

Counterpoint

by Linda S. Barth

Author's Note:

"Counterpoint" was inspired by the "rain scene" in the Second Season episode "Chamber Music." I had wanted to explore some of the ways Vincent might finally face his powerful fears and doubts about his desire for Catherine, feelings that lingered even after they had become lovers, along with some of the factors continuing to hold them back from fulfilling their dream of building a life together. The episode presented a great opportunity to do so, and I hope you enjoy the story.

"Counterpoint" was originally published in the September 1995 issue of Barbara Hill and Terrie Milliman's CABB zine series "Soulmates – A Never-ending Dream." The story won the Second Place award as "Fan Favorite Short Story" at the annual B&B convention in Norfolk, Virginia in July 1996. After that, I set it aside for a long time and then, following a great deal of revision, published it about ten years ago in "Remember Love," a limited print collection of my short stories. This is the latest and final revision of "Counterpoint", and I am honored to be able to submit it for publication in the retrospective section of the conzine for the on-line 30th anniversary celebration of our beloved show.

Please note: "Counterpoint" is rated PG-13. It contains some adult content and themes, but it is not explicit.

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(Inspired by the Rain Scene in "Chamber Music")

by Linda S. Barth

"Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength,
while loving someone deeply gives you courage."

Lao Tzu

Vincent raised a glass of water to the old man's lips and waited patiently until he had taken several slow sips. Sam Denton winced as he swallowed the cool liquid, and Vincent grimaced in sympathy for his friend's discomfort, hoping the small offering would help ease the hot, raspy pain in the elderly man's throat.

"Thank you," Sam whispered hoarsely, as he lowered himself back upon a mound of faded pillows. "That's better."

"You shouldn't try to speak," Vincent cautioned. "It will strain your throat. Your fever has broken, but you must try to rest now and let the medicine Father sent continue to help you."

In the dimly lit bedroom, Sam managed a weak smile. "I'm ok. My throat doesn't hurt much."

But the furtive flickering of his gaze from Vincent's face to the darkening sky outside his window spoke of deeper concerns. His friends had done so much for him, and he did not want to seem ungrateful, but a lingering fear haunted him.

"Sam, please try not to worry. We all understand that you want to stay Above in your own home, but you needn't worry that you'll be forgotten. I'll stay with you now until you fall asleep, and in the morning Jamie will come and check on you. I'm sure she'll be here early with a special breakfast from William – that honey and oatmeal that you like."

Vincent smoothed the rumpled blanket around Sam's chest and then took the old man's gnarled hand in his large and gentle grasp.

"Remember, if you need us, you have only to call Mr. Long and he'll get a message Below immediately."

Seeing that his words had helped ease Sam's fears, Vincent tilted his head in the direction of the bedside phone and, chuckling softly, released his friend's hand with a final pat.

"And besides, I think Mrs. O'Malley across the hall would be more than happy to keep you company. Unless she's finally given up on you and found someone else."

Sam shook his head. "That old busybody will never give up. She's always calling me and running over here pestering me." He tried to frown, but his smile revealed the enjoyment he found in his neighbor's attention.

"There, you see, you won't be left alone, even if you decide that's what you want." Vincent's smile matched the soothing tone of his voice. "Now try and get some sleep."

“Ok, I know you’re right, but first I need to tell you I’m sorry for taking up all your time tonight.”

“Please don’t apologize,” Vincent said quickly. “You’re part of our family, Sam. I’m happy to be able to help you.”

Sam’s heart lightened at those words, but he needed to let his friend know he understood the depth of Vincent’s unselfishness.

“Yeah, but when you brought Catherine to visit me the other night, didn’t you two say you were going to the concert in the park tonight? Did you change your plans just to help me? Don’t get me wrong – I’m grateful you’re here, but I feel real bad about making you two give up your time together.”

Touched by his friend’s concern, Vincent quickly reassured him. “No, it’s not your fault. Catherine must work tonight. It was unexpected, and it’s important that she do what’s right. Her job is very important to her, and she does much good for many people.”

“I know,” Sam agreed, “but you two don’t get much time together as it is. It’s a shame you have to miss the concert.”

Vincent nodded, keeping his tone even. “Yes, it is, but it can’t be helped, so please don’t worry about it. There will be other times.”

Sam heard the faint undercurrent of misgiving Vincent had tried to hide. “Maybe she’ll get out of work early, and you can still hear some of the music,” he added.

“That would be very nice, but I don’t think it’s going to be possible.”

Vincent knew Sam would persist good-heartedly and he needed the conversation to end, not only for Sam’s welfare but his own.

“Perhaps when I leave, I’ll go to the place Below where we enjoy the concerts, and I’ll be able to hear the final selections. And there will be concerts again next summer. Catherine and I will be able to listen to some of them together then.”

Sam sighed hoarsely. “Your Catherine is special – she’s a real nice girl.”

Vincent nodded, a smile curving his lips. “Yes, she is. She is very special.”

“You know, Catherine left her card here for me,” Sam continued, gesturing toward the bedside table. “She said I could call her anytime if I needed anything, or if I just want someone to talk to. I sure wish I could help you two out somehow.”

“I know you do, Sam, and I’m grateful for that. I’m sure Catherine is, too. But now you really need to try and get some rest.”

Vincent watched as Sam’s eyes closed slowly and the careworn lines of his face relaxed in the oblivion of sleep. He knew the medication would provide Sam several hours of restorative peace, and soon he would be able to leave safely. Yet he was reluctant to depart until he was completely certain his old friend’s rest would continue undisturbed.

As he settled back in the bedside chair, Vincent’s gaze turned toward the rapidly-fading light faintly visible through the threadbare cotton curtains that covered the room’s single window. He had made his way to Sam’s sixth floor apartment by way of a shadowy staircase leading from the sub-basement of the crumbling tenement, and he knew that would be the safest route of return to the tunnels.

But as the darkness deepened outside, he almost thought he heard something ... someone ... calling to him, urging him to rise and journey out into the night, to reach a secret place between two disparate realms. The siren song was one

he'd heard many times before, as difficult to ignore as it was desperately sought, and its music echoed ceaselessly within him.

As the minutes passed slowly in the quiet room, Vincent felt his entire concentration drawn ever inward, closer and closer to the one person who had become so much a part of him that he was aware of her always. She was a tangible presence, a whispered song in each breath he took, a tender promise in every beat of his heart.

"Catherine..."

He murmured her name, warm and low with longing, needing to hear the one word that defined his dreams.

"Catherine, Catherine..."

He was lost in memories and dreams of her. It was as if nothing else existed, nothing else mattered anymore.

Abruptly, Vincent shook his head, struggling to regain awareness of his responsibility to the old man whose troubles he had come there to ease. With a quick glance toward the bed, he was relieved to find his friend slept on undisturbed. Yet Vincent's deepening frown and the tightening of his mouth spoke of a sense of guilt. It had never been like him to become so easily distracted from his duties, and he found that realization disquieting, but entirely understandable as well.

He had hoped to see Catherine that night, but it was not meant to be, and he was left with an intense longing, an unending need to be with her that swept through him with familiar force, leaving him uneasy in its ever-increasing strength. There was no shelter he could seek from its presence.

Catherine. He wanted her, he needed her in his arms, in his life, in the only world he'd ever know. Always, forever. Nothing else mattered now, nothing else made any sense. His life could never be complete without her.

During the weeks that has passed since they'd first become lovers, the bond they shared had grown ever stronger. His awareness of her every emotion had intensified, and he wondered if she felt his emotions just as deeply, a thought that only added to his growing concerns. Before they'd become lovers, it had been difficult enough to live with his ever-increasing desire for her. But now that he could no longer deny that she, too, felt a deep and compelling desire for him, his torment – and his rapture – had been magnified.

Where there should have existed only joy, there was an unrelenting stab of despair, for Vincent believed that to continue to surrender to their yearning would only bind her irrevocably to his world and to him. With each step forward, she would become more committed to him, and she would be forced to abandon everything she'd always known. And while building a life with his beloved was his most cherished dream, he loved her too much to buy its fulfillment at the cost of what he believed was her true destiny.

From the moment he'd first felt the wonder of love, offered to him from deep within Catherine's heart, he had vowed never to interfere with the purpose of her life. He knew the love they shared was endless, yet he held to the specter of her parting and waited always for the inevitable day when her path would lead away from his world of shadows and secrets, taking her back into light. Burdened with this belief, Vincent had sworn he would never create obstacles that would bar her way and hold her to him, never realizing that the only barricade restraining her from the destiny she had fully-embraced was his own misplaced nobility.

When Catherine had returned to him from Connecticut several weeks earlier, she had told him that what they had was all that mattered, that it was worth everything, underscoring her words with their first kiss, exquisitely tender and filled with promise. Yet while Vincent fully trusted in her love, he still believed she did not entirely understand what she would be forced to give up by joining her life to his, the tremendous sacrifices she would have to make just because she loved him. He knew that Catherine needed and wanted him as deeply as he needed and wanted her, but there was so much more she deserved, so much more he longed to give her that could never be.

“No,” he murmured aloud, his voice little more than an icy shade of its usual intensity and warmth. “I won’t let Catherine do this. What we want, what we need, so much of it can only be a dream. I cannot live in her world and I cannot force her to choose mine. She must fulfill the destiny that was meant for her ... and I have to learn to accept my own.”

He shuddered, feeling a despondency fill him, where before there had been newborn hope. Dreams of a life of love and desire with someone like Catherine were not for one such as he, nor could they ever be, even when they were offered to him for the taking.

Vincent bowed his head as if to accept the weight of his pledge, as it settled like heavy chains across his shoulders. Then he resolutely pushed himself to his feet and leaned forward to unnecessarily straightened the blankets over Sam’s chest. He almost wished the old man would awaken and ask something of him, anything to take his attention from the painful burden of his own thoughts. He frowned as he looked down upon the healing serenity that had at last come to Sam, and he felt ashamed of the selfishness of his wish and of the sudden yearning that he, too, might escape and find peace in dreamless sleep.

Dreams. He sighed heavily, knowing he would never give them up entirely, even though they would be filled with infinite measures of pleasure and pain, for all his dreams now and forever would be of Catherine.

Restless, Vincent paced the few steps to the window, then with inborn caution carefully pushed aside the limp curtains to stare out at the darkened city streets. Rain had begun to fall, and suddenly he felt an undeniable need to feel the coolness of the night on his face and hands. With forcibly-controlled impatience, he eased the window upwards several inches, carefully positioning his body in front of it to prevent any damp breeze from reaching the ailing man across the room.

The drizzly late summer evening promised a touch of soothing comfort for Vincent’s ragged soul, and bracing his hands on the warped wooden sill, he leaned forward slightly, drawing in deep breaths of rain-laden night air. For many moments he felt a cool and calming sensation as his innate sense of self-control descended once again. Yet in the deepest part of himself, he mourned the absence of the wildly stirring sensations he’d felt earlier, and he knew any serenity he gained would be distorted with regret.

He straightened and glanced absently at the amber fur coating the backs of his hands, glazed with a glittering of raindrops that caught and reflected errant sparkles of light. He turned them back and forth, watching bemusedly as the moisture gleamed upon the dark gold surface. Then, a precious memory slowly began to swirl and take flight. A soul-deep groan was wrenched from him, and he sank down hard on his knees upon the rough wooden floor. Staring sightlessly into the night, Vincent gave in to remembered images that filled him with torment and temptation, a beautiful blending of memories and dreams too seductively sweet and too deeply desired to ignore.

It was as if they were in a world of their own imagining, enclosed by soft mist and hazy light swirling within the outer tunnel Below and the stirring, impassioned sounds of Schubert’s “Unfinished Symphony” filtering down from Above. Side by side they sat, cushioned on worn comforters and quilts, the cool night breezes sweeping gently between them. They leaned back against the tunnel wall, eyes closed, as they listened enraptured to the music. Yet for all its soaring beauty, Vincent knew his true attention was drawn only to Catherine, and resting his arm on his thigh, he turned his body slightly toward her so that the moment he opened his eyes, he would see her there.

Her breathy murmured tones called to him. “Ahh, I love this part.”

He answered her immediately, "Yes, it's beautiful," savoring the understanding that the beauty which held him enthralled had nothing to do with the symphony soaring Above. She sighed softly, and unable to resist, he opened his eyes to look at her.

She wore a dark blue silk dress and fanciful earrings of pearls and gold, something he imagined she might wear to the theatre or a party Above, and it astonished him to realize that she had dressed as carefully for this special evening in his world, as she would have done for a social event in her own. He felt a sense of pleasure in that realization and, he forced himself to admit, a sense of pride that she would make this effort just for him. The thought sent tendrils of warmth through him, and he sighed softly, knowing that in the past he would have denied such a notion, but now, somehow, it seemed right.

Yet before he would allow himself the greater freedom of contemplating, even for a few moments, the slender, feminine beauty of her body, he gazed at the loveliness of her upturned face. Tilting his head to one side, he studied the ivory lines and curves of her profile and her mouth, soft with the warmth of a smile.

He could not look away, although he felt perhaps he should, and lost in the enchantment, he spoke without thinking. "What makes you smile?"

Unhesitating, she turned towards him, and as her eyes flickered open in response, Vincent felt dazzled by the light sparkling in their green depths.

"This is a wonderful spot," she began, and the words that followed, full of eager emotion, opened a floodgate within him.

He shared with her moments of his life Below, small pieces of the long years he'd lived without her, something deep within him needing to reassure her, to let her know that his had been far more than just a bittersweet, stoically endured existence.

Catherine's delight in supposing that for many years they'd probably listened to many of the same concerts, touched his heart even as some small part of him quietly mourned the lost hours when they'd been so close but still unaware of each other's existence. Then he told her of the stillness that would fill the small, hidden chamber when each concert ended.

Her eyes clouded and her voice was full of tears.

"The stillness. Didn't it make you feel ..."

Before she could finish the question, he replied, needing to soothe the sadness of her words with truth.

"Alone? Sometimes...and sometimes I found a wonderful peace in that stillness."

Her poignant smile, immediate and full of warmth, reassured him that she'd heard and understood everything, and he wondered if he'd ever felt so safe as he did in that moment.

Catherine leaned back once again, seemingly adrift in the music. Finding himself completely unable to turn away from her, he leaned infinitesimally closer, just as the sound and brilliance of a sudden summer storm tore apart the city sky. Its power, compelling and unexpected, seemed to vibrate within him, and, he sensed, within her.

Catherine's eyes opened wide, but there was no trace of fear in her voice as she turned to him in startled amazement. "Lightning?"

He smiled at her, his voice husky with a rumbling undercurrent of amusement. "I think it was."

Within seconds, the cloudburst from Above dissolved the orchestral sounds and swept concert-goers from their seats, sending them scurrying for shelter as its cool, silvery drops began to splash into the secret chamber Below.

“Vincent,” Catherine cried, “it’s raining!”

He immediately began to pull his cloak from his shoulders, intending to offer her shelter from the storm, but much to his surprise, she shook her head in refusal and pushed it away. Laughing, she rose to her knees and leaned back, letting the rain pour down over her upturned face and body.

At first, her impetuous actions left him confused, but the delight ringing in her laughter and shining in the wide, vibrant smile she shared with him, drew an answering chord and he smiled back at her, savoring her enjoyment as his own. For long moments, they shared an impulsive, childlike pleasure in the surprising turn of events, and Vincent was content to watch happily as Catherine played. But all too suddenly he felt a deep, insistent undercurrent begin to throb within him, a force devoid of any childish innocence, and although his first instinct was to deny it, he found to his growing concern that he could not.

With arms outstretched, Catherine gathered the rain to herself as its increasing torrent saturated her hair, turning its strands the color of dark honey, and soaked through her dress, transforming it to a length of cobalt silk that clung to her body like a lover’s stroking hands. Vincent wrenched his gaze away, trying to focus instead on the tumultuous storm above, feeling his hands clench the woolen folds of his cloak, drawing the damp fabric into tight, painful fists so that he would not reach for her instead.

But even as the allure of that erotic vision before him was surrendered to his ferocious self-control, the seduction of sound overtook him, and he was lost once more, drawn back to her as if he’d never forced himself to look away. The music of Catherine’s laughter became a wild melody, undulating with the storm, filling him with delight and torment. The sound flooded through him, inundating his body with unrestrained emotion, flooding over the barriers he’d erected to hold back the powerful feelings that unnerved him. His heart began to race, drumming a frenzied beat within the straining muscles of his chest, pulsating through the length and breadth of him, until it centered low in his body in an overwhelming rush of heat and hardness.

Vincent raised his eyes to Catherine and felt a surge of gratitude that she seemed unaware of his turmoil, so caught up was she in other pleasures of the storm-charged night. So many countless times in the past, he had known feelings of pure and uncompromising need and desire for her, but always, he believed, he’d hidden them from her, forcing himself to move away from her touch or to end an embrace. He’d been terrified that to act on his feelings would destroy her trust in the safety and sureness of his love. Now he took low, measured breaths as he summoned the power of his lifelong restraint in an attempt to smother the relentless force of his consuming desire for every part of her. Slowly, thankfully, Vincent felt his self-control return, and in relief he offered Catherine a smile that reflected the constant and more tranquil joy he always found simply by having her near. But the moments of respite when he could cherish such sweetness were washed away, as with an elated cry, Catherine flung herself toward him and into his instinctively outstretched arms.

He looked down into her smiling, upturned face, sharing in the wonder and delight of this extraordinary night. At first, his shock at her impulsive action served to maintain his hard-won serenity. Then, as he became increasingly aware of the sensation of her lithe body moving upon the muscled length of his, he realized that any sense of peace and quiet pleasure could not be sustained for long. She cuddled against him, her arms clinging to his neck and shoulders, and he could not resist holding her closer, still struggling desperately to force back other, darker sensations which he believed would shatter this wondrous moment. Never had there been such intimacy in their embrace; never had he allowed it, even though the unspoken need had filled them both. And he vowed he would allow nothing, not even himself, to destroy this moment, believing it might never come again.

But even as he dared to revel, just for a moment, in the pleasure of such an unexpected gift, Vincent could not ignore his own words of warning, echoing relentlessly in his mind. You must not touch her like this – you must let her go – you must not – you cannot!

The words thundered through him, over and over, yet for once he found himself entirely unable to give in to their demands. He pulled her tighter into his embrace, savoring the sensations evoked by her murmuring sighs and the delicious pressure of her body as she nestled against him. Don't let it end yet, he begged, his inner voice now offering a prayer of quiet desperation. Not yet, not yet.

He found his prayer answered in the slow return of his lifelong sense of restraint. With a relieved sigh, he drifted in waves of indescribable sensation which swirled through and around them, finding deep contentment in just being able to hold his beloved Catherine this way. How has this come to be? he wondered dazedly. The realization that he could be with her like this and yet not lose all control, that she wanted it to happen, that she herself had brought about such a wildly unexpected occurrence, was almost too much for him to comprehend. But he gave in to it at last with surprising ease, allowing himself, even if just this once, to be filled with nothing but pure contentment and pleasure.

Then, as Catherine raised her head and once again looked up into his eyes, everything changed. All soothing waves of blissful serenity were consumed in an instant by the relentless, driving heat that again swept over and through him. It was as if his body had been waiting only for the moment when he dared to let down his guard, and it took command of him once more, freeing everything he had tried to suppress within a gentler, more tender guise.

Every place their bodies touched seemed to spark with bursts of flame, as if the lightning that still jolted the night sky above crackled and flared inside them. This image burned within his consciousness, sending shudders of trepidation through him, but they did nothing to stop the response of his willful body. He could feel every soft curve of Catherine's supple form as she pressed closer to him, and in response, he could no longer resist deepening their embrace, spreading open his large hands to pull her more tightly to him. The wet silk of her dress was an irresistible enticement, and he rubbed his hands over the fragile fabric from shoulder to waist, imagining its delicate texture replicated the still unknown sensation of her sleek, bare skin against his work-roughened palms.

Catherine gasped in delight as his hands caressed her, and the seductive sound drew his focus immediately to her mouth, her soft lips parted and moist, inviting his kiss. Rapidly reaching a point beyond thought, he lowered his mouth to hers, drawing in the sweet heat of her breath as he adored her with his lips and tongue. He was lost in the sensation of her mouth moving so eagerly with his...the sound of her soft moans of pleasure. The very taste of her defined passion, and he wanted to drown in it, taking her mouth again and again in flame-drenched kisses.

Finally, deliciously breathless, Vincent raised his head and leaned back slightly, gazing down into the smoky heat of Catherine's half-closed eyes. He tilted his head back farther, inhaling deeply, to try and still his ragged breathing and regain a fragment of the self-control that he was no longer certain he truly wanted. Catherine snuggled closer with a deep, quivering sigh, pressing her body even tighter to his. Her tenderly seductive offering jolted him to complete awareness, every part of him responding to her. He felt it all in the pounding of his heart, the harshness of his labored breathing, the helpless hardening of his body.

And in one heartbreakingly sweet and sorrowful instant, he knew it must end. Again, that inner voice cried out to him – no more, no more – and this time he yielded to its commands.

Too soon, he forced his hands to take Catherine's shoulders in a careful but firm grasp and ease her body away from his. Much later, he would remember how she had trembled and for a long, heartrending moment had clung fiercely to him, unwilling to surrender those wondrous possibilities, until with a small despairing sigh, she had let him push her away. Like rolling thunder, a deep groan echoed through the chamber, and Vincent shuddered at the sound, not realizing for several seconds that it had been torn from him.

He could not recall the words they'd spoken then, although he knew they had been inconsequential ones, needed only as an attempt to regain the easy contentment they'd known earlier, before the rainstorm. Then he rose to his feet and offered his hand to her, telling her without words that their storm-tossed evening had ended.

Never had they let themselves become so caught up in a physical expression of their love, and Vincent knew he needed time apart from her now, time to replay in his mind everything that had happened, without the fiery distraction of the passion that still burned in him.

Almost as much as he desired those sensations, he feared their consequences, still mistakenly believing that to release them fully would draw from her a commitment that he felt she must not keep. She must someday return to her own life. For him that truth was irrefutable, and to give in to their desire now would only make their inevitable parting more painful and more permanent.

That was unthinkable, a risk he could not take, for without her in his life, even if only in stolen moments, there could no longer be any life for him at all.

He ached with the need to perceive her emotions through their bond, to try to further understand her reaction to the time just passed. Improbable as he told himself it must be, he could not ignore the realization that the flames that still burned steadily within him, seemed, by some miracle, to have their counterpart in her. But he would not allow himself to tell her so.

As they walked hand in hand through the tunnels, sometimes in slow, easy silence and sometimes speaking soft, casual words, he almost managed to convince himself that it had been merely a fantasy, and now all was well, all was as it should be. By the time they reached the entrance to her building, the passionate storm they'd shared seemed more the substance of his heated dreams than any form of reality.

At the threshold to the world Above, they paused and faced each other, hands clasped tightly together, entirely unwilling to let the evening go, loath to see its magic end in only memories and promises. In an attempt to hold back the inevitable moment of their parting, Vincent used the power of his heartfelt words to tell her how much it meant to him that a part of his world had become a very special haven they could share.

"I wanted to share this place with you," he offered, his husky voice deepening with his barely suppressed feelings, unable to conceal that there was so much more he wished he could share with her, knowing that she wished it, too. He looked down into her eyes, his expression partially concealed by the bronze, rain-darkened strands of his hair, as he awaited her reply.

Before she uttered even a single word, she told him everything. Her fingers tightened their grasp on his as if to anchor herself to him, and she swayed closer, like a tree bending to the wind. Even had he been able to blind himself to all else, he found in her luminous eyes the offering he had always chosen to refuse. This time he knew there was no choice, nor did he want one. The desire he'd always tried so hard to hide away, convincing himself it was his own shameful secret, he now realized had never been his alone, even from the start. Catherine had always reveled in his desire for her, welcoming the fire and fury of his feelings, for they matched an all-consuming need of her own, an equally deep and abiding desire for every part of him. Unbelievable as it still seemed to him, he finally understood without a doubt that this was a gift, powerful and beautiful and right, that they could give to each other.

Yet if he chose to reach for this wondrous gift, would he be opening doors to a world of joy and fulfillment for both of them, or to a prison of isolation and darkness for her?

He had no time for further contemplation.

Catherine gently pulled her hands from his grasp and reached up to stroke the unique beauty of his face. Then, as he felt her hands burrow into the damp, heavy richness of his hair, he immediately moved closer, unable to resist, despite his imagined consequences. Helplessly, eagerly, he lowered his mouth toward hers, only to turn away and bury his face in her hair with a low, harsh moan, a sound wracked with suppressed longing and barely maintained control. So much had happened so quickly that at last it overwhelmed him, and he knew he could bear little more.

The wet strands of her hair caught against his lips as he drew his mouth forward, deliberately seeking the lingering sensuality, and then he gasped as he felt her warm, soft lips pressed to his throat. The brief but devastatingly erotic contact threatened to consume all vestiges of his self-control, and he knew that for now, this dream within a dream must end. Pulling away from her embrace, he looked down at her one last time, letting the dark sapphire of his eyes tell her all the things he could not yet say.

And then at the threshold between their worlds, he let her walk away from him. They had parted with a promise to meet again in a week's time to enjoy another concert in their secret music chamber, but their words, a question voiced within a hopeful comment, a response given with restrained eagerness, had said so much more, revealing their deep need for constancy, for the gift of time together.

As he'd wandered the tunnels afterward, he had paused more than once, deeply tempted to return to her. It was as if once the very real truth of their shared desire had been acknowledged, even with lingering restraint, it had taken on a power greater than he had ever guessed possible. Somehow it had changed everything, making him doubt all his long-held beliefs about worlds that could never intertwine, destinies that must be embraced, a future that could never be. Maybe he had been wrong all along, maybe there were possibilities for them, dreams that could somehow come true. Maybe...

Lost in thought, he returned to the music chamber, intending to gather up the sodden quilts and comforters for cleaning, when the force of Catherine's emotions flared through the bond. She was Above, thinking only of him, still aching only for him, with a desperate longing she could not begin to control. He froze where he stood, his body half-turned in preparation to race to her, and it took all the strength he possessed to refuse her impassioned plea, for it was one he'd always secretly longed for, even as he pledged to deny it for what he felt was her own good.

It was all too soon. He needed time alone to come to terms with the miraculous possibilities that might await them, so unlike anything he'd ever dreamed possible. Sighing heavily, he forced himself to take a single step away from her, and then another and another until he moved with long, driven strides through the twisting passageways of the tunnel world, hoping desperately to outrun the heat of his blood and the compelling urging pulsating through their bond.

Full of equal measures of hope and uncertainty, Vincent had forced himself to stay apart from Catherine for several days after that night filled with rain and longing and possibilities. He'd felt her barely concealed yearning for him resonating through their bond, and had known that his own desire underscored every note of hers. He spent long hours examining reasons to convince himself that there was still validity in his long-held beliefs that to push Catherine away from him would give her the freedom she deserved. But in his heart, he continued to wonder if he'd always been wrong.

The waiting, while torturous, gave him strength, for it sustained him with the promises it held, making the often lonely days of his life easier to bear. Then, on a night he would always remember with ecstatic wonder, Catherine had come Below once again, and at last, his doubts and misplaced beliefs had been banished forever.

In the quiet tenement apartment above the city streets, Vincent shook his head and rose to his feet, slowly emerging from a world of dreams and memories. He almost believed he could hear the familiar sounds of violins and cellos, their voices separate and yet inextricably connected. Tonight, the orchestra would play the third of the Brandenburg Concertos. It was his favorite, the haunting, vibrant music he'd anticipated sharing with Catherine. He'd always loved the intricate design of that piece, the interweaving and balance of sounds whose full beauty could only be realized when played and heard in harmony. Beyond all else, it was that counterpoint, the soaring passage of two melodies

drawn together for a single purpose, that created unity and fulfillment. In his heart, Vincent knew that had they heard the music together tonight, spiraling down to them from the world Above, they would have heard the spirit of their souls in the orchestral sounds.

He sighed heavily and reached for a folded note he had placed carefully in the pocket of his chambray shirt. Although the words it contained had been painfully memorized two days earlier, he found he could not resist reading them again. In silence, he scanned the flowing lines of the familiar script, but within his heart he heard the sweet and sad voice of the writer.

Dear Vincent,

I wish I didn't have to say this, but I won't be able to meet you Thursday night for the concert as we'd planned. Joe was supposed to attend a reception for the mayor as a representative from our office, but now he can't go and he asked me to be his replacement. It starts at 8:30 and if I can somehow manage to leave early, I'll try to come Below. But that won't be until at least 10:00, and by then the concert will be nearly over. This reception is just a minor event, but one of us should be there. I've tried to find someone else to go in Joe's place, but no one else is willing to do it.

I'm so sorry to spoil our plans like this. If only there was another choice! Sometimes it does seem as if our worlds truly will do everything they can to keep us apart, and there's little we can do about it. Do you think there will ever be a time when we can be together as we truly wish to be? I thought things might be different now, but I guess I was wrong.

All I've thought of for the past few days is that soon we would be together. I'll be thinking of you tonight, as I always do, wishing things were different for us.

With all my love,

Catherine

As Vincent folded the note away, he found that certain phrases of it resonated within him. He recalled the words again and again, and their message of conflict and entreaty became clear and imperative, impossible now for him to overlook. For far too long they had allowed the demands of their worlds to tear them apart. Time after time, they had yielded to the needs and wishes of others, at the expense of their own dreams and desires. Often, their sacrifices had been admirable ones, given unselfishly to help someone truly in need, but there had been far too many times when the distractions provided by others had simply become easier to deal with than facing the truths, both bright and dark, within their love. And this, he admitted painfully, was just such a time, for this obstacle presented by Catherine's job was in truth an inconsequential one that could have been easily overcome.

As he replayed the words of Catherine's note in his mind, Vincent allowed himself to listen to their true message. She had wanted nothing more than to refuse Joe Maxwell's request and be with him instead. He knew that at one time, she would have done just that, without even complicating the situation by telling him about it. Why had she acted differently now?

Vincent felt a rush of anger at himself and his own sense of failure. The answers had always been there, and now he ignored the pain he would feel as he finally faced them. He remembered how open and honest Catherine had always been about her feelings for him, even in the earliest months of their relationship, and how she had always been patient and understanding of his hesitancy and fears. Fragments of cherished memories arrayed themselves like a mosaic in his mind, and he could not ignore the truth in the picture they presented.

Catherine grasping his hand and begging him to stay with her on the terrace of her apartment until the morning light. Catherine helping to take him home, bloody and beaten, vowing she would never give up or abandon him. Catherine speaking of the warm and lovely dream she'd had of him and the simple shared pleasures of sunshine and ice cream. Catherine risking her life to save his and then telling him she had done so not through courage but for love.

And what had he always done in response? Nothing, other than to gather the miracle of her love to his heart while continuing to hold her apart and away from himself and from his world. Catherine was more than just the dream he had never thought to know. She was warm and real and only waiting for him to overcome his fears and truly welcome her not only into his arms but into his life. She had told him so in countless ways, but he had been unable - and so often unwilling - to listen even when her love was all he'd ever wanted. Even now, when miraculous as it still seemed, they had become lovers in every sense of the word, he continued to build walls, to give in to fears that no longer held any validity at all.

Vincent thought of the message he'd sent to Catherine in reply to her note, and flinched in disgust as he recalled his words of willing acquiescence. Without hesitation, he had written a response telling her that she must fulfill the responsibilities of her job, that he would take Cullen's turn and tend to Old Sam that night, that they must be unselfish and continue to hope they might plan to be together on some other night, at some other time. He had told himself he meant the words to be supportive and understanding, but now he saw them for the weak excuses they were and wished with all his heart that he had done things differently.

Why, he asked himself in brutal honesty, was he still so quick to accept the restrictions their worlds placed upon them, to yield to those disruptions and distractions when so many were unnecessary and could be easily avoided. Were his fears still so great that he would sacrifice everything to them? And would he continue to do so even now, when everything his heart desired was within his reach?

Without noticing that he did so, Vincent began to pace the length of the narrow room. As the minutes passed, his analytic thoughts synthesized into a seamless and undeniable truth that made him halt his relentless motion. He knew it was time to face that truth with all the strength and courage he possessed.

There was no doubt left in him now, no dark places where he might hide, and at last he admitted that he could no longer escape to their false shelter. For many long months he had allowed his beliefs to control and shape the true destiny he shared with Catherine, purposely deflecting so many opportunities they'd had to explore their sweet and soaring feelings for one another, afraid to take what she offered him. He recalled some of the simplest, most tender moments that had been sacrificed to his fears, and he felt a wave of shame as he acknowledged how his doubts and diversions had impacted Catherine as well. So many times he had spoken to her of separate lives to be led, other destinies to be embraced, duties to be upheld, when he should have spoken the words of his heart. Words of dreams and desires, of commitment and conviction, all the words of faith and hope and love that sang through their bond but had been silenced by him time and again.

But worst of all, he admitted shamefully, was how he had imposed his beliefs repeatedly upon Catherine, tormenting her, and forcing her to yield to them when they had never been hers at all. She had only wanted to be free to love him and to help him unburden his heavy heart so that he would be free to love her in return, to fulfill the dreams they'd both cherished for such a long, long time. Instead, he had repeatedly turned her away, and even now he could not relinquish the habits of a lifetime and move forward into the life he knew they both wanted.

Perhaps at last she, too, had begun to find it all too easy to surrender instead of pursuing their dream. He knew she would always love him, there was no doubt of that, but how much longer could she go on when he continued to build walls around his heart?

The words of Catherine's note haunted him, and he wondered how he'd been able to ignore its true message, a plea that should have been painfully obvious to him, but which he'd convinced himself to disregard. In every word, she had

asked him to just this once agree that she should refuse the demands of the outside world and instead reach for something just for them. For months she had told him repeatedly, in myriad ways, that she wanted to be with him in his world, but he had never allowed it. With his response to this simple note, he could have taken that first step and asked her to turn to him, to come to him, but he had not.

She truly loved him, and now he could no longer deny that her feelings included a deep and abiding passion, a passion that was only for him. He thought of the way she so often looked at him now, her smoldering gaze wandering over his face and body as if she were caressing him, her smile offering endless possibilities. Her eyes, her voice, her every gesture spoke of her boundless desire for him, to be a part of him, body and soul, forever. She knew who he was, what he was, and had fully committed to a life with him. How had he doubted the rightness of their love? Why had he assumed he knew what was best for her when it went against all her wishes?

What's wrong with me? he asked himself with harsh honesty. Catherine said our love is all that matters, that it's worth everything. And I believe that, too ... our love is worth everything ... it is everything...

A horrifying vision of a life without Catherine, long years of mere existence, dark and empty and cold, rose within him, and its bleak and hopeless image almost broke his heart. He had been willing to lose every dream they'd shared by continuing to hold onto his false beliefs. Now the only question that remained was how to change the path he'd forced them to take.

The answer came straight from his heart. It cannot continue. I will find a way. There is no longer any reason to hold back, to deny what might be – what will be.

Vincent sighed heavily as a remorseful half-smile formed on his unique lips. "We have sacrificed much, Catherine," he whispered hoarsely, "in the name of love, when in truth it was not love – it was fear, my fear. But the time for that has passed, and now those fears must end."

He closed his eyes as if to mark the passage of a season in his singular and remarkable life, and when he opened them again, they burned with fiery purpose. He yearned to tell Catherine all he'd finally come to understand, to know the happiness and relief she would feel, to prove to her that his doubts and fears and mistaken beliefs would be laid to rest forever. Perhaps the first steps would be small, but they would lead in the direction of their dreams.

Faint strains of music from someone's radio drifted through the half-opened window and reminded Vincent of all they'd hoped the night would hold, and how their hopes had been damaged once again.

"No more," he said aloud, his voice subdued, yet strong and steely. "It will not happen again. This time, things will be different for us."

Unwilling and unable to wait another minute to take even a first small step to fulfill his vow, he feverishly sought a method to give substance to his promise. He noted the hour, not yet eight o'clock, on the battered clock that sat on a nearby shelf, and then his gaze rested on the bedside table. Vincent's newfound determination had sparked an inspiring fire within him, and in seconds he knew he had found his answer. He smiled, amused that a mundane object from the world Above might prove to be the means to make amazing dreams begin to come true.

With quiet footsteps, he neared Sam's side, and after quickly assuring himself that his friend remained deeply asleep, he sat once again in the worn, wooden chair. Then, he composed the message to Catherine that would, he hoped, deliver the direction of their shared destiny into their own hands.

While Vincent's reverie gave rise to a determined plan of action, Catherine found herself driven not by her dreams and desires, but instead by the increasingly frequent and less than reasonable demands of others. She slammed the apartment door behind her and forcefully flung her jacket, keys, and briefcase onto the soft pastel cushions of a couch. But that did not in the least satisfy her need to vent her anger and frustration on the nearest inanimate objects. Ordinarily, she would have caught herself in such a pointless reaction and would have laughed at her childishness. But tonight she was beyond reason, and instead glanced about wildly for a final target. In mere seconds she found it, and advanced on the combination phone and answering machine that sat on a nearby table, its red light blaring out a demanding summons as unavoidable as any subpoena issued from the DA's Office.

For a moment Catherine stood with one finger poised over the erase button, strongly tempted to simply eradicate the intrusive messages that clamored for her attention, but then she yielded to her own better judgment. With forced patience, she listened to a reminder from her dentist's office and a request on behalf of the Metropolitan Opera's latest fundraising drive, and then with a gradual return to a calmer state of mind, to a message from her father about next weekend's brunch with Peter Alcott, and a call from Jenny with plans for a movie and dinner later in the week.

Then, all too soon, the tentative calm that Catherine had begun to feel was shattered by the overly cheerful voice of Joe Maxwell, and with each uttered syllable of his message, she felt her temper flare dangerously high.

Hi, Radcliffe – you in? No? Well, I'm just calling to remind you about that reception for the mayor tonight. Since I was tied up with the Ferrelli case in Brooklyn all day, I didn't have a chance to call you at the office, so I figured I'd better do it now. You didn't forget about going tonight, did you? I know it's not that big a deal but someone has to show up. In all honesty, I got home earlier than expected – even picked up my tux at the cleaner's – so I guess I could have gone myself after all. But I'm pretty beat and, hey, they'd rather see your face there anyway! It's already – let's see – ten after seven, so if you're listening to this message instead of picking up, you'd better get moving. Don't be late for this one, Cathy! I'll see you bright and early tomorrow morning – and thanks – I owe you one!

Catherine heard the harsh sound of air forced through clenched teeth and was not at all surprised to realize it was her own ragged breathing. With deliberate force, she jabbed a finger down onto the erase button and smirked with satisfaction as Joe's infuriating words were obliterated. That small gesture somehow dissipated some of her anger, leaving in its place an enervating resignation. For one brief second, when she'd heard Joe's voice, she had hoped he was calling to tell her he was going to the reception and she was freed from the responsibility. But it was no use, she told herself, no point at all to keep on hoping that somehow this evening could have gone as Vincent and she had planned.

With a deep sigh, she shook her head wearily, and as she glanced down at the small gold watch on her wrist, she felt hot tears fill her eyes. Not far away in the bandshell in Central Park, musicians would be readying themselves for the evening's performance, the last of the season, just as she should be arriving at the threshold Below. Vincent would have waited for her there, sensing her eager anticipation blending with his to thrum deliciously through the bond, just as vibrantly as the first concerto's opening notes would soar into the late summer night air.

A single tear trembled on her lashes, and she wiped a hand across her eyes, determined not to let herself dissolve in self-pity. This was just one more obstacle their worlds had thrown in their paths, and deep in her heart she was beginning to wonder if they'd ever overcome them all. She knew she would never give up, but it was becoming increasingly difficult when seemingly everywhere they turned, there was another challenge, if not stemming from the daily responsibilities of their lives, then from Vincent's lingering doubts and fears.

She had tried time and again to prove to him that she had made her choice, that her destiny, her life belonged with him. She knew it was what he wanted to believe as well, there was no doubt they shared the same dreams, but she was running out of ways to help him accept what was meant to be. The turmoil haunted her, but there was nothing more to be done tonight, and once again she would have to look to future days and trust that there could be something more waiting for them. Somewhere, someday.

She took a deep, cleansing breath and looked again at her watch, forcing herself to concentrate on the here and now. "Oh, great," she muttered. "It's already seven-thirty and I have to leave in half an hour. I'll never make it!"

Feeling her tension escalate again, Catherine turned toward the latticed doors of her bedroom, only to come to an abrupt stop as the phone pealed out a new command for her attention. In one swift, graceful movement, she pivoted toward the sound and turned off the volume switch before the caller's intrusive voice could be heard.

"Whoever you are, you'll just have to wait," she said aloud. Then, smiling a bit self-consciously at the satisfaction her decision brought, she headed for what she hoped would be a revitalizing shower, and immediately dismissed all thoughts of the unknown caller from her mind.

Catherine stood under the force of the heated spray, welcoming the stinging sensation on her scalp and skin, as if it could reach within and wear away the sadness in her heart. She felt her eyes burn again with tears, and this time she did nothing to stop them. Leaning against the wet tiles of the shower wall, she rested her head against her arms and gave in to the sobs that shuddered from her.

Now, just when everything seems to be coming together for us, she thought mournfully, we're constantly torn apart. There are so many possibilities for us, but never the time to talk about them, to move past all the rest of his worries and fears. To try to discover what might be, what will be. I love him...and I know he loves me...

A ragged sigh was choked from her throat. Why can't we be together like other people, other lovers? I thought that once we'd finally made love, things would be different for us, but they're not. I know he only wants what's best for me. Why can't he see that it's him?

She raised her head and turned again toward the cascading water, feeling it mix with her tears. The sensation of the water flowing against her skin gave rise to memories of a night far different from this one. A night two weeks after the evening filled with storm-swept passion in their chamber beneath the concert stage...

She had run through the park, hoping to out-race another sudden summer storm that had prematurely darkened the early evening sky. But she had not been fast enough to escape the heavy, pelting drops of rain that quickly soaked through her light summer dress as she scrambled down the slippery grassy slope. Nearly out of breath, she had tumbled into Vincent's arms at the threshold of the drainage tunnel just as the first low rumbles of thunder and jagged flashes of lightning violated the serenity of the summer night. Laughing, she'd looked up at him, only to find him offering her a heavy-lidded gaze of sheer sensuality that for several moments robbed her of the power of speech and replaced playful mirth with something far stronger.

Wordlessly, she had moved closer, leaning into him, touching him everywhere she could. Her need to know the reality of his hard-muscled strength, holding her with such a stirring combination of desire and devotion, had been far too strong to resist. So caught up in one another, the growing strength of a summer storm once again surprised them, and without warning, its rampant, unleashed power vibrated through their bond, releasing a completely sexual energy that jolted them, much like the lightning that flared and bolted across the night sky.

Caught up in her memories of that night, Catherine trembled, remembering the way Vincent had held and caressed her with far less than his usual restraint, knowing it was what he, too, had wanted for so long, grateful he had not let the moment end too soon. A deep, pulsing heat filled her entire body as she recalled the sensation of his hands stroking her back, as if the clothing she wore had vanished entirely. Even now she could hear the harsh, uneven sound of his breathing as he held her to his chest, unable and unwilling to let her go.

With a quavering sigh, she relived her awareness of his arms tightening their hold on her, and his body straining instinctively toward her. She had pressed even closer to that provocative heat, hoping it would not be the final irresistible action that would spur him to bring their sensual idyll to an end. And for once, there had been no regrets.

She turned under the shower's spray and tilted her head back, a sensuous smile curving her lips as she remembered with intense clarity the hours that had followed, when at last they'd become lovers in every sense of the word. Just as Vincent had lowered his eager mouth to hers, a furious roar of thunder startled them to awareness of their precarious place at the edge of the storm. Without a word, he'd grabbed her hand and pulled her to shelter, but did not pause at the tunnel's threshold, instead drawing her at a rapid pace to the secret door that led to the world Below.

The erotic energy that had enthralled them Above did not diminish as Catherine willingly and eagerly followed Vincent through various tunnels, some familiar to her and others defining a path she'd never taken. Then, just past a sudden curve in the narrow, rocky passageway, she found they'd reached their destination. She felt a cool breath of air coming from somewhere in the darkness before them, as it rippled across her damp, heated skin.

"Where are we?" she began, her voice quivering with the tumult of her emotions and their rapid flight through the tunnels.

He released her hand, murmuring, "Wait," and then she heard the hiss of flames being lit nearby. Firelight from a single torch glimmered on the surface of a lake only a few yards ahead of them and glistened on the sparkling crystalline sand at their feet.

She gasped in surprise and looked up at him as he returned to her side. "It's so beautiful. I've never seen anything like this Below."

Vincent's unique mouth curved in the slow smile she so loved. "I wanted to share this place with you," he said, his words intentionally echoing those he'd uttered on that other rain-swept night. "Few people ever find their way here, so it has become a special sanctuary for me. I had begun to think of it as a place where dreams might come true...and I had hoped to someday share it with you." His voice deepened to a raspy murmur that left her breathless. "To share everything with you..."

"We've dreamed the same dreams, Vincent," she whispered.

Their bond pulsed with the fiery strength of the love and desire that had driven them forward to this magical place where dreams might come true. They both knew there was no further need for words, no further need to wait or to deny themselves the long-sought fulfillment of their love.

Vincent removed his cloak in one quick, decisive motion and spread it on the glittering sand, then untied his cambric shirt, pulled it over his head, and threw it aside. He had averted his gaze from Catherine, but without hesitating, he took off his boots and then unbuttoned his worn jeans, roughly tugging them down over the taut muscles of his long legs, to shove them aside with his other garments. He sank to his knees on the outspread cloak and only then did he raise his eyes to hers and hold out his hands to her, their slight trembling betraying the intense control and conviction his actions had demanded despite the depth of his desire.

At first, Catherine found herself unable to move, so entranced was she by the image before her, one she had despaired of ever seeing beyond her imagination. She had dreamed of a moment like this for so long, but now found that its reality surpassed even her wildest imaginings. Until very recently, he had always shied away from most physical intimacy. Why now – what had changed his mind -- and why, she asked herself with a grin, was she wasting time with questions?

Sudden ripples of misgiving penetrated her reverie through her heightened awareness of their bond, and she realized that Vincent had begun to misinterpret her silence.

Drawing in a deep, shuddering breath, she found her voice long enough to whisper, "Oh, Vincent, I love you," as she quickly untied the straps of her sundress and let it puddle at her feet on the sandy ground.

In her fantasies, she had imagined a sweet, slow seduction, candlelight and roses, hands at once eager and shy reaching for her, then undressing her with growing abandon. She smiled a soft, secret smile as she kicked off her sandals and swiftly removed her lacy bra and panties. There would be other times for those dreams to come true. All she wanted and needed now was the reality of Vincent, waiting and ready for her, in this secret cavern where he'd so often dreamt of her.

Without further thought, she fell into his arms and gazed deep into his eyes, then tumbled onto her back, pulling him forward to cover her soft, eager body with the hard yet gentle strength of his. The long-awaited sensation was overwhelming in its intensity, and for just a moment they laid motionless together save for the pounding of their hearts. Then, the depthless love and desire of one beloved soulmate for the other drove them forward to an ecstatic joining of heart and body that surpassed all their dreams.

Savoring each touch, each kiss, each breathless word of love, Vincent and Catherine found themselves exactly where they were meant to be, safe in each other's arms, finally set free to express their love in every way. At last with a final caress, they'd reluctantly but contentedly fallen asleep, wrapped in an inseparable embrace. Later, they'd awakened to make love again and to float together in the warm, rippling waters of the secret underground lake, vowing to return to their special place time and again.

Catherine sighed happily as the memories receded to a special place in her heart, feeling the heat and passion of their first night together continue to warm her from within. In those moments of loving and sensual commitment, there was born a promise of all that was still to be theirs. He had accepted at last the truth of their destiny, he had honored the commitment she'd long ago made to him, to his world, to a life truly lived together. It would come to be, she vowed, maybe not now, but someday.

Someday. That ominously powerful word blended with the cooling water of the shower and began to numb her again within and without. Shivering, she stepped from the shower and wrapped her dripping hair in a large, fluffy towel, before drying her trembling body with another, wishing the remembered, radiant warmth still lingering deep within her would never fade away.

From the living room she heard the soft chimes of the small anniversary clock on the mantel, and gasped as she realized it was now eight o'clock. She instantly became a rushing flurry of motion as she hurried to apply make-up and dry her hair before running into the bedroom to dress. Her movements were controlled but swift, and within minutes she was almost ready.

She glanced quickly at her reflection in the full-length mirror and could not help noticing the dispirited expression in her eyes and the downward turn of her mouth, imposing upon her an image of controlled despondency which the elegance of her black silk dress and gold jewelry could not offset. She shrugged her shoulders, knowing she had done the best she could, and steadfastly tried to ignore the insistent wish that she had spent this time carefully and lovingly dressing in a way that would bring pleasure to Vincent, rather than making an impressive appearance for people and purposes that no longer held much meaning in her life. She touched her fingers to her heart, the place where his crystal should have rested, and closed her eyes for the few seconds it took to turn away from her sad reflection.

A gust of wind rattled the French doors leading to the terrace, and the unexpected sound startled her from her depression. She remembered that a light rain had begun to fall as she'd left the office, and she reached into her closet for an umbrella and raincoat to keep away the damp chill of the night. As she did, her hand brushed lightly against the pale green summer dress she'd worn a few weeks earlier, the first night they'd made love, and once more her eyes glazed with unshed tears.

Sighing, Catherine draped her coat over her shoulders, picked up her umbrella and purse, and hurried into the living room. It was only eight-fifteen. If the doorman was successful in hailing her a cab the minute she reached the sidewalk, she might still make it to the reception more or less on time. As she neared the door of her apartment, she remembered having hurled her keys at one of the couches, and she shook her head in annoyance as she burrowed her fingers beneath the cushions in search of them. Straightening, keys in hand, she noticed once again the omnipresent blinking of the phone's message light. Yet its once maddening, scarlet blaze commanding her attention seemed muted to a warm crimson glow that issued only a gentle request.

Amused at the whimsical direction her thoughts had taken, she set her things aside and walked toward the phone. Even though she was already late, she reached toward the message button, and then paused and tilted her head to one side in unconscious imitation of Vincent's appealing gesture. For several disconcerting seconds she hesitated, inexplicably sensing that she would hear the faintest strains of a song meant just for her, if only she could listen closely enough. A billowing wave of warmth and love rushed through her, and although it lasted for mere seconds, it left in its wake an immutable sense of tranquility and strength, and she knew without a doubt that Vincent had reached out to her through their bond. Rarely had she felt those sensations with such intensity, and in a heartbeat, she knew that every trial and setback of the whole maddening, unhappy day was a small price to pay in exchange for this miraculous gift, given with his love.

Slightly breathless, she dropped onto a chair next to the table where the phone rested, its small, bright light still winking up at her. "This had better not be you again, Joe," she warned with a wry smile as she pressed the button and waited to listen to the new message. But when it began to play, the voice she heard was one she had never expected. Immediately, the low, husky sound filled every space around and within her, seeming to hold her close in the speaker's warm embrace.

"Catherine, I was wrong to answer your note as I did. I've tried so hard not to force you to choose between your world and mine, but sometimes through my fears I've denied you – denied both of us – the right to make any choices at all. I've taken from you the very freedom I've tried to protect...and I've taken us farther from our dreams. I know that it's too late to change things for tonight, but if you were there in your home right now, I would talk with you about what has happened, and this time I would not pretend I don't understand what you're asking of me. I would not avoid the truth. And, Catherine, my answer would be different than the one I gave you. I promise that this time I would not be afraid to hear what's in your heart ... and to tell you what's in mine."

For several seconds Catherine sat frozen in disbelief. How, why... She felt the flaring demands of a thousand thoughts and questions. Is it true that he's willing to talk about all the things we've always avoided? Is he finally ready to move forward toward everything we can be together? If only I'd been here when he called – how had he – when?

With a groan of pure regret, she realized, improbable as it seemed, that it had been his call she had ignored less than an hour earlier, and the anguish the realization brought was almost more than she could bear.

"I didn't know," she whispered. "I didn't know and now it's happening all over again. It's too late. It's always too late."

She leapt to her feet, desperate to do something, to find some way to make things right, but she could find no direction, and she stood desolately staring down at nothing at all. Once again, there were chances lost, opportunities missed, another link in the ominous chain of restrictions and regrets that still held them apart from one another. Now, just when he was finally willing to move forward, she was forced to remain beyond his reach.

Catherine pressed the message button on the phone, needing to hear again the promise of his words, when from the terrace there came a sudden scraping noise, as if the small wrought-iron bench had been pushed across the tiled floor. Her head snapped up at the sound, her entire body poised to react. And even as her mind told her that it could not be, that he had gone to tend to Sam Denton, that he expected her to be out, she rushed toward the sound, knowing in her heart what she would find when she threw open the doors.

“Vincent!” The very sound of his name was the most beautiful music she had ever heard, and she flew into his outstretched arms, trembling as they enfolded her in an embrace as powerful as it was tender. At first, they were content to simply hold one another close, and then she leaned back in his arms just far enough to be able to look up into his face. The look in his eyes told her that he knew she had listened to his heartfelt message, and now he awaited her reply.

But before she could even try to speak, words tumbled from him. “Catherine, I shouldn’t be here. I thought you would be gone and that I’d wait for you to return. But you’re late and I’m keeping you from your appointment. You must go now. I’m sorry, I ...”

Not again, she vowed silently. Never again. Raising one hand from its resting place on his shoulder, she pressed her fingers to his lips and silenced his racing words. For just a moment she felt the stirring pressure of his mouth in a gentle, defenseless kiss upon her fingers and she paused, unwilling to ignore even this small pleasure. But when he stilled the softly seductive motion, she found the words they both needed, words that would help them continue to move toward a life together, toward love.

“No more excuses, Vincent. No more,” she began with a gentle shake of her head. “You said in your message that you’re ready to talk about all the things we’ve never been able to face. Is it true? Are you ready?”

He could only nod his head in response, his gaze never leaving hers, as he waited for her to go on.

“I’ve been thinking about this a lot,” she continued. “I know now that I was wrong to send that note to you. I should have made my own decision about tonight. I should have followed my heart.”

Vincent’s mouth softened for a moment at the sound of those familiar words, but he shook his head in denial.

“How could you, when I did everything I could to make it impossible? When I let my fears force me away from everything we both want? I know you were only doing what you thought I wanted, what I had convinced myself was best for both of us.”

“Maybe,” she agreed, a smile beginning to ease the tense lines of her face. “And it probably won’t be the last time.”

He laughed softly, shaking his head in wonder at the miracle he held in his arms. “Catherine, I meant everything I said when I called you from Sam’s apartment, but for tonight it’s too late.”

“No.” The single syllable silenced his words. He paused, unsure of what was to come, and then she repeated that undeniable edict. “No, it’s not too late. It’s never too late for what’s meant to be.”

Taking a deep breath, she raised her hands to stroke along the angled planes of his face, reveling in the sensations of her smooth skin sliding caressingly over the soft golden stubble. She let her fingertips once again glide across his mouth, this time encouraging his response with words and touch.

“Say it, Vincent,” she urged him. “You promised that you would not be afraid to listen to my heart. You said you would face the truth and your answer would be different. I want nothing more than to be with you tonight, to let nothing in your world or in mine stand between us. To start to truly build our life together. But what do you want? Can you tell me?”

There was nothing left in him to resist her, and he wondered how he ever had. “What I want, Catherine, is to share this night with you. To ask you to change your plans and be with me instead. I want us to leave all our fears behind forever, and ignore everything that would force us apart.”

He paused and took a deep breath, and when he spoke again, there was no hint of hesitation or doubt in the smoky rasp of his voice. “I have been wrong to make decisions for both of us, when it was never what either of us truly

wanted. We are meant to be together. What we have means more than anything else. The life we will share begins now.”

Her gasp was a breathy, joyous sound, almost smothered by the sweet ferocity of her embrace as she flung her arms around him, burying her face in the curve of his neck and pressing small, heated kisses against his flesh. Vincent’s arms closed tightly around her, allowing them both this moment they so needed. He raised one large hand to stroke the smoothness of her hair, entwining his fingers in its satiny lengths. Then, he eased her head back to gaze into her eyes, before lowering his mouth to hers in a kiss full of tenderness and passion that would never again be diminished.

All too soon he released her, and felt through their bond the overwhelming power of the eternal love they cherished. He knew how close they had come to losing everything, but at last he had truly listened to her heart and accepted everything she had offered him, all the wondrous possibilities their life together could be. And he knew he could never wish for anything more.

With a brilliant smile, Catherine reached for his hand. “I have a wonderful idea! If we leave right now, we’ll still be able to hear at least half of the concert.”

He wanted more than anything to simply agree, but hesitated just for a moment. “But the reception – your job – what will you ...”

“I’ll take care of it,” she replied with no trace of doubt in her voice. “And then we’ll be free to go. It’s what we both want, isn’t it?”

This time, there was no hesitation at all. “And if we hurry, we can still hear the third concerto.”

“Your favorite.” She squeezed his hand tighter. “And then after the concert...”

“It will be quite late, Catherine.” With that seductive half-smile she so adored, he added, “Perhaps you should stay Below tonight.”

On tiptoe she leaned closer and whispered her response in his ear, caressing him with the warmth of her words. “I think that’s a wonderful idea.” Then leaning away playfully, she added, “But first there’s something I have to do. I’ll only be a minute. Wait for me?”

He nodded as she released his hand and hurried back into the apartment. Pausing just at the threshold, he watched as she reached for the phone and quickly pressed a series of numbers on the keypad. As he listened to her words, he was filled with the joy of certainty and promise.

“Joe? Yes, it’s me and yes, I know how late it is. Something has come up and I won’t be able to – No, I’m not going to that reception tonight. Don’t start, Joe – you said you could go after all, so I’m not and it’s not up for negotiation.”

She fell silent, but looked over her shoulder at Vincent and grinned conspiratorially. “Yes, I know this is unexpected, but I’m not changing my mind. If you leave in the next few minutes, you’ll still make it in time for the mayor’s speech. And, you know, it’s a good thing you picked up that tux!” She stifled a giggle as she held the phone away from her ear. Then she added, “Have fun and I’ll see you in the morning, although I may be a little late.”

She dropped the phone onto the table with a satisfyingly decisive clatter and then turned back to Vincent. The smile he so loved brightened her face and he felt it warm his heart. The steps they were taking tonight might be small for most couples in love, but for them they were momentous, and they both knew it was only the beginning.

“I’ll meet you Below, Vincent,” she said, her pleasure in those simple but portentous words glowing in her eyes and along the channel of their bond.

“And I will be there for you,” he answered before turning to go. “Always.”

She paused only long enough to secure the terrace doors behind him. "Always, Vincent," she murmured, knowing somehow that he would hear her. "Always."

The End