

LEAP OF FAITH

by Christine Cunningham

(from *MASQUERADES* '93)

Catherine had been away for a full week and Father's patience with Vincent was wearing thin. He had watched as his son paced the tunnels and chambers, hardly speaking to anyone.

"Vincent, for pity's sake, sit down and talk to me. Catherine has left the city several times in the past and though you have worried for her, I can't ever remember you being so anxious before. Can't you tell me, son?"

Vincent saw the worry in Father's eyes and tried to explain, although it was difficult for him.

"I'm sorry for worrying you, Father, but this week without Catherine is somehow different to other times she has been away." He shook his head, trying to put his thoughts in some kind of order. "How to explain. In a way, we needed the time apart. Our feelings for each other were becoming... being so close to one another without... I apologize, Father. I'm not being very coherent, am I?"

"There is no need to struggle with the words, Vincent," said Father. "I understand you well enough. Deep down I suppose I knew the problem, but I just did not want to acknowledge it. We talked of this when you were young and I thought that would be the end of it, but neither of us reckoned on Catherine coming into your life, did we? Or that she would love all that you are. I just do not want you hurt by any of this."

Vincent shrugged. "I have no answers, Father, but one thing I do know, Catherine would never hurt me and that thought sustains me."

Catherine was on a plane returning from Washington, after a week of lectures on new procedures within the DA's jurisdiction. The time away from Vincent had been long, but in her opinion, necessary. She had finally lost the battle of restraint where her physical feelings were concerned. It had become clear that he would never cross the line he had drawn for them both, so she made a decision which would either open new doors for them, or drive a permanent wedge between them. To her way of thinking, someone had to make a move and it was going to be her. Right or wrong. The decision made, she felt a determination grow and focused on the outcome being one of new dreams and possibilities.

The drive from the airport to her apartment seemed to take forever. She was anxious to go Below and get it over with. She deliberately closed her thoughts from Vincent, not wanting him to sense what she was about to do. She needed all the help she could get and surprise would be an added advantage.

Two hours later she was hurrying through the tunnels on her way to Vincent's chamber, when she was waylaid by Father.

"Dammit, he's all I need," she mumbled under her breath.

"Catherine, welcome back. I'm afraid Vincent is off on one of his solitary walks. We've hardly seen him at all this past week. I don't know when he will return, but maybe you would keep an old man company in the meantime?"

"Terrific," she said, not very convincingly, but it seemed to satisfy Father.

"Good, because I wanted us to talk."

Seated in his chamber, Father began to speak.

"Vincent has been in an agitated frame of mind ever since you left. We talked a couple of days ago, not the private details you understand, but enough for me to get the general drift."

"And you disapprove. Is that what you are trying to tell me, Father?"

"Whether I approve or not is irrelevant now. Vincent is the one struggling with emotions he feels he has no right to feel."

Catherine felt the anger rise within her. **"Sure he is and who do you suppose planted that idea in his head in the first place?"** She got up and paced the chamber, furiously berating the stunned old man. **"All his life he's been told he's different. Well you tell me, Father, what exactly constitutes different? None of us are the same. Wasn't it you that emphasized his otherness, by telling him he should always keep himself covered from prying eyes? Then there was that stupid incident with Lisa, which should have been handled better by you. By all accounts everyone knew what she was like, but did anybody ever tell Vincent? You all made him feel he was unworthy of a woman's touch."**

Father held up his hand in protest at her last remark. "Oh! No, Catherine. That I never did. I agree I should have been more understanding about what happened, but you have to realize that it was the first time Vincent had shown any signs of a sexual nature. Back then, we were not even sure he was able to feel those things. After all, he was nearly eighteen at the time. **When Lisa left, I tried to tell him to be patient, that one day his dream of love would happen. I told him that. I did,**" he beseeched her.

"Yes, you let him dream, actively encouraged that dream. You let him have something to hope for, but deep down you confidently thought it wouldn't ever come to be. And then what happened? One Catherine Chandler walks into his life and shoots everything all to hell. Upsets the status quo and you see his dream in his grasp and it scares the crap out of both of you."

She sat down again and poured herself a cup of tea with hands that shook. Father looked at her and saw a stranger. This wasn't the gentle Catherine he knew and had come to love. Here was a spitting tigress fighting for what she wanted and it threw him for a loop.

"Catherine, I..."

She cut him off ruthlessly. **"I haven't finished yet, not by a long shot. You brought up this conversation and I will have my say. Vincent is different, so what? We will never really know how he came to be, but whatever extra something he carries in his genes makes him more of a man, not less, and I love and want all that he is. Father, you are looking at a woman who wants her man and I don't need our bond to know he wants me in the same way. We have gone through enough heartache and sacrifice to last a lifetime and I'm here to tell you that neither you nor anyone else is going to stop me making our dream a reality."**

She took a deep calming breath and quietly said, "Now, you can aid us with encouragement or you can stay out of it. Your approval and blessing would be welcome, but I can live without it. I can't live without Vincent, however, and he is all that matters." She picked up her coat and went to leave the chamber. "I am going to

Vincent's chamber to wait, however long it takes. Would you please see to it that we are not disturbed?" And she was gone, leaving a stunned Father in her wake.

"Dear God, where will it all end?"

Catherine stumbled into Vincent's chamber and collapsed on the bed, drained of energy after the confrontation with Father, energy she needed to recover before facing her man. Looking around the room, she was momentarily surprised by the untidiness surrounding her. Well, it would give her something to do until Vincent returned.

Books were strewn all over his desk, some laying open. She picked one up to see what he had been reading, but a few lines were enough to tell her that he had been in a sombre mood at the time. Closing the cover, she replaced it on the shelf along with the others. Clothes were folded and put away carefully, but not before she allowed herself the luxury of pressing them to her face to inhale the scent that was uniquely Vincent. Leather, candle smoke and a muskiness that could only be his. And this was how Vincent found her.

He had not sensed her nearness and knew that for reasons of her own, had blocked her mind from him. Nevertheless, he was overjoyed to see her. "Catherine," he breathed, "I have missed you. Welcome home."

The sound of his velvet voice shimmered across the distance separating them and she shivered involuntarily, wanting only to throw herself into his arms, but she pushed the thought away and turned to face him very slowly.

"Hello, Vincent. I missed you too. Have you been well?"

Vincent was puzzled and just a little hurt by her polite manner and he tilted his head to one side, concentrating firmly, until he broke through the barrier she had erected between them. What he found was somewhat reassuring. She was not as calm as she outwardly appeared to be and there was something else which he could not identify.

"You look different, Catherine."

"I do? How so?"

He spread his hands outward, indicating his confusion. "I am not sure, only that I feel your determination. As though you had a problem which has now been resolved."

Catherine shrugged. "You're half right. I still have the problem, but when I was in Washington I made a decision. Acting on that decision will hopefully solve the problem, or could make matters worse. Either way, I'm committed."

Vincent had always known that Catherine was brave. She had to be in order to do the work she did, but he did not realize how brave. So much courageous than he, as he at last realized what her problem was.

"This problem of yours. It is me, is it not?"

God, he looked so vulnerable standing there, so lost, and it took all her willpower to keep from hugging him to her like a small child needing comfort.

Smiling in what she hoped was a reassuring manner, she bade him to sit down. Facing each other across the expanse of his desk, Catherine stepped into the unknown.

"The problem is us, Vincent, not just you. I believe the time has come where we need to talk openly about our lives and of our true feelings for each other. Do you agree?"

Poor Vincent sat as though turned to stone. Part of him welcomed it, yet part of him was afraid. "I am such a coward, Catherine. I know you are right but I am afraid of what you may tell me."

"You are not, nor ever could be a coward, Vincent. Do not assume the worst. First off, I love you. Do you accept and believe that?"

He nodded his head warily.

"And can I accept and believe that you love me?"

Another nod, more emphatic this time.

"So, having established that fact we can move on. Vincent, we have known each other for over two years, becoming friends, learning from each other, helping each other, and somewhere along our journey the friendship turned into a deep spiritual love, which has now developed into a need to express that love in a physical way. By both of us. Do you still agree with me?"

Vincent found his voice after long moments of silence. "Physical love is not for me, Catherine. It cannot be."

'Here we go,' thought Catherine. 'Here is where I begin to tear down the wall, brick by brick.'

"Are you saying that you cannot make love with me, or simply that you won't? And be truthful, Vincent."

He saw the determination in her eyes, her singlemindedness, and her strength of faith. So be it, then. He would tell her the truth.

"I am fully able to enter into a physical relationship, although I have never travelled that path, as I am sure you know. Yes, I have felt our love grow and deepen into something which threatens to tear me apart inside. I want and desire you, of course I do, but there is a beast inside me which, when let loose, wants nothing more than to hurt. To lose control of that beast, by whatever means, would be to hurt you and that I will never do. Not if my life depended on it. Understand Catherine, that the hunger I feel inside for you terrifies me."

At last they were getting somewhere, painful as it was for Vincent. For the first time, she reached out and held his hand. A contact which made them both shudder.

"I know this must be painful for you to discuss, Vincent, and I'm sorry, but I fully intend to see it through. I know you want me, I didn't need our connection to realize that. Hearing the words from your own lips just confirms it. As for the rest of what you said, the only word I can come up with is **'Bullshit'**."

"Your fear of causing me harm may well have been a valid reason a long time ago, but not it's only an excuse and a tired one at that. You've hidden behind it for long enough. Vincent, I love all that you are and the so-called beast which you struggle so hard to control knows it too. The other side of who you are protects me always, so why should you believe that in loving me, it would hurt me? It's ludicrous. Losing yourself to passion would give you a freedom you have never known, or dreamt of. For the whole length of our relationship, I have abided by your rules, never crossing the boundaries you set for us, prepared to follow wherever you led. The trouble is, Vincent, you're not leading us anywhere, so how in the world are we supposed to move forwards?"

"Take your own advice and face your fears. Take a leap of faith with me. And remember that different is as different does. If you were anything than what you are, you would not be the man I fell in love with. I truly believe we were fated to fall in love and so we owe it to ourselves to explore every facet of that love, wherever it may lead us."

Vincent sat in the chair staring at her with such a haunted, trapped look on his face that she finally took pity on him. Walking around the desk, she leaned towards him and he could smell the subtle scent of her perfume invading his senses and making his head swim. Stroking his hair, Catherine gently calmed his shattered nerves.

"Don't look so worried, my love. I'm not for one moment suggesting we make love this instant, or even tomorrow, or the next day. I'm just reminding you that with love, all things are possible, and we know that

better than anyone, don't we? I'm going to give you some time alone - and Vincent, don't think, don't analyze, just feel. Open your heart and listen to what it tells you. I can't come back down until Saturday at the earliest, but you can come to me any time. Until then, will you look after something for me?"

He could barely get the words past his mouth. "Of course. What is it?"

"This," and she leaned closer to kiss his lips lingeringly. "I want it back with interest next time I see you. Be well, my love," and she was gone.

His fingers stole up to his mouth and his tongue came out to savour the taste of her kiss. *'She kissed me, she really kissed me,'* the unspoken thought pounded through his head over and over again.

Father couldn't stand it any longer. He just had to find out what was happening. He hadn't heard any raised voices or fierce roars of denial from Vincent. Nothing, and it was driving him crazy.

Closing the unread book resting on his lap and returning it to the shelf, he reached for his muffler, tying it securely around his neck, picked up his cane and proceeded silently to Vincent's chamber.

What could he say if they caught him eavesdropping?

He crept on until he reached his objective. The interior of the chamber was almost in darkness and he strained to see through the gloom. Cocking his head, he listened intently but heard only silence.

The candles could have burned out of course, but then again maybe they had been snuffed out and even now his son and Catherine could already be...

He halted the half-formed idea abruptly.

'No, not so soon, surely. What should I do? I'm no voyeur and they would never forgive me for intruding. No, best leave it alone for now. If they were at last together in there, then he would give his blessing. If not, the day would come soon enough.'

Catherine had convinced him of that, indomitable woman that she was. He sent a prayer heavenward and limped slowly back to his chamber and sleep if that was at all possible.

Vincent sat in the chair unmoving. He had not noticed the candles burning low, or even heard Father outside. All his senses were centered on Catherine.

'How can she be so sure?' Yet, she was. He went over all she had said and one thing above everything else stood out. *Was he really using his fear of hurting her as an excuse rather than a reason? Be truthful, she said.* He relived his fierce rages, terrifying to himself and everyone else Below, when no one could go near him, no one, save Catherine. She trusted the beast in him not to harm her and it hadn't, not once. So it had to be an excuse. Vincent accepted it as the truth, but that then left the question of the real reason he held back from loving her as he wanted. He ruled out that it could have anything to do with Lisa all those years ago. He had not wanted to hurt her and he knew he wouldn't have, if she had felt the same as he. She had only been teasing him in the cruellest way; he was not alone in that regard. Many young men had suffered at the hands of flirting females. The whole point was that it had been an accident, nothing more. No, he could not use Lisa as a reason.

What then held him back?

All that was left was his deep-seated fear of rejection and the possible inability to satisfy all of Catherine's desires. He realized this was one instance where relying on his instincts and their bond might not be enough. It was too important. He truthfully did not know what to do and it embarrassed him. It seemed he'd had a more

sheltered upbringing than he'd thought.

The irony was, that the workings of the female anatomy were no mystery to him at all; he and Father had spent many hours pouring over medical books, improving their knowledge, crucial for emergencies when Peter Alcott was unavailable. The trouble was that pictures in a medical book were not very helpful and he had never seen any of those girlie magazines. Father forbade anything of that nature. Unbecoming to women, he'd said and he was right of course. In truth, he had never actually seen a completely naked woman in the flesh, or otherwise, not even when he had first found Catherine. Mary and Father had undressed her and all he had seen was a bruised bare back. He felt woefully inadequate. The clinical details of the act of love itself he understood. It was the foreplay, the gentle buildup to a glorious oneness which was his stumbling block. He did not want to appear awkward and clumsy, like a callow youth taking his first steps into manhood, which was what he really was. He did have some pride.

He needed to learn and the only way open to him was the written word. Books, romantic, historical novels, that was the answer. Jamie and Rebecca were forever '*oohing*' and '*aahing*' over some wildly handsome and rakish pirate between the pages of a lurid paperback. He would have to borrow them and suffer their girlish comments as to why he wanted them.

That decided, Vincent slowly got to his feet, stretching cramped limbs, surprised at how long he had been sitting in the darkness.

"Oh! Catherine, how steadfast you are to put up with one such as I. Do not give up on me just yet, please." With those words, he lay upon his bed, pulled the covers over him and slipped into a dreamless sleep.

Catherine, on the other hand, could not sleep at all. She did not regret what had been said earlier in Vincent's chamber, nor her conversation with Father, which was long overdue. She felt they had waited long enough, in fact she was heartily sick and tired of pussyfooting around Vincent's feelings. It all seemed so simple and straightforward to her. They loved, therefore they should be lovers. Should even now be curled up together in his bed, skin touching skin, hearts beating in unison. No, she didn't regret speaking out. '*What bothered her was how he was coping with it. Was he suffering and blaming his differences on their plight? More than likely, he usually blamed himself.*' She could only hope and pray that he had really listened with an open heart and mind, believing she loved all that he was. "Have faith, Vincent. Your heart knows the truth, so trust it, please."

When Vincent met with Father for breakfast the next morning, the old man could barely contain his curiosity.

"Good morning, Vincent. I trust you slept well?"

"Well enough, Father, thank you for asking." He poured the tea and passed a steaming cup to Father, along with a plate of buttered bread, then sat down and began to eat his own, much to Father's chagrin.

"Catherine and I had a long chat yesterday while she waited for your return. Did she stay long with you? I didn't see her before she left."

Vincent smiled behind his mug. Poor Father. Trying so hard to be diplomatic and failing miserably. He was practically transparent in his desire to know what went on inside the chamber last evening.

"She stayed some time, Father, doing most of the talking, while I had to listen."

'That was it' Father snorted noisily. "Humph! I bet she did. You should have heard the tongue lashing she gave me. I mean, what did I do? I tell you, Vincent, she's a changed woman. Do you know, she actually swore at me, told me either to help you both or stay out of your affairs. Really, I was quite shocked."

Vincent sighed. "Catherine has been patient a long time, Father. How many other women would wait as long as she has? I do not blame her for speaking out. One of us had to, and what she said to me came straight from her heart. There is no wrong in that."

"That may be, Vincent, but your relationship is different. It needs careful thought and she ought to understand that."

Different. There was that word again and he was beginning to hate it. Different is as different does.

"I'm never allowed to forget it, am I? There is always something or someone to remind me and it is usually you, Father. I will say this only once. I am different to look upon. In every other respect I am the same as you, as any man. Catherine sees that, has always seen it and I finally see it too. Look on me and see a man, Father, because that is what I am. No longer a boy who knows not his own mind and has to be protected from life."

Father looked carefully into Vincent's eyes and saw a son to be proud of. "I have watched you grow with great love and pride, Vincent. The way you have struggled to overcome problems no one should have to contend with, and still emerge with your spirit undiminished, never ceases to amaze me. If I have overprotected you, it was done only to save you from hurt. But now it seems you must go your own way. You have a great capacity for love, Vincent, and in Catherine you have a wonderful woman. Just don't ever underestimate her. I can assure you I never will again. I will not interfere, but know I am here whenever you need me. Forgive me, Vincent, but when a father realizes that his son has outgrown his council, it is hard to let go."

Vincent smiled. "I will always value your advice, Father, but in the end I must make my own decisions. I've finally grown up. As to Catherine and myself, what she told me was true and the only thing stopping me from going to her is my abysmal lack of knowledge. Truly, Father, I am sorry to say that you have neglected parts of my education most shamefully."

Poor Father squirmed in his chair, not knowing where to look, anywhere but at Vincent. *'Lord, what a mess.'* Vincent laughed a little depreciatingly.

"I am sure I am not the only thirty-five year old virgin walking around and I am sure that Catherine would teach me with gentleness and patience, but I have some pride. I have no desire to go to her knowing nothing at all. The irony is, if Catherine were to ask me about medical matters concerning her body, I would have no trouble at all. Strange, is it not?"

This was terrible and Father felt awful. His son had come to a momentous crossroads in his life and after painful-soul searching, decided which path to take, only to find how unprepared he was for the journey. Would nothing ever come easy for Vincent?

"Dear Lord, I'm sorry, son. I'm not much help, am I? Look, there are plenty of books here that might help. I can find some for you, there must be something appropriate here. Lord, what a disaster."

Vincent watched open-mouthed in surprise as his Father fell over himself in his eagerness to fill in the missing pieces of his son's education.

"Father, please calm down, I beg of you. Do not worry yourself. I have a plan which I believe will solve my problem."

Father brightened at once. "You have? What?" He saw the grin come over his son's face and crossed his fingers, hoping it wouldn't be too drastic a plan.

"I am going to borrow some of Jamie and Rebecca's paperback romances. Simple."

Oh help! Reading such utter garbage would teach him more than he bargained for. *Talk about a crash course. Still, it got HIM off the hook.*

"Um! Well, if you are sure then go ahead, but do not have them in full view of everyone. We have to think of the children, not to mention sparing my blushes." Seeing Vincent grin again, he tutted. "Oh, go on. Get out of here," and he covered his ears with his hands. to blot out the sound of Vincent's laughter as he exited the chamber.

After concluding the morning lessons with the children, Vincent went in search of Jamie and Rebecca. They often took their lunch together and exchanged books or passed opinions on ones they had just read. He strolled casually through the communal dining room, talking to various people while scanning the chamber looking for them. William caught sight of him and went to lay a place at the table.

"It's all right, William, a sandwich will suffice for now. I'll help myself, shall I?"

The cook shrugged his massive shoulders. "Suit yourself. There's cheese and pickle or egg and cress. And clean up after you." Vincent smiled. William hated anyone messing up his kitchen. Ten minutes later, armed with two huge sandwiches, a glass of milk and a juicy red apple, he walked towards Jamie and Rebecca.

"May I join you, ladies?" They were engrossed in their books and barely glanced at him, just waved a hand to an empty chair. He attacked his lunch with gusto and listened to the sighs coming from the girls opposite.

"Sounds like a good book. What's it called?"

'That was an innocent enough remark to get the conversation going,' he thought.

Rebecca dragged her eyes away from the pages and looked up. "I doubt you would like it, Vincent. Not your type of literature at all."

To which Jamie giggled. "You can say that again."

"Really? Why do you say that? You know I will read almost anything if it is well written."

The two girls looked at each other, then at Vincent, then passed the books to him, watching his expression.

He glanced at the covers and somehow managed to keep from blushing. Pictures of half-clad dusky maidens passionately held in the arms of bare-chested pirates... And the titles... *'FLOWER AND THE FLAME, CARIBBEAN PASSIONS.. Phew!'*

"Maybe I should try them. Could I borrow some?"

They sat wide-eyed with astonishment. *He never, but never, touched these kinds of books.*

"But... Vincent, you've always said they were trashy and that we were silly for reading them."

"Yes, I did, didn't I? And I had no right passing opinions on things I've never read, so I thought I should rectify it. Could be I am completely wrong and they are well-written novels. So, may I borrow some?"

Jamie found her voice at last. "Well, sure. I've got plenty in my chamber. Come over anytime and help yourself, but I feel I should warn you, Vincent. You see, there's quite a lot of um... ah... love stuff. You know, passionate clinches." She was colouring up like a brandy bottle. *What a conversation to be having with Vincent, of all people.*

He hid a smile, imagining what they would be talking about after he'd left. "I understand perfectly, Jamie. You mean there are graphically descriptive scenes of a sexual nature." He dropped the books back on the table and

took his leave. "I will come by your chamber before the evening meal, if I may." As he left he chuckled to himself. *'That was not so traumatic after all,'* he mused.

The girls watched him leave and Jamie wondered aloud. "Well, well, well. What's gotten into him?"

Rebecca shrugged. "Maybe he's fed up with the classics and wants to try reading some books by authors who are still living."

Jamie raised her eyebrows disbelievingly. "Yeah, sure. Or maybe he's just plain horny!"

Rebecca was shocked. "Jamie, please, keep your voice down. Honestly, the things you say! Vincent?"

"Yeah, Vincent. And why not? He's a man in love, isn't he?"

Rebecca thought for a moment. It was hard to believe their Vincent was with a woman, but Jamie was right. It would just take a bit of getting used to, that's all.

"Yes, of course he is. Be interesting to follow developments, don't you think?" Both girls looked at each other and giggled. *Interesting indeed.*

Catherine went back to work, her mind still on Vincent and their conversation. Her office was just as she'd left it before the Washington trip, except that her *'In Tray'* was filled to overflowing with cases pending.

"Oh, wonderful."

Joe followed in behind her and ruffled her hair affectionately. "Just because you go on a week's vacation, don't mean the crooks do too, Radcliffe. How was it up there?"

She poured a cup of coffee and sat at her desk mulling over the past week. "Joe, those people up there haven't got a clue what really goes on in the DA's office. They come up with hare-brained schemes that have no chance of making our job any easier. All it does it makes more damn paperwork. Bunch of know-nothing, pen-pushing bureaucrats! Makes my blood boil!"

Joe laughed. "Okay, okay, I get the picture. Aside from that, did you enjoy yourself? I've never been to Washington."

Catherine grimaced and shook her head. "I hated that place. It's full of politicians putting on a show in public and slinging the dirt in private. And the women are worse. Gossip columnists earn easy paychecks up there, the scandals are hotter than Hollywood. I grew up living with those kinds of people and I'm glad I got out. Anyway, enough of that. What's happening here? Anything I should know?"

"Nah! Situation normal all f..."

"Yeah, Joe. I get it. No need to elaborate. *SNAFU*, right?"

Joe laughed. "Listen, I'll leave you to it and, by the way, Moreno wants a report on your trip ASAP." He was still laughing as he exited her office and entered his own.

The day dragged on and the pile in her tray hardly diminished at all. *'Why do we bother?'* she thought. *'Put one crook away and two more crawl out of the woodwork.'*

Six o'clock came and went and she was still at it when Joe tapped at the door and came in.

"Quitting time, Cath. It'll still be there in the morning. C'mom, I'll buy you a coffee."

She glanced at her watch. "Six forty-five already? Thanks for the offer, Joe, but I'll take a raincheck. I'm going to have an early night."

Joe waited as she cleared her desk and walked out of the building with him, just in time to grab a cab. "How's that for timing? In you get. See you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Joe. Night."

Opening the door to her apartment, she wondered whether Vincent would come, but she guessed he probably wouldn't. It was too soon, so she resigned herself to a few more lonely nights.

'Just don't take too long, Vincent Wells, that's all.'

Vincent had been to visit Jamie and had acquired several paperbacks. Now, safely ensconced in his chamber, he settled down with the first book. The cover was not dissimilar to the ones he'd seen earlier and as he began to read he was soon engrossed in the adventures of swash-buckling pirates on the high seas. He was pleasantly surprised by the quality of the writing and ruefully admitted that the author had really been able to capture his imagination. He could almost smell the exotic spices, feel the misery endured by the poor unfortunates chained below decks in the slave ships. Could even see himself standing bare-chested and proud at the helm of a captured Spanish galleon, watching the sails unfurl to billow in the wind. The hero of the story was a cut-throat renegade with a heart of gold, an irresistible combination to the female populace. The heroine, however, was determined to resist his advances, but of course, she surrendered after a token fight.

Vincent eagerly turned the page and was hit between the eyes by the wildly erotic description of the love scene. He avidly devoured every word of the next few pages, the writer leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination. Every emotion felt by the couple was revealed in minute detail, so much so that Vincent felt beads of sweat standing out on his forehead and lips and he shifted uncomfortably in his chair, trying to relieve the pressure in his pants, caused by the rapid swelling of his manhood. He lay the book down for a moment and sucked in a lungful of air, startled to realize that for the last minute or two he had forgotten to breathe. *'Can it really be like that, so intense that your whole being is concentrated on giving and receiving pleasure, to the extent that all else is as nothing?'* He picked up the book again and continued to read until the final page was turned.

His mind swam with images of all he had read and when he went to bed that night, he allowed his imagination to run unchecked, transposing the faces of the pirate and his lady into Catherine and himself. **HIS** hands undressing her, **HIS** hands caressing her and feeling her hands on him, just as it was in the book. But most joyful of all was looking into Catherine's eyes and seeing complete acceptance, because she loved all that he was.

"Oh! Catherine, it will be all right. With love anything is possible and soon, I will hold your hands in mine and together we will take that leap of faith. My heart is open, laid bare, and all I can feel is you, you loving me always. Sleep well, dearest Catherine." He closed his eyes and drifted away into the most peaceful sleep he had ever known.

Catherine's sleep that night was riddled with jumbled erotic dreams and the next morning, she couldn't be

sure if they were products of her imagination or Vincent's. '*Whichever it was, it was a step in the right direction,*' and she went to work with a spring in her step, ready for anything the constant chaos of the DA's office could throw at her.

Over the course of the next few days, Vincent was always late for breakfast, lunch and dinner, because he simply could not leave the novels alone. He resented the intrusion of work details taking him away from the adventures he read about, not to mention the lessons he was receiving in the ways of love. Everyone was becoming a tad annoyed at his tardiness. William, for upsetting his kitchen routine; Cullen and Kanin, because he wanted to rush jobs rather than do them properly; and Mouse, because he wasn't spending enough time '*hanging out*'. And Vincent was oblivious to it all.

The only ones not annoyed at him were Jamie, Rebecca, Father and Mary. The first three because they knew why he was acting the way he was, and Mary because she never got annoyed with him anyway, even when there was cause.

When he had completed all of Jamie's paperbacks he returned them with thanks and an apology. "I apologize unreservedly, Jamie. The majority were very well-written and I profess to having enjoyed them immensely. So much so, that I do believe I have become addicted to pirates and Elizabethan espionage. Dare I ask if you have more?"

Jamie was delighted. "Vincent, you wouldn't believe how many there are Above, just waiting to be salvaged from trashcans. These kinds of books are the throw-away kind. Marshmallow reading, I think they called it. Give me a few hours and I'll have you a crateful." She eyed him curiously and ventured to ask, "What about the other stuff. You know, the naughty bits?"

Vincent chuckled. "Very enlightening, Jamie and very tastefully written. Need I say more?"

She giggled. "No. I understand perfectly. They make me breathless, too. Seeing Catherine anytime soon?" She couldn't resist tacking on that last remark and Vincent couldn't help colouring up.

"Soon, yes, and I know you are teasing me, but please do not tell everyone. That would be too much."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Vincent, really. I just think it's great that you and Catherine will be together. My lips are sealed. Promise." And to prove her point, she ran her finger across her mouth, zipping it shut.

Vincent gave her a grateful hug. "Thank you, Jamie."

Father was reading a pocket-sized version of *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* when Vincent joined him in his chamber.

"What are you reading, Father?"

He looked up and showed him the cover. "A work of art in case you'd forgotten." he said with a twinkle in his eye.

'*First Jamie, now Father.*' "Father," he said patiently, "I have not, nor will I ever, eschew the classics, but I have to admit, I enjoyed the marshmallow reading, as Jamie called it. I believe you should widen your horizons, Father. There is much to commend the modern fiction writers. Very well-researched, good use of the English language and an interesting story as well."

Father grimaced. "If they have served their purpose and helped you, then I'm glad, but if you don't mind, I will stick with the classics, thank you very much."

Vincent leaned down and kissed the top of Father's head. "Very well, but you don't know what you are

missing."

"Humph! Haven't you got chores to do before dinner?"

Vincent laughed affectionately and departed in a buoyant frame of mind. A plan was coming together in his head.

"Not long, Catherine. Soon, I promise."

It was now Friday and Catherine was due to go Below the next day to spend the weekend. *'Would he come tonight or would she have to resign herself to a few more hours alone?'* She wished their bond worked as strongly for her as it did for Vincent. That way at least she'd have some idea of his thoughts, instead of this agony of wondering.

Some time during the night, she was woken by a tapping on the balcony doors. *'Vincent. He'd come.'* Throwing back the covers, she rose from the bed and rushed to open the doors, not even thinking to put on a robe to cover the transparency of her nightgown. Vincent swallowed when he saw her standing before him, the light from the bedroom beyond, shining through the flimsy material, allowing him to see more than either of them expected. They stared, just absorbing the joy of seeing the other for long moments.

"I was beginning to think I would have to wait until the morning. I'm so glad you came, Vincent."

He moved a step closer. "I cannot stay long, Catherine. I really came to make sure you were still coming Below and also to give you this." He held up a single red rose and solemnly presented it to her.

How thoughtful he was. Whenever he came to her balcony, he always brought her a gift, whether it be a tangible thing like a rose, or simply a piece of poetry he had found which he thought she would like.

"Thank you, Vincent, it's lovely."

He stayed for only a few moments and then prepared to leave. He was about to climb over the rail when he suddenly reappeared in front of her.

"I forgot to give you this." Before she had a chance to ask, he rested his hands on her bare shoulders and leaned down to return her kiss with compound interest.

'Was it possible for human bones to melt?' Catherine's legs buckled and she had to lean into him to stop herself from falling. That kiss went on and on, until only the need to breathe forced him to release her. Then he was gone.

Catherine groped for something to hold onto and found the back of a patio chair. Slumping into it she drew gulps of air into her starving lungs. *'God, did that really happen? Where in the world did he learn to kiss like that?'* A hand slid down her silk-covered abdomen and cupped the throbbing pulse at the juncture of her thighs. She was so ready for him and tempted beyond reason to rub her hand just a fraction, to ease the burning there, but with a determination she hadn't known she possessed, resisted the impulse. Having waited so long, she would not resort to relieving herself in such a manner. A little while longer and she would know the untimate joy of release, brought about by Vincent's hand. "I won't spoil it now."

Vincent was practically dancing through the tunnels. He had done it. Where he had found the courage and the

audacity, only the good Lord knew, but he had done it. Kissed Catherine the way he had always yearned to do, without awkwardness or shame, and the feelings which thundered through him defied description. Just sheer ecstasy knowing she had accepted his mouth on hers, breath mingling, tongues touching and when she had leaned into him, he'd thought he would never find the strength to let her go. Even now he could taste her in his mouth and remember how the bare flesh of her shoulders had felt in his hands.

He began to run, exhilarated, laughing out loud and finally roaring in triumph, arms aloft. It was a beautiful beginning and he could see in his mind's eye, all the closed doors slowly begin to open for himself and Catherine.

"Catherine Chandler, I love you and I know that I can show you how much. Wait for me, my love," he whispered, opening the bond to its widest so she would hear and understand.

For the rest of the night, Vincent sat up writing in his journal, page after page, setting down on paper, his most intimate thoughts and dreams, seeing for the first time, not a forlorn, empty future, but one with real substance; solid. A partner to travel through the years with, grow old with, make plans with. They were true, the words he wrote, had meaning now.

Saturday morning dawned, seeming to know that it was a special day. Not a cloud marred the blue of the sky, birdsong was clearly heard above the noise of early morning traffic which had to be a first in this city, and Catherine's telephone remained blissfully silent. Looking up into the blue sky, she smiled.

"Someone up there likes us, Vincent. Whoever you are, we thank you."

Going back inside, she worried over what to take Below. Clothes were a problem. Usually, she wore tunnel attire as it was practical and warm, plus it made her feel more a part of Vincent's world, but they generally consisted of several different layers which were hard to remove in a hurry, and not especially alluring. She could be forgiven for wanting to look and feel attractive this time. So, what to wear. Slacks were definitely out. She eventually settled on a soft lambswool cream dress which had a zipper running the whole length of her back. Warm, flattering and easy to get out of. A thick sweater, a pair of jeans and ankle boots, just in case Vincent took her exploring, completed her ensemble.

After packing the holdall, she then gathered together the games and candy she always took for the children, and also the wool she had begged from workmates to give to the women Below. One of these days someone was going to ask her to produce the finished article, what with all the wool they were parting with. Truth be told, Catherine couldn't knit a stitch. Lastly, she had a bag of Father's favourite mint sweets. A peace offering. She wasn't one to bear grudges and she knew he wasn't either.

That done, she donned a leather jacket, turned on her answering machine, checked she had her keys, then left the apartment to go Below.

If Catherine had but known it, Vincent was also in a quandry as to what to wear. His best clothes seemed over the top for what was supposedly a routine visit from Catherine, but he wanted to look halfway decent when she came. His wardrobe soon emptied and his chamber ended up littered with various items of patchwork, leather and wool. He finally settled on faded denim jeans, which still had the zipper intact. Most of his pants were laced at the fly. Then a chunky knit sweater over a thin tee-shirt, followed by his cloak. He glanced down

at himself and smiled when he saw the zipper on his jeans. Great minds think alike it would appear.

He lost half an hour putting his wardrobe back to rights and then made himself late for breakfast.

No matter how casual he strived to be, everyone noted at once his different mode of dress and the air of excitement he brought with him. Most were curious, but refrained from intruding, as was their way. Those that did know what was happening held their tongues and just smiled a welcome for him. Father looked him up and down and declared.

"Well, I can see you have no plans to work today."

Vincent shook his head shyly. "Not today, Father. Catherine is coming."

"Is she really? We would never have guessed, would we?" Father asked of the others.

Vincent looked into the smiling faces around him and shrugged ruefully. "So much for nonchalance," and sat down, taking the teasing good-naturedly.

After breakfast, Vincent didn't really know what to do with himself to pass the time until Catherine arrived. He was too nervous to read a book, even one of Jamie's, and he couldn't work, not without changing clothes again. In the end some of the younger children came looking for him, hoping he would mend the wheel on their go-cart - or at least what passed as a go-cart. Vincent happily went with them and soon had the vehicle tunnel-worthy again, to the delight of the youngsters.

"Thanks, Vincent," they shouted, running off to play.

He went back through the tunnel, thinking of the innocence of children and wondering why it was lost once they grew up. Suddenly a warmth flooded his heart. *Catherine was Below*. He began to run in the direction of her basement, happiness making him move like the wind, until he stopped abruptly, cocking his head, listening.

"Fool," he muttered. "She's coming from the park!" He had to backtrack a few miles and he rounded a corner at such speed that he only missed knocking her flat by inches. *What a welcome!*

"Where's the fire?" she said, somewhat breathlessly.

"I am so sorry, Catherine. I wanted to meet you, although not quite like this." He picked up her holdall and held out his other hand to her. When she made no attempt to move, he asked, "Catherine? I am sorry. I must have scared you just now."

She shook her head and looked at him wistfully. "Last night. I didn't dream it, did I? Tell me I didn't dream it. Lie if you have to."

His eyes softened with the memory. "Oh! No, my Catherine. It was no dream. Come." He pulled her close and they travelled along the tunnels enjoying the peace and warmth of their togetherness.

With silent understanding they went directly to Vincent's chamber, bypassing the guest room completely, both somehow knowing she'd never sleep there again. There was no shyness, just a quiet acceptance that the time was right for both of them.

"I made some room in the wardrobe for you, Catherine. Will it be enough?"

She peeked inside and nodded. "This is fine." As she was stowing her things she asked, "What have you planned today? Should I change into jeans?"

"No. I think you should rest. I sensed your tiredness this past week. We could visit with Father if you'd like." She grimaced and Vincent caught the look. "He tells me you had quite a conversation. Said you swore at him."

"I didn't. Well, actually I did, but only the once."

He chuckled and draped an arm across her shoulders. "Don't worry, he's recovered from the shock and you

know he doesn't bear grudges. All is well, Catherine."

She leaned into his chest for a moment, then straightened and moved out of the embrace. "I know, but to be on the safe side. I brought him his favourite mints. Okay. Lead on MacDuff."

Father had already heard of her arrival Below and tea was waiting, along with William's cookies, which he knew she was addicted to. To his way of thinking, if she was chewing on those, she couldn't chew on him, could she? He heard their voices and rose to greet them.

"Good morning, Catherine. Welcome. Come and have tea."

She came down the staircase and walked towards him. "Hello, Father. It's wonderful to be here." She held out her hand and offered him the bag of mints.

He opened the bag, smiling as he saw the contents, then, not saying a word, he reached behind him and brought out the plate, filled with chocolate chip cookies and waved them backwards and forwards under her nose. Catherine looked at the cookies, then the mints, and then at Father. The beginnings of a smile were tugging at his lips, matching the twinkle in his eyes, and Catherine broke up.

"Touché, Father," she said and hugged him. As Vincent had said, all was well again.

For the rest of the day, Catherine mingled with the other women, passing over the wool, for which they were very grateful. Then spending a lot of time with the children, sharing out the candy and playing games with them. It was plain to see how much she was loved and how much love she gave them in return. And Vincent stood by, watching, and had never felt happier. All was well. She extricated herself from a particularly boisterous game of tag and made her way back to Vincent.

"Phew! Beats me where they get their energy. I need a breather."

"Catherine, you are supposed to be resting. Come, there should be some lemonade in the kitchen."

The children called after her. "You coming back, Catherine?"

She shook her head, grinning. "Sorry guys, you've done me in. See you at dinner."

Dinner was a happy affair, made even happier when William came in with one of the largest turkeys most of them had ever seen. One of the Helpers had donated it, saying that because it was so big there was no chance of selling it, so where better to give it a good home. Meat was a rarity Below and most were vegetarian out of necessity, rather than choice, so a meal like this instantly became a party.

Father stood up and sharpened the carving knife with a flourish. The delicious smell was making them all impatient. "Cut the dramatics and carve. I'm starved," someone called. Even Vincent felt his taste buds come to life and he wasn't overly fond of meat anyway. Roast potatoes, carrots and green beans completed the feast, with what seemed like gallons of gravy. Silence reigned as the community set upon their plates with relish.

"What the..." Catherine felt something brush against her foot and thought that Arthur had come scrounging for a tidbit. There it was again. She peeked under the table and couldn't believe her eyes. Her head came up and banged the table. "Ouch!"

Vincent, sitting opposite, asked if she was all right and she just stared at him. Those baby blues of his were as innocent as a cherub. The cheeky devil was playing footsie with her under the table.

Father noticed the exchange. "Is everything all right, Catherine?"

"Um... yes, fine. I thought I felt something run over my foot, that's all."

Father frowned. "I hope we aren't getting rats again. We had a veritable plague of them a few years ago. We'd better keep our eyes open."

Vincent shook his head. "It was probably just a mouse, Father."

Catherine snorted. "Felt more like a **RAT** to me. A big one, wanting a nibble." At last she broke his composure and the colour crept over his face like a rising tide. Head down, hair covering his face like a curtain, he mumbled something unintelligible.

Father finally realized what was going on as he caught Catherine's wink. "Ahem! Yes, I see. Vincent, behave yourself."

"Yes, Father," said a suitably chastened Vincent.

After dinner, most just sat around, too stuffed to move. Mary and Elizabeth nodded off in their chairs, Pascal went back to his pipes, never comfortable if he was too long away from them, and William closeted himself in his kitchen, red in the face after so many compliments on his superb dinner, thinking it would be nigh on impossible to better that meal. Cullen and Kanin sat, heads together over some new chamber plans and Jamie and Rebecca had their noses stuck in a book as usual, but every once in a while they would catch Catherine's eye and wink, much to her bemusement.

Vincent and Catherine joined Father, who was writing a letter to Devin and Charles. Ever since they had gone to live in the mountains, they had kept up a regular correspondence, via Helpers. Both Father and Devin agreed not to lose touch with each other. Life was too short and too much time had already been lost in the past years. Vincent looked over Father's shoulder reminding him to invite Devin and Charles for a visit.

"Already done. Now leave me be. I can manage to write a letter without you leaning over me. **Shoo!"**

They decided to take a walk to help digest that marvelous dinner and made their way to the Chamber of the Falls, which was one of Catherine's favourite places Below. On the way Vincent stopped several times to kiss her and she wondered what had gotten into him today. Not that she was complaining, of course, but his whole attitude seemed to have changed overnight.

They arrived at the Falls and it was as beautiful as she remembered. "I love it here. It's almost like a cathedral." She looked into his eyes and saw no trepidation or fear, only love and a passion he was no longer afraid to reveal. How long she had waited for this moment. Maybe it was better not to question his inner serenity, maybe it was better just to accept that somehow he had battled his demons and overcome them.

Vincent sat with Catherine in his arms, closer physically than he had ever permitted them to be and he felt wonderful. The hunger was rising in him true enough, but now he no longer fought it. He freed it from its prison for the first time and it spread, warming his blood, making him tingle in delicious anticipation.

Catherine was not oblivious to the changes in Vincent's body and she moved closer, running her hand up and down the length of his thigh. At one time, he would have immediately and forcefully thrust her away, but now he groaned in response and pulled her even closer, if that was possible.

"Your hand burns me, Catherine."

She took his hand and gently placed it on her breast. "Touch me, Vincent. Burn me."

To feel her softness against his hand, even through the wool of her dress made him shudder. He tried to inject some humour into what was fast becoming a very heated interlude.

"I should not have started to woo you in these uncomfortable surroundings. I had a much better place in mind, but my body overtook my brain. Forgive me."

She smiled. "Don't be sorry. Anywhere, anytime is fine by me. Shameless, aren't I?"

"I hope so," was his rejoinder, much to her surprise. Whatever was happening to her man, she was all in favour.

"Come, we shall return to my chamber and begin again."

They took their time going back, hand-in-hand, allowing the heat between them to build slowly, so very slowly, until, by the time they entered his chamber, it was smouldering like a banked fire. All it needed was a spark to

set it raging out of control. As there were no doors Below, Vincent had erected a thick curtain at the entrance and had left a lamp burning outside which was, in effect, a '*Do Not Disturb*' notice to all members of the Community. No one would dream of disturbing him at such times, and certainly not tonight of all nights, especially if they knew what was about to happen.

Catherine excused herself and went to the small shower room, taking her bag with her. Once inside she went through the contents, looking and looking, but it wasn't there. "***Oh, please!***" she moaned. "***Don't do this to me now, dammit!***"

Of all things, she had forgotten her contraception and there was no way she could continue without telling him. Opening up her wallet she did find two condoms, but her hopes were dashed when she read the date. Totally useless, which just proved how long it had been.

"Damn, damn, damn!"

Vincent came rushing in and saw her standing there, purse in hand, crying as though she were heartbroken.

"Catherine, what troubles you so?"

"Oh, Vincent! I'm so sorry. We can't love and it's all my fault. I'm so stupid. I didn't bring my contraceptives and these things are out of date." She flung the offending condoms away in disgust and cried even harder.

He smiled. He just couldn't help it. At least he wasn't the only one here with an attack of nerves. He gathered her into his arms and led her back to the bed.

"Sit down, Catherine, and dry your eyes. It is not the end of the world."

"Yes, it is. How can you stand there and say it's not? I've ruined everything."

Vincent thought quickly and came to a decision. If he ran all the way there and back, he'd only be gone for about half an hour. Yes, he'd do it.

"Sit here for a while and calm yourself, Catherine. "I shall not be long."

She watched him go and had a terrible feeling he wouldn't be back, thinking that maybe he had retreated behind his fears again.

"Damn, damn, damn!"

Luckily, Vincent always carried spare cash in one of the many pockets of his cloak so no one need ever know. Ten minutes later he was in Central Park, keeping to the trees for cover, and when he had found what he was looking for, he had to take a risk on being seen. It was quite dark, but there was a full moon. The risk, though minimal, was worth it. '*The things we do for love.*'

Dropping the coins in the machine, he was then faced with which to choose. God, he fervently hoped that one day they could look back on this night and see the humour of it, because right now, he felt like crying, himself. There was only one thing to do, and that was take one of each and let Catherine decide. She was more experienced in such matters thank goodness.

He tore back through the tunnels at breakneck speed, instinctively ducking whenever he came across an outcrop of rock. Anyone else hitting those at speed would be killed outright.

Staggering back into his chamber, he collapsed on the bed beside Catherine, trying to catch his breath. He glanced at the antique clock on the shelf.

"Twenty minutes. Must have broken all records," he gasped.

"What are you talking about? Where have you been? I thought maybe you were angry with me."

He sat up and searched in his voluminous cloak and withdrew three small packets. "You choose, Catherine. They all look the same to me."

Catherine was dumbfounded. "How... where?"

"Catherine, do not ask," was his reply.

She suddenly saw the funny side and couldn't prevent the giggle escaping and she clamped a hand over her mouth, not wanting him to think she was laughing at him.

"It is quite premissible to laugh, Catherine. I was hoping you would."

"What a farce this is turning out to be, Vincent. What do they say about the best laid plans? The only reason I got so upset earlier is because I have no intention of getting pregnant for at least a year. We have a lot of loving to catch up on."

He looked at her in awe, wondering how she could even contemplate wanting a child with him. *'Was it even wise to think about it?'* She could hear the wheels turning in his mind as he mulled over her words.

"Oh yes, Vincent! I've dreamed of holding our child someday, and I've thought of the consequences of such an action, including Father's wrath. He's probably having kittens already, thinking of the possibility, but it has to be a mutual decision and a year seems time time enough to weigh all the pros and cons. Plus the fact that my biological clock is running down."

Vincent looked at her for long moments and then stood up and removed his cloak. Then he pulled the sweater up and over his head, leaving him clad in just a tee-shirt. This was Catherine's first real opportunity of seeing him in the flesh and she was not disappointed.

"Why have you been hiding yourself from me for so long?"

Encouraged by her words he pulled her up to stand in front of him and nuzzled her neck while at the same time drawing the zipper down the full length of her back. He felt her shiver as his hands slid inside and wandered leisurely across the silk material of her camisole and then touched her bare skin.

"Silk on silk," he breathed.

Catherine's hands clasped his biceps, feeling rock hard muscles, then moved lower to his forearms and back again to roam under his flowing mane, kneading his neck. She then spread her hands across his shoulders and back, feeling him tremble.

He thought he would be able to sustain any amount of Catherine's hands touching him, but it was not to be. He pulled away for a moment to control himself.

"This is hard for me, Catherine. I am sorry."

She, too, was glad of a respite and ventured to say, "It's hard for me too, Vincent and I think that our first time together will be over very quickly. I think the moment we join will be cataclysmic for both of us, but that's all right. Sometimes it happens that way and after all the time we've waited, it's understandable. The second time will be the one I remember."

And so it turned out to be. No soon had Vincent entered her than the world turned upside down, inside out and righted itself, before they realized what had happened. Over in the space of seconds. Neither had even moved, yet their orgasm had taken them to heaven and back. Vincent couldn't believe it could happen so fast, despite Catherine's words earlier. He was grateful she had prepared him, otherwise he would have been racked with guilt that he had not given her pleasure. He was not even certain it did happen.

"I see what you mean, Catherine," he panted. "Hopefully, I too will remember the second time because I cannot recall a thing of what just happened."

Catherine felt disoriented and it took a while before she could answer him. "Neither do I, love. I bet we were great though," and she laughed out loud.

While they recovered their senses, hands began to explore and eyes devoured new places until both were

highly aroused once more. This time they were able to fully enjoy the experience of becoming part of each other, surrendering themselves to that little death known only to lovers.

Vincent felt the chains of his fear breaking one by one until he soared free, unfettered by years of self-doubt. Catherine had always known they would be good together, but never could she have known the freedom of expression she felt in his arms.

"Wow. I don't know about you, but I feel wonderful."

Vincent lifted his head and smiled into her eyes. "I do not have words to even begin to describe how I feel. Mostly, blessed to have you with me and a freedom from fear and insecurity, which was always with me. Inside, I feel a space that the fear has left in order for you to fill."

Catherine snuggled close. "Hmmmmm, Sounds good to me. I'm moving in, lock-stock and barrel, forever."

They lay together, savouring their new beginning and talking quietly, making plans for a future that was in their grasp at last. She still found it incredible that Vincent could have changed so much and gave in to female curiosity.

"Vincent, can you tell me what happened to make you change your mind? You don't have to, of course, but I shall always wonder."

He nodded. "Yes, I can tell you. You have the right to know, although you will probably never let me live it down, along with two others I know."

She was intrigued now. "Tell, Tell!"

And so he told her about the paperbacks. "I never thought to actually enjoy them, but once I started I became hooked."

She never thought to see the day when Vincent would admit to enjoying anything other than the classics. There was hope for him yet. *Think of all the modern music she could introduce him to.*

"Well, however it happened, I'm just glad it worked. I do have a confession though."

He raised his eyebrows inquiringly. "Do tell."

"Well, if you hadn't worked it through by yourself, I had every intention of seducing you and taking the risk that you wouldn't regret it afterwards. You see, my love, I have never had plans to become a born again virgin. Celibacy is not a state which suits me. I was getting pretty desperate and if I'd known that a few torrid paperbacks would wreak such a transformation, I'd have brought down a truckload a long time ago."

Vincent laughed and hugged her close. "Jamie has already offered, much to Father's disgust. I had to do some hard talking to convince him I had not given up the classics. I'm not sure he believed me."

To be able to talk freely about such intimacies was strange and wonderful for Vincent, but with Catherine, there was no embarrassment or hesitancy, no need to hide behind high defensive walls because she was the one person on this earth who truly understood him, saw him as he was, loved all that he was and all he could be.

As Catherine slept, Vincent eased himself from the bed and sat at the table to write in his journal.

'I cannot find words to describe what has happened this day, but somehow I must. From the moment Catherine came Below, we both of us knew that our dream was about to be realized, although when the time came it was very nearly a comedy of errors.

What a pair we were, Catherine and I. Not at all the romantic evening I had planned for us. But, oh! The joy, the freedom I discovered, held in the arms of my love. Even in the deepest recesses of my heart I could not have known the reality of what happened this glorious night. I gave to Catherine all that I am and she accepted all I had to give, and then returned all of herself to me a thousandfold. TO ME.

I have always known what I am and accepted my fate to live alone, but a small part of me refused to relinquish the hope of finding someone to be connected to. I never expected my dream to come true, it was only a faint hope which gave me comfort through all the lonely dark nights. Yet here I sit, writing about the reality of my dream and I still find it hard to comprehend, but it is true. Catherine is my salvation and I know now that I am hers. I do not know what awaits us as we move forward into the future, but whatever happens, whatever comes, I have an unshakable faith that together we will endure. We will. I can write no more now. I must return to her side as it is where I belong, now and always.

THIS IS MY DESTINY AND I ACCEPT IT WITH HEARTFELT GRATITUDE.

END