

All that Heaven Doth Allow

by Trisha Kehoe

Turning for a last look at the one she loved, as though never to see him again, the woman spoke in a quiet, hesitant tone.

"I don't want to leave you, especially... now."

Eyes the shade of tempest-tossed winter seas clung to Catherine's, glanced away, then reclaimed her gaze. One could get lost in those eyes and not mind if you weren't ever found again.

For a moment, Vincent didn't answer, as though in not responding immediately he could keep her here, with him, for one more beat of his heart.

Finally, in that velvet-soft voice only he possessed, he replied, his words tinged with a subtle edge of stoic acceptance, "As I do not want you to go, Catherine. Yet, I know you must."

With a final, lingering touch to the side of her face, he took a step backward, certain that if he didn't do it now, he would never be able to do it. How he wanted to give voice to the plea trapped in his throat, to beseech her to stay here, with him, but years of keeping his deeper feelings to himself would not permit him to express them aloud, at least not yet. Instead, he said solemnly, "Each time we part is difficult, for... both of us. But parting is sometimes unavoidable."

Catherine nodded. "I know. I'll return as soon as I possibly can. Hopefully, the closing arguments won't take more than a few hours."

"I shall be here, waiting." *Hours?* he thought. *No, not hours -- an eternity.*

"I should be back soon." Looking up at him, Catherine smiled brightly. A shade too brightly, as she tried to alleviate the look of dejection Vincent didn't realize was mirrored in his eyes.

"Yes," he murmured looking away. "I know how heavily this case depends on your testimony. I recall the depth of feeling in your voice when you discussed it with me, earlier."

Catherine's jaw tightened angrily. "We have a good chance of getting that fiend off of the streets, away from children. How could he brutalize a child the way he did, Vincent?"

Realizing, naturally, that there were no answers to some questions, she sighed heavily, continuing, "In my job, I see so much violence, so much cruelty, every day, but I'll never understand what makes people act as they do at times. If I can help Joe get a conviction today, Andy Charbone will never hurt another child! He'll spend the rest of his life behind bars, where he should be, where he deserves to be!"

Feeling her anger and pain rip through his soul, Vincent nodded, agreeing with her, but said nothing. What could he say?

Her face was pale, pinched with emotion. "I can still see him standing over that little boy. I saw what he did to that child!" Her eyes sought his. "And so did you."

"I shall never forget that night," Vincent replied, his words taut with barely suppressed rage. Exhaling roughly, he swallowed his anger, then forced it to the back of his mind. It would serve no purpose to relive what they had seen that horrific night. He had been taking a moonlight stroll with Catherine... Still smelling the blood, seeing the ravaged body of a child in his minds-eye, he turned his thoughts

outward, away from the memory, saying, "There is another reason you must testify." Pivoting on his heel, he pressed the palms of his hands to the cool surface of the tunnel stones, fighting desperately to constrain his anger. "I cannot go into your courts to tell them what I saw. So you must do it, Catherine." Turning to face her, he went on, "You must be there for both of us, to denounce him; to finish what I... cannot."

Catherine's eyes darkened purposefully. "He'll pay, Vincent. He will! I'll do everything I can, I promise." Dropping a kiss to the side of his face, and a second one to his mouth, she hugged him fiercely for a moment, then reached for the rung of the ladder leading Above. "I really must go, but I'll be back so soon you won't even have time to miss me."

Beginning the climb to the basement of her apartment building, Catherine didn't hear Vincent's parting words. She wasn't meant to hear them. They were spoken wistfully; tinged with sadness.

"And yet, watching you go, I already miss you, Catherine. My love."

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As the woman he cherished beyond life vanished into the bluish veil of light leading from his world into hers, Vincent's eyes remained fixed on the point where Catherine had been standing. Staring at the spot for many moments, shaken to the depths of his soul, a sensation of wretched loneliness swept through him.

Putting one finger to his mouth, still feeling her warm lips there, he closed his eyes and sighed. The ache of parting from her was so strong. This ache, this emptiness within him, was this also part of loving; part of physical love? Physical...

Ducking his head shyly, he began reliving the last few hours over again in his mind, in his heart, as he knew he would until his last earthly breath. The warmth of Catherine's mouth, the scent of her skin, the feel of being lost inside of her, had rendered him nearly witless. There was no longer any judicious reason to keep his emotions buried deeply within, or to deny them. Not after last night.

As his consciousness formed mental images of making love to Catherine, no traces of darkness reached out to hinder him, or to strike out at him. The light of her love had ended that darkness - forever.

Her eyes were the lamps that lit his world. Her courage and sincerity had vanquished all of the twisted, tortured places within him. Catherine's love had truly saved him.

Searching his soul, Vincent waited for the old doubts and misgivings to rear their destructive heads, to rise from within, as a blighting mildew would, to destroy a rose - the rose of his memories.

But there were no doubts, or any shadows of them. None. No malevolent specters of the past, or of his other 'self', reproached him, nor taunted him. Or shamed him. From the ashes of a life of isolation, he had been reborn complete, inwardly serene, and oh, so desperately in love.

He and Catherine had won.

As that thought shifted to a more conscious level of existence, his powerful form began to quake with relief. Thank God his hands had not hurt her! He could never hurt her. He knew that now. In the time it took for that truth to be acknowledged and accepted, he felt more alive than he had ever imagined possible, and free at last to surrender to emotions and feelings he had once been so certain would never be allowed to surface -- not in him.

As these newly budding, mysterious sensations rushed through him, he sought vainly to slow his irregular breathing. Desire, passion, the freedom to touch, to love a woman with all that he was. These things were now his. His! How he exalted in that knowledge. For the first time, he truly felt like the man Catherine had always been so certain he was from the beginning of their relationship.

Probing his soul, the very essence of his uniqueness, this solitary, gentle being sought interpretations of the barely contained passions rising from within.

Swaying backward to rest against the rock wall behind him as comprehension engulfed his senses, Vincent gasped, alarmed by the fervor of his own emotions. With his left palm to his breast, he strained to come to terms with all that had happened to him. Through habit hard to break, he fought against the realization, yet still it evolved. He could be aware of his passion and feel no shame ever again in allowing that to happen. What was this excitement, this utter joy which ran rampant through every part of him? Was this, too, part of total love? Oh, he hoped so with all his heart. Not since he was very young had he felt so utterly at peace with his surroundings -- with everything! Another gift given to him by Catherine.

Catherine!

Barely contained exhilaration flared in his breast, assailing every fiber and nerve ending in his body, as a dam would when it exploded past all restraint. Merely to think her name unleashed something so powerful within him.

A sensuality he had never experienced before made him momentarily dizzy; unsteady.

Ah yes! To know passion, to share it without restriction with her. Rejoicing in this new freedom coursing through him, Vincent welcomed these emotions into his life, celebrating their arrival with tears of gratitude.

Suddenly, shaking so badly he thought he'd surely collapse if he didn't sit down, he took a slow breath, released it, then took another, exhaling slowly again as he fought for mastery over his body, but he didn't seem to have any strength left in his legs. Suddenly, he was as weak as a newborn babe.

"Oh, my dearest love... "

Calling out to her, he sank gradually to the floor of the tunnel corridor. A fleeting, but unusually expansive smile etched into the furrowed corners of his mouth, his mind awl with sensations and memories. What had he done? What had they done? Never had he, in his wildest fantasies, dreamt that this -- this was what loving could be.

It was as though he were caught up in the eddies of a tidal pool, drowning in need. It was terrifying -- and glorious! His entire body tingled as though it had come to life for the very first time. Perhaps it had.

Nearly frantic with yearning, Vincent rested his head back against the rock wall, fighting for composure. Ah, this hurt too deeply. This part of love was one he had never known could wound to the heart. His body was rigid with desire... with such an all-consuming hunger...

Thinking of Samhain nearly three years earlier, and the heroic Irish woman he had met that night, Vincent smiled. At last able to admit that Bridget O'Donnell's words to him that night were true, he whispered, "Yes Bridget, ah, 'tis such a sweet pain... "

Succumbing to the memories of what had taken place between he and Catherine, twin orbs of an inconceivable shade of blue flashed luminously, then filled with tears. Alone in the gray murkiness of the tunnel passageway, giving his tears freedom, Vincent lowered his head to his bent knees, weeping openly in tribute to the courage and devotion of an extraordinary lady. Catherine. His lady. Only his. Forever his.

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Frantically digging her keys from the pocket of her jacket, Catherine opened the door to her apartment and slammed it behind her as she made a mad dash for the bedroom. Forty minutes. She

had forty minutes to shower, change, and get downtown to the Municipal Courthouse.

'Damn it', she thought, 'Of all the times to have to leave him!' After struggling out of her fleece pants, top, and underwear, and flinging them to the edge of the clothes hamper, she twisted the shower faucets to the 'on' position. Running one hand under the water, waiting impatiently for it to reach a bearable temperature, Catherine took a deep breath and then, smiling, she took an even deeper one. A strangely new, yet hauntingly familiar scent filled her nostrils.

"Vincent..." Stepping into the shower, she closed her eyes for a moment and leaned back against the tiles. "Hm..."

The scent of his body still clung to her skin; a spicy odor, intermingled with a hint of smoke from years of living in the proximity of candle vapors. And it was as sexy as hell. She loathed washing his scent off, but she knew if she didn't she would never get through the next few hours without totally losing her mind.

Stretching to ease the taut muscles in her back and shoulders, Catherine grabbed the soap and began to wash, wincing as various parts of her body stung just a little. Oh, but such a pleasant, incredibly exquisite sting was this.

Here and there her skin was still highly flushed from the touch of hands callused from years of rough labor, and from probing kisses. Oh, such kisses!

Glancing down at her body, she gasped, then took a second look. Oops. There was a tiny scratch on the inner edge of her left knee. Good. She hoped it stayed there forever. To her, it was a token of Vincent's ardor, as well as a symbol of his courage - although that had never needed proving. Not to her.

Catherine touched the minute scrape with the tip of her finger. She would gladly have kept it forever, letting it become a part of her, for it was also a testament to his passion. In the steamy bathroom, she rubbed at a sudden rippling of gooseflesh pricking her skin. And what passion.

Vincent had made love to her last night. Exceptionally shy, but gloriously ardent love.

Running her tongue slowly over her teeth, savoring the lingering taste of him as one would a delicate vintage of perfectly matured cognac, Catherine reached out blindly for the shower wall, suddenly feeling a bit dizzy.

The flavor of his mouth still saturated hers. She touched her tongue to her bottom lip, deciding that he tasted a little like peppermint, with a slight hint of oranges and something else she couldn't quite distinguish. Yes, he did taste almost sinfully good, she decided, smiling.

And Vincent felt good -- and moved splendidly. Giggling, she wondered if anyone had ever told him that he had an adorable dimple on his lower left buttock, or the most magnificent set of walking away buns she'd ever seen on any man? No, she couldn't quite picture anyone telling him that. She'd like to tell him. Of course, it might be years before he would be ready to hear words such as those, if ever. Catherine smiled, deciding that he would hear them -- some day.

Wrapping her body in a thick, blue towel as she stepped from the shower, she twisted a second one around her hair and wriggled her toes into the deep pile bathroom rug.

The word 'good' seemed much too ordinary to use in defining Vincent. He was far beyond being merely good. He was delicious.

Still unsure of the exact order of circumstances that had begun with a shy kiss and ended with him making love to her, Catherine pursed her mouth. Thinking hard, she tried to sort out the memories in an analytical fashion; to recall them in the proper sequence. She was a lawyer, after all. But it was no use, she just couldn't remember and wondered if she ever would?

Vincent had been reading to her from Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. They'd been sitting just inside the grate which led out into Central Park. Did he bend over to nuzzle her hair, as he enjoyed doing, just as she looked up at him? Or had she looked up first? Oh well, the way it happened wasn't important at the moment. What was important was it did happen. Someone moved.

The next thing she had become aware of was the feel of Vincent's trembling lower lip resting against hers. It was the lightest of contact, but their mouths were touching. Then, he drew back slightly and looked at her, gasping. So had she. Eyes wide, with either shock, surprise, or perhaps a combination of the two, he'd frozen as still as death. Whatever happened next, Catherine knew it had to be Vincent's decision. He had closed his eyes for a moment, and as he did, she had wondered if he was remembering his own words from two years earlier? Of the night he had told her, 'One either moves towards love or way from it, Catherine. There is no other direction'.

As the strength to hold on to the book of poetry seemed to desert him, the small tome had fallen unnoticed to the dusty culvert floor. For the space of a solitary beat of her heart, Vincent had stared into her eyes, searching for... what? Answers perhaps, to so many, many questions?

Seeming to find what he needed in her eyes, he had whispered her name, then put his hands somewhat tentatively on her shoulders. And then at last, Vincent had moved toward love.

His mouth had brushed softly against hers a second time, like a moth with trembling wings, drawn closely to a flame he knew must consume him. With a half-strangled sound, his lips had parted slightly; hopefully. Hungrily. Shaken as she put her arms around his neck, he had pulled back just a bit, seeming to return to his senses. Eyes wide with shock, or perhaps fear, locked to hers, then clamped shut. At that moment, Vincent's long, solid jaw had tensed, as though half expecting to be rebuked or even slapped for having the effrontery to take such inappropriate liberties with her.

Catherine had known if she scorned him at that moment, it would have truly destroyed him.

When her reaction had been to melt into his arms, he had gained the courage to put his lips against hers again, a little more firmly, a fraction surer of himself. A groan had come from one of them. Him? Her? Both? It made no difference. Suddenly, fiercely, they had been lost in each other's taste and touch, yielding all to desire.

His first kisses had been almost reverent, hesitant, yet so trusting. Convinced, finally, that this woman would not reproach him, and had absolutely no fear of him, that she truly did want him as he was, for what he was, the strain of a lifetime seemed to have visibly lifted from his broad shoulders, and perhaps from his very soul as well.

Time became as nothing. Had it stopped, or had it become suddenly endless? No matter, they had all the time in the world.

Burying his face in the nape of her neck, his voice has been tight, husky with feeling. "I... I love you, Catherine. So much - so deeply. Know this. I do love you with all that I am, with all that I could ever become."

And she had given him the only answer possible to give one you loved so much. "As I love you, Vincent. I will always love you. Always!"

Cupping his chin in one hand, Catherine had slipped the other to the inner lining of his cloak. With a smile of encouragement, she had moved her hand slowly, gently, from the middle of his back to the nape of his neck, stroking him as you would a startled deer. Then, she urged his head down to her.

With his eyes seeming to pierce her soul, and nearly ebony with longing, Vincent had come willingly, and oh, so eagerly, toward her, needing her as much as she needed him. Holding her hands in his, he had repeated her last word.

"Always?" His voice had been so soft, unsure, and filled with pain. Dear God, such pain.

Catherine had fresh tears well up in her eyes at the tone of incredulity in that single word. Even then, there with her, like that, he was still afraid to trust. Had he thought perhaps that she, too, would leave him eventually? People did leave, even those they cared for, many times. Devin had left him. So had Lisa.

Vincent's bottom lip had trembled as he held back all of the questions she knew he wanted so much to ask, but couldn't; all of the emotions which he couldn't give voice to, as he fought back tears. Kissing away the two or three drops of wetness that had escaped and spiraled down over his prominent cheekbones, Catherine had held him close. Comforting him as you would a child overcome by some unnamed fear, she had begun rocking him gently back and forth, taking his anguish as her own, feeling his sorrow binding him to her for as long as time and life would allow, for only death could part them now. If even death would ever dare!

Sensing the years of his aloneness fall away at last, like the perverse leaves on the ice-laden branches of a tree, she had made a silent pledge she would never break. She would love and protect this gentle being in every way she possibly could, in any way she had to, from ever -- ever, being hurt by people or anything else for the rest of her life. Vincent deserved such a pledge. He had earned it. And she had vowed there and then to return to him full measure all of the devotion, all of the respect, he had always given her since the climatic night he'd found her.

Wanting to curse all of the people, both friends and strangers, who had caused this vulnerable soul so much sorrow in his life, she had instead swept the tousled, amber-toned bangs away from his brimming eyes. Leaning forward, the promise of constancy had been whispered into his mouth. "I will love you and be with you always, Vincent. Always."

Then, she had kissed him with a depth of yearning that was nearly frightening in intensity.

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Waiting for Joe to finish giving his testimony in the pending court case, Catherine leaned back in an archaic looking, highly uncomfortable wooden chair, fidgeting impatiently. Two hours and she hadn't been called to the stand yet, damn it!

Hoping her friend would be his usually terse, prudent self - at least while in court, she thought, *Let's go, Joe. We've already proven the case. I want to get this over with and get out of here, now. Maybe you don't have anything better to do than be in this miserable courtroom, but I do. My life is waiting!*

Seeming to be listening carefully, although she truly wasn't at that moment, having heard Joe go over his speech at least ten times at the office, Catherine let her mind travel back once again to the dominant force in her life and all that he meant to her.

Fighting off a sudden urge to shriek her happiness aloud, she shifted in the chair until no one could see her face. Closing her eyes, she savored the memories of the gentle way Vincent had responded to her, how he had tasted when, with her encouragement, he'd begun hesitantly moving his mouth and hands on her. Then, she smiled, thinking of his body. Oh, his body! He had been kissing her more confidently with each passing moment, as though finding his way down a path he had thought never to travel. Then, suddenly, he'd pulled away from her, jumped to his feet and helped her up, asking huskily if she would come with him. Come with him?! Catherine knew she would have willingly followed him anywhere, even into the very depths of Hell itself.

As soon as she had taken his outstretched hand, he'd led her down a section of the tunnels she didn't recognize, explaining on the way that the path led toward a series of rooms called Meditation Chambers. Only recently carved, the chambers served those who needed some time alone to think, perhaps to find solace, or to resolve problems of a personal nature.

When she had asked, "Or a place to love undisturbed?" Vincent had seemed to nearly choke for a moment, before replying that he couldn't be certain of that. Then, he had turned to face her and in a

trembling voice asked if he had taken too much for granted; if she was insulted by his intentions? Lastly, he asked if she truly wished to be here with him, knowing full well what could conceivably happen if she stayed Below tonight?

Catherine had merely pointed ahead of her, to an area where the passage divided into two separate walkways. Then, she'd asked him quite calmly -- she thought -- which path she should take?

Finding the answers to all of his longings reflected on her face, a flicker of hope had exploded in Vincent's beautifully slanted eyes. Nearly dazzling her, it had warmed Catherine to the soles of her feet. As his various misgivings seemed to diminish a bit more, he had swiftly reclaimed her hand and strode toward the path on the right.

The chamber he led her to was small, sparsely furnished, and very clean. As though always kept in readiness for anyone needing time alone to mourn the passing of a loved one; or perhaps just to be by themselves for a while, as lovers would, in a world with so little true privacy.

Catherine could still picture the cozy chamber in her mind.

Over the entrance lay a pair of heavy, patched velour drapes, which when drawn assured the occupant or occupants of the room absolute privacy. When Vincent had peered over at her and slowly drawn those drapes together, she remembered her mouth going dry and her heart seeming to pound in her ears.

Along one wall rested an antique walnut, four poster bed. At the head of it lay an abundance of plump stuffed pillows of various shapes and sizes. One of Mary's lovely handmade quilts in assorted shades of beige and lavender hung nearly to the floor from three sides of the stately bed. Next to the four poster was a small chair and an aged, but highly polished bureau. On the top of it sat a chipped porcelain basin, two glasses, and a covered decanter, perhaps filled with sweet, cool water from the cavern of the Triple Falls.

She had gazed about the room while Vincent stuck a match and lit several candles. Watching him at that moment, she wanted to twirl and twirl about the chamber in sheer happiness, but instead walked over to where he was standing and hugged him as hard as she could, giggling as he gave a small grunt of surprise from the unexpected strength of her embrace.

Oh, yes, Catherine had loved that chamber -- for a variety of reasons.

Turning to look at her, in much the same way he had the day they prepared Olivia's anniversary surprise, Vincent had asked softly if the room was pleasing to her -- if she would be comfortable there.

Instead of answering his question in words, she had sat on the small chair, taken off her shoes and stockings, then loosened the top buttons of her fleece shirt. She hadn't removed it, hoping that he would feel secure enough eventually to do it himself. It had taken a while, but Vincent had removed it.

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As the courtroom voices buzzed around her head, Catherine stared at her hands. Yes, she had felt quite at home in that chamber last night. Any place could be home. It could be a sumptuous apartment, a log cabin, a small chamber ... or a TREE. If the one you loved shared it with you, you were home.

Allowing her thoughts to drift for a moment, a tiny smile played at the edges of her mouth...

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It had taken her nearly an hour to induce Vincent to let her help unfasten and then free him of his shirt and vest. But not the pants! That had taken a very long time, and when he finally convinced himself to step free of them, she had been more than a little surprised to discover he wasn't wearing

briefs, or anything else for that matter!

Extremely embarrassed that he had not foreseen that this particular fact would have been discovered, not quite meeting her eyes he had explained that some of the soap used in the laundry Below was very harsh to his skin. If the slightest residue of it remained in any of his clothing, he would itch for days, all over.

Fighting off a grin, Catherine nibbled on her lower lip. Well, it had been one less layer to be removed, possibly saving her at least another hour of time - exceedingly precious time.

Vincent's strong hands had shaken badly as he had helped her unlatch, then discard the cumbersome metal belt encircling his waist. At last, gulping nervously, he sat down on the edge of the bed, eased out of his heavy boots and socks, then stood up, facing her.

When he'd rested his hands on her shoulders, she had felt him scrutinizing her, watching carefully as she ran her eyes down his body; having to know her first reaction to him. Saying nothing, she had unsnapped the one fastening at the waist of his jeans, carefully unzipped them, and then stopped, allowing him to make the final decision; one which was only his to make.

With a look on his face that closely resembled one of sheer terror, Vincent had finally pushed the jeans down over his hips and let them slide slowly to the floor in a rumpled heap.

Her initial reaction upon seeing his body for the first time was all Catherine could recall right now. Splendid. That single word described him perfectly. Vincent had indeed been splendid to look upon as he'd stood before her, naked to her eyes; vulnerable to the soul.

And oh, how afraid he had been of not pleasing her. She had seen the dread in his eyes just as he hung his head, awaiting her assessment -- as though, even then, he was still more than a little afraid that she would see his body and instantly spurn him. And that would have been the end of this, and of him.

But to reject or hurt Vincent had been the last thing on her mind. Devouring him with her eyes, she had noted the solidity of his body; the firm thighs that led down to long, muscled legs. Legs that shook just a little as he had stood before her utterly still, seeming to be barely breathing. The look in his eyes had told her he would like to do nothing better than run and hide, but he hadn't run. He hadn't moved a muscle. And he did have muscles. Oh yes.

Standing there uneasily on very large and uniquely hairy feet, with his legs slightly parted, Vincent had endured her glances of natural curiosity for as long as he could. Taking steadying, even breaths, seeming not to know what else to do with his hands, he had folded both arms across his chest, hiding them.

His massive, nearly barrel-shaped chest, covered with tightly curled amber colored hair, had delighted Catherine. She'd wanted to rake her fingernails through that mass of curls and wind every springy one around her fingers. There and then, she had promised herself that one day soon she would do exactly that.

Although she hadn't meant to embarrass him, she simply had to take a peek further down, between his thighs. When she did, she could remember losing the ability to think clearly for a moment. At times, seeing something or someone truly exquisite caused her that reaction. He was so beautiful.

Locking her gaze to his fully aroused penis and softly stirring testes, she closed her eyes for a moment, then looked at him again. No, his passion certainly wasn't something which could be concealed now. Sighing, she had tried to coax her heart back to its usual tempo.

Nodding her head encouragingly, she had reached for his hands and placed them just at the edge of her open top. Shivering as his long fingers closed around the material, Catherine remembered smiling, watching him discover that his hands truly were meant to give love, just as every part of him

was meant to give it.

Allowing her emotions to flood their connection as never before, the only thing she had wanted to do then was kiss every single, blessed solitary inch of him -- top to bottom, back to front. She wanted to eat him up, as one starving would savor a feast. For that's precisely what Vincent was -- a feast for the senses.

Catherine had wanted to touch him, and oh, how she had needed him to touch her. In a jerky motion, as though truly surprised by her complete acceptance of him, Vincent's head had snapped up. Eyes wide with astonishment had looked where she had placed his hands, then inched down slowly to look at her body with an endearing timidity. He had appeared to appreciate what he saw, although he hadn't said a word. He didn't have to, for when he looked up again, she had seen all of his emotions shimmering in his eyes. Everything he was feeling at that moment had been reflected there, in those exquisite, startlingly blue eyes.

Moving his left hand carefully upward, Vincent had run a curved nail just along the edge of the lace teddy she was wearing, seeming to be terrified that his claws would snag or rip it. When she had arched her back, pressing into his bashful stroking, he had sensed her joy and her need of him, seeming to know instinctively she wanted his touch other places as well.

Then, Vincent had stopped for a moment, breathing harshly, as though his entire body had gone momentarily weak; her need of him, her love of him, capturing his heart all over again. Sensing her complete trust, and shuddering with relief, he smiled at her. Not the crinkle of a smile that merely curved the corners of his mouth upward then quickly disappeared, nor the tight-lipped smile he usually gave everyone. This time, Vincent had absolutely BEAMED at her, impulsively exposing all of his teeth and the tips of his fangs. Oh, those wonderful teeth! And, when he grinned at her, as Catherine had never seen him grin before, that smile lit up her world.

With growing assuredness, Vincent had gently eased the straps of her camisole from her shoulders, and then slid the bit of silk up over her head. Sitting on the bed next to her, he had lowered both hands to lovingly cup her bare breasts, asking in a feathery whisper if anything he was doing was displeasing? When she had said no, he asked the next question silently with his eyes, by focusing them on her breasts, and she knew immediately how badly he needed to taste her.

Catherine's mind had cried out for the touch of his mouth, and he had given her what they were both so desperate to have -- all of his love, all of his yearning. Vincent had offered her the truth of what he was, all that he needed, and she had accepted him without a moment's hesitation.

Closing his eyes, he had begun running the pads of his thumbs slowly over her breasts. Moaning, as though lost in the pleasure of at last being able to touch her in such a way, Vincent had shuddered strongly. Taking one aching bud into his mouth, with a hushed whimper that had nearly broken her heart, he began doing what he had always dreamt of doing -- suckling sweetly at a woman's breast.

The feel of his warm mouth and searching tongue, the sounds he had begun to make as he tugged a bit more forcefully on her, the urgency of his hands as they kneaded her flesh, had almost made her lose her mind! As if he knew her agony and shared it completely, Vincent had pulled back, bringing her with him to rest against his chest. Holding her so closely that the curls there tickled her just a little, Catherine had known, of course, how desperately he was struggling to control his need -- and to contain both his impatience and his hunger.

Tilting her chin up, he stared at her through eyes glazed with passion, told her he loved her, then claimed her mouth with an unyielding explosion of sensation and taste that left her branded forever.

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Even now, the memory of that kiss clutched at the center of her, causing tiny prickles of heat to race through her womb. No man she'd ever known in her life before Vincent had ever given her such

pleasure in the smallest of touches, or caused her to become so completely unglued at the sounds of his ecstasy.

Catherine knew. She had known since the day she fell in love with him -- or had she always loved him, that there would never be another man in her life. Who would want anyone else after Vincent? The idea was ludicrous.

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He had stopped caressing her suddenly, the look on his face one of distress... discomfort. In a low voice he had told her that he wasn't really certain of what he should do next, that he needed her help.

Urging him back onto the pillows, she had taken control -- at least for the moment. How innocently he had followed her lead, allowing her to guide him onward toward consummation, as she revealed to him all that making love was. How it could be.

Slowly, patiently, Catherine had shown the man she loved that to touch her as he wanted to, and to respond to her touch, was a natural thing -- holding fear for neither the one doing the caressing, nor for the one receiving it. With her leading the way, Vincent had learned how completely love could unite two people into a singleness of being, unconditional... eternal -- if they allowed it to evolve naturally, withholding nothing from one another.

Realizing, of course, that Vincent wouldn't be able to endure too much stimulation this first time, she had gently coaxed him to part his legs. Settling herself between his thighs, she placed herself over him, then eased him into her with a single downward twist of her hips.

Oh, that feeling was indescribable. Having him.

Whimpering in pleasure as he filled her completely, she had taught him how to move, what to do. He had done all she asked without hesitation, with utter trust.

Hearing his soft groans, feeling him grow impossibly harder and longer inside of her, she had known he was very close to release. Easing slowly onto her back, she had helped him to position his body over hers. He had moved her carefully beneath him, so excited, so eager, he couldn't hide it. It was time. She'd felt his penis brush against her thigh, rock hard, betraying his agony. Reaching between them, she'd grasped him gently, guiding him, encouraging him.

Vincent had gasped with pleasure as he once more found himself sheathed completely within her warm, willing body.

Although he had been incredibly aroused he had continued taking only very small strokes within her, moving as though afraid she would break. Coaxing him to move, she had lifted both of her feet up and locked them tightly around his tensed bottom. In that same moment, a jarring moan escaped from in-between Vincent's clenched teeth. Breathing heavily, he had quickly eased out to the edge of her body, fighting to hold back his first climax. But Catherine hadn't wanted him to do that. She'd known that in time, he would certainly learn how to control his release, but not this time. This time was just for him.

Needing his completion almost as much as he did, she had reached between their bodies again. Stroking along the ridged sides of him, from the base to the top of his steely length with knowing fingers, she had discovered, as she thought she would, that the one she loved was throbbing, incredibly large, and already dripping semen. After spreading the wetness into the small pucker of flesh at the rounded head of his phallus with her finger, she moved her hand to gently stroke the delicate mounds beneath it.

Immediately, an anguished whimper had risen from him. Burrowing into her palm, unable to stop himself, Vincent had groaned his confession, telling her plaintively that if she continued touching him in that way, he would not be able to control himself, and that he wanted her pleasure to come before

his.

Reaching up, she had touched the side of his face, kissed the tip of his nose, then his quivering lower lip, and told this beautiful, innocent being that this was what happened to most men the first time. That it was nothing to be ashamed of, and to simply allow it to happen.

Understanding her, knowing she wasn't disappointed in him, Vincent had immediately loosened all restraint. Moving fast, hard and very deeply, he had rolled his hips down. One hand went to her breast, the other rested at her left hip, tightening imperceptibly as his frantic need of her had taken utter control.

Then, all too soon, the time of his first climax was upon him; powerful, unconquerable. His body tensed, but only for a moment, as ecstasy led him towards a world that consisted solely of her body sheathing his most intimate part.

Urging him to completion, she had begun dropping a lingering trail of hot, wet kisses to his bare breast. Stiffening against her, he buried his face into the pillows as his long denied instincts were at long last given their freedom.

Just at the edge of fulfillment, Vincent had suddenly stopped moving, seeming to be embarrassed at the rumbles of pleasure he couldn't prevent from welling up in his throat. Knowing she would hear him, he'd fought to subdue the sounds, but they couldn't be muffled. He wasn't yet aware, of course, that it was all right to allow himself this freedom of expression.

Hearing him, sensing how uneasy he was and how annoyed he was at his lack of command over himself, she had quickly reassured him, telling him that to give voice to one's pleasure was an expected, normal reaction, in most people. She told him of her happiness at inspiring such a response in him and that she welcomed it with all her heart.

In a private place within Vincent that only he knew of, her words seemed to have freed an inner force long buried, long forbidden. The potency of his unique maleness had crashed to the surface and took him, and oh, it was breathtaking to behold.

Tiny whimpers had escaped Vincent as his ardor quickly became too much to be borne for one more second. He had quickened inside of her, his eyes never leaving hers, as though only by focusing on her could he be certain he wasn't hurting her in any way. She knew his pleasure, had sensed his excitement; it was her own yearning mirrored in his eyes.

With a gasp of disbelief, his momentum had intensified. Whispering her name, tears of joy had welled up in Vincent's eyes, falling to lie warm and wet against her breast. The expression on his beloved face as his orgasm surged upward from his groin, hot... uncontrollable, was beyond envisioning. Better than a dream from her -- more than he had ever hoped for.

When he had instinctively tilted his hips down and began to thrust deeper and harder, loosening all control, and expelled his seed, it swept heatedly through every part of her womb, lifting her to a state of incredible oblivion she hadn't known existed. But, of course, she'd never had Vincent make love to her before. And oh, the look he had given her as he regained strength enough to shift his body slightly to one side of hers, knowing he was too heavy to stay where he was for any great amount of time, was truly indescribable.

Easing her over to lay on top of him, Vincent had gathered her into his arms, fighting for words, wanting to share his deepest feelings with her, but he didn't seem to be quite able to say those words aloud -- not yet. A lifetime of aloneness and inhibitions weren't that easily overcome. In time, Catherine knew, he would learn he could tell her anything. And in her heart, she had already known what he wanted to say, or at least some of it. How could she not know what he was feeling? She had always known.

Vincent's extraordinary eyes had gleamed in the candlelit chamber, his face awash with so many conflicting emotions: love, peace, elation, and such a delightful expression of infinite pleasure.

Then, suddenly, a soft chuckle drifted through the chamber as he nuzzled his furry nose into the nape of her neck. His skin had felt warm from the candlelight, which bathed it in a wonderfully burnished, golden hue. Kissing the side of his jaw, she held him quietly to her breast, savoring the moment, as women will. Yes, she had known what he was feeling -- the miracle of it radiated from his eyes, his smile, his touch; from each and every part of him.

They had lain together quietly for some time, gathering strength. Then, astonishing her, Vincent had asked if it was "allowed" to make love again so soon. When she had laughed and said that it was definitely allowed, his eagerness as he reached for her the second time was charming and very precious to her. Everything about him was so special, so untainted.

And the unharnessed force of his passions the second time they made love...

In the humid courtroom, Catherine smiled enigmatically, basking in her memories.

* * * *

Finally getting some strength back in his legs, Vincent managed to find his way to his chamber without bumping into too many tunnel walls. Once inside, he gratefully collapsed onto his bed.

He had been aware of Catherine's thoughts and emotions from the moment she had left his side. He continued to share them with her now, and those emotions were slowly destroying him, decimating him, driving him wild. Surging from within him was an inherent maleness of which he had never been truly aware, heightening each sensation of his newly acknowledged masculinity.

Reasonably certain that these nearly overwhelming urges would, in time, be if not dominated, at least held in check when necessary, he rested his large frame back against the bed pillows, enjoying his inborn sensuality of nature, finally admitting that it was an intrinsic part of him.

As visions of Catherine stimulated every nerve ending in his body, he rubbed his left thumb gently along a small suede pouch hanging from his neck. Inside was her mother's rose, something as dear to him as untold wealth would be to another. Stroking it lovingly, his mind soared. This rose and Catherine were one and the same to him -- gifts beyond price.

Lost in thought, Vincent stared at the ceiling, enjoying the sensation of peace washing over him. The Bond he and Catherine shared was stronger at this moment than he had ever hoped it could be. Since the previous evening, the flow and pattern from within it had changed ever so slightly, seeming to expand more than he had ever envisioned.

Tilting his head, he listened carefully for a moment. Yes, he felt certain it had changed. Lying here alone, he could still feel their connection so strongly it was as though his Beloved was in the chamber beside him; as though he were still lost inside of her, loving her with every part of himself -- mind and body.

Catherine's love, in all of its myriad shapes and depths, was a certainty of which he'd always been conscious, and yet at this moment, the sumptuous richness of it, and the absolute ferocity of her devotion, undid him. The scope of constancy and the unending courage that she had shown in accepting him, loving him, and wanting only him, was nearly overpowering.

Vincent not only sensed her heart beating in tune with his, he knew her innermost thoughts. The subliminal images of them joined physically permeated every level of consciousness, every fiber of his very being. It felt astounding. It felt... glorious! The emotional pull was a kaleidoscope of swirling shapes of every pattern, size and color. But, this montage of impressions was not one of his own making. These feelings were Catherine's! How they warmed him. Did she no longer feel it necessary to conceal anything from him, he wondered? Ah, if only that were true! If this was what was

happening, how long he had wished for this, dreamt of it -- hungered for it.

Or was this new closeness due to the joining of not only their bodies, but of their very souls forever, so that now they were 'truly' one? Either way, it felt wondrous to have her so close... so impassioned.

Sighing heavily, Vincent put his right hand over his heart. Catherine's thoughts were not merely enervating, they were also quite unnerving. To understand, at last, how much she wanted him, to grasp her need of him, was satisfying, but also quite humbling. To be able not only to welcome her love, but to be free to accept it without self-reproach was...

"Ah!" His body stiffened as a torrent of feelings rushed through him, centering in his groin. He knew these sensations now for precisely what they were -- his sensuality, his passion. He also knew they would surely decimate him if they remained unfulfilled.

"Oh, my Love, my dearest love," he groaned, "Please return quickly, before this hunger for you entirely consumes me?"

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, Vincent reached for his journal, then hesitated. Pulling his hand back, he closed his eyes. No. He couldn't write any of these longings down. There were some emotions that just could not be expressed on paper- not even to oneself.

Blissfully surrendering to Catherine now, as he had last night, knowing there was simply no use fighting it any longer, he blinked back the tears threatening to spill down his face. Ah, such sweet, sweet surrender! To give all in this way -- for how could he exclude her from any part of himself ever again? All barriers were not only down, they were in shards, as they should have been years ago. Trusting her, Vincent settled his long frame back onto the bed as alternating visions of her face and form encompassed him.

Flinging his left forearm over his eyes and fighting vainly to stifle a bevy of delighted chuckles, he was oh, so sweetly vanquished by a tiny slip of a woman! Feeling more than a little disgraced, disconcerted at his weakness, Vincent tossed his flowing mane back from his eyes as every drop of blood in his veins exploded with a hundred lusty urges he knew only Catherine could ever nourish, fulfill, or end.

Secretly enjoying his tormented state, he conceded defeat in much the same way he did everything -- graciously, his mind lost in her image. Even if he had wanted to turn from her now, which was inconceivable, how could he? How could he not love her? It would be easier to give up his life than to ever stop loving her. Conceding, at long last, that the seed of a man truly did exist within him, how could he not want to share this with the woman he cherished, and only with her?

Finally, he did believe Catherine. He was what -- and who, she wanted. She lived within him as the other half of his soul, and never again could he forbid either of them the pleasure of sharing, truly sharing, what they felt. And although he would never deserve all she gave him, or truly comprehend her devotion to him, this radiant, generous woman, truly was his LIFE.

Naturally, he had read all of the books available in Father's library regarding the technical aspects of the uniting of male and female, but books were, after all, merely books. The words there had not prepared him for the act of love itself. No text, no matter how thorough it was, could have prepared him for the miracle of integrally experiencing such intimacy. He was as one blind who had been led towards the radiance of physical enlightenment and, oh, the exhilaration of finally being able to see that brilliance without fear.

Riding the swell of wild passions that taunted him, Vincent let them carry him away as he contemplated that wondrous second time they had exalted in their love.

* * * *

With great caution, still afraid of being animalistic, unaware as yet that he could never be, he had

begun loving Catherine first with his mouth. She wished him to do this, and had asked if he wanted to. If he wanted to! His beautiful lady had seemed delighted when he asked which touch was allowed and which wasn't.

When she'd answered that there were no boundaries regarding the license of touch, he hadn't been prepared for her words, nor for her total confidence in him. The ability to trust fully, without reservation, came slowly to those who had been spiritually wounded as deeply as he had been, by people and events of the past. But he did trust Catherine,

He'd been nearly ravenous to savor her. To fill himself with her taste, as a man kneeling at the well of a long sought oasis would quench an infinite thirst. There were hungers within him he knew would never be completely satisfied, but with her guidance and understanding heart, he could alleviate them, for now. He treasured the memory of how Catherine had welcomed this need in him, gloried in it, as he moved his tongue over her body. Moving carefully, aware that his tongue was very coarse, he'd begun his journey of discovery at her left ear lobe. Then, in slow increments, using his mouth, nose and hands, he had edged downward on the bed until his lips rested just at her small toes.

* * * *

The memory of what he done next still astonished him, but he felt no shame. He'd... he'd nibbled on her feet! When Catherine had giggled, then shifted on the bed to begin doing a bit of nibbling of her own, he had nearly lost his mind, and his acute sense of judgment, but that hadn't frightened him. He had known precisely where he was, and what he was doing. He was stimulating both of them, readying their bodies for an act of exquisite sensuality.

For an hour or perhaps a bit longer they had touched, tasted, and learned one another as people in love do. But then, the time finally came when the sweet teasing and loving caresses just weren't enough. Not nearly enough.

Even knowing that it would happen, desire had still caught both of them unprepared, flinging them headlong toward a desperate quest for release. Furies had risen in his blood that would not, could not, be contained, or denied, ever again.

Catherine's body had called to his like a honey-scented drug, a woman's elixir; his woman.

He had become as flame, searing into her, as his body had responded to that call, turning that elixir of womanliness into primal orgasmic smoke. It had been impossible to turn aside their hunger for each other, or to forbid its natural fruition. Their passion was too new, their need of each other too extraordinary.

* * * *

Hugging a pillow to his chest, Vincent became a prisoner of his own memories. His body tensed, every muscle trembling, as he relived the moment of that second explosive dual climax. To have shared that with her... How badly he had wanted to take more, give more, never wanting to leave her again. Selfish of him, perhaps, but it had been an honest reaction. He had desperately wanted more.

He remembered looking down at Catherine, thinking that her small body was too delicate to sustain his weight again so soon. Yet, she had encouraged him to love her, and love her is what he had done. Taking several deep, nervous breaths, he'd knelt between her thighs. Searching her face, he'd asked with his eyes what she would have him do, how best to grant her what they both wanted.

Catherine's response had been quite explicit, leaving no doubt as to what she needed from him -- no doubt at all. Urging him closer, her hand had captured his length, stroking slowly, but eagerly. Oh, dear God, the pleasure... the pleasure!

Thinking of it now, his reaction to her touch still astonished him more than a little. He fought to remember. Had he shouted or cried out at that moment? Or... Vincent gripped the quilt beneath him

in clenched fists.

* * * *

No, he hadn't shouted or cried aloud, but as a rumbling growl-like sound welled up from private regions inside of him, for a moment he'd thought the darker side of his dual nature had risen. Not only had it terrified him, it had humiliated him to hear those sounds. But Catherine would have none of that.

When he would have turned from her, she had pleaded with him to stay, reassuring him that whatever his reactions were, they were a part of him, and she wasn't afraid of them. He could yell, roar, bellow, do whatever was natural for him, whatever brought him the most pleasure. She understood and accepted every part of him, whatever made him what and who he was.

Catherine then insisted that she cherished his reactions because they were his. He had finally allowed himself to believe her, and allowed her words to chip away at a caustic ache in his very soul. He thought how much he wanted her small hands on every part of him, in him, through him. Never in his life had he ever wanted anything... anything so badly as Catherine's hands touching him.

Whispering to her of the depths of his love, he'd entered her body. Angling his pelvis downward, he'd fought against crying out in ecstasy when Catherine had thrust upward at that same moment, sheathing all of his rigid flesh in one fluid motion. And how desperately he'd wanted to drive harder into her, to take her quickly, feverishly, without thought.

But he hadn't done that. To him, their joining was not an act of mating. It was a pledge, a covenant between them, and he would not taint it with carnal lust. He would not.

Discovering that he could maintain a semblance of control if he concentrated on her pleasure and not his own, he begun moving achingly slowly within her, cherishing her.

Catherine's joyous murmurs deepened, becoming more pronounced as he'd submerged himself fully, then withdrew from her slick heat again, then again, and yet again, never wanting to leave her, never wanting to stop. Oh, how good she'd felt to him, how pliant, how incredibly fluid her hidden places were - yielding, yet grasping, all at the same time.

When her soft cries of rapture had heightened to a crescendo of only his name, again and again, she'd caught him around the buttocks tightly with her fingers, urging him down. Ah! How that had sounded to him, to hear her cry his name aloud in that way, at that moment.

An almost sinful pride had swelled in his breast as he'd focused only on her, devoting himself to bringing to her all of the ecstasy he possibly could. When she'd arched against him, flushed and wide-eyed, her climax had inflamed him.

Then, something happened he wasn't prepared for. The special, hidden places in Catherine's body had spasmed, clutching at him, holding him firmly within her, as a silky wetness met his last, nearly frenzied thrusts. Running her tongue over his breast, she then blew the warm breath out against his already overheated flesh. That had been the crowning blow, sealing his fate. All defenses, all capacity to impede his orgasm, had deserted him. He had begun to move unyieldingly deeper, explosively harder, then...

Vincent tilted his head, fighting to remember. Had he merely thought the words or had he indeed shouted them aloud, telling her that ejaculation was beginning for him? No matter, one glance at his face and she surely must have known that his time was upon him.

As pure desire reached out and dealt him a mighty blow, his hips had snapped down spontaneously, beyond thought, just as his groin muscles convulsed. Lifting to the palms of his hands and tensing his forearms, he had climaxed mercilessly, the part of him which was most male flowing hotly into the deepest recesses of Catherine's body. The orgasm seemed never to end -- he hadn't wanted it to

end.

How responsive his Beloved had been, how willing to receive everything he offered her. And he had given Catherine the only thing she had ever truly wanted -- himself, heart, soul, body and his quintessence, scattering it in undulating eruptions of semen into her moist femininity.

It had been almost spiritual, that moment of oneness. Time seemed to...

* * * *

"Time? What... time?!"

Jerking upright from the pillows and instantly returning to the present, Vincent's eyes flew to a nearby mantel timepiece. No. It simply wasn't possible! It was nearly four in the afternoon?! He'd been lying here wallowing in his own imaginings for that long a span of time, and he hadn't even showered yet!

Leaping from the bed, he grabbed three towels, a bar of soap, a bottle of shampoo and stuffed them into the pockets of his cloak as he yanked it on. Then, carefully lifting a single red rose from a small vase on the corner of his desk, he placed it lovingly in an inner pocket of his cloak. A rose for a rose.

Tapping out a hasty message to anyone interested, telling them that he would be gone for the remainder of the day, and perhaps far into the night, he bolted towards the Triple Falls, undoing the buttons on his vest as he sped down the passageway.

* * * *

Cursing Joe, his lengthy court discourse, her missing briefcase, and all taxicabs in general, Catherine rapped on the cab window. "Let me out here, please." Flinging the money at the driver, she bounded from the passenger side of the taxi like a tightly coiled spring.

Nearly five o'clock and she was just getting out of that miserable courthouse! Well, at least Andy Charbone had gotten what he deserved - a life sentence with no chance of parole. The jury had adjudged him sane, much to his lawyer's disgust. No second 'hearing' at a later date, no pleas of 'But, my client is reformed, your Honor.' No. Not this time! They got him!

After squandering ten precious minutes freshening up in the courthouse ladies room, she had fought the crowds pouring out of their office buildings at this time of day. Oh, what a mess! Didn't people work anywhere else in this city?!

Accepting the fact that Vincent wouldn't be able to meet her this early, for it was nearly broad daylight, she still chose to go through Central Park to return to him. Removing her high heels, Catherine broke into a fast walk, then a fully unleashed sprint. As she neared the entrance to the culvert, her thoughts went to the last time she'd run through the park like this, to him -- into his arms.

That night, Vincent had been waiting for her with such a look of impatience on his face, with such eagerness and love, even now the memory of it made her shiver. Glancing up into the waning light of the late afternoon sun, she thought, 'He'll meet me at the grate.'

Just then, a flash of something golden glinted at the edge of the shrubbery surrounding the culvert, immediately catching her attention. Nearly stumbling in shock, her eyes widened. Vincent was standing there, out in the open, and his hood was down! Outside? In the daylight? What was he doing? Had he lost his mind? Glancing around anxiously, she waved to him.

Shifting from one foot to the other, Vincent shyly returned her wave, then ducked his head, watching cautiously for interlopers. Fully aware of how dangerous this was for him, he fought the old terrors rising from within, wanting to see her in the sunlight, and knew she had always dreamt of seeing him this same way. So, he would do this. No matter how much it terrified him to be here, he would do this, for Catherine.

As she neared him, the sun glittered like a thousand jewels that had somehow been caught up in her

hair. Dear God, she was so lovely. As his lady cleared the last barrier of shrubs between them, Vincent opened his arms wide. Yes, my Love, hurry. Hurry!

Even from this distance, she could tell that Vincent had just washed his hair. In the soft breeze, that glorious wild mane fluttered about his shoulders like the halo of an angel. That's what he was, an angel come to earth. And he was hers.

Vincent's cloak glided around his legs, seeming to caress his thighs, as he opened his arms, waiting for her to fill their terrible emptiness.

Sobbing with joy, Catherine flung herself against his chest. She was safe. She was home.

Curling his lower body slightly as she threw herself against him, Vincent gathered his best Beloved to his heart, then buried his face in her hair.

As though the power to speak had been wrenched from him by the sheer wonder of holding her close once again, he was unable to say anything but her name. "Catherine... "

He didn't have to say anything. She knew. Aware that he would have sensed it anyway, Catherine had to tell him. "Oh, I've missed you! We won, Vincent. We won. We got Charbone off the streets for good!"

Vincent smiled, but made no reply. Won? Yes, Catherine had won today, and last night they both had won... everything.

Finally able to release her death grip on the man she loved, she turned him towards the culvert opening and the tunnels, then gestured back towards the park, asking, "What are you doing out here like this?"

"Waiting for you." When Vincent glanced at her from beneath his long lashes, she could see a tiny smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"Yes, I could see you were waiting for me." With that, she laughed aloud. "So, is this your usual reaction to passion?" Her eyes glittered as she lightly teased him, then grew very round at his answer, and the new openness he seemed to have when speaking to her. And yet, he was still so endearingly shy.

Answering her, Vincent tried to keep his voice from cracking with everything he was feeling at this moment. "My... usual... reaction to passion? I wouldn't know, my Dear, since this is my first experience with that particular emotion."

Catherine's eyes darkened with sudden trepidation. "But, if anyone had seen you. The risk... "

"... was mine to take," he interrupted, his voice resolute. Reaching the safety of his world, Vincent turned to face her. "Catherine, there are so many things I want to give you that I can never give you. One moment in the sunlight... " Reaching for her, he grazed her lips ever so carefully with the pads of his fingers. "It was not enough, but it's all I have to... offer."

"No, it's not all you have to offer me, Vincent. You give me everything I'll ever need. Everything. But the courage for you to do what you just did... " Suddenly overwhelmed by the depth of her feelings for this man, Catherine hugged him around the waist with all of her strength. Staring up into his joyous face and that wondrous grin he still wore, she studied him for a moment. "I thought I knew you so completely."

"Hmm," he responded in a noncommittal tone of voice. "As I thought I knew myself. It would appear that surprises are going to be our lot in life." Touching the side of her face, he tilted his head to the left and smiled at her, continuing, "Would you object to that, my Catherine?"

"Certainly not," she replied, grinning back at him. "Just don't give me too many of them all at once, okay?" Studying him, she rested her right hand against his stubbled cheek, loving him so much it hurt

- it physically hurt.

"I can see that I'm going to have to keep an eye on you."

"Only... one eye?" The words were solemnly spoken, but the twinkle in Vincent's eyes betrayed him. Taking her hand in his, he glanced away, astonished at his own boldness, then quickly changed the subject. "I... I would like to prepare supper for you. The long day in court must have been extremely difficult, and you are surely tired. I hope the meal I have planned will please you." Then, he did something totally unexpected. Instead of turning for the passage leading Below, he took the path Catherine knew led to her apartment.

"Where are we going?" she asked, her heart pounding; praying her intuitions were right.

"I took the liberty of utilizing the key you gave me many months ago and persuaded Kipper to take some supplies to your apartment. I thought I would prepare supper there." Stopping in his tracks, Vincent turned to face her. "You don't mind?"

'Mind?' She thought. 'Mind?!'

Taking her silence for approval, Vincent reached into his vest pocket and held out the rose to her. He had removed all of the thorns earlier, of course, knowing that his Dearest Treasure sometimes had a 'problem' with them.

"Oh, it's lovely. Thank you." Accepting his gift with her right hand, the other went into her pocket. "I have a gift for you, too."

"You... do?" Looking like a child waiting for Christmas, Vincent watched intently as she unwrapped a small cellophane packet. "What is it?"

"Chocolate." Breaking off a small piece, she popped it into his mouth. "I must really love you, to share my chocolate."

"Hm, yes, this is good." Sighing, Vincent leaned back against the tunnel wall, bringing her with him. "Is there anything as wonderful in this world?"

"As chocolate? Only one other thing - you." As she licked at the bit of sweetness that hadn't quite made it into his mouth, Catherine felt his body stiffen, then relax against hers.

"What... What are you doing?"

"Thanking you for my rose," she answered, continuing to kiss and taste him until he thought to go instantly and quite splendidly mad.

Pulling himself up to his full height, he settled Catherine back on her feet, slightly away from him, as he tried to remember how to draw a simple, ordinary breath. "Come." Catching her fingers in his, he wove them together, as she had woven their hearts together long ago. "A proper thank you cannot even be contemplated here. We should go. Another day shall end soon."

Gripping his fingers, Catherine murmured, "And then?"

Identical pools of china blue flashed at eyes the shade of new spring grass. "And then begins the magic of our night, Catherine. My love."

The End