



A Light in Darkness follows "A Kingdom by the Sea")

Chapter 1

"...I felt your joy when you knew he was alive....when death was nearest....when he..."

"When he kissed me."

"Yes, I felt...that too." His voice had dropped nearly to a whisper.

Catherine's voice was soft also. "I've never felt closer to Elliot than I did last night. We almost died together, and when he kissed me, just for an instant, some small part of me responded, and I wished..." a pause, "...I wished that it was...you..."

His face, always under control, stayed impassive. His expression changed not at all, but his eyes locked to hers. The gaze stretched out between them longer and longer. Her face was soft, vulnerable, loving. He looked back with increasing intensity, his eyes drawing her, commanding her, until his head jerked up suddenly. He got up and strode across the room, his back to her, and leaned over a table on his outstretched arms, his head hanging down between them, his mane obscuring his face.

Catherine sat for a moment, then got up slowly and followed him. When she was beside him, she reached out and lifted the hanging strands of his hair over his shoulder, uncovering his face. After a moment she spoke softly.

"You know, Vincent...you've always known. How long are we going to go on...pretending? Pretending it's not there...it's not real?"

He said nothing for a long moment before answering in a low voice, almost a whisper.

"I don't pretend it's not real." He glanced up for an instant, turning his head and meeting her eyes, then looked down again.

"It's real. But it's...not possible." His head dropped farther and his hair slid forward over his shoulder to protect his face from her sight once more.

"It cannot happen, Catherine. We must not think about this. I must not."

He straightened then and stood still with his back to her, staring at nothing, drawing his defenses about him. When he turned to her a few seconds later those defenses were firmly in place, so firmly that he even touched her. He put his hands on her shoulders, lightly, and for only a moment.

"Catherine...your hair is still wet, and you're exhausted. Go home and rest."

Catherine began to speak, but one clawed finger came up to press gently against her lips. He spoke softly, with infinite tenderness.

"Go home, Catherine."

The hours at work the next day were difficult for Catherine; she was exhausted and irritable. When the CIA had finally decamped and Elliot was gone, Joe collared Cathy as she walked by.

"Radcliffe, you look lousy!" His concern for her was evident in his face; then he grinned.

"Well, I guess you don't get shot at with automatic weapons and dumped in the East River every day." His voice softened. "You need a rest anyhow. You work too hard. It's nearly quitting time, so go home!"

When she started to speak he held up a hand.

"... Just shut up and take tomorrow and Friday off. I'll see you Monday."

Catherine didn't argue with him, she just grabbed her coat and got out before he could change his mind. Two hours later, after a pickup meal and a long hot bath, she put on nightgown and robe, pulled a blanket out of the closet and subsided onto the couch. She felt so tired that she wondered if the plunge into the river had left her with some unnamable germ; after all, it wasn't exactly a bubbling mountain stream... Well, that one was in the hands of the gods. She'd know soon enough. She smiled a little and picked up her book. But the book didn't hold her interest for long. She raised her head and gazed out at the darkened sky for a few minutes, thinking back over the last couple of days. As she thought she realized something, not for the first time.

The moments that stood out, that remained alive in her memory were not the moments of danger or excitement. Inevitably, they were the moments with Vincent. One picture that was imprinted indelibly was Vincent's face when she told him that she wished Elliot's kiss had been his, and the long look that passed between them then. The intensity of that look was not forgettable. The other memory was earlier, the night before. It was another long look, this one after he had kissed her injured hand. She had been so certain as the seconds passed and their gaze held, that he would kiss her mouth at last... and then the doorbell rang.

Once again a perverse fate had intervened to keep their lips from meeting in the kiss that she was certain would have changed their lives forever. Then the rest of the preceding days fell away and she remembered only Vincent's mouth touching softly on her hand, his gaze hungrily searching her face. Her eyes closed as she remembered the intensity of his look. She laid back slowly on the couch, and as she gave herself up to the imagined touch of his mouth she arched her back like a cat being stroked and then she pushed the blanket down past her waist.

Soft sounds came from her throat as her imagination gave her vividly the feel of his tongue sliding between her lips. Her hands slid softly down her body and her mind made them his hands, his wonderful long-fingered hands, their touch so beloved and so long desired. She didn't hear his light tap on the glass. Vincent stood outside the window for a moment watching her, perplexed by what he was seeing. Then as her emotion quickened and he realized that what she was feeling was sexual, not the tender loving feeling he had thought, and it dawned on him what was happening, he jumped back as if in terror. He turned instantly to cross the balcony for the climb to the roof, but stopped midway. For a second or two he stood absolutely still, his back to the doors, his heart pounding, while her emotion poured through him. Then, slowly, as if pulled by an outside force, his body turned and his eyes returned to the

scene inside. He moved closer to the window, his face rapt with longing, his hands raised to rest lightly on the glass before him. As he continued to watch, his eyes half closed and his breathing quickened as her rising excitement flooded over him.

Catherine slid to her back, and her hands loosened the ties of her robe. As Vincent watched, she bared one breast to touch it with languorous fingers. He sighed, watching avidly, honor forgotten in the rapture of what he was experiencing. As he watched her stroking hand he began to feel the texture of her skin beneath his fingers. He felt her breath warming his face. Strangely, he never doubted for a moment that the fingers she imagined stroking her body were his. His breathing quickened again as his imagination began to cooperate even more fully, and he felt her fingers on him.

In his mind her hands caressed him with the same erotic languor that he watched in the scene before him. As those imaginary fingers stroked and enfolded him his body responded with ecstatic shivers and his long suppressed desire for her took him forcefully. Those fingers, her fingers, on his body were unbearably exciting. Her fingers moved lower on her body, and he felt them move correspondingly on his. Inside, Catherine suddenly closed her robe and pushed her self up on her elbows.

“Mustn’t do this....” she sighed softly to herself, “He feels it...” But for Vincent it was too late. His eyes had closed in rapture, and he didn’t see her stop or hear her soft words. Her imaginary hands carried him to a higher and higher peak, and in a few seconds he fell ecstatically over the top of that peak into a mind-shattering climax.

His body shuddered and a low moan was forced from his mouth as he felt at last the consummation of his love for Catherine. He stood absolutely still then, feeling the receding spasms of an orgasm so intense as to take his consciousness. His eyes remained closed, and his head dropped languidly to rest his forehead against the glass. His mind and his body returned to the present moment slowly, as he stood enthralled still.

He stood too long, for Catherine looked up and saw him. His head jerked up as he felt her shock and they stared at each other for a second, both dumbstruck. Catherine’s face flushed with embarrassment,



but Vincent's face was white even through his golden hued skin. She moved quickly to the door, knowing instinctively that she must not let him get away until they had talked about it. But by the time she got there he was gone, off the balcony and out of sight in an instant. She went slowly back to the sofa and sat down. As she felt her way out of her confusion and embarrassment, one thought emerged clearly: Vincent's feelings about this incident were going to be much more disastrous than hers.

From the look on his face, she knew that he'd been watching her, and she knew also that he'd feel as if he'd betrayed everything they had together. His moral code did not allow for spying, which he would believe he had done, done to Catherine, and of course the fact that it was a sexual act he spied upon made it much more emotionally charged for him. Catherine was not aware of the physical consequence that had happened to him, or she would have been even more apprehensive.

God, he'll be destroyed! He'll make such a big thing of this, when it's really...only a minor embarrassment. He'd be long gone by now, she knew. Down into the tunnels to wherever it was that he went when he was inescapably confronted with the desire that they felt for each other, when the pain of knowing, and knowing that she knew, grew unbearable.

She sighed and leaned back, willing her tense body to relax. There was nothing she could do about it now. Tomorrow she'd go below and talk to Father. Not to tell him what happened! In spite of her worry a small smile crossed her face. *He'd have a heart attack. Just that Vincent and I had a difference, and I'm worried about him.*

Vincent was indeed far into the unused byways of the enormous tunnel system, running still, passing



sentry after sentry with no acknowledgement, until he was far past any human habitation. Heart pounding, lungs pumping, he ran until he could run no more. He staggered to a stop and fell against the tunnel wall, then slid slowly down until he sat, his head hanging, his hands flopping loosely from wrists resting on his drawn up knees.

Gradually, his heart slowed and his breathing became more regular. But as his physical body rested his mind began to go once more over the monstrous thing he had done, and the relaxation of exhaustion slowly turned to tension as anxiety tightened every muscle. His head swung back and forth as if he were trying to escape his thoughts. At length his head went back and a wild cry, despairing and lonely, rose up to echo against the unfeeling stone.

Ten hours later, Catherine steps slowed as she neared Father's study. As she rounded a sharp bend in the tunnel, she nearly ran into Rebecca, who said with a smile, "Whoa! Where are you going in such a hurry?"

Then her face sobered. "Well, I guess I know. And before you ask, yes; he's gone down in the tunnels. He does that. The sentries reported that he was running. Has something..." She hesitated, biting her lip.

Catherine nodded. "Yes. Something has, I'm afraid."

Rebecca's arms came up to hug her. "Well, I hope you'll tell Father about it. He's really a very sympathetic person, you know, even if he does bark. I hope you'll let him help..."

She stepped back to look at Catherine. "You look just... well, awful."

Catherine grinned wryly. "Thanks...I think. No, it's OK, Rebecca, I know I look bad. I had to look in the mirror when I combed my hair."

With another brief hug she left Rebecca and continued toward Father's study. She was sure that he too would be worried about Vincent by this time, and she was willing to bet that he assumed that the problem stemmed from her. What was she going to say to him? Rebecca's words came back to her, *He's really very sympathetic...* When she thought about telling him the truth her steps slowed. *God! But I don't want to lie to him, he deserves better than that. I'll just...just...oh, hell, I'll just start talking!* A small smile crossed her face; talking was something she should know how to do. *I'm a lawyer, after all!* She rounded the corner, her mouth opened to begin, but stopped as she realized that Father was not alone. Mouse was standing in front of Father's desk, a shy grin on his face.

"OK, good. Mouse can find him!" His head bounced up and down in an enthusiastic nod. "Go now. Bye." He turned quickly and caromed off Catherine, who had stopped in the doorway. "Oh!" His head ducked. "Sorry...sorry." He moved to continue on his way, but Catherine caught his arm.

"Wait, Mouse. Who are you going to look for?" Her head turned to Father. "Vincent?"

Father nodded and said, "Wait, Mouse, just a moment," as Mouse made to pass by Catherine. "Maybe Catherine can help us here."

He looked inquiringly at Catherine, one eyebrow raised.

"I don't think so, but..." She looked back at Mouse rather helplessly.

Father understood immediately. "Mouse, go and get some lunch, and ask William to pack you some food, and some for Vincent too, should you find him. When that's done, come back here. I may have some further instructions."

When Mouse was gone Father turned to Catherine, his eyebrow still raised. "Was that satisfactory?"

She smiled a little. "Yes, exactly what I had in mind. I just couldn't talk... couldn't say what...it's better if it's just the two of us." As she said these words her face sobered. "I...I'm afraid Vincent is very upset. He...I..." She made a helpless gesture, unable to think of how to phrase the problem.

"Come over here and sit down. Mary just brought a fresh pot of tea."

He shepherded her carefully to a seat at the big library table, they both sat, and he poured tea.

When she was settled in the chair and had taken her first sips of the hot liquid, he leaned back, his hands steepled, and began, "I was afraid that there was a serious problem when Vincent disappeared without letting me know where he was going. ...Yes, the sentries saw him. He's down in the tunnels. Well now, what happened, Catherine? Tell me."

He watched her face as she hesitated for a moment before answering, noting when indecision turned to determination. She straightened in her chair, her head high, as if getting ready for an ordeal. "I'm going to tell you exactly what happened. I don't see how I can make you understand how serious this is to Vincent without telling you the truth." She hesitated again, embarrassed. "When I got home yesterday I was tired, so I undressed right away, and laid down on the couch. I..." She paused to draw a deep breath. "I was thinking about Vincent. I was...daydreaming a little, I guess. Ah...anyhow, I...uh..." she stopped for a moment, then lowered her head and went on, looking down at her hands.. "I was having a...fantasy about...Vincent." Her cheeks were burning. "I...made some movements...it didn't go all the way, you understand," she glanced up at him for just a second, "I just...well, I know I shouldn't do that sort of thing, he feels it, so I pulled myself up and shut my robe. When I looked up, he was...standing in the window... he had been watching me."

Father's face paled and his eyes shut for a moment. He had understood her. Then he said very low, "Dear God... he'll think he's betrayed your trust...that he's spied on you. He'll be devastated."

"I'm afraid that's true." Quick tears filmed Catherine's eyes. "He looked... frozen. He *will* think he's betrayed my trust, but Father, I don't care! I'm glad he saw me..."

The tears spilled over and began to run down her face. "I'd be glad of anything that would break this awful control that he has over himself."

Father sat quietly for a few moments, his hands again steepled in front of his mouth. He tapped his lower lip with his forefingers as he thought. Catherine watched his face apprehensively as she brushed the tears from her cheeks. She had no idea what he was thinking, but her fervent hope was that he wouldn't be angry. She needed his counsel in this. As his silence stretched on her anxiety became unbearable. Softly, tentatively, she spoke. "Are you angry with me?"

"No! No my child, I'm not angry; only unsure of what, if anything, either of us can do about this." He shook his head slowly, worry in every line of his face.

"He is all right down in the tunnels, isn't he?" Apprehension caught suddenly at Catherine's throat.

Father saw her sudden panicky thought in her face. "Yes, I'm sure he is. He knows those tunnels better than anyone alive. He's in no physical danger, barring accidents. But Vincent almost never has accidents."

"I'm going after him!" Resolution was in her voice, although she hadn't even considered that course a moment ago. "I know you won't like it, but I'm going to go. Mouse can guide me."

He thought for a moment, then surprised her. "I think...yes, I think that might be the best course... it is critically important for Vincent to understand that he has not lost you, that he has not destroyed the relationship..." Here he paused. "...but how he will forgive himself may be the biggest hurdle." He thought a moment more. "Mary will get you some more suitable clothes to wear. You may have a long and very exhausting journey; you do understand that?"

"I can do whatever I have to do." Father stood up and took her hands in his as she stood also. "I know you can. I know the depth of your love for Vincent, Catherine. It took me a while, but I have come to believe in it." He smiled gently at her, and squeezed her hands.

Chapter 2

Catherine smiled to herself as she looked at Mouse's head, bobbing along in front of her. He seemed

to be absolutely tireless. They'd been walking for four hours without a break, and Catherine needed to rest, but Mouse moved along with that bouncy step as if he'd just come from a long sleep.

"Mouse? Mouse..." He turned to look at her, slowing, but not stopping. "Got to keep going. Never catch up with Vincent, but got to keep going."

She smiled again. "I understand that you can keep going, but Mouse, I'm getting very tired."

His face fell. "Tired? Stop now, we'll rest...here." Without any hesitation he plopped down in the middle of the path, dropping his pack on the ground.

Catherine decided he was right, this place was as good as any. She unslung the pack she was carrying, and sat down beside him, opening her warm tunnel jacket, Mary's thoughtful provision, along with woolen trousers and a parting hug..

"Oh! That's a lot better. Shall we have something to eat, Mouse? William has packed a lot of good things for us."

Mouse's face brightened. "OK, good. What's there?"

"My gosh, there's enough here for an army. No wonder it's so heavy! Here's bread and cheese, and two pears, and... oh look, Mouse, blueberry muffins!"

"Muffins are good. Let's have muffins?"

Catherine spread the cloth wrapping on the tunnel floor and they picnicked on muffins and cheese, with cold water from an underground spring

"Told you water'd be good. Said so, didn't I?"

"Yes, Mouse, you were right to fill our bottles there."

"Mouse knows all the good places." He nodded complacently; satisfied that Catherine appreciated his capabilities.

"Do you know where he is, Mouse? For sure?" She had been wondering for some time if he was leading her in the right direction.

His brows drew down. "Not for sure. Can't tell for sure." He brightened. "Think so, though. Pretty sure."

"Well, if you're pretty sure, that's good enough for me." She smiled at him, amused at the transparent pleasure her words brought to his face, but what she had said was true. She knew that he'd found Vincent before, and besides, what other choice did she have? They'd go on, in what she devoutly hoped was the right direction. And if we're lost Vincent will find us, her mind whispered. But after another four hours of walking, she was beginning to wonder. And she was exhausted.

"Mouse, where are we? Is there any place we could stop to spend the night?"

"Don't know."

"You don't know? What don't you know? Where we are, or where to spend the night?"

He hunched his shoulders and hung his head, looking up at her from under his brows. "Don't know where we are, can't know where to spend the night." Then he brightened. "Doesn't matter where we are. Going to Vincent. *He* knows."

Catherine smiled wryly. It was too late now to worry about it. "Well, we've got to get some sleep. Any suggestions?"

"Lay down." His face was guileless; he meant exactly what he said. They had something to eat, and then unrolled a bedroll for each of them and lay down, as Mouse had suggested.

When Catherine awoke, there was dancing firelight on the walls. "Mouse, you made a fire. Good, it's cold!" She sat up slowly, stiff from a night on the stone floor, and look around her. The cloaked form sitting on the other side of the little fire was not Mouse.

"Vincent?"

The figure moved slightly, looking up, and the firelight brought the furred nose and chin and one blue

eye out of the shadows. At length he spoke, very low.

"Yes."

Catherine had no idea what to say. She hadn't thought she would see him so soon, and she'd been putting off trying to decide how to approach him. *I'll know when I see him*, she'd thought, but now that she was facing him she didn't know, so she spoke of practical considerations, avoiding the subject she'd come to talk about.

"Where did the firewood come from?"

"I brought it with me."

"Where's Mouse?"

"I sent him back."

"Oh. Alone?"

"He got here alone. Once he's been on a route, he knows it." He paused. "...He is...inquisitive."

Catherine understood. Vincent was afraid that she wouldn't be discreet, and he couldn't bear to have Mouse witness anything between them. Well, she probably wouldn't have been discreet.

She could think of nothing else to say about it, so she said, "Have you eaten? I'm hungry."

"There is food here." He slid a packet of food a little way in her direction.

"Thank you."

She got out of her blankets and came to sit across the fire from him. She took a slice of bread and some cheese from the food he had offered, and began to eat silently, eying him furtively as she did so. He seemed very withdrawn, almost angry.

"Vincent...are you angry?" He said nothing for a minute or two. Then: "It was wrong of Father to send you so far with only Mouse."

She was somewhat nonplussed by this statement, but she guessed he meant that that was what he was angry about.

"I had to come. Vincent, I..." She paused, not knowing yet quite how to start the discussion.

"There is no need for talk. If you are finished, we should be on our way."

"Where are we going?"

He looked at her. "Back, of course."

He began to pick up the remains of the food.

She turned to her bedroll, meaning to pack it up, but he forestalled her.

"I'll do that."

When he began to transfer the contents of her pack to his own, she put her hand out to stop him.

"I'm perfectly capable of carrying a pack, Vincent."

He stopped what he was doing, but didn't raise his head. In a moment he spoke again.

"As you wish. The bedrolls are bulky but not heavy. You will not find them difficult to carry."

In silence she waited while he put out the fire and picked up the traces of their presence. He filled her pack with his bedroll as well as hers, transferred the sizeable package of food she had carried to his, and helped her into the straps. Then he put the contents of Mouse's food pack into his larger pack, out of which several unlit torches protruded. He motioned for her to precede him, and they started down the tunnel without a word spoken. Catherine walked along, wondering how to get through to him.

He seemed absolutely closed, unwilling even to talk to her, much less discuss what had happened. She thought of a dozen ways to approach it, none of which seemed feasible. Her mind groped back and forth over the problem without progress, fatigue making her thinking fuzzy. She was still very tired from

yesterday's long trek and an uncomfortable night's sleep on the tunnel floor. As the time passed and Vincent seemed intent on getting her back to the Hub as quickly as possible, she began to be annoyed.

"Catherine."

She stopped and turned.

"The tunnel gets darker from here on, and the floor is uneven. I will lead."

He passed by her without a further word, and walked on. "Vincent!" He stopped, but didn't turn.

"We need to talk." "I don't wish to talk. I'm going on now." And he began to walk away.

That did it. Her temper flared, and she sat down in the middle of the tunnel. In a second or two, Vincent became conscious that she wasn't behind him, and turned. He stood for a moment, and then strode back to her.

"Catherine, I..." His shoulders slumped, and his head went down.

"I can't talk to you about this yet. I have...I am... Please!" He shrugged helplessly, turning away from her so his face was hidden.

"I have something to say, though. Doesn't that count at all?" She was angry, and it showed in her voice.

"Yes, of course it does, but if you have any...pity...for me, you will not say what I can't bear to hear."

"Can't bear to hear? What do you think I'm going to say, Vincent?"

He stood silent. "Tell me. I want to know what you think I'm going to say."

His head came up and he looked at her. His voice was cool. "You didn't come all the way down here to tell me you hate me, and you didn't come to punish me for what I did. I know that."

His eyes turned away from hers, and his voice became almost inaudible "...You came to forgive me." His hands clenched and he raised his head to look up at the tunnel ceiling.

"No. No, I didn't, because there's nothing to forgive. For Heaven's sake, Vincent, don't make a big thing of what's really a minor incident! I was doing something I shouldn't have been doing, and you caught me at it. How's that for a different take on it?" He winced.

"It wasn't just what... I can't...I can't talk about this any more. Please, please, get up, and let us go on."

She sighed. "All right. I can't make you talk about it. And I can't make you forgive yourself for something that's all in your own mind." She got to her feet. "Let's go."

He turned and began to walk. They had walked for some while, Catherine thought perhaps an hour, when Vincent stopped. He raised his head and turned it back and forth as if scenting something. She waited, but he said nothing, only stood alertly, still with raised head.

Finally she said "What is it?" No answer.

"Vincent, what is it?" "Dust." She was mystified. "Dust? What do you mean?"

"I smell dust in the air. Something has collapsed or exploded or fallen in, somewhere."

He continued to look ahead of them for another moment, then turned back to her.

"We'll go another way." He passed her and started back the way they had come.

She turned to follow him, obedient to his greater knowledge, but she wanted to know the reason. She lengthened her steps until she walked beside him.

"Why are we going another way?"

He didn't answer. After a moment her temper flared again.

"You might do me the courtesy of answering me on this subject anyway. I'm not exactly asking for your innermost thoughts!"

He answered then, glancing at her for just a moment.

"I'm sorry, I was thinking, I didn't mean to be rude. I was checking this alternate route in my mind, making sure it's something you will be able to manage. It's longer, but I'm suspicious of a section of

tunnel on your original route. There have been some small cracks appearing in the rock over the last two or three years. I have no reason for thinking that particular tunnel is involved, I just...I've lived here all my life; I know these tunnels, and...I have a feeling about that one."

He paused for a moment. "This way is better. If that tunnel is blocked, we'd have to come back here anyway."

They continued to walk, and after a moment he went on.

"Catherine, I'm willing to talk to you about any practical matter. We can't spend this whole trip in silence. But I will not discuss any personal matters; I have much to think about and I cannot talk about it until I have come to some point of...of balance inside myself. I hope you won't remain angry with me."

Catherine considered that for a minute. Well, anything is better than complete silence! she thought, and gave tacit consent to his wishes by an impersonal remark.

"OK. How far do we have to back track?"

"Not far, perhaps a mile. There is a side tunnel that leads to a large cavern. Perhaps you will find it interesting. There are the remains of some construction there that I believe to be very ancient, perhaps prehistoric."

It was indeed very interesting. There was no lighting here, but by the glow of one of Vincent's torches she saw a path perhaps six feet wide, curved around the side of a huge cavern that extended both above and below them to be lost in the gloom. Because of the curve, she could see under the path ahead of them that massive beams had been brought in and used to shore up the ledge they walked on. The path along the ledge was smoothed with wear, and she thought that many feet had passed along this trail in the past; many people had lived or worked here at one time.

"Is there any sign of homes, caves or any other signs of habitations?" she asked.

"I've never discovered anything that would give a clue as to why these people went to the trouble of making this path safe. There is nothing either ahead or behind that would indicate that they ever lived here, or mined here. Mining would seem to be a reason for such heavy construction, but I've never seen any signs of it or of habitations anywhere, and I've searched. This ledge is the only remaining sign."

Catherine shook her head, mystified. "What an enigma! This was well worth seeing, Vincent. The engineering involved in placing those beams is the work of pretty sophisticated minds. I'm glad that our detour brought us here, I'd be sorry if I'd missed it."

While Catherine looked again at the beams, Vincent's eyes dwelt on her with love and longing. Her quick appreciation of what she had seen was just another reason to love her, but when she turned to him again he looked away and started down the path.

"We've a long way to go, Catherine. Shall we start?"

They had gone only a few feet when a loud cracking sound and a rumble from above startled Catherine. She had time for one quick glance over her shoulder before she felt a violent shove as Vincent pushed her forward, compelling her to run. His arm was around her shoulders, half-carrying her weight as he pressed her to make the best speed possible out of the way of danger. Behind them the rumble became a roar. With a final shove that carried her off her feet, he nearly succeeded in getting her totally clear of the rockslide that followed, but a bouncing rock clipped her sharply on the head. The last thing she heard as consciousness faded was Vincent's cry of pain.

Chapter 3

When she opened her eyes again, it was completely dark.

"Uh...Vincent?"

No answer. She lay still for a moment, waiting for her head to clear a little.

“Vincent??? Vincent!”

She heard echoes of her voice rebounding faintly from the cavern walls, but no familiar soft baritone answered. She sat up slowly, her head pounding. As she put her hand to her aching forehead, she found a trickle of warm wetness. Further searching discovered a large lump and a cut just above the hairline, which was still bleeding slightly. Unable to see, bleeding, lost, alone....she stopped abruptly. That line of thinking would only lead to panic. *Catherine, get a hold on yourself. It's up to you, girl. Vincent is here somewhere, he must be unconscious, or...No! That's only going to get you crazy. He's here, and he's unconscious. Find him.* She sat up straighter. *OK, where are you? The ledge is about six feet wide, so within six feet of you is a way to orient yourself. The rock wall is one way, the drop-off is the other. Then there's the path ahead, and the path behind, which must be covered with rocks, and where Vincent is....* That thought nearly made her panic again. *Vincent! Oh God, be all right, Vincent, please!* Tears welled up and began to slide down her cheeks. She raised herself to her hands and knees and began to crawl very cautiously.

“One...two...three..” before she got to four her sliding hand found the edge of the drop-off.

OK, now I know where I am. She felt cautiously to make sure that it was indeed the lip of the ledge. Satisfied, she sat up to think. Her head still throbbed, making her slow to decide what to do next. If she was facing out toward the cavern, then Vincent must be on her left. Slowly, using caution with every movement in the complete darkness, she turned to her left and began to crawl, feeling with one hand for the edge of the ledge as she went so she wouldn't get turned off course. Within a few feet she came upon the first of the rocks. She turned to her left again and began to feel along the edge of the rocks. “One...two...three... four... five...six...” The wall! Panic struck. Where was he?

“Vincent! Vincent! Answer me!” She swung around toward the rock slide again. “Please..please... answer me?...”

Her voice trailed away into a sob, and she began to cry in earnest, but only for a minute or so. She raised her head then, gulped, and swallowed her tears. *I can't do this, I have to find him, maybe he's bleeding! Now what else can I do?* She sat still for a moment, thinking. *I went along the edge of the rocks, maybe he's farther back toward the rock slide. How can I crawl farther back among the rocks, it'll kill my knees. ---Oh for Pete's sake, so what!* Sniffing, and wiping her nose on her sleeve, she began the crawl through the rocks. It took only a moment; she must have missed him by just inches the first time. His clawed fingers were cold, and she scrambled to his head, her heart in her mouth. He was lying on his back. She bent over to listen for his breathing, but her heart was pounding so hard she couldn't hear. She felt then for the artery in his neck, and when she felt the slow steady beat she began to cry again, but she didn't stop moving.

While the tears slid down her face, she began to lift rocks off him and toss them over her shoulder. There were none so big she couldn't lift them, and soon she had his body cleared to his knees. There she came upon what felt like a timber, lying over his shins. She found it impossible to budge, however much she strained, so she turned her attention back to Vincent.

He didn't appear to be bleeding anywhere, but he also had a lump on his head, which she hoped accounted for his unconsciousness. She was most worried about shock, since he seemed so cold. She unslung her pack, still on her back, and got out the bedrolls. She spread one over him, but she was afraid to move him enough to get the other one under him. Instead, she moved more rocks to make a place beside him, and put it down next to him. She lay down beside him, snuggling close to him to share her body heat, and pulling the edge of the bedroll over her.

As soon as she was settled quietly, her body's activity was replaced by racing thoughts. *Have I done everything I can? Should I have tried to put a blanket under him, or tried to wake him, or... what else? Is he going to be all right? Oh God, is he going to wake up? Is he ever going to wake up? Vincent... oh Vincent, oh my love....* Tears started then, and she cried with grief and fear until exhaustion claimed her

and she finally sobbed herself to sleep.

Vincent woke her. "Catherine? What...."

She opened her eyes to find his face very close to hers, and her body pressed against his for its whole length down to her knees, which were uncomfortably bent. She was utterly confused for a moment, and from the look on his face, so was Vincent. As the past few hours came back to her, she realized that she could see him. Looking up, she saw daylight streaming in from an opening far above, the sunlight glowing on the heaped up stones of the cavern floor. Even the shadowed ledge on which they lay had plenty of reflected light for her to see Vincent's face plainly.

"Oh! I'm so glad to see daylight, that's wonderful!" she exclaimed. Then she turned back to him.

"Are you all right, Vincent? Are you hurt anywhere? Bleeding anywhere? I couldn't tell in the dark. All I could do was get the rocks off of you."

As she spoke she moved away from him and sat up. He raised himself on his elbow and looked around them.

"I remember...there was a rock slide. I did get you out of the way of it, didn't I? You have blood on your face, Catherine. Are you badly hurt?"

"No, no, not badly. It's nothing. I think a flying rock hit me. It's you I'm worried about."

She turned to look at his legs. "Oh! I knew that there was something over your legs, but...but not that it was so big." She was horrified to find that the timber over his legs stretched back at least eight feet, disappearing under the rockslide. It was a foot square; she knew at once that she'd never be able to lift it. Vincent studied the problem with his usual calm. "Yes. You won't be able to lift that."

He moved his legs as much as he could. "And I'm solidly pinned. Only one leg is caught, the right one, but I'm unable to pull the other out until the pinned one is freed."

"Is your leg injured very much? Can you tell?"

He thought about that for a moment. "No. I can't really tell. I don't think it's bleeding, though, I don't feel any of the symptoms of blood loss. However, it's numb, I'm afraid the circulation may be at least partially cut off. We'll need to get it free as quickly as we can."

Catherine slumped down, terrified.



"How? How are we going to do it, Vincent? How?"

As she spoke tears again began to run down her cheeks. She turned her head quickly, ashamed of them, but he saw them. He sat up, wincing a little as bruised limbs and body objected.

"You must have been very frightened when I was unconscious."

She put her hands up to cover her face, her voice coming out from behind them throaty with tears.

"Oh, Vincent, I was so scared... it was dark...I couldn't see anything, you didn't answer... I was so scared..."

Her head dropped further, and she sobbed once or twice, but her tears stopped after a moment. She sniffled, raised her head, and smiled at him.

"But I found you. I'm so glad you're awake and OK, so you can tell me what to do. I haven't any idea what to do next."

"Of course you don't. This isn't exactly your home environment, is it? But it is mine, and I do know what to do. Unfortunately, it looks like the doing of it will be up to you. I'm rather...tied by the leg." He smiled his small smile.

Catherine returned the smile rather shakily.

"OK. Tell me."

"What we need to do is to rig a lever, to lift the beam far enough for me to slide my leg out. It doesn't have to go up far. An inch will probably do it." He looked speculatively at their surroundings.

"The fulcrum will need to be there," he indicated where with a pointing finger, "and you will need a strong lever about six feet long. Any longer, and you'll be off the edge of the path because of the angle of the beam." He thought in silence for a moment more. "If you can move as much rock as possible off the beam, it will help. And if you can get the rocks under the beam away from my left leg, I might be able to get that leg out. It will give me more freedom to turn, and I might be able to help with the lever."

"What needs to be done first then, is for me to move rock. Is that right?" Catherine was in control of



herself once more, and anxious to start with the job. She got up.

"That's right." As she moved to the rock pile to begin her task, Vincent held up a hand.

"Wait. We should think about what will be the safest and most labor-saving way to do this. I believe if you could get the rocks out to free my left leg, I might be of more help to you. And there should be a pair of gloves in my pack. They will save your hands any more damage."

Catherine looked down at her hands, hands that had been pampered for most of her life. They were in bad shape. Her blind battle of the night before to get Vincent uncovered had been made without regard for pain or damage, but daylight showed that there had been plenty of both. Nails were broken to the quick and bleeding, as were many gouges and scrapes. She raised her eyes and smiled wryly.

"Not exactly in shape for the senior prom, are they?"

He looked down at her hands. "Not exactly. Come here, let me see."

She knelt beside him and held them out. "Oh, Catherine." He took her hands carefully in his. "I'm so sorry." His voice throbbed with his care and love for her.

She was surprised at his tone, at the warmth in his voice. Was it only yesterday that he had refused to talk to her at all? He looked up, caught the look on her face and understood at once what she was thinking.

"I know. But we're in a serious situation here, Catherine. I don't have leisure or energy now to soul search, I only know that you...you are all that is important to me in the world."

His gaze held hers for a moment, then he turned his head away. "Let's begin on the rocks by my leg."

She put her hand on his arm. "Wait... wait a minute."

He turned his face back to hers. "How serious is the situation, Vincent? Please be honest with me about this. I want to be prepared for whatever may happen."

His gaze dwelt on her face for a moment before he spoke, measuring her ability to accept the hard truth, then a short nod of his head signaled his decision to be frank.

"All right, this is what I think. It is possible that you will have to leave me here."

She shook her head violently, and began to speak, but he raised a hand. "Wait, wait, Catherine. Let me finish. It is possible that you will have to go for help, and leave me here. We're not talking about my dying. We're talking about my making it through several days alone. I can do that."

"Several days? You can't be here for several days! What about food? Water? Vincent, we have to get you out of this! We have to! It..." Catherine stopped as he held up a hand again.

"Let's think about it. First, we'll need some time here before you can leave, to prepare. Several hours at least. You're right about water. That I will need, and that you can get for me, but it will take time. Then you must traverse some miles of caves, where there is a possibility of taking wrong turns and having to backtrack. When you arrive at the nearest pipes, you must get a message to Pascal that he can understand." Vincent smiled a little here. "Pascal is very clever. You'll be able to make him understand. The rescue party must prepare, and get to you, and then you must all get back to me. At the very best, five days."

He smiled a little. "Food is not so important. It's not as though I'll be working hard...but that's all only if we're not able to free me, and I think we can, so let's leave that eventuality in the future where it belongs. All right?"

She had to realize that he was right. She sighed and agreed. "All right. Let's work on getting you out of here. Where did you say those gloves were?"

In half an hour they had freed his left leg, Catherine rolling the rocks to within Vincent's reach, and he heaving them over the edge of the path. Sitting back on her haunches after moving the last rock, Catherine pulled her gloves off.

"That wasn't so bad."

"And it will make me more able to help, although I'm afraid the bulk of the work will be yours." He was sitting up more comfortably now, able to raise his left knee and rest his elbow on it.

"OK, what's next?"

"A lever. We'll need a timber five or six feet long. Hopefully there will be some more timbers back in the rock slide somewhere. You should try to locate something while we still have daylight. Then in the morning we'll be ready to try to move this thing."

He looked ruefully at the heavy timber still pinning his right leg.

"I believe that there is about an hour of usable daylight left. Because of the way the opening is structured, with a deep overhang on the west side, the morning sunlight is able to light up the cavern more than the afternoon light. We awoke late this morning, so we've shortened our useful daylight hours.."

Catherine got up. "Well, I'd better get at it then."

"I know you will be careful." His anxiety for her showed in his normally controlled face.

She smiled brightly at him. "Don't worry about me, I'll be OK."

She pulled on her gloves and turned to her task, skirting the edge of the rockslide until she came to the place where it spilled over the edge of the shelf. She looked back at Vincent for a moment, surveyed the pile of rocks before her, and started the climb over them. She found the going to be very rough. Thank heaven for the gloves! she thought, as she heaved a rock over the edge to clear her way.

As she moved along she saw other timbers, but all were the same foot-square size as the one over Vincent's leg. Before very long she came to the other edge of the slide, and there she found a timber that had splintered. Among the broken pieces was a piece that she thought was about right, and that she could possibly move. It was perhaps six inches by twelve inches in the cross section at the large end, tapering after about 8 feet to three inches square at the other.

I can do this, it looks perfect! she thought. However, it appeared she had overestimated her strength or underestimated its weight. She could lift one end, but not carry it. How she was going to get it over that pile of rocks she did not know; she was already exhausted. She sat down heavily, wondering if she'd ever get up again. A little rest was essential before starting the next phase of her task, but the waning light pressed her to work quickly. As she rested, she planned her tactics. *I could try dragging it over, or I could get rid of the rocks. Which? Well it makes sense to try dragging it first. If I can't, I'll move rocks.* In the end she had to do both. Dragging it worked for about a third of the distance she needed to cover, then she came to a place where she had to start heaving rocks. As she removed one particularly large rock it started a mini-slide that scared the life out of her.

"Oh hell!"

She jumped back, but there was no need. The slide had done her a favor, removing most of the remaining rocks.

When her heart had steadied a little she called, "I'm all right, Vincent. Small rockslide did some of my work for me."

She heard his answering "Good!" while she took advantage of the extra time saved to sit for a moment, until her breathing slowed to a more normal pace.

She returned then to her dragging strategy, and with the last of her strength she pulled the beam over the remaining rocks and dragged it to Vincent's side.

"I'm glad to see you in one piece. I was worried when I heard the rock slide, but I also heard you...ah...telling the rocks where to go...so I knew you were all right."

Vincent smiled his almost imperceptible smile as she collapsed gratefully to the floor.

"You've done exactly right, Catherine. This beam looks perfect for our purposes. You're exhausted, I know. But you should eat something before we sleep."

He also had been busy, to the limit of his capabilities. He had fixed a pile of rocks to hold a torch, since

the light was nearly gone, and he had laid out the contents of his pack to consider what they might need of his supplies.

"I brought everything I had stored ...where I was. I didn't know whether you were alone, or whether you had any supplies at all. I only knew that you were coming."

He shook his head regretfully. "I don't have a lot of food. I had only the emergency supply I keep in my pack, and I don't keep any...there. But William sent a great deal of food with you. Ordinarily I'd say it was too much, but in our present situation, it is very welcome."

Catherine got up stiffly.

"Let's eat; then we'll figure out how to get some bedding under you tonight. I know you're cold on that stone floor." When they had finished Catherine was very ready for sleep, but there was a difference of opinion about sleeping arrangements. A large difference of opinion.

Chapter 4

Catherine spoke to Vincent out of temper. She was very tired, too tired to watch her tongue, and he had objected to her plans.

"Vincent, I am just not going to put up with any foolishness. You are going to sleep with this sleeping bag under you. I am going to sleep on it too. And we are going to cover both of us with the other one. It's cold down here, and I am going to be as comfortable as I can. That means we share the blankets. Now just you be quiet and learn to live with it!"

Vincent also was very tired. He was hurting, he felt utterly helpless to take charge of the situation, and he was frightened for Catherine's safety and his own. He had a temper too.

When he spoke his face was expressionless and his voice was low and silky soft.

"Since I am in a helpless position, one would assume that you would be conscientious about not taking advantage of it. However, I can see that such an assumption would be ill-founded."

She bristled. "Yes. Such an assumption would. Now sit up so I can put this blanket under you."

"That will not be necessary. If you will hand me the bedroll, I will make my own sleeping arrangements." She stood up, rigid with anger.

"Damn it, Vincent, will you quit thinking only of yourself! Your body heat is all that kept me from freezing last night, but if you want to be so damn stiff-necked about it, sleep by yourself! I'll see you in the



morning!" She threw his bedroll at him, picked up hers, and marched off down the path. "Catherine... wait... Catherine!" She stopped, but didn't turn.

His worry for her took precedence over his temper and his reluctance to sleep next to her. With some difficulty he reined in his anger.

"All right! We'll do it your way." He couldn't resist adding: "You might have let me know that you needed... these arrangements in order to be comfortable."

She wheeled around; now she was furious.

"You thought I just couldn't wait to snuggle up to you, did you? Well, I assure you, I can live without you. If you would lend me your body heat for the night, it would make me more comfortable, but I certainly wouldn't want to impinge on your sacred person!"

That swept away his restraint.

Coldly: "I believe that I may be able to stand it."

Catherine didn't want to leave him and spend the night alone. She bit her lip, then curbed her temper far enough to answer.

"All right! Let's get this done."

She began to unroll the blankets in cold silence. The remaining bed-making was done without further conversation. When they were finally under one blanket, Catherine moved as close as she could get to Vincent. His body was stiff and unwelcoming, but she molded herself to him and threw a leg over his. His response to this move was immediate and angry. He pushed her leg off him forcefully.

"That is totally unnecessary."

"Maybe for once in your life you'll let me decide what is necessary!"

Her anger at him was compounded of more than just the immediate situation, or perhaps she wouldn't have goaded him any further. However, the worry and strain of the past two days, culminating in their present situation, combined to make her unable or unwilling to control her temper. She deliberately put her leg back where it had been.

Vincent also had been under very great strain, both physical and emotional for forty-eight hours. He was consumed with guilt over his spying on her most private moment, and most of all, over the physical effect it had had on him. He was not able to remember what he had done without wanting to die on the spot, and the thought of confessing to Catherine that he had stolen physical pleasure from her without her knowledge or consent, was unbearable to him. He knew that he must tell her if their relationship was to continue, but he also believed that the confession could end that very relationship forever. All of these things made the present situation untenable to him. And as if his guilt weren't bad enough, he could not banish the memory of Catherine's bared body, and the feeling so vividly imagined of her hands on him. This combination, together with her deliberate provocation, moved him to snap at last.

His temper, never shown to Catherine but well-known to Father and his childhood friends, rose up to control him now. He raised himself up on his elbow, leaning over her with imminent danger of injuring his tethered leg.

His hand gripped her shoulder with enough force to leave a mark, holding her down while he hissed at her, "Be very careful. You're treading on thin ice here!"

This was fuel to Catherine's fire. No one, no one, threatened her!

"Get off me, you great oaf! Who the hell do you think you're talking to!" She struggled against his hand, to no avail. "Get off me! I'll do what I please, and say what I please!"

Vincent glared down at her while his face turned red with rage. "You think so?" he growled. Then, in the blindness of his temper, his desire for her swept over him to make him do something unthinkable. "Try saying something now!" His mouth came down on hers and he kissed her, passionately, with anger and desire so mixed as to be one emotion.

In an instant, after the first amazement had subsided, she was a willing captive. Her arms came up around him and she kissed him back. For a long moment his lips softened and he drank deep of the wet heaven of her mouth, his tongue stroking her lips, and then moving inside her mouth to stroke her more intimately, until Catherine's ecstatic pleasure in the kiss was made apparent by her soft moan. At that he jerked back, his face a study in confusion.

"Dear God! What... Catherine, move away! Get away from me!"

He rolled away from her as far as he could, lying on his back with his face turned away from her, his chest heaving with his panting breath. Catherine, gasping in shock, and feeling still the marvelous touch of his mouth on hers, did as he asked without thinking about it. When she was no longer touching him she looked back at him.

His hands were clenched into tight fists, his eyes were closed, on his face was a look of agony. And she couldn't miss also that he was in a visible state of arousal. Her bad temper was forgotten as if it had never been. She wanted with a burning immediacy to reach out and touch his body, run her hands over his broad chest, slide them down, down, until she caressed the swelling at his groin. But his suffering was evident, and she could do none of these things. They would only make him suffer more, in his present paroxysm of guilt.

Finally, after several minutes, Vincent spoke, still not facing her.

He stared up at the rocks above him, intermittently visible in the light of the flaring torch, as he said, painfully, "I...don't know what to say to you...I can't say I'm sorry... it's inadequate. And what else can I say? I'm ashamed, Catherine. Ashamed of my temper, and of my weakness."

His eyes turned and barely glanced at her before going back to the rocks above him. There was another silence; then, in a soft voice as if he talked only to himself, he said, "...I've wanted that..."

He seemed to come to himself then, and he turned back to her.

"Oh, Catherine, I am sorry. I had no right..."

"No. Let's not talk about rights. You know you're given the right, that's not in question." Catherine turned to him, reaching out her hand.

"...And I should say I'm sorry. My terrible temper! I do apologize, Vincent, I..."

"Oh don't! Please don't. The fault was mine..."

"No it wasn't! I should never have..."

"If I hadn't..." They spoke together, and both stopped abruptly.

"Well, I guess that takes care of apologies. We seem to have covered that ground pretty thoroughly." She smiled at him sadly, then looked down at her hands. "Let's just forget it, shall we?"

Vincent turned his head to look at her. His voice was low, husky.

"I won't forget it..."

"Nor will I..."

She looked up at him then, and their glances caught and held. In that long look was all of the passion so long suppressed, the joy at the kiss finally realized, the aching desire for more, so much more...

They said very little else that night; conversation was confined to the matters at hand. When they lay down together at last, pressed close in their skimpy blankets, sleep was long in coming to both.

Catherine woke as the grey light was just beginning to pick out the high points of the rocks. She turned her head to find Vincent's eyes on her.

"Hello". She said softly.

"Hello." His reply was equally soft. Impulse ruled her in this moment of waking, and her hand came up to stroke his softly furred cheek.

"Oh, Vincent, I love you so much!" Her voice was soft and tender, and her hand touched him with equal

tenderness.

He looked back at her, a long look equally tender, until he became conscious of the danger in that tenderness. He opened his mouth as if to say something, hesitated, then shook his head slightly, turning his eyes away from her. He pushed the blanket off him and sat up. The thought of the kiss they had shared burned in his memory, making every look or touch suspect. How could he keep from kissing her, now that he knew the ecstatic pleasure of her mouth? He shook his head again, and turned to practical matters, his defense against an almost irresistible desire to kiss her and kiss her...No! He must not think of it!

"I want to be free of this beam. Let's get it moved."

His voice was almost brusque. Catherine lay still for a moment, surprised and hurt by his reaction. What was he thinking? She knew that he loved her, why couldn't he just say it? But she knew also that it wasn't so simple for him, particularly in the light of recent events. She sighed to herself, and resolved to be patient, but in her mind also the kiss burned. When she looked at him her eyes were drawn irresistibly to his mouth. How she wanted to explore it with hers! How she wanted to lie under him while he kissed her and kissed her.... She sat up quickly.

"What can I do?"

He was examining the beam that had him pinned.

"I think that the first thing to do is to move some more rock. I'm sorry about that, you've already done yeoman service in that area, but the more rock we can get off the end of the beam, the easier it will be to lift it. However, this will need to be done carefully, not to start any more rockslides. You could be thrown over the edge of the ledge by a slide underfoot, and I'm vulnerable down here under it also." He looked rueful.

"I'm sorry to say such worrying things, but we've got to be clear, both of us, what we're doing, and what the dangers are."

"You're right, of course." She tilted her head and smiled at him. "I'm pretty much able to take the truth, you know."

"I do know that, but it...hurts me to have to worry you in any way." He smiled rather shyly at her. "I know you're strong. I've seen a great deal of evidence of that, not the least of which has occurred since we've been in this situation. You've been marvelous. I'm full of admiration for your bravery, believe me."

He smiled again, wryly this time.

"And my admiration is not for a woman who's brave, but for a person who is dealing bravely with a strange environment, and a frightening situation."

She grinned. "Thank you. You knew exactly what I was thinking."

She turned and began the climb. Vincent watched with apprehension while Catherine climbed carefully up the rock-pile to the place where the beam disappeared. She stood for several minutes, appraising the situation, while he waited below, helpless. She spoke at last, slowly, still looking down at the rocks.

"Vincent, I don't think I can move any more rocks. The pile goes up rather steeply above the beam to a point past where I can reach. I'm afraid there's no place to begin where there aren't other rocks that may be dislodged."

"All right. Come down...with care, please." When she was safely down, they turned their attention to the lever and its fulcrum.

"We need a rock that's roughly rectangular, and three to six inches high. A brick would be perfect, See if you can find something bricklike."

Vincent spoke while he still surveyed the situation.

"We'll need to have it relatively flat on the top and bottom. We don't want it to tilt the lever, and swing you out over the drop-off." She came back in a little while with a rock that was about twelve inches long

and four inches high at the high end, tapering to two inches.

“Good! That will give us a gradation of heights. Now, place the small end of the lever under the beam, beside my foot. The rock will go under the lever, as close to the beam as you can push it.” He helped her by lifting on the lever until she got the rock within six inches of the beam. “All right. This is the moment. Now, when the beam lifts, I’m going to pull my foot out just as soon as I can. I’ll keep telling you to push down harder until I feel the beam lift. All right?”

He gave the situation a final appraisal, and issued a final correction.

“No, not there, swing the lever in a little bit, and get closer to the end. Now!”

“Not yet...lean harder...not yet. it’s starting to lift...a little more...done!”

He pulled his foot triumphantly out from under the beam, just as a warning rumble told him that the rocks were going to come down.

“Catherine! Move!!!”

Vincent’s voice galvanized Catherine, who’d not been looking up at the rocks. She dived for Vincent, narrowly missed by a roaring cascade of rocks that took the beam and the lever over the edge of the drop-off, and left a large pile of rock where she had been standing.

“Are you all right? Did anything hit you?” Vincent frantically looked her up and down.

“I’m fine. Just a couple of bruises, I think.”

Several rocks had hit her, but as she stood up it was clear that there was no real damage done. She stood for a moment and looked over the edge of the drop-off, where dust came roiling up from the displaced rocks.

She turned back to find Vincent standing right behind her, and as she looked up at him, his arms came around her and he pulled her tightly to him.

“I nearly lost you. A second, one second later...!” His head came down to press his face into her neck.



“Catherine....Catherine...”

“It’s all right, my love, I’m here...I’m right here...”

She stroked the back of his head as he struggled to gain control of himself. After a few seconds he raised his head.

“Yes, you’re here. With me.”

He dropped his arms and took a step back. As he did, he yelped and sat down suddenly on the ground.

“Oh God, Vincent, your leg!” He sat with his eyes shut, waiting for the pain to subside.

“Yes...” he said finally. “My leg...”

Catherine knelt down to look at his right leg. As she laid her hand on it she glanced up at him.

“I’ll try to be careful.”

Slowly she began to unlace his boot. With the laces off the boot was loose, and came off easily. Next came his pant leg. She pushed it up a few inches and gasped.

“Oh, Vincent!”

His leg was solidly black and blue nearly to his knee. She pulled the sock gently from his foot and heard a hiss of indrawn breath as she did so.

“Sorry, oh, I’m sorry.”

As she looked at the extent of the damage tears ran down her face. The bruising continued all the way to his toes. The skin was broken in only one spot, but the cut was directly on the shinbone, and it was right down to the bone. It had not bled very much that she could see.

“It’s all right.” Vincent smiled grimly. “I’m beginning to get feeling back in it. I don’t think there was any permanent damage. There must have been some blood circulation.”

“Maybe not permanent damage. I certainly hope not. But there’s damage, Vincent. You can’t walk on this!”

“Not for a while, anyway. After the blood is circulating well again it’ll start to heal. In the meantime, we’ll have to make a crutch. Then I’ll be able to move.”

He hesitated before he added reluctantly, in an attempt to reassure her, “...I heal very well as a rule. Father says too well! The first time I had a serious injury, he was astonished at its healing ability. In his words, ‘It’s unnatural!’ But it is natural...for me.”

He looked down, unable to meet her eyes. His shame was apparent, as if he had confessed to a crime. Between them there was for a moment the stark reality of his physical differences: manifested on his side with shame and guilt, on hers with love and admiration.

Catherine shook her head mentally as his head went down. Would he never understand that her love for him was, in part, because of his differences? In the meantime, because he healed well didn’t mean that he didn’t feel pain. Catherine shook her head. Tears were still running down her face.

“Oh my dear, this must hurt. Is there anything at all I can do to help? I...I guess not, is there? If I could...” She stopped, unable to speak.

“There is something you can do. Get the first aid kit, it’s sitting right over there on the pack. Then you can clean and bandage the cut. That will be a great help.”

She gulped, and straightened. “Yes, of course, I can do that.” And she proceeded to do just that, in a very workmanlike manner. When she was all done, she sat back, took a deep breath, and started to cry again.

Vincent looked at her quizzically. “Are you falling apart now? After all you’ve done, are you going to faint at the sight of a little cut?”

She couldn’t help but grin. “OK, OK... I’m all right.” She sniffled and rubbed her nose. “I’ve bandaged a few cuts in my time, but never one with the bone showing before.”

As she said the words she began to cry in earnest.

"Oh Vincent, I bet it hurts," she sobbed.

"It's all right, there now, it's going to be fine, it feels much better now that it's bandaged."

Vincent lied to her cheerfully, the way he would have to a child, patting her on the back all the while. She grinned up at him through her tears.

"I'm not nine years old, and I know it hurts like a sonofabitch."

He grinned back, showing those sharp white teeth that always made her long to kiss him.

"Yes, it does. But you've done what you can, and it'll quit in a while."

She sat up straight, and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

"OK, all done. Vincent, what are we going to do now? This is not just a bruise. You shouldn't be walking on it for days."

"Well, not today, anyway. You're right, this is going to complicate things somewhat. We'll have to make some decisions." He paused, thinking.

"I think we'll have to plan on spending at least one more day here, maybe two. That means we're going to need water."

He looked up at her again. "You'll have to go for it."

She straightened further. "All right. Draw me a map."

Chapter 5

She started off down the path almost jauntily. Vincent knew that it was for his benefit, and that she was scared. However, there was nothing he could do about it. He watched her go with some misgiving: It was so easy to get lost in the tunnels. The route to the spring that he had drawn for her was not a difficult one, though. She should be back well within two hours, even if she stopped to bathe, as he had suggested. He told himself that she would be all right, and turned back to the splint that he was whittling from a broken piece of timber.

Catherine walked briskly along the path, telling herself that she wasn't scared. But she was; the torch that she carried was her only light, and it stood alone between her and a lonely death. The two water bottles bumped gently against her hip as she walked along. *I've got to do this, Vincent's life depends on it.*

She found Vincent's map to be accurate and easy to follow. After half an hour she began to feel humidity in the air as Vincent had said she would, and shortly after that she came around a corner and found the water spread before her, sparkling in the light of her torch.

"Oh...my goodness!" She raised the torch higher and gasped as the walls and ceiling above the spring shone back at her in a myriad of brilliantly glittering stony facets. Vincent had not told her how beautiful it was, he had only said that the water was warm, and that she might want to get into it and soak for a few minutes.

"It's a mineral spring. It will soak away a great deal of soreness in a short time." were his words. Following his instructions, she turned to her right and walked along the edge of the pool. There she found a kind of beach, where the cavern floor sloped gently down and continued to slope under the water to make a perfect bathing place. "Yes! Oh, that looks wonderful!" Catherine quickly piled rocks to hold the torch upright, a trick learned from Vincent, and began to shed her clothes. Steam curled gently up from the hot water as she waded in and sank down thankfully into the welcome heat.

"O-oo- h, that's just a miracle."

She found a rock along the edge of the pool to rest her head on, stretched out bruised arms and legs



to float in the gently flowing mineral-laden water, and promptly went to sleep.

Vincent began to worry when more than two hours had gone by. He knew that her torch wasn't good for much more than that, and although he had provided her with extra matches, it was necessary that she have something to burn. He was concerned that he wasn't able to sense her very well, hadn't been for some time. He was afraid that she'd gone to sleep. He'd done it himself in that pool. He began to lay plans.

When Catherine awoke, although she had no idea how long she'd been asleep, she knew she was in trouble. Her torch's flame was only about half as high as it had been when she went to sleep. As she threw her clothes on and checked for matches, she began a mental soliloquy. *Don't panic. If I keep a cool head, I'll get back. If I'm not back, Vincent will come for me somehow, I know that. I just need to keep cool, so he won't be forced to walk on that foot. I'm not in danger of my life, Vincent will come for me.*

She threw her clothes on, and without stopping for anything but to check for the extra matches, and to pick up the torch, she started off. Fifteen yards down the tunnel, she stopped suddenly, turned and ran back. She knelt at the edge of the pool and filled the water bottles, screwed the lids on tight, and turned once more to the tunnel. *God! I'm glad I remembered that when I did!*

She knew she couldn't run all the way, but it was very hard for her to keep her pace at a steady jog trot. Every time the torch flared, her heart bounded, and she found herself sprinting. Then she had to force herself back to the jogging pace. *Keep a cool head, girl. I've run farther than this in Central Park without stopping, I should be able to keep it up, if I just keep a steady pace, and don't lose my head.* There was also the question of keeping on the correct trail. Although the way had not been difficult, it looked different when coming from the other direction. *I'll stop at every intersection and check the map, take a few breaths, and go on.*

After about fifteen minutes, the torch was burning significantly lower. Catherine was reasonably sure that she was on the right trail, and she knew that it couldn't be much further. *I think I'm going to make it!* That, of course, was the moment that the torch went out.

"Oh, God."

The darkness was complete. Catherine bent over, hands on knees, breathing hard. As her heart rate slowed and her breathing eased, she slid further down until she knelt on the ground.

"OK," she said, out loud. "What am I going to do now?" She shut her eyes while she thought. Somehow it didn't seem so dark with her eyes shut.

As she sat there, wondering how she was going to stay sane, she heard him. Vincent was calling her. "Catheri-i-i-ine... Catheri-i-i-i-ne..."

"Vincent...Vincent...I'm here" She shouted at the top of her lungs. "I'm com- m-ming."

OK, you can do this. He's within shouting distance, you'll see the light in a few minutes. Don't make him walk on that leg!

Immensely heartened by the sound of his voice, she began to walk slowly forward, both hands out to the sides. She knew that there should be only one more side tunnel. It would be on her right, so she turned toward the left and walked slowly forward until the tunnel wall was under her hand. Then she turned back and began to walk steadily ahead. She thought that it probably took more sheer guts than she'd ever needed before to keep walking ahead into the pitch dark. She felt cobwebs on the rough wall surface that was under her left hand, and the thought of spiders was almost more than she could manage. *Spiders! She thought. Spiders? You're walking through the dark in a tunnel far underground where you could die in the dark, and you're afraid of spiders?*

"Vince-e-e-nt! I'm com-m-i-i-ng"

She heard his answering hail, closer now. And in a few moments, maybe twenty more slow steps, she saw the first sign of light. Her steps quickened, and several more moments saw the tunnel turn, and he was there. He stood in the reflected glow of the sunlight shafting into the cavern, leaning against the rock wall, his weight on his good leg.

She was crying hard as she crossed the last space to run into his arms. He clasped her close to him, crooning softly, almost below the threshold of hearing.

"...It's all right now, you're safe now, you're here with me...", and soundlessly his lips moved as he added, "my love, my love...."

Her sobs slowed as she felt the safety of his embrace and heard the soft murmuring reassurance of his voice..

"Oh, Vincent, I'm so happy to be back! I was so glad to hear your voice, I don't know if I'd have lasted without it. I was so scared when the torch went out."

She moved a little back from his embrace to turn a tear-stained face up to his

"It's... it's amazing how dark real darkness is, isn't it?"

He smiled a little and lifted a hand to stroke the tears from her cheeks.

"Underground is a special kind of dark, I agree. I thought I'd try calling before I set out looking. I felt that you had wakened, and I hoped the torch would last, but there was no way to tell. You did go to sleep, didn't you?"

She looked down, shame-faced. "Yes."

"I understand. I've fallen asleep in that water myself. It's easy to do when you're exhausted, as you were. I'm only sorry that I didn't think to warn you of that danger."

"It was stupid of me not to realize it myself. It certainly wasn't your fault, anyway!"

Vincent reached down to her waist and lifted a water bottle. "Good. You did fill the bottles."

"I almost didn't. I had to go back to do it."

Again he smiled that small smile.

"That must have been hard to do, if you knew that the torch was low."

She nodded. "I'm not experienced enough in tunnel ways, I see that. I'll bet you would have filled those bottles before you did anything else."

"That's right. It's good practice to make sure that the important things are done first."

"I'm learning. ---Oh, Vincent! You're standing! For pity's sake, sit down!"

They spent the next couple of hours assessing their position and making plans. They sat on the ground

next to the augmented rock pile while Vincent laid out in a methodical manner all of their supplies to estimate how far they would go and what would be the best ways to conserve them.

"I'm astonished at how much food you've got here, Catherine! How long did you tell William you'd be gone?"

Catherine chuckled. "I didn't talk to him, Mouse did. And you know William, he always thinks it's not quite enough, and I'll bet Mouse encouraged that belief. William knew also that you hadn't taken any food with you, so I'm sure he packed more than enough for three people."

"It's true, I always have to pare down what he wants me to take on a trip into the tunnels. 'A little bit extra never hurts' is William's favorite saying."

Vincent shook his head as he looked over the supplies.

"Well, in this case I'm certainly glad that he overestimated. We should have enough food here to last us for....hmm, I think five or six days, if we're careful. There's a lot of cheese and hard salami. That will keep well, and there are crackers, after the bread is gone. A little crunched now, I'm sorry to say, but crackers nevertheless. He stopped and thought for a second.

"Catherine, I must tell you that I don't think there's much chance of a search party finding us. I have wondered if you're hoping for that to happen."

Catherine nodded. "It had crossed my mind. Why don't you think it likely?"

He pondered for a moment. "For these reasons: First, Mouse has never been on this route to my knowledge, so they won't come from ahead of us. Second, the cave in that caused us to take this route will also stop searchers from coming that way, if my surmise about the suspicious tunnel wall is true. They will not be able to follow our track, so they won't come from behind us. Third..., they...will be hesitant to search for at least a few days because they will think it possible that...that we do not wish to be found."

He turned away, embarrassed to have vocalized what he knew to be a likely decision on Father's part, but his compulsion to be honest with Catherine wouldn't let him leave it out. Catherine was secretly amused by his embarrassment. Does he think that I'd be anything but happy to be honeymooning here with him?

The reality of what she was thinking about suddenly hit her, and a warm tide of desire flowed through her body at the thought of that honeymoon. To be held in his arms, to feel her body naked next to his, to be kissed and kissed and touched and stroked and caressed... and his body, that long held secret... to see it... to stroke it...

"...so I believe we're on our own here...Catherine? Is that..."

He paused, then gasped as he felt her sudden heat. It swirled through him with hurricane force, and he moaned almost soundlessly, feeling the passion of her imagined lovemaking. He shut his eyes and gave himself up for just a moment to the delicious pleasure; but he couldn't let it last.

"No! No..." He whispered, suddenly consumed with guilt, as he realized the parallel to his previous transgression. "No!"

She took a breath, coming back reluctantly from their imaginary lovemaking, and realized that she'd missed what he was saying. "Yes, Vincent?"

They stared at each other, confused and disconcerted by what had happened, both of them still under the spell of the short seconds of unleashed desire. Vincent recovered his mind and his voice first.

"We'll not expect rescue then. All right?"

Catherine looked at him, still in thrall to the previous moments. "Vincent...I don't care if they never find us..." Her eyes never left his.

Vincent stared back at her, unable to look away. Then he spoke very softly, still gazing at her, with entreaty in his voice, "Don't, Catherine...don't."

She couldn't deny him. Slowly, she closed her eyes, and lowered her head. "All right."

A silence followed while both recovered their balance. With an effort, Vincent took up where they'd stopped, it seemed hours ago.

"We easily have enough to keep us going, even if it takes longer than five or six days to get back. We'll start out with a reasonable ration every day, and if it looks like the food will run out before we're back, we'll have to go on half rations. Does that sound feasible?"

"Yes, of course," said Catherine, trying hard to come back to an everyday stance. "We'll do what we have to do."

Then she added, as the meaning of what he had said came to her through her diminishing fog, "I trust that you will not make extra allowances for me."

She tilted her head and stared at him soberly, until he nodded, with his small smile. "All right, I understand. Yes, I will not make extra allowances for you...or perhaps I should say that I will apportion the food where I believe it will be best used. Is that satisfactory?"

She surveyed his expression. After a moment she decided that he meant exactly what he said without trying to deceive her, so she agreed.

"All right. I can go along with that." Vincent turned then to another matter.

"A more difficult problem is torches. We have six, that's twelve hours of light. There is a stash of torches ahead of us, but it's a tossup whether we'll make it there before our light runs out."

Catherine asked with curiosity and some trepidation, "Have you ever been caught in the tunnels with no light?"

"Many times. I seem able to navigate pretty well by hearing and scent, and I have a strong perception of obstacles in my path even when I can't see. Also, there is often fungal light in the tunnels, perhaps too faint for you to sense, but I can see quite well if there's even a small light source. We aren't completely dependent on the torches."

He paused and studied her face for a moment. "I know you must be apprehensive about the dark, but I hope that I've helped to set your mind at rest."

His hand lifted as though he were going to touch her, then stopped and settled back in his lap.

"I won't be afraid if I'm with you. Never..." She looked up at him with a soft smile.

Vincent looked down at that warm expression for a moment, his eyes intent. The look stretched into more than a glance as their eyes locked. Then a shadow moved over his face as if an unwelcome thought had intruded, and he turned away.

After a long moment when he sat staring outward into the alternate sunlight and gloom of the cavern, he turned back to her and resumed their discussion "I'm not infallible, certainly, Catherine, but in our present circumstance I'm concerned but not really worried."

He hesitated, then continued. "I can tell you now that before you did such a...a really magnificent job in getting my leg free, I was worried. Very worried, because it's a journey of miles to the nearest pipe, and even someone who's familiar with these tunnels might not be able to find the way."

He looked at her for a long moment, and then stared away again into the vastness of the cavern before he continued, his voice lowered almost to a whisper: "The thought of sending you off on a journey so dangerous for you was..." Still looking off into the distant shafts of sunlight, he shook his head slightly and didn't finish the thought. Instead he turned back to her and said, his voice now matter-of-fact, "...I'm very glad that it won't be necessary." He shook his head slightly. "Well. We should consider the next problem facing us."

They were sitting in their place at the edge of the rockslide that had been such a disaster for them. Vincent gestured at the rocks "I hope there's another broken beam that you can find in this rock pile. We'll need something from which to construct a crutch." He looked ruefully at his bandaged leg. "I'm

afraid that I'll not be able to walk far without one."

Catherine tried to match his positive demeanor as she said, "I guess that means another trek over the rocks. OK. I'm really getting quite good at it."

She reached for her gloves, and stood up. "The daylight won't last forever. I'd better get started."

"You're right, we need to get this done by daylight. Further plans can wait until dark. Now, do you know what to look for?"

"I think so. We'll need a piece about six feet long, and light enough for me to move." She grinned. "There's not much point in making other specifications, the 'light enough to move' one is the defining one, isn't it?"

Vincent returned her smile. "Right. Six feet is good, but five will do the job. It must be strong enough to carry my weight also. We must hope that you can find something suitable." He paused for thought. "If you can't, it's not the end. In that event we must just wait a couple of days for my leg to heal enough to walk on."

"I'll find something. You're not going to walk on that leg!"

"Certainly not unless I have to."

"OK. Here I go." Catherine pulled on her gloves and waved over her shoulder as she threaded through the first rocks. Soon she was climbing. The rock pile had changed somewhat since the last slide. As she looked up at the wall above her, she decided that most of the loose rock had already fallen. There seemed very little danger of more slides.

"Thank goodness," she murmured to herself as she navigated over the rough tumble of stone. But as she moved further over the mound she could see that the pile now covered much more of the path. It was a long way to the other side, and she saw no sign of timbers ahead. However, there was a bend in the path, so she didn't give up hope. When she got past the bend she could see that there was plenty of timber. Apparently the weight of the stones had collapsed the path, which had caused a further collapse above it. When the rock came down it had carried with it all of the shoring above. There were timbers strewn on both sides of a large chasm where the path was completely gone. There was no going back on this route.

Catherine was encouraged to see the pile of splintered timbers on her side of the gap. If I can just get down there without going over the edge, I should be able to find something that will work, she thought. She sat for a moment planning her route down to the timbers. She was getting to be quite an expert at rock-climbing. Rock crawling, that is, she smiled to herself as she began the descent on her bottom, sliding carefully down. It was only about seven or eight feet in vertical height to the bottom, but she thought ruefully of the trip back up, dragging a heavy timber with her.

There was, thankfully, a small clear space at the bottom of the slope, where she could stand and look over the available material. There was plenty of it; the choice she had to make was between something too light to carry Vincent's weight and too heavy for her to move over the rocks. She found what she was looking for almost at once. The timber fragment was three inches square at the large end, tapering to an inch or so at the other end. It was about nine feet long. She thought Vincent could make a usable crutch out of the piece; he could cut it off at either end until he got the length and thickness he desired. If not there were lots more to choose from, it would just require another trip over the rock pile.

She picked up the chosen fragment. It wasn't unmanageably heavy, just awkward to carry. Well, here we go, Cathy. Watch your step, for God's sake. She lifted the long section of wood to her shoulder and started the climb back to the top of the rocks. After about three wobbly steps, she dropped it off her shoulder.

"A good way to end up with a broken leg!" she said aloud.

The length of the piece made dragging it a much safer alternative. She never remembered quite how she managed to fall.

Chapter 6

She found herself suddenly face down among the rocks, her head lower than her feet, and pain lancing up her arm from her wrist. Dazed, she lay still, while waves of pain shot through her.

After a few seconds, she began to think again, and her first thought was, *God, what have I done! How will he ever get us home if I'm bunged up too? He doesn't need any more trouble.*

As she thought this, she realized that Vincent was calling.

"Catherine? Catherine! Answer me, please! Are you all right?"

She raised her head and gave an answer, albeit a weak and breathless one.

"Yes. Yes, I'm all right. Wait..."

Her head downward position on the rough slope made her breathless. She tried to raise herself, and gave a little scream as the extent of her injuries became more obvious.

"Ah-h-h-h!" Then, knowing he would have heard it, "I'm OK, I'll be there in a few minutes."

She turned herself over painfully, and managed to sit up.

"I'm coming, Vincent. Sit still!"

She raised herself stiffly to her feet. It seemed that she had injured a good many portions of her anatomy in the fall. She moved slowly and laboriously down the pile to the crutch-to-be, which had rolled down several feet below her. Carrying that burden had become a real difficulty, since among her injuries was a painful left wrist. With that hand curled protectively against her chest, she began to move again, hauling the beam fragment behind her with her good hand. There was one more rock mound to cross before she rejoined Vincent. To her exhausted and agonized sight it looked twenty feet tall, but she started grimly up the side. There was no choice. It had to be done. With one more reassuring call to Vincent, she began the climb.

By the time the job was done, she was at the very end of her endurance. She staggered over the last of the rocks, dropped the piece of wood, and followed it to the ground, where she subsided gracelessly into a huddled heap. Vincent was there at once, with a cool wet cloth to wipe her face. Gently he coaxed her head up so he could carefully clean the tear-tracked dust from her cheeks. Then he turned his attention to the rest of her.

"Catherine, tell me, where does it hurt? I see that your wrist is injured, is that right?"

She nodded, turning her face up of her own accord as she held her wrist out gingerly. "Uh-huh."

He took it very gently in his hands. "This is going to hurt. I'm going to check the bones."

She let her breath out explosively as he examined the wrist, and tears started in her eyes, but she didn't make a sound.

"I don't think it's broken, although I'm sure it feels like it is; it's only sprained. It's starting to swell, we'd better get it bound up."

He tore a long strip off the edge of one of the blankets, and bound the wrist securely. When that was done he turned his attention to her other injuries.

"Catherine, what's this?" He pulled aside her jacket and exposed a bloody smear that extended the whole length of her shirt from underarm to waist. "Oh! I must have cut myself. I didn't even feel it at the time; I guess I just hurt all over."

She paused for a moment, then raised her head to give a small wry smile and said, "I didn't notice it until you pointed it out. *Now it hurts.*"

"It must." Gravely, he pulled her jacket off her shoulder and began to unbutton her shirt.

"No, I can take care of it, Vincent!" Catherine pulled the unbuttoned top of her shirt together. *No more*

problems, please! her tired mind cried silently. *He doesn't need anything more to feel guilty about!* But of course she couldn't take care of it. She had only one hand, and she was so exhausted that she felt ready to pass out. Even as she spoke she knew he'd have to do it.

He sat back. "You look to me like you're right on the edge of unconsciousness. Did you hit your head? Are there any bruises?" His attention turned to her head. After examining it and checking her eyes, he was satisfied that her unsure grasp of consciousness was due to exhaustion, not a concussion. "I think you'd better let me take care of you, Catherine. Please, just let me help. I'll be very careful, but we must treat your injuries."

He returned to his task of unbuttoning her shirt, and she gave up her objection. She was just too tired. Under the shirt she was wearing only a tank top, which he lifted up without hesitation, exposing her breasts and a jagged cut running from the edge of her breast for about two inches diagonally down her right side.

"Oh, Catherine."

He was very much concentrated on the injury, so much so that Catherine found herself hoping that he wouldn't find this exposure of her body an occasion for guilt. He mopped the injury carefully with a wet cloth, and as he got a clear look at it he shook his head. "I'm afraid that this is going to require stitches."

He looked up at her with sympathy. "I'm sorry."

"It's OK. Just let me lie down. I...don't think I can sit up...much longer."

She was fighting a black cloud that kept descending over her field of vision.

"Of course. Here's the blanket. Lie down." She collapsed gratefully onto the blanket. Vincent helped her to turn on her left side, and she let herself grey out, trusting to Vincent to take care of her. In three minutes she was in a hazy half-sleep.

In spite of the pain of multiple scrapes and bruises, Vincent hitched himself along the ground to his



pack, where he removed the small first aid kit, then returned to Catherine, still half-crawling, half-sliding along the ground. The injury to his leg was going to be enough of a problem; he meant to keep off it until he had to use it. Catherine seemed to be asleep. *That's good*, he thought. *She won't feel everything I have to do. The stitches will wake her up, though.* He began to clean the wound.

He was not so concentrated on the injury as Catherine had thought. As he gently stroked the skin of her breast to clean the blood away he became aware of the softness of the skin under his hand. When he saw the nipple rise to a firm peak, stimulated by his stroking hand, he suddenly comprehended exactly where his thoughts had gone. His hand froze in horrified awareness. *Thank God she's asleep!* was his first thought, followed by an appalling one- *Does it make the offense less that she doesn't know about it?*

The parallel to the incident on the balcony that still haunted his memory was too close. Suddenly the whole enormous load of shame and guilt that he had ignored during this time of emergency fell on him with petrifying force. In his mind he was again looking through the balcony door at her half nude body, flushed under the influence of her sexual arousal. Once more he felt that irresistible rising tide of excitement flow through him, and to his horror his body also relapsed into those unforgettable moments. His penis rose to press painfully against the fabric of his jeans, while his hands still touched the skin of her breast, as soft as velvet and beautiful as a lily.

Even while he deplored with all his strength the emotions that tore through him, his hand lingered on that soft skin, that target of his most fevered dreams. Sweat rose on his brow as he struggled with himself, trying with all his strength for the will just to withdraw his hand. And his will, that instrument honed over years of self-control, won out; his hand fell back to his side, and as control returned slowly, he exhaled a long sigh of relief. But his trial was not over. The wound remained, and he must care for it. Muscles in his jaw knotted as he strove for a controlled return of his hand to her body. Slowly he resumed the cleaning of the wound, and as he did so a measure of distance from the sexual aspects of the task returned to him. Gratefully, he relaxed slightly and immersed himself in the job of sewing up her wound. Catherine had been oblivious during the moments of Vincent's inner ordeal, but the first piercing of the needle woke her to awareness of pain.

"Ow!" She jumped under the needle. Then as she came to full consciousness and realized what he was doing, "Oh...sorry...Ow!" She jumped again.

Vincent shook his head slightly, apparently immersed in the job before him.

"Just try to lie still if possible..." He looked up at her for a moment. "If not, I'll try to compensate." He smiled slightly, and returned to his job. His iron control had returned with a vengeance. He felt every prick of the needle as she did, and inside of him was a maelstrom of anguish at the pain she felt, but the job at hand must be done, and to sympathize too greatly was to magnify her discomfort.

So he was matter-of-fact, and she responded by trying her best to be the same. "OK. I'm trying..."

As the operation progressed, she held valiantly still, but when he looked up at her a moment later, two tears were rolling down her cheeks. "Almost done...one more...there!"

As she heard the words, her whole body relaxed. Her sigh of relief was more than matched by his. When the light bandage with which he covered the wound was in place he pulled her tank top down quickly and closed her shirt, buttoning it up carefully.

"Eight stitches. You were very... gallant."

His task finished, Vincent leaned back and looked at her soberly. "You are a brave woman, Catherine. I... admire your courage."

The words he longed to say were tightly reined back, but the tender longing look on his face was, to her eyes, enough to tell her that he adored her.

"Oh, Vincent..." She leaned forward slightly.

He leaned away immediately. The burden of guilt that he carried had become heavier in the last half-

hour. As he gazed at her, his longing more apparent than he realized, it occurred to him to wonder how long he could carry that burden. Soon...soon, he must lay it before her and accept the consequences. She had said there was nothing to forgive, but...nothing? A betrayal of her, and a betrayal of his own honor... nothing? How could he tell her? His shoulders slumped, and he looked away from her, toward the failing light in the cavern. Twilight was fast turning to night.

"You must rest now, you're injured and totally exhausted. I'll make a new bed; you must be as comfortable as I can make you. I'm apprehensive for you, Catherine. You have driven yourself past what is safe for you. Close your eyes and rest, while I make a bed and get us something to eat."

Without his conscious control his hand came up to touch her cheek gently, and was withdrawn quickly. "Rest."

She lay back on the blanket and closed her eyes, glad to rest without thinking any further. Vincent would take care of it, whatever it was. Her side and her wrist both ached abominably, but she slept almost immediately. The hours of unaccustomed physical labor and the tension of their fight for survival had indeed pushed her past safe limits.

She half-woke sometime later to find herself cradled in Vincent's arms, warm and safe, her aches dwindled to a dull discomfort. With a deep sigh she slid back into sleep.

Chapter 7

Father sighed deeply and shook his head, looking down at the litter of pens, books and notepaper on his desk top. A moment of silent contemplation helped to recover his considerably strained patience, and he began a second time.

"Now, Mouse, let us try again. *Why* did Vincent send you back alone? Did he say anything to you about the difficulty of finding your way? Did he give you any instructions about how to get back?"

"Uh-uh," Mouse looked up under his brows. "Said Catherine shouldn't be here. Said Mouse shouldn't be here. Said ..." His look became mischievous. Father had asked, hadn't he?

"Vincent was *mad*...Said Father shouldn't've sent us."

He grinned slyly. "Not mad at Mouse, though. Vincent knew Mouse could find his way. Easy! Been there once, just go back the same way!"

Mouse sat back, satisfied that he had explained everything necessary. Father took a breath to ask further questions, then he sighed and gave up. The boy was back safely, that was undeniable.

"Yes...well...that will do, Mouse. Go and ask William for something to eat."

When Mouse had disappeared, intent on William and muffins, Father sighed again, leaning back to stare into the gloom at the top of the chamber. He was chagrined that Mouse knew of Vincent's displeasure with him. Really! Couldn't Vincent keep their personal disagreements between the two of them? He still didn't know why Vincent had sent Mouse back alone, but at least he and Catherine were now together, and hopefully arriving at some agreement.

Now that he thought about it, perhaps Vincent had done the right thing. They certainly couldn't talk about their personal relationship in Mouse's presence; his curiosity was legend, as was his inability to identify a confidential matter as such. He turned ruefully back to his medical journal. There was no advantage in worrying about them. They would settle their differences or they wouldn't, whether he worried or not. But of course he would worry.

Sighing a third time, he began to read.

Catherine's eyes opened to late morning sunlight glancing from the rocks below to light their ledge with its reflected glow. She began to turn over, then stopped quickly with a strangled groan. *Is there a place*

that doesn't hurt? God! I'm not going to be able to get up! She tried it again, more slowly this time, and managed to turn to her other side. From this vantage she could see that Vincent was nowhere in sight. "Vincent? Where are you? ...Vincent? ...*Vincent!*" It took no time at all for panic to set in. She sat up then, heedless of discomfort. As she was trying painfully to scramble to her feet, he came out of the tunnel mouth that she had explored yesterday, and moved quickly to embrace her.

"I'm right here. I'm sorry, Catherine. You were sleeping so soundly, I thought I could retrieve your burnt-out torch before you woke up. It will make firewood on the journey. I'm very sorry that I frightened you." His arm was around her, holding her tenderly, his hand warm on her shoulder.

"No...no, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have panicked like that." She raised her head from his shoulder and looked up at him, her tear-stained face irresistibly close. To her absolute astonishment he kissed her cheek, the merest touch of his lips but held for a second, long enough for her to feel how warm they were, and how soft. Then he dropped his arm from around her and stepped back, leaving her staring at him, stunned.

He said quickly, "I've been busy while you slept, making my crutch from the timber that cost you such pain to retrieve. It was exactly right." He gestured with his free hand to the sturdy crutch under his right arm.

"Y-yes, uh,...that's good."

Was he going to ignore the fact that he had just kissed her?

"I hope you're feeling better? You look much more rested. There are some things to be done before we start our trip, and I think that you'll benefit from another hour of rest while we do them."

He didn't look at her while he spoke, busying himself with small tasks.

"The journey back to the hub is a long one, and for at least the first few hours we must move quickly. When we've retrieved more torches from the cache we'll have leisure to move more slowly." He paused



for a moment, seeming rather at a loss.

Then... "Will you have something to eat now? I'm afraid there isn't much variety, but what we have is nourishing and filling. We'll be tired of cheese and crackers before we've reached our journey's end, but we won't be hungry."

He paused again, began to speak, and then turned away without continuing.

He is going to ignore it... He had filled the space between them with talk in a most untypical manner. *He's embarrassed!* she realized with a soft inner smile. In spite of her disappointment that he wasn't going to acknowledge what he'd done, she was amused at his nervous outburst of conversation.

Vincent lowered himself to the floor with the help of the crutch and began to lay out their meal. His outer appearance was as usual, but his mind was roiling with emotion, desire, and guilt. *I can't do this! I can't keep my hands and my mouth from her, can't bear to see her looking up at me and not kiss her. What am I going to do?*

Unbidden there came to his mind the look of her bare breast, the feel of her satin skin under his hand. When sight of her breast's tip rising under his touch came forcefully before his mind's eye, he dropped the box he was holding and cradled his face in his hands. Holding his head, he rocked himself slightly back and forth in a spasm of guilty desire.

"Vincent?" Catherine knelt beside him. "What is it?"

He stopped suddenly and raised his head. "Nothing...nothing...I'm all right"

He resumed his preparations for the meal without any further outward sign of his inner turmoil. But inside him, in the place where his guilt and pain resided, a decision was made. He would tell her soon, very soon, of his betrayal of her trust and his own honor.

Catherine knew the signs; whatever it was that bothered him, he wasn't going to tell her, so she changed the subject.

"Why did you let me sleep so long?" She scanned the angle of the sunlight lancing into the cavern.

"It must be nearly noon! We should have gotten an early start, shouldn't we?"

"No. Your rest, and mine also, were more important than an early start. It makes no real difference, day and night are the same where we're going. I think we're going to have enough food to last, and that would be the only reason for haste."

Catherine stretched as much as her various injuries would let her, and sat back down in her blankets, cautious of her bandaged wrist.

"I must admit that the sleep did me good. I feel much better. I guess the wrist isn't broken, it hurts much less this morning."

Vincent looked up from his food preparation.

"I found something in the bottom of the pack that William must have meant for a surprise." As he spoke he removed a covered pan from the tiny fire. He took the top off, and an amazing, delicious aroma greeted her nostrils.

"*Coffee?* Oh William, I'm forever in your debt!" She reached heedlessly, stretching to reach the cup that Vincent held out, but in mid-reach she crumpled with a strangled cry.

After a moment's white-faced endurance she spoke: "... Wow. I won't forget the stitches again!!" And she reached more slowly for the cup which Vincent's dexterity had rescued in midair without spilling a drop.

"There isn't much coffee, but I thought that this was the time."

Vincent kept his head down, busy with food preparation.

Catherine savored her coffee, holding it close to her face even when she wasn't sipping to enjoy the aroma.

"I kept thinking I smelled coffee, but I was sure it was just a wishful delusion! When we get back, I'm going to buy William a present. What do you think? A whole wheel of the best cheese, or a twenty five pound turkey? No, that won't feed everyone. Hm-m. Maybe twenty five pounds of coffee? No....it wouldn't keep...." She huddled over her coffee, deep in thought.

Vincent looked up from closing the second pack.

"We're ready."

"OK. Let me swallow this." She grinned at him as she drank the last drops of coffee. "This will keep me going. Thanks to William, and thanks to you. Today certainly was the right time to produce it."

She got up and slid into her pack, stashing her cup in the top, then stood beside Vincent, prepared to be his prop while he levered himself to his feet. When he had gotten himself upright he raised his eyes to hers.

"There. I'm ready. Are you?"

As she met his eyes she realized something. It was the first time today that he'd looked directly at her. She searched his face, and when he tried to look away she grasped his chin to hold his gaze.

"Vincent? What is it?"

Wordlessly he tried to turn away, but her hand on his chin held him.

"What is it? Are you all right?"

"No." His shoulders slumped, but he didn't try again to turn away.

"I have...I need to...talk; but not now. We should go."

"Now! Tell me."

"Please, Catherine. I will talk about it, but give me this day to think it out. Please?"

She couldn't refuse his plea. "All right. Tonight?"

"Yes."

"OK." She dropped her hand from his face with a soft pat of his cheek, hesitated, still holding his gaze, and then stood up on her toes and kissed his cheek swiftly. He stood absolutely still, his eyes closed,



for a long moment, then opened them and turned away without a word.

They started off; Vincent seemed to be moving quite easily with his crutch, although she was sure that his leg was still hurting. It was, but it was running a poor second to the pain in his mind.

As they walked, Catherine recognized that they were using the same path that she had taken to get water.

"Are we going back by the mineral spring, Vincent?"

"Yes, it's on our way. We'll refill our water bottles there."

He walked on for a few seconds, then stopped and turned to look at her.

"You could use another soak in the spring, couldn't you? And so could I. We'll stop there to bathe. I believe that the time lost will be compensated for by the beneficial effects of the spring. I should have thought of it sooner."

He turned and continued to walk. Catherine was slow to start. He mind was totally engaged with what he had just said. "...we'll stop there to bathe." *And just how does he plan to do that?* She gave herself a little shake and skipped a few steps to catch up with him. *I guess we'll find out.* Vincent came from the Tunnel culture, where people often bathed together in the community pools. Nudity wasn't usually practiced, but the attitude was casual. One turned one's back as others dressed, but it wasn't required, it was only a matter of courteous behavior, and when climbing in and out of pools one wore one's towel until there was danger of wetting it, but to most tunnel residents it just wasn't a matter of great importance. Sometimes it wasn't convenient to cover up, and modesty bowed to necessity on occasion.

On this occasion, nudity would be necessary. The clothes they were wearing were their only clothes, and wet clothing was not an option in the chill of the tunnels. As she thought about it a little more, Catherine was apprehensive that Vincent would find this very difficult. He didn't seem concerned about it. When they reached the pool, he propped the torch very close to the edge of the pool, and laid matches carefully beside it. He laid out the one towel that they had on the other side of the little beach and gestured toward it.

"Catherine, this is for you to use. Will you be able to undress and enter the pool in the dark, or shall I wait to put out the torch?" Catherine wished very much to say that she could do it in the dark, but her stiffened body and injured wrist might make that difficult.

"I'd really rather have the light, I'm afraid I'm not in such great shape to be trusting myself in the dark," she said apologetically.

"Yes, of course. I should have realized. All right, go ahead."

He turned his back before he spoke again.

"Get into the water as quickly as you can, the air is cold."

The heavily mineral laden water was very warm, almost hot, and when Catherine was thankfully submerged in it she could see her body only vaguely in the fitful light of the torch. She laid back, enjoying at the comforting feel of the water, and looked up at the sparkling beauty of the cavern's ceiling.

"I'm going to put out the torch now. Is that all right with you?" "Any time. I'm so comfortable, I think I'll go to sleep again."

"Do that. The combination of rest and the hot spring will be very beneficial. For me too. I'm looking forward to it."

The torch went out, and she heard the rustle of Vincent getting out of his clothes. The water surged and lapped nearly over her chin as he entered it beside her. When he was settled in the hot water he sighed heavily.

"That feels good."

As she stretched her body out, finding a comfortable position for sleep, Catherine smiled to herself. He had found a way to get them undressed and into the water without embarrassment. He always found

a way to surprise her. Then he surprised her again as she felt his hand touch her arm, then run down it to clasp her hand.

“Rest now, Catherine. Rest.”

Hand in hand, they slept.

Chapter 8

When she woke she had no idea how much time had passed. “Vincent?” she said, on the merest breath of sound.

“Yes, I’m awake.”

“Have I been sleeping long?”

“About two hours.”

“Did you sleep?”

“Yes, I woke just a few minutes ago.”

She waited for him to suggest that they leave the pool, but he said nothing further, so she asked, “Are we going to get out now?”

While they rested, the guilty knowledge which was eating him up had claimed Vincent’s entire attention; so much so that their mutual nakedness and Catherine’s nearness hadn’t caused a problem for him; his total concentration had been focused on the problem of how to tell her, and how to reconcile his own feelings of agonized guilt. He didn’t answer her question directly.

He said instead, “I want to talk about what happened now, if that’s your wish also.”

There was no question in her mind of what he meant. So, he was ready to talk at last, and he preferred to do so in the darkness.

Yes, I want to talk about it too. Whenever you’re ready, Vincent.”

There was a pause so long that she wondered if he had changed his mind, but at last he began to talk.

“I...I could try to express to you my shame and my sorrow at what I’ve done, and perhaps I should do so for my conscience’ sake, but I think you know, and I will spare you and myself that much. You do



know how sorry I am.”

It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes.” She stopped there. It was his time to talk.

“I think that the way to go about this is to tell you what happened that night.”

There was a pause, and Catherine wished that she could see his face. But that probably was the reason why he had chosen this time and place to talk. It would be easier for him if he didn’t have to look at her, or know that she was looking at him. While she mused he moved restlessly, dropping her hand, and began again.

“I’m going to report it as nearly as I can.” Another pause. When he began again his voice was a half-whisper.

“... When I came to your balcony what I was feeling from you was...a sort of languorous...well-being. I was...glad that you were feeling so contented and happy. ...But as I reached the door...the ...sexual... content of what you were feeling broke over me like a tidal wave.”

He stopped for a moment, then said in a different, harder tone of voice, “I don’t want you to think that anything I say is an attempt to excuse myself for what I did. There is no excuse....none. I’m well aware of that. I’m reporting what happened.”

There was another long pause before he resumed his narrative, his voice again the soft half-whisper.

“When I realized what you...what was happening, I turned to leave immediately. But...I can’t explain what happened, Catherine. I can’t. Without meaning to, without *wanting* to, I turned back. And when I saw you...my God, Catherine, I’m only...human...” he found the phrase grimly humorous; she could hear the irony in his voice.

When he spoke again, his voice had changed; it was colder, harder again.

“There is no excuse. I could have turned and left the balcony. I didn’t. That’s the fact. I stood there, aware of what I was doing to myself, and to you. I stood there and watched you.”

There was silence for a moment, and when he went on his voice was husky with emotion.

“...And...and...oh Catherine, I *d o n ’t* want to tell you this...!

“I watched your hands...touching that lovely body, and I felt them...on *me*. On my body. I *felt* them!



And when your hands moved lower on your body...they did on mine also, and...and it was the most wonderful...the most...exciting... and I couldn't stop, I *couldn't* stop... it... it...went all the way."

The water lapped gently against her as his massive tension resolved itself in random, restless movement while he continued to excoriate himself in a convulsion of guilt.

"I took my pleasure...my selfish, solitary pleasure...from spying on your lovely, lovely body. Nothing, *nothing* can excuse that."

He was absolutely still then. Catherine thought he must be holding his breath. When she answered she spoke from the heart, without preparation.

"Vincent, I love you. My body is yours. You have always had my permission to look at it, to touch it, to take your pleasure from it, in any way whatever. I only wish that it *had* been my hands touching you. I long to do that, I want you so much. I am yours, Vincent, body and soul, now and forever."

Silence. Then a long shaky sigh and he spoke brokenly.

"...What am I...what have I ever been...or done, that I should hear this from you...the most generous, the most loving of hearts...how can I be worthy...of such love..."

There was another silence while he regained control of his emotion. Then he took a long, shuddering breath.

"...What I did was wrong, Catherine. I'll be sorry for the rest of my life that it happened. But I am forever in your debt for your forgiveness, forever astonished at your generous heart. If you can forgive me, perhaps someday I will be able to forgive myself...."

"Vincent, my dearest ... there was nothing for me to forgive. And I see nothing for you to forgive yourself for. What happened to you was a result of your love for me, a love that is my proudest, most precious possession. You've always known that I love you; did you think that your excitement at seeing my body could make me love you less? How could I be anything but happy that you find me desirable?"

He didn't answer immediately. When he spoke again, his voice was choked, tears very close to the surface again.

"I...you are so magnificent...I am humbled by your generosity, and your love..." His voice closed off entirely.

Catherine thought that he had had all of this that he could take.

She waited a few moments, then said gently, "I think we should be going. Don't you think that we should get out of the water?"

He said nothing for a second or two, and then his voice came softly out of the dark; "Yes....yes, we should, we must be going."

And she knew that she had been right to end it. She heard him rise out of the water, heard the water sluicing off as he stripped his body with his fingers. In a few moments he was dressed. She heard the match strike, and light bloomed from the torch.

He stood with his back to her as she toweled herself and dressed quickly.

"All right, I'm dressed."

He turned and watched her as she bent over and rubbed her head vigorously with the towel.

"There, that's as good as it's going to get." She handed him the towel. "Dry your hair, Vincent, it's still dripping. I'm sorry, I'm afraid the towel is pretty damp."

She smiled at him, and pulled a comb out of her pocket.

"I wonder if I'll ever get this mess straightened out?" She began to pull the comb through her tangled hair.

Vincent took it, rubbed his head quickly, and tucked one end of the towel into the top of his pack, spreading the rest out over the pack. He walked a little upstream from where they had lain, bent to

the edge of the water and filled the water bottles. When the bottles were full, and the packs were shouldered, Vincent turned to look at her.

"Thank you, Catherine." She knew that he meant to thank her for ending the difficult conversation. Then he went on, "and I must thank you again for your generous words. I know that you meant them in the kindest possible way, and I am much comforted by them."

She put her hand on his arm as he began to turn away from her. "Kindest way? Vincent, what am I going to do with you? Are you now trying to convince yourself that I didn't mean them literally?"

He turned back to her and she saw his eyes drop to her mouth and rest there for a moment. He looked up at her then, his eyes intense, with a longing look that broke her heart.

"No." he answered, his voice very low, "I know that you meant your words... how could I not know? How can I..." He stopped and turned away without finishing, took her hand and started off down the tunnel, pulling her gently along with him.

They walked for several minutes before he spoke again, looking into the dark ahead.

"Our task now is to get out of here. When we're safely at home we will talk again."

Chapter 9

It took them five days. Vincent's leg was much improved by the soak in the mineral spring, and it continued to improve steadily over the rest of the journey. His body's ability to heal was a continuing wonder to Catherine. But Vincent's injury was not a minor one, and on the evening of their first day's travel, his weariness and pain showed in his face.

Catherine too was weary, but her heart went out to him; it was so unusual for him to show any sign of fatigue. She finished the last of her chores and turned to look at him. His chores were finished also; he was sitting with his back against the tunnel wall, his hands in his lap, his head leaning against the wall, his eyes closed.

"Vincent?" He turned his head to look at her. "Mmhm?"

"You're exhausted. Let's make this a long stop. We don't need to get going after eight hours; we can choose our own time."

He rolled his head back and forth against the wall.

"We need to get to the torches. And we need to think also about conserving food."

He sat up straighter. "You're right, I'm tired. The crutch is the only thing that's made this day's trek possible. We must just put up with a certain amount of discomfort in order to follow our plan.

"But Catherine, you're very tired also. My injury will continue to improve with every day; however, I'm afraid that in your case, infection is very likely. You may be glad before the trip is over that we made good time before you began to feel worse."

He stopped for a moment. "Perhaps I shouldn't have said that. I don't want to alarm you."

She smiled. "Come on, Vincent. We're in this together, and I can certainly bear the truth. You should know that by now."

His glance touched her tenderly. "I do. I am somewhat concerned about your injury, though. Father will be very upset when he finds out that there was no disinfectant in my first aid kit. I can't remember the last time I used the kit. I must have used the disinfectant and forgotten to replenish it years ago."

He shook his head with a small wry smile. "Father won't forgive that easily! I'll get a lecture."

At the mention of Father's name, Catherine thought of something that she must tell Vincent.

"Father was very good to me when I came Below looking for you." She looked down at her hands for a moment, reluctant to relate what she had done..

"Vincent...I told him... what had happened that night. I couldn't see any other way to make him understand how serious the problem was. And I had to get to you. I had to!"

He didn't look at her, examining his own hands with some attention. "I see." He said nothing more for a moment, then looked up at her. "Yes, you had to tell him. I understand."

"Do you? I know you wouldn't have wanted him to know."

She reached over and put her hand over his. "I'm so sorry, Vincent. I just didn't think...I should have, but I was so intent on finding you. I would have found it very hard to lie to him; it just seemed the right thing to do. And he understood right away that it was a serious matter. He didn't hesitate for a moment. He agreed that I had to find you, and arranged for the trip."

"He would understand. Father is at his very best when faced with a problem that requires decisive action. I..." He hesitated, looking down at her hand, still covering his. "...You're right, I would have preferred that he not know. It's a shameful thing that I did."

"I'm glad you did it." Vincent's head jerked up, and he looked at her with amazement. "What?"

"Well, look where it's brought us, Vincent."

"What? I don't see..."

She smiled tenderly at him and continued softly, "You kissed me, Vincent. Did you think that I'd forgotten that? And I've told you what I've longed to tell you for all the time I've known you. That I love you and want you...so much."

"Catherine...don't..." He turned away, tension in every line of his body.

She knew at once what he was doing and she took immediate steps to correct the situation.

"Vincent, don't you do this! Don't you dare try to go back to the way things were before." She sat up straight, exasperation erasing the exhaustion that she felt. "I will not allow it! I did not go through all that we've been through to go back to square one!" She tugged at his sleeve. "Look at me!" When he turned back to her, she was astonished to see a small smile on his face.

"Are we going to have another battle? If so, perhaps you should remember that I'm no longer tied by the leg."

She couldn't help grinning back. "Are you threatening me? Well, if this battle ends that way the last one did, I'm all for it. Come ahead!" Her fists went up.

"Oh, Catherine, I don't want to battle with you. I want to....to have peace between us." His hands came out to take her fists, and he carefully straightened each finger.

Her voice changed, was soft and throaty. "I want to have love between us." She looked up at him, her lips parted, her eyes soft with her feeling for him.

Vincent was very tired, and discouraged by how hard the day had been for him. When he looked down at the love shining from Catherine's eyes, it seemed that to touch the moist softness of that mouth could heal all the ills there were. He knew now how her mouth felt, how it tasted, knew the healing to his soul in her kiss; how could he not do it? He stared down at her, and without his conscious will his head slowly came down until his mouth covered hers, gently, tenderly. Her arms came up around his shoulders, and his circled her, drawing her against him. His tongue moved over her lips with velvety smoothness, touching softly in the corners of her mouth, reaching farther in to slide over her teeth.

And she melted into him, moaning into the kiss. His mouth left hers then to slide over her face, to touch lightly on her eyes, her nose, then moved slowly down her neck to the hollow of her throat.

His voice shook as he murmured, "Oh Catherine, my love, my love..." His mouth moved up to her ear, and she felt his tongue come out to taste the soft skin under it.

She shivered and moaned, her hands coming to his head to hold him where he was. "I love this... I love you, kiss me..."

The sound of her voice seemed to bring him partially out of his daze of desire. He raised his head and

looked into her eyes, a long look that told her without words of his adoration. His mouth came to hers once more, a soft kiss held just for a moment, then his arms dropped and he straightened, putting his head back against the tunnel wall.

“Catherine...” His voice was a hoarse half whisper. “I...I can’t...I’m unable to resist you. When you look up at me like that, I’m lost. I don’t know what I’m going to do...”

“Well...you could just relax and enjoy it?” She looked up at him, a spark of humor in her eyes. “You do enjoy it, don’t you?”

It wasn’t a question; she knew how he felt. It was plain to see in his panting breath, his hoarse voice, his trembling hands, now clasped tightly together in his lap. At that he turned his head enough to look at her out of the corner of his eye.

“It is...beyond belief. Kissing you is...it’s heaven, Catherine. But I have no right...”

“Did you notice me struggling? Did I cry out and fight you?” She smiled tenderly at him. “...Or did I just sink into your kiss, loving it so much...”

He rolled his head back and forth against the wall again. “It can only lead to... pain.”

“No. It can lead to love, Vincent. It can lead us to such happiness...such contentment.”

He was silent. She reached to put her hand on his cheek, and before he could think about it he had turned his head to kiss her palm. Then he took her hand from his cheek to hold it in his, shaking his head.

“Catherine, I must not do this. But I cannot resist you; please, help me.”

He didn’t turn away from her this time, he looked down at her steadily, and then he began to talk; for the first time he talked freely, telling her of his feelings about her coming to him as his mate.

“This is not for us. I have no business to do this, and I must not! You must see that I am no fit mate for you. *Look* at me, Catherine! How can you *think* of...of mating...with me!”

His voice broke a little on that sentence; and Catherine opened her mouth to answer it; but he put his finger to her lips and she subsided. He paused, regaining his composure, then continued.

“We must remain dear and loving friends, nothing more. I must learn to curb my feelings for you, to set you free. This life of mine is not for you! Do you think I could condemn you to my life? Not in this world. There is nothing for you here, in the tunnels.

“The whole world is your playground, Catherine. You have youth, beauty, intelligence, a loving heart. There is nothing you cannot accomplish, nothing! And you have money, to make anything you wish a possibility. You have every advantage that life can give. Do you think that I could...”

His eyes dropped from hers as his voice choked, but he went doggedly on: “That I could sentence you to the life underground? When the whole world is yours for the asking? What kind of love would do that to you? What kind of love...”

He could speak no longer. Grief overwhelmed him at what he knew he must give up. He turned himself away from her so that all she could see was his bowed head and shaking shoulders, as he finally lost the battle with tears.

Catherine didn’t know what to do. If she tried to hold him now, she thought it would only intensify his grief. So she put a hand on his shaking shoulder, and waited for the storm to pass over him. It took only a few minutes. He quieted, and in a couple of minutes more he straightened. Without turning, he began to apologize.

“I’m sorry Catherine. You don’t need this, to see me...”

“Stop!” She wasn’t about to let him apologize for his grief. “Just stop that, Vincent. If you will turn around here and look at me again, I’m going to tell you my side. Turn around.”

He did as she asked, slowly. His face showed no trace of the tears just past, but he looked tragic.

Catherine was torn by the sadness in his eyes; she wanted with all her heart to hold him in her arms. But this was not the time. She mustered all of her inner concentration and began to speak with slow thoughtfulness.

"What you say about me is true. I do have, I have had, all the advantages. I can do pretty much anything that I want to, outside of things like private jets and chateaus in France. My money doesn't stretch to that kind of expenditure. But I could do pretty much anything I want.

"But there's a problem with that, Vincent. What I want...is you. I could travel the world, I could buy things that please me. But ... those things would not satisfy me. I would only think of you.

"Do you think that this feeling that I have for you is temporary? Or shallow? Examine your own feelings, Vincent, and then you will know what mine are. This isn't going to change. I will love you, and want you, only you, until my dying day. If you reject my love, I will spend my life alone. The very thought of any other man touching me makes me shudder with disgust. If it isn't you, it will be nobody, for the rest of my life. I want only you.

"If we were to go back to our 'loving friendship', as you call it, our beautiful love would wither and dry. You can see that as well as I. We will have to be careful not to touch each other. We will have to be careful even about looking at each other. When I look at you, I want you, and I know you feel the same. I see your desire for me in your eyes, and it excites me. You see that in my eyes, and it excites you. So, we mustn't look at each other.

"We'll have to be careful what we read to each other. No love poems, no romantic novels. No Jane Eyre, no Pride and Prejudice, no Wuthering Heights. And we shouldn't see each other too often. It's very difficult for me to keep from touching you, and I know you feel the same way. So we should keep apart as much as possible.

Is this your idea of a future for our love? It isn't mine. The truth is that we want each other. And without that ultimate intimacy, the only alternative is to break it off entirely. Is that what you have in mind? Because I tell you in all seriousness, Vincent, I think I will die. Not right away, of course. I'll continue on for a while, but the spark, the will to continue, will have gone. I think that eventually I'd give up my job, just hole up in my apartment and wait for something to give me relief from my grief. I'll die eventually, if that's the only way to get that relief."

"No!" His arms went around her, and he pulled her to him frantically. "No! None of those things will happen. We will find a way. Oh, Catherine, I promise you that we will find a way."

She felt his heart pounding next to hers, and his lips on her hair. She raised her face, hoping for another kiss, but it was not to be.

He looked down at her with a crooked smile, and touched her mouth lightly with a trembling finger.

"I want it too, so much, but we will wait."

She sat up straight. "Does that mean that I can hope? That someday we will...?"

He raised his shoulders in a small shrug. "Catherine, I don't know how to answer that. I only know that we must talk about this further. But I don't see how we can avoid the dreadful consequences that you have outlined, without taking some steps...toward love."

"Oh Vincent!" Her hands came up to frame his face, and she looked up hopefully once more.

Catherine thought there was a touch of satisfaction in his face, and pride at her desire for his kiss, but he said with his small smile, "Rest now, Catherine. We have a long journey ahead."

He got up, moving away from her clinging hand, and began to unroll their blankets. After a few moments, he stopped what he was doing and turned to her again.

"Catherine, while we are traveling, I ask that we...keep apart. This journey is going to be hard on both of us, and we.../...can't shoulder the additional... tension...of...of...lovemaking. It's too hard for me to stop...please, Catherine, I want...us to talk more about this, to make a decision when we are rested

and ...not in isolation from the world. Is that acceptable to you?"

Catherine sighed and resigned herself with grace.

"Yes, Vincent, that's acceptable. I know that we'll need all of our strength just to get home. Yes, it's all right with me."

And so they continued on their journey as dear friends. But neither forgot the delight to be found in the other's arms. Catherine's body healed, but not at the rate that his did. Her exhaustion was exacerbated when the cut on her side became infected as Vincent had feared, in spite of his painstaking care of it. Their journey was slowed by her inability to walk for a full day; Vincent's time sense knew how long they walked, but Catherine felt that the days were endless, so she never knew that he had cut them short.

By the end of the third day, she was beginning to run a fever. Vincent gave a great sigh of relief when they came in sight of the first pipes, on the morning of the fifth day. "Sit down here, Catherine. I'm going to call for help."

He made a place for her to sit with his cloak under her and his pack for a backrest, and turned to tap urgently on the pipes. When he had finished the message, Catherine began wearily to regain her feet, but Vincent stopped her, pressing her back down on the cloak.

"Just sit there. The relief party will bring a stretcher."

His hand caressed her hair briefly before he straightened. Catherine was indignant.

"Vincent! I am not going to be brought home on a stretcher! I've made it this far, I can certainly walk the rest of the way!"

Vincent shook his head.

"You cannot walk. You have been extraordinarily valiant throughout this whole trial, but you will go home on a stretcher. That's the way it is going to be, Catherine. I would have been carrying you for the last day, if it hadn't been for this..." He lifted his crutch.

"Brave as you are and gallant as you have been, you will agree to do this...for me." The last two words



were spoken with immense tenderness.

She had been ready to fight, but those words made it impossible for her to argue any longer. And in truth, she was more than happy to relinquish all control to him, and to ride home. Getting to her feet one more time had loomed in front of her as an insurmountable task.

"OK. I'll..." Her words were interrupted by the chatter of the pipes. Vincent tilted his head to listen to the message, and a small smile crossed his face when it was through.

"Father wants to know the extent of your injuries, and if I'm all right."

He began to tap rapidly in reply. When he finished, he came and let himself down beside her.

"What did you tell him?"

"I said that you were totally exhausted and had an infected cut on your side, and that I had hurt my leg, but that it was well on the way to recovery. He will worry about both of us until he sees for himself that we are all right, but that can't be helped. He worries. Now rest, Catherine, we have perhaps three hours before our rescuers arrive."

Chapter 10

Father was predictably anxious to get them both on the examination table. Vincent insisted that he examine Catherine first, declaring that his own injury was mostly healed. Stretcher and all, Catherine was placed on the table.

"Well, Catherine, it seems that you had more of an adventure than you ever thought you would."

Father smiled down at her as he lifted her injured wrist.

"Perhaps you will begin the story of what happened to the two of you, while I finish what I need to do here. ...Hm, this wrist appears to have recovered from what happened to it very well. Does this hurt?" He flexed the wrist.

"It's a little uncomfortable, but nothing like it was."

"Then I think we can count that injury as pretty much past. Sit up now, I'll look at the cut on your side."



Vincent?”

Vincent obliged by turning his back, while Father lifted her undershirt to expose the cut. “Good heavens, Vincent, you didn’t tell me it was so bad. You’ve taken a lot of stitches here to close it.”

“I believe eight.”

“And Catherine was conscious while you did this?”

“For every stitch. And she never made a sound.”

“Catherine, brava! But it is now indeed infected. I think I may have to put a drain in it; otherwise it’ll continue to become more uncomfortable until the antibiotics can reduce the infection. But this time there’ll be a local anesthetic, and you won’t need to be so stoic.”

As he worked, he congratulated Vincent on the professional job he’d done in closing the wound.

“If you’d had some disinfectant, it would have been a perfect job. What happened to the disinfectant that should have been in your first aid kit?”

“I don’t know, Father. I must have used it and forgotten to replace it. It would have been years ago, I can’t remember the last time I used the kit.”

Father turned to peer at Vincent’s back over the top of his glasses. When he replied, his voice was stern.

“You will see to it that you replenish that kit with everything required, at the first possible moment. I am *astonished* at you, Vincent.”

Then he turned back to Catherine.

“Well, the infection doesn’t seem to be deep. I think a few days on an antibiotic will see you as good as new. Here it is; take it and then you can rest.”

As he spoke he handed her the pill and a glass of water. When she had swallowed the medication, he replaced her clothing, and she slid gratefully back down on the stretcher. Now that they were home the anxiety of the trip fell away, and her exhaustion and fever took precedence.

“Thank you, Father.”

“Look at this, she’s nearly asleep. I’m going to let her rest before we put in the drain. We’ll see how the wound is in the morning, perhaps it won’t be necessary.”

Catherine wasn’t entirely asleep. She raised her head.

“Father, could you ask Peter to tell Joe that I’m all right, and I’ll explain when I get back?”

“Go to sleep, Catherine, it’s all taken care of. Peter let Joe know last weekend that you had an emergency and you might not be back for a few days.”

Father pressed her head back down. “It’s all right. Sleep now.”

He called in the rescuers, waiting in the tunnel to make sure that their charges were all right.

“Will you boys please just pick her up with the stretcher, and deposit her in the guest bedroom? I don’t think you’ll need a sleeping pill, Catherine.”

He smiled down at her, and smoothed the hair back from her forehead. With a drowsy “Thanks”, and a warm but sleepy glance and smile at Vincent, who said softly, “Good night, Catherine”, she was gone.

“Now, Vincent, if you’ll just get up on this table, we’ll take a look at that leg.” Vincent sat on the table, his legs stretched out, while Father pulled up his pant leg.

“Great heavens, Vincent! How on earth did this happen?” As he removed the boot, exclaiming again at the extent of the damage, Vincent explained to him what had happened, and how Catherine had rescued him from his imprisonment.

“You are extraordinarily lucky; you could have lost your leg, but there seems to be no permanent damage. If it had been anyone else, I think they would not have been so fortunate. Your powers of healing are indeed miraculous, Vincent. I can see nothing further that I can do for you; it’s a matter of

time until the bruised tissue heals.”

“And I may just sleep until that happens; I feel as though I could sleep for a week!” Vincent shuddered as he rose from the table.

“I was so frightened, Father, for Catherine. When I found that I was solidly pinned, I thought I might have to send her back alone through the tunnels, and I knew that it would be very, very lucky if she found her way. But she was magnificent. She worked like a navvy to assemble all that was needed to set me free. And then I worried that she had driven herself past the safe edge of exhaustion. She saved us both, Father, at great cost to herself.”

He reached for his crutch and started for the door.

“We’ll tell you the whole story when we’re both rested. All right?”

“Yes, of course, my son. Go to bed. You too are exhausted.”

When Vincent had gone and Father was alone, he sat down heavily. *Oh lord, it was a very close thing.* He bowed his head over his desk and shed a few difficult tears.

As it turned out, Catherine didn’t need a drain in the wound after all; the antibiotics seemed to be taking firm hold. When she returned to see Father after fourteen hours of sleep, (“In a comfortable bed! It was miraculous!”) and a long hot bath, his examination showed a significant reduction in the swelling and redness.

“Vincent could have been a very fine doctor,” Father said, as he admired again his son’s handiwork. “I don’t believe I could have done this as well.” As he spoke he handed Catherine a pill and a glass of water.

“Wow, that’s praise indeed. I’ll tell him you said so.” Catherine grinned at him as she lifted the glass to her mouth.

Father looked a little disconcerted. “Well, I said it, I can’t deny that. And in truth he deserves it. It’s a very professional job.”

“Thank you, Father.” Vincent’s voice came from outside the doorway. “May I come in?”

“In just a moment.” Father smoothed Catherine’s nightdress back over her shoulder and helped her into the sleeve of her robe.

“Now, son.”

“Is the patient rested and recovering?” Vincent smiled tenderly down at Catherine.



"The patient slept for fourteen hours." She smiled back. "She should certainly be rested, and Father says she's recovering nicely, thank you."

"I didn't match your record, but I also slept for many hours."

"And you're walking without the crutch! I was beginning to think it had grown to you. I'm going to miss it."

"Since I don't have to look forward to a full day of walking, I thought I could dispense with it, before it did indeed grow into me."

He stepped back to give her room to descend from the table.

"May I escort you back to your chamber, milady?"

"You may, sir." She turned back to Father before they left the room. "Thank you, Father, for your help, and for the help you gave me when I came Below."

"All's well that ends well. I'm very glad to see you both on your feet, and getting stronger."

As they approached her chamber, Catherine said, "I think it's time I got dressed. I don't want to appear in the dining room in this, and I'm *hungry*!"

"I believe lunch is still being served. I'll wait outside for you, and we'll see if William has anything to eat beside cheese and cracker crumbs."

She giggled. "I'll be out in a sec."

As they entered the dining chamber, they were besieged by well-wishers. "So glad you're OK." "We were worried about you." "Gosh, you're lucky to be here at all." and many more good wishes and expressions of happiness at their return.

"Our thanks to all of you." Vincent spoke to everyone, looking around at the crowd about them.

"We came for some lunch. Anything but cheese and crackers, William!"

"But I'll bet you were glad to have them when you were so far from the dining chamber, weren't you?" William's face was bright with laughter.

"We certainly were! William, I promise I'll never say again that you've packed too much." Vincent put his arm around the big cook, hugging him heartily.

"You saved us from a very hungry march home!"

"It always pays to have a little bit extra." William smiled complacently. He felt that he had had a large part in getting them home safely.

Catherine could wait no longer. "What's for lunch, William, I'm starved!"

"Chicken stew, and fresh rolls, and for you Catherine, coffee!"

That reminded Catherine of the coffee discovered at the bottom of her pack.

"William, you'll never know how welcome the little present of coffee that you stowed in my pack was. It probably single-handedly saved my life. I'll be forever in your debt."

"Oh, you found my little surprise, did you? I thought it might be welcome." He chuckled.

"You'll never know! I was feeling pretty worn down, and suddenly, I smelled coffee. I thought I was hallucinating!"

"She's telling the literal truth. She told me she thought it was a delusion." Vincent said.

William laughed heartily. "Well, I guess it was successful, then."

Lunch was eaten to the accompaniment of more good wishes and congratulations on their safe return.

After they had eaten their fill, while Catherine was still savoring her coffee, Vincent took advantage of a temporary absence of well-wishers to say, "I think we've got some...unfinished business to settle between us, Catherine. Would you care to walk with me to a place where we won't be disturbed?"

She was astonished, but not so astonished that she would let this opportunity pass.

"Lead on. I'll follow you anywhere."

He looked down at her with smiling eyes. "That's quite a statement."

"It's true, though. Anywhere."

His face sobered, and he said in a different, more tender voice. "I hope that neither of us will regret your following me this time."

"I don't think we will, Vincent."

He took her hand, and they left the dining room that way, hand in hand, causing a murmur of speculation among those left behind.

Chapter 11

"Vincent, where are we going? Wasn't that last turn the one that leads to your chamber?"

"I said a place where we won't be disturbed. Do you think that my chamber is such a place?"

Catherine smiled up at him. "Gosh, no. I'd say the average length of uninterrupted time in your chamber is... oh, ten minutes?"

"That's about it. This is a bit of a longer walk, but I can just about guarantee that our privacy will be maintained."

She smiled. "And for what reason do we need privacy, pray tell?"

He didn't look at her, but he was smiling also. "I think we need to...talk."

She stopped, taking his arm to stop him too.

"Vincent, you're getting my hopes up. Just exactly what does all of this innuendo mean?"

He took her shoulders in his hands, looking down into her eyes.

"I want to tell you how I feel, and ask you to tell me the same. I think that we need to have clearly in our minds what we want from this relationship before we take any... steps."

"Is it far? How long to I have to wait for this clarification?" "Not far now. Two more turns."

When he stopped at last it was in front of a door. Catherine was surprised.

"A door? There aren't very many of those down here."

"I'm very much aware of that." He opened the door, and bowed. "Milady."

She entered, and stopped. "Oh, Vincent."

He had been busy while she slept. The room was obviously a storeroom for unused furniture, but he had made a room within a room. There was a wide daybed, piled with many pillows, a low table in front of it with a tea service on it. There was a brazier with a steaming kettle, and candles everywhere. Behind the soft glow of the candles, the big room's contents were shadows, shutting them into a warm circle of intimate privacy. And best of all, the room had a door, now closed.

Vincent moved to the brazier, took the kettle and filled the teapot.

"Please, sit down, Catherine."

She made herself comfortable among the pillows on the daybed while he opened a cupboard and took out a plate of cookies. Then he came and sat down beside her, putting the plate on the table and smiling. She smiled in return.

"Vincent, this is perfect. Thank you."

"I wanted us to be comfortable, and to have our privacy assured. I think that this fills all of the requirements."

"It certainly does. I love that you'd do this for us." She looked around her again. "It's perfect. And there's tea; you've thought of everything. Is it steeped yet?"

"No. It's only been four minutes."

"Vincent, I'm always amazed when you do that. How do you know it's four minutes?"

He smiled and shrugged slightly. "If I knew perhaps I could teach others to do it."

Catherine shook her head. "You would think about teaching others! That's one of the things I lo...well, I needn't hesitate to say it any more...things I love about you."

Her eyes were soft with her love for him. He looked down at her with equal tenderness.

"No, you needn't. And I don't know why it's taken me so long to do the same." He stopped for a moment and put his hand up to touch her cheek. "Catherine, I love you, with all there is in me..." He caressed her cheek, his hand moving down to curl his fingers around her neck, touching her nape lightly. "I have since the first moment I saw you...oh Catherine, don't cry."

"I'm not crying...much."

She summoned a watery smile while the tears ran down her face. His arms went around her and he held her to him while he kissed her cheeks, taking her tears into himself. "Catherine, don't cry any more. Please...my love, I must kiss you when you're crying, and I have things I need to talk about. Please..." She lifted her head from his shoulder.

"I'm listening. It was just...I was beginning to think I'd never hear it. I've wanted for so long to hear you say it." Her tears were over; she smiled up at him, snuggling into his embrace.

His voice was soft as he spoke with his lips against her hair. "I'm finished with denying the truth. The truth is that I love you, and I have promised you that we will find a way to move toward love."

His arms were around her still and he held her firmly against him. "That means that we must find a way for us to be together, while you maintain your access to the world above. I haven't changed my mind, Catherine. I still cannot accept that you will live below. It is not a life for you to live. For those injured or disappointed by life Above, my world is a refuge. For you I'm afraid that it would become a prison."

She began to protest, but a clawed finger was pressed gently to her lips.

"I believe that I am doing you no service by attempting to tie you in any way to my life here Below, but I



can no longer deny that you are tied also by the bonds of... of your love for me. We have come too far now to back away from those bonds that hold us to each other."

She felt him drop a light kiss on her temple as he continued.

"I think I may have found a way to give you still the freedom of the world Above, while allowing us to be together, at least part of the time. Do you think that you could find a place to live, an apartment or a house, where we could make a private tunnel access through the basement, as in your apartment building? It seems to me that it would be the best solution. Then we can be together, and if you have a place Above that I can reach at any time we will have privacy whenever we wish." He smiled wryly. "You know that privacy is in short supply in the tunnels, most specially in my chamber. For twenty years people have been welcome there at anytime. The tunnel dwellers will learn, but it may take a while."

She could wait no longer to answer him. She sat up straight and turned to face him. "This is a wonderful idea, Vincent! I don't see any reason why we can't do that." She smiled and reached to smooth the hair back on his forehead. "You *have* been looking for a way to move toward love, haven't you?"

He caught her hand, and continued to hold it while he spoke. "Yes...oh, yes, I have. Catherine, I love you with every part of my being. I can no longer deny it to myself or to you. And there is something else that I have denied and suppressed for...well, from the first time I saw you." He looked away from her eyes, down at their joined hands.

"I... want you, Catherine...I want you with such passion, I want to hold you in my arms in love...to touch you and taste you...to make us complete. I have dreamed...dreamed of us together...in loving. Catherine, I am beginning to hope that perhaps I may have more than dreams of you. Is it possible that we may...that my dreams may become a reality?" He looked up at her again, his heart in his eyes.

"Oh, my love, you *know* it is. I've been waiting to hear you say that for..." She smiled. "Well, forever!"

He went into her outstretched arms with a groan. "Oh Catherine, are you sure? I need to know that you're *sure*, because I don't know that I will be able to stop... when...later."

"I've been sure since you and Father were caught in the cave-in. When I thought that I might have lost you, I knew. I knew that I wanted us to be lovers then, Vincent. But I was afraid that you would never



agree.”

One arm still holding her tightly against him, he raised a hand to touch her cheek softly. “I have been so torn. I wanted you with such urgency, such overwhelming...desire, and I’ve always known although I denied it to myself, that you wanted me as well. But I couldn’t reconcile myself to condemning you to live Below.”

He hesitated before he went on, “I must tell you, I am still not sure that I am doing the right thing by binding you to me. But the frightening vision of the future that you made so vividly clear to me has convinced me... that...and the passion for you that makes my nights a torment. Oh Catherine, I want you so much...”

Her lips were so close. He bent to them with a long sigh, meeting her opened mouth with soft lips that cherished hers, and with a tongue that moved into her mouth softly, touching here and there, making her heart hammer. When he raised his head at last, he said in his soft half-whisper, speaking with his mouth against her hair.

“I’m not... experienced. You would tell me if I did anything...anything that displeased you, or... hurt you? I must not hurt you; it would kill me. You would let me know if I am...clumsy...or...or coarse? I feel very much at a loss, Catherine, now that...it looks as if my dreams...may come true. And I must tell you, I feel unsure...that I will be able to control myself...in...in the heat of...” He stopped, moved away from her and looked down at the floor before them, his hair shadowing his face.

She lifted his hair away. “Vincent, I love you and want you very much. I can think of nothing that you could do that would displease me. I promise, though, I’ll tell you if anything is...not what I would wish. And...if you were to scratch me or nip me in the heat of passion, would that be ‘hurting’ me? I hope you won’t think so, because it may very well happen that I will do that to you. Sometimes when I look at you, when I watch that beautiful body move, I feel as if I could just...just *devour* you.” His head came up and he turned to her. He looked incredulous.

“What? Your body?” She smiled. “You don’t know that you have a beautiful body, do you? Well, let me assure you, Vincent, you do, and I’ve wanted for *years* to undress you!”

He blushed. She chuckled, and drew him back to her. With her lips next to his ear, she whispered. “Love me, Vincent. I want you so much.” She felt him slowly stiffen as his muscles tensed. He raised his head to look at her, and stared down into her eyes for a long moment, then he spoke with great intensity.



“...Now? Now, Catherine?”

“Oh please, my love...” Catherine smiled tenderly, “...Could there be a better time?”

He saw her eyes soft with love, her lips trembling for his kiss. He just looked for a moment, savoring her desire for him, and then with a groan he dropped his head to meet her lips. His mouth covered hers warmly, and his tongue moved immediately between her lips, to stroke the inside of her mouth. She responded passionately, making a small sound as her tongue moved over his sharp incisors.

He groaned with pleasure as she slid the fingers of one hand into the neck of his sweater, reaching as far as she could to feel the warm skin beneath.

He lifted his mouth from hers to whisper, “Oh, Catherine, I want your touch so much... and I want to touch you...your body...I have dreamed....so long...”

“Oh, my love, so have I!” As she spoke she was searching for the fastening of his vest. “Take this off...I want it off you... How...?”

He reached down to the edge and pulled it up over his head. “Like that.”

He was more undressed without the vest than she’d ever seen him before. His sweater and undershirt had come up a way with the vest, and there was a tantalizing strip of golden haired midriff visible. Her hands were drawn immediately to touch the skin exposed, caressing him, making him gasp. Then she could stand it no longer, she had to see him. She reached to the edge of the shirts to lift them up, but Vincent was there before her. In a moment he dropped them also to the floor, and he was bare to the waist.

“God! How beautiful you are. I knew it.” She just looked for a second, then her hands came up while she never took her eyes from the sight she had so longed to see. She stroked him, sliding her fingers into the heavy thatch of soft golden hair on that broad chest, running them across the sharply defined pectorals, moving to his broad shoulders and down to caress those beautiful heavy biceps.

She made a little soft sound in her throat as her hands touched at last his beloved flesh. Vincent sat still, head thrown back, eyes closed, while she fondled and stroked and kissed his bare chest and shoulders. He drew deep trembling breaths, luxuriating in the feeling of his beloved making love to him.

When he could stand it no longer, when his desire for her overflowed, with a low growling groan he reached for her. Wordlessly, he began to unlace the tunnel blouse that she wore, holding her close with one arm as he worked. As the neck opened farther, his mouth came down on the skin exposed.

“I need to touch you, and smell you, and taste you ...” He breathed deeply with his nose pressed into the angle where her neck met her shoulder. “Your scent... Catherine, it makes me insane with longing for you.” He took in another deep breath of that scent. Then slowly he pushed her woollen vest back over her shoulders and opened the unlaced blouse.

As he gazed down at her uncovered breasts, he murmured softly, “Now....now this is mine, this is for me...” He bent and his mouth covered a nipple that reached up to meet him. “Mm- m-m-m,” a long moaning sigh escaped him as he nuzzled, drawing her nipple deep into his mouth.

“Oh yes, do this, yes, yes...” Catherine slid back on the bed until she was lying down, and he followed without raising his head from her breast. Her hands cradled his head, lost in that golden mane, while she writhed in pleasure. A soft moaning stream of words came from her mouth, a long repetition of the one word. “yes, yes...yes....yes.”

Their mutual desire ignited in a firestorm of kisses and caresses. He never remembered how they got out of the rest of their clothes; he only knew that he felt the whole length of her body pressed against him at last, skin to skin. In a delirium of excitement he kissed and stroked and nuzzled her body, finding all the wonderful warm places that he’d had guilty dreams of in all the nights of his long desire.

And Catherine opened to him; opened her heart and mind and body to his long held wishes, loving the feel and scent of him, moaning in the frenzy of her desire for him. Vincent felt his remaining control on

the edge of dissolving.

"If you've changed your mind say so now...now! I want you...I want your body to be mine... I want you ...all of you!"

He was kissing her breasts; as he spoke his mouth moved lower, and he began to slide down her body, kissing and tonguing and breathing in her scent as he went. Suddenly he raised his head and looked down at her. Her eyes were closed, she was flushed and panting.

When she realized that he had stopped, she opened her eyes and reached for him "Don't stop! Come back...oh come back."

Vincent's voice was hoarse, and his hands shook as he took her hands, holding them against his chest. He needed, he must have, final reassurance that her desire for him was real before he could let go of all hesitation, before he plunged into the stuff of his dreams at last.

"You do want me?...you want this as much as I...?"

Her look was questioning. "Haven't you believed me?"

"Yes! Oh, yes! I just...I believed it here..." he touched his forehead, "but not really, here..." and he put his other hand over hers that he was holding against his heart. "But...you do want to make love with me, I believe it now, I see it in your face, and your body..."

He could wait no longer, he lowered his mouth again to her body. Between kisses, he spoke with his lips against her skin, "...You do want me, you want this..."

"Oh, please, yes, yes..." She was nearly wordless, only showing him with her hands and her body's response to his kisses how much she loved what he was doing.

When his mouth reached the soft curls of her pubic hair, he glanced up at her for an instant, looking for her consent. Her hands came to his head, and her soft murmur, "Please, please..." reassured him, and



with a moan he dropped his head to kiss that soft hair, moving then to the inside of her thighs, breathing deep of the scent of her sex, his tongue lapping at her where the liquid proof of her excitement coated her skin.

“Oh, Catherine....your scent...the taste of you...” The soft words fueled her pleasure, and she opened her legs further, inviting him. He began to growl a soft accompaniment to his passion when he nuzzled at her very center, realizing a long long dream.

Catherine’s hands held his head as her hips lifted to meet his mouth. “Oh God, God...” Her hands held him against her, while he licked and sucked and kissed and nuzzled in a delirium of desire. Her scent, her taste intoxicated him, sending him near to madness with his delight in her. And his attentions to her at her very center were driving her to new heights of passion; when her body began to tense with the onset of her climax his mouth and tongue covered her with even greater intensity, until at last her body arched upward and she cried out.

He felt her climax in every part of him. It pounded through his body with enormous effect; he stiffened and came to his own orgasm, his hips pumping wildly, his back arched, his head thrown back in a delirium of ecstasy...he was unable to hold back the torrent of his desire when he felt her ecstatic release.

Chapter 12

As the convulsions of their passion lessened and smoothed, his head came to rest on the hollow of her belly between her hip and the curls of her pubic mound. He lay there for a moment, recovering, and the first thing that came to his consciousness was that scent, that seductive scent of her. How he loved it! How he had longed to be here, breathing her scent, touching her in this intimate way.

His love for her surged in him, and he raised his body up to take her in his arms. For a moment they simply clung together, Vincent whispering to her of his love and his joy in her, and she pressing his hair back from his face so she could kiss it more thoroughly.

When she was able to think, instead of just feeling the overwhelming love and satisfaction of lovemaking with him, she said, “Oh, Vincent, that was...I don’t know what adjective could tell you how wonderful it was.”

He smiled at her a little shyly. “For me also. I...did you know that I, too...” He was unable to say it.

“Oh yes! I knew; how could I miss it? I felt it when your body...exploded, and the look on your face was... indescribable.”

“Was it...are you all right?” His arms cradled her tenderly.

She turned to face him, sliding a leg between his thighs, and put her arms around his neck. “It was, and I am! Wow! All I can say is ‘wow!’”

She smiled brilliantly at him. “You’re the most wonderful, the most accomplished lover! Are you sure, Vincent, that you haven’t done this before?”

He shook his head, embarrassed. “If I didn’t know you for the truthful person that you are, I’d have a hard time believing that!”

This was too much; he bridled. “Although my experience is...well, nil, I’m not without theoretical knowledge. You may have noticed that I read.”

She grinned. “Yes, I have noticed that. But does Father’s library include works that...would tend to increase your theoretical knowledge of this particular subject?”

He chuckled, a deep note that she could feel in his chest. “No, but I grew up with Devin. Believe me, his library made up for any lack in Father’s.”

“I’ll bet it did!” Her grin exploded in a giggle as she pulled herself closer to his body. “Did...your sources...

tell you that women are capable of repeating this act almost at once, usually more quickly than men?" He stared at her for a moment, and she could see intensity replacing humor in his gaze. Then he rolled until he was on top of her, leaning on his elbows above her. "Oh, Catherine, I want...I want to feel you enclosing me...I want to be inside you." His voice was throaty as he half-whispered the words. "Oh my love...I need to be...one with you. Take me inside you, make me complete..."

She brought her hands up to cradle his face, and looked into his eyes with love glowing in her gaze as she whispered in return, all thought of laughter lost in a moment.

"Oh, yes! Make love to me, Vincent...oh, love me, take me...I am yours..."

Her legs came up around him, and he realized that his penis was nuzzling at the entrance to that place which had been for so long his ultimate desire. He looked down at her then with wonder in his face, and with apprehension.

"...I'm afraid...afraid I'll hurt you. You're so little...so fragile."

She smiled. "You won't hurt me, my body was made for this...I was made for this, to take you inside of me. Oh, please, love, take me..." Her hands still held his face, and she drew his mouth down to hers. Passion flared again wildly. Her plea made him burn to plunge into her, but he held back, still apprehensive.

When he raised his head long tremors were rolling over his body as his desire battled with his fear for her.

Tears welled up as he whispered: "I want this so much...so much...but I must not hurt you, Catherine. How can I be sure...?"

"Only by trying. love." She smiled tremulously. "Trust me, it will be all right."

They exchanged a long look, as he searched her face, looking for some further assurance; but she had said it, there was no way to tell in advance. So, without further words, trusting her, Vincent began to ease into her, his penis surging powerfully. As he moved slowly into the warmth of her body, Catherine's eyes closed, her mouth opened for the passage of her panting breath, and she moaned softly with each of those breaths.

"...Oh yes, yes...yes..." He stopped, again paralyzed with apprehension. Words fell from his lips with his own quick breath.

"I want you so much...please, are you all right...oh please... please..." Catherine could wait no longer.

"Oh God, Vincent, yes!...now ...now...all the way!"

With one plunge, he complied, and it was indeed all right. Both of them gasped as he was finally seated far into her warmth and softness. Vincent was overwhelmed with the sensation of being inside his love at last. He lay perfectly still, eyes closed, absorbing the moment, the subject of so many guilty dreams now brought to ecstatic reality. It was Catherine who moved at last; she was unable to wait any longer to feel the lovely friction. She lifted her hips a little bit, and Vincent gasped and began to move, just slightly, in and out of her body.

Then his eyes opened in astonishment and he spoke, his voice slurred and hoarse, "Oh Catherine, your body....your body caresses me...*inside*..."

And it was true, with every slight movement he made, her body's interior muscles clenched to hold him close. It was more than he had ever dreamed; tears rose to his eyes.

"You love me with *all* of you..." His head dropped to nestle into her neck and she felt his tears on her skin.

"Because all of me loves you so much, Vincent...all of me..."

She scattered kisses on the parts of his face and neck she could reach. Then he began to move in her again, and there was no more talk; both were immediately beyond speech. Catherine began to moan softly with each breath, and Vincent found that small sound added to his excitement, and his increased

heartbeat and gasping breath made Catherine's excitement swell in turn. His strokes grew longer and deeper, and he began a soft growl. In a moment he was pumping in and out of that rich warmth to the full extent of his penis, all the way out until he felt only the touch of her on the very tip, then plunging in until his testicles rested gratefully against her.

Catherine moved with him, her head tipped back, her eyes closed, and the little gasping moan never stopping. As he looked down at her, he knew beyond any doubt that her ecstasy equaled his.

"My love...my love..." His breathless words were so low as to be almost unintelligible, forced from him unaware by the bottomless depth of his adoration. The level of sensation became so intense that Vincent was drawn out of himself. If ever he had worried about losing control, this was the time, but his gentleness and care for Catherine didn't desert him. While he plunged into her with abandon, still his nails were turned away from her, and although his open mouth moved hungrily over her face and neck, taking in the scent and taste of her, his teeth slid over her skin without leaving any mark.

He began to move more quickly, his body caressing hers as he moved, so that she felt the heavy thatch of hair on his chest sliding over her breasts, making the sensations that were so intense at the place where they joined, spread over her entire body. Everywhere he touched her electricity seemed to spring between them as she felt her oncoming climax.

"A-a-h...Vincent...it's coming...A-hh..." When he heard her involuntary exclamation of excitement, his testicles pulled themselves up close to his body as sweat sprang out all over him.

"Oh God...Catherine..." The exquisite tension burst at last into a mutual orgasm. Catherine's soft wailing cry blended with Vincent's growl as their bodies convulsed in a profound ecstasy, which went on and on before it began to subside into a long descending spiral of sensation, leaving them both limp and semi-conscious.

As he returned to himself, Vincent rolled himself over, bringing Catherine with him, until she lay on top of him. She woke then from her daze, and looked down at him with all of her love in her eyes.

"Oh, Vincent...Oh, my love..." He lay looking up at her, with tears running from the corners of his eyes.

"I adore you. I am your slave...I am your willing slave..." She smiled, blinking back her own tears.

"And I am yours...."



Epilogue

Catherine watched Vincent with a deeply felt delight as he stretched, relaxing profoundly in the big chair, and put his feet up on the footstool. *It was the right choice, it really has worked!* she thought. It had been several months of effort, refitting the tired old brownstone into a home where they could be together, but the time and money had been well spent. Her effort was rewarded now by the contented wellbeing that Vincent showed in every tranquil line of his body. In the firelight his mane glowed, surrounding his features with a nimbus of soft golden light. His shirt was open to the waist and his feet were bare, reminders of their lovemaking just past.

As she watched, those furry toes wiggled and he sighed deeply. "This place is wonderful. Better than I ever thought it could be. I feel very comfortable here."

"I love to hear you say that." She smiled at him from the other chair. "I wanted you to feel at home so much."

Vincent leaned over, reached for her hand and tugged, an invitation to come and sit on his lap, which she accepted with pleasure. When she was comfortably settled against him both sat for a moment staring into the fire. He spoke softly then. "I am at home. Catherine, I feel..." He turned his head to look at her. "I feel...married."

Catherine smiled at him, her eyes filling with tears. "Oh, my dear, you couldn't have said anything that I'd rather have heard." She kissed him softly. "And so do I. That's what our house is...a place for married people to live! I've been looking forward to it, and wanting it so much, every since we...since our lovely afternoon in the storeroom."

His arms tightened around her. "I remember. I remember everything of that afternoon. It was the most...magical time I could ever have imagined."

"It was. And it's just gotten better since then."

He chuckled. "Well, I've had more practice. Quite a lot more."

"You didn't need any practice! You were wonderful. I was astonished, and a little bit nervous that you hadn't told me everything. I couldn't believe that a man who had never...had any practice... could be so...so expert!"

"That may have been a result of three years of thinking about it and dreaming about it." He paused and looked her slyly, from the corner of his eye. "Not to speak of a partner whose willingness was only exceeded by her enthusiasm."

She flicked his cheek with a nail softly as she chuckled. "Well, *I'd* had three years to think about it too."

She sighed deeply, and put her head down on his shoulder. "It's so nice here. I'm so glad that you're pleased with it. ...You know, I don't think you were ever at home in my apartment. I don't know why exactly, do you?"

He thought for a moment, staring into the blaze in front of them.. "No. I don't know why, but you're right, I wasn't comfortable there. It seemed...I don't know...so...so *aboveground*. Does that sound foolish?"

She grinned. "Yes." Then she laughed aloud as he looked at her, surprised. "Well, you asked! The eighteenth floor *is* about as aboveground as you could get! ...But I do know what you mean. It wasn't very...tunnelish...was it?"

She looked around the big room, lit softly by the firelight and a few candles.

"When I decorated this place, I had you in mind. And myself too, don't think I did it all for you! It's just...I've changed, my taste has changed since the tunnel people became my family, and the tunnels became my second home. So it followed that this room, the whole house would be...different. Let me see, in what ways is this house different from my apartment?"

Vincent thought for a moment. "Darker colors, softer light, oriental rugs, bigger furniture. That's just the start of the catalogue, but they make a large difference."

He snuggled down into the chair further, tightening his arms around her.

"I feel...at home. Oh, and candlelight. That's a large part of the difference. I've wondered about that. How did you manage to light this place with electricity, but make it feel like candlelight?"

She looked smug. "Just a little decorating magic..." Then she grinned. "Well, and a lot of candles, too."

He kissed her lightly and said, "Thank you, Catherine. Thank you for making this place for us to be together."

Then he turned his head to the fire, so she wouldn't see the smile on his face.

"I don't know how many more years I could have gotten to your balcony without killing myself in the attempt. I'm not getting any younger, you know. When I first came to see you, it seemed romantic, like Rapunzel in her tower, but I soon got over that. Especially in the winter."

He sighed, his arms tightening around her.

"This is much better. I'm in no danger of breaking a hip."

She struggled for a serious expression as she turned in his arms to look at him.

"Yes, for an old man, this is much more appropriate. Aged bones become brittle."

"Aged? I'll show you who's aged!"

This kiss was much more thorough, and his hands came into play to back up what his mouth and tongue were telling her. Her arms came up around his neck, threading through the golden mane, and she began to breathe faster as his hand took the opportunity of her lifted arm to slide softly around her breast.



“M-m,” she said, when he raised his head at last, “I believe you’re not quite over the hill yet!”

Vincent rose from his chair with her in his arms, and deposited her on the hearthrug.

“Catherine, you were so clever to put a soft rug in front of the fire! It’ll be so much easier on *your* aged bones. You do remember that we’re nearly the same age?” He slid down beside her, and his voice dropped into that husky half-whisper that always made her blood run faster as he said,

“Now! Now we’ll see. Now we’re going to find out whose bones will give out first!”

The End