peter's face. 'Thank you.' she mouthed silently, gratefully. Peter nodded a few times, his eyes wet, glistening.

"Get out of here," he said affectionately, his voice breaking slightly.

He watched as Catherine stood quietly, pulled her coat over her shoulders and walked out quickly. When he was safely alone, he swiveled in his chair to face the bookcase. He looked at the tens of bound volumes before him, brightly lit, pretending to contain all the knowledge he required as a healer. He shook his head bitterly, his cheeks now streaked with the tears he had not wanted Catherine to see.

Devin sat quietly in his chamber, a battered copy of "Moby Dick" on the bedspread in front of him, his head resting on two clenched hands, the book teetering precariously between his elbows. His legs were bent, his feet banging together idly, unconsciously, as he read. He would laugh occasionally, the sound of his laughter filling the chamber and echoing in the halls outside.

"Devin, are you here?"

"Come on in, Cathy," he said, quickly sitting upright on the bed, legs crossed in front of him.

Catherine entered the chamber warily, surprised to find him alone.

"Don't worry." Devin smiled broadly, motioning to a chair near the bed. "I won't bite you."

"I'm surprised you're alone. I was expecting Vincent to be here with you."

"Nope." He sprang from the bed, folding the book page over and throwing it on the desk next to her. "I haven't seen him since our little confrontation this morning."

"He probably needs time, Devin. This can't be easy for him, caught between the two of you."

"Not a pleasant place to be caught, is it Chandler?"

She smiled and nodded reluctantly. "You're both stubborn."

"Determined."

"As you wish. I can't fight you both."

He looked at her with ill-disguised curiosity. "So what's the bad news?"

"I'll have the drugs tomorrow, Devin."

He looked at Catherine as a drowning man would a life raft, his eyes shining in gratitude. He rushed to her, taking her in his arms and holding her, his body shaking with joy. He held her at arm's length, his smile more eloquent than his words.

"How can I thank you, Cathy?"

She reached for his arms, pulling down on them with her hands, her grip on each arm strong. She brought his hands together and took them in hers, holding them in front of her.

"If you ever use any of my friendships..."

"You won't speak to me again for the rest of my life?" he asked, his voice half-serious.

"Right," she answered, defeated.

He drew her close to him, kissing her forehead affectionately. "What do we do now?"

"Peter will tell me tomorrow, after I get the prescriptions filled. He'll be seeing Father tonight."

"I want to be there."

"No, Devin. You and I have a date tonight." He looked at her quizzically.

"We do?"

"Yes. Joe is taking us to dinner. He has lots of questions for you, now that he knows you're back and what your real first name is."

A devilish look crossed his face, a look she had seen before. It drew years from him, making him look youthful, exuberant. She knew he would see a meeting with Joe as a challenge - a chance to toy and to role-play. She also knew that Joe would try his damndest to uncover as much about this mysterious man as he could, using Catherine as his sounding post.

"He said you can even choose the place."

He turned to Catherine, his smile still broad, sly, childlike. "All right. You've both got a date."

"We can do it."

Father sat behind his desk, the relief maps of the southern sections of the tunnels spread out before him. Vincent studied them intently, weighing what Father had told him about Devin's bypass plan against his own knowledge of the area. He knew that the plan would require many extra man-hours of work, but the security the longer tunnel would afford and the isolation from any possible topside project tipped the balance in its favor.

"How difficult will it be?"

"It will require at least 100 full cutting days, with a minimum of three two-person crews working in six hours shifts. It will be difficult."

"I still believe the safer access to the south gardens is important. I don't like the children walking through those dangerous passages. It's almost as dangerous there now as in the Maze."

Vincent stood and moved behind the desk, consulting a calendar behind Father's chair. "When shall we begin?"

Father turned in his chair, his chin in his hand, his fingers gently playing with his beard. "Do we have full crews ready to begin?"

"Yes. We'll be training a new stonecutter on this project, but I can work on his shift when he tires."

"Thomas?"

"Yes. He is most anxious to begin his internship with Kanin. He's a very devoted student."

"I always thought he would want to work with Pascal on the message system and new codes."

Vincent laughed gently. "I think since Kanin's return from prison he has acquired an aura among the older boys. He seems to enjoy teaching them how to work stone. His determination to rebuild his life comes through in all he does."

Cindy ran into the chamber, breathless. "What is it, Cindy?" Father asked.

"Someone is in the outer tunnels, heading this way."

"You don't recognize him?"

She shook her head quickly.

"What does he look like?" Vincent asked, reaching for his cape.

"He's old and thin and he's wearing a suit."

Vincent looked at Father and smiled. Father laughed gently and knelt down beside her. "It's all right, Cindy. Why don't you go and eat now?"

"Who is it, Father?"

"Never mind," Vincent said softly. He pushed her gently towards the door. "Go and eat now. We'll handle this."

"Nobody tells me anything!" Cindy pouted, the sound of her footsteps fading quickly.

"Were you expecting Peter?" Father asked tentatively.

Vincent shook his head.

"Neither was I," Father said.

"Perhaps he heard from a helper that Devin returned."

Father shook his head. "No. He would send a message or wait for one from us. I think he knows."

"About Devin? Who...." Vincent stopped abruptly, understanding. "Catherine."

"I fear Devin may have drawn Catherine into this situation."

"He had no choice, Father. What else could he do?"

"He could let me try to help him..."

"I see I've been expected." The sound of the voice surprised them both. Peter stood in the doorway, leaning against the stone lintel, his arms folded.

Vincent walked forward quickly. "It's good to see you, Peter," he said, extending his hand. Their handshake was warm, extended.

"Good to see you, Vincent. It's been too long." He stepped back and looked Vincent over from head to foot. "You're looking well."

"You frightened Cindy," Father said. "She thought you were an intruder."

"She may be right."

Vincent understood immediately.

He sat quietly in a chair next to the desk. "I need to talk with you, Jacob."

Father removed his glasses, carefully inserting them into their case and putting them into a drawer. He folded the maps before him slowly, deliberately, binding them with their leather ties and returning them to their storage bins. His actions were carefully timed to allow the two of them time. He returned to his chair, leaving back carefully, his face calm and expressionless.

"About my son?" He asked quietly.

"About my patient," Peter answered firmly.

"What the hell are we doing here, Chandler?" Joe asked as they arranged their coats on the backs of their chairs.

Catherine only shrugged, her face lit by the incongruity of Joe in his business suit, perfectly moussed hair, gold watch, leather briefcase and she in a designer dress of grey and black, diamond earrings and coyote jacket sitting down for dinner in a restaurant that had been ancient the day Catherine was born and had aged poorly since. The only other patron was a middle-aged woman wearing an old but well-kept dress and a plaid coat who sat in the corner eyeing the newcomers warily, a look of confusion on her face.

"This is the place Devin named. He said you would understand shortly after we got here."

Joe shook his head, warily eyeing the disheveled cook behind the tattered countertop. "Didn't we bring him down once on a bunko charge?" he asked.

"Probably." Catherine answered, not even turning to look. "Joe, we're at dinner, not Riker's Island. Please order me some coffee."

Joe signaled for the waitress, a shuffling dowager who looked like a house-Madame and talked like a truck driver. She ambled over to the table slowly, as indifferent to her customers as they were to her.

"Coffee?" she grunted through yellow, cigarette-stained stumps that had once been teeth.

"Three, please."

"Which of you gets the extra cup?" she asked, not looking up.

"We're expecting another person in a few minutes."

"Right," she said, not really hearing Joe's answer. "Anything in any of 'em?"

Catherine shook her head. "Cream and sugar in mine. Nothing in the others."

"Coffee regular" she said gruffly, looking at Joe with undisguised contempt. She looked over at Catherine, noticing her earrings. "Nice ear weights, honey," she said.

"Just bring the coffee, please," Joe said, suddenly nervous.

"Sure, handsome," she said, her eyes never leaving Catherine's earrings.

Catherine shook her head as the waitress departed, then fixed Joe with a knowing smile. "Your renowned way with women rears its ugly head once more."

He glared at her with mock anger. "I'm sure you've dated your share of dogs. By the way, you never told me how Devin reacted when you told him I wanted to treat the two of you to dinner."

"Oh, he thought it was a great idea."

"Really? Why?"

She looked past him and slightly over his head. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

Joe turned abruptly. Devin was standing behind them, his casual jeans and rumpled leather jacket in marked contrast to their formal attire. He was smiling infectiously. Joe stood up, surprised at how little his guest had changed in three years. He looked as young and ebullient as he had the day Joe had hired him after listening to two hours of non-stop fabrications. He reached for Devin's extended hand, acknowledging their friendship through Catherine.

"How's life been treating you, Jeff?" Joe asked, his voice mocking.

Devin peeled off his leather jacket, carefully draping it over the seatback. He was wearing a burgundy cable-knit sweater and white scarf beneath. He grabbed a chair from the next table and threw it in front of him, back against the table, and sat down unceremoniously.

"Cathy already told me you know my real name."

"Well, half of it anyway," Joe answered.

"And how are you tonight, Miss Chandler?" Devin asked, his voice betraying no trace of offense at Joe's words, nor any hint that he would enlighten Joe further.

"I'm fine. We already ordered you some coffee."

He rubbed his hands together, as if he were chilled. "Great. Best thing on the menu."

At that moment, the waitress appeared from the back, balancing a tray of coffee cups and silverware as if she were unaware of its presence on her arm. She placed the cups of black coffee in front of Catherine and Devin carefully but literally threw Joe's cup in front of him with ill-disguised contempt. "Two blacks, one regular," she muttered. "You know what you want to eat yet?"

"I'm not even sure I want to drink," Joe said, studying the spoon before him critically.

"Why not give us a few minutes?" Catherine said quickly, before the situation could worsen.

The waitress nodded, heading to her own waiting coffee behind the counter.

Devin eagerly downed a mouthful of coffee. Catherine stirred hers briefly, then took a tentative sip. Her face melted into a look of surprise and shock.

"This is delicious," she said, looking at Devin.

"I know," he answered. "I don't eat just anywhere."

Joe was cautious, fearing a set-up. He took a sip of the dark brown liquid, sloshed it around his mouth gently, then swallowed bravely. He winced, expecting the worst, but the worst did not come. It was delicious.

"I don't believe it. This is great."

"I found this place my last time in the city. The food is just as good as the coffee. I recommend the veal."

Joe fixed Devin with a steely glare. "So, who have you been impersonating for the last three years?"

Catherine winced. She did not want a confrontation. "Joe, please..."

"It's all right, Cathy," Devin interjected. "He has every right to be angry."

"And confused," Joe said. "I did a lot of checking on you after you left. I found out about the real Jeff Radler in New Mexico. I found out that you flew into the country under the alias Derek Sanders. I couldn't find anything on him."

"Of course not," Devin answered, smiling. "He lives in Kenya."

"And you just happened to borrow his passport?" Joe asked.

"No, I stole his passport."

"Joe, this was supposed to be a friendly dinner. Please stop cross-examining your guest."

Joe took another sip of coffee. "I'm sorry, Cathy. Force of habit. There's so much I need to unlearn about Devin."

"He's right, Chandler. I did invent quite an interesting person back then. Of course, not as interesting as the real Devin Wells."

Catherine was certain that his words were deliberate, not a slip.

"Wells?" Joe said reflectively. "Devin Wells. I like it. Certainly not a name to be ashamed of."

"Thanks. You're one of only a handful who know my real name."

"You mean I'd be wasting my time running a background check on you?"

"Joe!" Catherine said sharply, her look menacing.

"Utterly," Devin answered, finishing his coffee and snapping his fingers in the direction of the waitress. She was on her feet and headed towards the table before the sound faded. "You won't find anything about me in any official record anywhere in the world." He noted Joe's doubtful look. "Count on it."

Joe studied Devin's face. He was good at reading bluster when he saw it. He did not doubt Devin's words. "And how about the three souvenirs on your cheek?"

Devin touched his scars lightly, not breaking his glance at Joe. "The price I paid for an injustice I inflicted on a friend long ago."

Catherine was becoming uneasy. She knew that both these men were excellent game players, able to feel out and exploit their opponent's weaknesses. She also knew that neither of these men would find weakness in the other, and that their tenacity and hatred of losing could drive them to a confrontation that neither would win.

"Joe, Devin hasn't asked you about your private life. I don't think he owes you an explanation of his."

"It's just that his scars look an awful lot like some of the wounds I've seen in autopsy reports that have crossed our desks in the past six years. Don't you think so?"

Catherine controlled her voice. She glanced at Devin quickly, then back at Joe, her eyes hard, unforgiving. "Not really."

Devin had seen the anguish in Catherine's eyes. He reacted quickly. "When I was working in Kenya, the year before I stole my friend's passport and decided to come to New York to become the bane of your existence, I was working in a wild game reserve. Derek and I had a fight one day about safari fees. I said some pretty harsh things to him. He decided to play a little game with me. The next day, we took our clients out into the wild scrub outside the park to observe a pride of migrating lions. One of the females thought I was attacking her cubs. She came at me. I tried to drop her, but Derek had replaced my bullets with blanks. He was close enough to insure my safety, but his aim wasn't at its best. His first two shots missed and she grazed my cheek with her paw. His third shot felled her, but not before I got these."

Catherine looked at him, her face unchanged but her eyes filled with wonder, respect. It was the greatest performance under pressure she had ever witnessed.

"Close shave," Joe said, shaking his head. "I can see why you stole his passport."

Catherine heaved a silent sigh, relieved that the worst moment was passed. Whatever else Joe might ask, she knew he believed Devin's story. She even found herself happy that the surly waitress was approaching, thankful for the distasteful interruption.

"So you 're telling me I cannot care for my own child?" Father spat, his fury rising.

"Surely you should understand that, Jacob. It has always been considered unethical."

"This is not the world above, Peter," Father said, his anger tangible. "We do not need ethical pronouncements from your associations and your governing bodies of men whose greatest driving force is for money and power. I will not allow it into these tunnels."

"You're being unfair. I'm not trying to tell you how to practice medicine in these tunnels. The same rules apply to flesh and bone and muscle below as above. I'm simply trying to tell you that Devin, for whatever reasons, wishes to be treated according to his wishes."

"You are not treating him. You're killing him."

"No, Father," came Vincent's sonorous, calm voice. "The cancer is killing him."

"These pills that Peter has prescribed will kill him immediately."

"And they will take his life easily, painlessly. Would you rather Devin suffer?"

Father was silent. Vincent walked to him, his hands rising and taking Father's shoulders in their firm grip. He looked deeply into the old man's eyes. "Do you want him to suffer, Father?"

He shook his head violently.

"Then you have no choice in the matter, Father. You must give in to his wishes here. You cannot reject him again."

Father looked at Vincent, his eyes filled with pain. "You are asking me to tum my professional

obligation into a tool of destruction. There may be things I can do for Devin, things that medicine above does not accept as treatment. There must be something to do short of this."

Vincent looked down sighing. He turned to Peter, his face a question mark. Peter shook his head slowly.

"Tell him," he said, walking away sadly.

"Tell me what," Father asked, looking to them in turn.

Peter crossed to Father's desk, sitting on a corner. "Jacob, the type of cancer that Devin has is non-operable. There is no treatment for it short of intense chemotherapy and intense radiation treatment. One will necessarily lead to the next. Neither has any history of helping in cases like this. Both are expensive, invasive, painful." Father looked down, trying to block the sounds out. "But not as painful as the cancer. Devin will spend hours in agony, writhing, his body desperately trying to find comfort where none exists. I'll have to increase his doses of morphine to the point where the drug will become useless. If he's lucky, he'll lapse into a coma. If he's not..."

Father turned his head savagely away, springing to his feet and walking to the bookcase against the wall. He looked and moved like a trapped animal.

"If he's not, his screams will have to be muffled by..."

"Stop!" Father cried, turning on them, his face a mask of terror and rage. He fled the chamber, his shuffling gait hastened by the fear that in blind rage he might use his walking stick as a weapon instead of a crutch.

"Any of you folks want dessert?"

Catherine shook her head. Devin studied the menu casually. Joe fixed the waitress with a look of undisguised contempt. No one but Catherine noticed.

"I'll have the peach cobbler," Joe said quickly, the abruptness with which he handed the menu back her his answer to her evening-long harassment.

"Sounds good. And three more coffees," Devin added.

"My pleasure, sweetie," the old woman answered, flashing a distasteful smile at him. She took the other menus, winked at Devin, and headed for the counter, chuckling to herself.

"Quite a catch there, Devin," Joe said sarcastically.

"She's harmless, Joe. You just have to know how to handle her."

"No thanks. I'll leave any handling of her to someone else."

Catherine decided to intervene before their exchange grew more unsavory. "I must say you were right about the food here, Devin. Dinner was outstanding."

"I agree. Who would have thought a place like this could serve food this good. Of course, the atmosphere could use some improvement."

Devin nodded his thanks. "You can't eat ambiance, Joe."

"Maybe it's just the help."

"I'll have a word with her. She'll be better the next time you show up here."

"Right. I can see bringing a first date here."

"It's a great conversation starter... assuming you can get her through the door and seated."

The waitress reappeared, two dishes of cobbler and three fresh mugs of coffee appearing quickly. She was gone in seconds.

"So, you got as far as New Zealand. Where did you go after that?" Joe asked.

"Iceland."

"Not exactly your typical vacation paradise. Why there?"

"It's got some of the most active geologic formations in the world, it's isolated, and it's sparsely populated."

"So you hate big cities?"

"I don't hate them. I avoid them whenever I can."

"But you were born here, right?"

Devin nodded slowly, warily.

"How old were you when you left?"

Devin looked at Joe intently. "I was twelve years old."

Joe was startled. "You were on your own at twelve?"

Devin nodded slowly.

"Why didn't your parents try to stop you?"

"My mother died in childbirth."

Joe shook his head sadly, his apology soft, low. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"My father..." Devin looked at Catherine, his eyes determined. "...my father had no say in the matter. I was determined to see the world, so I left."

"What about schooling? You were able to convince me that you had a law degree. You obviously didn't obtain your education from casual reading."

"No. I was formally tutored as a child."

"Private school?"

"In a way."

"Where did you go after your stay in Iceland?" Catherine interjected, her growing uneasiness obvious to Devin.

"Arizona," he answered, acknowledging her fear and moving to assuage it by accepting her diversion. "The Grand Canyon, Sedona,"

"I remember when I stood on the edge of the canyon for the first time," She continued. "It's a sight one never forgets."

"I've never been west of the Hudson River," Joe said, slightly embarrassed.

"You're joking."

"Nope. College and law school at night took up too much time. I've never taken a vacation in my life."

"You're missing a lot," Devin said. "Especially once you get out to the Rockies."

"Well, maybe this year I'll take some time and get out of New York for a while."

Devin downed the remnants of his coffee. Their desserts had vanished during their talk. As the final forkful of cobbler left Joe's plate, the waitress materialized beside the table. "Anything else?"

"No thanks. I'll take the check," Joe answered.

She added the columns of figures quickly and scribbled a total at the bottom of the check, then tore it from the pad and placed it in front of him, then with several swift, sure movements, she whisked their dishes and utensils from the table onto her tray.

"How much do I owe you?" Devin asked, reaching for his wallet.

"My treat," Joe answered, rising slowly, donning his overcoat and taking his own wallet from the breast pocket.

Devin stood behind Catherine's chair, pulling it out and helping her on with her jacket. The three of them walked to the cash register slowly. Joe managed to pay the check and get his change from the waitress without further verbal battles, then pushed the door open for his guests. Catherine walked out quickly.

"I'll be right out," Devin answered.

Joe joined Catherine in front of the diner. Inside, Devin spoke for a few moments with the waitress, their quiet conversation erupting into laughter several times. Once, the woman looked out at Joe and chuckled. Finally, she and Devin shook hands and Devin joined his friends.

"What was that all about?" Joe asked.

"Your next visit will be less tense, she promises," Devin said, smiling. "You just gotta know how to take Doris."

Joe laughed. "I guess she kinda' grows on you, huh?"

Devin started walking towards Fifth Avenue, Joe and Catherine unconsciously following him. "Thanks for dinner, Joe. It's really nice to eat with people you know."

"I take it that doesn't happen very often?"

"Nope. In fact, in all of New York City, I can't think of any two people I would rather dine with than the two of you."

"Not even your family?"

There was a beat, a moment when Devin seemed taken aback. "Who ever said my family was in New York City?"

Joe caught the moment clearly. Catherine knew it. Devin knew it. "You did, earlier this evening."

"Well, my family and I aren't exactly on the best of terms right now," Devin answered, but it was obvious that he had slipped.

"I understand." Joe took the answer with good grace, but Catherine knew that he had discovered an inconsistency in Devin's story. She knew it might be difficult to avoid his questions later.

When they reached the corner, Joe hailed a passing taxi. The dingy yellow car ground to a squeaky halt beside them. He turned and extended his hand to Devin. "I really enjoyed this evening. Maybe we can all get together again?"

"Sure," he answered, taking Joe's hand. "Thanks again."

"You'll get Cathy home safely?"

"Sure."

Joe kissed Catherine on her cheek. "Night, Radcliffe. See you Monday."

"Goodnight Joe," she muttered, grateful that the confrontation appeared to be over, the damage minor. Joe jumped into the back of the cab and gave him an address in the West Seventies. The cab disappeared in the thick traffic.

Devin watched the cab vanish, then turned to Catherine, his sigh of relief audible. "I messed up, didn't I?"

She nodded. "He suspects you were lying to him. That's all I could tell. I'm sure he'll have dozens of questions for me on Monday morning."

They started walking towards Fifth Avenue again, their gait slow, casual. "No chance you might get into trouble, is there?"

"Me? How?"

"Well, he may suspect you of covering for me."

She laughed lightly, taking Devin's arm in her own. "Joe may suspect you, but he has no reason to

suspect me. I told him we were friends, nothing more. He believed that. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about, Devin." She noticed his look of annoyance, more with himself than with her. "Come on, Devin. I'll walk with you as far as the Main junction. Don't worry."

He looked at her, reassurance showing in his face. He smiled again, the impish smile that Catherine knew meant he was feeling better. They fell into easy conversation, noticing the chill of the night and the brightness of the marquee lights that surrounded them as they headed through the theater district and into the park.

Neither of them noticed they were being followed.

The Retreat

"Not like that. Hold the chisel parallel to the grain, like this." Kanin took the tool from the young man's hand and repositioned it against the stone. He struck two quick blows with his hammer. Huge chunks of stone fractured, then fell from the side of the wall. Thomas jumped back, afraid that the entire wall would collapse on them.

Kanin did not move. As the dust settled, he stepped back to the newly-opened split rock face. He positioned the chisel and struck three sharp blows. More shards of stone fell from their ancient moorings, littering the floor of the passage with sparkling pieces of granite. The air became thick with the dust, the clean smell of freshly exposed rock filling their nostrils. He stepped back, fixing Thomas with an inquiring glance.

"You understand lateral placement now?"

"I think so. Let me try."

Thomas took the chisel and brought his own hammer into position. He stepped to the jagged split in the rock that marked the point of least adhesion, placed the tip against the rock as Kanin had taught him, and struck a single blow. A huge chunk of stone fell away from the face of the tunnel. Another glancing blow sent the chunk to the floor, small fractures tearing apart as it hit, sending pieces of rock against the opposite wall. He stepped back and turned to his teacher, the beaming smile of a pupil grasping a difficult lesson lighting his face. Kanin nodded, allowing a slight smile to cross his lips.

"Good job. Let's clear some of this away before we go on."

They set to gathering the chunks of rock into wooden wagons, pushing them out of the way quickly. The children who worked at pulling the wagons filled with stone to the waste pile remained farther back in the newly-hewn tunnel, ready at a moment's notice once the danger of falling stone was past. They cleared the tunnel floor quickly, anxious to make as much headway in the soft stone as they could before dinnertime.

"Pullers!" Kanin yelled.

Two young children appeared from around the corner of the passage, walking slowly towards them. Each took one of the wagons and slowly pulled them down the passage and around the corner, the sound of squeaking wheels fading slowly, only to be replaced by the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Expecting anyone?" Kanin asked.

"No."

Devin appeared from around the corner of the freshly cut tunnel, his shoes muddy and his coat covered with a thin layer of chalky dust.

"This is as far as you get in a solid week of work?" Devin asked in mock dismay.

"Devin!" Kanin gasped. He rushed forward, embracing his friend warmly. They stood for several long moments, rocking gently, their happiness and affection for each other almost palpable.-

"When did you get back?"

"Three days ago. I thought you would have heard by now."

He shook his head. "Nope. Thomas and I have been working double-shifts here for over two weeks. I don't have much free time these days. What little I have goes to Olivia and Seth."

Devin smiled in understanding. His gaze fell on the young man standing nearby, a young man he did not recognize.

"Thomas, this is Devin Wells. Devin, Thomas Sendreiss."

Devin extended his hand warmly. Thomas stepped forward reluctantly. "You're Father's son, aren't you?" he asked, returning the handshake tentatively.

"Yes."

"I've heard so much about you from the other kids."

"I'll bet."

"Is it true you've been to every country in the world, like they say?"

Devin laughed aloud. "No, Thomas. I've been to every continent, but not to every country. One lifetime wouldn't be enough to accomplish such a feat."

"You've been to Antarctica?" Thomas asked, amazed.

"Yup. Twice."

"Neat," he answered, his interest growing by the second. "I'd like to hear about it sometime."

"Drop by my chamber this evening, if you like."

"I thought only scientists got to go there," Kanin said casually.

Devin's look of trepidation was directed at Kanin, but his words were for Thomas. "They thought I was a scientist."

Kanin laughed softly, shaking his head. "Then Jamie wasn't kidding," Thomas said, partly in awe.

"What did she say?"

"She said that you were..." He stopped quickly, embarrassed to go on.

"You can tell me, Thomas. Jamie and I are old sparring partners."

"She said you were the biggest phony she ever knew."

Devin threw his head back and laughed, the sound of simple joy filling the cavern. Thomas was surprised by the reaction. Kanin simply sat by quietly. He had seen this scene before.

"She's right, but only to a certain point," Devin answered. "I never lie about my life to people I trust."

"Well, I think she's just jealous," Thomas answered.

Devin stood and walked to the young man, putting a hand on his shoulder reassuringly. "Jamie is a young woman of many conflicting emotions and desires. She's headstrong, willful, determined to prove herself to everyone, especially Father." Thomas nodded slowly, his thoughts obvious to both men present. "Listen Thomas..."

"Tom."

"...Tom," Devin continued, his look softening. "I need to talk with Kanin for a while. Why not let me take over for you?"

"If it's okay?" Thomas looked at his teacher expectantly. Kanin nodded a few times. Thomas handed Devin his hand tools and headed back to the main passageway. He turned at the junction leading back to the main tunnels. "Eight o'clock?" he asked, looking at Devin.

"Sure," Devin answered, smiling. "Thanks." He was gone in an instant.

Devin moved quietly, sitting on the floor of the tunnel next to Kanin. "It's good to see you. Catherine told me about..." He stopped, reluctant to say the word.

"It wasn't as bad as you may be thinking. The worst thing was the loneliness, knowing Olivia and Seth were down here, just as lonely as I was, waiting."

"Catherine said you only had to serve two years?"

"Yeah. Mrs Davis asked the sentencing judge for leniency. The sentence was 5-10, but I was a model prisoner." He looked at Devin intently. "I think Catherine helped, too, but I can't get her to admit to it"

"Catherine is an amazing woman."

Kanin nodded several times. "I resented her for a while, but she was only doing her job. I couldn't ask her to let me off - not when she had to face Mrs Davis. That woman went through hell because of what I did, I just had to put myself in her place and imagine what I would want if someone had done to Seth what I did her to her son." His look softened, the pain of recounting the past years having lessened with time. "Catherine knew I was strong enough to pay the price." Kanin looked up suddenly, curious. "Are you in love with her?"

Devin picked up assorted pebbles from the floor and casually threw them against the opposite wall. "Cathy's a good friend." He reached for another handful of stones and fell silent

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

He weighed the stones in his hand, then resumed his idle tossing. "I need a special favor, Kanin. But you can't tell anyone what you're working on. It's to be a special gift."

"For whom?"

"For Vincent."

"What's the occasion?"

He threw the remaining pebbles against the far wall with a single abrupt movement of his arm, their high-pitched echoes filling, then fleeing the narrow corridor. "No special occasion. It's to be a special

farewell gift."

"You're leaving again? So soon?"

Devin's glance hinted at nothing beyond his answer. "Sooner or later."

"Will I be able to work in my home chamber?"

"Sure. Just don't let your wife see what it is while you're working on. Tell her it's to be a surprise."

"Okay. When should I start?"

"As soon as you can. I need it before the new tunnel expansion project starts. I figure that will be in two or three weeks. Can you do it in ten days?"

"Depends. Tell me what you need."

Vincent sat in his chamber, writing in his journal. The light of his candle threw huge shadows over the rock walls behind him, an occasional glint of color reflecting off the stained glass window over his headboard. The crystal pear-shaped ornaments of several discarded crystal lampshades shone in the reflected light, filling the room with a myriad of tiny rainbows, their hues cascading across the ceiling and down the walls of stone. The tunnels were peaceful, the usual soft orange glow muted now, to allow for sleep.

Suddenly, Vincent could sense Catherine's presence nearby. He replaced his pen in its stand and blew over the still-wet ink, making certain it was dry before closing the journal. He pulled his cape over his shoulders to the sound of her footsteps. The sound preceded her by several seconds.

She entered the chamber tentatively, making certain he was awake. His smile was warm and inviting, an open invitation to enter. She walked to him slowly, propelled by the events of the past several days. The empathy towards Devin, the sorrow for Vincent and for Peter, Father's intransigence, Joe's relentless scrutiny - all the conflicting pressures had built to a point where she desperately needed to talk with someone who could understand. She took her refuge in the only completely safe place she knew.

Vincent reached for her, his arms circling her and drawing her close. He could feel the many conflicts racing through her mind, each painful moment she had to endure forcing itself into his consciousness as well. His own pain, deep as it was, was almost welcome compared to the suffering he sensed in the one he loved. He could feel her crying, her body heaving in sobs against his, her face pressed against his chest. He did nothing to stop her outburst, sensing her relief through their bond, drawing strength from it. Her tears told him more than words could express, more than any explanation she could offer. Everything she sought at this moment was granted gratefully, completely, without question or reservation.

He stroked her hair gently, letting her slowly regain her composure. Her sobs were gentler now, less frequent - her bottled emotion spent with final inexorable fury. He drew her shoulders up and away from him, looking into her eyes. She did not try to hide her face from him, knowing that she had no reason to be ashamed of her loss of control. Everything she had felt, she knew Vincent had felt. He slowly drew her to him, their kiss a gentle act of healing, of bonding.

"I needed to see you tonight," she said quietly, their lips still close. "It's been hard, these last days."

He drew several stray strands of hair away from her cheek, cupping her face in his hand.

"Yes," he answered. "I've felt this coming."

She put her head down on his chest, sighing deeply, relishing the quiet and the comfort he provided.

"Has Father given in yet?"

"No, Catherine." He stroked her hair gently, lightly. "He and Peter fought bitterly. I've never seen Father so angry."

Catherine put a hand on Vincent's chest, placing it over his heart. She could sense his heartbeat through the leather folds of his vest, the slow, rhythmic pounding was comforting, almost sensual.

"It's my fault. I shouldn't have gone to Peter without Father's consent."

"You did what any friend would have done." She held him tighter, her head shaking almost imperceptibly. "You did what I would have done."

She pulled back from him slowly, then drew him into a long, affectionate kiss. Her hand went behind his neck, holding his lips against hers, her touch gentle. They did not move for a long time.

Reluctantly, Catherine pulled away from him, walking to the chair beside Vincent's desk. She sat down slowly, her head in her hands. "I'm afraid there may be another problem, Vincent."

His voice was soft, reassuring. "Tell me."

"It's Joe."

"Yes?"

"He treated Devin and I to dinner on Friday night."

"Yes, I know. Devin told me."

"Well, what Devin doesn't know is that Joe did a background check on him, without my knowledge. He found out about the aliases. He has a lot of questions about Devin's background." She paused, reluctant to tell him the rest. "Joe knows Devin's full name now, Vincent."

"But there are no records about Devin above. What danger could there be."

She sighed. "Devin slipped. Joe caught him in a lie."

"Surely he wouldn't continue his inquiry if you ask him not to?"

She looked at Vincent, her concern obvious. "Joe is naturally curious. He was tricked by Devin, nearly embarrassed professionally. Now he knows that Devin has no background, has used multiple aliases, and has misled him about his childhood here in New York. He'll assume that Devin is a criminal."

Vincent shook his head slowly, angrily. "I've warned him, Catherine."

"It's not his fault, Joe pressed him. I tried to keep the conversation simple, but you know how much

Devin likes to..."

"To test people?"

She nodded. "He chose the wrong person to test. Vincent, I'm worried. I have to face Joe tomorrow morning."

He went to her, taking her in his arms and holding her close. "You be as truthful as you can, Catherine. He's your friend."

She returned the embrace, taking comfort in the warmth in his voice and in his arms.

"I want it to look like this," Devin said, pulling a pencil sketch from his shoulder bag and placing it on the drawing table.

Kanin studied the drawing carefully, making several measurements and jotting down some rough calculations. He looked up several times from his work, studying the drawing, counting letters, roughing out the job in his mind. He did not comment on the content of the drawing, he concentrated instead on the stonecutting task at hand. After a few minutes, he looked up. "You want me to polish this?"

Devin nodded.

"All right. This will take three weeks, minimum. Is that okay?"

"Sure. As long as it will look just like that," he said, his finger falling to the drawing.

"It will."

"Thanks," Devin said softly, putting his arm around Kanin's shoulder. "This means a lot."

Kanin studied the drawing intently. "I can see that."

"So what's the story, Radcliff?"

Catherine looked up from her desk, her exasperation obvious. She had many hours of work ahead of her. She was in the middle of researching a difficult precedent, a tricky legal morass of decisions which seemed to point in an unfavorable direction in her current case. She did not need a useless interruption.

"What story, Joe?"

"Can I talk to you?"

"Joe, I'm really swamped."

"Now."

She knew from his tone, from his departure which allowed no argument, that she had no choice.

Wearily, she pulled herself up and walked slowly to the privacy of his office. He ushered her in, closing the door behind her. She dropped unceremoniously onto his couch and waited for Joe to retreat to the safety of his chair. He picked up a handful of darts and began throwing them casually at the dartboard across the room. Normally, this was one of his endearing habits. Now, it annoyed her.

"Did you ask me in here for a dart game?" she asked sarcastically. She did not smile.

"Maybe. That depends on how honest we are with each other."

Catherine's face did not change, but she felt her insides turn. She wondered silently whether he had done any more checking into Devin's past and secretly laughed to herself at the frustration such a search would cause him. But through her anger and frustration and fear she could hear a calm, collected voice saying to her 'He is your friend.' She tried to focus on that simple truth and ignore her concern.

"What's on your mind, Joe?" she asked, perhaps too casually.

"Come on, Radcliffe. You know and I know that Devin was feeding me another helping of garbage Friday night." He threw a dart at the board, a little harder than usual. He missed badly. "What's he hiding, Cathy?"

"I don't know. We're not that close."

"Apparently that's a trait you share with the rest of the world. I ran a complete check on him through all city, state, and federal databanks this morning. There is absolutely no record of a Devin Wells anywhere, in any databank. Nothing." He looked at her intently. "Don't you find that odd in a man who convinced me he was a law school graduate?"

"I find it none of my business, Joe," Cathy said, her tone carrying a hint of warning.

He stood up slowly, moving slowly to the board to retrieve the darts. Catherine knew Joe well, knew when he was holding a trump card, ready to play. She had seen him play this game with attorneys and clients before. She simply could not believe he was playing this particular game with her.

He gathered the darts together into a huge mass, then slowly walked back to his desk. He fixed her with a look she had never seen from him before, a look of accusation.

"Really? Well, let me ask you this then. Do you trust this guy?"

"Yes," she answered easily.

"You trust someone with no records, whose background is obviously bogus, who lied to both of us in an important case. Exactly what has he done to live up to your expectations of somebody you can trust?"

"Joe, I know he's given you reason to wonder about his past, but you have no right to treat him like a criminal suspect. He's done nothing wrong."

"How do you know? How do you know he's not using you in some way you don't see yet?"

She laughed unexpectedly at Joe's words, at the thoughts that must be going through his mind. "I know, Joe. He's an extremely intelligent young man, Joe. So he didn't choose a life that you or I can understand. What's the harm in that?"

Joe returned to the dart board, gathering the projectiles into his hand. He leaned against the door

casually, crossing his arms, the darts incongruously jutting from his right fist. He fixed her with a serious stare. "Tell me, Chandler, where is Devin staying while he's in New York?"

She shook her head, feigning ignorance. "I don't know. I assume he's staying with his father. Or with a friend."

"Not with you, right?"

Her face hardened, anger honing her answer. "You know better than that." Joe nodded in return, his voice calm. "You're right. I do."

"What do you mean?"

"I can understand Devin's not being able to afford a hotel, Cathy, but I hardly think a drainage tunnel in Central Park is a safe place for anyone at night, especially a woman."

She shot to her feet, rage overpowering all thought of caution or concealment.

"My resignation will be on your desk in the morning," she said, shoving him aside and marching out of the office, the slam of the door in her wake nearly shattering the glass. Joe stood for a moment, stunned, then jabbed the mass of darts into the dartboard.

"Bullseye," he said softly.

The soft light from a green-shaded desk lamp formed a circle of intense light on the desk and wall. A medical journal lay open before Peter, an article on a newly-discovered chemical compound used to treat some obscure affliction half-read and largely forgotten. The sound of the knock on his door was as soft as the light.

"Come in," he said, closing the journal and setting it aside.

Silhouetted in the light that spilled through the open door, he could see the long, casual hair - the stylish coat - the gloved hand. He could not see the anxious face or the stains left on the cheeks from hours of crying.

"Sit down, Cathy," he said, bending the lamp upwards so that light shone on the leather chair in front of his desk. He waited while Catherine seated herself and pulled her gloves off, stuffing them absentmindedly into her purse. When she looked up, Peter saw the evidence of her emotional state on her face, in her eyes.

"What is it?" he asked, his concern obvious. He could see the effort she was making to keep her composure.

"I have handed in my notice. I'm resigning from the District Attorney's office tomorrow morning."

Peter sat back, stunned. "Why?"

She spilled out the entire story - the dinner, Joe's unrevealed investigations of Devin, his following them to the park, his confronting her with his suspicions. She broke down only once during her recounting of the events, at a point where words were spilling too quickly to allow her emotions to keep pace.

In the silence that followed her revelations, Peter could only sigh deeply, sorry that she had been drawn into a situation not of her own making. He had always feared that her association with the Tunnel World might someday be discovered and exploited, but he could not believe that Joe would become her adversary.

"What did Joe say about the things he saw?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I gave him my notice the instant he said he had followed us from the restaurant."

"Don't you think you should find out what he intends to do now?"

"I don't know, Peter. All I know is that I can't afford to put the tunnels in jeopardy any longer. I'm a constant Achilles' Heel so long as I work for the DA's office."

"Come on Cath... you've done so much good since you joined them."

"I'm a sworn representative of the state, Peter. As long as I hold this job, I'm walking a very dangerous tightrope. I'm sick of the constant fear of disclosure, the dread that someone will catch a glimpse of Vincent above, or of me heading below." She paused briefly, her head down. "I'm tired of seeing Vincent forced to kill in order to protect me. I look into his face and see the aftermath of the violence, Peter. He tries to hide it, to justify it as protection. But I can see his pain, his torment over being drawn to a world he can't walk, can't inhabit, can't live in."

"Have you told anyone else?"

She shook her head, determination firming her chin. "My mind is made up on this, Peter."

"What will you do?"

"I may take some time off, spend more time below with Vincent and the children. There's also that children's story book that I've never gotten around to finishing."

"How about money? Are you all right?"

"No problem. The firm's buyout of my father's share was substantial."

"What will you do about Joe?"

She shook her head sadly. "I don't know. I'm sure he'll try to justify himself."

"Let him try, Cathy," he said gently. She moved to speak, but he raised a hand to stop her. "You may find out what his next move will be. It may be important."

She nodded, then sat back in the chair and reached for her purse, as if to cut off further discussion. She pulled two bottles from inside and set them in front of her - the tiny pills shone red in one bottle and white in the other in the glare of the lamp.

"I need to know what to tell Devin," she said, looking past the bottles and directly at Peter.

He took a magic marker from his desk drawer and wrote a large red '1' on the first bottle and an equally large '2' on the other. He pushed the bottles back to her slowly. His voice became mechanical, emotionless - as if he were addressing a computer, or a roomful of strangers.

"Thirty minutes before the end, he is to swallow the entire contents of the first bottle with several glasses of water. After thirty minutes, he is to swallow the entire contents of the second bottle with alcohol of some sort. Use whiskey or bourbon. He should take them in several quick motions, not all in one swallow. He needs to keep them down."

"Why the wait?"

"The first bottle contains Compazine. They'll relax his stomach muscles, allowing him to keep the other pills down long enough for them to begin to act. We don't want his body to reject the sedatives."

"How long after..." She could not force herself to finish the sentence. Peter understood.

"Less than an hour. He'll be unconscious long before that, probably within minutes." He looked at her intently. "Anything that needs to be said should be said before the second set of pills is taken. Those are the ones that will take his life."

"Will it be painless?"

"Yes. He'll lose consciousness fairly quickly. Then he'll lapse into coma, then stop breathing."

He looked at her with sudden intensity, his voice filling with empathy, as if he were addressing a patient of many years standing. "Someone who cares about him should be with him at the end. He may hallucinate before losing consciousness. Someone will need to be there to talk to him, to comfort him."

She nodded slowly. "Someone will be," she said.

"Jacob is still opposed to this, Catherine. He won't even speak with me, won't answer any of my messages to him."

"Give him time. Vincent and I will talk to him again."

"How is Devin feeling?"

"Feisty as ever. He looks a little thin and haggard, but his spirits are good."

"Good. Outlook is important in cases like this. The more he has to live for, the longer he's likely to last. That's why it's important to get Jacob turned around. His opposition can only make it harder on Devin."

Catherine stood up, replacing the bottles in her purse, pulling her gloves on slowly. "We'll try again. I'll see Vincent tonight." She put on her coat and walked slowly to the door, the light from the hallway again shrouding her with an eerie halo, hiding her face. Only her voice betrayed the emotion her face concealed in the darkness. "Thank you, Peter."

The sound of the door closing was as faint as her knock, the glow vanishing quickly, leaving him alone at his desk, his face and shoulders cut diagonally by shadow as he leaned back in his chair.

The spray from the waterfalls wafted over the trail, drops of water clinging to the rocks, glistening in the reflected light of the wall torches. The sound of water dropping to stone filled the chamber, echoing through the canyon, the water cascading deep into the broken rocks below the trail. It ran for several hundred yards, then fell straight down into blackness. No explorer had ever plumbed that darkness - no

outlet for the river had ever been discovered. The children said the river fell through the earth and emerged on the other side of the world.

Vincent led Catherine along the trail, holding a torch in one hand and Catherine's hand in the other. They reached the overlook safely. Vincent mounted the torch in a wall brace and sat next to Catherine, their legs dangling over the stone edge.

Catherine had been very quiet during their walk. Vincent had felt some deep distress in her, some sadness that had brought her to him. Yet, he also sensed that the sadness had been accepted, become a part of her.

Catherine picked up a few stones and tossed them idly into the chasm that opened before them, the faint echo of their plunge into the distant water taking many seconds to reach them. She was strangely silent.

"What's troubling you, Catherine?"

"I have resigned." she said wearily, another stone vanishing into the blackness.

"Catherine! Why?"

She turned to face him, pulling her legs up from the edge and crossing them beneath her. "Joe followed Devin and me to the Main Junction last Friday night. Now he's investigating Devin's background. I can't continue in my job under these circumstances, Vincent. It's too dangerous."

Vincent looked down, shaking his head. "It's my fault."

"No, it isn't!" she said intently, her hand touching his arm gently. "You couldn't know what would happen."

"It's not just this night, Catherine. It's every night - every time I come above, I put you at risk. Every time you come here, there's a danger that someone will follow. It isn't fair to you."

"Vincent," she said solemnly, pressing his arm with her hand. "You are not *responsible* for this. The actions were Joe's. The decision to resign was mine."

He looked up at her, his eyes saying the things he could not say, could not face. Catherine sensed his sadness and understood the reason for it.

"I understand how you feel, how much it hurts every time you're forced to..."

"To kill?" he whispered.

"Yes." She looked at him intently, looking deeply into his eyes. "Vincent, it hurts me every time you protect me. I feel guilty, ashamed. I spend my days working to prosecute criminals. I can't count the number of cases where I've withheld evidence, withheld information from Joe and others, evidence that *matters*. I don't want to live that kind of life, Vincent"

She held his face in her hands. "And I won't give up my life with you."

He looked at her, sadness filling his face. "Perhaps we can seal off the Main Junction. Use only the entrances beneath your building."

She shook her head slowly, a smile crossing her face. "Thank you, Vincent, but my decision is final."

"I'm sorry, Catherine. All the good work you do. It was your life..."

"And it still is my life."

"What will you do now?"

"Take some time for myself, for us. Maybe take a few trips, help Mary care for the children, spend time with Devin."

Vincent took Catherine's hands in his own, pressing them to his lips softly. "Anything I can do for you is yours for the asking."

She drew him close to her, hugging him gently. "Right now, you can go with me to see Devin."

He drew back, smiling weakly. They embraced warmly for several long moments, the mist flowing over them, a sudden gust of wind from the falls extinguishing the torch. They ignored the sudden darkness, lost in each other's arms.

Devin lay sprawled across his bed, leafing through a thick book. The sound of approaching footsteps sparked him to action. He rapidly closed the book and stuffed it into his shoulder bag, the sound of its collision with the far wall fading as Catherine and Vincent entered his chamber.

"Hey, guys!" he said cheerfully.

"It's not too late, is it?" Vincent asked.

"Nope. Come on in. I was just thinking of the two of you."

"Good thoughts I hope," Catherine said warmly.

"About you, always."

She rolled her eyes at Vincent, laughing lightly. "He never stops."

Vincent sat on a chest next to the bed, leaning forward, hands together. He fixed Devin with a knowing look. "Catherine wished to see you." He looked at her expectantly.

Catherine nodded to Vincent, moving slowly to the side of the bed. She reached into her coat pocket and produced two small bottles. She extended her hand to Devin, the bottles lying side-by-side in her palm. Devin looked at them, his smile vanishing. He slowly reached up, taking the bottles from her hand. He looked at each bottle in turn, noting the large red numerals on each.

When he looked up, his voice was solemn, calm, grateful.

"Thanks."

She pulled a folded page from the same pocket, throwing it onto the bed next to him. "I wrote Peter's instructions out for you. You need to follow them precisely." He nodded, taking the paper and wrapping the bottles in it, then placing the bundle in the drawer next to his bed. "You also need someone with you at the end."

"You mean ...all the way to the end?"

"Yes. It should be someone you trust. Someone you care about. You may hallucinate, vocalize without any control over your words. You need someone with you the whole time." She sensed his unease. "You don't have to decide now."

"Good." He sat upright now, his knees drawn up, arms folded over his legs. "Listen, I want to do something special this coming weekend, something with the two of you. I've got an idea..."

He jumped up from the bed and headed for his wardrobe. He pulled a map from some hidden storage compartment, unfolding it as he walked back to the bed. He spread it before them, pointing out a location with a finger, his glance fixing the two of them with undisguised excitement. "I want you to see this place."

Catherine looked closely at the spot. When she found her voice, it was more unbelieving than frightened. "You're not serious?"

Vincent looked at the map closely while Catherine stared at Devin, shock forcing its way forward. She knew - from his face, from his voice - that he was serious.

"It's a very special place to me, Cathy. It's the first place I went when I left the tunnels, when I decided to go out on my own. I want to go there again, now, at the end. And I want you two with me."

"Devin, how can we?" Catherine gasped.

He sat quickly back onto the bed, pointing to the map. "We rent a van for the weekend. We drive out at night and drive back the following morning. It's no problem. The roads are almost bare once you get out of the metropolitan area. It would be a chance for Vincent to see things he's never seen before."

"I don't think it's a good idea, Devin. What if..."

"I think it's a good idea," came the voice behind them. Catherine whirled to face Vincent. "I think we should do it."

"Why?"

"Because it's what Devin wants. It's a chance for the three of us to be together in the world above. It's what you and I have dreamed of for years, Catherine."

"But I thought Father strictly forbade our going above in the daylight"

"Father has no say in this matter, Catherine." His tone was alien to her, the open defiance obvious. "This is Devin's wish. I see no reason not to grant it."

"Father doesn't even have to know about it, Cathy." Devin offered. "We're not children. Haven't been for years."

She looked at him dubiously, ready to argue the accuracy of his statement - but it was obvious to her that she was outnumbered in this. She had always wished to take Vincent above, to let him enjoy the sunlight and the company of those who loved him in some quiet, beautiful setting. Her memory of the eastern tip of Long Island was dim, but she remembered enough to know that Devin's words were true - it would be a wonderful trip to a lovely spot. His infectious optimism overcame her initial unease. She

knew it was deep in Devin's soul to share such a time with Vincent. She could not honestly try to convince him otherwise.

"Okay!" she said, smiling with mock camaraderie - her fears quelled for the time being. "We'll do it."

Devin smiled like a boy at a candy store window, his anticipation as eager as that boy's. "Next weekend?" he asked eagerly.

"Why wait that long?" Catherine asked. "Don't you have to go to work tomorrow?" She shook her head slowly. "No."

Devin's face lost some of its enthusiasm. "Slacking off, eh Chandler?" he said.

"No, Devin. I'm resigning tomorrow morning."

"What!?"

She explained her reasons, the circumstances which had forced her to take such drastic actions. He listened closely, looking to Vincent occasionally for confirmation. When she had finished, most of his exuberance was gone.

"Cathy, I'm sorry. This would never have happened if..."

"This would have happened eventually, whether you were involved or not. Please don't blame yourself. You were only telling the truth."

"I didn't have to fool around with Joe's head like that."

She smiled. "Yes you did. It's part of what makes you what you are. Usually it serves to protect you. This time it didn't. You couldn't know what would happen."

"I wish it could have been different."

"Forget it," she said, moving to stand next to Vincent. "It's done. I'll be all right." He looked at Vincent, concerned. "I'm sorry, buddy."

"You did nothing wrong," he answered, smiling.

He folded the map slowly, carefully, and moved to return it to its drawer. He turned to them, leaning against the wardrobe. "What do you say to Friday night?"

Catherine and Vincent exchanged affirming looks, each nodding in turn.

"I'll rent the van this week and pick it up Friday morning. And I'll pack enough food for the weekend."

"We can bring blankets from here," Vincent offered.

"I need to bring this too," Devin offered, picking up a camera from his dresser and holding it in front of him. "I want to remember this trip as long as I live." His voice dropped. "And I want you both to remember it, too." Both of them noticed that his smile was childlike, compassionate - with only a flicker of resignation creeping into his voice.

Neither of them noticed the dots of sweat on his arms, the rivulets running down his back - nor the

effort he was expending to remain standing upright.

It had been harder than she had foreseen to type the words 'my resignation' at the end of her brief letters to Joe and to John Moreno. She faltered for a moment, but only long enough to call to mind the prospect of being followed, of Vincent being seen and photographed, of the tunnels being entered by an armed squadron of law enforcement officials. The thought cut through her like a knife, the mental pain providing her the strength to finish the letters without further backward glances. She signed both, her graceful signature dominating the sparsely covered pages. She stood up quickly, coat and briefcase in hand, and walked to Joe's office. The sound of voices inside did not deter her. She threw the door open.

John sat opposite Joe, their conversation stopping abruptly at the sound of the door opening. Moreno started to smile, but the gesture was lost when he saw the look on her face. Silently, she handed each of them a single sheet of paper.

"What's this about?" John asked, taking in the brief message quickly. "What's happened?"

"Why don't you ask Joe."

Joe had read the letter, surprise apparent on his face. There was no doubt in her mind that he felt he had called her bluff and lost.

"So?" Moreno said gruffly, looking at his young protégé. "What's the story?"

Joe stood up, his face ashen, but his voice determined. "I was following through on my suspicion that a known professional con man might be planning to take advantage of..."

He stopped. He realized how nebulous he sounded. "Of what, Joe? Of Cathy?"

"This guy took us in once before. Now I've caught him in new lies, and when I questioned Cathy about it yesterday ..."

"You mean when you secretly tailed the two of us," Catherine said angrily.

Moreno eyed Joe with disbelief. "You followed an employee of this office without coming to me first?"

"I followed a known felon..."

"Did you say known or convicted, Joe?" she spat at him. She turned to Moreno, not permitting an answer. "I'm sorry, John. My decision is final. I'll send someone to clean out my desk."

"Come on, Radcliffe, talk to us about this. We're all friends here."

She jerked the door open and turned to look at Joe contemptuously. "We were," She walked slowly but resolutely out of the office, leaving the door open behind her.

Moreno moved to close the door quickly, then turned back to Joe, angry and confused. "Will you tell me what the hell is going on?"

"Jeff Radler is back in town."

"Radler... Radler... oh, the guy who worked here less than a week. The one whose father died suddenly?" Joe nodded. "The Aringer Case!" John said, remembering.

"His name isn't Radler, he has no legal credentials, and I have reason to suspect that Catherine is shielding him."

"Not Chandler. I don't believe it."

"John, we had dinner Friday night. I caught him in an inconsistency in his story. I was suspicious, so I followed them back to her place. Only they didn't go to her place. They walked to a drainage tunnel in Central Park. Eleven at night and they're in the middle of crime central. They went into a huge tunnel and were gone for about five minutes, then Cathy comes out... alone. I watched her walk over towards her apartment building, but this guy never comes out of there. What am I supposed to think?"

"Maybe he's living on the streets?"

Joe shook his head. "Too well-groomed. Clothes are too clean, and too expensive. His hair is too well-trimmed. There's no way."

"Maybe paying a visit to some childhood place? Looking for something?"

"Come on, John!"

"Hell, I don't know, Joe. What were you doing following Chandler anyway? Why not just ask her?"

"I did. Yesterday. The instant I told her I had followed them, she clammed up and threatened to resign."

"I'd say it was more than a threat, Joe." Moreno said angrily, holding the letter up and shaking it. "I've just lost my best Assistant DA and my right-hand man is out tailing his employees and hurling accusations with damn little evidence."

"John, something is strange here. First Cathy lies about this guy, then she befriends him after she finds out he's a professional liar. Then I find out that they're both still lying to me. This guy grew up in New York City, yet tells me there's no record of him anywhere. What does that tell you, John."

He shook his head sadly, folding his copy of the letter and pocketing it. "Look, Joe, I know it sounds funny. I agree you've got a right to be suspicious. But this is Catherine Chandler. You should have come to me first."

"I'm sorry. I thought I needed to move quickly."

Moreno walked to the door, turning before he opened it. "You really think she might be involved in something illegal?"

"Never. But I do think she's in danger from this guy. She's obviously protecting him. Why?"

"Check it out. Unofficially. On your own time." Joe nodded slowly.

"And don't talk to anyone else about this, Joe. I mean that." He pointed to Joe with one finger, accenting his order.

Joe was left alone in his office, his body suddenly tired, his muscles drained. He could feel tears forming

in his eyes, but he didn't know why? He was afraid for Catherine, afraid that she was becoming involved in something dangerous through a misguided sense of loyalty - but to whom or what he could not know. Then he remembered her last words - "We were." - and understood the root of his sorrow. He fought the feeling as best he could, telling himself that if the price of her safety meant the end of their friendship, then it was a price he was willing to pay.

Catherine lay back on her sofa, the silk folds of her pyjamas catching the reflected rays of the city lights outside her balcony windows. Her apartment was dark, the intricate doors open to the cool, gentle breeze that swept across her balcony. The strains of a Tchaikovsky piano sonata filled the room and flooded her senses, transporting her from the real moment to the imagined next - to a time and place where she would be as light and free as the music, as the emotions it invoked. She felt her consciousness grow to enclose the room, the balcony - the open sky and light wind that crept into her sanctuary the only resistance keeping her earthbound, bound to this place and this time.

The slow build to the passage carried her further afield, her eyes closed, her senses no longer serving her body, but guiding her mind through a peaceful, beautiful 'darkness dream', where nothing and no one could reach her. She allowed the peace to carry her further afield, the final sensual tie of skin against fabric finally lost - until she was nothing but detached consciousness - scaling, then sliding down a hilly musical terrain. She let the notes transport her, bring her to the place the creator of these musical signposts meant her to be.

Deep beneath the city, Vincent felt Catherine relinquish control of her mind, of her body. It frightened him for a moment, but he sensed no danger, no fear. He decided to head above, in case he was needed.

The final strains of the musical piece faded away slowly, each second seeming to Catherine like an individually-framed minute, the peaceful scene of her mind's creating falling apart bit by bit, until she was left with nothing save the memory of the place and her joy at having gained brief, ecstatic admittance to such a sanctuary. She longed to make this place real, to have it live for her hands and eyes, for all her other senses, as completely as she could make it real for her ears. She knew that the tunnels offered the closest she had ever found to this feeling of peace, of tranquility - but she also had to admit to herself that she could not use the relative safety of the tunnels as a place to hide, nor idealize them into the tangible realization of her musical dream. No, she thought to herself, the place I seek must be some meeting, some joining of the two worlds. But how do I find it... how do I know it even exists? How can I make it real....

She heard a rustle on the balcony. She sat up abruptly, all her senses instantly alert, aware of the slightest sound or movement near her. She knew that no leaves ever found their way this high - not this late in the Fall. She moved closer to the window, peering out into the darkness warily.

Vincent stood before her, the outline of his cape obvious in the reflected light of the Citicorp Tower. He stood before her, his shadow blocking out the lights behind him, blotting out several major skyscrapers. This struck Catherine in an odd way, and she laughed lightly - rushing to embrace him. He returned the embrace gently.

"Is anything wrong?" Vincent asked.

The opening chords from the next musical piece filled the apartment and forced their way out through the wind to the balcony, Vincent looking at the stereo silently, then at Catherine. "Oh, I see," he said, laughing.

"I was listening to music. I'm afraid I got rather caught up in it."

"It must have been beautiful. I could feel... such wonder, such depth of feeling in you, Catherine. I've never felt it before tonight"

She nodded. "I think it's just that with everything that's going on right now... I needed to escape so badly. I needed a place where I didn't have to think, only exist and feel."

"Did you find it?"

"Only for a moment. It was gone the moment the music ended."

Vincent leaned against the brick wall, crossing his arms over his waist. He looked at Catherine intently, lovingly - as a parent would a child during their first visit to a place the child found enchanting, mysterious, new. "I've been there too," he said softly. "Many times."

"I know you have."

"But one can never stay, Catherine. If we could, we would soon take it for granted, grow used to its wonder and its peace."

She put her arms around him, feeling the warmth of his body and arms surround her. "I'm just glad I have someone I can go there with, even if it can't endure."

"It endures, Catherine... as long as the memory is there, it endures." He held her close, protecting her from the chill of a world they both loved and feared.

Vincent had left her several hours before, the day's turmoil and the night's recovery having taken their toll on her. She had gone to bed for several hours, but sleep had been elusive. Just as it seemed she would drop off, the sounds of a distant jet or a persistent car horn below would intrude, pulling her back from the edge. She decided to drink a glass of warm milk and read for a few hours, hoping that she could slowly relax enough to try the bed again.

She worked her way slowly through a tattered volume of eighteenth century poetry, her mind retaining bits and pieces along the way.

'...for roads which seem familiar to us turn, and take us places dreams could not foresee...' she read, taking a sip of milk. She closed her eyes for a moment, thinking of the meaning of the words - how appropriate they were to her own life this past week.

She opened her eyes and brought the book up from her lap, but the motion jerked to a halt half-completed. Over the arm of the sofa, on the floor of the room, she could see the long line of bright light that marked the bottom edge of her apartment door. The line was broken now, two dark puddles of shadow moving along that line, close to her door. She bolted to the door on naked feet, her movements expertly silent. She slowly moved her head up to the peephole, trying to see who was outside her door. Perhaps it was a neighbor, inebriated, heading for the wrong door. Maybe it was the Hanson kid, leaving another paper-route sign-up request.

She shook her head, noting on her clock that it was nearly one o'clock in the morning. She caught sight of a face... a familiar face.

She pulled the deadbolt aside, flicked the lock, and pulled the door open so quickly that the figure could only stand on the threshold and stare, dumbfounded.

"What the hell are you doing?" Catherine said. "Am I to consider myself under surveillance?"

Joe looked at her sheepishly. "No. I was just..." he fumbled, finally pulling an envelope with her name on it from his pocket. "I wanted to leave this with you. I saw your lights were out and decided to stick this under your door."

"A little late, don't you think?"

"Cathy, please let me talk to you."

She did not move. "I don't think so, Joe."

"Come on, Radcliffe. You owe me at least five minutes."

She refrained from answering quickly. She knew that he was acting out of personal concern, anxious about her safety. She knew he had looked the other way several times on her past cases - whether from ignorance or friendship she could not be certain. His actions in regards to Devin were not meant to impugn her integrity - that she understood - but she knew that she could not give him the slightest hint of the motivations for her protection of Devin, nor of Devin's past or present life. He was right about one thing, though. She did owe him time to explain. She knew she would have to hurt him again, hurt him through his own love and respect for her. She hated to punish him for his virtues, but she could see no other way out.

She stepped aside, allowing him to enter - flicking on the wall switch quickly, flooding the room with light. Joe started to remove his jacket.

"Don't bother," Catherine said, her voice hard. "You won't be here that long."

Joe stopped partway through his motion, then stopped - pulling the jacket back over his shoulders slowly. He looked behind him, then at Catherine, as if asking permission to sit down. She nodded slowly. He took a seat opposite her, his expression contrite.

"Don't you think you're being unfair, Radcliff?"

"No. I made a decision. I intend to stand by it."

"You're too good at what you do to give it all up over something this minor."

"Joe, I would never, but never betray you like this. It was one thing to investigate Devin without telling me. That I could understand. But your treating both of us like suspects is beyond anything I would ever have thought you were capable of. Even Elliot Burch never stooped that low!"

She knew that Elliot was a sore point with Joe, that comparing Joe to Elliot would hurt him. He was not disappointed.

"You're accusing me of..."

"I'm not accusing you of anything, Joe. You followed Devin and me for no reason other than your own personal curiosity." He looked at her, not denying the truth of her words, but surprised that that truth was making her angry. "I thought I made myself clear long ago that my personal life is private."

"Even when you're involved with... shall we say, suspicious individuals with a record for committing felonies?"

"What Devin did was not a felony, Joe. He withdrew from the case and resigned. There was no harm done."

"He impersonated an attorney, admitted to stealing a passport. And those scars! Do you honestly believe that story of his now?"

"Those scars are none of my business. Or yours."

"And how about his living arrangements?" Her expression did not change. "Have your friends suddenly taken to living in the sewers of New York? Doesn't it bother you that this guy has no history, no official records? He could be anyone, he may be capable of anything - and you act as if he were your brother." He fixed her with a fierce glare. "Why are you protecting this guy, Cathy? What is he to you?"

"Your five minutes are up, Joe," she said, her face and voice expressionless. She walked to the door slowly, pulling it open and waiting quietly.

He stood up and walked towards her, his pace slow, his mind racing. He stopped beside her, looking deeply into her face for some sign of the Catherine Chandler he had known for so many years. "Help me, Radcliff. Talk to me. Who are you protecting?"

"Goodnight."

He shook his head slowly, his anger and resignation mingling with despair. He pulled her letter of resignation from his coat pocket, tearing it in half and extending it to her. She took the torn halves, folded them, and put them back into his pocket, her eyes not leaving his.

"Goodnight."

This time her voice left no room for discussion.

Sunlight poured through the seams between the skyscrapers of lower Manhattan, covering the walls, the streets, the windows of this treeless jungle with a golden frosting that resembled lemon meringue and felt every bit as light, every bit as insubstantial. Catherine fought the alternate bursts of brilliance and shadow as the sun bicycle-spoked its way between the buildings to her right. The tinting that lined the windows of the rented van filtered the worst of the rays whenever a longer patch of blue appeared, but nearly a week of cloudy, rainy weather had made the gloom comfortable, the sunrays strange and unfamiliar.

She moved slowly through the late afternoon traffic, careful not to let the huge wicker basket or stack of blankets on the front seat topple when she turned. The rush hour was still over an hour away, but she still hurried her pace - knowing that Friday was the worst night of the week to negotiate the expressways leading away from the island.

The back of the van was empty save for a passenger bench and tinted rear windows that allowed perfect vision from inside the van, none from outside. She had mounted a curtain rod behind the front seats, held in place by pressure mounts and fitted with a heavy curtain that reached from ceiling to floor. Once they left the city, they would not need the curtain, but she was taking no chances.

She came to a nondescript alley on the east side of the island and pulled the van up to a locked door. She jumped from the van and thrust a key on her keyring into a weather-beaten padlock. The click of the spring moving aside was not immediate, but finally it gave way - the padlock pulling apart easily. She raised the metal door quickly and moved the van into the building - returning to secure the door once she was safely inside the building. It was dingy and deserted - many old massive wooden crates piled against the walls, a ramp leading to the floor above in the distance. The darkness at the end of that ramp was total. The second floor had not been used in years. The building belonged to a helper.

Catherine pulled the van to a far corner of the first floor, behind a stack of dusty crates. Against the wall, discolored from years of musty air and neglect, was an air vent shaft cover. The abandoned shaft it protected led beneath the building, beneath the streets around her, beneath the city. This day, it would serve as a pathway to liberation and light.

Catherine leaned against the front of the van, pulling her gloves off and stuffing them into her coat pocket. She was relaxed, calm. The sounds of the city slowly coming to life around her were completely inaudible here. Only the sounds of an occasional animal intruder roaming the upper floors or an occasional jet making its way over the island forced their way through the walls around her. There were windows on every wall around her, but they were frosted with layers of dust and decay, the thick glass meant to admit only enough light to underscore the lack of it. The windows were well above the floor, above any human ability to see through or break.

The sound of metal against metal pierced the silence near her. She focused on the air shaft next to the van. A pair of hands appeared on the grate, the fingers pushing through the metallic squares and pushing the fixture slowly aside, the creak of rust on hinges echoing through the building. Devin appeared slowly from the darkness, dressed in battered jeans, a white muscle shirt, and a brown suede jacket. He looked at Catherine, acknowledged her nod, and looked back into the gloom behind him. Slowly, furtively, Vincent emerged from that darkness. he moved quickly, replacing the grate and joining Catherine beside the van.

Devin carried his shoulder bag on his back and a camera with several lenses around his neck. Vincent carried several blankets and his journal. His leather cape shone even in the dim and dusty light that filtered in on them. That light was just beginning to fade. The darkness of the second floor was advancing down the ramp almost perceptibly, moving towards them.

"Right on time," Devin said happily, yanking the side door to the van open. Vincent threw the blankets into the rear and stepped quickly inside, the sound of the door slamming shut behind him echoing through the building and back upon them, fading a little with each round trip.

"Any trouble?" Catherine asked quickly, moving behind the wheel and moving her bundles aside to allow Devin inside.

"Nope," he answered. "Plenty of film, plenty of blankets." He looked at the wicker basket on the floor. "Plenty of food?" he asked.

"Plenty," Catherine said, smiling.

She drove to the padlocked door again, Devin jumping from the van - raising and lowering the door to

allow their passage - then returning to the passenger seat expectantly.

Catherine pulled the curtain aside slowly, making certain that no one was in the alley near them. Vincent sat in the middle of the passenger bench, leaning forward warily and looking at the sunlit cavern surrounding them.

She looked at him intently, knowing that they were about to embark on a dangerous journey. There would be no tunnels to protect him, no sentries, no helpers, no one but the two people he trusted most in the world to see to his safety. She scanned his eyes for any sign of fear or uneasiness. She saw nothing except the fire of curiosity and the glow of expectation. She knew this was the final moment. "Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked, her eyes and voice taking them both in.

Vincent nodded slowly, smiling at her concern - knowing it sprang from feelings even more deep. Devin smiled in turn. "I'm with him," he said jokingly, pointing his thumb at Vincent.

Catherine's smile underscored Vincent's laugh.

Afternoon was fading rapidly, the late fall sun sliding quickly behind the Palisades of New Jersey. Street lights were slowly winking on around them, springing to life - dimming slowly, then brightening again - their light sapping the glow from the air around them, making the streets they lined look darker in the gathering twilight. The sky to the east of them was a deep blue, an occasional pinpoint of light appearing low on the horizon.

Catherine made her way slowly east on Delancey, the pillars of the Williamsburg Bridge looming ahead of them in the gathering dusk. Traffic was lighter than she had expected, moving easily to the east - her task made easier by the leeway given their official-looking black van by many of the cars around them. Only the yellow cabs offered any resistance, yielding not an inch nor a right-of-way. The lights of East River Park appeared below them as they entered the causeway, the cables of the bridge looming just outside the windows. The tops of the buildings on the far shore were still a muted yellow from reflected sunlight, but the lower floors were already cut by deep shadows. The dark footprints of the Manhattan skyline stood in bold relief against the surface of the East River, an occasional tug boat breaking the water into whirlpools of white. In the distance, closer to the Hudson River, an ore carrier plowed towards them, its white funnel standing as a beacon over a dingy, blood-red cargo. The streak of red ore on the river was the only break in the sunlight - against shadow world surrounding them.

The seams in the roadway sang in a familiar cadence beneath the van *tu-tum ...tu-tum* - as the van reached the middle of the span. Devin was leaning forward, allowing Vincent to peek from behind the curtain outside the passenger window. Catherine deliberately stayed in the far right lane, permitting him an unobstructed view.

Visible now less than a mile downriver were the mismatched spans of the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges - the more famous of the two looming beyond and above its neighbor, the famous twin towers catching the final sunrays.

"Magnificent!" Vincent said, drinking in the sight.

As they neared the eastern anchoring tower, the ore carrier began its slow turn into the piers which lined the industrial park on the shore opposite Manhattan, the long, low silhouettes of the docks jutting out into the river to meet the onrushing shadows of the skyline in an unintentional handshake of commerce and nature. The kaleidoscope effect of the bridge cables gave the effect of a mammoth film of the cityscape, each frame caught for a split second between taut sheaths of metal, only to be

replaced by a new image - with a subtle shift of light and shadow or an occasional new light the only changes to mark the progression of the frames. By the time they reached the eastern end of the bridge, the buildings behind them looked like cardboard cutouts of an impressionist skyline, edged in black, the windows merely suggested by the occasional appearance of a lighter square on the black velvet background.

They drove quickly over the paved remnants of toll booths that had been torn down years before. Only vehicles heading into Manhattan had to pay for the privilege, their lights already stretching to the horizon as they approached the city. Catherine maneuvered the van into one of the center lanes as the river and the lower half of the skyline were cut off behind them, the smaller brownstones of Queens blocking their view. Only the tops of the giants remained - the icons of New York City gleamed along the horizon behind them. Neither Catherine nor Devin could see Vincent's face pressed to the rear window - his visage protected from the drivers behind by the special glass - as he drank in a sight he had never hoped to see.

Catherine swung onto the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway for the two mile trek to the Long Island Expressway, their progress rapid. Catherine could sense traffic building on the side streets beneath and beside them, the lights of autos flaring to life, gathering in bunches at the intersections, backing up at the entrances to the freeway. She swung right quickly, merging onto the expressway and accelerating to the far left lanes - the lanes furthest from local traffic. A long journey lay before them.

Vincent appeared at the curtain behind them, parting the cloth slightly. Devin put a hand on his shoulder, smiling broadly. "Never thought you'd see this?" he said, his tone halfway between statement and question.

"No," he sighed, looking at the twinkling lights in the darkness ahead of them. "I've seen the island from every imaginable vantage point at night. But until this moment..." He stopped, reluctantly, then continued in a halting voice. "...until this moment, I never envied your world."

Devin and Catherine both smiled - she keeping her eye on the thickening traffic ahead, Devin's gaze resting on Vincent's childlike expression of discovery and wonder. His own smile matched his friend's, his glance ahead equally childlike.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," he said, softly

The darkness was total now, the past hour having swallowed the final, faint rays of sunlight that had clung to the horizon, the jagged canyons of buildings behind them giving the illusion of fingers of light clinging in desperation to the edge of the earth. The stars were numerous now, their brilliance magnified by the chilly night air and the cloudless sky overhead. The light of the cities was growing dim now, the glow of New York City translucent now, almost invisible. They had passed through the flat, industrial suburbs that peppered Long Island for more than thirty miles. Their conversation had grown sporadic now, Catherine and Devin because they had seen this sight many times - Vincent because he was too captivated by the sights to take his eyes from the ever-changing landscape.

As they passed out of Hicksville, traffic thinned abruptly. Most of the rush hour had been left behind as they headed eastward, towards the sparsely populated central and eastern sections of the island. There was less to see now, blackness enclosing the van from all sides - with only the faint glow from the instrument panel to light the inside of the van and an occasional oncoming car's headlights to illuminate the outside. In minutes, the darkness around them would be total.

"How ya' doin' back there?" Devin asked, pushing the curtain aside.

Vincent returned to the passenger bench slowly, pushing his cape aside. His eyes were bright in the darkness, catching the errant rays of oncoming cars.

"I never imagined this."

"It's even more wild and desolate from here out," Devin said.

"How far away is this place?"

"It's about 65 miles farther. It's near the very tip of the island. Can we expect anyone else to be there?" Catherine asked.

"Not this time of year. It's too cold, too isolated. We should be alone, at least until sunrise."

"This is the first place you visited when you left the tunnels?"

"Yep. Twelve years old, just me and my backpack and my thumb. I got a ride from a truck driver as far as Hempstead. I walked a few miles, then an elderly Indian man picked me up and took me the whole way out to the point. He told me a lot about the tribes that inhabited this island before the white men arrived. Wonderful stories, told by a great storyteller. He always reminded me of Narcissa."

"Without the potions and spells?" Catherine added.

"He was a fisherman part of the year, a guide during the summer months. He lived in a cabin just outside the park. He let me spend two weeks with him, exploring the dunes, listening to stories, tasting freedom for the first time."

"He never wondered what a twelve-year old was doing by himself?"

"He was on his own when he was ten. Why should he wonder? I took care of myself pretty well, even back then."

"You took care of yourself pretty well *before* then," Vincent joked. "Do you think this man is still alive?"

"I doubt it. He was getting up there in years when I met him. He must have been sixty or so. He'd be over eighty if he were alive now."

"What was his name?" Catherine asked casually.

"Everyone called him 'Old Carl', but I don't think that was his real name. I never asked and he never told me." Devin chuckled to himself in the darkness. "When I decided to move on, I went to Arizona. I used the name Carl Wells."

"So *that's* when it started."

The three of them laughed easily.

Catherine swung the van off the expressway, as they entered the town of Medford. She pulled slowly into an all-night service station. Devin pulled the curtain closed while she filled the gas tank and paid the sleepy attendant. She also bought two cups of coffee, the aroma inviting, invigorating. She headed quickly back to the expressway, Devin cracking open the plastic lids to allow them to sip the coffee slowly. When they were safely beyond the bright lights of the interchange, Vincent pulled the curtain

aside.

"Have some coffee, buddy," Devin said, passing the Styrofoam cup over his shoulder.

Vincent took a long sip, the steam wafting into nostrils, past his eyes. "It's not like Mary's," he said, passing the cup back to Devin.

"Or Catherine's," Devin added, exchanging a knowing look with her when she turned to smile at him. He could see her look of gratitude in the dull glow of a set of oncoming headlights.

"You want me to take the wheel for a while?" Devin asked.

"How? You don't have a..." she began, but stopped when he reached into his back pocket and produced a valid New York State driver's license. She could not tell what name appeared on it in the darkness, but sensed it would be his own or he wouldn't have shown it to her.

"How did you get that?" she asked, a hint of concern in her voice. "Simple. It just took a road test and a couple bucks."

"How long have you had it?"

"Just for a week or so - since the day I got back to the city. I figured I might want to do some traveling on my own." He noted her concern with a bemused smile. "I do know how to drive, Catherine. It's been my living more times than I care to remember."

"Please be careful, Devin. Joe will be checking out your background. You've left him a warm trail now."

"So what?" he said easily. "What's he gonna' do.... *exit here!*" he said suddenly, pointing quickly to the right. Catherine swung the van onto the exit ramp, pulling slowly to a stop at the overpass. The headlights illuminated a dilapidated sign, faded from years of neglect. There, the arrows pointing the way, were the names of two tiny hamlets.

Devon

4 mi.

Promised Land

6 mi.

The Respite

"Devon?" Catherine said, more as a statement of surprise than a question.

Devin nodded slowly, his smile pregnant with amusement and satisfaction - the satisfaction of surprise inflicted, of a carefully planned revelation successfully accomplished. Vincent and Catherine sat looking at the signpost in front of them, their glance eventually meeting, then falling in tandem on their self-satisfied companion.

"You don't mean to imply that they named this town after you?" Catherine asked, not quite believing what she was seeing.

His reply was a long laugh, his body shaking uncontrollably. He could not contain his emotion, his laugh lapsing into a spasm of coughing as he tried to catch his breath.

"I'm infamous in certain quarters, Cathy - but not on Long Island."

"Then it's just a coincidence?"

"Not really. A special friend lived in Devon."

Vincent understood. "'Old Carl'?"

"Yes," came the low, solemn reply. "It's still early. I thought we might..."

"Tell me the way," Catherine said, turning left and heading away from the intersection and into the barren darkness. The road was old, well-worn. There were few trees, fewer houses, and no cars to keep them company on their passage towards the sea. The light of a just-rising harvest moon lit the landscape, throwing a ghostly luminescence over the sand and scrub that extended away from them in all directions to the horizon.

As the car crested a slight rise, the feeble glow of a small collection of lights to their right marked the town of Devon. Beyond, spread before them to the horizon; lay the waters of Gardiners Bay -and beyond that, the Atlantic. The waters were strangely dark against the sand, the outline of the shore visible where breaker broke against dune. The lights of the stars filled the sky down to the black line of the horizon, a blackness unbroken by the light of ship or sail. Only one lone red beacon well out in the harbor winked in the darkness, warning nonexistent ships of dangerously shallow water. The days when ships sliced these waters were long gone, even when Devin had last crested this hill as a child.

"Make a right at the intersection ahead," Devin said, leaning forward and squinting in the darkness.

Catherine swung the van around the turn, the road degenerating into battered macadam as they left the county highway. Sea reeds grew to the edges of the road here, and the sand was beginning to make inroads onto the fringes of the broken surface. There were cattails in profusion here, and sea ferns, and a profusion of withered beach grass, clinging to the roots of the heartier plants. Ahead of them was a rusty sign carrying the name of the city, the black letters faded and torn, some disfigured by playful children. There were small holes in the sign, the relics of some long-past target practice. The speed limit sign just beyond slowed their progress by half - but Catherine's caution was useless, an automatic acceptance of city rules not needed here. There was no one to enforce the limit - not within this city. The pranksters seemed to have known this - the zero of the number on the sign had a smile painted inside it. It was the only welcome the sign offered them.

They passed a few houses, their lights bright in the darkness. No one walked the lonely street - no cars met or passed them. The city seemed frozen in time - in space - a relic of a time long past, when most lived as simply and as unassumingly as this. In the darkness, the glint off the eyes of an occasional wild animal shone through the grass, their attention drawn to the road by the motion and the light.

Devin drew to the side of the seat, rolling the window down quickly as the van continued past the main concentration of houses and on towards the blackness of the bay.

"Do you remember any of this?" Vincent asked, his hand on Devin's shoulder.

"Yes," he answered uncertainly. "Nothing has changed. It's scary."

"Are we close yet?" Catherine asked, trying to negotiate the curving road while remaining vigilant for any sudden requests to stop.

"Here!" Devin said sharply, pointing to a small cabin just off the side of the road ahead of them.

Catherine pulled the van off the main road, coming to a stop near the end of a long, sloping dune that paralleled the road. There was a break in the dune, a footpath decades old, the cabin standing a few yards from the roadway - yet barely visible to the casual eye. A light shone through a window, a curtain flapping in the breeze in, then out of the opening. The place was not deserted.

"You don't think..." she said quietly, looking at Vincent.

"Why not find out?" Vincent said softly.

Devin looked at the cabin, noting that the only change since his last view of this place was his own - that he had stood in this precise spot over twenty years before and beheld the same sight. He turned to look at his friends. "What do I say if..."

"If it's a stranger, just say we're lost and ask for directions. If not..."

"If not, you'll know what to do," Vincent said softly, squeezing Devin's shoulder. He gave him a gentle push as incentive. Devin opened the door and climbed down to the street. He gently pushed the door shut and turned to look at them through the window. "Wish me luck," he said, turning away and walking slowly towards the house.

Catherine got out of the van and walked around to the passenger side, leaving against the door, watching as Devin approached the doorway to the ramshackle dwelling. He stood in front of the wooden door for a moment, then turned to look back at his friends. He hesitated for a moment. He seemed tortured, as if he was unsure of what he should do. Catherine was certain he had not planned to stop in this place. She felt suddenly guilty for forcing him into a confrontation he might not be ready for, but took comfort in the knowledge that it might be important for Devin to confront part of his past.

The sound of his feeble knock didn't reach the van, but she knew he must have been heard, for the door to the cabin swung open slowly.

"Can you see anything?" Vincent asked from the dark.

"No," Catherine answered, squinting.

In the faint light of the open doorway, she could see Devin's silhouette standing completely still, frozen. In the doorway, the outline of a man appeared, a cane extending from his right hand, his figure slightly bend at the waist. For several moments, neither figure moved. Then suddenly, without a sound, the figures embraced. She could see Devin stoop slightly and encircle the figure with his arms.

"I think Devin's just come face-to-face with his past," she said in hushed tones.

"I'm glad," Vincent offered. "The way he spoke about this man seemed so eloquent, so loving."

"Perhaps we should give them some time together."

Before she could move, she noticed that the men had broken their embrace. The door had closed and Devin was walking quickly towards them. He motioned to Catherine to get back into the van. As she resumed her position behind the wheel, he jerked the passenger door open and threw himself into the van, slamming the door behind him.

Several seconds passed. "Well?" Catherine asked.

"Well, he's older -his hair is whiter -he has a few more wrinkles. Except for that, the old guy hasn't changed a bit!" Devin's happiness was apparent in his voice, in his eyes as he looked at his two friends.

"Do you want to stay for a while?"

"Why should I?" he replied. "I'll be seeing him again before we leave."

"Did he recognize you?"

"The instant he opened the door. Remember, I'm pretty easy to pick out," he said, running his fingers over the scars on his cheek.

"I'd almost forgotten," Vincent said, his tone sombre.

"Listen, I want to get to the bay quickly. Stay on this road."

Catherine brought the engine to life and pulled back onto the road, heading towards the black tapestry spread out before them. They lost the small dunes quickly, a large wedge of sand appearing to their left, capped with grass. They had gone less than a mile when Devin pointed out a small side roadway that led through the dune. The faded tracks of four-wheel drive vehicles and dune buggies were still apparent in the notch which led to the bay, but none of them was freshly made. Their tires sank deeply into the fresh sand, but the way was solid -the water opening up before them as the road vanished behind. She pulled to one side of the dune, moving the van well away from the roadway. When she turned the headlights off, they were plunged into darkness. The white, snaking lines of seafoam and salt breaking close by. They were surrounded by sand and saltwater now.

"I'll make a fire," Devin said quickly, heading into the back of the van and opening one of the storage compartments. There were several large logs inside, along with kindling and matches. He unlocked the rear doors and threw the logs and twigs to the sand, careful to pocket the matches, protecting them from the damp sea air.

While Devin was busying himself, Catherine set the hand brake and gathered the picnic basket and blankets together. Vincent slid slowly out the front of the van, helping her with the bundles. Their hands touched briefly on the same blanket. They stopped in turn, brought to a halt by the same feeling, the same longing. Quickly, she put her hand against his face and kissed him warmly, deeply. He took

her hand as she drew away, bringing it softly against his lips.

The sharp crackle of exploding sap and steam competed with the muffled sound of the surf, the sound of the fire overpowering through its proximity. The three logs were fully engulfed in bright yellow flame, with smaller kindling logs glowing a deeper orange, and the dying embers glowing a dull red. The flicker of light fell over their faces, framing them against a black background - the starlight unable to overcome the dancing flames.

A light breeze washed over them, breaking like the waves against the base of the dune behind them. Catherine and Vincent sat close to each other, Vincent's cape offering some protection against the cold and the wind. Devin sat near them, midway between the sea and the dune - but he sat far enough away so that he could see them both clearly in the light. He could also see behind them. Vincent and Catherine could see only the sea, Devin, and each other.

"What do you think of this place?" Devin asked, eyeing Vincent with amusement touched with pride.

"I've read of places like this, of the ocean, of sand dunes and salt air. But words can never really make a place like this *real*."

"It's lovely here. I can't even hear any birds." She looked out over the bay. A lonely white light shone on the horizon, its glow alternately dimming, then erupting to brilliance. It moved very slowly against the starry background, headed inland. "What do you think that is?" she asked, pointing to the horizon.

"Probably a freighter shortcutting through the gulf. Or maybe a yacht headed for Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard."

"Did you manage to get out to sea during your stay here?"

Devin shook his head wistfully, dragging his fingers idly through the sand. "I wanted to, but it was the wrong time of year. I mostly swam and hunted for crabs at the waterline. We would build a fire and boil five or six of 'em for supper. Sometimes we'd have cattails, too."

"Cattails?" Catherine asked, aghast.

"Sure. They're edible. The roots are like small onions. The thick part of the stem is delicious, too."

"I never knew that."

"You'd be surprised at what is edible in the wild. Carl taught me a lot about surviving away from cities, away from civilization. You can survive almost anywhere as long as you can make a fire."

Catherine laughed, shaking her head in mock horror. "Unless there are coffee trees somewhere close by, I'd be doomed."

They laughed together, Vincent drawing closer to her involuntarily, his movement subtle but obvious. He caught himself, drawing back nearly as quickly as he had advanced, but it was too late. Devin's lips turned up slightly, a knowing smile spreading slowly across his face.

"It's all right, Vincent. I know."

"You..." Vincent turned to Catherine, aghast, but she could only look at him with equal surprise. Her

face told him that she had divulged nothing about their relationship. They both looked at Devin, the same question hanging thick in the silence.

"It's obvious you love each other. I've known it for quite some time."

"How?" Catherine asked quietly.

"Didn't it ever occur to either of you that I might know something about your feelings for each other from personal experience?"

"You mean...," Vincent started.

He nodded slowly, his eyes bright. He moved slowly towards the small pile of personal effects they had brought from the van. He dug out his shoulder bag, unfurling the straps slowly. He looked up at them once, his smile mischievous.

He pulled the top flap aside. Inside the bag was stuffed a thick scrapbook, its many pages battered and torn, its binding held together with string threaded through the small holes at the page margins. The leather of the covers was cracked and dry. He lifted it slowly out of the protective folds of polished cloth and moved closer to his friends, holding the book against his chest as a little boy might hold a cherished toy, or a beloved pet.

He opened the book to a page he had obviously memorized. He handed Catherine the book carefully, the huge pages covered with erratic writing in what she instantly recognized as Devin's handwriting. On the left page, framed with a plastic protective cover, was a photograph of a young woman. Her hair was the color of pine needles, the brown accented with shades of dark orange and reddish blonde. Her eyes were a brilliant green, her teeth a flashing white - she was drawing a hand through her wind-tousled hair and smiling broadly at the photographer. They both knew who the photographer had been.

"What's her name?" Catherine asked, handing the book to Vincent carefully.

"Alicia."

"What a lovely name. Where did you meet her?"

"Australia. She was working outback tours, taking groups of people born and bred in cities into the wilds and babysitting them while they pretended to give up their civilized lives. I was just starting in the trade, cramming like a schoolboy - every book on Australia I could find. I had to convince people I was an expert, a native. I managed to fool everyone - everyone except her." He smiled to himself, a smile of bittersweet remembrance over some personal vision, some moment too private to share even with his friends. "She saw through me almost immediately. Everything. The accent. The credentials." He looked at Catherine, smiling. "She was every bit as suspicious as you, Cathy. And every bit as right about me."

"What did she do?" Vincent asked.

Devin's voice took on a thick Australian accent. "She taught me how to talk like an Aussie. She taught me all I needed to know about the outback - enough to convince any stray traveler I was likely to meet that I'd been born and bred in the wilds I was paid to show them. She taught me about things I had never seen before, plants and animals and peoples that were foreign to me."

"And you fell in love with her."

"On the spot. She saw right through me, but she understood. Without words. How often do you find that? How could I not love her?"

Vincent looked at Catherine, his eyes echoing Devin's words.

"Where is she now?" Catherine asked.

Devin looked out over the bay, his voice dropping slightly, his tone eloquent but resigned to a long-accepted truth. "She's dead." Only the ghost of some feeling thought long-dead seemed to haunt his words.

Catherine spoke first. "I'm sorry."

"Silly thing, really. She taught me how to drive a lorry. She could handle anything any man could drive. But one afternoon, while we were racing, she flipped over an embankment. Broke her neck. She was gone before I could even reach the damn car." He shook his head violently, as if to dispel a particularly unwelcome sight.

"And that's when you...," Vincent began, suddenly realizing what must have happened.

He nodded. "That's when I came home. To heal."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"It was hard enough facing you and Father without making it more difficult. Just being back with my family and friends was comfort enough." He moved closer, sitting nearly in front of them, his features half-lit by the fire and half-hidden by the darkness. He took the scrapbook from Vincent's lap, folding it closed and holding it against his body.

"Now tell me about you two. I want to know everything."

"Now I understand why you came above my first night back," Devin said. He looked at Vincent carefully. "You say you can feel whatever Catherine is feeling, no matter how far apart you are?"

He nodded.

"Do you share the bond, Catherine?"

She nodded. "Not to the same extent. I have often sensed when Vincent was in danger, but Vincent seems to be able to feel all of my emotions, no matter how subtle they are."

"What do you think caused the bond to form in the first place?"

"I don't know. I sensed it while Catherine was convalescing - while her face was still bandaged. I could feel her fear, her pain. I still can't explain where it comes from. All I know is that it is real, a constant companion that I accept"

Devin shook his head sadly. "I envy you. Both of you." He looked at Catherine, his eyes betraying a newfound respect and admiration for her. "When did you realize that what you felt for Vincent was more than gratitude?"

"It took time, Devin. In retrospect, I think I understood Vincent completely before I took the bandages off. He spent over a week reading to me, talking to me, reassuring me. His voice was SO gentle, so soothing - I felt safe and warm when he was near me." She turned to look at Vincent, her eyes shining. "Then I saw him for the first time. I remember he came up behind me unexpectedly and I screamed. I was so ashamed at that moment - I know I had hurt him. He left me alone to collect my thoughts. I cried and cried, desperate for him to return."

"Did you feel that, Vincent?" Devin asked.

He nodded, taking Catherine's hand in his. "I knew she wanted me to return. I felt she needed time by herself, time to accept what she had seen, time to adjust. It was difficult, but I let her face her fear of me alone. It was the only way."

"When he came back, I felt so completely helpless and alone. I couldn't face going back above. His words gave me the strength to face what needed to be faced. I knew that if Vincent could find peace with the world, then so could I."

"You must have been just as terrified as she was."

Vincent nodded. "I felt shame and pity for the first time in years that day. I couldn't face her. I was afraid she would sense what I was feeling, even then. I remember she lowered the hood of my cloak and looked at me. I'll never forget the look in her eyes. It was so warm, so caring. I looked away for only a moment. When I looked back, I felt her fear ebb, acceptance replacing it, acceptance and empathy. It was a moment I've never forgotten."

"When did you first realize you were in love?"

Catherine explained the crisis she had faced and overcome - her near nervous breakdown and her final acceptance of Vincent.

"You knew earlier, didn't you?" Devin said to Vincent.

"Yes. Right after Father lost Margaret."

Devin looked out over the water, the surf rising now with the wind, breakers curling and lapping along the shore near them. There were a few clouds rushing past them now, their eerie white tufts faintly visible in the moonlight. The air was growing colder now, occasional drops of sea spray lashing them. Devin added two new logs to the fire, stoking the flames with a piece of kindling. Catherine drew closer to Vincent, pulling the blanket around her exposed shoulder. Vincent drew his cape aside and enfolded her within it, drawing her closer to him. Devin looked at them, affection highlighting his features.

"Why haven't you two married?" Devin said, the question made nearly impertinent by the nonchalance with which he had asked it. He laughed when he saw their faces reflected in the growing firelight - faces stark in their shock and surprise.

Catherine looked at Vincent, her cheeks obviously red with embarrassment. She moved her mouth to speak, but no words came forth. Vincent's eyes were empty of response, he too struck dumb by the meaning of Devin's question, yet suddenly, vibrantly aware for the first time that the word had arisen in regards to their relationship.

"He's never asked me," was the best Catherine could manage, moving her cloaked arm around Vincent's waist and drawing him closer. She smiled at Vincent, her eyes dancing with laughter and

mock accusation.

"Well, old buddy, here's your chance."

"You don't mean... Devin, you can't be serious."

"Father has to perform the ceremony. You'll need a best man, right? I always thought that honor fell to one's younger brother." Vincent was looking at Devin with mixed anger and despair. "You won't have me to kick around forever, you know." His tone was jocular - there was no bitterness, no sadness in his voice.

Catherine looked at Vincent. He could sense no discomfort in her, no fear or regret at the implication of Devin's words. He sensed more a reluctance, a general regret at the manner in which the issue had arisen - almost a relief that the word had been used, but regretful of the circumstances that had occasioned it.

"Devin, all I can say is when the time comes, I want you by my side. That's the most I can offer now."

"That's enough for me," he answered, smiling. "It wasn't fair of me to pressure you."

Vincent's answer was cut off by the sound of footsteps in the sand somewhere nearby. Vincent's head turned sharply to the rear. He drew his hood over his head quickly. Catherine made a move towards the van, but Devin abruptly threw a hand up, motioning her to sit down and keep quiet. He did not seem concerned. He drew himself up, his body lit by the flames. He was looking directly behind them and slightly upwards, towards the crest of the dune. As the sound grew closer, she could see his features melt into a smile of recognition and welcome.

"Carl!" he said, raising his right hand in welcome and walking towards the footsteps while motioning with his left hand to the two of them - his upturned palm moving slowly downwards, his manner calm. Catherine drew Vincent closer, intensifying her embrace.

"I come to meet your friends," came the quiet, serene voice.

Devin slowly drew back, making room near the fire for his friend. He extended his hands in welcome, a quick glance to his friend enough to reassure them that Vincent would be safe.

The old man walked slowly in the sand, his body wrapped in a handmade shawl of bright colors, woven into the shapes of wild animals and exotic birds. His dark hair was long, braided and banded to fall below his shoulders. He needed a cane for support, the figurehead the face of a lion. Devin reached forward to help, but the man extended a gnarled hand and fended off the outreach - a defiant, proud gesture that immediately touched them both.

Vincent had made no move to lower the hood of his cape. His face was completely hidden in the shadows, his hands drawn inside the folds of his cloak, Catherine's hands holding his tight.

"We're glad you came," Devin said softly, putting a hand on the man's shoulder and gently easing him to face his friends. "This is Catherine Chandler. Catherine, Carl."

She made a move to rise, but the old man shook his head gently. "Don't, beautiful lady. Women not rise to greet men - especially old men like me." His words were spoken with affection, with no trace of self-deprecation. "I am honored," he said simply, bowing as best his advanced years allowed.

"I'm glad you could join us," she answered, smiling warmly.

The man looked at Vincent expectantly, his eyes wide. Slowly, Vincent moved his hands from their haven. He lowered the hood gently, his eyes capturing the firelight, shining brightly and openly, without a trace of fear.

Carl's only reaction was a slight widening of his eyes as he beheld the creature seated on the sand before him. The moment passed quickly, the old man's gaze growing softer, his face a mask of wonder, of awe. He slowly lowered himself onto the sand, his eyes never leaving Vincent's face. He lowered his cane to his side and leaned forward slowly, extending his hand.

Vincent looked at the man's outstretched hand for a moment, then reached forward to clasp it warmly. Whatever fear or discomfort he had been unable to suppress vanished in the instant their hands met and intertwined.

"I have heard of you," the old man said, a hint of reverence reaching them all.

"How?" Vincent asked. "Surely Devin didn't tell you about me."

"No need to," he answered, picking up his cane and holding it in front of him, the firelight illuminating the lion head at the cap. "My people have told of a great warrior from the world below for over a hundred years."

Vincent laughed, taking the cane and looking at the carved figurehead. "I don't believe in war, Carl. And Devin is older than I."

"What about your forefathers, Vincent?"

"I never knew my parents."

"My people did."

Vincent looked at Devin in disbelief. Catherine fixed the old man with a bewildering look.

"How could they?" she asked.

The old man leaned forward, his eyes alive. "My people have spoken for many years of a world beneath the wind and waves. Of a place where men and beasts thrive. Of a world beneath the feet of the white man, where rivers and streams run to great underground seas. Where powerful warriors rule kingdoms peopled with travelers from above, trapped forever in a maze of endless paths which lead from tribe to tribe. They say that once a man has discovered the way down, that he never again may return to the world above.

"Wouldn't you say that Devin's life stands against that belief?" Catherine asked.

"Depends on which world the boy feels is his own." He turned to his friend. "Are you bound to the world of your youth or the world of your manhood?"

Devin shook his head, his dislike of the question obvious. "Both... neither... I don't know. It's a question I've never answered before."

"You, pretty lady. Which world do you claim?"

"I think I share Devin's dilemma. Both and neither. I know my life above can never be what it was before I found what lay below," she said, looking at Vincent. "I have ties to both worlds."

"The time will come when you will have to choose, my dear. All men must choose the shape and form of their worlds."

"Some have their choices forced upon them," Devin said, stirring the embers to red-tongued brilliance with a piece of kindling. The wood snapped and popped angrily at the intrusion.

"No!" the old man said sharply. "No one can force their choice on you, my young friend. Only the weak and cowardly live in such a way. That is not life." The old man looked out into the bay, catching sight of a pair of lights well out to sea, moving against the wind towards the open ocean. "You see those lights? A fishing trawler. My friends, they try to make me give up my life here and work on one of those boats."

"You were not called by the sea?" Vincent asked.

"I was, Vincent, but only on my own terms. Only I knew what the call sounded like in my head. I could never have spent my time in this place sometimes and on one of those boats sometimes. I spend all my time here, fishing for myself and some friends and family. I carve wood, paint, fix things that break. And I am happy in that. Only in that. To have done as others wished would have meant less time in this place for me, for Carl. Not everyone can be as old as me, have as much time in this place as me. Our time here belongs to us, *only to us*." He looked at Catherine, his eyes twinkling. "If you give away your time, you give away your life. I tried to teach this young buck that lesson."

"I think he learned his lesson well," Vincent offered.

"Not then. He was running away from his life. I tried to teach him to run towards his life, towards the things he wanted to do most with his time in this place." he looked over at Devin, smiling and clapping him on the shoulder. "I think I finally made him see. Stubborn, stubborn young man back then. Maybe not so much now?"

Devin laughed aloud, as if at a compliment he felt he deserved, but finding the way it is paid surprising. "I don't know if I should thank you or throw you in the next wave."

Old Carl picked up his cane, holding it between them and shaking it wildly. "You try that, young man, I make your time in this place shorter than you think!" His gestures were uncoordinated, wild - his smile obvious beneath his mock anger. It was obvious to Catherine and Vincent that the old man did not know the irony of his words, did not know how much they might hurt Devin - but Devin was madly ducking his friend's feigned blows and laughing wildly. If the words had hurt him, he gave no sign of it.

"Hey, this is supposed to be a party. Who's hungry?" Devin asked, leaping to his feet. He tore into the picnic basket and handed out the food, grinning like a child. The four of them shared a feast, Catherine and Vincent drinking in the old man's stories and legends, and Devin surreptitiously bringing out his camera to record the evening's festivities. Devin basked in the camaraderie of the people he loved most, happy that, faced with a choice between worlds, he did not have to make his choice at this particular moment.

"Which did she choose?"

Carl smiled slightly, studying her face. "Which would you have chosen?" he asked quietly.

"Devin, help me here."

"Sorry, Cath," he said. "I've already fallen into this trap."

She sighed, lowering her head, thinking carefully. "Let me see if I understand this. I have two choices. If I drink the contents of the first bottle, I am guaranteed a life of spiritual peace, but with no possibility of material comfort, nor any respite from backbreaking physical toil. If I drink the contents of the second bottle, I gain material comfort and a gentler way of life, but at a cost of endless inner turmoil and uncertainty."

"Yes."

"What about love? Is it possible with either choice?"

"Yes."

And I must drink a full bottle?"

"Yes."

She shook her head. "This is tough. I'm not sure which choice I would make. It's like the legend of the lady and the tiger. At least I won't die if I choose the wrong bottle."

"Perhaps your body not die," the old man said, "but when did I say you had only two choices. Do not consider as you would in court of law, pretty lady. You must find a way to live life you want to lead and solve problem at same time."

"I need to think about this a little longer, Carl."

"You have much time before you need to choose. I know you come to make right choice once you see it."

She smiled at him warmly. He reminded her in many ways of her own father-warm and wise, generous without question - sincere and honest without judgment.

"Which bottle did you choose, Devin?" Vincent asked.

"Neither," he answered. "I broke both bottles and let the damn liquid drain into the ground without drinking from either."

"I should have guessed."

"That is the boy's way," Carl said gently. "It is the way he dealt with many things as a boy. To refuse to choose is a choice also."

The sky to the east was sliced open now, the blood-white streak of sunlight ripping the heavens apart. There were clouds all along the horizon, the glow of morning white-hot beneath and behind the base of the long, low bank of water and wind. There were fewer stars now, their brilliance lost to the rapidly brightening hues of blue and green that spread their fingers upward, pushing the darkness overhead and away from them, to the west.

The birds were coming alive now, their voices growing in number as the onrushing light brought food to the surface of the bay. Occasionally, a streak of light gray appeared near them, the sound of a splash right behind, then the sound of wings beating against the still morning air. The earth and sky awoke all around them.

Catherine rose, stretching the muscles in her arms and legs, throwing her head back to drink in the cool breeze. She stretched her arms wide, as if she were preparing to dive from a high platform into the inviting waters of the day. A deep, drawn-out cry of pleasure filled the air around them -the pleasure of a body roused to action, the salt air filling her lungs, blood finding its way into fiber and sinew forgotten hours ago. The sensual joy of their reawakening filled her, gaining its release in that cry.

She extended her hand towards Vincent. "Let's go for a walk."

He stood, wordlessly, and took her hand in his. They held each other's glance a second longer than was necessary, then turned to their friends. "Which way is safer?"

"That way, - towards the sun," the old man pointed. "We won't be long," Catherine said quietly. They walked away together, Vincent drawing her close to him, shielding her with his cloak.

They walked easily along the waterline, the seagull's chorus all around them. The greedy birds followed them, begging for an easy meal. Only when no morsels of food were offered up did the hungry flock melt away, heading out to sea to earn their breakfast. An occasional gull strayed overhead, its call made blatant by its lonely insistence.

The tide was moving out, leaving more of the beach exposed to the morning warmth. There were bundles of seaweed and flotsam scattered here and there, left on the shore by riding that one wave more powerful than the rest. They avoided the masses of green and brown, their tracks stretching out behind them, mottled by the flow of a dying wave's return to the sea.

"Devin seems happy," Catherine said.

"I've never seen him smile so much. He seems so alive, so strong."

"You gave him what he wanted most. He must be grateful for that."

"I gained something as well. The chance to see all this was worth the risk."

"Risk? We haven't seen anyone but Carl since we left the main road. It's almost like the Twilight Zone."

"The what?"

She shook her head, remembering. "I'm sorry. It would take too long to explain."

Kneeling down, Catherine pulled off her shoes. She tied the laces together and threw them over her shoulder casually. She rolled the legs of her jeans up to her knees, knocking dried sand off her lower legs. A wave washed over her feet, the salt water washing away the few pieces of seaweed that clung to her calf.

She looked up at Vincent, his body silhouetted against the pastels painting the horizon behind him. He appeared as a solid outline, no highlights, no face or hands -just a huge, cloaked figure standing before

her, dominating the sky.

He knelt down to her, gathering two handfuls of seawater in the palms. He let the water drain away, leaving his fingers cool and wet. Slowly, he drew his hands across her face, pushing the strands of hair aside, her features framed by sinew and sunlight. He kissed her warmly, the salt of the seawater mingling with the salt of her skin, of her mouth. He drew her upwards, their mouths never parting, until they were standing together in the gathering daylight - two figures drawn into a single form, a single shadow against the sky.

Vincent drew back slowly, his eyes looking down on her with an expression she had never seen before. An emotion he could not name flooded his mind and body, a potent mixture of passion and apprehension.

"I love you, Catherine," he whispered.

She leaned against him, her forehead resting on his breast. She could hear the pounding of his heart clearly, feel the faint pounding grown faster now with excitement. This was a moment they had never shared before. She did not want it to end. 'Perhaps, if I don't answer. If I stand here silent, protected, and do not answer - perhaps time will stop for us, waiting for me to acknowledge his words, acknowledge the greatest feeling of my life - but not before I have spent a lifetime with his arms around me, with his words to fill me with joy and wonder, with his body close to mine. I need all of this and more, so much more.' She knew she could not remain silent, could refuse him neither her body nor her soul.

"I love you," she said. She pulled back slowly, extending her arms, pulling him along. The nearly silent waves lapped at their feet, washing up to and occasionally over them, the water cool and green. They were silent for a few minutes, the plaintive cry of the ever hungry gulls and terns their only audience. Here was no strain in the silence, only the quiet acceptance of the moment.

"What do you think of Devin's friend?"

"I think he's remarkable," she answered, kneeling quickly and gathering a handful of stones from the waterline, idly tossing them into the swells. "He certainly didn't seem surprised when he met you."

"I fear Devin may have told him more than he admits. Yet, there was something in his eyes when he looked at me earlier - it was almost as if he recognized me."

"You don't believe his legends are true, do you? An underground world of warring tribes and mythical..." She caught herself, smiling as she turned to him. "Don't say it."

"What would you have me say, Catherine? What would you have said ten years ago? Would you have believed there was anything beneath New York City except solid stone?"

"No."

"Who can say whether his stories are tales handed down for generations or the words of a traveler to that world?"

"Why would he give that world up for such a difficult life above?"

He gazed out at the fiery line of the horizon, alive now with golden filaments stretching into the dark blue overhead. "I would give almost anything to share this kind of life with you, Catherine - a life in the sunlight, filled with mornings like this." He turned to her, his face serene, his voice soothing. "But look

what I would have to give up to live that life. As much as my choice would seem to be imposed by what I am, by what you see standing here in this light, I would still be a citizen of the Tunnel World"

He gazed at her lovingly. "That is the bottle I drank from, Catherine."

She shook her head. "It's not the same, Vincent. You have ties to both worlds. You grew up with helper's above and family below. No matter how much time I spend in your world, I'll always be a stranger there. I didn't share childhood games and fantasies with Devin and Pascal and Olivia. I wasn't with you that night at the carousel. I wasn't running behind you when Devin saved your life that night in the railyards. You grew up in both worlds, no matter what restrictions there might have been. I'm a creature of this kind of world." She stretched her arms out, their sweep taking in the dunes and the waves behind her. "This is the bottle I'm forced to drink from."

"No, it isn't," he said, his eyes never leaving hers. "As long as you believe you are a prisoner above, then whatever happiness you find below with us will always be fleeting. It won't provide lasting comfort or genuine love. It will remain that which you always dreaded the most - a refuge."

"I won't let that happen."

"Neither will I. If the time ever comes when you feel sure of the love and devotion that I know flourishes for you in my world - then and only then will you not feel that you are forced to remain in a world that offers no comfort .

"I have to decide what to do with my life now."

"I know that."

"I've alienated Father."

"You are not the cause, Catherine. He needs time, just as Devin needs time. His anger will fade."

"I've placed you at risk again. Joe won't let his suspicions die just because I've resigned."

"He is bound by his oath of office to investigate those who break the law."

"He violated a trust by following Devin and me."

"So you would have him violate his trust with his conscience?"

She shook her head firmly. "I don't know what to expect of anyone anymore."

"He cares for you. He doesn't understand what Devin means in your life."

"And I can't tell him, Vincent. He's the one person above I thought I could trust implicitly -and look what's happened. I'm forced to lie to him, to hurt him. Just like I'm forced to lie to all my friends. I hate what this is doing to me, to everyone I care about."

"Could you leave the last five years behind, Catherine? Could you abandon everything you've seen, everyone you've come to know?" He stopped, turning to face her, his shadow falling across her face. "Could you give up everything we share in order to live a more honest, less complicated life above?"

"No!" The word ripped the stillness around them, echoing off the sand. No moment of doubt stretched between his silence and the violence of her answer.

He smiled. "Now do you see what Carl meant?"

She nodded, hiding her face from him. He held her close, drawing a hand up to her neck, stroking her hair gently.

"Come. We must go back."

They spent their final minutes arm in arm, moving silently away from the sun - their shadows preceding them, alternately touching and parting as they walked.

"Something's wrong."

Catherine jerked her head towards the van, now looming larger in front of them. Though they were still out of hearing range, they could see Carl leaning over Devin. He was leaning against the side of the van, his knees up against his chest. When he saw the two figures on the beach hasten their approach, he struggled to sit upright.

Carl looked up at the sound of Vincent and Catherine's approach, their steps gouging out great puffs of sand behind them.

"What happened?" Catherine asked breathlessly.

"I'm fine," Devin answered quickly. "Just a case of too much excitement and not enough sleep."

They could see it was more than that. He was sweating profusely, his shirt front soaking and his hair matted to his forehead. The chill of the sea breeze sent shudders through him. It seemed to her that his voice was too controlled, too even, as if he were fighting for words against pain. She had seen this fight against pain before, as a child. It was a struggle she knew well, its physical symptoms unmistakable.

Vincent knelt down and took the rag from Carl's fingers, soaking it in the remnants of melted ice in the cooler beside him. He drew the cool cloth across Devin's forehead, leaving a hand firmly against his friend's head, trying to comfort him.

"Are you in pain?" he asked.

Devin shook his head halfheartedly but stopped when he saw Catherine's eyes. He knew that she had guessed. He looked at her, his eyes asking the question he dared not allow himself to put into words.

She pulled the passenger door open, tossing aside several bundles until she found her purse. She pulled two pills from a bottle inside and handed them to him wordlessly.

"What are these?" Vincent asked, his voice tense, frightened.

"Just codeine. It will help him relax."

Devin's thanks were in the gentle touch of his fingers on her palm and in the softening of his gaze as he looked at her. There was no need to cause Carl needless emotional pain. He downed the pills with a long swig of cool water from a clear plastic cup that Vincent had prepared for him. He handed the cup to Catherine and lay back, closing his eyes.

"When did this start?"

"A few minutes ago," Carl said, kneeling next to Devin anxiously. "We talking of Devin trip to Africa. He suddenly stop talking. I notice him sweating like middle of summer. He told me it was just lack of sleep." He looked at his friend sternly. "I know tired when I see it, my boy. I too old to lie to." He glanced over at Catherine. "Maybe best if you get the boy back to city. He need help."

"All I need is sleep," Devin offered, trying to stand. Vincent helped him rise, then gently eased him into the passenger seat, unbuttoning his shirt and wiping his chest with the cloth. He moved to rinse the cloth in the cool water while Catherine gathered the blankets and the rest of their belongings into the rear of the van. Carl helped her bury the remnants of their fire in the sand. She used two clear plastic glasses, alternately filling them with water and dousing the ashes, the hiss of water on ember giving way slowly to the heavier sound of cold water on warm sand. Carl dug out a deep hold in the sand and pushed the dead embers into it, filling the hole with fresh sand from all around him. In moments, there was no sign that a fire had ever burned on the spot.

Catherine held the two glasses in her hand. She threw them into the ice water in the Styrofoam cooler, watching as they filled with cool liquid and sank.

It came to her suddenly, without conscious thought. The solution to Carl's dilemma was so simple, so elegant - pushing all her 'what ifs' and 'if onlys' aside. As Old Carl caught her face, he stopped to watch her every movement. She filled both glasses with the melted ice water. Then she slowly poured half the water from the first glass, topped it with half the water from the second, and drank the now-full glass down.

She looked at the old man calmly, her smile the smile of a proud student who has mastered the difficult lesson of a stern teacher.

Carl nodded to her in silent acknowledgement of her choice. She fitted the cooler lid on securely and lifted it into the van. She could feel her strength rekindle as she did so, a strength born of conviction and determination.

Carl stood silently behind Vincent at the passenger door. Catherine walked slowly up to him, standing at his side. "We'd better get on the road. It's a long drive."

Vincent turned to Carl, taking his hands in his own. Without a word, the old man put his arms around his taller and larger friend. Vincent held the old man gently, reluctant to embrace him too strongly for fear of injuring him.

"Thank you," Vincent said softly, looking directly into the old man's eyes.

"You can say now you walked on the beach in Promised Land," he answered, his eyes sparkling.

He nodded, then pulled the side door open and stepped inside the van, his hooded form vanishing into the darkness inside. The door closed with a loud thump.

Catherine stepped before Carl, holding her arms out. He embraced her gently, keeping the pressure of his arms light and his body distant out of respect both for what he knew and what he suspected. He pulled back slowly, nodding in silent affirmation of the choice she had made minutes before. "You can do anything you truly want with your life, pretty lady. Remember that."

"I'm grateful to you," she answered. "And I know Devin is too. He's lucky to have you for a friend."

"Carl know that," he answered, smiling. Her laughter filled the air around them.

She drew behind the wheel of the van and searched for her purse among the remnants of the night's debris. Devin was breathing slowly, his head still back against the headrest. She found the keys and reached to start the engine. Devin opened his eyes and sat up, looking out the window to his friend.

Slowly, with obvious effort, he rolled down the window. Carl reached into the van slowly, his eyes brimming. Devin clasped his hands in his own, leaning down and resting his forehead against their intertwined fingers. Catherine turned away, allowing them a moment of private farewell.

"You take care of yourself, old man," Devin said quietly. "I expect to find you in that cabin when I come back here."

"If you not find me here, I join you wherever you are," Carl answered. "Thank you for sharing your friends with me."

"Be well," Devin breathed, slowly loosening his grip on the man's cracked, suntanned hands.

Catherine started the engine and slowly headed back up the beach, quickly coming upon the cut through the dune that would lead them back to the road. As she looked to her left, back over the dunes, she saw that Carl had climbed to the top of the dune. He was holding his cane aloft, swinging it in the air. She waved at him through her open window, a final salute to the lonely figure standing stark, small, unprotected in the middle of a vast sea of sand.

Behind him, scattered across the morning sky were hundreds of sea birds - as richly alive as the golden hues of sunrise that ripened into morning all around them.

As she pulled onto the road, his tiny figure slowly shrank towards the horizon until he was finally lost to her sight. She did not look back again.

She accelerated now, leaving Promised Land behind.

The black van swung rapidly onto the eastbound county road, a cloud of dust rising behind it. The late morning sun glinted off the tinted windows, sparks dancing along the seams where glass met metal. It slowly melted into the light traffic headed westward.

They had spoken rarely as Catherine retraced their route of the previous day. The roads were filling with cars now, many headed for the tip of the island, in hopes that one final weekend of sun and sand could be wrung from the approaching cold and snow of winter. The national parks had long since closed, but that did not stop the more independent, the more adventurous, from seeking a day of respite.

Vincent knelt at the rear doors, gazing through the protective glass at the retreating wilderness. They were rapidly overtaking civilization now, the warehouses and fast food restaurants and banks of modern man encroaching from all sides now, covering the landscape like weeds, spreading as rapidly away from the highway and towards the shores on either side of them.

He moved slowly to the front of the compartment and parted the curtain slightly. Devin was asleep, his head thrown back against the door, his jacket acting as a makeshift pillow. He had stirred little since they left the beach.

"How is he?" Vincent whispered.

"Sleeping, for now. The codeine seems to have relaxed him."

"How far have we come?"

"About 40 miles."

He looked at her, concerned. She had not slept for nearly a day. "Are you tired?"

She shook her head. "There's still some coffee in the thermos. Cold but stimulating. I'll be fine." She saw his look in the rear view mirror and laughed lightly. "I used to go for days without sleep during exams. I'll be fine."

The traffic was building now as they approached the old manufacturing cities of central Long Island. The beautiful Saturday had brought many people out for one final frolic before the first Nor'easter lashed their shores with snow spray and icy wind.

The hours melted by quickly, the suburbs becoming more closely bunched together, the stretches of forest and field between becoming less frequent as they approached the city. As they drew close to Queens, the sound of jets became more frequent. Vincent sat at rapt attention, his eyes following the great silver bullets as they slowly sank towards the ground, shuddering as metal sliced through air, wings gently rocking as the concrete of the roadway drew ever closer.

"Miraculous," he said breathlessly as a jumbo jet arced over the roadway just ahead of them, its wing tips seeming to brush against the sides of the low buildings on either side of them.

"You've never seen airplanes before?"

"I watch them at night, like strands of pearls ringing the city. To see them so close... so close you can almost reach out to them. Touch them."

She laughed. "I'll remember that the next time one of them wakes me up in the middle of the night."

The city loomed ahead of them, thousands of shades of grey and black thrust up from the horizon, filling the sky with glinting metal and glass. Catherine pulled into the right lane as she entered the approach to the Queens-Midtown Tunnels. A deeper-than-normal pothole shook the van, throwing Devin against the window with a loud thud. He awoke instantly, throwing the blanket off and wiping the sleep from his eyes and face. He looked out the front window, squinting against the sun, trying to guess where they were.

"You takin' the QM tunnel back into the city?" he asked sleepily.

"Yes. We'll have less traffic to contend with on Roosevelt."

"How are you feeling?" Vincent asked.

"Like a white shirt in a Chinese laundry," he answered, stretching his arms up and over his head as high as the van roof would allow, then out in front of him, trying to regain sensation in his fingers. He looked back at Vincent. "You're about to see what those above call a tunnel."

They sank below the level of the street, dark and dirty concrete walls rising on either side of them, cutting off the sun. Darkness enveloped the van, the line of the sun climbing the cement wall as it grew

beside them. Catherine snapped on the van headlights as they entered the eastern portal.

The dingy, foggy yellow of thousands of fluorescent lights inside the tunnel rocketed by, the sound the tires made as it passed over the metal road plates echoing inside the van. The sound reminded Devin of the sound of train wheels on tracks, every fourth knock accented. There was no danger of Vincent being seen here, all the traffic moving in the same direction. Vincent took in the sight as they plunged deeper, beneath the East River, the tunnel finally leveling off then rising slowly again as they climbed towards the city. Far ahead of them, a small square of intense white loomed larger and larger. The climb was steeper now, the water overhead replaced by bedrock. The brightness of the western portal was soon overwhelming, forcing Vincent and Devin to shield their eyes against the onslaught of light. Catherine had donned a pair of sunglasses she had placed in the visor over her head - her eyes never left the road ahead of them. She swung the van around a ramp and onto Roosevelt Avenue, heading southward. The buildings provided some relief from the oppressive light now, their shadows sometimes reaching the expressway, sometimes not - giving the effect of a piano keyboard. Catherine removed the sunglasses absentmindedly and replaced them in the visor.

She found the way to the abandoned warehouse surprisingly open, few people having ventured downtown on a Saturday. She unlocked the gate and drove to the secluded air vent, having re-secured the door behind them. The squeal of the tires on the oily cement reverberated through the building for several long moments, the sound driving an intruding bird from its roost overhead into the far end of the building. Its defiant cry burst forth from time to time as Catherine helped Vincent gather their belongings together into bundles.

She opened the passenger door quietly, helping Devin down. He fended off her outstretched hand gently, drawing his jacket around his shoulders. He was unsteady for a moment, blood rushing to his legs quickly.

"Are you well enough to walk?" she asked.

Devin stretched his arms out defiantly, like a magician who had just pulled a rabbit from a hat and was waiting for applause from his audience. "Hey, I got this far, didn't I?" He moved to the vent, Vincent following behind with their belongings.

He turned back to Catherine, his eyes emphasizing his words. "Thanks, Cathy. This meant a lot to me."

"To both of us," Vincent added, but Devin's and Catherine's eyes never parted. She knew somehow that this moment was special, that this was Devin's moment to say goodbye to her - that though they would see each other again, this was their moment to acknowledge what each meant to the other.

She embraced him slowly, her arms around his shoulders and back, her hands gently stroking him affectionately. She knew that this moment was difficult for him, that it was not his nature to linger too long over a touch or abide a tear one moment longer than necessary. She could feel the hint of a sob from him, but she drew him closer - and the effort he was making to stifle his emotions came through in the sudden rigidity of his muscles to her touch.

"Thank you, Devin," she whispered to him, so softly that Vincent did not hear. "For everything."

He held her closer for an instant, his embrace tightening in answer. Slowly, he pulled away, taking one of the bundles from Vincent's hand and heading into the darkness. "Come on, big brother," he said.

Vincent turned to Catherine, his gentle nod and smile telling her that he understood that this was Devin's time, Devin's way. He turned away, moving into the shadows, turning back only once to see Catherine's body outlined against the wire mesh of the grate, her hands grasping the latticework, her

features hidden by shadow and silence.

The Release

"What've you got?"

Joe threw a thin manilla folder onto Moreno's desk, sighing deeply. "Not much. There's a lot on Jeff Radler, but that was an alias. The real Radler lives in Santa Fe. Claims he met this guy on a white water raft trip in Arizona four years ago; claims the guy told him his name was David Holt. That was another alias." He paused to refill his cup with lukewarm coffee. He took a quick swig, then sat across the desk, idly scattering the papers in the file. "All I can get more recently is from Kenya. He worked for some time as a wild game refuge guide. Went by the name of Scott Yandle. He spent over four months there, then stole a passport belonging to some guy named Derek Chambers. That's the name he used to enter the country almost three weeks ago."

"Where's he staying?"

"Who knows. I followed them as far as the drainage tunnel in the park. Cathy came out and headed towards her place. I never saw this guy come out."

"How long did you wait?"

"At least an hour."

Moreno looked at the papers scattered before him. He pulled a photograph from the stack, studying it intently. "Did this guy tell you his name?"

"He says it's Devin Wells. Cathy backed him up."

"Anything on a Devin wells in the computers?"

Joe shook his head. "Nothing. I'm running a check now on noteworthy individuals named 'Wells' from the late 40's through the late 60's. We should know more later today, but there's nothing scholastic, nothing from motor vehicles, nothing from any hospital or insurance company. There's no record of a Devin Wells anywhere."

"What about military records?" "Negative."

"Mental hospitals, orphanages, halfway houses?"

"Nothing there either, so far as we can tell. It's like he sprang from the earth fully grown."

"Like Zeus," Moreno said quickly. "From what you've found so far, it would seem we're dealing with a master con man here."

"He has something to hide - that's all I know. That's what I'm worried about. It may be dangerous for Cathy to associate with him. He already used this office once."

Moreno did not answer, allowing Joe this moment of self-deception without comment. He knew the real reason for the concern, the true motivation. Whatever else he might believe about this stranger, he was fairly certain he meant Catherine no harm. Still, he remembered the professional

embarrassment he had nearly brought down on both he and Joe, the taste of it still bitter. Always cautious, he saw no reason to reign Joe in, so long as he remained discreet in his inquiries.

"Keep digging, Joe, but remember... quietly. I don't want word of this to leak out. If you don't find anything concrete, then move on. What we really need to know is this Devin Wells' background. Who are his parents? Are they still alive? Why no records anywhere?" He pulled his glasses down to the end of his nose, looking out over the top of the frames, his glance serious. "Stay away from Chandler for a while, ok?"

"No problem there, John. She already threw me out of her apartment once."

"Let's see to it there's no second time."

Catherine fell back against the pillows of her bed, exhaustion having taken its toll on her mind and her body. The light of three white candles flickered against the walls of her bedroom, their shadows in constant conflict - the flames dancing to the faint rustle of every movement she made.

There had been much to do this day. Her answering machine had been swamped with calls the day of their trip, mostly from professional acquaintances just hearing the news of her resignation. She had told Jenny of her decision and relied on human nature to take its characteristic course of sharing copiously so long as nothing tangible were involved. Indeed, she was surprised that word had traveled so far, so fast. Most of the callers sought her reasons for leaving or the details on what she expected to do with her future. Few asked how she was.

She had allowed the tape to play, noting only that there were no calls that required her immediate attention. She had cancelled all of her professional appointments. Jenny was due tomorrow for dinner. Joe had abided by her wish that he not try to convince her to change her mind. There was no one else she expected to hear from.

She had returned the rented van, laundered her blankets and clothes, vacuumed the sand out of her carpets, cleaned and dried the cooler, showered and written a letter to a college friend in Atlanta in order to relax. In going through her purse for her apartment key, she found several rolls of film on top of her belongings. She knew immediately where it had come from and what she was expected to do with it. She had called a helper and arranged to have the rolls developed the following afternoon.

The final chords of a Beethoven piano sonata had long faded to silence, the needle of her phonograph bumping against the center groove repeatedly in the darkness, its faint double echo still discernible. She pulled herself up out of bed, her muscles crying out in rebellion at her exertion. She shuffled into the living room - half asleep, she lifted the needle back onto its support and shut the power to the system off.

On the way back to her bed, she spotted a small, white rectangle lying on the floor in front of her balcony doors. It had lay there all night, hidden by the shadows of early evening. Now it stood out plainly in the reflected candlelight.

She picked it up and opened it carefully. Unable to read in the darkness, she returned to her bed, flopping unceremoniously onto the sheets headfirst, her body bouncing a few times, then relaxing into the comfort of the cool, clean sheets. She read the note by candlelight.

'Tunnel Council Meeting tomorrow night - 9:00 - we need your voice.'

'V'

She sighed, folding the note slowly and carefully laying it on the bedside table. In a final victory of will over nature, she drew herself up and blew the flames of the three candles into dark oblivion. In moments, her own consciousness had joined them.

The night had passed fitfully for Devin, the excitement of the journey and the joy at the reunion with his old friend having combined to keep sleep at bay. Now he could feel the onslaught of slumber in the ache of his joints, the subtle warmth of his muscles. There was something else too, a feeling that intruded on the others, making them seem more disruptive than he remembered. It wasn't pain. It was that intangible sensation, just short of pain, that seeped into every other sensation. The battle was starting, a battle he knew he had already lost.

"You're back," came a soft voice from the doorway. Devin jerked back to consciousness, squinting into the darkness. It was Jamie.

"How did you know I left?"

She shrugged. "I followed you and Vincent to the warehouse. I watched you go up."

"You're pretty good," Devin said respectfully. "If Vincent didn't hear you, your stalking skills must be extraordinary."

"They are. Where did you go?"

He sat up in bed, pulling the comforter up as he rose. "We went far out on Long Island. Just the three of us."

"Catherine too?" she asked excitedly. He nodded. "What were you doing out there!"

"Resting."

Jamie moved to the side of the bed, sitting on a small stool near the bedside table. She looked at Devin impassively, her curiosity held in check by the nagging jealousy she felt towards this man.

"Everyone's talking about you. We know there's a Tunnel Council meeting tonight, but Father won't talk about it. None of the Council members knows what's going on." She studied his face closely, looking for some sign that he might confide in her. His expression did not change. "Rumor has it that you're back for good."

"In a way I am, yes."

"Does your little sojourn have anything to do with the meeting tonight?"

"I don't know what the meeting is about, Jamie. All I know is that I won't be at it. I don't really care what it's about"

"Father would be angry if he thought you found a Tunnel Council meeting something to be ignored."

"I'm sure you won't be the harbinger of that message, will you?"

"Why shouldn't I?" she asked stonily.

He studied her face intently, suddenly curious. "You've disliked me for a long time, Jamie. Ever since I first came back to these tunnels. Yet I've never done anything to you. Why is that?"

She drew back a little, her face easing into a combination of surprise and respect. "I never knew you could be so direct."

"Sometimes the situation demands it."

"I don't dislike you. Not anymore."

"But you did - even before you met me, you had your mind made up about me."

"Well, you did leave here without telling a soul. Not a word for twenty years. What did you expect?"

"And after I came back?"

"You were never around long enough to get to know. I was so damn jealous ..." She stopped, her voice reluctant.

Devin sat up straighter, his voice gentler now. "Of what?"

"You got to do everything!" She hurled at him, her voice a torrent long dammed and now free to flow, the words spilling down and out of her. "You've seen everything I've only heard about in books. Or from Father and Catherine. You got out of here! I'll be stuck in these tunnels forever."

"Is that so bad?"

Her laugh filled the chamber, the tunnels outside. It rang in Devin's ears. "You can ask that?"
"Well then, why not do something about it?"

"Like what? Disappear for twenty years?"

"You aren't a prisoner here, Jamie. You can exist above. From what I've heard, you're smart. Determined. Resourceful. You're a lot like I was at your age." He looked at her, his smile and words breaking down the barriers. They laughed together.

"All I know is the tunnels. What could I do above?"

"There's a lot you could do up there, Jamie. And you're lucky...women have more options today than they did when I left here. You'd be surprised at what you can do."

"I wouldn't know how to begin," she said sadly, hanging her head. Devin leaned forward, his hand under her chin forcing her head upwards to face him.

"You can do whatever you set your mind to do. And I can help you."

"How?"

"Hand me that book on the desk." He motioned to the huge scrapbook lying closed on a corner of the desk. She picked it up carefully and handed it to him, careful not to allow the binding to break apart.

"What's in here?" she asked.

Devin ran his fingers over the cover, his voice was solemn. "A life. My life. Every place I've visited - every name I've used - every profession I've tried to master - every person I've met in thirty years. Every thought..." his voice trailed off into silence. He looked up at her, his face undecipherable to her. "Every dream is in here. I made this especially for Vincent. I always promised I'd show him the world when we were older." He looked down sadly. "This was the best I could do."

She moved to sit beside him, putting an arm around his shoulders slowly. "You did this for Vincent? All these years..." He nodded, looking at the scrapbook. "Does he know?"

"Not yet."

There was genuine respect in her eyes as she leaned forward to look at him. "Can I look at it?" she asked. He looked at her tentatively, not trusting his eyes to control his emotions. Slowly, he nodded.

She opened the book to the first page eagerly, studying an old and faded photograph of a windswept, gray beach - a young man with black hair, impish eyes, and three scars on his cheek -and a middle-aged man with long hair tied in a ponytail. She read Devin's words, surrounding the photo like a frame, hungry for knowledge of places she had only words to describe.

"Let me tell you about a man named Carl," he said softly, moving close to her.

To her, the moment was one of healing, of hope. To Devin, it was an instant when lives crossed, where the driving will to explore and to experience all the gifts of life blessed, then left in its wake, its benefactor. For some brief span of hours, he would be friend, mentor, teacher.

The faces around the table were familiar, comforting to Catherine. Yet there was an undercurrent of restlessness that flowed through the room like a rapids out of control. She knew she was not the cause of their disquiet, for they had greeted her in the usual manner, welcomed her to the table - their usual round of questions about her time above filling the empty minutes.

Vincent sat beside her, a comforting presence amidst the apprehension. He knew nothing of the reasons for the meeting, having been told by Mary that Father had important business to bring before them. No one had seen Father for two days, his chamber door having been closed and locked - the light of many candles the only sign that he was present behind that door. He had eaten the food that Mary had left on trays lovingly prepared and placed outside his room, but he had refused to answer her appeals to open the door. Only his quiet demands to be left alone had served to assure everyone present that he was not a prisoner.

"I wish I knew why I was asked to be here," Catherine said.

"We all do," William said angrily. "No explanation, no agenda, nothing. Just a note commanding us to be here tonight."

"Father has never done this before," Mary offered. "Perhaps it's bad news from above."

"We've had bad news from above before, but Father has never called a Council meeting without telling us the reason before," Vincent said softly. He looked at Catherine, his expression unreadable to all but her. She saw concern in his eyes, she could not guess its cause.

"There's nothing on the pipes. Nothing from the deeper levels. I don't understand it," Pascal said. "He

must have told you something, Vincent."

He shook his head. "Nothing. I found a note in my chamber when I returned. It said only that the meeting would take place tonight and that Catherine was to be here if possible."

"But she isn't even a Council member," William said. "It doesn't make sense."

"I agree." Pascal's voice was strong but respectful. "But if Father wanted Catherine here, he must have a good reason for it." He turned to Catherine. "You're sure you don't know why he wanted you to be here?"

"I got the note from Vincent last night, nothing more."

"Could it be about Devin?" Mary asked, her gaze falling on Catherine somberly.

"I don't know."

They were interrupted by the sound of footsteps approaching from the main passage. Slowly, his gait subdued and resigned, Father entered the chamber. He carried two books with him, struggling against their weight in his arms as he descended the stairs and took up the head of the table. He pulled his glasses from their case and put them on, then surveyed the table slowly. No one spoke a word in the silence, some common instinct in everyone present warning them against premature questions.

"I'm glad you could all be here this evening," Father said calmly, his tone paternal. There was a hint of control in his demeanor, as if he were performing a task he found distasteful but necessary. "I'm sorry I could not be more forthcoming as to my reasons for gathering you here, but you will know them in a moment. I trust you will understand them."

"What is it Father? What's happened?"
Mary asked, concerned.

Father's voice hardened now, his answer to Mary contained in the words that fought their way past the set of his jaw. "All of you know that Devin..." He stopped, a split-second of silence betraying what everyone present realized was an attempt to regain self-control, "...that my son returned to the tunnels. I must now tell you the reasons for his return."

Catherine's face was a mask, drained of emotion - of color. She put her head in her hand, lowering her eyes from the others' view. Vincent silently clutched her hand beneath the table, steadying her. He could feel her shudder at his touch, then clutch his hand in return. He remained impassive, his expression unchanged. Father did not look at either of them. He spoke more to the table than to anyone else, purposely avoiding eye contact with anyone, afraid that his control would be lost should his eyes meet those of anyone he loved.

"My son is dying..," he managed to say, pausing for a few moments to gather his thoughts and his strength to continue.

In those moments, the others silently reacted, each in their own way. Pascal and William stared dully at Father, not quite believing what he had said, yet certain that it was true.

Mary had clutched a hand to her mouth to stifle a scream, her eyes filling with tears she could not hold back. The pain of losing a child was a part of her being, a part of her soul. She knew what it had done to her twenty-five years before - she could not bear to see that kind of pain inflicted on the man she loved so deeply.

Vincent hung his head silently. He knew that in their absence, in those long hours and days of solitude and introspection, that Father had accepted this new loss, this new blow that fate had dealt him. His tears now were not for Devin, but for the incredible courage of this man, of the indomitable spirit and drive that could not defeat him, could not strike him down, no matter how hard the blows nor how great their number.

"His cancer is inoperable. He has refused any kind of radical treatment. Such treatment would only prolong the inevitable."

Catherine looked up slowly, her eyes meeting Jacob's directly. She found no accusation there, no malice - only the quiet acknowledgment that he had fought for what he felt was right, fought as he would fight to keep any of his patients alive, as he had sworn decades before. But she could see now in his glance at her his forgiveness of her, of Peter Alcott, of himself. She nodded to him, her glance tender.

"He has asked me to provide him with drugs which would bring a painless end to his life at a time of his own choosing."

Vincent looked up quickly, his face a mask of concern. He knew that those present would find it difficult to understand how and why the drugs had been obtained from Peter Alcott. He did not want to see Catherine and Peter dragged through such a confrontation. "Father...", he began, but Jacob raised a hand to silence him, his glance knowing, reassuring.

"This has been done."

No one else present at the table saw the look of relief that swept Vincent's face clean of worry. Nor did they see Catherine's tear-stained face crossed by a hint of a smile. None of them knew how much pain, how much conflict and resentment and anguish had gone into his being able to utter these four words so calmly, so authoritatively. He might be unable to save his son, but through his strength and his resolve to tell only as much of the truth as was required, he was able to save those he loved as much.

There was the beginnings of a murmur of protest from around the table, but Father put both hands up. When silence filled the chamber again, he looked to each of them in turn. "I want each of you to keep this knowledge to yourselves during these final weeks of Devin's life. You each may have things you might wish to say to him before... before the end. Please try to say them in such a manner that he not know that you are aware of his decision, or of mine. Please tell no one the reason for this meeting. If you are asked, say it was to discuss the new South Division tunnel. Do you all understand?"

Everyone nodded in turn, Father's glance passing over Vincent and Catherine.

"I want my son's final days in these tunnels to remain as normal as possible. I trust you all know what that means."

"Is there anything we can do for you, Father?" Mary asked.

He stood, hands on the table before him, his arms taut, his head lowered. "I think I'd better be left alone now. Please."

Mary stood up and came to his side, trying to take one of his hands in her own. Father resisted, his head averted, his voice firm but betraying control about to be lost

"Please!" he repeated.

Mary kissed his neck gently, her own tears breaking through as she hurried from the chamber. Pascal walked solemnly past, placing a comforting hand on Jacob's shoulder for a moment as he passed. William ambled out of the chamber quietly, his head low.

Catherine and Vincent stood together. As she walked by, Father extended a trembling hand towards her. She took it in hers, bringing it slowly up to her lips. She kissed him gently, allowing him to pull her into an embrace. He wavered in her embrace, but he did not break.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Vincent stood at his other side. He slowly bent down to Father, resting his massive jaw on Father's head, his arm encircling them both. Father drew Vincent closer, his arm encircling Vincent's waist. The three of them stood together for a long time, each lending strength to the other.

When Catherine and Vincent left the chamber some minutes later, they could hear the sobs break loose, all the pent-up emotion spilling forth at once, unchecked. The sounds filled the chamber and spilled into the tunnels around them. It sounded like the cry of a wounded animal.

In the moments when the flames flickered to near-death around him, Kanin lost sight of the small strip of burlap in the corner of his work chamber. Beneath the burlap was a three-foot square block of marble. Every day for two weeks Kanin had labored over the stone like a master diamond cutter - carefully chiseling the words Devin had given him, questioning neither their meaning nor his promise to keep the task secret.

Slowly, he walked to the corner and knelt down, lifting the marble slab to his work table. The muscles of his arms and shoulders rebelled at the exertion, the day's work at the South Crossover Project having taken its toll. The table legs bent under the weight of the stone, their outrage made perceptible by the creak of timber against binding.

He pulled a fine chisel and a hammer from his work belt, then slowly unfurled the paper Devin had given him to work from. It took only a few moments to find a new candle in the cabinet behind him, to bring it to life by touching it to the dying torch next to him, then placing it in a carved wooden basin. The chamber came to life with the gentle glow and the soft sounds of metal against cold stone.

"How's it coming?"

The sound of the voice jolted Kanin backwards, the hammer falling from his hands to the floor. He reached instinctively for the burlap shroud, but stopped when he recognized Devin in the shadows. He leaned back in the chair, exasperation tinging his voice.

"I'll be starting over if you scare me like this again!"

Devin walked to the front of the table, the stone gleaming in the candlelight between them. He tried to read the words from his side, tilting his head slightly.

"You should know what it says," Kanin joked. "You wrote it."

"No, I didn't. Someone a lot smarter than me wrote these words. I just borrowed them."

"You never told me what this is for."

Devin ran his fingers over the stone, feeling the roughness of the letters, the icy smoothness of the margins. His eyes seemed sad to Kanin, touched by some secret he could not share with his friend. "It's a memento."

"Of what?"

"Of time lost, Kanin," He looked up quickly. "You should know about that better than anyone else down here."

"I try not to think about it," Kanin said solemnly, taking his glasses off and setting them aside carefully. "It's over."

"I know," Devin said gently . Kanin did not know that his friend was speaking not of him, but of himself.

The days were growing shorter quickly now. The first snow of the season had fallen, a surprise dusting that melted quickly from the streets and sidewalks, but clung to the comers where building and pavement met, clung to the now-bare branches of the trees. Central Park was barren, the trees resembling the hands of skeletons, reaching skyward from beneath the frozen earth. There were more squirrels on this path than people, Catherine noted, their boisterous chatter following her as she made her way towards home.

The warm silence of her apartment had been unbearable. The freshly brewed cup of hot tea with lemon, the light-hearted strains of a Viennese waltz, the half-written letter to a friend lay hours behind her now - none of them able to break her restlessness. Hoping that the cold and wind of the park would refresh her, she had pulled on a heavy parka and headed for the seclusion of the near-empty trails. She needed the sensation of motion now, of moving towards a goal. All that remained was for her to determine what that goal would be, what to do with the weeks and months ahead.

She had received a card from Joe, an apologetic note folded inside a flower-covered card, sickly sweet verse adorning the front. She had glanced only briefly at the note, crumpling it the moment she recognized the handwriting. She was not interested in his justifications, nor in his empty words of duty and concern. All that remained was a deep sadness at losing a good friend and a suspicion that their paths would cross again. He may not unravel the mystery he had chosen to investigate, but she knew that soon she would remain his only object of scrutiny. Whatever her future, she thought, great care would have to be taken during her visits below. The park entrance, the entrance beneath her building would have to be avoided.

Her friends had offered little in the way of help, but she could not expect them to help when she could not be honest about the events in her life that were causing her pain. There had been cards and flowers, the required tokens of friendship and affection - the sender's concerns fading as quickly as the blooms and petals. 'It's not their fault...' she said to herself, over and over. 'I expect too much...' - a feeling that had slowly evolved to a string of words she could feel pressing against her skull with increasing pressure - 'I demand too much.' To maintain a professional life as a representative of justice while shielding Vincent and others below was beyond her ability now, beyond her ability to rationalize. She knew that none of Vincent's acts could morally be called murder. All had been committed as defense or to prevent harm to the Tunnel World. But her part in some of the acts committed in her name was not a matter for Tunnel World justice to decide, it was a matter for the legal system above. She had taken an oath to uphold that system, no matter what the cost. Now she found herself wracked by guilt as the self-protective barriers came down around her. She had destroyed most of her personal life above when she had accepted her love for Vincent. Now that same love was destroying her

professional life, tingling her closest friendships with suspicion and mistrust, driving her towards a final, irrevocable choice between the worlds above and below.

'Carl understood.' She heard herself saying, over and over. 'He knew what kind of dilemma I faced. Why can't I choose? What is it that's stopping me? Vincent and I love each other, we have Father's blessing. I love the people below as much as my friends above. I love the children. I have no family to hurt. There's so much to call me below. Why can't I leave this?' she thought, looking at the dull, lifeless grey that surrounded her. 'What is its hold on me?'

It wasn't Devin, she was sure of that. She had done all she could to help him, tried to find the words to convince Father and Vincent of his right to make his own choices in life. She had turned her anger inwards now, determined to discover why she was unable to apply her arguments to her own life - why she was able to think so clearly so long as her decisions were for others, not herself.

Each time she had looked in a mirror these past days, she had beheld a tired, tentative, uncertain reflection. Part of her apprehension was the uncertainty that had forced its way into her mind - a nameless, shapeless uncertainty about her own life that seemed to paralyze her, make any effort seem useless, senseless. In a matter of weeks, she had watched as a seemingly healthy young man had begun to deteriorate, had grown frail and helpless. She had watched her mother die like this many years before as cancer ripped through her like a summer forest fire. Her father had collapsed and died in a matter of days, a man who had always taken care of his health, of his family, of her. Now Devin was about to leave them. She had accepted that. Father had accepted it. She knew she must try to find the strength to help Vincent accept it. Yet, through all the acceptance, all the memory of loved ones snatched from her life too soon, she kept hearing her inner voice call out to her, almost as a warning - 'My God, he's two years younger than I am!' - and the apprehension would wash over her again. All thoughts of strength, of supporting others in their grief, fell away.

She knew that her final acceptance had come at the air vent many days before, that one moment when she and Devin had met and touched on that deepest level where words can never reach, where only those words that speak in eyes and touch are heard and understood. Vincent had not faced that moment. She knew it would be difficult for him - far more difficult than it had been for her. They had grown up together, all the memories and experiences of childhood a binding force she knew it would be difficult to overcome. Devin had been Vincent's closest friend for many years, had offered him the dream of a life spent exploring a world Devin knew full well Vincent would never see. Even when Devin had fled the tunnels for the light and liberty he craved, Vincent had not harbored any ill will. He had understood, perhaps long before Devin had actually left, that their youthful thoughts of odyssey and adventure would remain just that - dreams as bright yet as insubstantial as sunlight. Now, just when it had appeared that Devin might return to their world, to their lives, the final cruelty had been inflicted. Vincent had used his words to try to convince Devin to fight, but this was a battle she knew Vincent had never witnessed. His arguments had been heartfelt, his reasons altruistic, but his words did not, could not reflect any truth he could know. No matter how great his love-his desire to see someone he loved fight - there was simply no way his words could ever reach Devin. She knew that Vincent now had to face the fact that while Devin was renouncing his battle for life, he had already lost his battle of words.

The path was empty now, even the squirrels having abandoned their unfulfilled demands for food. There were no birds in the trees near her, not even a pigeon. No dogs pulling their owners along on strained leashes. No cats stalking their small, furry prey. It was as if life had ceased all around her, leaving her at the center of a vast, dingy landscape. She found a small mound of dry earth covered with withered grass and brown reeds. She eased herself to the ground, facing her building - just visible through the branches. She gazed up at her balcony, struck by how low to the ground it seemed, how naked and vulnerable. She found herself looking around her guiltily, suddenly aware that she could no longer assume she was not being followed. She longed for spring, for thick green shrouds that would camouflage more than the branches that supported them.

A solitary squirrel dared to approach her from behind a tree to her right. Tentatively, he approached, his jaws working furiously, his chirp filling the air. Slowly, she dug into her parka pockets. Deep in one of them was a fragment of a salted pretzel eaten long ago, this tiny fragment hard and white. She threw it towards her visitor, the crumb landing a few feet from her quarry. Warily, the intruder approached the crumb, sniffing it on all sides and keeping a constant vigil on all sides for potential pirate squirrels. Finally, satisfied that he was safe and driven by hunger, he drew the crumb into his mouth and scampered quickly into the branches. Catherine smiled slowly, pleased to find that she was not the only creature driven by suspicion and hunger, but as far as she could see, there was no one to throw her a crumb of solace in her hour of need.

Vincent sat beside Devin's bed, his gaze falling on the face of his sleeping friend. The black hair was shiny even in the dim glow of the candle, thrown back off his forehead and cascading over his ears and onto the pillow. His complexion was paler now, his body marshalling its defenses against an invader not to be repelled, drawing blood from his face and arms. His mouth was relaxed, the lips parted slightly, the sound of his lungs working to keep up with his need for fresh air faintly audible. Vincent gently lowered the comforter, exposing his neck and upper chest - the black hairs matted from perspiration. The muscles of his chest and upper arms still stood out, firm and healthy. The handsome face, the rugged build - this was the kind of man Vincent pictured with Catherine. His eyes avoided the left cheek, the scars a sight he still found difficult to look at.

Slowly, Devin opened his eyes. He made a movement to rise, but Vincent's hand reached out and pressed against his chest - forcing him back into bed. He dipped a cloth into the basin of water on the nightstand and wiped Devin's forehead and chest. He did not resist.

"How long have you been here?"

"Not long. How do you feel?"

"Tired. Very tired." He looked at Vincent closely, without speaking, for a long time. "Tell me something."

"Anything."

"You love Catherine?"

Vincent's nod was solemn, slow, his eyes never leaving Devin's.

"She loves you too. It's a wonder to see the way she looks at you sometimes. It reminds me of the way I would look at Alicia. She was so beautiful..." His voice faded to silence, his eyes faraway and focused on a vision of his mind's creation.

Vincent moved closer, his face level with Devin's, his eyes clear, bright, searching. "Concentrate on her face, Devin. It may help..."

"Never mind me, buddy. You've got to think about Catherine. She's on her own now. She's going to need you more than she ever has before. You've got to be strong... for her." Vincent tried to look away, but Devin reached out and put his hand against his friend's cheek, forcibly turning his head to face him again. "For me, too."

"I'll do all I can to help her. You know that."

Devin could sense the effort Vincent was making to avoid looking at the three jagged tears down his left cheek. He looked deeply into Vincent's eyes. Firmly, he moved Vincent's fingers to rest against the three scars, his own fingers keeping both their hands in place. His voice was gentle but firm. "Don't be afraid to need her, Vincent."

"Devin..."

"Need her, Vincent. You can't be what you need to be to her if you hold back." He moved Vincent's fingers along the scars, certain that he could feel them beneath his tensed muscles. "You can't hide behind these anymore."

He allowed Vincent to pull his hand away, the quickness of the motion betraying the fear he could sense. Vincent sat with his hands together, his head down. "I'm afraid, Devin."

"I know you are. You always have been."

Vincent looked up, his sharp features accentuated by the single candle, his eyes glinting in the dark shadows that crossed his brow, his mouth held tightly shut.

"This was never your fault, big brother. In a way, I think I wanted you to do this to me. I knew you didn't squeal on me that day."

"Then why..."

"Because you were always so perfect. Father always doting on you, making exceptions for you. And me always the bad guy, no matter what bad thing happened, I got blamed for it. I think I just got tired of always taking Father's punishments and watching you reaping his rewards and his praise."

"I'm not perfect, Devin... I never pretended..."

"I know that now. Don't you see? It wasn't you who did this to me, Vincent. I did this, using you as the tool. I needed to do something to get Father's sympathy, some recognition from him that wasn't punishment. Your hitting me was the only time I can remember when he treated me..."

"Like a son?"

Devin nodded. "I wish he had told me that night, while he was tending my wounds, while he held me in his arms and comforted me. It could have changed so much, Vincent. So much..."

"Would you still have left?"

"Yeah... but maybe I would have come back more often. Maybe I wouldn't have done what I did to Joe... and Cathy. Maybe we could have spent more time together, like we always said we would."

Vincent's eyes were filled with tears now, his right cheek wet with their passage. He dared not look up.

Devin put his other hand on Vincent's face and held his head between them, forcing him to look at him. Vincent took Devin's wrists in his own hands, but he did not try to break away. Slowly, Devin drew Vincent towards him. He held his lips against Vincent's forehead gently, Vincent's head inclined in the darkness, tears welling uncontrollably now. Devin could feel his own emotions come apart, fray at the sound of his friend's sorrow. He pulled Vincent close, their embrace strong, passionate, two souls trying to make up for the shared emptiness of years apart, alone.

The note from below had been slipped beneath her front door, a sure sign that one of the children had brought it. It had merely asked her to come to Devin's chamber immediately, nothing more. She had pulled on a pair of tattered jeans and an old turtleneck sweater, battered sneakers, and an old woolen topcoat. She hurried to the basement entrance to the tunnels, making certain she wasn't being watched or followed – the urgency in the tone of the note forcing her to act with little regard for caution. She scampered down the iron ladder and ran quickly through the maze of tunnels she knew by heart. As she neared Devin's chamber, she could hear voices. She feared the worst, running faster and nearly catapulting herself into the chamber.

What she saw there was the last thing in the world she expected to see.

There were balloons everywhere, strung in gay strands of red and yellow and white. Candles were blazing everywhere, but most were clustered on the top of a triple-decker cake that sat on the table in the middle of the room, surrounded by packages adorned with crudely tied bows.

Children were everywhere, sitting on Devin's bed with him, on his wooden steamer chest, on his desk, on the floor. It looked like a daily lesson. Father sat at the desk chair, Mary on a footstool next to the bed. Vincent stood near the doorway, smiling as he noted her look of amazement and awe.

"Happy Birthday!" the children chorused, some a little late, some overeager. The message got through, however. They squealed with delight at the look on Catherine's face.

"How did you..."

"Ask Devin," Vincent said.

She laughed, for the first time in days. "Who did you pay off?" she asked happily.

"Never leave your purse behind when you walk on the beach, my dear. It's so easy to sneak a peek at one's license."

"Why you little sneak." she said in mock anger. She walked over to the bed and knelt down, throwing her arms around him warmly. "If it were anyone else, I'd be angry."

"I know."

She stood up, looking at the inferno raging on top of the cake. She tried to count the candles, but the glare was too bright - the candles the same color as the icing.

"I didn't tell them that," came Devin's voice from behind her, mocking in its insolence and its gaiety. We only had one box of candles left, so don't worry. Only you and I know."

She fixed him with a phony glare. "And it will stay that way, won't it?"

"Open your presents," Linda pleaded, trying to nudge her towards the table. "We can't have the cake until you do."

She felt herself being pulled towards the table, a helpless glance at Vincent met with a smile and a nod. She blew out the candles quickly, then opened the gifts carefully. The children had made a leather book cover with bookmark attached. Mary had knitted her a beautiful shawl out of scraps of wool. Father had given a first edition Dickens, one of his more obscure works - but the leather binding in near mint

condition.

She reached for Vincent's gift last. She opened it slowly, looking up at him several times, trying to guess what the parchment paper and leather drawstring contained. She pulled the wrappings aside to reveal a small carved wooden box. The hinges gleamed invitingly, a tiny key protruding from a small brass lock on the front. She set the box on the table and turned the key gently, lifting the lid when the spring gave way.

Inside the box was a string of sea shells polished to iridescent white, held together by a fragile strand of gold. The tiny white shells shone nearly as brightly as the metal. Vincent stepped forward, lifted the necklace from its box, and clasped it around Catherine's neck. The shells fell randomly around the base of her neck, the gold filaments holding them together almost invisible against her skin.

She touched the necklace with her fingers, her eyes meeting Vincent's for a moment longer than was necessary. "Thank you," she repeated for the fourth time, but there was a special emphasis in the words now, a special warmth that touch everyone in the room. Vincent lowered his head in acknowledgment.

"What about your gift?" Vincent asked Devin.

"Later. I want to give her my gift when we're alone."

"Can we have cake now?" one of the children asked, setting off the others.

"Yes," Catherine said quickly, pulling the stubs of the candles quickly from the crown and slicing the treat into slices, one for everyone present. Mary poured the punch and helped Catherine pass the cake around to everyone. All was joy at this moment, all was innocence. Only the children believed there would be another celebration like this.

The children had been ordered to bed hours ago, their mouths trimmed with white frosting and their heads filled with Devin's stories. He had even told them of the trip to Promised Land, Catherine noting that Father's expression had gone from shock to anger and finally to understanding and acceptance while Devin recounted his tales of Old Carl and his childhood excursion to what his young listeners must have felt was the edge of the world. They had all screamed to Vincent to tell them what he had seen, but he had silenced them with a promise to spend one lesson day answering their questions.

"I'm sure we'll all have questions for him," Father had said, looking at Vincent with anger tinged with exasperation. Vincent had only smiled in return.

Now they were alone, to talk and feel freely.

"Can I get you anything?" Mary asked, concern breaking through her every effort not to sound like a nurse.

"Nothing. I'm fine," Devin replied.

"Well then, I think I'll make sure the children are all in bed." She moved slowly to the chamber door, pausing only to kiss Catherine again and wish her a happy day. At the door, she turned. "Goodnight, everyone."

"Wait a moment, Mary. I'll walk with you," Father said suddenly. He kissed Catherine gently on the

cheek, then turned and did the same to Devin. Devin returned the kiss, then reached out and hugged Father tightly for several seconds, his arms clutching the old man as if he would never let go. Jacob returned the embrace warmly, his arms enfolding Devin like the wing of a bird, trying to protect, in spite of the distance years and miles had put between them.

"I love you, son" Father said in a whisper. It was the first time he had ever spoken this sentence.

Devin could only hug Father tighter, his arms saying what his voice could not summon. He kissed Jacob's neck affectionately, unobtrusively - so that none of the others could see.

At the door, Father turned and bid them a good night.

"Good..," Devin began, but stopped abruptly. He looked down. "Goodnight," he said softly, his voice low.

Mary and Father both understood what had not been said. It took every shred of strength he could muster for Father to take Mary's arm, turn and walk slowly out of the chamber. The sound of their footsteps faded slowly, leaving the three of them alone. Vincent could tell that something was wrong.

"Are you in pain?" he asked.

Devin nodded slowly his eyes half-closed. "It wasn't so bad earlier, but it's getting worse now."

"Is there anything we can do for you?"

"Find Jamie. Bring her here."

Vincent got up silently and left without a word. Catherine watched as Devin tried to pull himself up into a sitting position. His movements were slow, tortured, but when she made a move to help him he shook his head fiercely. She sat on the footstool next to the bed.

"Jamie?"

He nodded, fighting the discomfort as best he could. "We found some common ground. I've been sowing the seeds of rebellion in her."

Catherine laughed. "I think those seeds have been a part of her for a long time."

"Well, let's say I've been helping them along."

"She's so much like you. It's no wonder you and she had trouble getting along."

"She's determined to see the world. How could I not want to help her." He looked over her shoulder, lifting his head slightly. "Would you bring me my scrapbook. It's in the desk."

She turned and pulled the drawer open. She pulled the heavy, tattered book from the darkness and handed it to him carefully.

"I still owe you a gift, Cathy. It's in there. The last two pages are for you. I ask only one thing of you. Please don't read them until after I'm gone."

She inclined her head solemnly, her voice gentle. "I promise." She thought for a few moments. "What about Vincent?"

"Afterwards, you can share it with him if you wish. I did the book for him." A wave of coughing overtook him, wracking his body unmercifully. It took all his strength of will to fight off the attack, the sweat pouring off his face and hair now. He fell back against the pillows, drawn and pale - finally, he opened his eyes and looked at her. "I'm sorry about you and Joe."

She shook her head sternly. "It wasn't your fault, Devin. I should never have allowed the two of you to meet. Joe never leaves his job at the office."

"Still, if I hadn't..."

"Forget it. It was time to move on. You were just the catalyst."

He coughed once, involuntarily. "I seem to have that effect on people," he said sheepishly. They laughed together.

Jamie rushed into the chamber, breathless. She stopped at the foot of the bed, pulling her tattered vest off slowly. She looked down at Devin sadly, but her sadness was tinged with acceptance - as if she had seen this moment many times, as if she had been waiting for it. "It's time?" she asked, her words more a statement than a question.

"It's time," he said softly, looking not at her, but at Catherine.

Catherine put an arm around Devin and drew him slowly to her. He tried to raise his own arms, but it was too much. Gently, she caressed the back of his head, his head falling onto her shoulder. "What about Vincent?" she whispered softly.

"He knows," he answered. "We've already said what needs to be said. He needs time now, but he needs you, too, Cathy." He pulled back, his face close to hers, their eyes locked. "You'll know when to be there. You always did."

She leaned forward and kissed Devin softly on the lips, a final seal on their friendship, a final act of kindness. Without a word, she gathered the scrapbook in her arms-nodded to Jamie-then walked slowly out of the chamber.

She did not cry. She did not look back.

Jamie handed Devin the second bottle, having counted off the minutes since he had downed the contents of the first. She poured him some fresh cool water from the pitcher on the nightstand and put the glass on the table beside the bed. Her movements were mechanical, as if her mind were no longer attached to her body and her limbs were merely tools of Devin's wishes. To the extent that she could manage it, this was exactly how she wished to feel at this moment. Devin had told her of his decision. She had accepted it reluctantly, feeling as Vincent did that it was always better to fight. She had been shocked when Devin had asked her to be with him at the end, arguing that Vincent or Father should be beside him at such a moment, but he was determined that she share his final minutes. He offered no word of explanation to her and she could hazard no guess as to his reasons.

"Did I tell you about Alicia?" he asked suddenly.

"Yeah," Jamie answered.

"You look a lot like her. A few more years, sometime in the sun, who knows?"

He pulled the cap off the bottle and dumped the pills into his palm. There were quite a few capsules, the red and white plastic tabs reminded him of Christmas candies. He dumped the pills onto the comforter and took the glass of water from the table. Jamie watched as he took the pills in groups of four and five, washing them down quickly - grabbing another handful, until they were gone. It had taken less than 30 seconds.

He handed the glass back to Jamie and lay back against the pillows, lowering his head into the soft, cool folds. Jamie came to the side of the bed, sitting next to him. He looked at her gratefully, his voice clear and strong now. "Thanks, Jamie. For this."

She smiled, a nod her only answer.

"You know, those times when I thought of settling down, of raising a family, I always thought of having a little girl. Alicia and I even discussed having a child together."

"I would have thought you would want a boy. Someone to follow in your footsteps."

He laughed a little, his smile broad. "I never wanted anyone to follow in my footsteps. I don't believe in footsteps, Jamie. They're to be made, not walked in. And for people like you - and me - they're best made alone."

He was looking at her strangely now. His tone seemed to say that she should take note of his words now, that they were important in some way she could not define, could not guess.

"I left everyone behind, Jamie. Vincent, Father, Mary - everyone. I didn't feel a moment of regret for anything I did with my life. Father chose to keep me away, apart from him. I understand why he did what he did, but I never really forgave him. Vincent came the closest to keeping me here. He and I were so much alike - are so much alike. And I left him, too. Without a word. For twenty years, Jamie, I searched for a place to call home, a place where I could walk, read, think - live - and answer to no one. I didn't want to be responsible for anyone else's happiness, anyone else's dreams. I looked for a place where I could keep from feeling, from wanting. I never found it."

"Is that why you came back?"

"The first time, yeah. I wanted to see if I had left what I was looking for behind me. I needed to know for sure if I had really escaped this place."

"Did you?"

"No. That's why I left again. I still hadn't found that special place I had dreamed about as a child. Even when I came back a second time, I still knew deep inside that the tunnels would always be a refuge for me, a place to escape. But they were never the goal, never that elusive place other people call 'home'."

"And now?"

He sighed, closing his eyes. "Now I'll find it. That stretch of beach I've always longed for, safe from intruders. No pain, no loss - just a tranquil beach to walk and a fortress to keep the world out." He opened his eyes suddenly and looked at her. "The only thing is, a fortress keeps what's inside prisoner. I never found a way out. Vincent thinks he's the prisoner. He's wrong. He has something I never found, something I could never find."

He closed his eyes again, unable to keep them open, his strength draining away slowly. The first ripples of warmth flushed through his limbs, a sign that the drugs were taking effect.

"These tunnels are your home, Jamie. Don't leave them because of that. If you leave, make sure you leave in spite of that. Make sure you know what you're looking for above before you leave this place. There's so much to see and do up there, so many different lives you can lead, so many places you can go. But go there, Jamie, don't run there. You won't find anything up there that isn't all around you down here."

She took his hand and pressed it in hers gently. "I won't. I promise."

She could feel the coldness of his skin, the clamminess. He was soaked with perspiration, his complexion drained.

"Talk to me, Devin. Tell me what you feel."

He opened his eyes weakly, as far as he could manage. "It's like an ocean all around. I can feel myself rising, sinking, rising again - except it's like the water is all around me. There's grey light all around, like twilight. It's peaceful."

"Can you hear me?"

"Jamie?" he called faintly. "I thought I heard your voice, but I can't see you." His eyes were blank now, focused on a vision of their own. "It's brighter now, bright as the sun. It seems so warm now."

"Devin!" Jamie said sharply.

"It's so bright... so bright... so warm. I want to be a part of it, Jamie. Inside it..." His voice was fading now, the words coming in short bursts, his eyes fixed ahead of him.

Jamie bent over and looked deeply into his eyes, but no recognition found her. Only a single final word found its way past his lips.

"Home..."

A lone candle flickered in Vincent's chamber, its feeble light throwing ever-changing wisps of shadow across the jagged walls, across the blankets of an unmade bed.

Rainbows of light danced on the ceiling, thrown upwards off the stained glass window over the bed, its multitude of hues dark now, the different shades bleeding together into a puddle of textured color. Vincent sat next to his statue of justice, his back against the cool stone, his eyes as muted as the shadows that enveloped him.

Faintly visible in the darkness, propped against the side of his bed, was a slab of marble covered with burlap, a scrap of paper pinned to the front. The paper bore only his name in large letters and the initials D.W. below, in smaller print. The handwriting was Devin's.

He knew what this was, where it was meant to rest. Yet some force held him back, kept him from lifting the cover and reading the inscription he knew lay hidden beneath. It was almost as though if he were never to read the words, they would not become real to him, as if death could be held at bay by refusing to acknowledge its legacy. The longer he stared at the stone, the more uneasy he became.

'I must face it,' he thought to himself.

Slowly, he walked to the stone, knelt and pulled the burlap away from the stone's face. He brought the candle down to the stone, its light playing off the freshly-carved letters. Vincent read the inscription slowly, pausing after each sentence. As he read, he could feel the weight of his fear lessen, the accumulated anger and desperation fall away. He continued to stare at the words for a long time, his eyes fighting back the emotions washing over him like waves on a beach.

Gently, he pulled the burlap back over the face of the marble. He sat on the floor now, facing the stone, its words hidden from sight now but burning their way into his mind, their healing cadence soothing and serene.

An errant gust of wind extinguished the candle, plunging the chamber into total darkness. Vincent did not move, did not react.

The thick, battered book looked strangely out of place amidst the cut crystal and polished marble of her coffee table. It had lain there all night, unopened and unread. She had not wanted to read the final pages until her emotions had quieted, her grief receded to a level where she could face the words.

She reached for the book, careful not to let the full weight of the pages pull against the solitary binding cord. She opened the book from the back and moved to the next-to-last page. There, framed at the top of the page was one of the photos he had taken at the beach, a shot of she and Vincent huddled together in a blanket. He had written beneath the photo, the lettering ragged but easily read:

These are the only two people I could truly call friends, could ever say I loved beyond the moment, beyond the confines of proximity and time. From them I was granted more affection than I had earned, more devotion than I had granted, more love than I could ever hope to return. To them I gave what I could find within me that was true and honest, whatever my capricious nature would allow in those brief moments when our lives touched. Because of them, my final days were as they should have been, neither filled with pain and suffering nor empty with loneliness and despair.

They did not demand more of me than I could fairly give, nor give to me more than I dared accept, ingratitude untouched by guilt or obligation.

She could feel her throat tighten, but she did not break - did not give in to despair. She knew Devin would not want her to feel these things now.

She turned the page slowly. On the final page was a photograph of him from their trip, sitting alone in the firelight, his smile broad and bright against a background of sky and surf. Beneath it were the dates he left the tunnels as a child and the current month and year. The day was missing in the second date. Catherine took a pen from a cup on her desk and silently wrote the date in the blank space he had left. She closed the book slowly and walked to the balcony door.

A light snow was falling over the city, the flakes massing on her balcony floor and wall. The line of the city was cut by the clouds, the shafts of the buildings vanishing into the grey mists - their outlines dim now through the haze of white. Most of the cars had turned on their lights, the bright circles of light surrounded by rainbows of color as the ice particles in the air caught their rays and scattered them. There were lights in the buildings too, but they were overpowered by the growing storm, their feeble

glow vanishing as the storm grew heavier. Already, buildings were vanishing from sight that had been visible moments before.

Catherine pressed her forehead against the pane, the shock of cold passing quickly through her, barely noticed. She stayed there for a long time, the grey fading slowly as the storm rose and night overtook the city. She did not move to turn on the lights in the apartment, did not feel any desire to move or think or see. She pressed her fingers against the panes of glass, the cold less obtrusive, less sharp.

She surrendered now. Her tears washed down her cheeks, falling now as quickly as the snow outside, and as silently.

He had felt the sadness envelop him; the familiar call had sent him out of the darkness of his chamber, out of the tunnels, to the Main Junction. He had stood now for hours, waiting, the bond unbroken, the pain unrelieved.

She had not come to him.

He walked to the end of the tunnel slowly. Outside, he could see the beginnings of the storm, the snow falling faster with each passing minute. Through the haze of white he could see her building, her balcony. He knew that she was there now, overcome by the same pain as he. He stood for some moments more, drawn to her by his love, by his wish to alleviate her pain - yet he knew that he could do nothing for her now; he had no words to help her face these hours and these days. This pain was too intimate to share, too personal to respond to empathy, to words, to touch.

He could feel her pain increase now as he gazed upwards, the windows of her building becoming light gray splotches through the deepening veil of white, then fading away completely. Soon, only the nearby trees were visible in the growing storm.

[End Part One]