

THE STAINLESS STEELE TUNNEL BRAT

(a BATB/Remington Steele crossover)

by Margaret Basta

In spite of the cumbersome bag that she carried, Catherine Chandler's step was light as she tripped down the stairs towards her apartment's basement. To a casual observer, she would have looked as if she were on her way to the laundry room. But a more perceptive observer would have known that no mere whitening, brightening powder could put *that* kind of smile of anticipation on the lips of a young lady.

Slipping past the secret entrance, Catherine was not surprised to find Vincent waiting for her at the threshold. Immediately, he removed Catherine's tote bag from her grasp to carry it himself. But she stayed him before he could move away from her. Catherine threw her arms about him and gathered him into the biggest bear hug she could manage. Hesitantly, Vincent responded.

"Oh, Vincent, I am so excited. And I am sorry that I am so late," she said breathlessly. "Every crank caller under the sun must have known that I wanted to leave early this Friday afternoon, so I got every single one of those calls. And, then I was delayed with an errand!"

"I am excited too, Catherine. It is not often that you can spend an entire weekend with me.... with us ... Below. I hope that you will not find our company too boring. The children wish to perform some madrigals for you this evening. And then tomorrow, Mouse wishes to show us his latest discovery, whatever that might be. And Father insists that he further your knowledge of the game of chess."

Catherine just gazed dreamily up into his beloved visage before she collected enough of her wits to ask, "And you.... what is on my agenda with you?"

Vincent tried not to smile as he said, "My family and friends have filled your cotillion card completely, Catherine. I will consider myself the most fortunate of men, if they grant me permission to sit next to you when we dine."

In mock-protest, Catherine started to stomp down the tunnel path. Vincent trailed after her, trying to assess her feelings.

"Catherine?" he asked, wondering if she had misinterpreted his attempts at humor. Teasing was something that he rarely did, and especially around Catherine.

She whirled to glare at him, the sparkle in her eyes belying any anger. "I thought that you were going to take me on a picnic past the Great Falls."

Vincent mulled her words, now understanding that she too, could tease.

"Perhaps I can find time to squeeze that into your busy agenda.... a Eudaemonic (*happy*) picnic sounds delightful."

"To achieve that, we most definitely will have to be alone. I'll tear up my dance card."

"Catherine.... you are happy in my company? You need no one else?"

Vincent's deep-set inability to think of himself worthy of Catherine's affection was a major problem in their relationship. Catherine shook her head in denial of Vincent's continuing insecurity. She would allow nothing to spoil this long-awaited weekend Below, not even Vincent's tenebrific (*dark*)

and gloomy) tendencies.

She reached up and tangled her fingers in his hair as she lifted herself up to kiss the silken down of his cheek, her lips lingering long past the point of propriety for a kiss of mere friendship. "Vincent, alone or in the company of others, being with 'you' is what makes me happy."

He tried to accept her words as they held hands, walking home.

The moments passed quickly during the hours of her visit. On Sunday morning, Vincent surprised her with a light breakfast in bed before he led the way for their picnic. Catherine was in the mood for a *tete-a-tete* rendezvous. Vincent tried vainly to consider this picnic as one similar to the picnics he had shared with his teenage companions.

Alone at the Great Falls, they drifted into the quiet pools and shallows beyond the falls, as Vincent punted their small skiff about remembered dangers. For a while, they floated in companionable silence. But then, subconsciously, Catherine started to hum to herself. *'Belle Nuit'* from the Offenbach opera. Memories of desire flamed into Vincent's consciousness as he recalled the last time Catherine had heard that duet. Trying to desperately alter the mood, Vincent moored the boat, assisted Catherine ashore, and started to lay out their picnic. His determination momentarily faltered when he saw that Catherine was opening up a wine bottle. He hoped that Father had not noticed it.

Catherine grinned knowingly up at him as she raised the bottle up to him for his perusal.

"Champagne, Vincent. But, by *'Ariel.'* It is *'non'*-alcoholic."

It was a pleasant luncheon, as Vincent entertained Catherine with childhood stories of derring-do. Then it was Catherine's turn as she told of girlish dreams and almost-forgotten tomboy memories. Only Catherine's wristwatch told the passing of time, as they watched the firelight send dancing shadows about the measureless caverns. In a sudden moment of inspiration, Catherine returned to the skiff, and came back with a small cassette recorder. Vincent allowed her to nestle into his arms, and they again leaned back against the rocks, this time listening to the tape playing in the machine.

"Phantom of the Opera," Catherine explained, as Michael Crawford's voice sang *'Music of the Night.'*

Vincent held her closer, daring to brush his lips through the silken glory of her hair. At that moment, time ceased to have meaning.

In dull acceptance, her mind numbed with disbelief. Catherine Chandler allowed herself to be put through the incoming prisoner routine. She suffered all of the indignation of being strip-searched, fingerprinted and photographed with mute pain. But it wasn't until her soft skin scratched against the harshness of the rough garb of a prisoner, that the full horror of her situation finally began to sink in. She had been arrested for murder in the first degree. The impossibility of this happening was beyond her. And yet, it had happened.

"I *'hate'* Mondays!" an almost broken Catherine whispered mockingly, recalling how old friends, Lt. Bert Samuels and Gary Hughes had Mirandized her, and then led her away, in handcuffs, from her office desk at the DA's office. Joe Maxwell had raged in impotence. He had pleaded with John Moreno. But Moreno had been adamant. Catherine's public arrest in front of the entire office was done to prove that there would be no favoritism in this particular case.

Joe finally realized that Moreno would be implacable about any of the DA office staff being involved in the Chandler case, other than to help convict Cathy. In desperation, Joe did the only thing that he could think of to counteract Moreno - he called Elliot Burch. Joe didn't like doing this, but Burch was the only guy with enough clout who could maybe help Cathy. Joe'd do anything to save Radcliffe, even if it meant quitting his job in order to be her attorney.

Father put down his fork, noticing the confusion in Vincent's eyes.

"Vincent, what is it? Is it Catherine? Has something happened?"

Vincent wavered, trying to analyze the feelings that he was sensing. "I do not know, Father. There is something troubling Catherine, but I sense no danger." He looked up in fearful puzzlement at Father. "She's trying to keep me from feeling her thoughts...."

Kipper suddenly burst into the communal dining room crying out Father's name. His haste was not that of a young boy being late for his supper, fearful that all the good stuff would be eaten before he got there. Worried, Father stood, as Kipper ran into his arms.

"Father! Look what a Helper gave me!" He thrust a tabloid newspaper into Father's hands. Father read the lurid headlines before he handed the shocking news to Vincent. Vincent quickly read it, roaring an anguished " *No!*" before storming out of the dining hall. Father went after him, eventually finding him wildly pacing about his chambers, preparing to go Above.

"Vincent, you cannot go."

"I must, Father. She needs me."

"And how will you get to Catherine without endangering yourself? Or Catherine?"

"I will find a way!"

"Vincent, think, my son. You yourself said that Catherine was hiding her emotions from you. It is because she loves you and wants to protect you that she does not want you roaring about Above. She has friends Above. They will help her. And, we will too...."

Vincent knew the wisdom of his father's words, but his heart was finding it hard to follow them.

And then, Vincent realized that Catherine was reminiscing about their picnic, so he followed Father into his chamber as the Council met to discuss what was to be done. Vincent accepted Catherine's decision to let the memories of their times together sustain her, and him, till they could solve this crisis, together.

Jamie knew what has to be done though, as she took her turn to read the paper. She raided her meager savings and went Above to make a telephone call to a Helper and an old tunnel friend.

A sleepy raven-haired detective groaned into the honey-brown silk of his wife's hair. "Laura, if this is your idea of a joke, 'tain't funny."

"Not I," she mumbled back. "It's your phone that is ringing at...." she looked at her nightstand's clock/radio, "five-ten in the morning. I'm not *that* early of an *early bird*'.... without a good reason."

Remington flailed his arm blindly about till he found the phone, heard Mildred Krieb's voice on the other end, and shoved the receiver under his wife's nose.

"It's for you," he pronounced, "and tell Mildred that she is fired."

Laura listened for a moment, and then elbowed her husband in the ribs. "Mildred says that you cannot fire her. *'m'* the boss, remember?"

Remington buried his head under his pillows, trying to ignore reality.

Laura listened, and nodded, and spoke out loud. "Really?... Cleon Manning? And all expenses paid, a first class jet at our disposal, and twenty-five thousand a day? Get Tony and Fred. Mr. Steele and I will be ready in two hours.... What's that, Mildred, your cats? Yes, the agency will pay for the boarding fees for Zeno, Hollister, Nina and Connor." She put down the phone and then gleefully said, "We've got a case in New York City! Come on, rise and shine, Sunshine. We've got work to do!" When her husband did not move, she snuck her hand under the covers to pinch her

husband's nude callipygian (*well-shaped*) behind.

Pillows flew at Laura as Remington sputtered back, "Oh no, we're not! It's Tuesday! I must visit my tailor...." Laura threatened him with a pillow.

"Oh, by the way, there was a message for you on the answering service. Somebody called, asking for 'Harry,' and said, " *Vincent needs you!*"

The sudden stillness of her husband's body should have alerted Laura as to the seriousness of this message. Instead, she was rummaging about, wondering just exactly where her husband had flung her house robe last night.

"Nothing else?" he tersely asked his partner for life.

"Nope. No name at all." She glared at him. "If this is a message from one of your old mates, they are simply going to have to wait till we solve this murder case in New York." Giving up on finding the robe, she sashayed into the bathroom, knowing that a glimpse of her naked form was still appreciated by her legally wedded husband. (*What it had taken to get him to be her legally wedded husband, is another story....*)

When she was in the bathroom, Harry removed a black address book that was taped behind the dresser mirror, and looked up the phone number for a restaurant in New York. *'The Palace of Heaven.'* He dialed. "Chow Li? It's Harry. Tell Vincent that I'll be there as soon as possible."

Harry Chalmers, aka Remington Steele (*and a long list of other aliases*) went about the business of getting dressed and packing, not caring to notice that there was something of a coincidence about needing to be in Manhattan.

Rushed hours later, the entire ensemble found themselves being met by Cleon Manning at La Guardia, and then driven directly to Elliot Burch's office.

Remington adopted a rather blase attitude when he was introduced to Elliot Burch. After all, it was somewhat of a commonplace occurrence. His attitude immediately changed, however, when he saw the gleam in Burch's eye when the man shook hands with Laura Holt.

Laura politely spoke, "I have heard so much about you, Mr. Burch. Cleon says that the matter is desperate."

"Yes, Ms. Holt, it is," Elliot replied.

Remington interrupted him. "Actually, the lady's name is *'Mrs. Remington Steele,'* Mr. Burch. My wife and I are partners in every sense of that word."

Laura tried to smile to mask her annoyance at her husband's territorial protectiveness. Cleon Manning was just surprised at the marital announcement. He had never even heard a whisper of a rumor of it.

Burch indicated that they all should be seated. "Cleon, tell them the unpleasant details." Cleon did.

After a while, Laura stated, "Mr. Burch, we are going to need a great deal more information about Catherine Chandler and the man that she allegedly murdered. He was her ex-fiancé - Steven Bass?"

Sighing, Burch confirmed Laura's words. "Yes. They lived together a long time ago." Only Remington sensed the pain behind Burch's words.

"We are going to need access to computer, too," the ever-efficient Laura continued. "And we need to see the scene of the crime, meet Cathy...."

Elliot wearily spoke. "Whatever you require. Cleon's agency is at your disposal, Ms. Holt. Do whatever you must to clear Cathy Chandler. Whatever it takes, or costs, I will pay it."

Laura left the office with Cleon to explain the situation to Mildred and Tony Roselli. Remington lingered, studying Elliot Burch.

"You care a great deal for this Cathy Chandler, don't you?"

"I was once engaged to the lady briefly, Mr. Steele," Burch admitted.

"I sincerely hope that your fate does not match that of her other ex-fiancé, Mr. Burch." Remington was trying to understand the motives of this man.

"Cathy would never do anything to hurt anyone, or me. She simply is not capable of murder, Mr. Steele."

"Do you think that she is capable of killing someone?"

"Only in self-defense. But not as a cold-blooded, calculating murderer...."

"We shall see...," Remington muttered under his breath, trying to figure out what kind of woman could have been engaged to a man such as Elliot Burch, and then turn the multi-millionaire down. And why Burch still loved her, anyway.

Late Tuesday afternoon it was Laura who was pacing about the large living room of their suite at the *'Plaza Hotel.'* She suddenly stopped dead center in the room and announced, "I don't get it! Nothing adds up!" She turned to face Cleon. "She doesn't see this guy for more than a year and then she poisons him? Why?" Laura started pacing again. "We've got to get more info - check out her apartment, her diary - anything!"

Mildred looked up from her portable PC and modem. "Hon, I don't think that at Fifty-First and Lex, they call them *'apartments'*. They're *pieds-a-terre (small house or apartment, especially in a town, which you own or rent but only use occasionally)* or something really ritzy like that."

Remington stretched a bit more on the couch, and decided that Mildred needed some more coffee, and Laura needed some soothing chamomile tea. He went over to the built-in bar and started fixing up the cups. Cleon joined him.

Remington gave Cleon a cup of coffee, and asked, "Mr. Manning, why did you recommend Laura to Elliot Burch? From what I have heard of your agency's reputation, you are perfectly capable of handling a case such as this one."

"Elliot wanted the best, Steele, and Laura Holt is it." Steele didn't argue with that statement. "My agency is the meat-and-potatoes kind of company. Security? Protection? Employee screening? My job. An impossible case like the Chandler case? It's a job for the *'Prince of Detectives,'* isn't it?"

Remington weakly smiled. "Don't believe the legitimacy of that nickname, Manning. Not even my wife calls me that." Under his breath, he mumbled, "Though I wish she would...."

"Anyway, Steele, Laura Holt is the best detective I know to solve a nutty case like this. Nothin' about this murder makes sense. It's too C & D!"

In surprise, Remington amusedly said " 'C'ut and 'D'ried!" glad that he had paid attention to Laura and Murphy Michaels during his first year as Remington Steele. *'You know Laura from Havenhurst! So that's where Laura learned all of that silly P. I. argot,'* he thought to himself, deciding not to be jealous of Cleon after all. Then his eye caught the time, and Remington knew that he had to find a way to escape and soon, if he was ever going to find out why Vincent needed him, without alerting Laura as to the real reason as to why he had been so amenable to their trip to New York. And then, the phone rang.

Antony Roselli, who had recently become an unemployed Company agent, and was now, temporarily, the Steele Agency's company *'gofer,'* grabbed the phone. Mildred grabbed it away from him. Mildred's opinion of Tony had not improved even though he was now her subordinate. She took the message and walked over to Laura telling her that Elliot would meet them at Cathy's apartment.

It was just turning dark when they met Elliot Burch. He had bribed Cathy's doorman to give him the key to the apartment. Elliot Burch was not accustomed to breaking-and-entering, so he handed the

key to Remington. "Stay behind me," Remington commanded. And then, they all heard a distinct *'thunk'* from within.

Bravely, Remington slipped inside the darkened room, and grabbed the first heavy object he could find - a Queen Anne period solid brass candlestick. He peered through the gloom, trying to let his eyes adjust to the light. And then he glanced down at the candlestick, and removed the candle from it. In disbelief he looked at the white, yellow and orange oddly colored candle in his hand. He felt Laura nudge his back.

"Let me go," he commanded, not wanting to endanger Laura or Elliot. He stealthily stepped into the center of the room trying to determine the direction of the noise. His ears heard another noise from the balcony so he crept towards the fenestrated (*provided with a window or windows*) French doors, then moved aside a portion of the curtain, not believing his own eyes.

"Huh!" he muttered to himself, as he accidentally dropped the candlestick on his foot. He said a few invectives as he opened the doors, and hopped out onto the balcony, closing the doors behind him. In the mean time, Laura rushed towards the doors to give assistance, when she heard her husband curse, "Get out of here, you bloody idiot! I'll meet you later!"

Laura hastily whirled about to block Elliot Burch's intervention from whatever it was that was going on out on the balcony. A moment later Remington limped back into the room, looking apologetic.

"Twas nothing," he explained, "merely a cat burglar...."

Remington could see Laura's eyes sending burning glares at him through the dimness, but she said nothing. Remington pathetically hobbled over to her and whispered, "Cat got your tongue? Thanks...."

Laura decided to intervene. "Let's toss the place," she said by way of a diversion. She ignored her husband as she went to turn on some lights.

Remington said out loud, "My wife, the detective." He was not fooled by her behavior. Later, she would rake him over the coals for his actions.

Elliot decided that Laura Holt was the consummate professional and that her husband was merely the company figurehead, so he dismissed Remington and dealt only with Laura. For the moment, Remington appreciated being treated as the company buffoon. He really would have found it difficult to explain to Burch about the balcony.

"The police have thoroughly checked out this place," Elliot stated to Laura. "What do you hope to find?"

"Anything unusual. Anything that might help us make sense out of Cathy Chandler's life." Laura walked into the bedroom, beginning her search.

It took Laura about an hour to realize that her husband was more of a hinderance than a help. He was deliberately debunking anything that might be considered a clue. Indeed, the *'clues'* were little things - books of poetry, party invitations, and even notes. He was determined preventing Laura from examining them as well as Elliot. Laura knew that she would get nowhere with her husband in the presence of Elliot, so she wearily sighed, and announced that perhaps it would be better if they started fresh in the morning. Laura did not miss the look of gratitude that her husband sent her. Now she was really worried.

When they got back to their hotel suite, Laura kicked everyone out, telling them to get some supper and then some sleep. The moment the door was closed, Remington expected all hell to break loose. It didn't. Instead, Laura walked into her bedroom. Remington gingerly followed her, sitting down next to her on the edge of the bed.

"I suppose that you would like me to explain....," he hesitantly asked.

"The cat burglar? No need. Undoubtedly one of your old mates." She let her anger show. "What I

don't understand is why you were hiding evidence?"

Remington swallowed, and stared about the room, looking at everything but Laura. He drew a deep breath and stated, "Laura, this case has suddenly become very, very complicated." He tugged Laura's hand anxiously, making her turn to look at him. "Do you really trust me, Laura? 'Unreservedly'?"

With the seriousness of his voice, Laura started to tremble. Now, she was frightened. What was going on?

"Yes, I trust you - with our lives and my love."

Remington accepted her words, then started to speak softly. "The man on the balcony was my brother," he explained. Dizziness overwhelmed Laura as she tried to calmly accept this statement.

"Brother?" she managed to squeak out.

"Foster brother, of a sorts," Remington laughingly said, though there was no humor in his voice.

"'Vinnie,' and I am the only one who has ever lived after calling him Vinnie. Devin and I were raised almost as if we were all brothers."

"How?" Laura remembered what she did know about his past. "I don't..."

Remington clasped her other hand and stared into her eyes, silently pleading for acceptance.

"Vinnie's adopted father is a man that I called '*Father*' most of my teenage years. Father and my real father Daniel Chalmers were very good friends, though only heaven knows why. They did not exactly hold the same point of view on anything. Well, when I was a lad, Daniel tried to get me an education. Schools didn't work. I kept getting kicked out of every one."

"You sound very proud about that," Laura dryly commented.

"Laura, you are finally going to learn everything about my mysterious past. Soon, I promise. Very, very soon." He stood and started to pace the room, motioning with his hands as he talked. "Daniel finally took me to the one place on this earth where I could get an education, and from which I dare not roam. Not that I would admit it at the time, but I rather enjoyed myself with Vinnie and my other foster brother Devin. Devin was older than me, but I taught Devin every devious trick I knew. And he taught me some too."

"What is Vinnie's connection to this case?"

"Laura, I honestly do not know. Somehow, Vinnie is involved in all of this, which is more of a cataclysmic shock than you know. He's used us most of his nine lives," Remington mused. Laura glared at him. Remington started to change his clothes into what Laura always thought of as his '*To Catch a Thief*' sleuthing outfit. He dressed in black, including a black leather jacket and then grabbed a flashlight.

"You're going somewhere?" Laura asked, with fear flooding her heart.

"To meet Vinnie. He's waiting for me." He knelt down on the floor before her, capturing her face between the palms of his hands. "Babe, I promise you that soon you will get an explanation," he said as he softly stroked her cheek. "But right now I have to go out alone. There are lives at stake here, and I am not just referring to Chandler's life or my own. I'll be back as soon as I can." He mutely appealed for acceptance and more trust.

"And if you're not?" She tried to sound like a professional instead of a scared woman.

"If I am not back by the morrow, or, if it is an emergency, contact Chow Li. He owns two restaurants in Chinatown - '*The Palace of Heaven*' and '*Yee Mee Loo*'."

"If I have to stall Elliot, I will, not that I think that he'll miss you that much." Laura's heart was in her throat with her faint attempt to tease him. "Take care of yourself," she entreated. As a response, he pulled her into a deep embrace, kissing her as if he never wanted to let her go. And then he left.

A short time later Harry found himself at the entrance by the Carousel. Haltingly, he retraced the steps of his boyhood, till he rounded a corner and bumped into Vincent.

Vincent grasped Harry's shoulders and hugged him. "It has been too long a time since we have last met."

"It's been a while," Harry admitted, hugging Vincent back. They started walking home with Vincent guiding Harry through the new route.

"You have been quite busy, Harry. Devin writes us about your exploits, and how you are assisting Charles and him to build a new life at your cabin."

"Vinnie, I *won* that cabin in a game of chemin-de-fer (*baccarat*) years ago. Devin needed it? He got it. It was a bloody liability to me." Harry shrugged. "Contrary to what Father believes, the wages of gambling isn't always sin, Vinnie. Sometimes you get lucky and win a great treasure." His voice softened, thinking of the chances he had taken to win Laura Holt's heart. "How's Father, Vinnie?" This time Harry noticed the disapproving glare over the use of a nickname. "'Vincent,' I expect that he is still giving long lectures about profligate tendencies, and I am the bad example, eh?"

Vincent smiled. "Yet, you were the one who always helped Devin to protect me from Father's wrath...." As they neared his chambers, he asked. "Devin has written to us of an improbable event - that you are married. Naturally, Father will wish to know if, as Devin writes, '*a real lady*,' could be so foolish as to marry you? Even I find this impossible to believe," he teased.

"Laura Holt is my bride, and I've used quite a few adjectives to describe her over the years. But the best way is to think of her as a feminine version of Father." Remington grinned at Vincent's surprise at his words. "She is trustworthy, loyal, frugal, maddening, brilliant, hardworking, meticulous, witty, tediously scrupulous and very, very frustrating. She makes lots of little lists, which I promptly try to lose. If anyone could duplicate Father's achievements here Below, she could. Regrettably, she is also very, very honest. What is worse, she insists that I be very, very honest too. Goes against my nature."

"You must love her very, very much."

Remington replied from his heart. "I do, Vincent. I do. Oh, Vincent, she heard us on the balcony tonight. I cannot maintain marital bliss without mentioning you." Though he spoke casually, Vincent recognized the importance of his request.

"I shall discuss it with Father. When he learns that Devin was not under the influence of some intoxicant when he wrote us about your marriage, he will surely wish to meet the lady who could accomplish such a thing." They entered Vincent's chamber. Harry started poking about, searching for memories.

"It hasn't changed much - maybe it's a little cleaner." He studied Vincent, then mentioned. "Who is Catherine Chandler? I noticed your handwriting in some of her books - which used to be '*your*' books, Vinnie.... cent," he corrected.

"Catherine is my life."

Harry was shocked. "You *love* her?" Vincent reddened in response. Harry blurted out. "But *how* can that be?" Then he realized his faux pas.

Vincent moved away from him. "I love Catherine with all of my heart. And she loves me in return." He sat down on his bed.

"There's a physical relationship?" Vincent looked away from Harry. "What on earth does Father think of all of this?"

"He disapproves," Vincent whispered. "I can *never* have a normal physical relationship with Catherine, and he is afraid that one day I will try. But if I ever do, I would lose her. And then I would die...."

"Vincent, this doesn't make any sense to me. If she loves you back, then she *'must'* want you. Sex *'is'* a part of love...." Harry abruptly stopped speaking, seeing Father at the door. The man limped into the room, wondering if he were imagining things. Then he held open his arms to receive his prodigal foster son.

"You *'came'*," he joyously said. "When Chow Li gave me your message, I didn't know what to think. We've seen you so infrequently these past few years...."

Vincent grinned a knowing smile behind his father's back for the subtle chastisement that Harry was receiving. Harry hugged Father, then Father turned to look at Vincent. "Who would've thought that one of Mary's three *'hellions on Earth'* would become an internationally known detective?" There was pride in Father's voice. "Daniel's son...."

"Daniel Chalmers redeemed himself before he died, *'Father'*."

Father guessed at the pain and silent accusations behind Harry's words. "We shall discuss the old times later, when matters are not so pressing. Has Vincent told you of our Catherine?"

"We were just beginning, Father. Please join us." Vincent looked at Harry. "What was your purpose in being at Catherine's apartment tonight?"

"Elliot Burch has hired the Steele Agency to prove that Ms. Chandler is innocent. My wife Laura, Father, is the finest detective that I have ever been privileged to meet, on either side of the law. She can save Cathy. As for being in the lady's apartment - Burch let us into it. We were investigating."

Father tapped his cane against the floor, angrily saying, "Burch, again! Why cannot he leave well enough alone! He is too close to finding the tunnels!"

Vincent placatingly said, "It is because of Elliot Burch that Harry can assist our efforts to save Catherine. We owe him a debt of gratitude."

Remington quickly added, "I would have come regardless, the moment I learned of your need. I would never fail this community." He then removed a micro-cassette recorder from his pocket. "I need to tape record our discussions. Laura is the only one who'll hear these tapes, and she does need to hear them. She might discern a clue that I've missed. To help Catherine, may I?"

It was Vincent who agreed. And then he began to speak of Catherine Chandler and of all that he knew of her relationship with Steven Bass.

After a while Harry asked, "Catherine was *'here'* the entire weekend?"

Vincent softly agreed. "She never went Above once during this time."

Slightly embarrassed, Father said. "I know this to be true as well, Harry. Friday night, Catherine was with me. On Saturday, she went with Mouse. On Sunday, Vincent showed her more of Below. They were completely exhausted when they returned. Looking in on Vincent late Sunday night, I discovered that Catherine had collapsed on his bed too. I covered them up, and saw her for breakfast on Monday. Perhaps I could testify in her behalf?"

"According to the police Bass died Saturday afternoon. His only visitor was Catherine on Friday. But they are claiming that she returned unnoticed to poison him. You see, her fingerprints were all over the bottle that contained the arsenic."

"I still could be a witness, Harry," Father firmly stated. "We all know that she is incapable of murder. Catherine is innocent."

"Father, regrettably, you would not be the most reliable of witnesses to the courts. I am not saying that you shouldn't testify, but it may mean little to them."

"Is there only circumstantial evidence against her?" Father wondered.

Remington admitted. "Before Bass died, he wrote out her name on the table where he collapsed."

And, poison is a woman's weapon, you see." On Vincent's puzzled expression, he added, "Not as messy as a gun..." He turned to study Vincent's reaction to all of this. "Vincent, what did Catherine tell you about her visit with Steven Bass?"

With a steady speaking voice, Vincent ignored the pain in his heart as he responded. "She neglected to mention the visit to me. Perhaps she feared my disapproval." Both Remington and Father were surprised at this.

Remington knew he had to ask it, so he said. "Why?"

"The last time Catherine saw Steven Bass, he tried to kill her. I intervened, and injured him." Vincent then told Harry the ugly story.

A long time later, Harry turned off the tape recorder. He stood and stretched, finishing off the last of his herb tea. He knew that it was past midnight, and that he should be going. But there was one more thing he had to ask.

He leaned down onto the table, resting on his hands. "Father, if the worst should come to pass, and Catherine Chandler is convicted, she'll be sent to prison. A DA investigator wouldn't stand a chance in prison. She'd be dead within a month. Or less." He noticed the terrible sorrow of Vincent's expression, but he still stared at Father. "I promise you that I shall not let Catherine Chandler die. But, if prison should come, would she be welcomed here? Would she have sanctuary? A home? Or, will the Council abide by its rules concerning convicted prisoners?"

Father's voice quivered as he spoke. "Harry, are you telling me that you would break Catherine Chandler out of jail in order to save her life?"

"If I have to. I could not send a woman that I know is innocent to her death. It's her damned ill-fortune that the proof of her innocence rests beyond the courts. My wife *'is'* a good detective. If she cannot save Catherine..." His voice trailed off as Remington began to realize what his decision might mean to Laura. He still spoke firmly, as he turned to look at Vincent. "I promise, Vinnie. She will live."

Father finally spoke. "Catherine will always be welcomed here, regardless of the circumstances. I will speak with the Council." He looked at the man standing before him, at last accepting the knowledge that the irresponsible youth that had on occasion, been the plague of the tunnels, was now a good man. "Do what you must," he said with finality.

Vincent could not speak as he accepted the decision of both men.

Harry decided to change the subject. "Father, I would wish for my wife to meet you and Vincent. After this problem is resolved, would you consider my request?" He tried not to look nervous.

Vincent tried to help matters by weakly teasing. "She is a paragon of virtue."

Father feebly added. "Harry, any woman that has taught you the definition of *'paragon,'* is a lady that I must meet. I would be honored."

Their shared laughter was stronger as they bid Father adieu.

Laura Holt sensed rather than knew that her husband had returned to her. She climbed out of bed, and slipped on the comfort of her old blue chenille robe. She padded over to the doorway to peer into the darkness of the living room. Her husband was leaning against a window. His very stillness worried her. She walked over to him, and placed her arms about his waist, squeezing him against her body, resting her head on his shoulder.

"Did you see Vincent?" she quietly asked.

"Yes, and Father too. I found out that Father's real name is Jacob Wells. I never knew that before. Why is it Laura, that most of the people in my past have so many secrets.... and aliases?" he

mused. But Laura could tell by the strain in his voice that he was not amused.

"What did you discover?"

"That Steven Bass was dying of a brain tumor over a year ago, and that he tried to murder Catherine Chandler at that time. Instead, he was crippled himself, and blamed Catherine for his injuries." Remington rubbed a throbbing temple. Laura took over the massage with her fingers. "We have to see if the doctors at the residence home where he lived will talk about Bass."

"If Bass tried to commit murder a year ago, why wasn't he in prison?"

"Mentally ill. But somehow, a couple of months ago, he was released from a mental hospital on his own recognizance."

"Mr. Steele," Laura absent-mindedly said. "Someone must have signed those release orders, and arranged for him to live in a minimum care apartment complex."

"Yes, Laura. Mildred at all, will have a lot to do in the morning."

"And Catherine's alibi for her whereabouts this weekend?"

"She spent the entire weekend with Vincent."

Laura stopped massaging her husband's temples. "Surely if Vincent came forward, he would clear her name. It is Chandler's very refusal to speak of her actions that damns her so."

"Vincent cannot come forward." He saw the look in Laura's eye and protested. "Don't press me for an explanation now, Laura. Just trust me. Perhaps I can find some other witnesses....."

Laura skeptically asked. "Are you trying to tell me that all of the possible witnesses are unreliable?" Remington guiltily nodded. "What kind of people are they?"

"The best," Remington softly replied. He straightened up and spoke more resolutely. "Laura, there are some tapes that you must hear, but you cannot reveal their existence to anyone else, including Mildred. Perhaps you could listen to them in the morning. It is getting too late."

"Catherine's arraignment is tomorrow afternoon. Burch says that we should be able to talk with her about two hours before."

Remington sighed wearily and spoke, "Laura, there is something else." She stiffened when she sensed the grim determination behind his voice. "Remember in the past, how angry you would become, when I plotted something and failed to mention it to you?"

Trying not to let her fear show, Laura answered. "Yes, but that was the 'old' Remington, and not the new and improved version, wasn't it?"

"It was. Which is why I think that perhaps it would be best if you took Mildred and Antony with you to LA, if we fail with this case."

"What will you be doing?"

"Catherine Chandler cannot go to jail. It would be a sentence of death."

In shock, she understood. "Are you telling me that you would break her out of prison?" Her voice rose in angered incredulity. "You'd risk *'everything'*? The Agency? Our reputation? Even prison? For a woman that you have yet to meet?"

Remington avoided Laura's wounded stare. "I just wanted you to know so that you could pull out of it before things get nasty. I do not have a choice, Laura. You do."

"What kind of hold does this *'Vincent'* have over you? What is he to you?"

"Until I met you, Vincent was the very best part of my past after Daniel. I owe him, Laura. My life, and my loyalty. I promised."

Laura turned from him and walked over to the bar, pouring out two liberal servings of brandy into snifters. She then returned to him, and handed him his drink. "Well, you *'are'* improving," she

casually announced, hiding her disquiet.

"What?" he choked out. This was not the response he had been expecting. Laura was still a mystery to this man.

"Finally, you are telling me, so I don't have to go snooping about. Maybe you have learned what being a *'partner'* means after all." She placed her hand willingly into his, and tugged him towards the bed. "Sleep, I think."

"Laura, why is everyone suddenly concerned with my vocabulary?" His glib remark hid the gratitude rising in his heart.

Catherine Chandler stared at the two strangers seated across the table from her. "Who are you? The guard says that you are my lawyers."

Remington started his study of the lady. "We are *'Associates'* of Emerson Marshall and Kerwin Tucker, the law firm that Elliot Burch has hired to come to your defense." He tried to see what Vincent and Elliot saw in the lady.

"Jay and Mark Coolidge, and Al Proctor are *'my'* attorneys," Catherine contradicted. "I never authorized Elliot to hire new lawyers!"

Laura replied. "Mr. Burch convinced Coolidge, Coolidge and Proctor that it would be best for them professionally, if they let experienced criminal, and not corporate, lawyers handle your defense." She nodded towards Harry. "This is Harry Chalmers, and I am Laura Holt."

Catherine grudgingly acknowledged the wisdom of Elliot's action, but she resented the man for making it without her consent. "What do you want to know? More grisly details of my alleged crime?"

Harry kept his best gimlet stare on her as he precisely said, "Why did you visit Steven Bass on Friday afternoon, especially after what he'd done?"

"Steven called me earlier in the week. He said that he had to speak with me and that it was urgent. He said that he could not forgive himself unless I first forgave him for his actions. I could not refuse him."

"Why not?" Laura asked.

"I talked with Dr. Sidney Freedman, Steven's psychiatrist before I went to visit him. He told me that Steven would benefit from seeing me. So, I went."

"And then what happened," Laura continued.

"Not much. We talked, Steven apologized for trying to kill me, and then he told me that he had finally accepted responsibility for his actions in life. He served some tea, and I said goodbye."

"Nothing else? There must be something! Think, Ms. Chandler. Your fingerprints were all over the bottle that the police have in evidence."

"Oh yes, that. It doesn't make any sense to me." She was tired, feeling as if she'd answered these questions dozens of times before. "Steven asked me to get this bottle of medicine down from his kitchen cupboard. I did. He took a dosage in front of me, and he was fine when I left."

Remington finally stopped his inspection of the lady. "Why didn't Steven get the bottle down from the shelf himself?"

"Steve is.... was a paraplegic, in a wheelchair. He couldn't reach it."

Remington and Laura exchanged glances. Laura then walked over to the door and alerted the guard that she wanted to leave. "I'm going to see if your other advocates are here, Ms. Chandler. Coming, Mr. Chalmers?" He waved Laura out the door, and then stood, leaning over Catherine.

Softly he said, "By the way, Elliot Burch allowed us to look at your apartment yesterday. Interesting collection of candles, Ms. Chandler - especially the yellow, orange and white candle. Handmade, isn't it?" She froze, recoiling in shock. "I haven't made it to Winterfest for a long time now, but this year I'll bring my candle only if you can come too."

She raised her eyes up to gaze into his deep blue eyes, automatically comparing their depth of color to the intensity of Vincent's eyes. She mutely shook her head, fearful that someone might be monitoring their conversation, even if that was against the law. She could not speak *'his'* name. He understood.

"All is well, give or take Devin's worried brother." Remington glanced about the room, and then carefully flipped his legal pad open to a page with writing on it. He showed it to Catherine, and she read it.

"I need to know your answer, Ms. Chandler, just in case...."

"The unthinkable should occur?" Catherine had finished the sentence for him. "You cannot mean that they would...."

Remington interrupted her. "Both love you. Both, *'would.'* However, you must choose now, as to the direction that you would go."

Catherine bowed her head, almost breaking under the weight of this new dilemma. She finally whispered. "I cannot choose Devin's brother. I could do nothing that would endanger him...."

Remington tried a little levity. "Hell o'er heaven, eh? A topsy-turvy universe. I *'do'* understand, and admire your courage."

Catherine tried to bravely smile at his words. "You are not a lawyer, are you?"

"I've had a passing acquaintance with a few of them in my time." He bent over and took her hand, gallantly kissing it before he left the room. "Think of me as Galahad, my lady," was his parting statement. He left behind a bemused, but more hopeful Catherine Chandler.

Laura cornered him in the corridor. "What was that all about?"

"Remember what we did not discuss last night?" Laura warily nodded. "I did not have the same discussion with Elliot Burch this morning. He's of the same mind as my brother. She picked Elliot in case what we did not discuss has to be done."

Laura understood it all. "She loves Elliot more than she does Vincent?"

"No, Laura. She loves Vincent too much to endanger his life."

"Poor Elliot," Laura sighed. Remington agreed with his wife.

The newspaper had made it a foregone conclusion that Catherine Chandler would be bound over for trial on a charge of murder in the first degree. The state of New York did not generally permit bail for such a charge. However, because of the sensationalism of the case, Chandler was assigned an early court date. This left Laura and Remington with less time to solve the murder.

Late Wednesday afternoon, Steele, Laura and company were caucusing in the Steele's hotel suite.

"Anything?" Remington asked of Mildred who lifted her nose up from a terminal keyboard.

"Yes. No. Maybe." Mildred enigmatically responded.

"Explain!" an impatient Elliot Burch ordered.

"Events do not make any sense," was Mildred's reply.

"Mildred!" Laura warned in exasperation. Mildred looked at Laura for tacit approval to speak in front of the outsiders. Laura nodded.

Mildred said, "Dr. Sidney Freedman is *'not'* the man who got Bass out of the nut house. The guy who did was one Dr. James Whitman."

"So?" Remington and Laura chorused in unison.

"Dr. James Whitman has not had a practice since 1977. He's still licensed, but the bottom line is that he's retired."

"Maybe someone made a large donation to his retirement fund?" Remington mused.

"There's more," Mildred continued. "According to the hospital records, Bass didn't have a brain tumor."

"Remission?" Laura asked the room in general.

"Nope. Never had it to begin with."

"What?" the entire room asked.

"According to Dr. Freedman's records, the tumor was some kind of psychological delusion, that seemingly started when Cathy Chandler broke her engagement to Bass. That guy sure didn't handle rejection well, chief." Remington sent her a warning glare, so Mildred cut the social commentary. "Seems that Chandler became the focus of everything that Steven Bass thought was wrong with his life. He blamed Cathy for everything, including parking tickets."

Laura started thinking. "And when his back was broken, Chandler was responsible."

Remington stood and made an announcement. "We hate the people we love because they're the only ones who can hurt us."

Mildred enthusiastically cried out, "I know that one, chief! Samuel Hinds to Claudette Colbert, *'Private Worlds,'* Paramount, 1935!"

Laura tried to vainly convince Elliot and Cleon that her staff was not insane. "Mr. Steele speaks in obscure quotations, sometimes."

"Most of the time," Tony chimed in. Laura sent him a withering look.

Laura stood and started walking about the room. "I think I get it! Mr Steele, what you are trying to say is that we've gone about this all wrong. Maybe, just maybe, it is *'not'* a murder. Steven Bass committed suicide!"

Cleon Manning spoke up. "Suicide? God, you're good, Laura."

A slightly miffed Remington butted in to the conversation. "Steven Bass hated Catherine Chandler with a passion equal to or greater than his love for her. He was, after all, a wealthy spoiled specimen of a human being, used to getting his own way. Catherine thwarted him, not once, but twice. He could not let this insult to his petty dignity go unpunished. What better way to destroy Catherine Chandler than by sending her to a sure death in prison, for a murder that she did not commit?"

A pragmatic Elliot asked. "But can we prove it?"

"Do we have a choice?" Laura commented. She started making up a list of things that had to be done. "We'll need Dr. Freedman's corroboration." She studied Mildred's printouts of information.

"Bass tried to commit suicide several times before. We have to prove that this time he could have succeeded." She rattled on. "We have to track down how Bass got the arsenic. But that shouldn't be too difficult. A man buying arsenic in a wheelchair should be memorable." She looked at Elliot Burch again. "Don't you see? All we need to do is prove that there is a reasonable doubt that Steven Bass' death was a murder. It might not clear Catherine Chandler entirely, but it should get her released."

Cleon Manning spoke again. "Laura, why are you so sure that Chandler did not kill Bass?" He waved aside Elliot's protests. "I gotta know. You guys know more than you're saying. I can feel it."

Remington reluctantly gave his approval to Cleon. "You're good, Manning. We know that Catherine Chandler did not murder Steven Bass on Saturday afternoon. She did not sneak back into his

apartment, because she was elsewhere that entire weekend. Since the amount of poison that Bass ingested was a fairly large dose, and took effect almost immediately, there is no way that Catherine could have administered the dose to Bass. Either Bass committed suicide, or someone else gave him the poison. However, regrettably the people that could testify on Catherine's behalf are not what one could best refer to as *'reliable'*."

Elliot Burch groaned out loud. "Street people. I should have known." A surprised Remington looked at Elliot. The man explained that, "I've met some of Cathy's *'friends.'* One in particular kept robbing one of my building sites till Cathy convinced him to stop. I do understand, Steele."

"I'm glad that you do. Our best witness would be a doctor who lost his license in 1952," Remington added. Elliot groaned again.

Cleon said. "Well then.... let's go get enough to convince the DA that he's trying to crucify one of his own. That's the only way to save the lady."

Elliot agreed, saying. "And then we go see Joe Maxwell and Rita Escobar."

They spent the next 36 hours working non-stop. Early Thursday evening, Catherine Chandler was released with all the charges being dropped. Elliot stood on the courthouse steps waiting for Cathy. And for a moment, she did rush into his arms, and warmly kissed his cheek, thanking him profusely. But then, she turned to look at Steele, he pointed towards a waiting cab. She ran off, avoiding the reporters and Elliot. A disappointed Elliot joined the Steeles.

Remington spoke quietly to him. "You don't stand a chance, mate. The lady loves another. I'm sorry."

"What do *'you'* know about it?" Elliot belligerently asked.

Remington held his tongue knowing that Burch would not heed any more advice.

Later that night, Laura and Remington were celebrating in bed. Nuzzling into her husband's shoulder, as she tried not to slosh any more Dom Perignon '76 onto the sheets, Laura asked. "So when do I get to meet this *'Father'* of yours? And Vincent? And get told the whole truth and nothing but the truth?"

"Father, eh? My old man spent 14 hours a day down in that subway...."

Laura smiled an unsaintly smile as she asked, "And just what does Dustin Hoffman say to Jon Voight in *'Midnight Cowboy,'* United Artists, 1969, have to do with the saga of Jacob Wells?"

"It's a cat-o-nine-tall-tales?" Remington innocently replied.

Laura glared at him, perplexed. "Are you trying to tell me that I'm going to have to be bored to death with a variety of exaggerated stories before you get around to telling me the truth? You *'did'* promise me the truth about your mysterious past," she warned, as she groped for some ice in the champagne bucket.

"I promise, Laura! Remember that curiosity killed the cat." She threatened him with the ice. "Very, very soon! In the meantime, I want to go shopping tomorrow." And then, as if it were a private joke, he said, "Okay, good? Okay, fine?"

Laura wondered what movie that was a quote from, as she decided to use her ice recklessly.

A long time later, Remington mumbled, "Make me roar again, my sweeting...."

Catherine was too impatient for darkness to settle before Vincent could come to her. She quickly showered, then changed clothes, setting a new speed record in her dash towards the basement's threshold. Vincent was there, waiting for her. She raced into his arms, and prayed that he would never let her go.

Silently, in his heart, he prayed for the same thing, as he swung her about, rejoicing in the feel of her softness once more in his arms.

"Vincent...", she pleaded. He knew her need. He led her to a small alcove, away from prying eyes.

"Catherine...", he whispered into her hair. He tried to constrain the reckless emotion that was coursing through his body, but Catherine was in his arms again, and he had nearly lost her. She bent her head into the haven of his shoulder. Uncontrollably, his mouth started to caress her neck, where her hair had fallen aside. It was too much of a temptation for him to resist.

He touched the smooth skin there, thrilling as he felt the pulse of her heart against the warmth of his lips. She arched into him, pressing herself against his strength. Catherine could not really believe that Vincent was finally holding her as a man holds the woman that he loves, instead of his usual embrace of honorable protector.

She dared to lift her head till her lips brushed against the velvet smoothness of his skin, tasting him. She placed fragile little kisses up the length of his jaw, as emboldened by his acquiescence, she rebelled against past constraints, and demanded more from him. Every mutual touch and caress of the lovers enflamed the other even more. Vincent was overwhelmed, as through the bond he felt Catherine's desire and ever spiraling, demanding need for him. Part of him shuddered in wonderment that he was responsible for such a driving need in the woman he loved. But there was also part of him that was frightened at the siren song of her need. His body was beginning to demand the ultimate lover's duet, and the very newness of this feeling sent threads of apprehension to entwine with his rising desire.

She lifted her eyes to gaze into the sapphire mirrors of his soul, as irresistibly, her lips moved towards him. On the precipice, Vincent waged a war within, as he lowered his head to kiss her. He would not be denied this one kiss - it would be his for eternity. In the past, when Catherine's lips had lightly touched his, those kisses had been only fleeting glimpses of the entrance to the world of passion. As his arms tightened about her pliant body, to lift her closer to him, they both knew that his kiss would be different from those earlier flirtations. Sinking into his arms, Catherine relinquished control of herself into Vincent's safekeeping, as their lips met. The touch of his lips conquered her soul. Instinctively, Vincent began to mold his body into hers, as the glory of her kiss combined with his soul to form their own lover's universe.

Her heart cried '*Vincent!*' In response, he deepened the kiss, reveling in the sensations that were dominating his senses. And then Vincent broke away from Catherine, forcibly shoving her from his arms.

"Someone calls," he rasped, as he tried to force his lungs to start to breathe again, struggling to control the urge to take this woman now and forever into his embrace.

He shuddered as he called out, "Here!" Brooke approached the alcove to say that Father and the Council awaited their arrival. He told Brooke to tell them that they would be coming soon.

A temporarily defeated Catherine silently acknowledged Father's determination to keep them apart. He must have know how vulnerable Vincent would be, and he had sought to prevent what almost had happened, from happening. But she would not burden Vincent with her suspicions.

Vincent finally was calm enough to look at Catherine. "They wish to celebrate your passage into freedom. We all were so worried."

"I owe them much. Harry told me that you were willing to accept me as a permanent member of this world."

"Did you doubt that we would?"

Catherine shook her head.

"But you chose Elliot Burch instead.... I knew that you would when I learned of his offer."

Catherine looked up at Vincent in surprise. "I had to do so, Vincent."

"Yes, I know. You were protecting me.... us. And we all love you the more because of it. Your courage is your strength." He silently added *'Though your choice broke my heart....'*

Catherine brushed off his praise. "I did not feel so courageous when I thought that I would never see you again. I would have preferred death instead."

"Catherine, there are some things that must never be." She knew that he was thinking of what had just happened between them.

Catherine tried to smile. "Aren't you the one who believes in the possibility of being? Someday, Vincent, your fears about us will be allayed."

"You sound *'quite'* determined, Catherine."

"I am, Vincent. I am. Just you wait and see." She held out her hand. "Now, will you be my escort to this party, or do I have to bang on the pipes for a guide?" He dared not touch her hand, but he did lead her to Father.

At the party, in the presence of other people, a somewhat restrained Vincent carefully tested all of his newly-made self-promises, as he placed his arm about Catherine's waist, if only for a few, brief moments.

Friday morning the Steeles took Manhattan. For a while, Laura and Mildred enjoyed shopping, but as their enthusiasm waned, Remington's seemed to grow. When Mildred finally left them, Laura studied the boyish charm of her husband.

"I can understand why you have bought what seems to be almost everything under the sun, Mr. Steele. Everything that is, except for your little red wagon. I know that when some men have a mid-life crisis, they revert back to their childhood. I just never expected you to want to take your toys with you."

"You're a cruel woman, Laura Holt. Mid-life crisis, indeed!" He harumphed. Changing the subject, he fingered the note in his pocket that a street musician had passed to him earlier in the day. "We leave at five. I've told Mildred to enjoy the weekend and that we'd see her back in LA on Monday." He did not particularly appreciate the sight of his wife trying not to laugh out loud at his indignation. "Laura, I am at least a good 20 years away from a mid-life crisis...."

Laura giggled. "Not if we buy the house that is for sale right next door to my sister Frances, in Tarzana." Remington's eyes widened in dismay at the thought.

"Are you sure this is wise, Vincent?" Father grumbled. "Having a stranger stay the weekend? Granted, she is Harry's wife, but when you consider the lad's reputation, in spite of his lapses, she is nevertheless an outsider."

"Father, you worry too much," Vincent said as he helped Father with the almost impossible task of straightening up his chamber. Tumbling back stacks were righted. Surface dust was scattered. The best china and mismatched silver that could be found had been brought to set Father's table for the special supper that William and Mary were preparing for the evening.

"Still, Vincent, what do we know about this woman? Harry says that she is honorable. What if her sense of duty demands that she report us? What if she, heaven forbid, faints at the sight of you?"

Father stopped speaking when he realized the unkindness of his words. He was distracted when he saw what Vincent was doing. "And *'don't touch'* that!" he warned as he protectively grabbed his inkwell out of Vincent's hands. Vincent stopped trying to discover the surface to Father's desk.

"Father, would you prefer it if Catherine cooked dinner and I dined Above? That was her original

suggestion. I realize that my debt of gratitude towards Laura and Harry is not your responsibility. It was *'my'* Catherine they saved."

"It was *'our'* Catherine they saved," Father said, exasperated. "And yes, I know that I am fussing, Vincent. After all, any woman that could love Harry has to be an extraordinary person. It's just...."

Vincent chuckled. "Why don't you check to see if the guest chamber is prepared, Father?" Father gave Vincent one of his sterner glares before leaving.

"Where's your little red wagon?" Laura sarcastically asked, eyeing the Dodge Caravan van. "Why'd you rent this?"

"Knowing how Mildred shops, I thought that perhaps we'd drive back to LA in it. Might be cheaper than Mildred paying for the shipping costs of everything that she bought."

"Uh huh." Laura didn't believe him for a second. "And just how much did *'you'* buy when I wasn't around?" She opened up the side door to the van and gasped. It was filled with canned ham, food, cases of wine and beer, bolts of cloth, tools, and much, much more. " *'What'* are you doing? Starting a new business?"

"Making up for a few Christmas and birthday presents that I might have missed," he seriously replied. "Where we are going - well, it is a place rich in love, but lacking in the usual amenities. If I were to simply give them the money, they'd spend it on necessities and not life's little luxuries."

Laura touched a smoked turkey. "Food is a luxury?"

"When meat costs more than rice and beans, it is." Laura recognized the grim truth of his words.

A short time later, they were driving toward Chinatown. As Laura watched the neighborhoods change, she commented, "We are in the middle of one of the most sophisticated cities in the world. I packed hiking boots instead of dancing shoes. Now, where did you say we were going?"

"Laura, we are literally getting away from it all for the weekend."

Laura knew that her husband was trying to be mysterious again, so she ignored him. A little while later, he turned into an alley and pulled up behind the shipping door to the *'YEE MEE LOO RESTAURANT.'*

"Here?" she asked, doubtfully, glancing about the filth-strewn alley.

Remington honked his horn. All of a sudden a horde of people appeared, most of whom could best be described as *'street.'* They greeted Remington as if he were a long-lost relative, as he opened up all of the van doors. Immediately, they started emptying out the van and loading the stuff onto a service elevator by the restaurant. Harry corralled three of them and dragged them over to meet Laura.

"Pascal, Cullen and Mouse, this is my wife," Harry proudly announced. Pascal and Cullen shook hands with Laura, but Mouse was distracted by the sight of a large tool chest being removed from the van. Remington noticed this and explained, "Yes, Mouse. It's yours."

Mouse scampered off crying, "Show Jamie!" He suddenly twirled about and yelled "Thanks!" before he disappeared.

" *'Who'* was that?" Laura bemusedly asked, staring after the usual teenager.

"Mouse. He's a bit odd in some respects, but he *'is'* a genius. A regular Rube Goldberg," Remington said with pride.

"Is Vincent anything like him?"

Remington thought about it for a moment. "Somewhat. That is, he is a bit odd - unusual in appearance. He really will be unlike anyone else that you will ever meet. Most tend to lionize him...."

"High praise, indeed," Laura thoughtfully said. "Please describe him."

"Vincent defies description, Laura."

She smiled sweetly. "Try."

"Well.... he's rather large and strong, with a leonine nose, a bit on the hirsute side, with teeth that a dentist might want to see...." With sadness, Remington said, "And he has the kindest, greatest heart of any man ever born. If the fates had been kind, he would have been a king. Instead, he lives here."

"In the '*basement*' of a Chinese restaurant?" Laura asked skeptically.

"A little bit more below than that," Remington explained, cryptically.

After the van was unloaded and Remington surreptitiously handed the keys and the pink slip over to Henry and Lin, telling them it was theirs to be used to help the Helpers, Laura and Remington rose with the final load down to the tunnel level.

Remington led Laura past the loading dock, and into a tunnel. Laura looked about studying what she was seeing. "Jean Val Jean, where are you?" she whimsically asked. She looked over at her husband again, after watching the direction that the Helpers were going with their loads. "I always knew that you were a rat, I just never suspected that you really '*did*' live in a sewer."

Remington smiled broadly, and began to explain the history of the tunnels to her, as he led her down tunnel pathways.

"As I had mentioned earlier, Daniel was afraid that I would grow up as an ill-mannered little beastie, so he repaid his best friend by dumping on him a wild child of the streets, expecting Father to turn the child into a civilized man. Those years that I spent here, not counting a lapse or two when I just had to go a-roamin', were quite instructive. More so that I would admit to at the time. Lots of children have received an education from Father, Laura. Quite a few of them have even graduated from college. The Old Man is quite proud of them. If I had stayed, and ignored my wanderlust, I might have acquired a degree myself."

"You mean that you escaped and Daniel kept bringing you back?"

"Not every time, Laura." They rounded a corner and Laura froze at the sight of the bridge over the Abyss.

"I don't believe it," she whispered, stunned. "This is New York City?"

"Only the first sight of many you'll see this weekend, Laura. Prepare to enter a world of enchantment - of sorts."

Remington took Laura in his arms, kissing her softly, murmuring a warning. "Vinnie, er, Vincent has come to greet us. Laura, be prepared. Don't let his appearance frighten you. He really is a big pussycat of a guy." He released her and pointed across the Abyss.

Laura could see the figure on the other side of the bridge. Her step faltered only a little when she realized that she was walking over a fragile bridge above a bottomless pit. As she neared Vincent, he pushed the hood off of his head. Laura felt light-headed, as she stared at the man illuminated by the many torches about the walls. Only a slight gasp left her lips; she continued walking towards him. When she crossed over, she extended her hand towards Vincent, frankly studying the man before her. Vincent took her hand carefully.

After a moment, Laura shook her head, trying to clear it, and then said, "Hello, Vincent. I've heard so much about you that I feel that I already know you.... or at least, thought I did."

Vincent chuckled. "It is nice to finally meet you too, Laura."

Laura had thought his appearance was impressive, but his voice.... She dreamily sighed, before she reached up to hug him, and kiss his cheek. Vincent was surprised but pleased at this display of

affection.

Remington finally reached them, and said, "Greetings Vincent."

Laura turned and studied her husband, looking at him as if he were her least favorite arachnid. She stepped over to him and stomped hard on his toes.

"What was that for?" he moaned.

"Your bloody 'cat' jokes!" She explained to Vincent. "Please forgive me my ill-manners, Vincent. But ever since we arrived, I've heard one feline pun after another, and could not fathom a reason as to why I was being subjected to such torture."

She then bestowed upon Vincent one of her famous charming smiles. "Finally, I get to meet a member of Harry's family who can tell me the truth about his mysterious past. It's a pleasure, Vincent." With that, they walked off, arm-in-arm, ignoring Harry trailing behind them.

Vincent delighted Laura with tales of the tunnels; even with some that mentioned her husband. And then they reached Father's chamber. Vincent escorted her to the top of the spiral staircase, clearing his throat to let Father know that they had arrived.

Father looked up and was relieved to see how comfortable Laura seemed to be with Vincent.

"*She was a phantom of delight, when first she gleamed upon my sight....*," Father said by way of greeting as he hugged Laura after she had descended. "Welcome, my dear. Harry has told us about you, but his description were in error. I chose to interpret this as a failure of his memory, rather than an error, in perception, on his part."

Remington saw Father's restrained smile as he climbed down the stairs, knowing that Father was repaying him for a past sin or two.

Catherine entered the chamber and immediately went over to greet Laura.

Remington finished off Father's quote. "*A perfect woman nobly planned, to warm, to comfort and command. And yet a spirit still and bright with something of an angelic light.*" He didn't indicate which woman he meant.

Laura looked at her husband in mock-horror. " 'You' are quoting something other than a movie? No one will believe it."

They all joined in with laughter as Remington explained, "See, Father. My memory has not failed me. *'For they remain a living thing within my mind'*."

Vincent suddenly spoke out. "*'How Green Was My Valley'*."

Remington quickly answered. "The '*book*,' and not the movie, Father."

Laura eyed her husband suspiciously, but went over to join Vincent and Catherine. She glanced at Catherine's long rose silk evening dress with an overdress of ecru lace, and then looked at her own jeans and Aran sweater.

" '*MEN!*'" she said in disgust. "Remington forgot to tell me that we were '*dressing*' for dinner!" And then she had to explain to Catherine how Harry was also Remington....

Father studied the trap that Laura has set for his queen, and conceded to Laura another game of chess. "My dear, you should be a grand master."

Laura started to set up the pieces for another game. She enjoyed playing this game with such a charming opponent, and told him so.

"In that case, dear Laura, will you play Vincent? You may be my only hope of ever seeing the boy truly trounced."

"You do take your chess quite seriously, don't you, Jacob? Laura found it difficult to call any man

'father.'

"Oh, yes. In fact, when I play Vincent, my only chance of a draw is when I distract the boy by speaking of Catherine. And that does not always work."

Laura merrily laughed as she looked about his chamber again. "It *'is'* a world of enchantment Below. Harry was right."

"Vincent's appearance tends to give that illusion. Unfortunately, the reality includes pestilence, cave-ins, floodings and the Above world. What would happen to Vincent and us if we were ever exposed...."

"I *'do'* understand, Jacob. I give you my word of honor that I will never endanger your world by word or deed. I would never betray you or my husband."

"Thank you, Laura. Harry called you a remarkable woman, and he is correct."

Laura stood, and walked over to pour some more tea for Father, stopping to admire the Pair point Art Glass table lamp that was on Father's desk. She then studied the bronze figural torchiers based in an eighteenth-century Japanese cloisonne urn, and absent-mindedly rubbed her toes against the nape of the Princess Sarouk Oriental rug on the cavern floor. "This place is amazing, Jacob. From what I've seen, you have at least five centuries of history within your grasp. I once had dreams of being an archaeologist, but, I became a detective instead."

"Some of our Helpers are historians and antiquarians, Laura. We do what we can to preserve, when surviving is not an issue. As for being a detective, surely you would employ similar skills in being an archaeologist as well...."

Much later that Saturday night, Remington and Laura, Catherine and Vincent held their own private party in Vincent's chamber. Laura and Catherine were becoming fast friends, with Catherine especially appreciating the luxury of being able to discuss Vincent with another woman. She knew that they would keep in touch in the future. Remington started refilling the glasses with the champagne that he had brought.

"Wonderful stuff," Vincent commented appreciatively. "The bubbles tickle my nose." He had somewhat lost count of the number of times Remington had filled his cup. "Kipper is keeping an eye out for Father. Father disapproves of imbibing, you see."

Remington disagreed. "No, Vincent. I can recall Father drinking ale at the Winterfest, many times. And he has never refused my Christmas brandy...."

"Ah, but Father never wanted *'me'* to drink it," Vincent added.

Catherine giggled. "Vincent is right, Harry. Remy.... or whatever. A few months ago, I served Vincent a wine, La Chapelle '61. We both received lectures on temperance. And you *'do'* know what a lecture is like from Father, don't you?"

They all laughed. Harry then mentioned, "Remember the times I used to sneak you into the movies, Vincent?"

Laura muttered to herself. "Aha! I knew that Vincent Kane the movie game!"

Vincent fondly reminisced. "Devin, Harry and I used to sneak behind the screen of this old movie theatre. We'd see all sorts of wonderful stuff, especially the cartoons."

Laura smiled up sweetly at her husband. "Even underground you found a way to get to the movies. Absolutely amazing."

"Naturally, Laura." Remington grinned. "But, then there was the last time we went to the movies. Remember, Vincent?" Vincent looked somewhat embarrassed. "Anyway, Father finally suspected something, so he followed us. What we didn't know was that the movie theatre stopped showing classic films, and had become an adult theater. You should have seen the look on Father's face

when he saw the film that we were watching!"

Vincent added, "And you should have seen the expression on our faces when we realized that we had been caught by Father!"

Laura and Catherine were laughing too hard to speak.

"Ooohhh, were we ever penitent, Laura. I was on my best behavior for an entire month afterwards, and Father still did not let me off the hook."

Laura just had to clutch her husband and whisper into his ear. "Probably the only time you were on your best behavior of a month, too!"

Remington pulled Laura in for a kiss. "And what about our honeymoon, eh, Love?" His glance bespoke a sensual punishment that would be administered later to his most willing bride.

Catherine watched them, with their familiar intimacy of lovers and knew that her heart was jealous. She wondered if she would ever be so carefree and intimate with Vincent. Her pain was reflected in Vincent's eyes.

In what can only be described as an extraordinary event, Remington woke up before Laura. He quietly left their guest chamber and went towards the bathing pools, wondering if his childhood's shining memories would match the reality. He was not that surprised to find Vincent already soaking in the farthest pool. Harry joined him, slipping into the waters before he said good morning. Vincent grouchy responded before sinking below the bubbles.

"Headache?" Remington unwisely asked. Vincent growled back. Remington took a page out of Laura's book, and became cheerier. "You know, Vincent, I have been in spas around the world, but none can compare to these pools." Vincent refused to comment. After a while, Harry quietly asked, "Want to talk about it, Vinnie?"

Vincent finally grumbled. "What is there to discuss?"

"Catherine."

Vincent shook his head, scattering water droplets all over the place. Harry smiled at this old habit. Vincent spoke sternly. "You do not understand the nature of our relationship."

"Don't I, Vincent? I remember what happened between you and Lisa. I also can imagine what Father said to you afterwards."

"Father is correct, Harry. I dare not inflict myself upon Catherine in that way. What if I should lose myself and hurt her?"

"Do you think that lovers do not hurt each other, Vincent? All men do not know their own strength in the throes of passion. You can bruise, scrape, and even give razor burn. But as long as it is not intentional, and the woman loves you, all will be forgiven. Believe me, Vincent. It is the emotional pain that man inflicts on woman that causes the greater pain. It took Laura almost three years to teach me that. But, am I ever glad that I did learn it. There is no mistake greater than *'not'* to love. If you truly love Catherine, tell her. Marriage can be heaven on earth, Vincent. Besides, from the look of things, Devin is in no hurry to give Father grandchildren."

"And what if those children look like me?"

"Don't worry about all of the *'what-ifs,'* Vincent. Just *'do.'* Besides, Catherine is the type of woman who'd love your children even more if they looked like you. And if kids aren't possible, adopt. Think of what I'd have become, if I'd known a loving family when I was a kid. Eh, Vincent?"

"That path is not for me, Harry." Vincent looked away from him, in sorrow. "Even if it were," he whispered. "I do not know how...."

Remington finally was getting angry with Vincent. "A very wise man once said, and I quote,

'Anybody could make a case - and a helluvah good case - against you getting married. The arguments are so obvious that nobody has to make them, but you're two wonderful people who happened to fall in love, and happen to have a... problem. And I think that now, no matter what kind of case some bastard could make against your getting married, there would be only one thing worse - and that would be if, knowing what you two are, knowing what you two have and knowing what you two feel, you 'didn't' get married.'" Neither one noticed Father eavesdropping in the shadows.

"Don't be a fool, Vincent. Happiness is too precious to waste."

After a while Vincent asked, "Who was this wise man?"

Remington grinned and said, "Spencer Tracy. *'Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?'* Columbia, 1967. I think that we actually saw it together, Vin-nie."

The peace was disturbed by Mouse and Cullen. "Did it! Did It!" Mouse cried.

"Did what?" a wary Vincent asked.

"We finally put together your big gifts, Harry," Cullen answered.

"Come see. Come now." Mouse danced about the chamber. Remington and Vincent climbed out of the pool.

Father limped away, pondering what Harry had said, and wondering if he had been wrong in advising Vincent about Catherine. He had much to consider.

Early Monday morning, Laura sleepily leaned into her husband's shoulder. "Why did Mildred have to book us on an early flight? I don't want to go home. I want to go Below."

Remington nodded into her hair. "Sounds wonderful. Unfortunately, Mildred will probably tell the world again, that we've been shotgunned to death, if we don't arrive at LAX on time."

Laura grumbled. "She *'does'* have a tendency to do that, doesn't she?" She sipped her airport coffee and then spit it out. "I think I'd prefer tea." Laura looked down to check all of her carry on luggage. "All those marvelous belated wedding presents that they gave us. A Tiffany bronze double picture frame from Father. I wonder that we should put in it?"

"Our wedding pictures?" Remington innocently inquired. Laura tried to kick his ankle. He adroitly avoided her high heels.

I was covered in mud. No way, buster." She bent down to stroke the mohair shawl that had been a present from Mary. "They really are nice...." And Laura remembered the present that she had received from Vincent.

Right before they had said their goodbyes, Vincent had asked to speak to her privately. She willingly went with him into his chambers, where he handed Laura a first edition leather bound copy of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry, to lure Harry into quoting something other than movies on occasion. Laura laughed at this, touched with Vincent's wry sense of humor.

"There is one other special gift, Laura."

"Vincent, you and Father and Below have given us so much already. My sister Frances will be green with envy when she sees my beautiful shawl."

Vincent spoke quite formally. "Laura, I know that Harry, or rather, Remington, loves you very much."

Laura smiled. "I know that too. But that is not why you wanted to see me, is it?"

"Laura, did Catherine tell you of my bond with her?" Laura nodded. "I have other psychic tendencies as well." He stepped closer to Laura. "I can sense life - new life." He gently placed his hand on her stomach. "And if I am correct, twins."

Laura gasped, and sat down, trying to steady herself. "Lately, I've been dreaming about having a baby...." Her voice trailed off in awe at the thought. She reached up and kissed Vincent in gratitude. "Thank you, Vincent. I'll tell Mr. Steele when we arrive in LA. If I tell him in New York, he'll have too good an excuse to buy out FAO SCHWARTZ."

Vincent castled his king's rook, immediately placing Father's white queen in jeopardy. Father looked at this move with annoyance.

Father tried a new distraction on Vincent. He casually said, "Harry and Laura are remarkably generous with their gifts to us. All of the food, and the medicines - I admitted to Laura that I really didn't want to know how he had gotten so many of the prescription drugs that we need."

Vincent tried to hide his own smile as he recalled Harry's private gift to him, that Harry had left under his pillow. Vincent was now the bewildered owner of *'The Joy of Sex, Fanny Hill, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure'* and two books by a *'Dr. Ruth.'*

Vincent suddenly realized that Father was expecting a response. "Yes, Father. Harry and Laura were indeed generous. Being detectives evidently pays quite well. And their gifts for the children.... The children have been in the chamber off the dining hall since yesterday playing with the VCR," "I hope this 'VCR' does not interfere with their schoolwork," Father commented, as he contemplated his options. Vincent rarely left him many in the end game of chess. Father managed to rescue his queen. This new gambit was working.

"Vincent," Father said, as he tried it again. "What is a 'VCR'?"

Vincent chuckled. "Surely Father, if it is a gift from Harry, it must have something to do with the movies."

Father was about to respond, when he noticed Jenny at the top of the stairs. "Come in, child. Come in. Would you care to watch me win this chess game?"

"Father, you are losing your grasp of reality," Vincent whispered. "Do not disillusion the child."

Father ignored Vincent's flippant remark, as Jenny came to stand by him. Father gave her a brief hug, before he fiddled with his glasses again.

After a few more moves, in which Vincent was not distracted, Jenny spoke up. "Vincent, are you going to watch any of the movies that Harry brought for us? Some of them are really neat."

"Perhaps later, Jenny. Maybe even Father would care to join us."

"Are *'any'* of these movies educational, Jenny?" Father sternly asked.

Her response was enthusiastic. "Oh yes, Father. Especially *'Star Wars!'*"

Jenny then studied the chess board, as Father tried a desperate ploy.

"Father, may I offer a word of advice?" she politely asked.

"Of course, child. What is it?" Father indulgently asked.

"Let the *'Wookie'* win."

END