

# LOVE AND HARMONY

by Sandy P Shelton

(from All Things Are Possible VII)

*"Sleep, sleep, beauty bright  
Dreaming o'er the joys of night.  
Sleep, sleep: in thy sleep  
Little sorrows sit and weep.*

*Sweet babe, in thy face  
Soft desires I can trace  
Secret joys and secret smiles  
Little pretty infant wiles.*

*As thy softest limbs I feel  
Smiles as of the morning steal  
O'er thy cheek and o'er thy breast  
Where thy little heart does rest."*<sup>1</sup>

The words of the poem were spoken in a soft voice and in the soothing cadence of a lullaby. The baby Catherine held in her arms finally closed his eyes. She stared at him in amazement and with complete adoration. It had been six weeks since his traumatic entrance into the world and those weeks had been a time of healing for everyone. Her own strength had been slow in returning but each day was better than the one before. And, although her legs were still weak, she spent most of her days actively caring for her children. Playing with Jake and Katie was no longer a joy she was denied and she reveled in spending as much time with them as possible. Perhaps her near death experience had made each moment an even more precious gift than ever before. A very contented smile teased the corners of her mouth.

Slowly and reluctantly, she rose from the bed and carried the infant to his crib. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't hold him all night. That wouldn't be good for either one of them. As she straightened up, she became aware of a very familiar masculine scent. Her child's father was behind her and his nearness aroused a multitude of emotions.

"He grows stronger each day."

His deep, resonant voice caressed her as tenderly as his hands had often caressed her body. He was her husband, the father of her children, her best friend — her very heart. He was uniquely sensuous without even being aware of it. Perhaps that was why she was so drawn to him. She smiled wickedly as a few erotic images played across her mind.

"How are we feeling, Catherine?"

She turned to him and was immediately captured by his warm blue eyes — eyes that held nothing but love for her. "Good — really good," she answered.

He tilted his head and peered down at her. "What does Father say?"

"He says I need a few more weeks to regain the strength and for the internal damage to completely heal, but he's really encouraged by my progress. He says the baby's doing fine as well."

Vincent smiled. "Our son's good health is obvious. You are the one who suffered the most. You are the one who needs the greatest care."

His love for her was evident in his eyes as well as in his words. She sighed as she slid her arms around his waist. "All of that is over now. Our son was worth the price." She looked deeply into his eyes and saw, as well as felt, his unwillingness to agree. Surprisingly, it didn't anger her because she knew the suffering he would have endured if she had not survived. She could forgive him that.

A deep longing rose in her as she rested her head against his chest. It had been much too long since she had felt the warmth and comfort of his arms as they shared a lover's embrace. And, even though, she realized that it was too soon for her physically, her emotional and spiritual need of him was growing stronger with each passing day.

Just as her thoughts were taking her places her body could not go, she felt Vincent's body stiffen beneath her touch. Awkwardly, he pulled away. For an instant, his response hurt her deeply then it occurred to her that her feelings must have been torture to him. Throughout his forced celibacy, he had not once complained or sought comfort elsewhere —that was not Vincent's style. He would set aside his own needs for her comfort and safety even if it drove him mad. It almost had once. She just judged his response to be an attempt to put some distance between them to protect her and to retain his iron-clad control. "It won't be much longer," she said softly.

Vincent sighed heavily and gently shook his head. "You need your rest, Catherine. Tomorrow is the naming ceremony."

"We both need a good night's sleep."

"Catherine, perhaps it would be better if I slept elsewhere tonight. You would rest better..."

"I will not hear of such a thing! Vincent, we've been apart too long already. I hated sleeping alone all those weeks. Just having you close to me again has been wonderful?"

"I was only thinking of you, Catherine."

As always, his words and the emotion behind them, touched her very soul. "I know, Vincent. I know."

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Later that night as they lay snuggled up together under the quilt, Catherine allowed Vincent's warmth to flow into her. It felt so good to be held and touched by the man she loved. If only she could give him some sort of comfort. He had been so strong during their recent ordeal and had asked nothing in return. He had taken her sudden disinterest in sex with his usual quiet dignity. There had been no resentment, no argument, not even one disapproving look. He was an incredible man and she was grateful he had chosen her to love.

She snuggled deeper into his sheltering arms. Without her really being aware of it, her left hand began to work its way down over Vincent's broad chest and flat stomach. The familiar planes of his anatomy both excited and comforted her. The pleasing sensation the contact evoked gave her an idea and she began to work her fingers underneath his shirt. Gently, she teased the soft hair she encountered. His body stiffened slightly at her touch and a sound resembling a gasp escaped him. She paused until she felt him relax then she continued all the while thinking to herself, *There is a way.*

Her hand moved slowly downward and she could feel his heart beating rapidly beneath her ear. Her own heart responded. For the first time in months, she began to ache for him. *If only...*

Suddenly, she felt his hand catch hers. "Catherine — no."

"Why not? It's been months, Vincent."

"Please — don't."

It was the almost-frightened tone of his voice that got Catherine's attention. She lifted her head from his chest and stared into his eyes. "Vincent, there's nothing wrong with my touching you. It doesn't have to go any further."

The muscles in his jaw tightened noticeably. Then, without a word, he turned away and sat up on the edge of the bed. "You don't understand, Catherine."

"No, I don't. Vincent, give me some credit here. I know I'm not well enough to have intercourse yet but I feel well enough for this. We haven't had any kind of intimacy in a long time. I need that."

She watched as he gripped the edge of the mattress. "I too have missed that but the risk is too great."

"Vincent..."

He began dressing then stood. "I'm going for a walk. You should go to sleep."

As she watched him walk out of their chamber, Catherine, at first, felt hurt and rejected. Angrily, she lay back down and tried to sort things out. That's when the fear in his eyes and his warning about the risk being too great truly registered. "He's afraid," she murmured.

Catherine, Vincent, Jake, and Katie stood next to Father as everyone gathered around for the long awaited announcement, Charlie looked on from across the chamber with concern. Until his sister was her old self again, he would not let down his guard. He had come too close to losing her.

Vincent stood proudly next to his wife as he held Katie in his arms and Jake stood by his mother's other side looking very protective. The center of attention, however, was Catherine and the baby she held in her arms.

"And what name have you chosen?" Father asked.

Catherine looked down at the incredible being she cradled against her chest. "We've decided to call our son — Alexander."

The crowd of well-wishers soon surrounded them and the party kicked into high gear. The official reason for the gathering, of course, was the naming ceremony but the community was also celebrating Catherine's recovery. The last six months had been a strain on everyone but, on this night, all was well.

Charlie walked over to Catherine, "Alexander?" "It sounds noble like Vincent," she responded.

"Yeah — I guess he looks like an Alexander." He studied her face intently. "How are you feeling?"

"Will you stop worrying? I feel fine."

"You look tired."

"Oh gee — thanks," she laughed.

"You know what I mean."

His endearing look of concern touched her and prompted a hug. "I'm going to be all right."

Charlie sighed as he looked at her still gaunt and pale face. "You've got a long way to go."

"How long?"

"What?"

"How long will it be?"

"I can't give you an exact date. You went through a lot. You're lucky to be alive. Don't push it," he responded.

She smiled at him innocently. "I'm not trying to push it."

"Cathy — you've got to take it one day at a time. It's only been about six weeks. With the kind of surgery you had, it will take months to heal completely. You literally died on the table. Be grateful for every day you have."

"I am. Maybe that's why I want to live life to the fullest. I don't want to miss anything."

Charlie laughed. "I'm all for that but do it slowly, sis."

Her smile faded. "There is something I want to talk to you about."

"What?"

"You told me I couldn't have any more children."

"That's right. You cannot get pregnant."

"Are you completely sure?" she asked.

"Father and I did the surgery. There's no way."

"And you told Vincent that?"

"Yes. He knows. Why? What's going on?"

"Maybe I'm making too much of it, but I think Vincent is afraid of intimacy."

"Cathy! You're not trying...."

"No, of course not. What I'm saying is that he's afraid of even the slightest intimacy. He balks every time I try to hug him, backs away when I touch him, and will only kiss me when I initiate it. He's scared, Charlie."

"I would be too. He went through hell, Cathy. I can't blame him. You both need time to heal. You can't force it. If you try to have intercourse before you've healed, it would be extremely painful and you could permanently damage yourself further. If that happened, Vincent would blame himself in such a way he would refuse to try again. You could both be damaged beyond repair. It's not worth the risk. Be patient."

"Calm down, little brother. I'm not interested in — going all the way yet. I was thinking of — other methods that would give Vincent a little — relief."

Charlie couldn't help the blush that warmed his cheeks. "Oh — I understand now." He couldn't hide his embarrassment. "Don't push him, Cathy. It'll only make it worse. Relax. Heal."

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Over the next two weeks, Catherine heeded Charlie's advice. Actually, it wasn't that difficult considering the fact that she was weak and still very sore and taking care of the kids took all the energy she could muster. Vincent was his ever-patient, helpful, and attentive self. He would hug her, hold her hand, and return her kiss but would allow nothing more and she didn't push it.

As she sat on the bed one night feeding the baby, Vincent walked in. She glanced up discreetly and noticed the longing in his eyes as he watched the baby nursing her exposed breast. It was a look that quickly passed.

"Are the children asleep?" she asked as her gaze returned to the baby in her arms. Vincent walked over and sat down at the table. "Yes — all tucked in and dreaming."

"This one is almost there." Little Alexander's eyes were closing and his sucking motion had slowed considerably.

"I'll put him to bed," Vincent offered.

He stood by the bed as Catherine very gently disengaged the child's mouth from her breast. Without closing the gown, she handed the child to Vincent then watched as he tucked him in his crib. He was such a visual contrast at times like these. She sighed softly then leaned back into the pillows. She was experiencing some soreness in her breast so she left her gown open and gently began to massage it. It felt good and brought back memories of the times Vincent would nurse to relieve the tenderness of an overly engorged breast. This time, he had not offered and she had not requested it.

"Are you experiencing some discomfort, Catherine?"

His voice ended the trip down memory lane and she opened her eyes. "Some." He looked so uncomfortable her heart nearly broke for him.

"Are you.... Did the baby nurse long enough? I know how uncomfortable you say that can be."

She wasn't overly uncomfortable but this offer to share some sort of intimacy with him was too good to pass up. His eyes were telling her how much he needed that closeness as well. "Now that you mention it, I don't think he did. Would you mind?" She demurely opened her gown further to expose the other breast.

Both fear and need appeared in his eyes as he looked at her. He took a deep breath, walked over to the bed and sat down. After taking a moment to focus his attention, he tenderly captured her breast in his hand.

His touch aroused a flood of emotions — relief, comfort, excitement, and release all spun wildly through her. No, she wasn't ready for the complete act, but she had needed his touch so desperately. She fought back a moan that might have frightened him away.

He touched her for a few seconds then lowered his mouth to her breast. The sensation of his warm lips on her overly-sensitive skin was almost more than she could handle. She clenched the sheet in her fist as he began the gentle sucking motion. With her other hand, she clasped a handful of his hair and pressed him closer.

She savored every moment of their intimacy as brief as it was, until she felt Vincent trembling. She opened her eyes as he released her and pulled away. His resolve was shattering. His eyes focused on her mouth and his hand clasped her behind her neck. He captured her mouth in a passionate kiss that made them both tremble but all too soon, Vincent pulled back. When she opened her eyes, she saw a wildness in his that brought back memories of their first time together in that dark cavern. "Vincent?"

Shame and anger flooded her connection to him. "I'm sorry," he stammered as he got to his feet. He could no longer look at her.

"There's nothing to be sorry for, Vincent. You didn't do anything wrong," she argued.

"I cannot let this happen."

"You weren't doing anything that would hurt me. You only kissed me."

"I was out of control. I didn't want to stop at a kiss."

"There are other things we can do, Vincent. You know that. We don't have to have intercourse."

"No, Catherine. My needs almost killed you. It must stop." He grabbed his cloak and walked swiftly out of the chamber.

"Vincent!"

The events of that night were not discussed or repeated. Catherine could feel Vincent pulling further and further away from her and it was breaking her heart. On the surface, as far as the community was concerned, life had returned to normal but underneath the facade, the tension was tearing them apart.

On this particular day, Catherine had about all she could take of Vincent's polite coolness. "I'm going up to the apartment today," she announced as she changed her clothes. "Would you watch the kids?"

"Of course, but do you think you're strong enough for the journey?"

"Yes. I'm walking in the park every day and doing some light strength training. I can't run the marathon but I can handle a trip up top." The conversation was alarmingly cool.

"We'll walk you to the entrance," Vincent said as he lifted Alexander into his arms.

"That's not necessary."

"Perhaps not for you but it is for me."

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Catherine walked around the apartment she shared with her family when they could be up top. It felt strange to be here now and she wondered it would ever feel like home again. Once, she could

have her family all here at once but now the risk might prove to be too great. Vincent could look after himself but little Alexander was helpless.

The ringing of the doorbell interrupted her thoughts. "Whew — they're here." The *they* she was referring to was Joe and Jenny. She had sent them an invitation to meet her here to deliver her news.

She opened the door and found herself staring into two pairs of dark brown tear-filled eyes. "Hello Joe, Jenny."

"Cathy," Jenny cried out just before she threw her arms around her in an impassioned hug. "I'm so glad to see you. I've missed you so much."

Catherine patted her friend's back soothingly. "I've missed you too."

As soon as Jenny pulled back, Catherine's eyes met Joe's. His emotions were evident in his eyes and hers filled with tears. She opened her arms to him. "Come here."

Joe responded by quickly enveloping her in a hug. "God — I've missed you Radcliffe."

"And I've missed having you bossing me around. Who have you been picking on while I've been gone?"

"Everybody," Joe laughed.

"Come in, come in." Catherine guided them through the door. "Sit."

After everyone was comfortable, Jenny had to express her concern. "Cathy, you've lost a lot of weight and you're so pale. Are you all right?"

"I am now. It was touch and go for a while but I'm going to be all right."

"Are you sure?" Joe asked. "What happened?"

As much as she wanted to blurt out the fact that she'd had another child, she couldn't. She had to hide Alexander's existence just as she had to hide Vincent's. "I really don't want to relive it. It's over and I'm recovering. That's all that matters. That's why I asked you here."

"I don't like the sound of this," Joe commented.

"Joe — I have decided to resign."

"What? Cathy...."

"Hear me out. I've just been through a very difficult and frightening experience. I need time to recover and get my life back together. I want to spend time with my family."

"We'll just extend your leave."

"No. Joe, that's not fair to the city and everyone in the office. Look, it's not forever. When I'm ready to work again, I'll be pounding on your door. I just need some time — that's all. If you really care for me, you won't argue."

"Cathy, you know I care. Are you sure this is what you want?"

"It's what I want and, more importantly, it's what I need. Please understand."

Joe sat back. "Whatever makes you happy, Radcliffe, I'm all for. But please, don't shut me out of your life."

"Oh Joe, I could never do that. You're more than my boss, you're my friend. You will always be a part of my life."

Jenny took Joe's hand. It was a gesture that caught Catherine's eye. "How will you live? Where will you live?" Jenny asked.

"I have a sizeable estate from my Father. It will pay the bills until I return. My brother will take care of it. Jen, I just need to get away but I won't be far away. I'll write and sneak back as much as I can."

Jenny studied her friend intently. "You look tired. You've really been through a lot haven't you?"

"Yes. I was given another chance and I want to take advantage of it. That's what this is all about. I'm not up to tilting at windmills."

Although there were tears in her eyes, Jenny smiled then moved to Catherine. She hugged her friend. "You've lost so much weight. What's your secret?" she laughed.

"Serious illness. I don't recommend it," Catherine responded. Right after her comment, she noticed the way Jenny looked over at Joe. She'd seen that look before. "What's up with you two?" They both look shocked. "Come on."

Joe gave her an embarrassed smile. "Jenny and I have been seeing each other for a couple of months."

Catherine glanced back and forth between the two. "Define *seeing* each other. How serious is this?"

"We don't know yet, Cathy," Jenny replied. "We're still sorting that out."

"What do you think, Radcliffe? Do you approve?" Joe asked.

Catherine couldn't stop the smile that quickly appeared on her face. "I'm just wondering what took you two so long to *discover* each other. I always thought you would make a great couple. I want details."

The threesome talked for a couple of hours before Catherine realized she had to get back Below in time for Alexander's next feeding. "I hate to bring this to an end, friends, but I have to get going."

Joe stood up and walked over to Catherine. The genuine look of sadness in his eyes touched her deeply. "You take care of yourself, Radcliffe. There will always be a job for you in my department. You just let me know when you're ready."

"I will. You take care of Jen, okay?"

"My pleasure."

Catherine stood up and hugged her friend. When the hug ended, Joe quickly turned and walked toward the door. Catherine realized he was trying to hide the tears in his eyes. Next, Jenny walked over and enveloped her in her arms.

"I love you, Cathy."

"I love you, too, Jen. I hope it works out between you and Joe. Despite what he wants everyone to believe, he's a nice guy."

Tears streaked down Jenny's face. "I know. Cathy — be happy."

"I am."

Catherine watched as the two left the apartment. She wrapped her arms around herself and smiled. Although she would miss them, it was comforting to know that they had each other and she hoped they would find the kind of love that she and Vincent shared. The smile faded.

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Catherine returned to her chamber that afternoon feeling as if she had run a marathon. The exhaustion served to remind her that complete recovery was still beyond her reach. Grateful that the chamber was empty and quiet, she stretched out on the bed and quickly fell asleep. When she awoke sometime later and sat up on the side of the bed, she discovered she wasn't alone.

"Did you rest well, Catherine?"

She stretched and yawned then nodded slowly. "How long have I been asleep?"

"I would guess an hour. How was your trip Above?"

Now was as good a time as any to spring it on him. "Successful. Vincent — I met Joe and Jenny at the apartment. I wanted to see them and let them see that I was all right. And — I resigned."

Catherine wasn't really sure just what reaction she was expecting but she had not expected no reaction. Vincent simply looked at her for a few seconds then stared at his clasped hands resting on the table.

"Are you sure that is what you want?" he finally asked.

"It is what I need. It is what is best for me and this family."

"Catherine — why did you not discuss this with me before you made your decision?"

"The decision was mine to make and I didn't want to argue about it. Vincent — this is what is best for me now. If I want to resume my career in a year or so, I can."

Vincent again looked down at his hands. "I wouldn't have argued with you, Catherine. I agree with your decision."

Catherine sighed in relief.

"How did Joe take it?"

"Not bad, actually. I think his concern for my health helped him see my point of view."

Rising slowly from his chair, Vincent once again looked at her. "You can now concentrate on healing." He walked over and stood in front of her.

She got to her feet and looked into his calm blue eyes. "WE need time to heal." She slid her arms around him and rested her head against his chest. His steady heartbeat reassured her and gave her hope. "I love you, Vincent."

"I love you, Catherine."

His response sounded like the anguished confession of a tortured heart.

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The weeks turned into months and, before Catherine realized it, Alexander was six months old. He was crawling, saying a few words, and pulling himself up. His attempts to stand usually ended with an undignified fall on his little butt, but he wasn't easily discouraged. He was just as determined as his mother.

Her own physical condition had steadily improved. She had gained some of the weight back and no longer looked so gaunt and frail. Her walks in the park had brought the color and healthy vigor back to her skin and hair. The scar from the surgery had smoothed over and the redness had faded into a soft pink. It was still a little tender but she was no longer afraid to touch it. Even Father and Charlie's exams were no longer painful.

Thinking of the exams made her remember what Charlie had said at the last one. "Catherine, it's been over six months since the surgery. All indications say that you've healed. The internal I just did confirms it. It's safe for you to resume sexual relations but slowly and carefully. The first few times may be painful because you haven't had intercourse in a long while. The scar is still a little tender so you might not want to use the standard position."

She laughed at the memory. Charlie was trying his best to be detached and professional but he couldn't hide the blush that crept up his neck to his cheeks. "I'll keep that in mind if the situation arises," she had responded with a laugh.

"You are hopeless — you know that?"

They both laughed then Catherine's mood grew serious. "It's Vincent. He still doesn't show any interest in a physical relationship. But; more importantly, I feel as if I'm losing him."

Charlie took her hand in his. "I don't think that's possible, Cathy."

"I don't think Vincent would ever leave me or the children. It's just that he's so distant. The passion we always shared is missing."

"He's afraid."



"I know. I also know that if we don't work through this, it will put a wall between us that I don't know if I can tear down."

"He blames himself, you know."

"I know and it's ridiculous."

"Not to him. He doesn't want to risk losing you again even if it means sacrificing the physical aspect of your marriage."

"It's more to it than that, Charlie."

"I don't understand."

"It has to do with an evil man who told Vincent a lot of lies about his past. To some degree, I think he still doubts his humanity. What happened to me giving birth to a child like him seems to have re-enforced those doubts."

"Hum — he may need more help than you can give him."

"Maybe. I just know that something has got to give."

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That was two weeks ago and the situation had not improved. If anything, Vincent had grown more distant and aloof. Finally, the stress became too much for both of them and a confrontation one night almost destroyed their marriage.

Catherine had awakened in the middle of the night to find Vincent's arms around her and his leg wedged between hers. His mouth was so close to her ear that his every breath was driving her crazy. Oh so carefully she maneuvered herself into a more accommodating position beneath him. She hesitated a moment to make sure he would not turn away then began to nibble his ear and nuzzled his neck. At first, he responded by caressing her stomach with his hand and moving his leg in a very pleasing rhythm against the inside of her thigh. Soon, his mouth sought hers and the kiss they shared reawakened her need of him. Just as her passion roared to life, she felt Vincent pull away abruptly.

She opened her eyes and saw a look of shock and confusion on Vincent's face. "It's all "right, Vincent. I've healed enough. Please don't turn away from me."

Her plea was quickly rejected. Vincent virtually sprang from the bed, grabbed his clothes and dressed. "No," he repeated over and over again.

"Vincent, don't run away from this. We've got to work it out."

"No, Catherine. I will not put you at risk again."

He gave her no time to argue. Grabbing his cloak, he fled their chamber.

Hurt and anger raged in Catherine and she slammed her fist into the mattress. "You're destroying us," she cried. The tears began to stream down her face and she wept uncontrollably.

Two days passed and Vincent did not return. Catherine's anger had dissolved into a calm determination that this unbearable situation between them had to end. To save her marriage she had decided it was time to put it all on the line.

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"Hello, Catherine. Have you heard from Vincent'?" Father asked.

"No. That's why I'm here."

"Perhaps we should send out search parties."

"That's not necessary. I know where he is."

"Catherine, it's obvious to everyone that you and Vincent are having problems. Would you like to talk about it?"

"I'm afraid talking about it has been futile. Vincent's not willing to listen."

Father sighed. "Yes. I know how — stubborn he can be."

"Do you remember what Paracelsus told him about his birth?"

"That preposterous lie? Yes I do."

"Since I had so much difficulty delivering a child like him, I think he believes it. He blames himself and now he won't allow any intimacy between us at all."

"Oh — I see. He knows you cannot get pregnant again. Charlie and I both explained it to him."

"Fear can overcome logic, Father. You know that."

"I'm afraid so. What do you plan to do?"

"Confrontation is the only way. We've got to address the issue alone, away from the eyes of the community. Kanin and Olivia are watching the children. I'm going to find Vincent."

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Catherine?" Father voiced his concern.

"Something has to be done and this is my last option. I have to make him understand and I can't do that by just sitting idly by while he continues to build a wall between us."

Father reluctantly agreed. "I suppose you're right but I can't help being concerned. Be careful."

"I will. We'll both be back soon."

"Are you sure you shouldn't take someone with you?"

"Yes. I know how to get to him. If I need any help, I'll signal on the pipes."

Father hugged Catherine tenderly. "My love goes with you. Take care."

"I will. I love you, too. See you soon."

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Throughout Catherine's journey to the catacombs, her thoughts were of Vincent and their marriage. She loved him with all her heart and soul and all she really wanted was the closeness they had once shared. Admittedly, she simply could not understand the depth of his fear. They had been man and wife for almost six years and, during that time, had forged a strong bond of trust and honesty. They shared a level of intimacy that even the most ardent of lovers seldom obtained. So, with all that, how could he now allow some unfounded fear to come between them? She had survived the ordeal and so had their extraordinary child. The crisis was over. Why couldn't he get beyond it?

Despite it all, she couldn't be angry with him — frustrated, yes — but never angry. She could also feel Vincent's frustration and that frightened her. If he got caught up in that downward spiral again, she could very well lose him forever. Those horrible images of him on the brink of madness were permanently etched in her mind. And, with every step she took, she became more and more afraid that history was about to repeat itself.

She reached a familiar tunnel and paused. This was the cavern Vincent had found refuge in years before. It was where Jacob was conceived. An ache filled her heart as she thought about what had taken place in that cold, dark cavern. The memory of the desperation she felt in his touch that night made her shiver. They loved that night out of an overpowering need to connect. Vincent was a drowning man grasping at a lifeline — her love.

After taking a long, slow, deep breath, Catherine gathered her courage and walked down the tunnel toward the cavern. She peered into the semi-darkness searching for that familiar silhouette. Soon, her eyes focused on a shadow in the corner. "Vincent?"

The shadow moved toward her. "You should not be here, Catherine."

"And just why not?"

"You know what happened here."

"Yes; I do. Jacob was conceived here."

An anguished sigh echoed around the chamber walls. "I came here to die."

"And instead a new life was created — a life that has brought us a great deal of joy. So Vincent, why are you here now — hiding in the darkness?"

"Maybe this is where I belong, Catherine. I am a creature of the darkness."

"You are NOT a creature. You are the man that I love. Your fear drove you here just like it did then. And, like before, I will not allow it to win. So — let's face this new demon of yours."

"Catherine, please — leave me."

"Vincent, how many times are we going to go through this? You are the only one who can't seem to accept your humanity."

"It's not that simple, Catherine."

"Then tell me, Vincent. I want to know why you're pulling away from me. Does our marriage mean so little to you?"

"Our life together means everything to me. How can you ask that?"

"I ask that because you are so afraid of touching me that you hide in this place. You leave our bed if we get too close. You tell me the risk is too great. I ask because you're destroying our marriage."

Vincent began pacing. "I don't want to lose you," he admitted.

"You don't have to," Catherine countered.

"Don't you see? I almost lost you by loving you. Having my child, one truly like me, almost killed you."

"My God, Vincent, thousands of women suffer difficult pregnancies every year. Some miscarry, some die, I was lucky. I thank God for that. I don't for one minute think Alexander was the cause. It angers me that you do."

"I don't blame him, Catherine. He is an innocent child. I blame myself. It is dangerous to love me. I fear for you."

"If you're afraid I'll get pregnant again, you know that's not possible."

Vincent spoke slowly and deliberately. "I hear the words, Catherine, but I have difficulty accepting them. I loved you and it almost cost you your life. Every time I touch you, I remember that dream. I remember the blood and I remember Paracelsus' words."

Slowly, Catherine walked over to him and gently touched his clenched fist. "I understand the pain those words cause you but they are lies, Vincent. They were the creation of a madman determined to destroy you. Even from the depths of hell, Paracelsus is still trying to destroy you — destroy us. If you give in to those fears, he will succeed."

"I don't care about me, Catherine. You almost died."

"Someday, I will, Vincent. Just as you will. It's inevitable. That's why it is so important that we live life to the fullest. Almost dying has made me want to embrace all life has to offer. A large part of that is the love we share. When I'm in your arms, I feel alive. I feel loved. I soar beyond my day to day problems. I feel connected to someone on more than just a physical level. I miss that. I need that."

She moved in front of him and looked into the clear depths of his eyes. "It's not the sex, Vincent. I could live without that if I had to. I need the closeness, the intimacy, the sharing. If we don't have that, we don't have a marriage."

Pain filled his eyes. "Don't you think I miss those things? Don't you realize how desperately I need to lose myself in you. Catherine, at this very moment, it is taking all the strength I have to fight the urge to take you in my arms and surrender to the passion."

"What's stopping you?"

"A fear so intense it turns the heat of my passion cold."

Catherine reached up and tenderly caressed his cheek. "I don't think that is possible."

Vincent reached up and captured her hand in his. "Catherine...."

"I need you, Vincent. Not just as a protector or provider but as my husband. I want you back. I want what we had before. We are bonded by more than a ring. You know that."

She brought his hand to her mouth and gently kissed it. The silken hair tickled her nose. "I feel as if I've lost you."

The battle being waged was evident in Vincent's eyes. "Almost losing you was the most frightening experience of my life. Denying my need for you is a battle I cannot win despite my fear."

"I don't want you to deny what you feel. Vincent, there is no danger in loving you but there is a great deal to fear in denying what and who we are. We have learned that — at great cost to us both." As she looked into his eyes, she could see the wall of fear begin to crumble.

"I love you, Catherine. I need you." With those words, he expressed the truth he had held so tightly in his heart. Hesitantly, Vincent stroked Catherine's cheek with the back of his hand then watched her reaction. That soft, sensual, pleased expression once again awakened his desire. He had missed the softness of her skin and the warmth of her body.

The love in her eyes was like a healing balm to his tortured soul. She loved him. She needed him. She accepted him. That was all he wanted of life.

Catherine watched as Vincent began to lean toward her, his eyes focusing on her mouth. As he drew near, she lifted her chin and tilted her head to one side to await his kiss. When contact was made, an involuntary groan escaped her and, in response, he deepened the kiss. She soon found herself enfolded in two strong arms and held tenderly against a powerful chest. Her own body warmed and melded against his solid form as the kiss continued.

As their lips parted, she could feel him trembling. "I love you, Vincent. I need you," she whispered against his slightly parted lips. The heat the kiss had generated warmed her blood and heightened her senses. She wanted to feel his hands touching her and his body moving against hers. After all the pain and discomfort she had endured over the last few months, she needed the pleasure that only Vincent's touch could bring. Her heart needed the comfort only his love could give.

"Catherine, I..."

She could feel his heart pounding as the words failed him. "I know," she responded.

His eyes opened slowly and those piercing blue orbs focused on her. "I want to — I need to so badly — but..."

"No. I won't accept excuses. My body has healed. It's time we healed our hearts as well. Trust me, Vincent. Trust your love for me."

Once again, he pulled her against him in a tender embrace. "I love you so much."

"Then don't torture us both by denying that love."

He held her for a moment in quiet contemplation then slowly pulled back. In his softest, most sensual voice he whispered, "Not here. Not like this."

She smiled in triumph. "The place doesn't matter to me."

"It does to me. This place is filled with the shadows of the past."

"The shadows are in your heart — not in this place. This is simply a cavern — nothing more." In his eyes, she saw a growing reluctance. "I would prefer our first time together in almost a year to be in a more suitably romantic place but I think you have a demon that has to be defeated here — just like before. You will never be able to put your past to rest as long as this place holds such power over you."

Vincent pulled away and began pacing again. The forceful way he virtually marched back and forth betrayed his tension. To others, that stance was a signal to stay away; to Catherine, it was simply an expression of his vulnerability.

Finally, the pacing stopped and she approached him. She stood there silently reaching out to him through their bond. That sense of him that filled her heart and mind responded slowly as she enfolded it tenderly with her love. She felt it strengthen until finally the golden mane of hair moved as he looked upward. It was a gesture she had long ago recognized as capitulation.

Catherine stepped closer then tentatively placed her hand on his back. The contact was meant to soothe and comfort yet the feel of his warm, solid back softening to her touch was a catalyst. She wanted more so she slid her arms around his shoulders and rested her head against his soft hair. Quietly, she breathed in his scent.

In response, Vincent's hands began to caress her forearms and hands.

"I'm sorry, Catherine. I don't mean to push you away — it's just that every time I think about making love to you, I remember how sick you were. I remember all the blood. I remember the anguish I felt at the thought that I might lose you. I remember the guilt."

"An unfounded guilt. Once and for all will you please accept the fact that you are not responsible for everything that happens to me — good or bad? I think you're wonderful but you're not that powerful."

A soft chuckle turned into a hearty laugh as he turned around to face her and hold her in his arms. It was a tender moment that reminded them both of what they had been denied. Then, as the laughter ceased, other feelings surfaced. Those feelings led them to a soft, sensual kiss that began slowly but deepened quickly as passion began to rise. Their bodies pressed against each other in a growing need for the intimate contact they both so desperately needed.

A pleasant, almost forgotten warmth began to spread through Catherine's body. Its return revived her belief that things could be as they were until she felt Vincent struggling to overcome his fears. Gently, she ended the kiss and looked into his troubled eyes. "Vincent — don't pull away from me now. We have to get beyond this."

He looked deeply into her eyes apparently searching for some sign of doubt. When he didn't find it, his own eyes lost their turbulence and began to fill with love. That soft, vulnerable look of complete adoration and wonder had the power to make her weak in the knees and it was doing so now. She could imagine how she must look standing there with such a foolish grin on her face.

"Catherine — are you certain you have healed enough? The thought of causing you pain...."

"Vincent — there will be some pain because of the surgery and the fact that it's been so long but I'm prepared for it. It's not something I can't handle."

"The first time — here — did it hurt you then?" Vincent asked softly.

Remembering that time always evoked mixed feelings. There was the joy of finally becoming one with the man she loved and then there was the desperation and pain she experienced in that joining. "I won't lie to you — there was some pain because it had been years since I'd been with a man but that pain turned to pleasure. I was a little sore the next day and I will be tomorrow. That doesn't concern me. What brief pain and soreness I may feel is outweighed by the comfort and pleasure I will feel. I'll forget the discomfort — I won't forget the love."

Her answer troubled him. "Catherine — you are so — precious to me. I want to hold you carefully like a delicate porcelain doll."

"I am **NOT** made of porcelain. I am flesh and blood like you and that's how I want to be held," she answered then smiled warmly.

Vincent responded with a smile of his own then held her a little closer. "Very beautiful flesh."

That intriguing nose of his was so close she couldn't resist the temptation to rub her own nose against his. The tickling sensation made her giggle. "I've missed that."

"I've missed you," Vincent responded. His mouth then quickly recaptured hers in a tender, questioning kiss.

Catherine responded passionately and soon they were lost in a flood of desire until kissing just wasn't enough. She felt Vincent's hands move tentatively from her back to either side of her breasts. There he stopped. "Don't stop. You can touch them. I want you to," she encouraged.

"You're still nursing."

"So? You've always enjoyed that before."

An endearing, shy smile was his response. "I have to confess that I do derive a great deal of pleasure from that but I am also aware of your sensitivity."

"You know, my dear Vincent, you spend entirely too much time thinking," She leaned back a little so that his hands would slide up the sides of her breasts a little more. Just having his hands that close made her skin begin to tingle.

She felt his hands tremble as they hesitantly moved over the fullness of her breasts. Being held so intimately by his strong, masculine hands evoked a gasp of extreme pleasure from her. And, as his hands caressed her, she began to tremble as well. "Oh — Vincent," she moaned as she once again pressed her mouth to his.

He returned her kiss then sought the tender skin of her neck and her sensitive ear lobe. The desperation and passion rose with each touch. Then, to satisfy her own hungry need to touch him as intimately as he had touched her, her hands journeyed downward over his chest and belt until they encountered that familiar bulge in the front of his pants. She began to stroke and fondle him through the fabric until they both moaned.

Suddenly, Vincent pulled back a little then dropped to his knees. The abrupt move temporarily disoriented Catherine. "What...." She fought her way through a haze of passion to gain some hold on reality. "Vincent?"

Looking down, she watched as Vincent gently kissed and stroked her stomach. And once again, she could see the pain in his eyes. She reached down and pressed his head against her stomach then stroked his hair as a mother would comfort a child. Tears burned her eyes as she felt his anguish through their bond.

The movement of his hands refocused her attention. They had moved from her stomach and were now gliding up and down her thighs in long, slow strokes. She shivered with pleasure as he finally cupped her buttocks and squeezed firmly.

Vincent groaned and sat back on his heels. "I can't wait long enough to go back to our chamber but I cannot bear the thought of you lying on this cold, dirt floor."

She had to chuckle. "I'm not going to be on the bottom this time — you are. It will be a while before my stomach can stand the pressure."

His response was a gentle touch to her abdomen. "I give myself to you completely, Catherine. Just tell me what you want me to do?"

"I want you to undress me," she responded softly.

Her words had a profound and visible effect upon him. Their eyes met and the passion only they understood flared brilliantly between them. Then, without speaking a word, Vincent began to remove Catherine's shoes and pants. Once she had stepped out of the garments, he tearfully looked at the scar then once again touched it.

"I'm so sorry," he cried.

Then, in a gesture that brought tears to her eyes, Vincent leaned forward and kissed the scar repeatedly until he had covered the length of it with kisses. She was now totally consumed with desire. Carefully, she lowered herself to her knees then pulled her sweater over her head and tossed it to one side. Her bra was the last article of clothing to be removed and discarded.

Vincent looked at her then, not as the mother of his child, but as the woman he desired. Her breasts were not the source of nourishment for their child, but were objects of his desire. He wanted to fondle them and take them into his mouth. Before he could, however, Catherine

reached over and began to unfasten his belt. He helped her free himself then sat back on his heels again — waiting.

To Catherine, he looked so vulnerable like that and she just couldn't resist. Her hands were trembling with desire as she reached over and began to stroke him. With a moan, his eyes closed and his head tilted backward in a display of sheer ecstasy. He allowed her touch to continue to arouse him then he reached over, grasped her waist, then lifted and pulled her until she straddled his thighs.

Feeling his muscular thighs between her legs nearly drove her to the edge. The ache was almost unbearable. She rose to her knees to position her full and heavy breasts closer to his mouth. She needed to share that particular intimacy with him once again.

It was a need Vincent recognized and greedily fulfilled. To be completely honest, he needed it as badly as she did. That intimate act was not only a means of sexual stimulation, but an act of sharing and completion on a level beyond the physical. Perhaps it was related to some deep feeling of abandonment he experienced as a child and Catherine, in sensing that, used the almost maternal act to heal that trauma.

The warm insistent tugging of his mouth and the rhythmic kneading of his hands quickly fueled the fires of her passion. Every nerve ending tingled, her skin became excruciatingly sensitive and warm, her heart was pounding, and the need for complete union grew with every labored breath. Her hands kneaded his shoulders and stroked his back as his attention to her breasts continued. When he finished, he pulled back and looked up into her eyes. The desire she saw there fed her own and she lowered her mouth to his for a lingering, deep kiss that provided her with a taste of the nectar Vincent had so hungrily taken.

As the kiss continued, she slowly rubbed her body against his in an up and down motion. She fought to remain in control but it was becoming a losing battle. Tearing her mouth away from his, she gasped for breath then whispered in Vincent's ear, "I'm ready. Now."

In response, Vincent reached between them and guided himself carefully to her entry and hesitated. That moment of hesitation was more than she could bear. The need to complete the act overpowered her control and she lowered herself onto him slowly. The intrusion caused pain as she opened herself up to him and she gasped.

"Catherine'?" Vincent called out as he began to pull away.

"No — just give me a second to adjust." She concentrated on relaxing her muscles until the pain eased then she accepted more of him. That process continued until little by little, they were completely joined. The burning pain turned into fiery pleasure as she began to move her hips in a slow rhythm that produced more pleasure. With each stroke, the rhythm became faster and more frantic. They entered a world of pure sensation, moaning with pleasure as they sought that pinnacle of ecstasy awaiting them.

Catherine was well aware of the fact that Vincent was carefully letting her set the pace. He was allowing her to control the speed and depth of his thrusts and she was amazed at his control. Finally, all control was lost and the tension between them exploded into a rainbow of ecstasy. The powerful orgasm left Catherine completely helpless and drained of energy. She collapsed into Vincent's arms as she felt his release.

For the next several seconds, they were lost in the warm afterglow of their loving. The only sounds they heard were the beating of their own hearts and their labored breathing but slowly those sounds calmed into their usual rhythm. She could feel him nuzzling her shoulder and wrapping his arms more completely around her for comfort and warmth. Somehow, she found the strength to lift her head and whisper in his ear, "I didn't break now did I?"

"No," he moaned in a deep, passion-filled voice. "I love you, Catherine and I'm sorry I hurt you."

"The pleasure was worth the pain. Besides the discomfort is temporary. Every time we make love, there will be less pain. So — we've just got to make love as often as we can."

Catherine felt and heard him chuckle. "You won't get an argument from me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that afternoon, Vincent and Catherine returned to their family. The walls between them had been torn down and the entire community could sense that all was finally well. Father took one look at them and just smiled. Charlie, who happened to be visiting when they returned, saw the change immediately and hugged his sister. She pulled him aside as Vincent greeted the children.

"From the look on your face, I'd say all went well," Charlie commented.

"VERY well. We're going to be all right, Charlie."

He smiled warmly. "You resigned. Are you sure that was what you wanted?"

"Yes. I need some time for myself and for my family. I'll probably go back someday but until then, here is where I'm needed. Here is where I want to be."

"Okay, sis. As long as you're happy, so am I. Take it easy, okay?"

"I'll try."

Vincent walked over to them and handed the baby to Catherine. He then reached down and picked up Katie. Jacob leaned against his mother's side. "Let's go home," Vincent said as he looked into Catherine's eyes.

She smiled back at him. "Yes. Let's go home."

\* \* \* \* \*

As they lay in bed that night, Vincent read one of Catherine's favorite poems.

*"Love and Harmony combine,  
And around our souls intwine,  
While thy branches mix with mine,  
And our roots together join.*

*Joys upon our branches sit,  
Chirping loud, and singing sweet;  
Like gentle streams beneath our feet  
Innocence and virtue meet."<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> 'Love and Harmony combine' by William Blake

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