

The Fugitive

by Joyce Murray

(from DREAMS IN AMETHYST)

Catherine drank the last of her coffee and picked up the newspaper. The headline leapt at her from the page emphasizing her failure. Catherine ran her finger through her hair and sighed. She looked at the newspaper again.

RAPE VICTIM LOSES BATTLE FOR LIFE

The failure to apprehend this man was particularly irritating to everyone at the DA's office. Catherine picked up another piece of toast, spread it and took a bite. Just then the phone rang. Swallowing the toast, she picked up the phone. It was Joe.

"Radcliffe, it's me. Are you coming in today?"

"Joe, it's seven o'clock in the morning."

"I know. I know. It's just we've got a name on the rape case. We're going in this morning."

Catherine breathed deeply. "Thank God, Joe. I'll be about an hour."

Catherine put down the phone, her mood lighter with the news. Within fifteen minutes she'd left for the office.

EIGHT AM IN CENTRAL PARK

Mitch Denton sat on a bench nervously looking around him. February was a bleak month, and he always felt nervous when he was in the park. He pulled up the collar of his overcoat, both to keep warm and to try to conceal his identity. He looked at his watch for the third time in as many minutes. Suddenly, a voice from behind him disturbed his quiet.

"I didn't keep you waiting, Denton, did I?"

Mitch Denton turned and came face to face with Paul Aaron. He was still as tall and good-looking as ever, his face concealing the man he really was. He walked around the side of the bench and sat beside Mitch. Mitch threw the newspaper at Paul.

"I read about your latest handiwork. What do you want?"

Paul smiled at the headline. "She fought too much. Anyway, I need a favour and you owe me one, remember?"

Mitch took a deep breath. "I remember."

Paul stood up and turned to look towards Fifth Avenue. "Good, good. I've got to disappear for a while. I need some money and a route out of New York. The cops are onto me. I don't know how much longer I can stay ahead of them."

Mitch thought of his last meeting with Vincent, maybe there would be a way to redress the balance. "Maybe I know a place no one will ever find you without ever leaving New York. We'd have to play it

real clever." Mitch got up and walked over to where Paul Aaron stood. "There's this place I know of..."

Mitch took ten minutes to tell Paul Aaron of the tunnel world and Vincent.

"... And that's about the whole story."

Paul looked at Mitch suspiciously. "And you could get me into this place."

Mitch laughed loudly. "Good God no. Vincent and I didn't see eye to eye. I shot his woman." He beckoned to Paul to follow him.

Later, at the drainage tunnel, both men stood looking in.

"Meet me here at nine o'clock tonight. Then you and me, we're quits."

Lunch didn't happen at the DA's office that day. Joe was testy to say the least.

"I just don't believe it, we must have just lost him. The coffee in the cup was still warm. He's always one step ahead as if he knew we were coming." Joe picked up the file, opened it and slammed it down on his desk. **"Look at it, Radcliffe.** We've got a name and a description. With all the cops there are in Manhattan, he just keeps one step ahead."

Catherine looked intently at Joe. "It was bad luck, Joe. At least we've got the name - Paul Aaron. He will make a mistake sometime, and when he does, we'll be there."

Joe looked at her unconvinced. "Yeah, sure. And it'll be 80 degrees tomorrow."

Catherine left Joe's office and returned to her desk. There was a stack of files to go over. At least these criminals were safely behind bars. Six files later Joe left his office and stopped at Catherine's desk.

"Hey kiddo, it's 8:30. You not got a home to go to?"

Catherine looked at her watch unbelievably. "So it is. I'm gone, now." She had already made up her mind to go home via the park and Vincent.

Vincent and Father sat locked over a game of chess. Father's growing excitement at the prospect of beating Vincent had just reached fever pitch as he took Vincent's bishop. He held it proudly in his hand grinning at him. Vincent looked at him and smiled gently.

"Are you sure that's the move you want to make?"

Father scanned the board earnestly. "Yes, yes, of course."

Vincent smiled again and moved his Queen. "In that case, I claim checkmate." He sat back on his chair as Father looked disbelieving first at the chessboard and then at his son.

"Have you no compassion? I am an old man, could you not humour me?"

Vincent laughed. "By allowing you to win, what kind of victory would that be?"

Father started to laugh too. "The only one I will ever get when I play you."

They were interrupted by Kipper. The boy entered the chamber and walked straight over to Vincent. "There was a message from Catherine. Meet her at the Park entrance at nine-thirty."

Vincent thanked Kipper and picked up his cloak. "I'd better go. I will be back later."

Paul Aaron was at the drainage tunnel at exactly nine o'clock. Mitch Denton came a few minutes later and looked at Paul. His dark hair was dyed fair, and contact lenses had changed his blue eyes into dark brown. He grinned at Mitch.

"Well?" he said.

"Your own *mother* wouldn't know you. Now, are you *sure* you want to go through with this?"

Paul Aaron took a deep breath. "Just don't kill me. Okay?"

Denton beckoned Paul over to the bushes when he heard footsteps. He turned. "The Chandler woman. This is better than I hoped for. Come on."

Vincent was surprised not to find Catherine waiting for him at the tunnel entrance. He knew she was near and had assumed that she was waiting. Suddenly he heard her footsteps coming along the drainage tunnel.

"Vincent, what a nice surprise." She grinned at him and then threw her arms around his neck.

Vincent looked at Catherine, perplexed. "But Catherine, you sent a message to meet me here."

Catherine stepped back and looked surprised. "I didn't send any message. It wasn't me."

Vincent opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by footsteps from outside. Instinctively, he pulled up his hood and made his way to the entrance. Suddenly a voice said; "Denton, I've got you covered. Come quietly."

Vincent looked out and saw Mitch Denton with his back to him and a blond man with a gun pointed at Denton. Mitch Denton also held a gun and began to lower it. The blond man followed suit. Suddenly, at breakneck speed, Denton raised his hand and fired. The man clutched his shoulder and fell, hitting his head on a stone, rendering him unconscious. Mitch ran towards the open space of the park and hid behind a tree. Catherine had joined Vincent and both ran towards Paul Aaron. She looked at Vincent.

"We've got to help. Can we take him to Father?"

Suddenly voices came from somewhere back in the park. They were loud and young, and obviously a gang. Vincent looked out into the park and then at Catherine.

"Yes." He picked up the man and entered the tunnel. Just inside he paused and turned, looking out towards the park. A feeling of despair filled him. He paused for a moment.

Catherine tugged at his arm. "Vincent, we've got to hurry. He's hurt."

Vincent turned and began the journey Below. Outside in the park, Mitch Denton moved out from his hiding place. Quietly he murmured, "That's you and me quits, Aaron."

Father was less than pleased with Vincent and Catherine's find in the park. Reluctantly, he had put the man in the hospital chamber and removed the bullet. Three days later the patient was still in the hospital chamber recovering. Out of a sense of guilt, Catherine had sat with the man after Father had finished with him on the first night. Vincent had gone below them to avoid contact with the patient and so that he would not endanger himself and the tunnel world. On the fourth morning, the patient was sitting up in bed enjoying breakfast when Father entered.

"Now then, Paul, how are you?"

Paul grimaced. "I'm not too bad. Thanks for everything. I must have been asleep forever."

Father sat on the bed. "You've been asleep for most of the past three days. All you've told us is your first name." Father paused. "And asked questions about this place."

Paul grinned. "I'm Paul Brown. I'm with the police department. You saved me from a nasty felon. I should have known better than to go for Mitch Denton without backup. I need to thank you all, especially Vincent."

Father froze at the mention of his son's name. "What do you mean, Vincent?"

"The woman, ah, Catherine. I couldn't sleep much on the first night and she told me about Vincent saving me and all about her and him. He sure sounds like some guy. I can't wait to meet him. Don't bother me about his, ah, appearance." Paul lay back in bed and smiled, wincing with pain.

Father stood up and excused himself. Paul sat up again. That should ensure his stay at least for a while. He picked up a glass of water that was sitting by the bed and took a mouthful. Now he would maybe get a look at this man-beast.

Father found Vincent in the Chamber of the Falls. His anger clearly evident in his face. Vincent turned towards him.

"Something is wrong?"

Father sat on a rock opposite Vincent. ***"It seems Catherine told the man you found all about you."***

Vincent shook his head. "No."

"Then how has he just given me a description of you? Good God, Vincent, how could she? It is our strictest rule. Her carelessness has endangered our whole world. how could have been so stupid?"

Vincent stood up, fury rising in him. ***"Catherine would not have betrayed me. This man lies."***

Father got up and walked a little way off. ***"Only three people have been alone with Paul. Mary, myself and Catherine. Neither Mary or I spoke of you. That leaves Catherine. And we have Paul's statement that Catherine told him."***

Vincent took a deep breath. ***"This man lies,"*** With these words, he began to leave, paused and turned to Father. "I will speak to Catherine." Leaving no time for Father to respond, he left.

Catherine stretched and eased a twinge in her neck. Joe stuck his head around his door. He signalled for Catherine to come to his office. Closing the door behind her he spoke in a low voice as if he was afraid anyone might hear.

"We've got a lead on the rapist. Chicago has picked up a guy with the same M.O. Can you go talk to him? He says he'll talk to you."

Catherine looked relieved. "Sure, Joe. When do I leave?"

He looked anxiously at the clock. "You're on the seven-thirty flight." He smiled at Catherine, hoping this might help.

"God, Joe. It's three o'clock now!"

"I know, I know. Look, this file gives you all the info you require. Go home. Chuck a few things in a bag and get going."

Catherine sighed deeply, emphasizing her displeasure. "This is going to cost you, Joe. You owe me one."

Leaving his office and returning to her desk, Catherine was more than a little irritated. Damn, she thought, not even time to speak to Vincent. Quickly, she grabbed a piece of paper and scribbled a quick note. This would have to do until she got back.

Catherine walked purposefully out of the office, relieved to see a familiar saxophone player a little way down the street. Looking straight into his eyes she smiled at him and dropped the note wrapped in a ten dollar bill into his container on the ground. Then she hailed a taxi and left for her apartment.

It had been a rush, but Catherine had made the flight and much to her relief arrived at O'Hare Airport safe and sound. It was raining when she arrived.

Next morning Catherine made for the police department. By the end of the day she hoped to have this case wrapped up.

Catherine had been waiting for a few minutes when Detective Sargeant Miller came blustering out of his office.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Miss ah..."

"Chandler." Catherine answered for him, standing up to shake hands. "If I could get on with this, I've got to get back as soon as possible."

"Sure thing. I've got a heavy caseload myself. Let's go."

On their way to the detention centre Catherine and Detective Miller went over the cases. They seemed identical and Catherine's optimism grew as the journey progressed. The rain was beating hard against the window when Catherine entered the room to talk with the suspect. He was standing at the window looking out at the rain. Catherine sat at the small desk that was the room's only furniture.

"Now, then," began Catherine. "If we could begin, Mr. ah..."

The man turned and grinned. "Denton. Mitch Denton."

Catherine looked at him, rage consuming her. ***"What's the meaning of this, Denton? I came here to talk to a William Cooper."***

"I know, but now you can talk to me. Here, with no Vincent to interrupt us."

Catherine was beginning to lose her patience. ***"I'm on an important case. How dare you drag me here on a wild goose chase!"***

Denton looked at the file Catherine had opened in front of her. Before she could stop him, he had snatched a photofit of the man Catherine wanted.

"I don't know this guy at all," he leered. "But maybe if he had lighter hair, maybe brown eyes, I reckon I might know where he is."

Catherine picked up the photofit. After a second or two it dawned on her. She glared at Denton. "This guy... he's in the tunnels. What kind of a....?" Catherine didn't finish the sentence, but grabbed her things and dashed out of the room. Detective Miller was waiting outside.

"Well?" he asked.

"It's not him," Catherine said curtly. "I've got to get back to New York, fast."

In her hotel room the radio played quietly in the background as Catherine threw her things back into her bag. Suddenly the music stopped and an announcer began to speak.

WE MUST INTERRUPT THIS BROADCAST TO GIVE A WEATHER WARNING. DUE TO SUDDEN FOG, ALL FLIGHTS FROM O'HARE AIRPORT HAVE BEEN SUSPENDED. ANYONE FLYING TODAY, PLEASE CHECK WITH YOUR AIRLINE BEFORE LEAVING HOME. The announcer continued with weather information, his voice fading as Catherine desperately tried to think what to do.

Emptying her bag, she searched desperately for her address book. It wasn't there. In frustration, she threw the empty bag down on the floor then picked up the phone. At least she could remember Peter Alcott's number. The phone rang three times then the familiar voice of Peter began.

"This is Peter Alcott. I'm sorry I can't get to the phone right....."

Catherine slammed down the phone, then picked it up again remembering Peter's office number. "Hello," Catherine began to the receptionist. "Can I speak to Dr. Alcott?"

Catherine replaced the phone, defeated. How could she have forgotten. Peter was in New Mexico at a medical conference. Somehow she had to warn Vincent. She concentrated hard, hoping he would pick up her warning through their bond. Eventually, exhausted, she fell back on the bed and closed her eyes. All she could do was wait for the weather to lift.

Deciding to leave for the airport anyway, she packed up her things. At least if she was at the airport, she could get on the first flight.

Vincent had received Catherine's note with dismay. He had hoped to talk to her that night. Next morning while taking class he twice stopped. He felt first Catherine's anger and then a sense of fear. Stopping the class early, he went to talk to Father.

"Ah Vincent, come in." Father was still upset but not as angry as he had been. He looked at Vincent closely. "Something's wrong."

"I have felt a sense of anger in Catherine, and also a sense of fear. I know she's not in danger but something is wrong."

Father took a deep breath. "Well, Vincent, there's nothing you can do while she's still in Chicago. She is still there, isn't she?"

Vincent nodded. "I know that she is far away. That she wishes to come back but that she can't."

Catherine was on her third cup of coffee when the girl at the Delta Airline desk beckoned her over.

"Miss Chandler, there's a flight leaving for New York in thirty minutes. We've got one seat left."

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief. "Terrific. I've got to get back. It's a matter of life and death."

The girl smiled and checked her through. With much relief, Catherine walked through the loading pier to board the aircraft.

Paul Aaron was bored by life in the tunnels. He paced around the chamber like a caged animal. He had to get out for a while. He thought about the people here. God, they must be the most boring people on the face of the planet or beneath it. He heard footsteps outside his chamber. It was Samantha.

"Hi," said Samantha.

"Well, hi yourself," replied Paul. "What are you up to?"

Samantha was carrying a large pile of books. "I'm taking these books back to Father's chamber."

"You ever go up top?"

Samantha grinned at him. "Oh, sure, lots of times."

Paul Aaron breathed a sigh of relief. "Could you show me the way out? I want to get a present for Vincent for saving me."

"Oh sure," said Samantha. "But I've got to do this first. I'm free at about seven."

"That's just fine," Paul smiled. "But don't tell anyone. It's to be a surprise."

"I won't." Samantha hurried off down the tunnel.

Paul Aaron took his first breath of fresh air at ten o'clock that night. He was delirious to be out in the park after the confinement of the tunnels. His arm ached a bit, but he at least could use it. He put his hand in his pocket. He could feel the knife there. He was glad it was where he had left it before Denton had shot him. He thought of the people Below, only Vincent would be a challenge. And from what he understood he was far below even the tunnel world, mooning over the Chandler woman. He looked around. In the distance he could hear footsteps, woman's footsteps.

Vincent had known Catherine was returning as soon as she had left Chicago. She'd come out the park entrance. Quickly, he began to make his way up to the park.

Wrapped up in a warm coat and hat against the cold, Catherine was barely recognizable as she made her way quickly through the park. The click, click of her boots on the path echoed through the cold night air.

Suddenly, from behind some bushes she felt an arm grab her. Instinctively Catherine forced her elbow back in an effort to rid herself of her attacker. She felt a rope tighten around her neck. She tried to breathe but the rope tightened even more. She struggled and fought with her attacker who somehow managed to cut off the top two buttons of her coat and pull it down constricting her arms. He pulled her to the ground and slit her coat and jumper from top to waist then continued with her skirt and underwear. Catherine kicked out with her feet but missed. The attacker pulled the hat from Catherine's face and looked at her. As he did so, Catherine could see the fear spread across his face as he recognized his victim. Almost simultaneously, a snarling roar informed Catherine's attacker of Vincent's presence.

As he turned, Paul Aaron came face to face with Vincent. Vincent's face was twisted and snarling. In

seconds he raised his hand, the claws glinting in the moonlight. With a roar Vincent's claws tore through Paul Aaron's throat, stomach and leg. A scream of agony was choked off abruptly.

Long after death had claimed Aaron, Vincent continued to tear his claws through him, until he felt Catherine's arms around him.

"Vincent, please. It's over now. He's dead."

Vincent sat back on the grass, his breath becoming slower and slower till it returned to normal. He looked at Catherine as she tried to cover herself with her coat. Vincent lifted her up in his arms and carried her towards the tunnels.

Later, dressed in tunnel clothes, Catherine told the story to Father. He stood up and looked at her.

"I must apologize, Catherine. I should have known you'd never betray him."

"Thank you, Father."

Catherine smiled at Vincent and picked up his hand. The smell of blood was still on his fingers. She raised his hand to her lips and kissed it gently.

"Thank you, Vincent."

Vincent grasped her hand and raised it to his lips, slowly he kissed her hand. Father smiled at them, stood up and left the chamber.

END