

HOLIDAY FOR LOVERS

ONE

by Chuckie Burge

Catherine couldn't keep a smile off her face as she left the office. Part of her amusement was the astonished reaction of her co-workers to see her leaving on time for once. But, mostly, it was her joyful anticipation of her holidays.

Father had sent a formal invitation to come Below and stay for the long Thanksgiving weekend. She could hardly believe his change of attitude lately. She was enchanted with the prospect of four uninterrupted days Below - four days to be with Vincent with no demands on their time together.

She had packed the things she would need the night before. As soon as she changed into slacks and a warm sweater, she could grab her bag and be on her way.

She descended the ladder to the tunnels. A few steps from the bottom, Vincent's hands swept her from the ladder into his arms.

In the dim light she could see Vincent's eyes glowing with delight as he swung her around in a joyous embrace.

"Four days, Catherine," he said in a husky voice. "Four whole days to be together."

Her arms went around his neck and she hugged him before leaning back to look into his eyes. "I hardly got anything done at work today," she confessed. "All I could concentrate on was staring at the clock and willing it to hurry up and be quitting time."

Vincent stood her on her feet, unhooked her garment bag from the ladder and slung it over his shoulder. They joined hands and headed Below, talking of all they wanted to do and see, while she was in the tunnels; plans which included only the two of them.

They met Father near his chambers. He insisted Catherine join him for a cup of tea as he blithely waved a protesting Vincent off to deliver her luggage to the guest chamber.

Vincent returned, determined to spirit her away, but he found Jamie, Mouse and several of the children surrounding her, each bombarding her with tales of recent adventures, plans for the holiday or trying to show her new-found treasures. In patient resignation, he settled down on the periphery of her admirers.

When Father finally shooed everyone off to bed, Vincent escorted Catherine to the guest chamber. "This wasn't exactly what I had in mind for this evening," he said ruefully. "There are times when I could wish you weren't quite so popular with my family."

She looked up at him and smiled. "It wasn't what I had envisioned either, Vincent. But trying to stop Father is like trying to stop a steamroller. And the children.... well, when Geoffrey looks up at me with those big brown eyes, I can't deny him anything."

"I don't know how you managed to be an attorney," he teased. "You're much too soft-hearted."

"Look who's talking," she retorted. "I heard you agreeing we would join the children to play games on Saturday. I should warn you, organized team sport is not my strong point."

When they reached the guest chamber, his hopes of privacy were dashed when Mary bustled in to offer an extra blanket, a cup of cocoa; anything to make Catherine feel welcome. Vincent gave up gracefully and left her in Mary's capable hands.

The next day, they joined the others in the kitchen chamber to help William prepare the Thanksgiving feast, but there seemed to be more laughing and talking than work done. Catherine was sent from one group to the other until finally Mary led her over to where Vincent was shelling walnuts.

"I know you two want to spend as much time together as possible," Mary said. "Why don't you help Vincent?"

Catherine meekly sat down. After Mary left, she leaned over and confided. "What she really means is, please Vincent, keep this klutz out of our way."

Vincent smiled. "You a klutz, Catherine? I can't imagine you being inept at any task."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, my friend, but I'm the first to admit - as a kitchen helper, I'm a very good lawyer."

Vincent called Jamie and Mouse over and put them in charge of shelling walnuts. "Catherine and I have some important errands to attend to," he told them.

Catherine was puzzled but she took the hand he held out and they walked into the tunnels. After a few minutes of silence, she asked, "What do we have to do that's so important?"

"Enjoy each other's company," he replied.

She stopped, totally shocked. But, when he turned to face her, she had a wide grin on her face. "Do you mean to tell me you pulled me out of the kitchen just so we could be alone?"

"Yes," he said firmly.

She laughed delightedly. "I think Father's worst nightmare has come true. I'm starting to be a bad influence on you."

He looked intently at her. "Do you want to go back?"

"No, I don't, but Vincent - we really should be in there helping. I have to earn my keep, don't I?"

"You don't think that the turkeys you sent down will suffice for your share of the dinner preparations?"

"How did you find out?" she asked plaintively.

"You picked a bad conspirator. Chang Lee couldn't keep his stories straight on why he had the extra turkeys. Catherine, you mustn't spend your money on us."

"Who else do I have to spend it on? Now that my father is gone, you're the only family I have left."

They walked to one of their secret hideaways; a hidden cavern with a miniature waterfall spilling into a clear rock pool bordered on one side by a sandy beach. Some mineral in the rocks reflected the light of the torches to illuminate the small cavern, giving an impression of a sunlit beach. From his pocket, Vincent produced a volume of poetry.

Happiness welled up in Catherine and she impulsively threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. She intended to kiss his cheek, but at the last instant he turned his head slightly and her kiss landed rather haphazardly on his mouth, startling them both.

He stiffened in her embrace and stepped back from her, avoiding her eyes as he turned to spread his cloak on the sand. When he held out his hand, she took it silently and let him lead her over to sit

down.

He sat down to face her. "I'm sorry, Catherine. I don't mean to hurt you."

"Then why do you?" she asked quietly.

"You know why."

"Do I? I'm beginning to wonder if you get some kind of perverse pleasure out of rebuffing me. I have a fairly healthy ego, but anyone can be hurt after enough rejection."

"Catherine, I don't mean to reject you. It's very difficult for me - you know what you do to me." He looked down, unable to face her.

"I'm not so sure anymore," she said. "I feel things through our bond, but then your words and actions deny them. You've said many times that you feel all my emotions, but I doubt that. You experienced my hurt feelings just now because I allowed you to feel them. I love you, and I cherish our bond but... I do have a will and a mind of my own, Vincent." He looked up in surprise at her harsh words. "You sense so much through our bond but have you ever felt," she hesitated. "I don't know what to call it - coming up against a wall maybe - a barrier to my feelings?"

"I don't think so, Catherine. I'm not sure what you mean."

"Mmmmm, I'm not exactly sure either. I've tried to keep some of my feelings hidden from you, Vincent, because I didn't want to distress you. But I was never sure how successful I was, but now I think I overdid it - that I've left you with the mistaken idea you're the only one here who is suffering from frustration and selfish desires."

"Catherine, I.... I...."

"I may be jeopardizing everything we have, Vincent, and it scares the hell out of me," she said soberly. "But we have always spoken the truth between us. I've never lied to you but I have concealed things from you. May I be honest with you now?"

He swallowed nervously and nodded his head. Catherine prayed she was doing the right thing as she closed her eyes, took a deep breath and concentrated on relinquishing the tight controls she had kept on her deepest emotions. Through the bond, she poured her innermost feelings, the deep abiding love she felt for him, her frustration at the restrictions placed on their relationship... and all the long-repressed needs. She revealed her hidden desires to him - wanton and sensual fantasies of making love to him, of being loved by him.

Vincent paled visibly at the onslaught of her unbridled thoughts. He closed his eyes as he was bombarded by raw emotion and fleeting glimpses of erotic fantasies. but surrounding all the unsettling visions of her desire was the truth of her love. It swirled through his bloodstream like molten lava - searing, yet inexplicably soothing him at the same time.

Catherine felt an almost orgasmic sense of relief as she opened her eyes. Hiding her feelings from him had been a heavy burden that was now lifted from her. She focused her attention on Vincent, worried about his reaction.

He felt her concern and opened his eyes to reassure her. "I'm all right, Catherine," he said. "Just give me a moment." At her smile and nod, he closed his eyes again.

She was content to sit and watch him as he struggled to deal with this new information. She rarely had the opportunity to sit and look at his beloved face. Most of their meetings were hurried and under the cover of darkness. On the rare occasion she could see his face clearly, he would become uneasy and avoid her gaze. He abhorred his own features and could not believe she found pleasure in looking at him.

Finally he opened his eyes and stared at her for a long moment. "Catherine, I do not know what to say. Your revelations have truly stunned me." He shook his head slowly. "I had no idea. I am

ashamed at my conceit - my belief that I was the only one affected by our situation."

"Do you regret my confession?"

"No. You were right to share this with me. Shielding your thoughts from me required great strength of will. You always accepted my moods and churlishness as symptoms of thwarted desire. Now I find you have suffered the same feelings but you never let me know. You protected me, but at what cost to you? You must have been resentful at times. How could you not....?"

"Scream, curse or climb the walls you mean?" she grinned wryly. "Why do you think I'm so fit? I hate boring exercise, but I think I've jogged a million frustrated miles on account of you, Vincent."

He nodded in understanding. "I have trod many a mile here in the tunnels myself."

"Physical fatigue helps but it doesn't stop the longing, does it?" she asked softly.

He sighed heavily. "No.... it doesn't stop the longing."

"Maybe it's time for us to discuss this, Vincent. We feel so much - share so much through our bond but I want to be sure, absolutely sure there is no misunderstanding here. Is that all right with you?"

"If you wish," he said apprehensively.

"The impression of feeling I've always sensed from you is that you desire me, but you're afraid to make love to me - afraid you'll harm me in some way."

"I am afraid," he admitted. "Afraid of losing control, of hurting you. You are so tiny, so fragile compared to my strength."

"I have been with you when you were completely lost in your other self, enraged beyond reason," she said quietly. "You never hurt me then, why do you think you would hurt me if we make love?"

"I hurt Lisa," he said flatly.

"Vincent, you were an adolescent. No teenage boy has any control - they're all hormones and hands." She grinned at him. "And you're talking to someone who dated her fair share of the groping little monsters."

He smiled faintly at her attempt to lighten the mood.

"You are no longer a teenage boy overwhelmed by your desires. And I am not a teenage girl trying out my new-found wiles and going into a panic when they work too well. I'm a grown woman, Vincent, and I know what I want. I want you.... I always have."

"Catherine, I...." He hesitated as the distant clanging of pipes caught his attention.

"What is it?" she asked.

"They're calling everyone to the Great Hall for Thanksgiving dinner." He was apologetic. "We have to go now, Catherine. If we don't show up, it would alarm and upset too many people."

"I know," she said with a sigh.

"Damn it!" he cursed and slammed his fist into the sand. Startled, she looked up at him. Vincent never swore. "Always interruptions. At times I feel there must be a plot to keep us apart. Too often we've been on the brink of insights into our relationship, but either because of my fears or untimely interruptions we have stepped back and continued on as before."

He took her hand and rose, pulling her up with him. "Not this time! We will go and fulfill our obligations to our family and friends but later tonight, as soon as we can get away, we will come back here. You have given me much to think about, Catherine, before we continue this discussion."

She nodded in agreement.

He picked up his cloak and slung it around his shoulders, then he took her hand and they walked

towards the chamber entrance. He halted and turned to face her, his fingers lightly caressed her cheek. "Know this, Catherine. In spite of my perhaps confusing actions - I do love you. Never doubt that."

She turned her head and kissed his hand. "I love you too, Vincent. I just can't seem to convince you we belong together."

He stared into her eyes for a long moment. "My heart wants to believe you, Catherine, but my mind is full of questions," he said as he led her from the chamber.

Thanksgiving dinner was an agonizing ordeal. She and Vincent tried to behave naturally but their bond seemed to be sizzling between them. She was self-conscious and acutely aware of every move he made, every breath he took, as they sat at the holiday table with the others.

Dinner was followed by a musical recital in Father's chambers to celebrate the holiday. Early in the evening, Catherine was talking to Jamie, when she glanced over and saw little Samantha crawling up onto Vincent's lap. An overwhelming, irrational feeling of jealousy washed through her, followed by a deep sense of longing.

Vincent was listening to Samantha when he jerked his head up in surprise and turned to look for Catherine. Their eyes met briefly, then she flushed and looked away. He stared at her thoughtfully for a moment, until Samantha regained his attention.

Later in the evening, he saw Catherine talking to Olivia. When Kanin joined them, Catherine briefly hugged him. When she let go and stepped back, Vincent experimentally allowed his own feelings of jealousy to surge through their bond. He saw Catherine stiffen, then turn around slowly, her eyes searching the chamber for him. Their eyes locked for a long moment then Catherine smiled wryly and nodded, acknowledging their unspoken communication.

Later, as she waited in the guest chamber, Catherine was apprehensive about meeting him, talking to him. She was afraid----not of Vincent----but of the forces she had set in motion. Their future, or lack thereof, would be decided tonight. She didn't know how she knew this, she just felt it deep inside.

The decision would be his and she was deathly afraid he would tell her to go. She tried to subdue her fears, worried he would misinterpret them as a fear of him. But, since this afternoon she seemed to have lost the ability to hide anything from him.

After the tunnel world settled for the night, Vincent came for her. They walked through the stone corridors to their private place, not talking, not touching.

Only once did Vincent break the silence. He tried to reassure her. "Don't worry so much, Catherine," he said. "Everything will be all right." She acknowledged his statement with a brief nod but she didn't speak. She didn't trust herself to speak.

After lighting the torches, Vincent spread his cloak and they sat down, facing each other but avoiding each other's eyes. Catherine could stand the silence no longer. "If I'm going to be given my walking papers, Vincent, I'd as soon get it over with quickly."

Startled, Vincent looked up. The vulnerability he sensed through their bond and the false bravado of her words tore at his tender heart. He instinctively reached out to console her but she threw her

hands up in warning as she flinched back. He drew his hands back as he stared at her, uncertain, trying to understand---his self doubts stirring at her actions. Her hands were still raised as if to ward him off. Her eyes held his and her voice was steady and determined. "Listen to me very carefully, Vincent. I know your instinct is to comfort and soothe but I don't want your hands on me if it's only out of a sense of pity." She let her hands drop. "You've got to tell me where I stand; what's to become of us."

He nodded. "My thoughts have been tumultuous since this afternoon. I kept re-playing our conversation in my mind. Trying to make sense of it, trying to make sense of us."

"Sense of us, as in logic?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Vincent," she said, shaking her head. "You can apply logic to a chess game, but, trying to apply logic to life or love is futile. Human beings are intrinsically creatures of emotion."

"You are raising the very issue causing this discussion. I am not a human man."

"In every way that counts, Vincent," she said earnestly. "You are human. You have all the emotions, all the feelings of a human, plus so much more than most of us. I don't know what caused you to look the way you do but it in no way diminishes your humanity."

"Could you really accept me as a human man, as your lover, looking the way I do?" he asked hesitantly.

"I don't know what else I can say to convince you. I want to be with you in every way, spiritually, emotionally and sexually. I love the way you look. I wouldn't change a thing. In my eyes you are beautiful---a beautiful human being."

He raised his hands and looked at them. "I cannot fathom you wanting to be touched by these hands, or wanting to kiss these lips," he said as he brought his hand to his face.

Catherine sighed deeply. "Vincent, are you even listening to what you're saying? You just uttered a totally bigoted statement, it was completely unworthy of you."

"I don't understand...."

"All right, let's approach this from another direction. You say you love me, that you think I'm beautiful. Well, what if I wasn't, Vincent?" she asked urgently. "Suppose I hadn't been able to afford plastic surgery? If my face was still scarred, would you want me.... Would you still love me?"

He stared at her in shock. "How could you even ask me that? You know I love you for all you are, Catherine, not just your beauty. I would love you, and want you, no matter what you looked like."

She smiled sadly. "Then why can't you believe I love you and that I desire you?"

He was shaken by her words. He had never thought about their relationship from that viewpoint. Trying to clamp down his rising hopes he said defensively. "I should not try to out-argue a lawyer."

"I'm not trying to win a debate, Vincent," she said quietly. "I'm fighting for my life, my happiness.... and for my future."

"Catherine.... do you truly believe I hurt Lisa only because of my youth?"

"To me, Vincent, it would seem an obvious conclusion. I can't believe Father or Peter would not have realized this and eased your conscience before it became such a insurmountable obstacle in your mind."

"Father and I never discussed it. I became ill soon after it happened. By the time I recovered.... I was so ashamed. I never brought the subject up and was grateful that Father never referred to it."

"And I'm sure," she said, "that your mind, Lisa's injuries were much more serious than they really

were."

"I don't know," he admitted.

"Vincent, you may hurt me emotionally but you would never hurt me physically. I believe that with all my heart."

"I want to believe there is a future for us," he said. "I wish I had your confidence, your faith in me."

"We both want a future together, Vincent. That's the main battle already won. We just need to talk about problems as they arise so we don't have any more misunderstandings."

"What kind of misunderstandings, Catherine?"

"Vincent, I am a very tactile person. It is a natural thing for me to greet a friend with a hug or a kiss. When I kissed you this afternoon, it was an expression of my happiness----my joy in being with you." She hesitated a moment then spoke deliberately. "It was not an awkward attempt to seduce you. I would never want you to go anything against your will."

Vincent flushed at her frank statement and stammered. "It's not.... I.... I didn't...."

She said gently. "In a way. I think you did. You have had so many years to build a wall around your feelings and a dread of physical intimacy. You can't expect to overcome it immediately. If you could just learn to relax and be comfortable around me. Touch me or not, as you feel like it and try not to flinch or turn away when I touch you. Trust me.... accept the fact that I'm touching you with affection; I'm not trying to pressure you." She tried to lighten the mood. "Believe me, Vincent, when I make a serious romantic move on you----you're going to know it!"

He looked into her eyes and smiled. "I can hardly wait!" he quipped. Their laughter broke the tension between them. "How do we begin this transformation?"

She thought a moment, then smiled. "I know. Come on," she said as she stood up and held out her hand. He got to his feet and joined her and she led him a few feet away. "I think this is where we were this afternoon." She looked up at him, trying not to let him know how nervous she was. "I was so very happy just to be with you----I just had to show you," she smiled as she reached up, put her arms around him and kissed his cheek, then rested her head against his chest. This time his arms closed around her and he hugged her tightly for a moment, and she felt his lips brush the top of her head. She released him and stepped back. "I believe you were going to read poetry to me," she said, holding out her hand.

They settled on his cloak, Vincent leaning back against rock and Catherine resting against his shoulder. He read until he realized she was too still. He put the book down and turned his head to stare at her for a long moment, then tenderly brushed a lock of hair back from her forehead.

"Catherine," he said softly. "I should take you to the guest chamber.... you're more than half-asleep."

"Mmmm, dontwannamove," she mumbled.

Her head started to slide down his chest. He cradled her chin in his hand and gently tilted her head back against his shoulder, his fingers lingering to caress her cheek. Her eyes opened and she smiled at him, then turned her head and kissed his hand.

She leaned her head back against his shoulder again. "Can't we stay here?" she asked sleepily.

His heart melted at her absolute trust in him and overruled his better judgement. He slid his arms under her, lifted her up and turned her to lay lengthways on his cloak, then stretched out beside her and gathered the cloak around them both. Catherine sighed happily and snuggled against his chest.

Vincent lay awake for a while, content to hold her close, thinking of all that had happened today, then relaxed and happy, he drifted to sleep.

Catherine awakened slowly, thinking she was still asleep and dreaming. It was a familiar, recurring

dream. Vincent's strong arms holding her tight----the sound of his heart throbbing against her ear. But this time it seemed so real, it felt... belatedly, she realized she could actually feel him. She lay half across his chest, their legs entangled and her hand.... Oh God! Her hand was under his sweater, she was sensually caressing his bare skin. She froze, not sure how to extricate herself from this awkward predicament. She berated herself mentally----how could you do this when you promised him he could depend on you to keep things casual?

"I know you're awake," he said. "I can hear the wheels in that Machiavellian mind of yours. What are you thinking about?"

She lifted her head from his chest and casually slipped her hand out of his sweater. She propped up on her elbow so she could look at him.

"You, naturally," she said with a smile and leaned over to plant a fleeting kiss on his chin. "Good morning!"

His eyes gleamed in delight. "Good morning to you, too. But don't think that you'll distract me. What mischief are you conjuring up, and why did you remove your hand from under my sweater?"

"I hoped you wouldn't notice where it was," she admitted, her face flushing. "I apologize."

"Why?" he asked softly. "I was enjoying it very much." She stared at him in confusion, not certain if he was joking or serious. "Catherine, did I misunderstand?" he asked, trying to sound meek and timid. "That wasn't a serious romantic move, was it?"

Catherine relaxed----now she knew he was teasing her. A smile quirked at the corners of her mouth. "No," she said slowly. "It wasn't."

"Good! In that case, since you were only touching me affectionately, there's no reason not to continue, is there?" His tone was oh-so-innocent but his eyes sparkled with mischief as he raised the bottom of his sweater in silent invitation.

Catherine couldn't help it. She burst out laughing. When she regained control she said, "I've heard stories about all the pranks you and Devin got up to and I just didn't believe them. My quiet serious Vincent?.... Never.... Now I believe!"

She accepted the invitation and the unspoken dare and slipped her hand under his sweater again. Once her hand came in contact with his bare skin, however, she became very self-conscious and would not allow her hand to move.

"Well, really, Catherine," Vincent chided. "You were a lot more fun when you were asleep."

Two could play this teasing game. She raised her eyebrows at him. "Just exactly what was I doing?" she asked in a frosty voice.

"Well, you were stroking....," he began.

"Like this?" Her palm began to glide over his flat stomach. "Or perhaps like this," she murmured as her fingertips lightly grazed his rib cage and then slowly traced up and down the line of fur that led enticingly to the waistband of his trousers.

Vincent swallowed hard, realizing he just might have possibly started something he shouldn't. He struggled to act nonchalant. "Yes, I believe that's more like it. I believe you also said I should get used to touching you?"

She nodded, her mouth suddenly too dry to speak, as his hand slip easily under her blouse and began to stroke her back. Her eyes momentarily closed in pleasure then opened wide to stare at him.

"You do realize we're playing with fire, don't you, Vincent?"

He nodded and pulled her down to lie across his chest. "I know," he groaned. "I know!"

Catherine's left hand was trapped under his sweater by the weight of her body but her right hand

stole up around his neck. She turned and snuggled closer. "And here we are without a fire extinguisher," she murmured as she left a trail of soft kisses on his neck and jawline.

Vincent was losing himself in the exquisite sensations overwhelming him; her fingers caressing the nape of his neck, her lips setting him on fire.... his hand gliding over the warm silk of her skin. He had to stop this; he had to find a way to distract them both from this intoxicating madness.

"Is this what those '*groping little monsters*' used to do?" he asked as his fingertips lightly traced her spine.

She laughed softly. "Something on this order."

"How did you get them to stop?"

"Oh, told them to stop, pushed them away, or sometimes I threatened to tell their mothers.... or my father! That particular threat was usually successful, it had a real cold water effect on their.... enthusiasm."

"Why aren't you telling me to stop?"

"I am trying to, Vincent," she protested as her lips brushed his earlobe. "I just can't seem to concentrate on the idea."

Catherine felt his laughter before she heard it. His chest began to vibrate beneath her as he tried to control his mirth. His amusement was infectious and he soon had her laughing to. His hand slid down to grasp her waist and lift her away from him as he sat up. "Enough temptation," he said. "We must join the others for breakfast or someone may start asking questions we don't want to answer."

She looked at him. "What if they do ask, Vincent? What do we say? What do we tell them?"

"What do you want to tell them?"

"Vincent, I love you, and I'm proud of that love. I don't care if the whole world knows I spent the night with you. I won't be embarrassed if the community does find out but.... it is none of their business. We're both adults, what we do concerns only the two of us. However, I don't live here----you do and I don't want to make things awkward for you. It's your decision."

"My whole world already knows I love you," he said. "That's no secret, but I would prefer to keep our private lives private, for now at least, or as long as we can. Privacy is rather hard to come by, down here. I don't feel up to answering any tactless questions, especially since I probably don't know the answers myself. Besides, I guess I'm selfish. I just want to keep you to myself for a while."

"I'm selfish too, Vincent. If we just had room service, I'd want to spend the rest of the weekend here, in this chamber, alone with you."

He laughed as he helped her to her feet. "Love conquers everything but hunger, eh? Come on, my love. Let's go and feed you so you can concentrate on more important matters."

They ate breakfast and spent the rest of the morning with their friends. The company of other people held limited interest for them at this time, however, and after lunch they discreetly absented themselves to return to their hideaway. Vincent, with a suspicious pious look on his face, told her they needed peace and quiet and perhaps a nap to make up for their short ration of sleep the night before.

Vincent lay on his stomach reading aloud to her. Catherine lay on her back beside him, her eyes closed in lazy contentment. When he grew silent however, she opened her eyes and saw him staring pensively at her face. "What is it?" she asked.

He shook his head and reached out to gently caress her face with his fingers. He traced all the contours, much like a blind man would, learning her face through touch. His fingertips lightly teased her soft, full lips. "I want so much to kiss you," he said.

"Then why don't you," she invited.

"I'm worried about the consequences," he admitted. "We played with fire this morning and nearly got our fingers scorched. What I'm contemplating now is probably playing with dynamite. I have dreamed of kissing you for so long.... will you be able to stop with just one kiss?"

She stared into his eyes for a long moment and then shrugged. "Good question.... I don't know, Vincent. I may be a little more experienced than you, but I don't have all the answers."

"I'm disappointed," he teased. "A lawyer without all the answers."

She slapped his arm playfully. "Don't be a smart-aleck. This is serious.... or maybe that is the answer; whether or not we're serious." Vincent looked puzzled. "What I mean, Vincent, is that there are many kinds of kisses; hello kisses, goodbye kisses, light loving kisses.... and then there are the serious kisses; deep passionate kisses."

"And what is your point, Ms. Attorney?"

She poked his chest with her finger. "My point is, smarty, you have to learn to walk before you can run. The trick is to keep things light and not get serious.... but we'd better be prepared for any situation," she said with a sly grin. "Just in case I'm wrong about all this."

"Now I'm completely disillusioned," he joked. "I didn't think lawyers were ever wrong."

She laughed. "If you believe that, dear heart, I've got a bridge I'd like to sell you."

He hugged her close. "Oh Catherine, you are the delight of my life." He pulled back to look into her eyes. "You bring me such joy.... to my heart.... to my spirit," he said huskily. His sudden seriousness and the depth of emotion in his voice brought tears to her eyes. "You are the delight of my life as well, Vincent. In fact, you are my life. The women's libbers would completely disown me, but there is no other way to put it; I only exist while you do, my love, without you I am nothing."

"You are everything," he corrected. "Sometimes I think about the miracle of 'us' and wonder what I could have possibly done to deserve having you in my life. I truly feel I was only half alive, half a person, till I found you. Since then I have felt...."

"Complete?" she asked softly. "Like a part of yourself that you didn't even know was missing?"

"Catherine.... do you mean that you have felt this way too?"

"I've never tried to suppress my feelings about this, how could you not know?"

Vincent looked uncertain. "Perhaps I did and just assumed it was my own feelings I was experiencing."

She reached up to copy his earlier actions, caressing his face, delicately tracing his lips. He captured her hand and kissed her fingertips, the palm of her hand, and the inside of her wrists where he could feel her pulse fluttering erratically against his lips. Encouraged by the love and trust he saw in her face and eyes, he leaned closer and let his lips lightly touch hers. He raised his head for a moment and looked at Catherine, then, reassured by the welcoming look on her face he kissed her again. This time he allowed his lips to linger and let his love for her pour through their bond, his passion merging with hers, creating a firestorm of emotions.

The resulting jolt to his nervous system was cataclysmic. He jerked his head up in surprise and stared at her----all he could say was "Oh Catherine."

She smiled tremulously. "Well, so much for keeping things light!" She reached up, her hands cradling his face. "Come back here," she cajoled.

He needed no coaxing. His mouth found hers again, hungrily tasting and savouring her. Lost in this new experience, he felt dizzy and bemused; his mind incapable of any thought but his need to hold her, kiss her, touch her.... the blatant urgency of his erection pressing against her brought Vincent back to reality. He broke their embrace abruptly and sat up, turning away from her.

Catherine opened her eyes and struggled to speak. "Vincent.... are you all right?" He glanced over his shoulder, his all-encompassing love and need for her tempting him to throw caution aside and return to her arms; to allow themselves to be engulfed in their desire, but.... he resolutely turned away.

Vincent, being who he was, could not easily abandon his fears. He had overcome many anxieties in the last few days but the course of their romance had changed so rapidly he was a bit disoriented. He realized he alone would be responsible for setting the pace or limits of their involvement.

He knew Catherine wanted him to find his own way, to be comfortable and at ease with his emotions and not feel pressured.

She enthusiastically returned his passion but she followed his lead, she would neither initiate nor restrain his lovemaking at this precarious stage of their relationship. He got to his feet and turned to her, belatedly answering her question. "I'm fine, Catherine. I need a few minutes to regain my composure and then we'll talk."

She watched him with passion-dazed eyes as he walked about the small chamber. She understood, she would like to walk off her turbulent emotions as well, but didn't think her legs would hold her. Her bones had taken on a decidedly jelly-like consistency. She was pleased to finally find enough starch in her backbone to sit up. She ran her hands through her tousled hair, trying to regain some semblance of control over her mind and senses. She was stunned by her uninhibited response to his kisses. She knew their abstinence had created in her a hunger for his kiss, a craving for this touch, but even her wildest fantasies had not prepared her for the volatile chemistry between them when they finally let themselves go.

Vincent came back and sat down. His eyes searched her face while he sought her feelings through their bond. He found no anger, no recriminations, only unequivocal love.

"Catherine, I apologize for wrenching myself out of your arms. I...."

Her fingers touched his lips, silencing his words. "From this moment on, Vincent, there will be no more apologies between you and me, there's no need. I know you weren't rejecting me, we were just moving too fast, getting out of control. I understand."

"My thoughts are chaotic. I'm beginning to believe a future for us is possible. I was lost in your arms, totally enraptured, yet I didn't lose control. I was able to stop---even though I didn't want to," he admitted with a rueful smile. "I'm still wary, however, I haven't conquered all my fears yet."

"We have all the time in the world, Vincent. When it's right, it will happen. My own insecurities have been resolved. I have never been afraid of making love with you---my fear was of being sent away, of living my life without you. Now that we no longer conceal things from each other through our bond, I know that won't happen."

"Never," he vowed, as he pulled her back into his arms and their lips met.

They slowly walked back to join the others for the evening. They found it necessary to stop frequently for a hug or a kiss to appease their addiction to the new freedoms they were enjoying.

"Catherine, you said earlier we should be prepared for the consequences before we went any further.... were.... were you talking about contraceptives?"

"No. I wasn't. I was referring to emotional repercussions." She hesitated a moment, then said, "I'm taking birth control pills, Vincent. I guess I should have told you before but under the circumstances I didn't know how to bring up the subject. It would have been a bit.... awkward," she smiled wryly.

"Maybe even a little pushy."

He nodded. "I understand, Catherine. I have read about the pill in Father's medical journals. Is it safe for you? Aren't there a lot of side effects?"

"Nothing I can't handle. It just seemed more convenient than any of the alternatives. We already have

enough complications in our lives, Vincent. I wanted to be prepared if the situation came up." She giggled. "Sorry, no pun intended."

Vincent stopped and turned to face her. He smiled as he looked into her laughing eyes and asked, "Catherine, was that a Freudian slip?"

She grinned. "More of a pratfall than a slip, I think."

He laughed as he enfolded her in his arms. "So much has happened these last few days, but when I think back I seem to remember us laughing more than anything else."

"I love laughing with you, Vincent." Her hands stroked up his chest and around his neck. "And being able to touch you without you feeling guilty that I was being unfair to you. But most of all, I love kissing you." She tilted her face up in an invitation he was quick to take advantage of. They held each other close for a few minutes then regretfully continued their walk.

"I think it's because we're more relaxed with each other, Vincent. Before, we were too tense to see the humour in anything. Now, we can laugh together."

"That may be part of it, Catherine, but mainly it's you. My own nature is too serious, too staid and scholarly."

She pulled him around to face her. "I am not going to have you talk that way about the man I love. The man I love is serious and compassionate and intelligent, but he's also mischievous and witty.... and very sexy! You have repressed the playful side of you too long, Vincent. I think it's begging to be turned loose."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "You may be right. You also mentioned the pranks Devin and I used to play. It's true, we were constantly in trouble. Where did it go? How did I lose that sense of light-hearted adventure and fun?"

"I think perhaps your size and strength forced you to assume adult responsibilities and attitudes you weren't emotionally ready for. The only way to handle it was to bury the child in you. And, speaking of children Father will be scolding us as if we were five years old if we're late for dinner," she warned. "Can we get to our chambers without being seen?"

"Probably, why?"

She reached up to stroke his tangled mane. "Because my love, a hairbrush is an absolute necessity for us both before we will be respectable enough to be seen in public." She looked down at her extremely rumpled blouse and laughed. "I also think we should change for dinner, if we don't want everyone to immediately suspect how we spent our afternoon. Sand and wrinkles in one's clothing adds a rather questionable aspect when one is trying to project complete innocence."

"All right," he agreed. "But I have to have at least one more kiss before we pretend to be respectable members of the community. It is going to be a very long evening." And it was a very long kiss.

"Vincent---Vincent!" Father said loudly, trying to get his son's attention, continuing this chess game was useless.

Vincent turned to look at Father in surprise. "What is it, Father?"

"Vincent, I know you're reveling having Catherine here but you're acting...." he hesitated, then said grumpily. "You haven't taken your eyes off that girl all evening."

"When such beauty is present, Father, why would my eyes be anywhere else?"

Father was surprised. Vincent was usually reticent about expressing his feelings for Catherine; this candour was startling and unsettling. "The rest of us have hardly been able to talk to Catherine; the two of you keep disappearing." He added petulantly, "You know we're all fond of her too!"

"We've spent a lot of time just walking and talking," Vincent said mendaciously, "and enjoyed each other's company, Father. This time together has brought us even closer before. Catherine could only feel my emotions through our bond if I was in grave danger. Now, she shares all my feelings as I do hers."

Father was stunned. "You're joking, surely!"

Vincent eyed him for a moment, then, with a look of mischief in his eyes asked, "Can you see Catherine?"

Father looked past Vincent. "Of course, she's over...."

Vincent interrupted. "Is she looking this way?"

"No, her back is turned to us," Father replied.

"I'm going to call her through our bond, Father. She will come to us."

Father stared at his son in disbelief, then glanced over to where Catherine was standing. To his astonishment, she soon turned and looked across the chamber, then began to make her way toward them.

She walked up beside Vincent's chair. She smiled at Father as she put her hand on Vincent's shoulder and leaned over to ask quietly. "Is anything wrong?"

Vincent smiled up at her, lifted her hand and brought it to his lips and kissed her fingers tenderly, shocking Father even more. "Everything's fine, Catherine. Won't you join us?"

"Join my two favourite men in all the world? I'd love to!"

"Good," Vincent said smugly and pulled her onto his lap. It was all he could do not to laugh at the expression on Father's face.

Their new understanding and intimacies had brought about a subtle change in Vincent. Revealing her desire for him, and her obvious enjoyment of his kisses and his touch, had given him an added confidence; restored the pride in his masculinity, so damaged by Lisa's brutal rejection. Now his demeanour held just the slightest touch of male arrogance. Catherine was elated she had been able to do this for him; she found the change endearing and irresistible. She settled on his lap and leaned comfortably into the curve of Vincent's arm. She didn't know exactly what devilry he was up to but was more than willing to cooperate. She also had a very difficult time restraining her laughter----the stunned look on Father's face was priceless.

Father valiantly tried to regain his composure. "Are you enjoying your holiday Below, Catherine?"

"You have no idea how much, Father," she replied, causing a rumble of laughter deep in Vincent's chest. "It's such a treat to be able to stay here instead of spending the holidays by myself in my lonely apartment. I have...."

"And sleep by yourself in your lonely bed." Vincent muttered, just loud enough for her to hear.

Whatever she was about to say went completely out of her mind as their bond was flooded with suggestive images of the two of them in that bed. She wasn't sure if the source of the images was herself or Vincent or a combination of both. She blushed as she stared at Father, wondering if he had heard Vincent's remark.

Father was beginning to feel as if he'd stumbled into the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. Catherine had suddenly and mysteriously gone mute and Vincent just sat there looking pleased with himself.

When Mary came over to join them, Father was relieved, at least now he would have someone to talk to. For two intelligent, articulate people, Catherine and Vincent were a conversational vacuum tonight. He was curious about the reasons but concluded it was probably better for his blood pressure if he didn't know.

Mary had no better luck than Father in conversing with the young lovers. The pair would respond to direct queries but often as not became distracted before fully answering a question. In tacit agreement Father and Mary began to talk to each other, becoming so engrossed in their conversation they didn't notice Vincent and Catherine slip quietly out of the chamber.

Vincent stopped at the entrance to their hideaway. He turned and kissed her tenderly. "Would you wait her for a few minutes? No questions asked?"

She smiled warmly, "Of course. I don't promise not to be curious, but I'll wait." She removed her jacket as she waited for him and watched as light began to flicker from the chamber entrance.

Soon he came back, kissed her again and swept her up in his arms. "Close your eyes," he said softly. She put her arms around him and nuzzled his neck as she closed her eyes. As he carried her into the chamber she could feel his excitement and nervousness through their bond. "All right, Catherine. You can open your eyes."

She gazed around the chamber in amazement. Vincent obviously had made an extra trip here sometime this evening and replaced the usual torches with numerous candles, giving the chamber a soft romantic glow. Worn patchwork quilts were spread invitingly on the sand. The gentle murmur of the tiny waterfall was mesmerizing. Catherine looked back at the leonine face she adored. "Oh, Vincent, this is perfect! You are such a romantic man; you make me feel so special, so cherished." Her arms tightened around his neck. "How could I help but love you?" She asked as her lips met his.

Vincent sank to his knees to lay her on the quilts, then he settled down beside her. She was so beautiful in the candlelight, he was spellbound, he thought his heart might stop beating out of sheer happiness. "Do you think this.... is the right time for us, Catherine?"

"Anytime is the right time for us." She cradled his face in her hands and looked steadily into his eyes. "It's the right time if you're sure---if, at any point, you're no longer comfortable, it's all right to back off and slow down. You must be at ease with yourself, Vincent or it won't be any good for either of us."

He kissed her gently. "I can't say all my fears are gone, but my desire for you is so overpowering.... when you kiss me, all I can think of is your kiss. I can't remember why I was ever afraid to kiss you."

"Then just concentrate on kissing me, Vincent." Her hand brought his face closer so her lips could explore it. His nose, his forehead, and high cheekbones all received her loving attention before she touched his lips.

This afternoon, when he first kissed her, his mouth had felt strange to her, its odd shape was intriguing and mysterious and wildly exciting. Now, it was intimately familiar to her and even more intoxicating. Soon kisses were not enough and their hands began to roam, groping blindly, wanting, needing to touch. Vincent's hand slipped easily under her loose sweater, his touch sending shivers of excitement through her.

Catherine, stymied by layers of clothing, tugged at his shirt and vest in her frenzied need to touch him. "You wear too many damn clothes," she muttered in her frustration. Vincent raised his head, then slowly moved away from her and sat up. *'Oh damn, damn damn!'* she thought, afraid she had shaken his fragile confidence. *'Will I never learn to keep my big mouth shut!'*

Then, to her astonishment he shrugged out of the vest, jerked free the laces and pulled the shirt over his head to toss it aside. The seconds agonizingly crawled by as Vincent nervously awaited her reaction.

Her eyes greedily drank in the sight of him, the powerful muscles dusted with golden down, the broad planes of his chest hidden by dense tawny fur that narrowed to bisect the well-defined muscles of his abdomen. Catherine's well-meant intention not to initiate any sexual contact was forgotten as her traitorous fingers reached out involuntarily and stroked the thick pelt of fur that covered his chest. The

fur was so soft, so inviting, she sat up and buried both hands in it, her palms gliding over his chest, she delighted in the contrast of hard muscle and velvet fur.

"Catherine?" his voice was uncertain, doubtful. Reluctantly her eyes left his chest as she raised her head. The vulnerable look in his eyes made her want to weep for him, but she knew he would misinterpret the cause of her tears. "Catherine," he said hoarsely, "is what I'm sensing through our bond true? I.... I please you?"

Catherine was too overwhelmed with emotion to speak. She lifted her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately. She continued to claim his lips as her hands wandered over his heavily muscled shoulders and back down to his chest. Her lips followed her hands down his neck and his chest. When her fingers and lips began to tease his nipples, he forgot how to breathe.

She raised her head from his chest and looked into his eyes. "There's only one thing wrong, Vincent," she said huskily. "I want to feel your glorious fur against my breasts."

His heart nearly pounding out of the chest, Vincent took hold of the bottom of her sweater and slowly drew it over her head. She sat quietly, as he had, allowing him to look at her.

Vincent was finding it hard to breathe again. It took all his courage to reach out for her, to rest his furred hands on her slim shoulders, then hesitantly, his fascination and desire inhibited by his shyness and inexperience, he touched her breasts. His fingers trembled as he caressed them, so delicate, so soft; then her nipples hardened as his fingers grazed them, startling him.

Catherine could feel his apprehension through their bond. Her hands came up to hold his as they cupped her breasts. "My body has ached for the touch of your hands, Vincent," she assured him.

He leaned forward to kiss her, his hands sliding down over her ribcage to the tiny waist he could almost span with his hands as he lifted her up against his chest. The exquisite softness of his fur against her breasts was tormenting, breath-taking; inflaming her senses. He lay back, taking her with him so she was lying on top of him, one of his hands pressing her even more intimately against his arousal. His other hand came up to caress her face and he looked into her eyes. "I don't think I can stop, Catherine," he said hoarsely.

"Oh, Vincent. I don't want you to stop. Love me, please love me," she whispered feverishly.

Their remaining clothing went flying in all directions in their haste. He pulled her against him again but Catherine rolled on to her back and urged him with her hands to come to her.

He hesitated. "I'm too heavy. I'll squash you."

She smiled at him, "Trust me, Vincent, we'll manage."

He moved over her and tentatively lowered himself between her legs as he supported his weight on his hands. "Catherine, help me," he pleaded. "I don't want to hurt you."

She reached for him, her trembling fingers guiding him until he was sliding into her. "Come to me, my love."

He pushed into her with unbelievable gentleness, the myriad expressions in his eyes attesting to his wonder and ecstasy. As her body adjusted to his size, each stroke took him deeper, until he was completely sheathed within her.

"Hold me, Vincent," she whispered, her hands pulling him down towards her.

He slipped his arms under her back, lowering his torso but keeping most of his weight still on his elbows. He looked into her eyes. "Oh, Catherine," he murmured. "I love you.... I love you."

She raised her head and captured his lips. Catherine's entire being was a mass of sensation; the subtle torment of his chest fur brushing across her breasts, the muscles of his back flexing under her hands and the glorious unleashed power of him surging inside her, taking her to heights she had never soared. Vincent was astonished at the wiry strength of her slender body as she arched against

him. Turbulent emotions bombarded him through their bond as she writhed ecstatically beneath him, her needs driving him faster, harder; or was it his own needs? He couldn't tell anymore and it didn't matter---they were truly one now, one mind, one body, one soul as they exploded in shock waves of incredible release.

Vincent finally recovered enough strength to roll sideways and gather her against his chest, relieving her of his weight. Catherine sprawled bonelessly against him, absolutely spent.

"Catherine, are you all right?" he asked in concern.

"Mmmmmm," was all the speech she was capable of.

Wordless he took hold of her shoulders and pressed her back on the quilts so he could see her face.

"Catherine, please open your eyes." Her eyelids seemed to weigh a ton as she struggled to open them. She could see his face leaning over her, his beautiful blue eyes were confused and worried. She wanted to reassure him but it required too much effort. "Catherine, talk to me," he commanded.

Her eyes focused on his mouth, his wonderful, tantalizing mouth. "Kiss me," she whispered.

"What?"

She took a deep breath. "Kiss me!" she demanded. Vincent was bewildered but he obediently leaned down to kiss her. When his sensitive lips began to work their magic, Catherine decided she was still alive after all.

Vincent lifted his head to look at her in exasperation. Her response to this kiss indicated she was fine but.... "Catherine, answer me! Are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

She gazed in bemusement at his adored face. "You've ruined me for anything else, I don't want to be a lawyer anymore," she said dreamily. "I don't want to have to deal with people. I don't want to do anything but stay in this chamber and make love."

In his relief, he didn't know whether to shout at her for frightening him or shake her.... or kiss her---kissing won. When he stopped for breath he said sternly, "Don't ever scare me like that again, Catherine."

"I'm sorry, love. I didn't mean to. I literally didn't have the strength to answer you at first."

"Was I too rough?" he asked anxiously, his insecurities surfacing. "Is such exhaustion.... normal? I thought.... I felt through our bond I was pleasing you, but....?"

She drew him close and looked into his eyes. "Vincent, I don't know what a '*normal*' reaction is, and I don't care. I have never had such an absolutely fantastic experience in my life. You had to know you were pleasing me.... satisfying me."

"I thought so, but I was getting confused. I wasn't sure if I was feeling your emotions or mine."

"Vincent, I want to tell you something.... maybe it will help you understand what tonight means to me. I've been with other men in the past, you already knew that. It's a fact of my life. Not a fact I'm particularly proud of but I'm not ashamed either---it's just a fact," she hesitated.

"Catherine, you don't have to tell me anything...."

"Yes, I do. I need to. The few affairs I had were brief and unsuccessful.... emotionally or sexually. I truly believed I loved Steven Bass, but our engagement was a disaster! I thought it was my fault, Vincent. I assumed there was something wrong with me. I'd read all the books, I knew what it was supposed to be like but I.... I decided I must be too cold, or too inhibited to let go. Steven, of course, was more than willing to let me take the blame for our problems. I realized I'd rather be alone than involved in a bad relationship, so I more-or-less quit trying years ago. I still dated a lot but I was considered a flirt, or worse, because I wouldn't let anyone get too close. I resigned myself to the idea I might be alone for the rest of my life."

She smiled warmly at him. "Then I met you and after a while I realized I not only loved you, I was in love with you. It took me completely by surprise. For a long time I was glad you had doubts and reservations about making love because it left me free to love you without the fear I would disappoint you."

He interrupted her with a gentle kiss. "Catherine, you could never disappoint me."

She hugged him, grateful for his unconditional love. "At some point, my desire for you started to outweigh my concerns. Somehow, I knew it would be different with you. Tonight, Vincent, I found out what was missing before. It's love, my darling, complete and total love. I love you and I could let go with you because I trust you----with my heart, with my body, and with my soul."

"Oh, Catherine," he said with tears in his eyes. "I am humbled by your faith and trust in me.... yet at the same time you fill me with such pride that I can bring you joy. I love you beyond belief."

Catherine decided they had been serious long enough. She kissed him and stroked his chest. "By the way," she said lightly. "Did I mention you're also the sexiest man in the whole wide world? And the best kisser? And definitely the greatest lover!"

His eyes gleamed with delight as he teased, "Does that mean we can do this again sometime?"

"Sometime?" She snuggled closer, her lips setting him on fire as she nuzzled her way up his neck to nip his earlobe. "You have unleashed a genuine, bonafide, female sex maniac. Vincent, if you plan on getting any sleep at all tonight.... you'd better go barricade yourself in your chamber. As long as you stay here with me, you're fair game, my love!"

The next morning, the two lovers reluctantly dressed and prepared to join the others. Vincent had included a small mirror and hairbrush in his provisions for their secret chamber and Catherine insisted on brushing his hair, satisfying some need in herself to nurture. She adored his tawny mane and knelt behind him to lovingly brush out all the tangles her fingers had caused during the night.

"This is most irritating," Vincent grumbled. "I do not want any breakfast.... I do not want to see other people.... why are we doing this?"

"Because we have to, I guess," she said somberly. "Because we're expected to." She put the brush down and leaned against his back, resting her hands on his shoulders. "Vincent, would you come and stay for a whole weekend, in my apartment?"

"You don't have to ask. You know I will."

"I'll stock the refrigerator with food, lock the doors----in fact, I'll put up a quarantine sign outside my door----and unplug the phone. There will be nobody but you and me," she promised, sweeping aside his hair to kiss his neck. "And that lonely bed."

"Can we go there now?" he asked hopefully.

"Afraid not," she replied, straightening up and patting him consolingly on the back. "You promised the children we would play games with them today." Vincent audibly groaned in disgust. Catherine chuckled and she picked up the brush and mirror and perfunctorily ran the brush through her own tangled hair. She surveyed her face in the mirror with resignation. "We can make you look presentable, Vincent, but I'm not so sure about me. I have dark circles under my eyes from a lack of sleep, a very tell-tale puffiness in my lips and a deplorable tendency to grin like a fool when I recall how they got that way."

Vincent shifted round to face her. "I must be wearing a completely fatuous expression," he said. "How could I not? Every fantasy I've been afraid to dream came true last night. I still can't believe my luck, Catherine, but I don't question our future together. You've lost your chance.... you're stuck with me. I no longer have the strength to be noble and let you go."

"You have had an exasperating inclination to try to pair me off with other men. It was not exactly flattering, Vincent, for you to keep trying to get rid of me. Do you remember when Michael stayed with me?"

Vincent grimaced. "Yes. It was not one of my more intelligent ideas."

"You made a remark then that I've wondered about."

"Oh no," he said. "Are my words coming back to haunt me?"

"I don't remember your exact words but it was something about Michael being a fine young man and you should have been happy for me to fall in love with him."

Vincent looked very embarrassed. "Must you remind me of my abysmal stupidity."

Catherine grinned. "Vincent, didn't it occur to you that Michael was just a little bit young for me?"

"Does age matter where the heart is concerned?" he asked.

"Are you trying to tell me something, Vincent?"

Vincent tried to look serious but a smile quirked his lips. "You were thirty-one on your last birthday, weren't you, Catherine?"

She smiled and nodded, knowing he was up to something. "Well, I won't be thirty-one until January so, yes.... you are taking advantage of my youth," he teased, placing his hand dramatically over his heart.

Laughing, she fell into his arms. When she could finally talk, Catherine asked, "Leading you astray, am I?"

"Oh, I do hope so," Vincent replied fervently, tongue firmly in cheek. He rose and offered her his hand. "Enough frivolity, your love slave must be fed, if he is to maintain his.... energy."

"Love slave?" she inquired as he pulled her to her feet. "We seem to have a problem with semantics. Slaves are supposed to take orders----not give them. A certain love slave around here seems to have the mistaken idea he's lord and master."

"You lawyers always quibble about details," he said loftily as they left the chamber to wend their way home.

As usual, their trek required several heart-pounding, knee-weakening, mind-boggling pauses.

Father and Mary wearily trudged home after a long night tending to an ailing member of the community. "I'm getting much too old for these middle-of-the-night calls." Father complained. "William should have breakfast ready by now, but I don't know which holds the most appeal for me, food or sleep?" Soon, however, interest in either one went out of his mind as they rounded a curve and discovered Catherine and Vincent entangled in a passionate embrace.

The older couple froze in surprise, too stunned to either remove themselves from the scene or announce their presence. However, when the lovers' hands began to roam in decidedly intimate caresses, complete shock caused Father to drop his walking stick and it clattered loudly on the stone floor.

The uncurled pair before them did not immediately separate. In fact, it took several seconds for the noise to register in their befuddled minds. When they did reluctantly break their kiss and turn their heads towards the intruders, there was only bemused curiosity on their faces. *'They don't even have the decency to look embarrassed,'* Father thought irritably.

It was apparent Father was going to glower at them, so Vincent said quietly, "Good morning! The two of you are out and about rather early.... and far from your usual pathways."

Father was outraged at the implication that he and Mary were the ones in the wrong here, or perhaps

were somewhere they should not be. "One might say the same about you and Catherine," Father said irritably.

"Oh, we find that a long walk before breakfast can be quite.... stimulating," Vincent said provocatively. He felt Catherine gathering herself to step away from him and his arms tightened in warning. He refused to allow Father to treat himself and Catherine like wayward children.

She relaxed, content to weather the storm in his arms, as Vincent obviously was not going to side-step a confrontation. The lawyer in Catherine, however, demanded she try to mediate between these two immovable forces. She looked at Mary, hoping the older woman would help her smooth things over. "Is someone ill?"

Mary was grateful for the mundane question in this highly-charged atmosphere. "We spent part of the night with Old Sam, but Father doesn't think it's anything serious."

"That's good," Catherine said. "You look tired, Mary. Why not let Vincent and I watch the children for you this morning while you get some sleep?"

Mary protested. "I'll be fine, Catherine. This is your holiday, you don't want to be stuck baby-sitting." She smiled benevolently at the two young people she was so fond of. "I know the two of you would rather be alone."

"From the looks of things," Father said sarcastically. "I think baby-sitting duty would be an excellent occupation for these two."

'Uh-oh,' Catherine thought. 'The gloves are about to come off! This situation needs to be defused quickly.... but how?'

Mary, apparently of the same mind, tugged at Father's arm. "We really should go.... breakfast will be getting cold." Father stubbornly stood his ground, glaring at Vincent and Catherine.

Finally Vincent spoke, his voice was controlled but annoyed. "Your disapproval is obvious, Father, but I am puzzled as to your specific complaint. Are you irate because you found us kissing in a more-or-less public area or are you simply offended because of the fact we were kissing?"

"I'm angry," Father grated, "because you continually flout my advice with your thoughtless and irresponsible behaviour. I am appalled at your reckless conduct."

Catherine had heard enough. "How dare you talk to Vincent like that?" she demanded angrily. "Reckless, thoughtless and irresponsible? You owe your son an apology! Why on earth would you begrudge us our happiness? I know you have always resented me, but I thought we had made peace with each other; that you finally trusted me not to hurt him. how can you be so heartless?"

Father was stricken, her words cutting deep in his psyche. He raised a hand in supplication. "Please, Catherine, Vincent.... I'm sorry. As usual, I have allowed my fear for you both to govern my tongue. Of course I don't think either one of you are thoughtless or irresponsible, but I do think you are being reckless."

"I might agree we were reckless to fall in love, Father," Vincent said quietly. "But it's much too late to do anything about that. What exactly do you fear for us now?"

"Vincent, there is so much to be concerned about. Peter and I ran tests when you were a baby so we could take proper care of you. We discovered that your bio-chemistry and blood type are quite different, but we don't know.... we never tested...."

Suddenly Catherine realized what Father was worried about and she took pity on the embarrassed old man. "Father," she said gently, "it's all right, you don't have to worry about us. Vincent and I are lovers, but we aren't being reckless or careless; for the time being we feel birth control pills are our best option." she hesitated, then added, "We selfishly thought our love affair was no one's business but our own. I'm sorry.... we didn't take into consideration your very real concerns as well as a father.

Can you forgive us?"

Father limped forward and put his arms around them both. "If you can forgive my unwarranted and impertinent meddling, I can certainly forgive your reluctance to confide in me. I'm so happy for you both.... I've been so worried about.... well, enough of that! What are your plans? What are...."

Vincent shook his head in exasperation, then smiled down at Catherine. "You see, questions we can't or don't want to answer. We would rather not become the object of community speculation. Father, can we keep this discussion between the four of us?"

Mary came forward to join in the communal embrace. "Of course we can. We love you both but," she added with a warning glance at Father, "this really is none of our business, is it, Jacob?"

Catherine and Vincent both noticed her emphasized use of Father's given name and his immediate acquiescence seemed to attach some significance to the phenomenon. However, as they were both grateful to have escaped his wrath, they did not comment.

Father stepped back and cleared his throat as he looked around at the three faces watching him. "Yes, well, don't you think we should all be going to breakfast?"

Mary handed him his stick and then took his arm. "I could certainly use a cup of tea," she said and smiled at Catherine and Vincent and they stepped past.

"Save us a place," Catherine called out to the older couple as they walked around a bend. "We'll join you shortly."

"We will?" Vincent asked.

"Yes, we will," Catherine said firmly. "We're momentarily back in Father's good graces.... and I, for one, certainly intend to stay there as long as possible."

Vincent laughed softly. "Yes, we should take advantage of it. I don't expect the truce to last for long, my little lawyer," he said affectionately. "I quite enjoyed seeing you square off against Father in my defense."

"You didn't mind my.... butting in?" she asked anxiously.

"How could I mind when you demonstrate your love for me by trying to protect? I'm deeply touched, Catherine."

"You're mine, Vincent," she said possessively. "I will not stand by quietly and let anyone attack you---- not even Father! You're mine.... to love, to care for, and to protect."

Vincent kissed her again, then said. "A lovely thought, Catherine. I think we should include it in our wedding vows; it sound much nicer than love, honour and obey."

"Vincent?" she asked uncertainly, her hopes rising.

"You will have to make an honest man of me, Catherine," he teased. "Father will definitely expect it of you, now that you've led me astray. A wedding will be completely superfluous, however, as everyone will already know I belong to you."

"Just how will they know?" She asked, going along with his light-hearted teasing.

"Why, surely there's a big 'C' on my forehead proclaiming me yours?" At her puzzled look he elaborated, "Something like a brand on a steer."

"A steer?" She grinned. "A bull, maybe.... but brands?"

"It may not show, my love, but you put your brand on me last night; embedded in every sinew, every cell of my body." He kissed her again then said huskily, "They all say '*personal property of Catherine Chandler, forever and ever.*'"

