

PASSIONS RENEWED

by Sandy P Shelton

(from ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE FOUR)

Vincent stretched his arms up over his head in an effort to relax his tired aching muscles. It had been a long hard day repairing the water pipes that threatened to flood the lower chambers. As he made his way back to the chamber he shared with his family, he smiled in sweet anticipation.

He walked through the entrance and stopped, his breath taken by the endearing sight before him. Jacob sat on the floor quietly playing with his building blocks and Catherine sat in the big rocker holding their baby to her breast as she rocked back and forth. She would glance at Jacob then look lovingly at the child she nursed. Vincent could feel her warmth and tenderness as she gently played with the baby's tiny hand.

Even the worst of days didn't bother him anymore, as long as he could come home to this, he thought. He was glad Catherine had taken a six-month leave of absence instead of the usual three. The baby was six weeks old and that meant they could share another three and a half months of domestic bliss together before she returned. Silently, he hoped she would decide to stay Below, but he knew better than to push her. As always, the decision had to be hers.

Just then Jacob sensed his father. "Daddy!" Catherine looked up and smiled at her weary husband. He stepped into the chamber and lifted his son high above his head eliciting a round of giggles from the toddler.

"Hello there young man, have you been good?"

Jacob settled into his father's chest and let his fingers play in Vincent's thick unruly hair. "Yes Daddy. Will you play blocks with me?"

"Yes, a little later. After dinner, okay?"

"Okay."

Vincent then painfully lowered the child to the floor, where he resumed his mini-construction. He straightened up slowly, as his aching muscles fought the added strain. He walked over to Catherine's chair and bent over to kiss her upturned lips.

"Hard day?"

"Yes, but it's better now."

He knelt down beside the chair and gently stroked his daughter's arm. She looked at him with Catherine's grey-green eyes. Every time he looked at her, he couldn't help the smile that crossed his face. She was so beautiful, so precious, he found it hard to believe he could father such a beauty. *Catherine's genes*, he thought.

The baby finished her meal. "Here Vincent, why don't you burp her?"

He relished every excuse he could find to hold the tiny helpless bundle in his arms.

"Of course."

Catherine watched in wonder as she fastened her gown. The sight of this powerful man cradling a

tiny infant tenderly in his arms always touched her deeply. He was so gentle, so careful, her heart ached at the sight. Gingerly, he held the baby to his shoulder and lightly patted her back. Soon he was rewarded with a slight but effective burp.

They joined the community at the evening meal and enjoyed the many ooh's and aah's little Mary Catherine always received. There was no doubt she was everybody's darling. Father reminded Catherine of her check-up the next day with him and Peter, then the family retired to their chamber for the evening.

Hours later, Catherine sat in the rocker again nursing the baby and softly singing her lullaby. Jacob sat in Vincent's lap and leaned back into his arms as his mother's soft voice lulled him into that place where everything shimmers and floats.

Vincent lifted Jacob tighter into his arms and took him into his newly-finished chamber just across from his parents. Finally he had his own place. He was growing up fast - much too fast, thought Vincent. The chamber held the two carousel horses from Devin and Vincent's childhood as well as a multitude of toys from both worlds. It was so strange, this combination of two worlds. Much like Jacob himself.

He lowered the sleeping child into his bed then covered him up. Leaning over, he kissed the mass of curls and watched as the youngster cuddled up under the covers.

"Goodnight, sweet prince."

Back in their chamber, Vincent prepared for bed then watched his beautiful wife tuck their daughter into her cradle then sat beside him on the bed.

"How about a massage, you look exhausted," she caressed and kneaded his tired muscles.

"That would be wonderful."

"Take off your shirt and lie on your stomach, sir."

He obeyed her command and groaned as her fingers moved about his back and shoulders. Her hands were so soothing yet exciting. It had been such a long time since they had made love and even though he was tired, his body ached for it.

She loved the feel of his skin under her hands and the sight of his broad shoulders was more than she could stand. Slowly, she leaned down and planted a soft kiss at the base of his neck. Immediately she felt his body tense.

"Catherine please."

"I'm trying to."

He rolled over and she leaned into his chest, "Father hasn't said you've healed yet."

"I feel just fine, Vincent."

He took her hands in his. "I'm glad, but after all you've been through, I want to be sure. Catherine, when we make love again, I want you to be strong and complete." He smiled at her wickedly. "It's been so long, I don't know if I'll be able to restrain myself. I need you to be in top form."

She had to laugh. Vincent seldom talked like this to her and she enjoyed it. "Are you sure I can't satisfy you in some other way?"

He thought a moment. "It's very tempting, but I'd rather wait until after your check-up tomorrow." He pulled her down into his arms and nuzzled close to her ear. "For months I have longed to feel myself inside you again. It will be difficult, but I want to save up all that energy."

Catherine snuggled up closer and sighed in disappointment. "Well, if you insist, but I warn you, you're not the only one with pent-up energy. I'm going to be all you can handle, I promise you."

Early the next morning, Vincent, Catherine, Jacob, and Mary Catherine walked down the tunnel toward the children's chamber. Vincent walked proudly with his family as he carried the baby nestled securely in his arms. Catherine and Jacob walked hand-in-hand.

The children's chamber was a cheerful happy place, specifically designed for the younger children of the community. Mary, Sarah, and Rebecca read to them, conducted classes, and generally supervised their early education. Catherine had often marveled at how advanced the tunnel children's education was compared to their counterparts Above. How Jacob would react to the schools Above often concerned her.

She led him over to Mary and knelt down to his level. "You be good, honey. Your father and I will see you a little later, okay?"

"Okay, Mommy."

She hugged and kissed him then walked back over to Vincent who found himself surrounded by adoring females who had to have a glimpse of his daughter.

"We'd better be going. You know how grumpy Father gets when we're late."

"I remember all too well."

Together they walked toward the hospital chamber. Catherine slipped her arm through Vincent's and they both reveled in the sheer joy of the moment.

As they neared their destination, she gave into her playful spirit and slipped her hand from his arm to let it fall onto his inviting backside. She could feel him quiver slightly at her touch.

"Catherine, what are you doing?"

"I couldn't help it. You have such a darling tush."

He stopped and looked at her. "I have a what?"

She wanted to laugh outright at his expression but she restrained herself. "It means you've got a nice looking rear, sweetheart."

He thought it over carefully. "Women notice this?"

Still fighting her laughter but enjoying his innocence, she continued, "Most definitely."

Now he gave her a look that told her of his jealousy. "Do you notice such things about other men?"

"Sometimes." She slipped her arm around his waist and pulled him close. "But I only want yours."

He blushed fiercely. "We'd better go."

Father and Peter were waiting for them and both wondered why Vincent was blushing.

"Good morning," Father smiled at his newest grandchild. He immediately took the child from Vincent's arms and both he and Peter became absorbed in weighing, measuring, and otherwise examining their charge. Catherine made use of the time continuing her flirtation with Vincent.

As Peter handed the infant back to Vincent, he related his findings. "She perfectly healthy in all respects. She seems to be having no trouble with her milk and she's gaining weight normally."

"What about the blood tests, Peter?" Catherine asked.

"In that respect my dear, she's like you. She has your blood type. There are no visible traces of Vincent's differences. By the way Vincent, do you feel a bond with her?"

"Yes, but I feel a connection to Catherine and she is not like me."

"That's true. Your connection to them seems to be more empathetic than physical."

Father turned to Catherine. "Well my dear, it's your turn."

Vincent stood by silently watching the examination. He tried to concentrate on the baby, to keep his mind off of what Father and Peter were doing.

After they had finished, he impatiently asked, "How is she, Father?"

"She's just fine, Vincent," came the answer.

Peter added. "I wish all my patients healed this nicely."

After Catherine redressed, she approached a very personal subject. "Have I healed enough to resume....?" She hesitated.

Peter caught her meaning. "Yes Cathy, you can resume intimate relations, but have you chosen a birth control method? You can't use the pill while you're nursing."

Vincent shyly interjected. "I thought about having a vasectomy."

"No Vincent," Catherine answered decisively. "Not yet. What do you recommend, Peter, the IUD again?"

"They have something new called a cervical cap and I'm sure you've read about the implant."

"Yes, but I'd rather try the cap if that's agreeable with you?"

"Of course, but you'll have to come to my office for the procedure. How about tomorrow morning?"

"No Peter, how about this afternoon?"

The tone of her reply caused Father to turn his head and laugh and Peter to cast a bemused look toward Vincent.

"Yes, I think that can be arranged." He leaned over and whispered to Catherine, "Far be it from me to stand in the way of true love. I'll be leaving in a couple of hours, you can come with me then. Is that soon enough?"

She pouted disappointedly. "I guess it will have to do."

Later as they walked back into their chamber, she sat on the bed and looked longingly at Vincent. The desire in her eyes were burning through him. He pushed away the erotic images running rampant through his mind.

"I think it's time to feed Mary Catherine, don't you? I know she must need changing."

Catherine felt as if she had been hit in the face with cold water. She had definitely been enjoying the sexual tension they were just experiencing.

"Yes, you're right. I'd better pump a little for later while I'm gone." Suddenly she felt like teasing him again. "Why don't you help me?"

Again her look was smoldering and this time he could feel his body responding. His control was definitely slipping.

"I don't think that's wise right now, Catherine. Not until you've seen Peter, we can't take any chances."

Her expression didn't change as he handed her the squirming infant. Reluctantly, he backed away.

"I think I'd better go ... do ... something," he said as she opened up her gown. "Uh, I think I'll check on Jacob."

After he stumbled awkwardly out of their chamber, Catherine couldn't help laughing at her adorable

husband. "Later love," she chuckled, "Later."

She enjoyed her afternoon Above, even though she missed her baby terribly. Peter took her to lunch, she called Joe and Diana, then went with Peter to his office. When she returned that evening, she got quite a surprise. Vincent had packed an overnight bag for both of them as well as gathered up the children's things.

"What are you up to?" she asked as she hugged Jacob.

"A night of romance if you're ready, that is?"

She stared into those deep blue eyes that were sparkling with intrigue. "Ready, willing, and able!"

"Good," he smiled back at her. "After you feed the baby and prepare a few bottles for tonight, we'll tuck Jacob in and slip away."

"And just what did you have in mind, sir?"

"Later love, later."

All through the evening meal the anticipation was unbearable. They reminded Catherine of two teenagers who had just discovered hormones. She slipped her shoes off and ran her foot up his leg, he would drop his hand onto her thigh when no one was looking, and she would manage to let her hand caress his inner thigh whenever possible. If they didn't get away soon, they were going to embarrass everyone.

As Catherine later nursed the baby, Vincent paced impatiently back and forth trying to concentrate on getting Jacob ready for bed. Lifting him up on the bed with him and reading aloud helped somewhat but his patience was growing thin as was Catherine's. Finally he carried the sleeping boy to his chamber and the baby, cradle and all, to Mary's chamber for the night.

Back in their chamber, Catherine was preparing a few bottles for the baby's overnight stay. When Vincent walked in on her, he stopped suddenly then turned away quickly.

"Where are you going, Vincent?"

"To prepare for our trip."

"Don't you want to help me with this?"

"Catherine, if I do, we might not make the trip."

"So?"

He turned to her. "Catherine, I want tonight to be special for us both. I don't want just the physical release, I want to romance you. I want to seduce you, not just have my way with you. Do you understand?"

"Oh yes, I do. Who says this can't be a little foreplay?"

"Catherine?"

Little did he know just how erotic he could be. Having him help with this mundane task turned out to be one of the most erotic experiences she had ever known. It took all her restraint to keep from pulling him to the floor right then and there.

They dropped the bottles off by Mary's, took one last look at Jacob, and then went on their way. Since they could only be away for one night, they didn't travel far, but this section of the tunnels was new to Catherine. The tunnelway was deserted and only a few torches lit their way. Quietly Vincent led her to a chamber at the far end of the passageway. Inside it was completely dark. They stopped outside.

"Stay here a moment," he instructed her and then disappeared into the darkness.

She obeyed and soon warm light began to flicker through the entrance. "Now Catherine, you can come in."

She stepped inside and was immediately awestruck at the sight. A candelabra glowed as it sat on a nearby table and on another table in the corner was an assortment of food and drink and two large candles that added to the warmth of the scene.

But by far the most impressive feature of the room was the large brass feather bed. Her eyes immediately noted the tender preparations. The quilt and sheets were turned back and on one pillow lay a single rosebud. Her first impulse was to tackle him onto the bed and let nature and their libidos have their way. But no, Vincent wanted the romance and she would not deny him. Besides, being seduced by this magnificent man wasn't exactly a chore. Her only problem was staying in control long enough.

"Do you like it?"

Her eyes misted as she answered, "Yes, definitely yes."

Their eyes met and they both could feel the electricity of the moment. Vincent stepped toward the food-laden table. "Would you like something to eat?"

She lowered her head to hide her exasperation. "No, maybe later." She watched him as he picked up a book that lay open on the bed. "You're not going to read NOW, are you?"

He tilted his head. "I thought perhaps a little Byron would be nice."

"As much as I love to hear you read, Vincent, NOW is not the time."

It didn't take a great deal of thought to understand her meaning. "Later perhaps."

Their eyes met again and the sparks between them flamed brightly. Catherine's fingers found the ties of her gown and began to unfasten them.

Vincent stepped forward and took her hand in his. "No. This time I want to go first."

She nodded and watched in silence as he removed his clothing. Involuntarily, she licked her lips as he undressed. He seemed to be more magnificent than usual, or was it the haze of her own desires.

"Now I want to undress you."

He again kissed her hands then lowered them. His hands shaking with anticipation, he untied the laces and slipped the gown off her shoulders. How he wanted her! For so many months he had fought his longing. Even though she had insisted on satisfying his needs in various other ways, there was nothing as exciting or as fulfilling as joining with her and experiencing her release as well as his own. Through the bond, he felt her needs so strongly. As her gown fell to the floor, the strength of his desires became evident.

She blushed a little as she suddenly became self-conscious about her appearance. Although she had lost most of her added weight after the baby's birth, she realized that she was not quite in top form. The ravages of childbearing she thought.

He lifted her chin upward. "No Catherine, you are as beautiful to me now as you were that very first time." He let his other hand touch her stomach. "You bear the signs of carrying our child. Do not be embarrassed by that. You are and always will be the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"You don't know what that means to me, Vincent."

He leaned forward and gently kissed her. As her hands found their way around him, the kiss deepened. Pressing her body tightly against his, she opened her mouth to his probing tongue.

Minutes passed as they both fought to fill their long-denied hunger.

He pulled away just long enough to lift her into his arms and carry her to their bed. She picked up the rosebud and gently stroked his face and neck with it as he hastily pulled the covers aside and lowered himself onto her. She giggled a little, breaking his concentration.

"What?"

"It feels strange not having the baby between us anymore."

"You're right. I could always go get her."

Catherine tossed the rose aside and pulled him down to her. "No, you won't! I want your complete and undivided attention on me."

"Believe me, Catherine, you have it."

She wiggled her hips slightly underneath him. "Yes, I think I can feel it."

Their first coupling was not the slow erotic experience Vincent wanted, but the fevered expression of long pent-up desires. Afterward, they lay side by side trying to calm their pounding hearts. The silence was broken, however, as Catherine began to laugh.

"Why are you laughing now? Did I do something wrong?"

"No! It's just....," she paused and giggled again. "We acted more like two teenagers in heat than two mature adults."

He propped up on his elbow and stared down into her green eyes. "I think you're right, but you have to consider how long it's been. After all, a fire that burns hot quickly consumes, one that is kindled slowly burns all night long."

"Where did that come from?"

He smiled coyly. "I don't know. It just seemed appropriate. Perhaps you'd like to hear some Byron now?"

"How can I make you understand that tonight I have no interest in poetry. Tonight, I would rather be loved by your actions, not your words."

He sighed deeply. "You'll have to give me a few moments to regain my..." He hesitated a moment to emphasize his meaning, "...strength."

"I don't know if I can wait that long. My hormones seem to have kicked into overdrive and I intend to take full advantage of them and you."

He groaned loudly and lay his head on her breast.

A few hours later, Vincent was awakened when he felt Catherine moving about. Opening his eyes one at a time, he saw her propped up on her elbow staring at him. Actually, she was staring at a certain part of his anatomy, which had involuntarily made its presence known beneath the sheet. Being ever so careful not to move, he watched her in silence. Through their bond, he could sense her fascination.

When she discovered him watching her, she blushed furiously. "How long have you been awake?"

"Long enough."

She laughed, then snuggled up beside him. "That's embarrassing."

"Don't be embarrassed. You have no idea how fascinating I find certain parts of you."

She let her fingers work their way through the hair on his chest, then looked deeply into his adoring eyes. "It's been a long time since we've been relaxed enough to be this silly, hasn't it?"

He reached up and slid his fingers through her hair. "Yes it has and I've missed it."

"Me too. The stress of a career and two kids can be a strain on a romance."

"At times I just don't see how you do it."

"I do it because of you, because of the strength you give me everyday. As long as I can come home to you, I can survive anything." She pulled herself up so that she lay more on top of him. "I never realized the depth of my passion for life until I met you. I never knew I could feel so much passion for any one man until you."

He could feel his own passions building at her words, her closeness, and the emotions he felt in her.

"I always lived in fear of my passions until you guided me through them. Now I could not live without them. In essence, Catherine, you gave me life and the passion to live it."

The fire between them now was a slowly kindled one that began with a gentle kiss. Catherine reached for the sheet, then threw it aside. When they were both free of it, she draped herself over him and let the feel of her body against his arouse them both. She kissed his eyes, his cheeks, and nose, then let her tongue play with his upper lip. She knew how he liked that, he was very sensitive there.

He shivered slightly as he felt her tongue tease his lip. The feel of her warm soft body covering him awakened his responses. His hands slid around her smooth shoulders and lifted her hair, as he pressed her downward and opened his mouth to receive her tongue.

She explored deeply and then withdrew as he began to press his tongue into her mouth. Both groaned softly as his hands slid down her back and over her hips pulling her tightly to him.

Her legs parted over him and she slid down his body planting kisses and running her tongue over his neck, chest, and abdomen. She moved slowly because she wanted this encounter to last as long as possible.

Vincent felt her twist to one side and slide her hand down between his legs. With experienced and loving fingers, she caressed and explored him. Each stroke was meant to excite and arouse, and he fought desperately to sustain the enjoyment but not to peak too early.

Skillfully, she would bring him to one plateau of pleasure after another then pull away before it went too far. They both enjoyed this game for some time before Catherine finally decided it was time for more. She pulled her hand away and moved up over him again, as he whimpered slightly and his eyes opened.

"Catherine?"

"I'm here, love," she said as she slid up even higher. She placed a hand on either side of his head and lowered her breasts down to gently touch his face. When he closed his eyes, he gripped her shoulders firmly and pulled her down into his opened mouth.

With that motion, he felt her body arch in pleasure. She groaned softly and opened her legs wider around him. His eyes were closed but he could feel her toss her head back and push her breast deeper into his eager mouth.

Her skin tasted slightly salty and as his mouth tugged on her tender flesh, he tasted her milk as well. That seemed to excite her all the more and she cradled his head in her arms, pressing herself even deeper into his mouth as her body tightened around him. She seemed to convulse in pleasure and his arousal was becoming too painful to bear.

With strong hands, he lifted her up until his mouth found her other breast and elicited the same responses. As he tasted her milk once again, he clutched desperately at her buttocks. The desire

to enter her was beyond his control now.

When she pulled herself away, he begged, "Catherine, PLEASE!"

She looked down into his desperate eyes and allowed herself one hard deep kiss that tasted of her own sweetness. Now, no longer able to control their need to join, she pushed herself more upright and let his hands guide her over him. With agonizing slowness, she took him inside.

Their movements were slow and in perfect harmony. Catherine didn't want them to finish too soon, so she would slow the pace until he calmed a little, then begin the deeper, more rewarding, movements again. Vincent quickly caught on to her method and began to work with her to prolong their pleasure.

Their bodies were straining to the point of exhaustion, and they were perspiring from their efforts. Wanting to see her pleasure, Vincent opened his eyes and saw her glistening body staining above him. Her eyes were closed and her face showed her intense concentration. How beautiful she was! How primal in the throes of her passion!

They both could stand no more. The need for completion was agonizing. His thrusts became harder and deeper, and she responded by flexing her hips to accept as much of him as possible.

Suddenly, she leaned into his chest and gripped the sheets beneath him, as her body doubled over in repeated convulsions. He clutched her hips and pulled them down as he thrust hard upward until he felt the eruption. They both froze for a second in time as his seed filled her.

In an effort to prolong their union, Catherine continued to move her hips to keep him firm for as long as possible, but soon he slipped from her and she collapsed exhausted into his waiting arms.

Many times that night they gave into their passions and, when the morning finally came, it found them exhausted but thoroughly satisfied. They ate a light breakfast, packed up their belongings, including the bed linens, and decided a stop by the bathing pools was in order.

They spent a few luxurious hours playing in the water, drying each other, and dressing and redressing. Catherine wanted to stay longer but the ache in her breasts told her that her baby needed her home soon. Reluctantly, they headed for home.

A week or so later, a small family sat on a blanket under the stars in a very remote part of Central Park. Spring was in the air and they were determined to enjoy the sweet fragrances of the night.

Catherine sat with Vincent's cloak wrapped warmly around her as she nursed the baby and Vincent sat cross-legged next to her. Jacob sat on his father's legs and leaned back into his chest as they studied the night sky.

One by one, Vincent pointed out the various constellations to the curious child in his lap as Catherine watched. The sight of the two of them like this made all the horrors of what they had endured before Jacob's birth worth it. As she watched Vincent, however, she could sense a restlessness. Not a restlessness born of discontent with their life, but one born of his need for whatever freedom he could find.

Catherine knew that for most of Vincent's adult life he had roamed the streets of the city, becoming one with the night. He had given that up for his visits to her apartment and had insisted he no longer needed that escape; that his life with her was complete. Regardless of his protests, she still felt it in him.

Later, as they stood at the threshold staring one last time at the spring sky, Catherine felt it strongly but said nothing. Vincent carried a sleeping Jacob on his shoulder and the blanket on his other arm as they made their way reluctantly back to their chamber.

After they had tucked Jacob and Katie in for the night, Catherine prepared for bed. As Vincent began to undress, she simply handed him his cape.

He looked at her in surprise. "What?"

"Why don't you go out for awhile?"

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"No, but I think you need some time to yourself. Don't argue, go take a walk into the city. Just be careful."

"Catherine, I'm fine. I don't need to go Above."

"Yes you do, more than you realize. There's a part of you that needs to be a part of that world just as I do. I can feel it in you, Vincent. Now go!"

"Catherine, I..."

She put her fingers to his lips to discourage any more arguments. "I said go!"

He kissed her fingers and then her lips. "I love you."

A coy smile lit her face. "I know."

Vincent walked the night in silence. Something was drawing him, calling him, guiding his footsteps to where he did not know. Somehow, he found himself in an alley behind a desolate-looking building where rock music blared out. He stopped as if knowing he had been summoned here. Confused, he leaned back into the shadows and waited. He did not have to wait for long.

The back door to the building was thrown open as an angry woman walked briskly out into the alley followed by an even angrier man. The music had stopped moments before, so Vincent could hear their words clearly. But even before they spoke, he could feel the anger and pain pulsing through the woman who stared defiantly at the man.

"I can't do this!" she blurted out.

"You have to. We've got two weeks until the concert and we need a new song, plus you're rehearsing like a mannequin. There's no feeling in anything. What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I just can't turn it on and off like a faucet. Thepassion is gone."

The man looked at her wearily. "Then I suggest you get it back in a hurry. What do you need, a good roll in the hay or something?"

Vincent flinched at that question, just as he felt the woman do.

"Is that your answer for everything? Come on, Danny, there's more to writing, to passion, than a roll in the hay."

"Then what the hell is it? Tell me, I'll go out and get whatever the f---"

The woman's head jerked up suddenly at his use of that word. "Danny, I've told you NEVER, NEVER use that word around me. It's an insult to me, and it shows a lack of imagination on your part."

"I'm sorry, I forgot. Look Morgan, you've got to get past this block or this benefit could be a disaster. Your fans expect your best and if you don't deliver, this tour for the homeless won't get off the ground."

He was trying to reason with her and, for the moment, he thought it had worked. "Now, let's go back inside and try to put some feeling into these songs."

"You DON'T understand. I can't put feelings into a song if they aren't in here." She placed her hand over her heart. "Danny, I'm just empty inside, can't you understand? No feelings, no passion, no nothing."

The man looked totally frustrated. "I don't know what to do. We've got an entire band sitting in there waiting for you."

"Tell them to go home."

"Go home! You're joking."

"Do I LOOK like I'm joking? Send them home."

"We haven't accomplished anything!"

"Send them home, Danny!" She turned and walked briskly down the alley.

The man jerked the door open and stormed inside, as Vincent watched the woman walk away. Without understanding it, he felt compelled to follow and as he did, he felt her anger.

At the end of the alley, she kicked a trash can in frustration and began walking back. Vincent again slipped into the shadows still feeling as if he had been led there by some design. Just as he was about to forget the whole thing and go home to his nice, warm bed beside Catherine, the night air was shattered by the squeal of car tires and the glare of headlights filling the alley.

One quick glance told Vincent the woman couldn't get out of the way of the speeding car in time. Without thought, he lunged at her and pushed her away from the car. In the next instant, he heard the thud of the impact and felt the pain shoot up his leg and hip. Momentarily dazed, he fell to the ground.

Catherine bolted upright in bed as a sharp, sickening pain engulfed her. Every instinct told her something was dreadfully wrong. Quickly she checked Katie and Jacob and found them sleeping peacefully. As the pain continued, she fearfully realized it had to be Vincent. Fighting her panic, she changed her clothes, awakened Mary to care for the children, and went in search of Father.

The car hesitated for only a second, then sped down the alley and into the street leaving the two prone figures behind. Vincent was dazed and disoriented from the pain in his hip and thigh, and moaned as he rolled onto his back. The woman across from him suffered more from the shock of the incident than from any injuries. She shook herself then looked over at her savior as he moaned. Quickly, she got to her feet and knelt down beside him.

Vincent became suddenly aware that he was dangerously close to being discovered. He painfully pulled his hood over his face.

"No please," he begged her. "Don't come any closer, I'm all right."

"You're not all right. That car hit you. I'll get an ambulance."

"No please don't!" He struggled to get to his feet but the pain was too intense. After almost blacking out, he collapsed into a pitiful ball.

She touched his arm. "You need help."

"Please, I beg you, don't call anyone."

"What is it? What are you afraid of?"

Vincent's voice sounded weak and fearful, even to his own ears. "My appearance. I would frighten them. They wouldn't understand."

"I don't understand."

"Please, just go. Leave me."

The woman hesitated, but with a determined shake of her head she answered, "No way, mister. You need help from somebody regardless of what you look like." Before he could stop her, she reached over and pushed back the hood.

Vincent's breath caught as he waited for the usual reaction. Seconds passed before he could bring himself to look into her eyes and what he found there surprised him. Instead of fear and disgust, there was compassion and acceptance. The eyes looking at him were looking past his appearance and into his soul.

"Where are you hurt?" she asked simply.

The shock of her apparent indifference to his appearance silenced him for a moment. "My leg. If you'll just help me up, I can get home myself."

"Maybe it's broken?"

"I don't think so," he said as he moved his leg slowly.

"Do you think you can stand?"

He took a deep breath and tried to stand, but the pain sat him back down.

"Give me your arm and try to lean on me as much as you can."

Reluctantly, he reached out and put his arm around her neck and together they managed to get him painfully to his feet. He grimaced and nearly blacked out again, but he was determined.

"Where to?"

"I can make it from here." He tried to take a step and nearly collapsed before she caught him.

"Like I said, where to?"

He gave in then. He knew his only hope would be to make it to the tunnels and he couldn't do it alone. He had to trust her. "Down the alley and into that building." He felt a shadow of fear cross her heart and responded, "Don't worry, I won't hurt you. You can leave me whenever you wish. Thank you for your kindness and your help."

The shadow quickly passed and her grip around his waist tightened. "Let's get going before someone sees us."

The few minutes it took to make their way into the abandoned building's basement was the longest, most excruciating trip Vincent could recall. His leg was hurting terribly, sending shock waves throughout his body. Each step was agony, but he had to continue. He had to get home.

He leaned against the wall as he watched his mysterious helper clear the entrance to the tunnel as he had instructed. She peered into the tunnel, then looked back at him with a look of puzzlement on her face.

"You live down there?"

He nodded slowly. "We still have a long way to go." He studied her face for a moment. "You can leave me here. Someone will find me."

She looked at him, surveying his condition. "No. You can't walk all that way alone." Dusting her hands off, she again placed his arm around her shoulders, gripped him around the waist, and braced herself for the journey.

Back in Father's chamber, Catherine was pleading her case. "Something's wrong, I know it. I can feel it. He's hurt."

Father paced the floor. "Why on Earth does he continue to put himself at risk like this? He has a family to think about."

Catherine's frustration was surfacing. "That doesn't matter now. We've got to find him!"

"You're right. We'll get Pascal and William then check with the lookouts. Someone must have seen which tunnels he used. We'll send messages out on the pipes and will begin searching." He stopped a moment as he saw the near panic on Catherine's face. He gently touched her arm, "We will find him, dear. We will."

They had travelled for quite some time before Vincent finally called for a break. He could sense her fatigue as well as his own pain. She gently rested him against the wall of the tunnel, and then fell against the other wall in exhaustion and for the first time since their meeting, he truly studied this strange woman.

She was about the same height as Catherine, her eyes were a similar grey-green and even though she looked a little heavier, she had a neat compact build. Her hair fell to her shoulders and was slightly darker than his wife's and her skin was lightly freckled. She was so similar to Catherine he thought or maybe he just liked that type as Catherine would say.

"What's your name?" he finally asked.

She glanced over at him and looked a little confused. "It's Morgan, Morgan Church. What's yours?"

"Vincent," was his only answer. There was a moment of silence between them but she did not pursue it.

"Don't you want to sit down for awhile?" she asked with obvious concern.

"I can't."

"It hurts that bad, huh?"

He just nodded then tried to find something to focus his attention on. "Why did you help me? You don't know me. I could have meant to harm you."

Morgan stared at him then defiantly lifted her chin. "Because it was the right thing to do. Besides, in your condition, you couldn't do a lot of damage, could you?"

Vincent managed a smile. "No, but you still took a great risk."

Morgan relaxed a little more against the wall. "I guess it was the way I was brought up. My father taught me it was my responsibility to help people when I could. I remember once when I was real little, he saw a family on the side of the road. Their car had broken down and they were stranded. He stopped and tried to fix it, but couldn't, so he decided to drive them home."

Her head leaned back against the wall and she smiled at the memory.

"There were four of them and four of us. I will remember to my dying day eight people packed into that car as he drove them across town to their house."

They both laughed. "They offered him money but he refused. He always refused. To him, it was an insult to offer money for doing what was right."

"He sounds like an honorable man."

The smile changed quickly to a look of loss. "He was. He died a few years ago."

Vincent shifted uneasily as he felt her pain and his own.

She stood up again. "Maybe we should get moving before you completely lock up."

"Won't someone be looking for you soon?"

"No. They think I went back to the hotel. After the rehearsal we had, I doubt any of them would miss me too much anyway."

Meanwhile, Father had questioned the lookouts and could determine in which direction Vincent was last seen heading. As Catherine waited impatiently, he organized several search parties and dispatched them. As he prepared to leave with Pascal's group, Catherine followed behind. Father turned to her. "Where are you going, Catherine?"

She looked at him with her jaw set in determination. "You don't think I'm going to sit here and knit while Vincent's out there hurt, do you? "

Father had to admit he admired the woman's spirit and the image of her quietly knitting brought a chuckle. "No, I suppose not. Let's go."

At that very moment, the object of this manhunt was painfully maneuvering his way through the tunnels with the help of a topsider he barely knew.

Morgan was not beginning to question why she had gotten herself into this situation. After all, hadn't she also learned that danger lurked around every corner. How many times had her good intentions been used and abused in the past. But there was something about this man that pushed aside her misgivings. There was an honesty in his eyes she hadn't seen in a long time and she couldn't help but respond to it.

The search party had traveled for some time before coming to a fork in the tunnels. Father checked his map and decided they should take the one to the left. Catherine disagreed. "This way," she insisted.

Father tried to quietly dissuade her. "The maps are very specific, Catherine."

"He's down there, I can feel him close." She started down the tunnel, then looked back at Father. "Are you coming, or do I go alone?"

It was pointless to argue with her when she was this determined. Anyway, he had learned the strength of their bond could make the impossible possible.

"Are you sure, Catherine? We could be wasting valuable time."

"I'm sure."

They continued onward, guided by Catherine's connection to Vincent. With each step she could feel his pain in her heart and it was getting closer. They had just made another sharp turn when Catherine stopped suddenly and gasped.

"Vincent!" Ahead of them were two lone figures.

Catherine ran to him with the others following closely behind. Her eyes and heart sought the cause of his pain.

"Vincent, I'm here. Where are you hurt?" She ignored the stranger acting as his crutch until Father and the others lowered Vincent to the floor for Father to begin his work. Catherine then turned to his weary companion and a look of shock registered on her face.

"Morgan? Morgan Church?"

A spark of recognition flashed in the other woman's eyes as well. "Cathy Chandler?"

The two women stared at each other in disbelief for a few moments until Father interrupted. "I don't think it's too serious, but he doesn't need to be walking."

He quickly instructed one of the party to go back to the nearest section of pipe and signal for a stretcher. While they waited, they all nervously assessed the stranger now among them. Catherine in particular noted the disarrayed hair, the old disheveled sweat jacket and jeans she wore. Strange, she thought, she didn't much look like one of the world's wealthiest, most powerful women.

Morgan was also having difficulty believing what she was seeing. She hardly expected anyone to be down here, especially Cathy Chandler. Who were these people dressed in patchwork rags? What had she stumbled into with her good intentions? Regardless of who they were, they seemed to be here out of concern for one of their own and not because they were simply doing a job.

Sometime later, as they loaded Vincent onto the stretcher, Father gave instructions for Pascal to lead their guest back to the exit. At hearing his orders, Vincent objected strongly. "Father, she saved my life. I owe her more than a polite dismissal."

Father looked over at her, evaluating the risk. She'd already seen enough to do some serious damage to their world. Perhaps some time in the community, learning of its people and the need for its protection would be wise.

"You're right." He walked over to her and extended the invitation and she readily accepted.

While Father and Catherine attended to Vincent's injuries, Morgan sat in the study as the object of the children's curiosity. That was something else she hadn't expected, children. The vastness of this world unto itself astounded her and her mind was reeling with the implications.

In the hospital chamber, Father had finished his work. "You were lucky. All you have is a dislocated hip and some deep bruising. You'll be sore for awhile but there no permanent damage. Perhaps you will see this as a warning?"

The lack of response told Father it was useless. "I'll go see to our guest while you two talk." He nodded in Catherine's direction then left quickly.

Catherine took his hand in hers as she eased down to sit on the bed beside him. "You scared me."

"I'm sorry."

"I know." She leaned over and kissed him as a meaningful silence fell between them. Smiling, she said, "I let you go out for awhile and you go pick up the famous Morgan Church."

Vincent pretended to be insulted by her insinuation. "I did not PICK UP anyone. Actually, she picked me up.... off the ground. Who is Morgan Church?"

She looked at him in astonishment, then thought better of it. "That's right, you don't follow popular music, do you?" He still looked confused. "Let me tell you about the lady I caught you falling all over."

She got comfortable as she assimilated the facts as she remembered them.

"Morgan Church is one of the most prolific song writers in the world today. She's won every award imaginable, she's set records in the industry that may never be duplicated, and has turned her own record label into a multi-million dollar a year conglomerate. Not to mention her talents as a singer."

Vincent looked reasonably impressed so she continued.

"Her life reads like a fairy tale. She won a contest to meet her favorite rock star. During that meeting, he discovered she could write so she soon became his primary writer. A little later, he discovered she could sing and soon they were the hottest duet in rock. During all this, they just happened to fall in love. They were married just as they were putting together the record label.

"Not long after that everything fell apart," she explained with sadness. "They had been married for about five years and were expecting their first child. I think she was about five or six months pregnant when the accident happened. They had been on vacation in Hawaii and were returning by their private jet. Just as the plane was landing, something went wrong with the landing gear and it crashed. She was the only survivor. She lost her husband and her baby as well as suffering some terrible injuries herself. She stayed in the hospital for over six months. It's been a long hard journey back for her.

"After that she seemed to throw herself into the work and became known for her inspiring lyrics, her passionate performances, and her honesty. She has become a symbol of strength and integrity in a business that's known for a lack of it."

Vincent wondered aloud. "How do you know so much about her?"

"When I was in college, her songs meant a great deal to me. I guess they still do, especially the love songs. And I did do some work for her when I was with Dad's firm."

He saw the shadow of shame cross her face. "What is it?"

"As I've told you, at that time in my life, I was awfully shallow. I'm ashamed to admit that I dismissed her as not socially acceptable for my friendship."

He squeezed her hand. "That was then, Catherine, you've changed."

"I know, but I still feel guilty about it."

"Then perhaps this is your opportunity to correct that mistake. Perhaps destiny has arranged this meeting just for that purpose."

"Maybe."

"There's something else that concerns me. I feel such a strong feeling of hopelessness and despair in her as if she has no... passion for life anymore. After what you've told me, I understand why."

He thought for a moment. "Perhaps that's why you two have found each other again. You need to right an old wrong and she needs you to help her find her passion for life."

Catherine thought about it, but said nothing as Father led their guest into the chamber.

"I've given Morgan a small tour of our community," he announced.

She nodded enthusiastically, "Quite impressive." She then turned to Vincent. "How are you doing?"

"Much better, thanks to you."

"Thanks to me, you're in this mess to start with. By the way, thanks." At Catherine's confused look, Morgan explained. "He got that pushing me out of the way of a car."

"Oh, so that's what happened," Catherine exclaimed.

Morgan couldn't help but notice the look between the two. It was a look that spoke volumes and she turned away.

Father stepped toward her. "I hope you realize how important it is to all of us that our secret be kept. I'm sure you can imagine what would happen if we were to be discovered?"

Morgan nodded. "All too well." The room grew quiet as she looked sadly away. "I came from a small southern town. Back when I was a kid, everyone knew everyone AND their kids. Nobody locked their doors, they smiled at you on the street, and people looked out for each other."

She laughed a little. "I even understand about OUTDOOR plumbing. Your world is very much like that. It's all changed now. It's bigger and busier and the people don't know or care much about each other anymore."

She looked back at them, the pain obvious. "I have suffered that loss. Your world has nothing to fear from me." She changed the subject after a moment's silence. "There is something I have to know."

"You can ask anything," Vincent assured her.

She looked at Catherine. "I don't understand your connection. This is NOT Cathy Chandler's style."

The lawyer instinct in Catherine did not let her miss her opportunity. "You're right, but I'm not that

Cathy Chandler anymore."

She walked over and placed her hand on Morgan's arm. "The old Cathy Chandler made a major mistake in dismissing you as not worthy of my interest and I've long regretted that. I hope you can forgive my arrogance and let me make amends."

Morgan was momentarily taken aback by the sincerity that shone from those smiling eyes. "I don't see why not. You didn't do anything that many others haven't done before."

Catherine smiled warmly and embraced her. As she did, she could feel her tense beneath her touch. "Please sit down and I'll tell you the whole story."

Father left and Catherine resumed her position next to Vincent on the bed. Morgan assumed the chair by the bed and listened with awe at the story Cathy lovingly told. She noticed the looks that passed between the two of them and could almost feel the passion. Just as Catherine was telling her about the wedding, Mary walked in with the baby and Jacob in tow. "Excuse me, Catherine, but we've run out of bottled milk and little Katie is hungry."

"Oh yes. Morgan, this is Mary and the young man there is our son, Jacob." Mary then handed the infant to her mother as Catherine began undoing her blouse. "And this precious thing is our daughter."

The baby began to nurse and Jacob crawled up on the bed and gave his father a warm hug.

Morgan watched the scene in growing discomfort. She saw the tender look that passed from mother to child and then again she felt the heat of the intimate lover's look that passed from Vincent to Catherine. Suddenly, her eyes began to burn and she was overwhelmed by the memories of what might have been.

Vincent could sense the despair and turned his eyes to see their guest looking away, struggling with her feelings. Catherine's eyes followed Vincent's and they both felt the anguish. Before either could speak, Morgan quickly got up and left the room.

"I didn't think," moaned Catherine.

"It's all right, Catherine, she needs to face her demons. If the wound is to heal, it must first be cleansed." He looked deep into her eyes. "She helped you find peace with your past, after the baby is finished, perhaps you can help her find peace with hers."

Catherine later found Morgan sitting on the ledge near the falls. One look at the swollen red eyes told her of the pain.

"How did you manage to find your way here?"

"I'm good at directions, I guess," she said, as she tried desperately to hide the tear that slid down her cheek.

They sat for awhile in silence as Morgan fought to control her emotions. Finally Catherine decided to press the issue.

"Vincent told me about the argument." When Morgan looked at her in surprise, she explained, "He overheard your conversation with someone named Danny."

"Oh."

Catherine watched her stare at her hands as she struggled with her thoughts. "We'd like to help if we could."

Morgan's first instinct was to slam the emotional doors shut and change the subject, but something deeper inside responded to Catherine's concern. For so long she had not allowed anyone a glimpse of what lay beyond those doors, but now she battled her own confinement. To let someone

in again would bring only pain, but that sterile aloneness was destroying her. Slowly the doors opened a bit more.

"When David died and I lost the baby, I couldn't deal with the emotional and physical pain at the same time. Just to survive, I shut down all my emotions. As I started to get better physically, it was easier to keep it that way. Until now, that is."

Catherine remembered all the beautiful songs she had written since the accident. "But you wrote and sang some of the most beautiful and poignant songs I've ever heard."

Morgan got up and walked around. "All based on memories. The songs were my way of reliving what we had, if only for a few minutes. They were my way of making it last forever."

Catherine again felt the sadness welling up. "They were beautiful memories. Memories that touched the lives of so many. There are people out there who fell in love to your music and it will always be a part of their lives. And so many people who have difficulty expressing themselves used your songs to say what they couldn't. Your gift for words and music touched their hearts and made them smile or shed a tear. Listening to the feeling and the passion you put into your songs affected us all."

Her words affected her deeply. "But what about me? How do I fill the emptiness? How can I continue to write about love when I can't feel it anymore? Memories can be hollow things once the passion is gone."

"You can't feel love anymore because you've shut yourself off from everybody. You've depended on memories for too long. You have to tear down that wall and feel what's going on around you."

Morgan sighed deeply and ran her fingers through her auburn hair. The door opened a bit more.

"My son would have been ten this year. I was far enough along for them to know it was a boy."

"Oh."

"Every time I see a kid that age, I wonder what he would have been like and it hurts."

"I'm sure it must." Catherine stood up and moved close to her.

"You know what I miss the most?"

Catherine shook her head in response.

"The hugs. Isn't that silly? Oh sure, people in this business hug all the time, but it's not because they care. I miss that feeling of completely letting go in someone's arms and allowing them to be strong. You see, everybody seems to think I can fix everything. Well I can't. I just can't."

"Nobody can do that." Catherine could feel the frustration in her, the desperate need to reach out. Suddenly the door slammed again. She could see Morgan's jaw tighten and her back and shoulders straighten noticeably.

"If you don't mind, I need some time to myself to work it out."

At first Catherine was going to honor her request but something snapped inside. She turned to face her companion.

"I DO mind. Part of your problem is working things out alone. You don't have to. I won't let you shut that door again." With determination, she walked over to her and locked her in a tight hug. Morgan stiffened and refused to respond for a moment, but then the walls crumbled as Catherine stroked her hair and repeated quietly, "It's all right, let it go." Soon she felt her arms holding onto her as the tears flowed.

Morgan stayed in the tunnels for a few more days after that. She spent the time getting closer to the people and learning about their lives, but mostly, she spent time with Catherine and her family.

They would spend hours talking and Catherine made a point of hugging her frequently and freely, in an effort to get Morgan to reach out more openly. The friendship that developed between them in a few days enriched everyone.

By the time Morgan made her decision to return, everyone had noticed the change in her. She seemed always to have a smile on her face and no longer avoided the children. Jacob in particular developed quite a crush on Mommy's friend and Vincent encouraged it. The most startling change was her readiness to get involved with people again.

What wasn't so obvious, was the struggle still going on inside Morgan. At times she still wanted to retreat into the safety behind those emotional doors, but now she had found the strength and the inspiration to fight it. What's more, she was beginning to believe in love again. Watching Vincent and Catherine and their children together wasn't painful to her anymore because she had followed Catherine's advice and opened herself to the feelings around her.

Suddenly, she found herself depending less and less on memories of her past for inspiration and more and more on the love she now witnessed. By the end of her stay she could be found with pen in hand scribbling away.

Her last day Below was spent saying goodbye to everyone and leaving them with an impromptu concert. Jacob hugged her tightly and she held the baby for a long time before following Vincent and Catherine to the Central Park threshold. Although Vincent was still quite sore, he felt this goodbye was going to be hard for Catherine and he wanted to be there for her.

"Well, I guess this is it." Morgan was desperately trying to make it easy for everyone.

Vincent walked over to her and hugged her. She responded in kind. "You know you are welcome here anytime for a visit, or if you need us." He felt her nod against him then he pulled back to look into her face. "Catherine and I have been enriched by your friendship and you will always hold a special place in our hearts."

"As you will in mine." She smiled now, fighting her tears. "I'll be back."

"Good. I'll look forward to it."

Morgan then moved over to Catherine. "How can I thank you?"

"You don't. You've given me as much or more than I could ever give you."

They stared at each other for a moment as Catherine waited for Morgan to reach out first. With some effort and great relief, Morgan reached out and warmly embraced her. Tears streaked down Catherine's face, as she realized just how difficult that has been for her friend. It was a victory she would long remember.

Vincent watched the scene and felt the emotions. This small victory meant a lot to Catherine and it was a turning point for Morgan. During the last few days, he had watched their friendship blossom and he had so enjoyed seeing Catherine laughing and enjoying herself in this way. Their conversations and antics had livened up the entire community and he could feel the joy in his wife. They both had indeed made peace with their pasts.

"I'd better get going," Morgan said as she pulled away. "I've got a lot of work to do."

She winked at Catherine and Vincent could tell they were plotting something.

"Our project is still on, isn't it?" she whispered.

"Oh yes," was Catherine's reply.

"Good. I'll be in touch later."

They watched as Morgan walked away, singing some interesting little tune to which Catherine fell

back into Vincent's arms laughing. "I'm gonna miss her."

"I know you will, so will I. She's quite an..... unusual person." He turned her around. "By the way, what's this project you were talking about?"

"Just a little surprise for everyone, especially you. I don't care what you do to me, I won't tell."

He leaned very close to her ear and whispered a suggestion or two in her ear. "I still won't tell you, but can we try that anyway?"

Two weeks later everyone was herded into the Great Hall. Mouse, William, Cullen, and Catherine had been busy working on their "project" and now was the unveiling.

The doors of the Great Hall were opened to reveal chairs lined up in neat rows facing a giant screen TV. Catherine explained that Morgan had purchased the equipment for a specific reason. Since most of the community's residents could not attend her concert, especially Vincent, Morgan had arranged for it to be taped and had a VCR and the tapes sent to Catherine.

Soon everyone had found a seat in front of the screen, with Vincent and Catherine securing a place of honor on the front row. As the tape began, Morgan dedicated the entire concert to "two people who reminded me just what love is all about and helped me discover passion all over again."

She then proceeded to do several of her songs with an enthusiasm and passion that had been lacking before.

At the end she sang her rendition of "Love is a Wonderful Thing." A song that everyone knew was meant to describe her feelings about her visit. But when she sang "Wind Beneath My Wings," there wasn't a dry eye in the room. She sang it with such emotion, that the concert audience fell silent for a moment until they erupted into a standing ovation. In the Great Hall, the results were much the same.

Catherine leaned into Vincent and whispered, "I love you and you are the wind beneath my wings."

He put his arm around her and responded, "Love truly is a wonderful thing."

Much later that night, they let their passion sweep them away Below, and Above Morgan smiled to herself as she wrote yet another special song inspired by passions renewed.

END