

EVERYTHING TO LOSE

by Sandy P. Shelton

(from All Things Are Possible VII)

The door creaked slightly as Vincent gently pushed it open. He held his breath in the hope he had not awakened his young son. Once assured he had not, he looked into the room and saw the child sleeping peacefully. He smiled contentedly. It was hard to believe his son would be five years old in a couple of months. He was growing up so fast.

Vincent moved quietly to the next door and opened it easily with a slight push. Inside the dimly lit room, lay his beautiful young daughter. Little Mary Catherine was curled up in her small bed, her long light brown hair fanned out over her pillow. She was a lot like her mother and that fact made her very special to her proud father. His little angel, as he called her, would be three in February. That little girl had him neatly wrapped around her little finger and she knew it.

After leaving his daughter's room, Vincent returned to the master bedroom of the apartment he shared with Catherine. Before slipping beneath the warmth of the covers, he took a moment to study the serene face of his wife. A few rays of moonlight had found their way through the sheers on the balcony doors and were bathing her face in a soft glow. She was so beautiful she almost took his breath away.

She was peaceful now, but only a few hours ago her passion had burned out of control. Her passion — it had been unquenchable since her recovery from the auto accident. But he recognized it for what it was. As with her other pregnancy, Catherine's hormones were out of balance and their effect on her was — exhausting for him.

He slipped quietly under the covers but just as his head hit the pillow, he felt her hand on his arm. *Oh no*, he moaned to himself. To her he said, "I'm sorry if I awakened you."

"Are the kids all right?" she asked.

That soft, raspy quality of her voice always had a way of making him want to take her in his arms like a sleepy child. Tonight, he didn't dare. He well knew what one touch would lead to in her current state of raging hormones.

"They're sleeping," he replied.

Watching her out of the corner of his eye, he saw her roll over onto her back and stretch lazily. As the covers worked down a little, her nudity from their earlier love-making became clearly evident. Her breasts were peeking out from under the comforter and the sight almost made him laugh. Two months ago, he would have taken advantage of the moment, but her demands on him lately had left him thoroughly exhausted.

She rolled back over toward him and snuggled up close. When her fingers began toying with the hair covering his chest, he pretended not to notice. He briefly searched their strong connection and could tell she was adrift in that magical place between slumber and wakefulness.

"Go back to sleep," he whispered.

In response, she draped her leg over his and pulled herself closer. "Do you want to make love again?"

Before he could answer, he could feel her slipping deeper into sleep. He remained still until he was certain she was fast asleep. He lay there for some time thinking about the absurdity of the situation. A few years ago, all he could think of was making love to Catherine. Those erotic thoughts invaded his dreams and were constantly on his mind while awake. It was all he could do then to keep his distance from her. What he would have given back then to share a bed with her as he was doing now.

He sighed. *Maybe they were both just getting older*, he thought. The more he thought about it, the more he realized it was just a temporary condition brought on by her pregnancy and soon things would get back on an even keel. After that, he knew there would be no more love-making for several months. That thought brought about mixed feelings. Yes, he would get his rest, but such a long period without the physical release he had become so addicted to was quite unsettling. In fact, he found himself becoming very agitated.

"Catherine," he whispered. When she didn't respond, he stroked her shoulder and called out to her in a louder voice. "Catherine."

"What?" she responded in a very sleepy voice.

"Are you awake?"

She lifted her head and yawned. "I am now. What is it? Is something wrong?"

He couldn't remember ever feeling so foolish. "Uh — no. I just..."

After taking a deep breath, Catherine rubbed her eyes and tried to focus them on her husband. "You what?"

"Never mind. Go back to sleep. I'm sorry I disturbed you."

"What I find disturbing is the fact that you woke me and now won't tell me why." She tugged at his chest hair threateningly. "Confess," she demanded.

Vincent cleared his throat nervously. No matter how he tried to explain it, his little anxiety attack was going to sound foolish. But, heaven knows, she had awakened him from a sound sleep on more than one occasion over the past few weeks for a little gratification. It was only fair that he turn the tables.

Without giving her any warning, he grabbed her shoulders gently and pulled her down for a passionate kiss. When she managed to regain her balance, she pushed herself up off his chest.

"I didn't think you were interested in a repeat performance. I thought you were too tired and sleepy."

"I changed my mind," he responded as he tried to pull her down again.

"Wait a minute! Why the sudden change?"

He looked at her in total embarrassment. "I just started thinking about all those long cold nights without..."

Catherine smiled. "Oh, I see. You decided you had better get all you can before the well goes dry."

"Well — I suppose..."

"Vincent — don't be embarrassed. You can tell me."

Letting his fingers play with her hair gave him a moment to compose himself. "I have to admit that I'm not looking forward to the time we can no longer — make love. I know that over the past few years we've settled into a routine of sorts. I've found that routine — comforting."

Catherine began laughing. "You are getting old and very set in your ways!"

"It's all your fault. If you had not pursued me so shamelessly, I would have never known what I was missing."

"Ignorance is bliss, I suppose."

Vincent gently stroked her cheek with the back of his finger. "Not in this case," he responded softly. "That was a different life. I don't want to go back to it — not ever."

The conversation had taken an unexpected serious turn and, for a moment, they became lost in the memories. Catherine's finger began tracing a path along Vincent's nose and upper lip. That lip was one of the more fascinating parts of his body and she never missed an opportunity to explore it.

"With any luck, you won't have to — at least not for a few more years," she assured him.

He smiled as he looked up into her love-filled eyes. "I love you, Catherine. The thought of losing you..."

"Ssh — don't think about it. Just love me. Love me, Vincent."

With a devilish glint in his eyes, Vincent seized Catherine in his arms and quickly rolled her over onto her back. Once pinned helplessly beneath his strong body, she was completely at his mercy. Out of concern for her condition, however, he relented. "We're both too tired for this."

"Speak for yourself," she responded. "You know how I am when I'm pregnant. For the first few months, I have all this — energy. I can't seem to sit still and I don't need much sleep. I guess those little sperms of yours are super-charged." She continued her study of his mouth with her fingers.

"Super-charged is right. Even with a vasectomy, they hit the target. Catherine, I think we should take some drastic steps as far as birth control is concerned."

Catherine started laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"I just remembered a scene from a movie I saw. The couple went to bed wearing full body condoms."

After trying to visualize that image, Vincent simply shook his head. "I don't think anything short of a brick wall would do the trick for us."

"Well — it's about two months too late to worry about that now."

"Catherine — I am sorry about..."

"Don't say it. Don't even think it. This baby was meant to be. I believe that. There is no reason to be sorry." The determined look in her eyes silenced any argument he may have made.

"You really love being pregnant, don't you'?"

"Yes I do, but only because they're your babies. How can I explain what it means to me to give you children? In a sense, it's my way of assuring that you'll never be alone again — that you're not the last of your kind. Does that make any sense?"

"I can't think of one thing that's happened since the day I found you that has made sense. I struggled with that for a long time. Now — I don't give it much thought. Sometimes you just have to cast your certainties aside and simply accept life's mysteries without question."

"I couldn't agree with you more."

Vincent lowered his head and playfully rubbed his nose against hers.

She giggled then responded, "That tickles."

Her soft giggle of pleasure never failed to fill him with a great deal of satisfaction. He took great pride in being the man who could elicit those sounds. It had taken him some time and a lot of pain to realize that the gift of his love, support, and comfort was all she truly wanted of life. Despite what he was, he made her happy and nothing was more important to him than her happiness.

"Vincent?"

"Yes."

"Are you happy?" she asked.

Her strange question surprised him a little. "Why do you ask that?"

She shook her head slightly then allowed her fingers to gently follow the line of his broad shoulders. "I don't know. Sometimes I wonder if life with me hasn't overwhelmed you. You went from a very quiet, sheltered existence to the chaos of family life. In a short period of time, you fell in love, became a husband and father and have tried to balance a life between two very different worlds." She smiled wickedly. "You went from fantasizing about sex to trying to find a reliable way to keep me from getting pregnant. That's major culture shock."

"Yes and I'm enjoying every minute of it."

As he looked down into her loving, playful eyes, he could not resist the pull of her body. Their physical beings called to each other for completion and he no longer questioned it or fought it. He simply gave into it. He lowered his mouth to gently capture her soft, pliant lips. She gave herself up to him completely.

He wanted to take the time to savor her, to allow the taste and feel of her body to gently arouse him. There was no need to hurry. The urgency that consumed them in the beginning of their relationship had given way to a slower, more complete enjoyment of each other. Their love-making now lasted longer and was more fulfilling than ever before.

Her hands gently stroked and kneaded his shoulders and forearms as his kisses continued. There were times he felt as if he had waited all his life for that touch to set him free and it had. In her arms, he found the only absolute freedom he would ever know.

Moving away from her lips, he placed light kisses along the bridge of her nose, across her forehead, and down her temple. Her breath was warm against his neck and he could feel her heart beating against his. When she parted her legs, he maneuvered himself into the tender trap and allowed himself to be captured by her strong thighs.

As he lowered his body onto her, he felt the slight protruding roundness of her belly and pulled away slightly. "What is it?" she asked.

He balanced his weight on his knees and forearms. "I can feel the baby," he answered.

She giggled then responded, "That tickles."

Her soft giggle of pleasure never failed to fill him with a great deal of satisfaction. He took great pride in being the man who could elicit those sounds. It had taken him some time and a lot of pain to realize that the gift of his love, support, and comfort, was all she truly wanted of life. Despite what he was, he made her happy and nothing was more important to him than her happiness.

Pushing himself back up on his hands and knees, he carefully moved up and covered her delicate body with his own. He could feel the need in her calling to him, reaching into the very depths of his desire. Her arms and legs quickly enveloped him and pulled him down to her. Her hunger aroused his and her hands explored his body. He had signaled his desire for that touch by remaining still and holding himself slightly above her. That position gave her room to work her hands between them and take him in her hands.

The sensation of her hands touching him so intimately was an ecstasy beyond imaging. All his life he had longed for that touch and dared not think it was possible. But Catherine had shown her eagerness to please him and had indulged that longing. Her fingers stroking, caressing, squeezing, and fondling his most sensitive area released his most ardent passions. A growl escaped him as his head jerked backward. The urge to roar threatened to overpower him but his fear of awakening the children defeated it. An interruption now would be disastrous.

What she did next, however, nearly destroyed all his resolve. He felt her hand encircle him and begin pulling him into her. He was so fascinated by watching and feeling what she was doing, he couldn't move. He watched as she hungrily pulled him into her warmth. Once he had penetrated, she slid her hands around to his buttocks and pulled him down and deeper into her.

"Yes," she moaned. "That feels so good. Go deeper."

His own sensation of being inside her had momentarily obliterated everything around them. To Vincent, all that existed was their physical connection and the need to go deeper and faster. That need brought on the instinctive flexing of his hips as his body strained to complete the most natural of acts between a man and a woman.

They moved together as one as they sought release. Catherine absorbed each thrust and cried out for more as their passion grew. With every ounce of his being, Vincent strove to achieve the release they both craved and when it happened — their mutual climaxes were shattering.

Catherine's body quivered beneath him as he thrust weakly a few more times. When he finally managed to regain some control of his senses, he became vividly aware of how weak he felt. Opening his eyes slowly, he focused them on Catherine's deeply flushed face. Her skin was damp with perspiration and her hair was in wild disarray. It was a look he enjoyed.

"Catherine," he managed to say despite his inability to think clearly. Although he could feel her sense of fulfillment and total contentment, he had to ask. "Are you all right?"

She opened her eyes and tried to focus them on his. It took several seconds for her to manage it but when she did, the emotion in them was overpowering. Vincent could only stare in wonder at the peace and love he found there.

"I feel wonderful. What about you?"

He smiled when he felt her hands once again glide over his shoulders. "Much better."

They shared a brief, gentle kiss just before Vincent lifted himself off of her and lay on his side facing her. She took a deep breath, pulled up the covers, then turned to face him. In moments like these, words were not needed.

As Vincent studied Catherine and thought about how beautiful she was and how fortunate he was, a strange expression came over her face.

"What? What is it?" he asked with concern.

"A life that can never be."

"I remember those words. For a while, I actually believed them."

"I know. I know the courage it took to put aside those beliefs."

He tenderly caressed her cheek. "Courage had nothing to do with it. If I had believed in our love as you did, there would have been no illness, no..."

"Vincent — I don't want to think about those times. I just want to live in the moment. We found each other again, we have two — no, three children, and we are happy. That's all that matters."

"You're right."

A warm smile spread across Catherine's face. "I love you, Vincent. Never doubt that."

"I don't. Now — tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Why is my daughter keeping her Halloween costume such a secret?"

Catherine laughed loudly. "It's all her idea and I promised her I wouldn't tell. It's one of those mother/daughter things."

"Jacob and I are in for a lot of that, I suppose."

"You two have all those father/son things. Besides, us girls have to stick together."

A very exhausted sigh escaped him. "What do you suppose this one will be?" he asked as he stroked her stomach.

"Special," was all she said.

"You are incredible, Catherine."

"I'll remember you said that the next time you accuse me of being stubborn."

"I never called you stubborn — just — determined."

Catherine started laughing then playfully tweaked his furry nose. "Goodnight, Vincent."
"Goodnight, Catherine."

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The next morning, Vincent left the children with Mary and began a journey deep into the catacombs. Since his return from the apartment before dawn, a strange message had been tapped repeatedly on the pipes. The cryptic words were directed to him and simply said, "*Be warned. The walls grow thin.*" That warning, or whatever it was, had been repeated continuously for several hours. Despite Father's objections, Vincent had decided to follow

the sound along the pipe to determine its source. Even though the trail led him into the catacombs, he was determined not to leave the challenge unanswered.

He walked alone through the dark tunnels. Father had argued that he should take someone with him but no one could move as fast or as quietly as he. Furthermore, he knew the catacombs better than anyone in the community: He realized it was probably just someone having a little fun with them anyway and there was no need to waste anyone else's time chasing ghosts. He laughed at that thought. *After all, it was almost Halloween.*

He followed the pipes until they disappeared into the ground but still the message could be heard. *Where was it coming from — the very ground itself?* he wondered. He searched the area to try to find some way down but there just wasn't one. As he stood in the middle of one of the smallest, darkest tunnels, the tapping suddenly stopped.

"Vincent."

Quickly, Vincent turned toward the sound but no one was there. He was still alone in the darkness.

"The walls grow thin."

This time he spun around in the opposite direction ready to attack. Again, no one was there. His eyes searched the darkness. Every sense was alerted to possible danger. "Who are you?" he called out to the mysterious voice.

"Take heed, Vincent. The way is dark. All can be lost if you do not heed the warning?"

"Who are you? What does this warning mean?" At that point, Vincent couldn't determine if he was imaging the voice or if someone was actually there. He could not sense the presence of anyone other than himself — but how?

"The way is dark — be warned."

Vincent spun around again. The voice seemed to be echoing off the rock walls. "Who are you? Where are you?" he shouted in frustration. There was no answer. Only the sound of water dripping down the wall of the tunnel broke the silence. The voice was not heard again.

All the way back to the main hub, Vincent thought about the message. Was it a practical joke engineered by Mouse and some of the children or was someone truly trying to warn him of some impending danger? "What danger?" he mumbled to himself. Catherine was not working on anything particularly dangerous right now. The children were happy and healthy. He shook his head and decided it was someone's idea of a joke but something in the back of his mind didn't quite believe it.

Although Vincent told Father the messages were nothing more than a childish prank, he couldn't shake the haunting quality of the message itself. But more disturbing than that was the fact they still continued with no clue as to who the prankster was.

Vincent's fear of what affect the mysterious messages might have on Catherine prevented him from sharing the mystery with her. The risk just wasn't worth taking. He reasoned that eventually the anonymous messenger would grow tired of his little game and the messages would stop. That is, if he didn't get his hands on him first.

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Catherine sat at her desk in the D.A.'s office lost in the task of researching the backgrounds of several defense witnesses. Just as the murder trial Joe was prosecuting was going to trial,

the defense had surprised everyone with a new list of witnesses leaving the prosecution team precious little time to prepare. Luckily, Joe got a continuance but everyone in the office had been going nonstop all afternoon. She was so lost in the work, she didn't hear Joe approach.

"Hey, Chandler."

Catherine almost jumped out of her seat. "You shouldn't creep up on someone like that."

"Come on, Radcliffe. Since when does anyone around here creep?"

She favored him with her most charming smile. "Well — if you want names..."

"Never mind. Didn't you tell me you had a doctor's appointment today?"

Panic stricken, Catherine looked at her watch. She only had thirty minutes to get to Peter's office. "Oh God! I've got to go!"

"Cathy..."

Joe only used that name and that tone of voice when he was concerned. As she gathered her things, she took a moment to touch his arm and smile. "Don't worry."

"I can't help it. You've been pushing yourself way too hard lately. Hell — you've done twice the work of anyone in this office."

"So why are you complaining?" she asked playfully.

"You ... don't look ... well. I mean ...you look... I don't know. Cathy, this doctor's appointment, is something wrong?"

This was her opportunity to tell him that she was pregnant again. She had already put it off long enough and she couldn't hide it much longer. Her mouth opened but the words did not come out. For some reason she didn't understand, she just couldn't say the words.

"Cathy'?" Joe prompted.

"No. It's nothing serious. I'll tell you about it later. If I don't get going, I'll be late." Impulsively, she kissed her friend on the cheek and walked away. On the elevator ride down, she couldn't help but wonder why she couldn't tell Joe. That bewilderment and her guilt suddenly became a very heavy burden.

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The examination was finished and Catherine sat in Peter's office alone. He was analyzing the blood work himself to prevent questions he couldn't answer. Her good friend took a lot of personal risks to protect her and the people Below and she loved him dearly.

The door opened and Peter walked in carrying a large file folder. He closed the door then walked over and placed a kiss on her cheek. "I bet you thought I'd forgotten you."

As he took a seat across the desk from her, she replied. "I wouldn't let you if you tried."

"Believe me, honey, I could never forget you." His smile was followed by an uncomfortable silence.

"Are you going to tell me what you found or do we make small talk all day?"

Peter smiled. "You know me too well."

"What is it, Peter?" she asked fearfully.

"The blood work. You have a very high level of oxygen in your blood."

"Is that bad?"

After studying the reports one more time, Peter responded. "I don't know. It explains all this nervous energy you told me about. Vincent's blood is highly oxygenated."

Catherine remembered what the doctor in the emergency room had told her after her car accident about what he called the *strange results* of her blood work. "It's because of the baby isn't it?"

"To be more precise — babies," Peter corrected her. "Every child of Vincent's you've carried has shared his uniqueness to some degree. You share your blood supply with that child."

That thought didn't bother her, it never had. She shared her body with Vincent, sharing it with his children only seemed natural. Settling back in the chair, she studied Peter's face. He was obviously worried about much more.

"There's more, isn't there?"

"Yes," he reluctantly admitted. "I'm concerned about your blood pressure too."

"Could that be a result of the oxygen level?"

"Possibly, and that is what worries me. Vincent has lived with those levels all his life. Your body has not. I'm concerned at what kind of stress this is putting on you."

She leaned forward. "Peter — is there a chance I could lose the baby?"

"I don't think we need to worry about that now. I'll put you on a low salt diet and I want you to rest whether you feel tired or not. I also want you to get one of those home blood pressure kits and use it twice a day. Record the levels and I want to see you in a week. Cathy, I'm going to watch over you like ... a mother hen."

Catherine laughed. "You and about a hundred others."

"That's what you get for being so lovable." Her blush was endearing. "Cathy, have you told Joe yet?"

The guilt hit her again. "No."

"You won't be able to hide it for long. What's the problem?" he asked.

Again, Catherine found herself unable to explain, even to herself, why she couldn't tell him. "I don't know. I honestly don't know. Maybe..." she hesitated.

"Maybe what?"

"For a while now, I've had this feeling..."

"Come on, Cathy. Let's hear it."

Reluctantly, she began sharing feelings with Peter that she had not shared with Vincent. "Peter, I think ... no ... I'm almost certain this baby is going to be like Vincent."

Peter sat back in his chair and stared at her intently. "What do you base that on?"

"Nothing scientific I can assure you. I can't explain it ... I just ... I just know. That's why we can't let anything happen to this child. If it's like him, do you realize what that means?"

"Do you?"

She stared back at him. "Yes, I do and I'm prepared to sacrifice everything to give him a child in his own image."

"Even the child's happiness? Cathy, think about what his life has been like — the pain, the hiding, the fear."

"Our child will come into the world with the advantage of a loving family and a father who can understand. Vincent did not have those advantages."

Peter simply stared at her in amazement. She had to be the most determined, or stubborn, woman he had ever met. "If you're sure this is what you want, I will stand by you. You know that. Whether or not this child is like Vincent, I want you and your baby to make it through this healthy and happy."

Tears burned her eyes. "I know. Peter, I love him. This will be our last child — nothing can happen to it."

Peter stood up and walked around the desk. "We'll all do everything we can to make sure that happens." He took Catherine's hand in his. "Cathy, I want you to take it easy. May I make a suggestion?"

"Of course," she answered with a warm smile.

"Since you are reluctant to let anyone Above know about this pregnancy because of your fear..."

"Not fear, Peter." she corrected him.

"I'm sorry. Because of your conviction about this child. Perhaps it would be wise for you to take an extended leave from work before people begin to notice. I can take care of the appropriate paperwork. It should take only a few days."

"I hate to leave Joe in such a mess at the office."

"You have to decide, Cathy. This pregnancy could be difficult and, if the child is like Vincent, we won't know what to expect. A baby like that will need a lot of attention in those first few months. Vincent did."

She closed her eyes for a moment and chewed her bottom lip. "I always said I would choose my family over my job if the time ever came. I think the time has come. I guess I can always practice law in some fashion but my children... Jake and Katie are growing up so fast and a child like Vincent would need more of me." Her decision was made. "Put the paperwork through."

"I think it's for the best, Cathy. I really do."

"Thanks, Peter." She stood up and hugged her friend. "Promise me you won't tell Vincent about what I told you."

"He probably suspects something but I promise not to discuss it with him."

"You're a good man, Peter Alcott," Catherine responded with a chuckle.

"Remember that when you get my bill."

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When Vincent arrived on the balcony late that night, he fully expected to be pulled into the bedroom and seduced by his over-zealous wife. Instead, he found her lying quietly in bed staring at the ceiling. Even when he opened the doors and walked in, she hardly

acknowledged his presence. *Strange*, he thought. He wasn't sure if he was disappointed or relieved.

"Catherine."

She finally looked at him and smiled. "Hello, Vincent."

Her lack of enthusiasm stunned him. Cautiously, he walked over and sat on the bed next to her. "Are you all right, Catherine?" he asked.

"I'm fine. It's just been a long day."

Even after she caressed his cheek and tenderly kissed him, he couldn't shake the feeling of distance between them. She seemed to be pulling away from him.

"Why don't you change clothes and come to bed," she suggested.

After taking her suggestion, he lay beside her in silence wondering what had happened. "Is something wrong?"

She slid down under the comforter then turned toward him with the strangest look on her face.

"Nothing is wrong," she responded.

"You're frightening me, Catherine."

"I'm sorry. I was just thinking about how extraordinary you are."

An embarrassed smile was his response. "Most people just call me unusual." A strange moment of silence elapsed between them.

"Catherine, tell me what's troubling you."

For a moment, she seemed to be considering telling him something but the moment passed. "I was thinking about either taking an extended leave of absence or just resigning."

"Catherine!"

"While I carried Jake, I was isolated and scared to death. With Katie, I worked through most of it. If this is my last pregnancy, I want to savor it — that's all."

Vincent searched their connection for more. "I have a feeling something's wrong. What is it you're not telling me?"

Catherine smiled warmly then stroked his nose with her index finger. "You worry too much."

"Catherine, you are my life. You have given me so much. I worry that you sacrifice too much for me."

"I sacrifice nothing and gain everything. You've made all my dreams come true and have given me more happiness than I ever imagined existed. I didn't say I wanted to give up my life Above, I just want to take some time out to enjoy my family. I have enough money to do that. A lot of women don't have that choice."

He still wasn't convinced that was all there was to it. "Are you sure that's all it is?"

"Yes. Stop worrying."

"I can't help it."

Catherine's reassuring smile faded a bit. "I am concerned about how Joe will take it. He means a lot to me and I hate leaving him short-handed right now."

"He loves you, Catherine. Your happiness and welfare are his main concern. They always have been."

"How do you always know the right thing to say?"

Vincent smiled and gently stroked her shoulder. "I just put words to what your heart is telling you."

She leaned down and kissed him again. "I love you, Vincent. Sleep well."

When she turned over onto her back and closed her eyes, he was shocked. He was sure their conversation was a prelude for a more intimate exchange and now she seemed totally disinterested. After the passion of the last weeks, he found the situation a little annoying. Arousal with no release was something he had found extremely difficult to deal with since he and Catherine had become lovers.

Thinking that she might be waiting for him to make a move, he pushed himself up on one arm. He then used his free hand to trace a path across her shoulder and into the hollow between her breasts. He followed that with a light nip on her shoulder.

Her response was a deep intake of air. "Vincent, please. I'm not up to it tonight."

Although there was no coldness in her voice, Vincent shivered. The times she had refused him could be counted on the fingers of one hand but he would not force the issue.

"Goodnight, Catherine. Rest."

He watched her until she fell asleep then rolled over and tried to make some sense of what was going on with her. It wasn't her lack of interest in making love that concerned him, it was the feeling he had that there was something she wasn't telling him. With that thought, he fell into a restless sleep.

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Anxiously, Catherine shuffled the papers in front of her as she awaited Joe's arrival. The neatly-typed pages contained the deliberately vague request for an extended family medical leave from Peter. It was all very official looking, but Peter had assured her that the medical terms would give no clue as to the real reason for the leave.

She nervously tapped the forms with her pen. Although she felt guilty about her deceit, she just couldn't bring herself to tell anyone about the baby. Why — she didn't know. She just knew, with every passing day, the child she carried was like Vincent. Perhaps that belief made her more protective and more determined to keep her secret life a secret. The sound of Joe's familiar voice interrupted her thoughts. She gathered the papers as she rose from her chair and called out to him.

"Joe, could I talk to you for a minute?"

A bright smile greeted her. "Sure, Radcliffe. Come in."

She followed him into his office and closed the door behind her.

"What's up?" he asked as he removed his jacket and began rolling up his sleeves.

This was going to be more difficult than she thought but it had to be done. She took a deep breath and began. "Joe, I know this comes at a bad time but it can't be helped."

Joe's smile quickly disappeared. "Why do I have the feeling I'm not going to like this?" he quipped as he sat down.

Catherine just smiled at him uneasily then stepped forward to place the forms before him.

He looked at them for a moment. "What's this?"

"It's an official request for a leave of absence."

He looked up at her in surprise. "What?"

His reaction was exactly what she had expected. "I need to take a break, Joe."

Anger replaced his surprise. "Then take a vacation."

She was now on the defensive and she didn't like that. "It's a little more involved than that."

He looked at the papers then back up at her. "What's wrong, Cathy?"

His voice now betrayed his fear and it deeply touched her. In that instant, his feelings for her had never been so obvious. "It's nothing ... that I can talk about right now. You've just got to trust me when I tell you I will be all right."

Joe quickly walked around his desk and looked into her eyes. "You haven't looked well lately. It's got to be serious for you to give up your work. For God's sake, Cathy, I'm your friend! You can tell me."

"You are my friend, Joe. That's why I'm asking you to trust me. Just put this through as quickly as you can."

"Cathy, ... I..."

"Please, Joe."

"I'll do everything I can. With your vacation time added, we can stretch this out to a year. God — I can't imagine you not being here for that long."

Catherine gently touched his arm. "I was gone for six months before," she reminded him.

"It was six months of hell. I remember it well."

The pain she could see in his eyes was very real. "This time, you will know that I am safe. I'll be with Vincent and the kids and I'll be in touch with you. But, Joe, I need the time. If I can't get the leave, then I'll — have to resign."

Joe looked deeply into her eyes. "It's that important?"

"Yes."

Joe shook his head in defeat. "I'll get the paperwork started."

A sigh of relief escaped her. "Thanks."

Once more, Joe looked at her with genuine concern. "Cathy, if I can do anything..."

"I'll ask. You can count on that."

As tears filled both their eyes, Catherine threw her arms around his shoulders and hugged him fiercely. He returned that embrace.

Exactly three days after their meeting, Catherine left the D.A.'s office behind her. With some regret and sadness, she closed the door on that part of her life. Whether she returned to it or not, the people and the good accomplished here would stay with her forever.

* * * * *

Although Vincent was relieved and happy to have Catherine in his life twenty-four hours a day, he was still concerned about the reason. The changes he had seen in her over the last few days disturbed him enough to seek Father's counsel. Perhaps, as a physician, he could shed some light on the problem.

Father listened patiently as Vincent revealed his fears. "Vincent, I must confess some concern on my own. Catherine has shown some troubling symptoms. She looks as if she's at least four months along when she's hardly three. Her blood pressure is elevated as well."

"Have you noticed how — swollen her face is?" Vincent asked.

"Yes, I have."

"Father, is Catherine in danger?"

The older man released a deep breath. "We're watching her closely. If there's a problem, we'll catch it."

Vincent wasn't convinced. "Father, women die in childbirth. You know that."

That bitter memory hurt Father deeply. The guilt he had lived with for so many years came roaring to life.

"I know that all too well."

Realizing the pain he had caused, Vincent moved to Father's side and placed his arm around his shoulders. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"Nonsense — you have every right to be concerned about your wife. I would be worried if you weren't," Father assured him.

"This is all my fault," Vincent declared angrily.

"No, Vincent. If it's anyone's fault, it's mine. Apparently, I didn't do the vasectomy properly. If I had, we wouldn't be having this discussion. You can't blame yourself for loving her. You both thought it was safe. It was my fault it wasn't."

"Father, you're an excellent doctor but I defy every medical principal you were taught. The procedure you learned works perfectly on a normal man. I'm not a normal man."

"Vincent, the fact that you fathered children with Catherine disproves the theory you're..."

"Go ahead and say it, Father — an animal."

"I don't believe that and neither should you. Whatever you are — you are my son and I love you. Catherine loves you as her husband," he tried to reassure his son.

"Thank you for reminding me of my many blessings," Vincent responded with a smile.

"Speaking of Catherine, unless those mysterious messages stop, it's going to be very difficult to keep her from finding out about them."

"I know. I've asked everyone not to discuss it in her presence."

"She's learned enough of our codes to figure it out eventually. Remember, she will be Below for quite a while. Have you managed to discover anything about their source?"

Vincent's eyes focused on the chessboard. In the middle of the board was the Queen.

"No. I have traced the message into the catacombs but it ends when the pipes disappear into the ground." He carefully picked up the game piece and studied it. "There's no possible way anyone could be below that level."

"If the messages weren't so specific, I'd attribute it to some sort of anomaly of nature."

"But the messages are specific to me and that's what disturbs me," Vincent replied.

Father scratched his chin and laughed softly. "If it weren't so annoying, it would make a great Halloween story."

Vincent laughed as he looked at Father. "Indeed!"

* * * * *

Halloween arrived with its usual fanfare. The children Below were running around trying to put together their costumes and to scare each other. The adults were decorating, cooking, and putting the final touches on the night's coming events.

Vincent watched the rituals he had taken part in as a child with added glee. This year, Jacob was old enough to take part in the activities with the other children. At this moment, he was racing through the tunnels with a group of boys wreaking havoc. He and Devin had done the same thing as boys.

His daughter, on the other hand, was still too young to understand what it was all about, but she was excited all the same. She and her mother had been whispering quite a bit lately, and spending a lot of time Above. He was certain it had something to do with costumes but Catherine's absence disturbed him none the less.

As he walked along the tunnels, a message was being tapped on the pipes. At first, he paid it little attention but when his name was mentioned and the words began the familiar litany, he stopped and listened. Again, he tried to follow the tapping to its source but to no avail. His frustration was growing by leaps and bounds.

"Who are you?" he shouted into the silence of the tunnels. The only response he received was the echo of his own voice.

Later that evening, Vincent dressed in his best clothes and helped Jacob get into his ghost attire. After finishing with his son, he stood back and took a good look. "Jacob, you are the most frightening ghost I have ever seen."

The little boy looked up at him with his shy blue eyes. They were the only things visible beneath the costume's head piece. "Do you really think so?"

"Absolutely!" Vincent answered proudly.

"Good. I'll go scare Katie."

"Jacob, wait. Take it easy on your sister, she's very young. And please don't give your mother a hard time. She doesn't feel all that well."

"Because she's preg..."

"The word is pregnant and yes, that is why."

Jacob leaned over and lowered his voice. "You don't think anyone could scare the baby out do you?"

Vincent laughed. "No Jacob, I don't think so, but let's not take any chances. I don't want anything to happen to her or your baby brother or sister."

"How many babies is Mommy going to have?"

His son's mind worked in mysterious ways sometimes. "This one will be the last one. I think the three of you will be all your mother and I can handle."

"Daddy, how did the baby get inside of Mommy?"

Vincent felt as if the blood had suddenly drained from his brain and his knees had become jelly. "Uh — Jacob — it's kind of complicated but I guess you could say I put it there —in a way that is."

"Why?"

Oh no. The dreaded why question. This could go on all night, Vincent thought. "Because we love each other. Jacob, are you sure you want to get into this tonight?"

The boy thought it over for a moment. "How did you put it inside her tummy?"

"Jacob, why are you asking all these questions?"

"The older boys said that was why boys have a penis and girls don't," the boy commented innocently.

Vincent could feel the heat rising to his face. *Where was Catherine?* "It has something to do with it."

Jacob's eyes reflected his sincerity. "They said you put your penis in Mommy. Is that true?"

A cold sweat broke out on Vincent forehead. He wanted to avoid the subject but he realized what affect that would have on his son. He couldn't do that.

"Yes, it's true but there's a lot more to it than you and those boys are old enough to understand. I'll answer all your questions as best I can. Just know that I love your mother and would do nothing to hurt her. When grown-ups feel that way about each other, they share their bodies. I — planted a seed in your mother. Her body will protect it and nurture it until it becomes a baby and is ready to be born. That's as simple as I can explain it."

"Did Mommy want you to do that?"

"Of course, Jacob. I would never force your mother to do anything she didn't want to do. That's something you should remember. Never force anyone to do anything against their will. Do you understand?"

"I think so. I think it's dumb though."

"You won't when you're older. Now, if you keep asking questions we won't get to go trick or treating Above."

Just then Vincent sensed Catherine's presence and looked up. She was standing in the doorway wearing a long, flowing Victorian dress. She was absolutely beautiful.

"Catherine!" he uttered as he rose to his feet. "You look lovely."

"Thank you, kind sir."

Her radiant smile, the gentle sweep of her long hair up off her neck, and the flattering way the dress accentuated her breasts took his breath away. He could only stare.

"Mommy!"

It was his daughter's voice but he couldn't see her. She was apparently hiding behind her mother. "Where's my little girl?"

Catherine reached behind her and led the little girl around to stand in front of her father. "She insisted on this costume," Catherine explained with just a touch of apprehension in her voice.

He looked at his daughter and felt the urge to laugh. The little girl was dressed up like a cat, a kitten to be exact, complete with a tail and whiskers. It was such an endearing sight, he wanted to cry.

"Like Daddy," the little girl declared proudly.

Vincent walked over to her and knelt down. "You look absolutely charming, little one. You truly look like Daddy's little — kitten."

"You're okay with it?" Catherine asked.

"Of course I am. I very proud my little girl wants to be like me. I'm very honored, Mary Catherine."

The little girl smiled happily. "Go up top — I want to go up top."

"As soon as the party here is over. If we don't hurry, we'll miss it," Catherine added.

The children took off down the tunnel and Vincent took Catherine's hand. "Would you do me the honor of accompanying me?"

"It would be my honor," she responded as she took his hand.

"The dress is beautiful, Catherine."

"I chose it because you can't tell I'm pregnant. It hides my stomach."

"It looks wonderful on you, pregnant or not."

As they walked down the tunnel after their errant offspring, Vincent leaned over close to Catherine's ear. "Jacob wanted to know how the baby got into your stomach."

Catherine stopped in her tracks. "What did you tell him?"

"I didn't tell him anything. He asked if it was true that I put my — penis in you."

"Where did he hear that?" she asked in surprise.

"The other boys."

"I don't know how I feel about them talking about us that way. It's kind of embarrassing. What did you say to Jake."

"I answered his questions for now but I think he'll have more."

The thought of trying to explain to her child the basics of reproduction was very unsettling. Her face grew suddenly warm. "You actually told him that you put..."

"I answered his question honestly. Would you have had me lie to him?"

"No, but can you imagine how that must have sounded to a child who doesn't understand all of it?"

He stopped for a moment and considered it. "I remember how shocked I was by it."

"I don't suppose there's any way we can protect him from what the other children tell him, is there?"

"No," Vincent answered simply. "We can only counter it with the truth and with constant reassurances that we love each other. The rest, he'll figure out."

"Hmm — that's a frightening thought?"

After the evening's festivities Below, Catherine and Vincent took the children Above to see the sights for a little while. They walked along the streets in their costumes enjoying this special occasion just like any normal family. For this one night, that's just what they were and Vincent reveled in it.

As the hour grew late, the children began to tire. Vincent soon found himself carrying a soundly sleeping Katie on his shoulder and nudging along a grumpy little boy toward the tunnels. After putting the children to bed, their parents continued their adventure.

The couple walked hand in hand like new lovers drinking in the magic of the night and each other. But as dawn approached, Vincent suddenly began to feel as if someone or something was following them. It wasn't that he actually heard or sensed anything, it was more of a feeling. The kind of feeling that made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

"Vincent, have you heard anything I've said?" Catherine asked in an exasperated tone.

"What?"

"What is it? What has you so distracted?"

He started to explain but thought better of it. There was no need to worry her about a mere feeling.

"The freedom — it's overwhelming. This one night, I can be as any man. I can walk beside you and not feel threatened by the people who pass us. I can hold your hand proudly without fear. Catherine — it is wonderful!"

Her warm laugh touched his heart and he slid his arms around her. On the crowded city street, he began spinning them around as he laughed. He stopped suddenly, however, when he noticed the color slowly drain from her face.

"Catherine?"

"It's all right," she assured him. "All that spinning made me nauseous. I thought it was too good to be true."

"What is too good to be true?"

"So far, I haven't had morning sickness; in fact, I've felt great — until now," she tried to explain.

"Would you like to go home?"

"No. I just need a moment to settle my stomach."

Still wrapped in his tender embrace, Catherine leaned against him and remained silent for a few moments. "Are you feeling any better now?" he gently whispered in her ear.

She took a deep breath. "Much."

He stroked her back. "You haven't felt well for a couple of weeks, Catherine."

She stepped back and looked up into his concerned eyes. "That's not why I haven't wanted to have sex, if that's what you mean."

"I'm concerned you're not telling me everything. It's not just the sex. I am concerned about you." He emphasized the last word to get his point across.

Her defensiveness faded when she realized the depth of his concern. "I know and I'm sorry I implied otherwise. This hasn't been easy for you. I know that."

"Do you feel ill or weak — or what?"

"I can't describe what I feel. I just know it's different than it was with Jake or Katie. Normally, I'm very interested in sex with you, but suddenly I just don't have any desire. I still want to be held and touched and I want to please you but I don't want intercourse."

Vincent lifted her chin with his finger. "Catherine, if you are not interested in intimacy, I can adapt and will not press the issue. You are more to me than just a way to relieve my sexual desires." He smiled playfully. "I spent years practicing abstinence and I think I turned out reasonably well."

Catherine laughed then sighed. "You turned out wonderfully because you were not ruled by your libido as a lot of men are. Love rules you, not lust."

"Exactly. That is why you should feel no guilt if you are not interested in making love right now," Vincent tried to reassure her.

"It's not so much guilt I feel as disappointment. I know how long you were alone and I guess I've tried to make up for it. Besides, I never knew sex could be as erotic and as marvelously fulfilling as it is with you. I don't want to give it up. It's addictive. I just — don't have any desire — now."

She took his hand and they began walking down the street once more. He squeezed her hand gently to express his understanding and support.

* * * * *

While Vincent and Catherine were enjoying their night Above, Charlie Hamilton walked toward the now familiar chamber of the man known as Father. Since meeting his half-sister a few months ago, the magical world beneath New York had drawn him into the community as one of its own. His relationship with his new sister, her husband and their children had grown and enriched his life beyond measure. He loved his big sister and was determined to help her in any way he could.

"Father?" he called out as he entered the chamber.

"Charlie! What are you doing here tonight? Didn't you have some party to attend or something?"

The young man collapsed into the chair across from Father. "Are you kidding? A first year intern doesn't have a social life."

Father chuckled as he remembered his internship decades ago. "I remember it well. How are things at St. Vincent's?"

"Hectic. I just got off my shift. I thought I'd stop by and talk to you about Cathy."

Father closed the book he had been reading and removed his glasses. "You've noticed then'?"

"The puffiness, the fact she's showing at three months — yes, I've noticed. What are the other symptoms?"

"Her blood pressure is up, her blood work shows an unusually high oxygen level, and she has lost all interest in sex." Father blushed a little when he realized what effect that last comment might have on Catherine's brother. Although he did seem a little uncomfortable with the statement, he recovered his physician's detachment.

"Is that unusual for her?" The question was a difficult one because despite his attempts at professionalism, this was his sister they were talking about.

"According to Vincent, she never lost interest during the other pregnancy until it became physically painful."

Charlie leaned back and responded in a purely scientific manner. "Most species of animal mate, then have nothing to do with their partners

Father realized the comment was simply a scientific observation but still it bothered him. He angrily tapped his cane against the floor.

"Although we do not know what Vincent's origins are, we do not regard him as an animal."

The young man opened his eyes suddenly, realizing he had offended Father. "I'm sorry. I didn't intend that to sound as it did. Vincent means a lot to me and I think of him as human. It was merely an observation that might shed some light on Catherine's problems."

"I must apologize as well. I'm very defensive when it comes to Vincent."

Charlie smiled. "I understand and respect that but we must also consider all the medical aspects that might affect Cathy's health."

"Yes. I agree. Tell me, Charlie. What would your diagnosis be?"

"Except for the oxygen levels, it sounds like a textbook case of preeclampsia."

"Very good. Peter and I have agreed to treat it as such."

Stretching out his long, aching legs, Charlie sought to find some level of comfort for his tired body. "Is that why she took the leave of absence?"

"Yes. Peter recommended it. We don't want this to go into toxemia or anything worse. I have a feeling we're in for a difficult time. The fetus is developing abnormally fast and I don't know how that is going to affect Catherine."

"She told me it was the same with Jake. He was born full term at seven months, is that right?" Catherine's incredible tale of horror had both astounded and angered her younger brother.

"Catherine returned to us in labor. She had been missing for six months and there was no doubt the child was Vincent's. The blood tests proved it. We didn't have time to really get into all the details."

"Was she sure about the time of conception?"

Father blushed again. "Up until that time, their relationship had not been intimate. She was very clear about the night it happened."

Charlie rubbed his tired, burning eyes. "Then I guess we can expect a baby in March."

"Considering how fast things are going I'd say that's an accurate assumption. It's strange, though. Jacob is normal looking but was born in seven months. Mary Catherine was born in the usual nine months. This child... It's all so amazing."

"And quite a learning opportunity," Charlie added with a yawn.

"I think you need to get some rest. Why don't you stay here tonight?"

"I think I'll accept your generosity tonight. The prospect of making that long trip back is not a pleasant one. When will Cathy and Vincent be back?"

"Oh, they don't usually get back from their outing until after dawn."

Standing up slowly, Charlie stretched his arms out and yawned again. "Isn't that a little dangerous for Cathy? That much exertion might be detrimental to her condition."

"I warned her about that but she and Vincent promised me they would take it easy. Charlie, I have long ago realized that no one will take care of those two like those two."

"I suppose you're right. I'm just new at this brother thing. She's all the family I've got. I can't lose her."

"We all love her and will do everything possible to protect and care for her, whatever it takes. She'll be all right, Charlie. Now off to bed with you!"

"Yes sir!"

* * * * *

After watching the sun come up over the bridge as they sat on the park bench, a weary Vincent and Catherine returned to the tunnels. Vincent tucked his wife into bed and watched her fall asleep. Unfortunately, he couldn't do the same. That feeling that someone was near was still with him and it left him shaken. Once assured that Catherine and the children were safe, he decided to take a walk toward the last place he had heard the tapping and the oddly familiar voice.

He walked for some time until he came to the entrance of the catacombs. Silence surrounded him as he stared down at the pipe that disappeared into the floor of the cavern. There had been no messages for days and he had hoped the pranksters had given up their game out of boredom. Perhaps, their respect and concern for Catherine had stopped them. Whatever the reason, he was glad it was over.

After giving the cavern one final look, Vincent turned to leave the mystery behind him. He didn't get far. A horrible creaking sound stopped him in his tracks. As he desperately searched the dimly lit tunnel for the source of the sound, Vincent spun wildly around. Too late he saw the old beam give way and come crashing down at him.

* * * * *

Awareness returned in stages as one by one Vincent's senses awakened. The heavy dust blackened the tunnel and made breathing difficult. His lungs burned so badly every breath was a struggle. After determining he had no serious injuries, he pushed himself up into a sitting position only to discover that his legs were pinned beneath the beam.

"Trapped — are we?"

The familiar voice made his blood run cold. It was the voice who's seemingly gentle tone masked its deadliness. Even though he knew the answer, he still asked, "Who are you?" A movement in the shadows caught his attention and he strained to focus his eyes on the figure silhouetted in the eerie blue light.

"You know who I am," the menacing voice responded. The figure turned allowing the light to illuminate his features.

Vincent gasped. "Paracelsus!"

The thin lips turned up slightly in a cold smile. "I'm touched you remember; but then again, you can never forget the faces of the ones you've killed, can you?"

Taking a deep breath, Vincent tried to regain his control. "That's just it — you're dead."

"Did you think that death could defeat me? My boy, you underestimate me. I have simply transformed."

"Look, man, I told you to leave him alone."

The voice, coming from another direction, was also a familiar one. It was one, however, that evoked no fear in Vincent. He turned and his eyes found the strong, bulky figure of his childhood friend.

"Winslow'?"

"Yes, Vincent. It's me," the man answered as he stepped into the light then smiled.

Now totally confused, Vincent shook his head in disbelief. "I must be having some sort of hallucination."

"I've been trying to warn you for weeks, Vincent," Winslow tried to explain.

"You sent those messages?" Vincent asked.

His old friend smiled broadly. "I thought you should be warned. Good idea, huh?"

"But pointless," Paracelsus interjected.

Pointing to Paracelsus, Winslow continued. "He discovered how to cross between the worlds and he's come here to destroy you."

"I've simply come for what's rightfully mine."

"There is nothing here that belongs to you, Paracelsus." Vincent replied in a voice that invited no argument. Anger was burning inside of him with growing intensity.

"On the contrary, Vincent. There is one very important possession I seek."

Winslow literally jumped between Vincent and Paracelsus. "You don't have enough power to defeat the both of us."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, Winslow."

Vincent resumed his struggle to free himself. "I will not let you take me."

"It is not you I seek," came the cold reply.

Vincent looked up into the cold eyes of pure evil.

"I have come for the child you sired."

A mighty roar escaped Vincent as he continued his struggle.

"You shouldn't have made him mad, Paracelsus," Winslow warned.

"He can't harm me or prevent me from taking the child. Vincent, do you remember the story I told you of your birth?" He got no response. "The child in Catherine's womb will fulfil that prophecy." He stepped closer and looked down menacingly at Vincent. "It will rip its way out of her body and, in the glory of its strength, this child will become all that you should have. It will embrace its destiny."

Winslow remained in his position between the antagonists. "You're a crazy old man who can't accept his own mortality."

"I will take what's mine," Paracelsus argued as he lunged toward Winslow. Winslow responded by throwing himself bodily at Paracelsus.

Horrible images filled Vincent's mind. The scenes were so terrifying, he could form no words or coherent thoughts. Again, he roared angrily. "NO! NO! NO!"

"Vincent!"

The voice was one of comfort.

"Vincent!"

He found himself moving toward that voice and the peace it offered but the anger remained. "NO!"

"Open your eyes, Vincent!"

Reluctantly and painfully, he forced his eyes open. The blur in front of him soon came into focus. Catherine's face became clear and the concern in her eyes filled him with a short-lived sense of peace. "Catherine?" He touched her face tentatively to assure himself of the reality of her presence.

"It's all right, Vincent. Everything is fine. You just need to rest for a while." Confused, he continued to stare into her green eyes. "What happened?"

Gently, she took his hand in hers and kissed it. "A beam collapsed and pinned you beneath it. You've been unconscious since we brought you back. Father says there's no serious damage, only a few bruises."

Vincent closed his eyes for a moment and in that blackness, the horrible threat of Paracelsus came back. "Catherine!"

"Vincent — calm down!"

He grabbed her shoulders firmly. "You can't have this child!"

Her face turned an ashen color. "What are you talking about?"

"It will kill you! You have to get rid of it now."

The ashen color of her face turned into the deep red flush of anger. "You don't know what you're saying. I'll get Father."

"NO! You're in danger!"

"Listen to me, Vincent. I don't know where this is coming from, but let's get something straight. I will under no circumstances abort this child. I know you're concerned and I realize you're probably still in shock, but I can't understand why you would ever suggest such a thing!"

"It will happen like he said."

"Like who said?" she asked.

"Paracelsus."

"Vincent, Paracelsus is dead. He can't hurt us," Catherine tried to reassure him.

"You don't understand. He wants the baby. He will come for it."

"That's impossible!"

Vincent was almost frantic now. "He says it will — rip its way out of you."

Catherine could see the genuine fear in Vincent's eyes. "Isn't that the story he told you about your birth?"

He nodded.

"It was all a lie, Vincent. He made it up out of his sick, distorted mind."

"But, Catherine..."

"But nothing. I am not about to do something drastic because of some story Paracelsus made up to hurt you. It was a lie. This is our baby, Vincent. Maybe it was unplanned and perhaps you're feeling a little guilty about that but, God willing, I am going to have this baby!"

The conviction and reason in her voice calmed his panic slightly. "I'm sorry, Catherine. I'm just afraid of losing you. I couldn't bear that."

"Listen to me. You must have had some sort of hallucination before we found you. I realize how much that lie upset you and I know you never completely dismissed it, but I want you to remember something. We've had two beautiful children and they were born without any complications. There is no reason to believe that will not be the case with this child."

Tears filled his eyes as Catherine leaned over and kissed him. "I love you," he told her when the kiss ended. "I'm afraid, Catherine."

She lay her head on his chest trying to calm his fears while quietly battling her own as well. Dare she tell him of her own conviction that the child was indeed like its father? If she did, it would only add to his fear and guilt and that wouldn't help anything. No, she had to hide her own fears to help him get through his. She sighed and held him tighter.

Vincent stroked Catherine's back and tried to fight back his terror. Paracelsus' words haunted him but with Catherine in his arms, the horror they invoked lessened. He couldn't stop the tears that slid down his face, however. The relief that she was, for the moment, safe and the comfort she offered began to fill him with hope. Perhaps it was simply a hallucination born of his guilt and fear and not a harbinger of things to come. He had to believe that or go mad.