

SON TO SON

by Nancy Mastandrea

Weeks had elapsed now since Devin Wells, alias Jeff Radler, had returned to New York City and stirred up several lives in the tranquil tunnel community. His journeys had drawn him there, urged by a long-kept secret, a yearning to seek out the place of his birth, the place where he grew up. To see if it was still in existence.

It had been nearly 15 years since he'd had any contact with the world Below; everyone there had thought him dead. One day so very long ago, he had just up and left. No sorrowful goodbyes, no turning back. At the time, it was something he had felt compelled to do. The outside world was calling him to explore it and taste what it had to offer.

And now he was gone again - but this time, not only did he have the satisfaction of knowing that his birthplace was still intact, which would have been enough; but he also had a last name - Wells. Discovering that Jacob Wells, the leader of the tunnel world, was his real father had been indeed a surprise, but one which helped explain many childhood misunderstandings.

His convincing impersonation of a lawyer hadn't fooled Catherine for a minute; she'd seen through him almost immediately. But thanks to Vincent, she hadn't blown Devin's cover and he'd left quietly, happily, at peace with his new name.... on to a new adventure in never-before-visited Alaska.

Now, things had finally settled down in both Catherine and Vincent's lives. Devin's short but welcome visit had wakened old memories for Vincent - happy memories as well as sad. He had guessed that his childhood friend would not stay in the restricting tunnels, but had hoped he would stay in New York. That did not happen.

For Catherine, the Office of the District Attorney was back to normal, her co-workers unaware of what had transpired and none the worse for wear.

"Goodnight, Joe. See you in the morning." Catherine quipped as she ducked her head into her boss's office.

Joe Maxwell glanced up from his desk, smiling crookedly, his kind eyes sparkling in the fluorescent light. His rumpled suit and tousled hair indicated that he'd had a hard day. But seeing Cathy always brought a smile to his face.

"Hey, Radcliffe! Only a half day today?" he joked.

"Got a hot date!" she answered smugly, her smirk matching her tone of voice.

"Then go for it! Get outta here and have a good time," Joe ordered, successfully hiding his jealousy.

"Thanks, Joe. Have a good night." She smiled sweetly as she departed, struggling to contain her briefcase, coat and purse.

Once all was in place, Catherine breezed through the office and down the elevator to the parking garage where she had left her car that morning. Fumbling through her purse, she hunted for her car keys. It seemed they always found their way to the bottom of the purse. As she unlocked the car door, she froze. There was a noise, an indistinct shuffling of feet. Was she being followed? She

sensed a presence, but as she cautiously scanned the parking garage she found no one skulking in the shadows. Fearfully, she took a shaky deep breath and quickly jumped into the car, fastened her seatbelt, and eased the car out into the traffic, heading for home.

It was a beautiful fall night. The air was crisp and the traffic light for a change. She drove along cheerfully, forgetting for a moment her previous scare. As day turned to night, she watched the lights as sporadically they came on one-by-one, each adding its own special illumination to the city streets. Her mind wandered to the evening ahead while she hummed a tune along with the radio. She hadn't noticed in her rearview mirror that she was being followed by a grey Chevy.

When she arrived home safely, her head was still filled with thoughts of the upcoming *'hot date'* she had mentioned earlier to Joe. Tonight, the tunnel children were staging a play, *'Romeo and Juliet'*, and she had been personally invited to attend by Vincent. When he had brought the invitation the previous week, she had been so touched she'd almost cried. The children had made the invitations themselves, personalizing each and every one.

She shook herself out of her reverie and glanced around the bedroom, fixing her eyes upon the clock. An hour was barely enough time for her to *'make herself pretty'* for Vincent, but she could do it. She could do anything when it came to that special man in her life. Scurrying madly about the bedroom, she chose her clothes hurriedly but with efficiency. Her skilled fashion sense selected a pale blue silk blouse along with a navy wool skirt which would suit her purpose perfectly this evening.

After a hot, soothing, but short shower, she dressed quickly. As she was styling her hair, she heard a loud knock on her door.

'Damn!' she thought. 'I don't have time for interruptions now.'

She peered through the peep hole; the man at her door was no one she knew. He was tall with thinning brown hair and wore a cheap suit with a white shirt and a crooked tie. He looked harmless enough though. Probably just a salesman.

"Catherine Chandler?" he asked, as he placed one foot into her apartment, expecting to be invited in.

"Who wants to know?" she volleyed belligerently, attempting to block the doorway.

He handed her a business card. "I'm sorry. My name is Jason Kindrick, private investigator. You're a hard person to find, Miss. Chandler."

Grabbing the offering from his sweaty hand, she scanned it quickly. "Well, Mr. Kindrick, I'm in kind of a hurry so make it quick," she said abruptly, staring directly into his dull, mud-brown eyes.

Standing his ground, but not trying to advance any further into her living room, he continued. "Very well, Miss. Chandler. I'll make this as brief as possible. I'm looking for a man who goes by the name of George Castle. Do you know him?"

"I'm sorry, no. The name is not familiar," she answered roughly.

"What about Charles Jacobson?"

"No, Mr. Kindrick. I really must ask you to leave now."

The P.I. reached into his breast pocket and brought out a photo. "Please, Miss. Chandler, look at this photo and tell me if you recognize this man?"

Taking the glossy from him, she reiterated. "I don't think I can...." But as her eyes searched the photo, she instantly recognized the scarred face. It was Devin Wells.

Like they say, actions speak louder than words.... Kindrick had hit pay dirt. Finally, someone knew the elusive George Castel, whether she admitted to it or not. "

You know him then?"

Catherine nodded slowly, her eyes still glued to the photo. "Why are you hunting for him? What has he done?" she asked finally. Her feelings towards Devin had softened since their initial meeting. She had seen inside the man and felt he wasn't capable of evil.

"My client, a Miss. Linda Walden, claims he fathered her child. Nothing drastic. A paternity suit is what it amounts to." He reclaimed the photo, tucking it back into his breast pocket.

Taking a step back, she grabbed the door knob. "I really can't tell you much, Mr. Kindrick. About six weeks ago, I met this man. He was using the name Jeff Radler. I don't know where he is now or much about him. I do know he left the city shortly after we met. Sorry I don't have more to tell you."

The private eye backed out of the doorway. "Thank you for your time, Miss. Chandler. If you think of anything else, no matter how minor, please give my office a call. The number's on the card."

"Mr. Kindrick?" she called to his retreating form.

He turned around to once again face her. "Yes?"

"The child.... is it a boy or a girl?" she asked curiously.

"A boy, why?"

"No reason."

Jason Kindrick could only conclude from Catherine's last question that she knew more than she was admitting. It wouldn't be a waste of his time to watch her a while longer. This was the first real lead he'd found. He decided to wait outside her building for her to leave. But he never saw that happen, and could only assume that she had visited another apartment in her building.

Via the elevator, Catherine passed the street level to the basement where Vincent waited at the threshold below. Thanks to Mr. Kindrick, she was fashionably late - which was fine in the social circle she used to frequent, but in the tunnel community, tardiness was frowned upon. Vincent, of course, was happy to see her no matter what time she came. But in order to keep everyone else happy, they quickly traveled to Father's study, barely having any time to share the day's events.

As usual, Father was ever gracious and he smiled warmly when he saw the pair approach. He still hadn't totally accepted Catherine and Vincent's relationship, but he was learning.

"Catherine, my dear. So nice to see you again."

Catherine smiled warmly and embraced the elder man, leaving a kiss upon his left cheek.

"Father.... how are you?"

"Fine, dear. But we must go. The children may become impatient."

Placing his large furry hand against the small of her back, Vincent led Catherine to the makeshift theater. They took their seats of honor in the front row next to Father.

The play went off without a hitch. Samantha's portrayal of Juliet was the highlight of the evening. '*O Romeo, Romeo. Wherefore art thou, Romeo!*' she'd said with such sincerity. The audience was mesmerized. The young girl definitely had a career ahead of her in the limelight. As the final curtain fell, the children received a standing ovation.

Samantha ran off the stage after taking her final bow and stopped short in front of the audience.

"Catherine! Vincent! Did you like it?" she asked excitedly.

Catherine took the child's small hand. "You were wonderful, Samantha.... wonderful."

The girl turned to Vincent. "Vincent?" she asked for approval.

"I am so proud of you, Samantha - of all the children. Your performances were excellent. Mr. Shakespeare would have been proud too."

"Oh, Vincent!" she giggled, and ran off to join the other performers. "Don't forget to come to our party!" she yelled over her shoulder.

"Party?" Catherine questioned as Father hobbled over to join them, relying heavily on his hand-carved cane for support. "The invitation said nothing about a party."

"The children are having a small gathering, a celebratory party. And we've all been invited. Come, my dear. Vincent," Father said, encouraging them in the direction of his chamber.

Finally the evening came to an end. The hour was late, and Catherine had to go to work the next morning. In their final moments together, the subject of Devin did not seem to be a priority.

As they reached the shaft of light beneath her building, Catherine turned to face Vincent. Tentatively, she placed her palm against his chest and felt his heart thudding beneath her fingertips. Inside she shivered as strong feelings of love stirred within her heart.

The mere touch of her hand sent tremors throughout Vincent's being. He shuddered slightly and grasped her hand, drawing it slowly away to hold gingerly between both of his. His emotion-filled eyes lingered on her pouting lips for a brief moment before dropping to the trio of hands.

Catherine knew she had overstepped the limits he'd placed upon their relationship, but what the hell. She had to give it a try.

"It was a lovely evening, Vincent," she murmured finally, at last breaking the silence between them. "The children were wonderful. It's amazing the kind of education they receive down here. I believe they get a better perspective on life here than Above," she said, gazing at his bowed head. What little light there was reflected off his golden mane. She wanted to reach out and run her fingers through the silken strands.

When she had finished speaking, waiting for a response, his head lifted slightly and he stared into her upturned face.

"Yes...." was all he uttered as his heart thumped wildly within his massive chest. He released his grip on her hand and watched it drop to her side.

"Goodnight, Vincent," she whispered. Then, without touching him, she rose onto tiptoes and gently kissed his fuzzy cheek.

His breath was drawn in quickly but before he could bid her goodnight, she had disappeared through that familiar portal.

Jason Kendrick's dedication to his case was staggering. For seven straight days now he'd trailed this woman, Catherine Chandler. But either she was a very dull woman or he was missing something very important. He watched her leave for work in the mornings and come home at night... and stay there. Only once did she leave the office to go out for lunch, and she didn't even meet anyone.

The young, blond man ran feverishly through the tunnel corridors carrying his carefully stowed precious cargo. He didn't stop until he'd reached his destination.

"Vincent! Vincent!" he shouted, breathless, at the doorway to Vincent's silent chamber.

Vincent sat quietly in his large winged chair reading a huge volume of classic poetry. Calmly placing a marker between the worn pages, he glanced up.

"What is it, Mouse?" he asked, sensing vibrations of urgency from his young friend.

Mouse bounded into the chamber waving the letter he carried. "A letter for you!" he practically screeched.

Vincent rose from the chair, stepping forward. "Who is it from?"

"Don't know. Do know it came from Alaska. Here.... open it!" He thrust the letter at Vincent, anxiously waiting for it to be opened and its writer revealed.

First, Vincent stared at the front of the envelope. The handwriting was familiar, but the return address was not. 245 Pipeline Place, Anchorage, Alaska. With one sharp claw he zipped the envelope open. The letter consisted of a single sheet of paper with writing on only one side.

"Who's it from, Vincent? Who?" Mouse asked eagerly.

"Devin," Vincent answered simply.

"Gotta tell Father. I'll be back." And off he went, just as quickly as he'd arrived.

It was the first and only letter Vincent had ever received from Devin. It was a momentous occasion indeed. Something worth savoring. In two slow strides he was back in the winged chair, carefully unfolding the letter.

Dear Vincent,

Hey buddy! How's it going? Just thought I'd keep in touch this time. Don't want to return someday a stranger. How's Catherine doing? Anything going on there I should know about? She's a real looker, Vincent. I'd hang onto her if I were you.

I'm in Alaska now as you can tell from the return address. You can write me here. I think I'll stick around for awhile. And I'm using my real name - Devin Wells. Sounds good, doesn't it? A nice name to pass down to a son I may have someday if I ever find the right woman.

Anyway, I'm earning an honest living this time just being myself. Make sure Father knows that. I know how uptight he gets.

I was glad to see everyone and I miss being there but you know how I am. I have to keep exploring the world. I'm not much of a letter writer, so I'll sign off for now. Keep in touch, huh?

Devin

After reading it once, Vincent read it a second time. Then he knelt before his trunk of keepsakes and tucked it safely away. Tonight he would share his news with Catherine.

The soft rapping she heard was a welcome sound. It had been nearly two weeks since Catherine had been Below to see the children's play, and she was afraid she had scared Vincent away with her forwardness.

As the French doors opened, her eyes filled with the magnificent sight of him. "Vincent," she murmured softly.

"Catherine." He said her name in response. It sounded so beautiful coming from his lips.

Seeing the new brightness in his eyes, she knew he had something to tell her, but that nothing was amiss. Something wonderful perhaps. "What is it, Vincent?" she beckoned.

Gazing steadily into her sea-green eyes, he edged forward. "I've received a letter from Devin," he began.

Vincent watched as Catherine's expression changed from one of contentment to that of distress. Her green eyes widened dramatically and her jaw dropped open. She had forgotten all about Jason Kindrick's visit.

Certainly this was not the response Vincent expected to his news. "Tell me, Catherine. What's wrong?" he urged. The light from the full moon cast long shadows across the terrace floor and allowed him to see her face clearly.

She paced a few steps away from him and then back again, all the while wringing her hands together. "It slipped my mind last time I was Below. A man, a private investigator, came to my apartment looking for Devin," she babbled.

Reaching out with both hands, Vincent grasped her shoulders gently, attempting to calm her and

himself at the same time. "Why, Catherine?" he asked, with worry in his azure eyes.

She gazed up into those eyes, gathering courage from his physical presence and continued. "It seems a woman that Devin knows is claiming that he is the father of her child, her son."

He didn't need to think about his answer. He had known Devin since he was a child. "If he had known, Catherine, I'm positive he would have done the right thing. I know he can be irresponsible at times, but not when it involves a child, his child, his son. He would want to know."

She moved closer into his embrace, and felt his arms slide around her waist. Speaking close to his ear in a whisper, she asked. "But how, Vincent? We don't even know where he is."

"Yes, Catherine, we do." He drew her away again, holding her shoulders, and gazed with once again happy eyes directly into her upturned face. "As I started telling you, Devin has written me from, of all places, Alaska. We can write to him there. He's given me his address."

She smiled at his wonderful news, news that she knew made him feel special. "Vincent, I think a telegram would be faster. I believe Jason Kindrick is watching me, and I don't want him to stumble across you. So the quicker I can give him some information, the better."

Catherine left the balcony and returned shortly with pen and paper in hand. Together they drafted a short but precise message to wire to Devin.

The telegram was sent the following day. The next evening while Catherine was preparing dinner, her telephone rang.

After three rings, she picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

The voice she heard from the other end of the line was vaguely familiar. "Hey, is this my favorite assistant district attorney?" the caller asked.

Slightly annoyed, she asked. "Who is this?"

The man chuckled at her discomfort. "The elusive Devin Wells."

"Devin?" she said, relieved. "Did you get the wire? Of course you did. That's why you're calling, right?"

Devin laughed again. The girl was babbling. "Right. I'll be flying in tomorrow. Can you set up a meeting with this private eye? Maybe at your apartment?"

"Sure, Devin."

"This woman, did Kindrick tell you her name? Was it Linda?"

"Yes. Linda Walden. You know her then, I guess."

"Yes.... I'll tell you all about it when I get there. Tell Kindrick to come around seven o'clock tomorrow night. See you then, Chandler. Hi to Vincent. Bye."

After hanging up with Devin, Catherine immediately called Jason Kindrick to set up the meeting.

Luckily, the DA's office wasn't too busy so Catherine made it home at a decent time. She didn't want to miss Devin or Kindrick.

Devin was the first to arrive at 5:30 pm. He strolled in like he'd come from just around the corner instead of Alaska. With him he brought take-out Chinese, the least he could do for Catherine's kindness.

Eventually, they got down to the meat of the reason Devin was there. Between bites of chicken chow mein, Catherine's curiosity got the best of her.

"So, Devin," she began, "tell me about Linda. Do you think the child is yours?"

"Linda, hmmm," he mumbled while swallowing a huge mouthful of sweet-and-sour pork. "We had

a thing for awhile. I was really beginning to fall in love with her when I found out she was seeing someone else at the same time. When I found out, I asked to her to choose, him or me. Well, she didn't want to give either of us up, so I left. That's not the kind of relationship I'm looking for. The child I suppose, could be mine. There's a fifty-fifty chance. I don't think Ken, the other guy, stuck around either. I wonder if Kindrick is looking for him too."

"I'm sorry, Devin. If she had chosen you, do you think you would have stayed with her?"

"It's possible. It's the closest I've come to finding the right woman."

"What if the child is yours? Have you thought about what you'll do? Vincent tells me you're happy in Alaska. Is there someone special there?"

"I've thought about it but I haven't come to any decision. Having a son.... I don't know. It would be great, but.... I don't know what kind of father I'd be. I'll have to wait and see what the tests tell me."

At precisely seven pm, Jason Kindrick was knocking on Catherine's door. He was dressed in more or less the same manner as the last time Catherine had seen him. That rumpled look.

Waiting was not something that Devin did well. It forced him to think, which was not something he enjoyed doing. Nevertheless, he had to wait. For a while he paced, for a while he walked. The tunnels allowed anxious feet to wander. Devin found himself sitting before the triple falls staring into the tumbling waters. He swore he'd never do to any son of his what Father had done to him. If this child was his, he would tell the boy as soon as he was able to understand even, if he wasn't always able to be there for him.

He couldn't go back to Linda, not now. His life was in Alaska with Karen, the latest love of his life. Vincent and Catherine found Devin sleeping by the falls hours later. They woke him and presented him with an envelope.

"Your results, I believe," Catherine said, handing him the envelope.

Hastily, Devin tore open the envelope and ripped the contents out. His eyes quickly scanned the writing. He was not the father.

Devin remained quiet.

"Well," Vincent said.

Devin gazed up into his brother's eyes. "I'm not the father," he said forlornly.

"Are you sad about this?" Catherine piped in.

"In a way, I'm relieved but I'm also disappointed. Just the idea of having a son is frightening, but I was sort of looking forward to it. I don't know, I don't know how to feel."

"You'll have a son one day, Devin. You will," Vincent soothed.

"And you will be a wonderful father. Don't worry, when the time is right, it will happen." Catherine added. With a glance at Vincent, her own words reverberated through her mind. *'When the time is right, it will happen....'*

END