

I Know You're Out There Somewhere

by Trisha Kehoe

DEDICATION

.... the madness presses closer now.

*Yet, in that opaque darkness, I
sense you are near. But, when I
reach out to embrace you, there is
nothing. Oh, the pain of this
aleness cuts as a knife.*

*I must not give up hope. Even as
I bitterly lament your absence,
screaming out my pain upon the
wind, I know you're out there
somewhere. My heart, my life,
never doubt it for an instant,
Catherine, I will find you.*

*This world was an empty place for me
as I clawed my way Above, to freedom, away
from the aleness of my life. Meditating
upon the rooftops, melting into the icy
night air, my soul commenced to heal. I
wrote, I thought, I allowed myself to
.... dream. Then, a MIRACLE. One day, a
woman entered my domain and my solitude
was altered forever, into LOVE*

VINCENT

CHAPTER ONE

REBIRTH

Sensing an intruder, the beast growled menacingly, glanced sideways and sniffed the dank air. Someone had invaded this place? Flitting left then right, outraged eyes narrowed, searching the darkness. Who had *dared* to enter *here*? Snarling as a shadowed figure approached, the creature's mind screamed '*threat*'! then acted on the subsequent command: '*KILL*'! Moving through the red mist that seemed to envelope him, raising one clawed hand to strike ...

"Vincent! *VINCENT!*"

The tensed, high pitched screams cut through the veil of madness for only the briefest of moments - a heartbeat. Confused blue eyes locked to startled green ones as memories and words collided against each other in Vincent's consciousness: 'These are *my* hands', '*You could never hurt me*', '*Remember love*'.

No! He mustn't kill *her*! This was Catherine, the woman that he loved; she wasn't the one who must die. Yet ... someone ... must. Using the last fragments of his strength, Vincent's hand froze just at Catherine's throat as he turned the frenzied rage on himself. When his body started to betray him again, he fought the monster he thought had finally won, dominating him one ... last ... time.

The sensitive man, of whom little remained now, swayed, then collapsed at Catherine's feet as though mortally wounded. Trying to cushion his fall, she toppled with him to the sandy floor of the cave.

At this moment, Vincent was not only damaged physically, he was also crippled mentally by shame, and by the fear he'd seen in Catherine's eyes; fear that *he* had put there. He could smell it as bile - bitter on the tongue, bringing an end to love, to hope, and to dreams only envisioned when alone in the dark.

The beast that now had mastery of Vincent knew not the meaning of love - not the true meaning. The emotion called hope, to the enraged force that ruled now, was merely a word; a human word that held no interpretation for *him*.

Yet, even a beast can suffer anguish, can feel the end of possibilities that had once been held most dear. This is what Vincent felt as he lay there dying. Breath ceased; the beat and soft rhythms of a great heart shuddered, and then all was still.

For the beast that Vincent imagined he'd become, life could not continue under his rule. For the man that Vincent had always been, his life *WOULD NOT* continue under the authority of the beast.

Noting Vincent's confusion and disorientation as his friends helped him from the cave, Catherine fought to keep him moving, to keep him focused. He trembled as though each step, every move he made, was at tremendous cost. Keeping to the slow pace Vincent set, walking behind him and Father, Catherine could see how tired the older man was. She was also well aware of the terror he must be feeling at this moment - of his son's state of health. Catherine understood the fears; they were hers as well.

How much pain, how much torment, could one's body endure before it gave out or gave up the struggle to sustain itself; to simply *be*?

As Pascal and Mouse lowered Vincent to his bed carefully, Catherine knew this was the last time this sort of conflict within him must ever happen. *EVER!* For if this assault on Vincent, this struggle for dominance by his dual identities, ever happened again, he would not survive it. This, she was certain of and the thought of ever, *EVER* losing Vincent frightened Catherine beyond any other possibility.

After comforting him for a moment and promising to return very quickly, she asked Vincent to rest. The ordeal he had gone through; the battle for his very life, had indeed weakened him. He *must* rest and regain his strength.

Catherine sat with Vincent quietly. Not speaking; she even tried controlling her thoughts, knowing he would sense her worry and be troubled, in turn, for her sake.

When he finally drifted off to sleep, Catherine dropped a soft kiss to the center of his forehead, then pushed the damp, dirt-covered hair back from his shoulders; that long beautiful hair, only he possessed.

She stood over Vincent a moment, looking down on him as she tucked his bed covers higher about his chest. She loved him so much.

Quietly easing out of the room, Catherine went Above, her thoughts troubled, but her resolve strong. Certain decisions must be made and made quickly now. Particularly now. When next she talked to Vincent, Catherine hoped to be able to discuss many things with him. Among them, that she would be doing no more field work. There was too much chance of injury, both

to her and to him.

How many times must he risk his life to save hers? How many time would he be able to do this, before he was destroyed in the attempt? And why ... *WHY...* had it taken her so long to see what each killing *DID* to Vincent? It was destroying him by inches, right in front of her eyes.

What was *wrong* with her, that she didn't *see* what was happening to him? Was she blinded by her own ambitions, was that it? Did she care so littl for his welfare, she allowed th results they attained as a '*team*' to outweigh the risks of his being involved in her cases? No more.

Catherine shivered as she lit the fireplace in her apartment. Sitting on the couch sipping a glass of wine, she let her thoughts drift over these last months, these last two years. She allowed herself – no - forced herself, to face some cold, hard, truths, finally. Most of the times Vincent had been forced into killing, it had been in defense of her, in *HER* name! Oh God. Never again, *NEVER*. It would stop and it would stop right here.

Seeing Vincent as he had been just hours ago, crushed almost beyond hope of regaining his hold on himself, his strength; Catherine knew living between their world as she had for so long, must cease. It *HAD* to, for him, for both of them. Could she do this for them? *COULD SHE?*

When her father had died and she pleaded with Vincent to be allowed to come Below and told him she needed him, Catherine had also vowed she wasn't afraid, whatever the future held for them. But, *had* that been the truth, all of the truth?

Catherine remembered when Michael had caused such pain for Vincent; of the jealousy he felt and was not used to feeling, when Michael had kissed her. Then she had said whatever her fate was, she would accept it gladly, to be with him. Had *that* been the truth or merely hope?

WAS she brave enough to give up her life Above, work she enjoyed, friends who would never understand or accept him as her husband or her lover, if it ever came to that? Could she center her life around Vincent and his world? Did she have the courage to live *for* him, *with* him the rest of her life?

Catherine knew she loved him and that he loved her, though he had never dared give voice to that love in so many words. *WAS* Vincent her life, the most important, single part of that life? Could he always be that, would he *want* to be that?

Sitting here alone, in the darkened room, Catherine faced her fears as Vincent had taught her to; all of them. Both the ones any woman in love would have and those only she *could* have.

Hours passed; still Catherine sat there confronting all the questions and the doubts; her doubts of herself and what she truly wanted from life. Giving them each their place, weighing their importance against the singular, unchanging joy of being Below, with Vincent, of being finally able to tell him she wanted to stay with him for always and this time, *THIS TIME*, she was sure she would *NOT* fail him.

She must never disappoint him again as she did when her dad died. Oh, Vincent denied the disappointment, but though he believed he was being honest with both of them, Catherine still felt she had betrayed him, in not staying with him then.

She felt the defeat deeply and it was her own fault she *HAD* failed! He had warned her not to make decisions while still grieving as she was for her father. Had she listened? No. But, he had been right, he usually was. She had gone back Above and the sense of loss, of separating again, had nearly overwhelmed the both of them.

Resting her head on one arm, Catherine blinked back the rush of tears, happy tears. A million questions, but only one possible answer, *especially* now. Yes; the answer was yes - to everything, to *all* the questions. She loved him that much, so deeply, she would give up everything for him, to be *with* him.

Catherine laughed to herself. What was she *truly* giving up? Nothing, just ... things. A job, an apartment, entertaining friends ... things. Was there a chance for them, for some sort of a life together, completely together? Catherine hoped so, prayed it would *be* so.

From what he said before he fell asleep, the confusion he spoke of, she knew he did not remember all of what happened between them in that cold, dark cave. There was another truth to tell Vincent; he had loved her in that desolate place, filled her with a joy that transcended anything she had ever known in her life. And now, they *must* be together. Oh, the ecstasy he brought to her, to be with him in that way ... there were no words for it, but she better find some and very quickly, before Vincent sensed things he should not.

He had the right to know, had to be told. Dear God, how would he react? What would he say? Would he hate her or feel betrayed? Would he accuse her of allowing it to happen, for *wanting* it to happen? Dear God, help me? Would Vincent *even believe it did happen?*

She was putting all her cards on the table, to use a gambling phrase, for this was a gamble. A

big gamble. There were four aces in the deck and right now, Catherine knew she needed them *ALL!*

Joseph Maxwell looked up, then smiled, as Catherine stuck her head around the edge of his door.

"Joe? Got a minute? I'd like to talk to you, it's very important."

Leaning back in his chair, Joe put both arms behind his head, grateful for the interruption.

"Sure, always got time for you, Radcliffe. Besides, this case is gonna kill me! Sit down, take the load off."

He watched her carefully; she looked about ready to keel over right in front of him. Now what? Frowning, Joe got to his feet and walked around the corner of his desk, sitting on the end.

"Hey? You okay? You look beat."

"I am beat, Joe. It's been" Putting her head back against the couch, Catherine took a deep breath, clearing her mind. "I've been having some ... personal problems lately, Joe. Ones I can't really talk about, at least not now."

"Okay. Tell me whatever you can, tell me what's wrong, Cathy?"

He waited, sensing she needed a few moments to get her act together and give voice to her troubles, whatever they were.

Deciding with this man, the best way to say what needed to be said, was directly and to the point, Catherine looked up, trying to smile, but not managing to. Tears threatened to spill from her eyes. "I ... I can't do it any more, Joe. No more field work. I just can't!"

She looked away for a moment, then continued, trying to be as honest as she could be, under the circumstances.

"It's taking too much out of me, as well as hurting people I care for. People I ... love. I hope you'll understand, I don't want to quit, but if I stay ..."

Catherine bit her bottom lip, then sighed, closing her eyes. "... if you and Moreno *want* me to stay, it will have to be for investigative work only, inside the office or in court."

For a moment, Joe didn't know *WHAT* to say. He'd never seen this strong lady this upset before, except when she lost her father. Ah hell, just when he had a new person broken in and

doing a great job, they wanted to quit doing that job! He shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of acceptance; better having her work inside than not at all, she *WAS* good at what she did.

Patting her arm, he nodded his head. "Okay, fine, I'll go along with your decision, Radcliffe. You knew I would, huh? We'll talk to Moreno, get it all settled, as soon as I get back, deal?"

"Back? From where?" Catherine's eyes went wide. "Oh Joe, I completely forgot all about your vacation! Gee, I *AM* sorry. Just what you needed was me ..."

"Relax. No big deal." He grinned at her. "Rather have you tell me this *GREAT* news now, then have it waiting for me when I got back! So, when would you want to drop the field work? Next week, next month?"

"I can wait until you get back, Joe. There's only one case that has me on the ropes right now." He nodded. "Montelli, right?"

She groaned. "Oh, this is a miserable one, Joe! How long has this office been trying to prove their case against him and his syndicate, anyway?"

"Hell, years and years! I dunno. That case was already on the books when I joined the office. He's one slippery dude, that guy."

"I know." She started for the door. "Well, I'll do all I can, that's a promise. When are you leaving?"

"Day after tomorrow, if John doesn't jump all over me before then. I sure hope nobody thinks to remind him that I'm gonna be in Vegas!"

Catherine laughed. "Yeah, right. Well, he won't get any info out of me! You've earned some time away for a change."

So have you, pal. So have you."

As his sensitive ears picked up the slow, shuffling gait, Vincent knew it was his father. Capping his pen and putting it on the desk beside his journal, he glanced up smiling, just as the man entered the chamber.

"Father, it is late. I missed you at the evening meal. Please sit down, you seem very tired."

Carefully easing his sore leg out before him, Jacob Wells sat in the chair across from his son. Vincent noted his shoulders dropping in fatigue.

"Did you have dinner at all, Father?"

"Oh yes, William was kind enough to save me a bit of stew." He passed one hand over his eyes. "I don't think you have heard, Elizabeth is quite ill. There was a message from her earlier, while

you still slept. I was here, with you, when it came over the pipes. When Elizabeth asks for me, I know it is serious; she can be ... quite stubborn about caring for herself, you know."

"Yes, I know. What is it, Father? Will she be all right? Were you able to help?"

"Yes, a little, I think. One never knows, with her." The man shrugged. "I did all I could."

"I am sure you did." Vincent folded his hands, lacing the fingers together. "Would you like a cup of tea, some hot chocolate?"

"Nothing, thank you. All I need is some rest and I'll be fine."

Reaching out, Jacob touched his son's arm. "I should be caring for you instead of you caring for me right now. You look a bit better than this morning. How are you feeling tonight, are the dreams still troubling you?"

"No. Not as much as they were when we last spoke of them." Vincent looked away, as though focusing on something only he could see. "Yet, they *do* linger, just at the edge of consciousness. They are so real, so persistent, Father! I don't know what I can do, except have the patience to wait until they subside on their own. Never before have I had any dreams such as these."

Jacob got to his feet slowly, leaning on his cane for support. "Hopefully the dreams are temporary. An ... aftermath of your illness."

"Hm... that was also my thought."

"Have you tried both baths or warmed milk? I wish there was something more tangible I could give to you."

"I understand why you cannot."

"Although these remedies may seem like old wives tales, Vincent, they have been known to work, sometimes. It can't hurt to try them. Maybe one of the others could help you relax a little and thereby, induce a deeper, more restful sleeping pattern."

Smiling up at the man, at the concern he heard in his father's voice, Vincent nodded his head in agreement. "I shall test both your remedies, Father, and see which one helps me the most. Thank you, I knew I could depend on you for solace."

Jacob bent over his son's head to drop an affectionate kiss to his brow. "I hope you can always depend on me. I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight. Sleep late, Father? You have earned it, truly you have."

"If I can, I will. I don't seem to need as much sleep anymore. If the dreams keep you awake, Vincent, promise you will wake me up."

"I promise I will, if I really need you?"

He could feel each stabbing pain as though it were his own. Stretching out his arms, Vincent tried to embrace Catherine, but every time he did, she faded into a soft blue mist before his eyes. Vanishing beneath that shimmering fog, she cried out to him, straining to run to him. But something, someone, held her away from him, was hurting her! They could not reach each other.

Roaring her name, trying desperately to find her, he ran through the darkness. Fighting off his own feelings of terror, Vincent sensed Catherine's foreboding. It nipped at his chest - tearing at him like the scalding fingers of a blazing, incendiary storm. A tempest was rending him in two. What beast was here? His? Hers? NO ... No!

Then he was alone. Alone. Vincent was in a dark, empty place, with walls he could not find an opening in. There was no way out, no escaping from this spot. Was this hell, then? Where was she? Where was Catherine? WHY was he alone?

Vincent cried out in the darkness, raging against what must not, could NOT be real! 'Someone, help me, help me? I must find her. WHERE IS CATHERINE?'

His own screams finally woke him from the nightmare. "CATHERINE!"

Shaking all over, Vincent sat up in bed, staring at the pictures still winking out slowly in his mind, still able to see the horror of them before him. Would this never end? Why was this happening to him, to Catherine? What did the dreams mean? *WHAT?*

With a shudder, he lay back on the pillows, staring at the ceiling until he could breathe almost normally once again.

He must resolve these strange nightmares before they drove him mad and certainly before Catherine could hear of them from Father. They seemed more comfortable with each other these last days; more accepting, even loving. Friendlier in the way they spoke to each other.

Vincent rolled onto his right side. Folding his hands under his crossed arms, he let his thoughts carry him away. The aloneness he felt was beyond belief; how could this have happened? What had taken the connection ... his connection ... with Catherine, from him?

Dear God, this was piercing his soul, this loneliness! Where Catherine had been, in his heart, now lay only emptiness. All sense of her was gone. Hot, bitter tears fell from the man's closed eyes. After two years, to feel this isolation again, was beyond enduring.

He must speak of this, to Catherine. Only she would understand, *could* understand, how he felt. Did she feel it too, he wondered? And if she did, why hadn't she mentioned it?

At last, the need for rest overcame the need for answers. The gentle rumbling sound of Vincent's chest filled the chamber as he drifted off to sleep fitfully.

Just as Catherine entered the chamber, Father was coming from the second level, arms loaded with books. Reaching out to help him, her eyes were filled with concern.

"Good morning, Father. I came to spend the day with Vincent, as he agreed to yesterday, but he's not in his chamber. Do you know where he is, is he all right?"

"He is ... well, Catherine. It will take longer this time, for him to heal, than when he was young. The only other time this ... illness struck him down, was not nearly as severe, as terrifying, as this time."

"Yes? Can you tell me more of that period in Vincent's life, someday? It might help now to understand more of his past. I have to talk to him ..."

Jacob Wells looked over at the woman standing before him fidgeting with her watch. Catherine seemed out of sorts this day or troubled. But, as she said nothing of what was bothering her, he wouldn't ask. He knew, as with all women, this one also had her secrets. Perhaps, *someday*, he would tell her ... his.

"My son said if you or anyone needed him, he was at the Triple Falls. I didn't want him going about alone as yet, but..."

She smiled, but it didn't make her eyes, Father noticed. "He couldn't be dissuaded?"

"No. He could not be ... dissuaded, as you say. Would you like me to send one of the children for him?"

"Oh no, I don't mind the walk. Maybe it will clear the cloudiness in my head a little. I'll see you later this afternoon. Is it all right if I remain Below for lunch?"

"Of course, Catherine! You are most welcome. I'll let William know."

With a nod of her head in thanks, she turned for the stairs and the discussion with Vincent, that could no longer be turned aside.

The majesty of this place still awed her a little as Catherine ducked her head to enter the cavern of the Triple Falls. Directly in front of her, sat Vincent, staring down into the churning

waters beneath him. Such a sad look was on his face, it frightened her.

Catherine dropped down next to him, leaning back on a large boulder. "Vincent. Good morning."

Giving her a slight startled look, he half turned to face her. "Good morning, Catherine. Did you have any trouble finding me?"

"No. Father told me where you'd gone; he seemed a little upset with you."

"Yes, I know. He would have me stay in bed for another month, if he could do it."

"Perhaps he's right, you still look so drawn ..." Her hand wavered a moment with indecision, then lightly touched the edge of his chin. "Have you been getting enough rest, sleeping enough?"

He trembled slightly as she held his chin in her fingers, but didn't pull away. "I am fine. Please, you should not worry ..."

"But I do worry, where you're concerned, Vincent. You know that."

He looked down at her for a moment, then smiled shyly. "Yes, I know that, Catherine."

The slim smile faded as he took a deep breath. "There is something I must tell you, must discuss with you."

"Yes?" She caught his sudden change of mood immediately. "Vincent, what is it?"

In a voice thick with suppressed pain, he whispered, "Our bond, our connection ..."

Leaping to his feet, turning away from her to gather his emotions in a firmer grip, he tried again.

"What we shared has forsaken me, Catherine. Our bond ... the connection we had ... is gone."

Getting to her feet, Catherine took a firm grip on his arm. "I thought it might be that. It will return ..."

"No, I am certain it will not return. It's ... very difficult for me to speak of this to you, Catherine. I feel such an aloneness in here." His hand touched at his chest near his heart. "I cannot feel your warmth reaching out to me anymore."

His voice roughened with unshed tears. "If this is the price of ... healing, it is too much to be endured. It ... hurts ... too deeply. I have lost what I thought *never* to lose, my sense of ... you. Knowing when you were near, feeling your joy, sharing your life as you walked Above, brought such pleasure to me, Catherine. To be able to share so much with you, in that way, was everything I could ever hope for."

Catherine gathered him into her arms as glistening teardrops ran down his face. There was a

sorrow in Vincent's voice, an emptiness, that went beyond pain.

"Everything I could ever ... hope for."

Holding him as tightly as she could, Catherine said nothing for a moment, searching any words that could help ease his pain. Laying her head gently against his chest, her voice was loving, gentle with emotions. Many emotions.

"What we had was granted to us, perhaps loaned to us, for a short time, that is true. But, as long as we have each other, care for each other, we are still connected, Vincent. That *is* our bond, the caring."

She embraced him with her soul. "For people who feel as we do for each other, there can be no true aloneness, Vincent. I am always with you, as you are with me. Can't you see that? Can't you feel it?"

Catherine put one finger to his cheek, turning his eyes to meet hers. "Will you believe me?"

"I will ... try. I promise to try, Catherine."

His arms came up har around her waist, pinning her against him for a moment before dropping away hurriedly, as though afraid of hurting her.

Her words eased the agony he was being torn apart with just a little. It was a beginning. It would be enough, for now, to sustain him. It would have to be enough. To want any more from Catherine; to want to give her any more of himself than he shared with her now, was a dream Vincent knew he dare not have. Or acknowledge, even if only to himself. He had learned one harsh, bitter lesson in his life; how quickly a dream could turn to ashes in his hands. *Especially* in his ... hands.

After a lunch of William's thick barley soup and fresh baked bread, Catherine sat in Vincent's chamber, reading poetry. One of the many things they shared, was their love of poetry. Here, words of love could be spoken they thought could never be shared.

That had been the way Catherine felt before these last four days. Now, she knew Vincent could love her, truly love her, in all ways. He had done exactly that, loved her in every way a man loves a woman. With his body, his heart and his soul.

With his very breath, his mouth, his hands, every part of himself; this is how Vincent had loved her. It had been more wonderful, more beautiful, than she had ever dared to dream of. When would he remember, if ever?

Giving herself a mental shake, Catherine turned her attentions back to her book. Jenny had given this to her last month; now was the first chance Catherine had had to read it. This stanza

was called *'Before You'*. She thought it was beautiful; the words perfectly in tune with her feelings for the man sitting opposite her on the bed.

As she read, she didn't see the look on Vincent's face, the love shining from his eyes. Or what these words were doing to him. For the words she was reading had captured his soul and he was lost in them.

'Surely my life was empty, before you came into it; without a natural source of strength or radiance. I didn't always want to be the best I could be, didn't always wake up feeling good about myself.

But, you nourished me, cleansed me and restored me. You gave back all I could be, with you at my side, believing in me. The value of emotions I thought gone forever, you returned into my hands. You've taken photographs of me with your eyes, loved me with your smile.

I can only say I love you by staying with you, by caring for you as you cared for me. When darkness and death gathered all about me, you were there, you were my strength, the rock on which I built all my shining, new hopes ... and dreams.

The only gifts I can truly give you are words; words of understanding you as you are, accepting you as you are, not as how you wish to be, for me. By always being honest with you, trusting your never to hurt me or cause me pain that need not be caused. We are like the two halves of a single heart. A dream that never happens ... and has.'

Finishing the final verse, Catherine looked up to find him staring at her in a way he never did. Every emotion he felt, every need, seemed to flash around him as an amber colored assault on Catherine's senses. The air was heavy with unspoken words. She could feel her cheeks go pink and lowered her eyes from his piercing ones.

"Whoever gave that book to you, Catherine, must feel life very deeply."

"She does; her name is Jennifer. She's been my friend almost longer than I can remember. You enjoyed what I read?"

"I enjoyed it ... very much, Catherine. Thank you for sharing the book with me."

It was as if he felt her words, rather than actually heard them. "I would share everything, with you ..."

Her head came up slowly. Chin trembling, Catherine went and sat next to him on the bed. "I haven't been completely honest with you and I must be."

Waiting, his eyes held all the questions he did not give voice to as she continued. Stammering as she finally gathered enough courage to begin, Catherine touched his hand gently.

"When you were so ill, in that cave, Vincent, I was with you. I ... stayed with you all night in

there. Did anyone tell you?"

"Yes. Mouse did."

"Not Father?"

Vincent looked uneasy. "He started to, but didn't finish when I told him I already knew you had not left me alone. I owe you my life, Catherine. There is no way I can repay you, for all you did that day, for me."

"Yes, there is a way to repay me."

"Please tell me how? I'll do anything ..."

"When I tell you what happened in that ... place, will you try to understand it and accept it? It's the truth; as hard as it will be for you to believe that, it *is* the truth. Promise not to leave this chamber until I have finished, please?"

"Yes, I promise. If you say it is true, then it is, Catherine. I know you would not lie to me. We promised always to share the truth and we have."

"Yes." Catherine closed her eyes for a moment, as though praying. "Vincent, you collapsed on the ground; you were so still, I was terrified! I knew you were dying, that you ... had died."

She turned anguished eyes to him. "I had to save you. *I HAD TO*. In whatever way I could. Vincent, you weren't breathing, you had stopped breathing completely. I held your face in my hands, screaming at you. I don't remember what I said, not entirely, but I told you that you could not leave without me, that I wouldn't let you. I gave you mouth to mouth resuscitation, then I ... this next part is difficult for me to speak of. It's very ... personal. Have patience, please?"

His free hand closed over hers, keeping them joined. "Catherine, is whatever you must tell me so unpleasant that it causes this agony I can see on your face? If so, please, share yourself this, I beg of you. Tell me another time or not at all ..."

She shook her head wildly back and forth. "I *MUST* tell you now and it's *NOT* unpleasant, it's beautiful. Vincent, you loved me, truly loved me, in that place. All I ever wanted, you gave me; you gave me yourself. You didn't hurt me, you could never hurt me, I knew that. I always knew that and believed it ..."

Bounding off the bed, Vincent went to the far side of his chamber. Leaning his head forward to the rough walls, he rested both hands there, digging his curved nails deeply into the rocks.

"Catherine, do you know ... do you *realize* what you have told me! No, this cannot have happened! How did I allow this to *happen!* Oh God, dear God, to do *that*, to you! *NO!*"

Catherine threw herself against his arm, sobbing, trying to turn him from the wall.

"Vincent, look at me, please look at me! Is there fear on my face or revulsion or pain? Or anything other than joy? I love you. Vincent, *I love you with everything I am or ever hope to become. I love you!*"

His head down, the words seemed to come from a place within him, Catherine did not know.

"The shame I feel at this moment, is unimaginable. I have no memory of this. None at all! What can't I remember this, of all things ... *THIS?*"

Finally, he looked up at her, tears streaming from those gentle, blue eyes.

"How can you even look at me? How can you speak of joy and tell me I.....*I* gave this joy to you? I vowed never ... *NEVER* to hurt you or bring such shame to myself. How could I have done this to you, touched you in that way? The disgust, the loathing, I feel now, at myself, is not to be tolerated! I cannot be trusted; your words tell me I cannot be trusted where you are concerned, Catherine. Not after this! Not anymore!"

Vincent looked down at his hands as an expression of utter and total horror washed over his face. "I might have killed you!:"

"No! Vincent, no! You're not listening to me, not hearing the *WORDS.*"

Desperately trying to remove the look of panic on his face, Catherine dug her nails into the flesh of his hand.

"You loved me as a man would have loved me, Vincent."

She held him fiercely when he tried to pull away from her. "As a ... *MAN* would have loved me! *WHY* can't you believe that? Look in my eyes and tell me why you can't believe that I wanted your love? I've wanted it for so *long*, Vincent. I always will!"

His sobs broke her heart. "That is *why* our bond is gone. I have destroyed it ... with my ... lust!"

He sank to the floor, shaken and tense with anger at himself. "I took you ... raped you!"

"No, not that, you never did that! You loved me as I loved you." Crying herself now, Catherine threw her arms around his neck, burying her face in his chest. "You loved me and it was glorious. To feel your need of me, to see, to *know* how much you desired me, Vincent, was the highest compliment a man can pay a woman. Don't you know that? To feel your response to me is so difficult to describe in mere words."

He stared at her, shocked, stunned by what she was saying. And in that moment, in that brief shining span of time, Vincent let himself believe Catherine's words, at last.

"I ... did not hurt you? You are certain? Oh, if I had ever hurt ... you ..." He reached for her, holding her to his pounding heart, rocking slightly back and forth, seeking to comfort both her and himself. "I love you beyond my life, as my life. So long, I have loved you. Oh, Catherine ..."

He pulled back gently, gazing down at her. The look of sweet shyness laced with passion in his eyes he made no attempt to hide this time, made her so deliriously happy, she flung her arms around his neck with total abandon, sobbing with pleasure.

"Hold me, Vincent, just hold me!"

At this moment, with her love wrapping around the sharp pain in his heart, soothing it into peace, her gentle lover could deny her nothing. How could he ever deny her again? This was Catherine and he adored her. He held her close, safe within his arms, for a very, very, long time.

Waving frantically to get her attention as Cathy came into the restaurant, Jenny Aronson finally caught her friend's eye.

"Hey, Cathy! Over here ..."

Catherine approached the table, looking rushed and a little guilty. "Hi, Jen. Sorry I'm so late, but it's ..."

Jenny grinned widely. "Yeah, one of *THOSE* days, huh? *MINE* was yesterday!"

Catherine slid into the booth opposite her old pal and reached for the menu. "I'm starving! Did you order yet?"

Jenny shook her head and hailed a passing waiter. "No, thought I'd wait, but *IF* you weren't here in about ten minutes, though, it would have been every woman for herself!"

Settling into the pleasant companionship old friends have when together, the two women teased each other, joked about life and men, particularly Jenny's men and caught up with all the news and gossip as they plunged into their lobster salads with gusto.

Sitting back with a groan, Catherine picked at the last bit of bread and put it down.

"Oh, I can't swallow another bite or I'll explode!"

Jenny wiped her mouth on a lined napkin and took a long swallow of iced tea.

"I've never seen you eat like that, Cath. God, where do you put it? I'd weigh a *jillion* pounds if I

ate as much as you just did! *TWO* desserts?"

"Oh, don't remind me! I'll have to live on lettuce and water the rest of the month! Ohhhhhhh."

Catherine settled down against the booth's smooth leather back. "Before I forget, Jen, thanks for that book of poetry. You'll never know how much I really appreciated it."

"I thought you'd like that. Some of the words really got to me, you know? Whoever that writer is, she sure loves somebody an *awful* lot."

"Hmmmmmm, you can tell." Catherine got a very enigmatic look on her face. "I wonder if whoever he is loves her in return?"

"Oh, I hope so! Wouldn't it be too awful if she's some dried up old maid someplace, longing for her lost love, knowing she'll never see him *AGAIN?*"

"Jen, that's *TOO* depressing! Thanks a lot!" Swatting her on the arm with the wine list, Catherine laughed aloud. "I think she's a very ordinary woman, like us. who just happened to find exactly the right man at exactly the right time in her life ..."

Jenny glanced at Cathy, saying nothing; the look on her face was so faraway, so completely happy. Jen leaned forward on the table.

"Hey, tell me who he is?"

"Huh? What? Who *WHO* is?"

"The man that's got you *LOOKING* like that, that's who! You met somebody ..."

"I think you're a witch!" Cathy flushed, biting her lower lip. "It's nobody new, exactly ..."

"Are you insinuating you've been keeping *SECRETS* from me? From *me*? Ohhhhh, that's mean, Cath. Tell me, tell me everything!"

Catherine felt the situation was getting entirely too personal! Even with Jenny, so much could *NEVER* be shared.

"I ... I've known him about two years, now"

"*TWO* years! And this is the first time I get to hear about him? Why? Cathy, don't tell me he's married or"

Catherine lowered her head, smiling. "No, he ... he's not married. Not ... yet, anyway."

Looking a bit flushed, Catherine began gathering her belongings together. "I have to go, it's getting late, Jen. We'll do this again soon, huh?"

"Just when it was getting interesting! Okay, I'll let you off the hook *THIS* time, but next time, girl, you're gonna *TALK!*"

With a quick hug, the women said goodbye. Jenny stared after Catherine as she headed towards the check out counter. Something wasn't right here. Catherine *SEEMED* to be happy, yet she was awfully pale looking and Cathy had *never* eaten as she had today. No, something wasn't okay, not okay *AT ALL!*

Stepping outside into the chill night air, Catherine pulled her thin, silk wrap closer around her chest. Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes, sighing heavily.

"Catherine"

Turning around slowly, green eyes locked to deep azure blue ones. "Will I ever take seeing you there for granted? Are you sure you're well enough"

Vincent walked towards her slowly, his face taking on a silvered sheen from the moon overhead. Dear God, he was beautiful! Catherine shivered slightly, looking up at him.

Vincent put one hand out, grasping hers gently. "I am well enough to be Above. You are beginning to sound more and more like Father, Catherine."

She smiled, knowing he was teasing her as only he would. Shyly. Gently. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"It was meant as one, Catherine. Are you well?" His eyes scanned her face pensively for a moment. "You look incredibly tired." That deep, throaty voice trailed away to a whisper, "... and so incredibly lovely."

Catherine was so astonished by his words, she couldn't respond for a moment. That was the most intimate thing Vincent had ever said to her. She could feel his heart thundering beneath her hand as she leaned into his chest.

"Thank you, Vincent, for seeing me that way ..."

Two enormous hands held her loosely. "*SEE* you that way, Catherine? You *ARE* lovely ..." One hand rose to her face, touching softly at her cheek. "Beautiful beyond the most exquisite dream ever dreamt, by anyone." The other hand tightened at her waist, drawing her closer. "... anyone, including me."

Stepping back suddenly, Vincent turned to look out over the city below; he was trembling as the full power of Catherine's emotions hit him like a crashing, forceful river. He didn't need their bond to feel this, it was overwhelming him.

"I should not speak so, to you."

His voice, his eyes, were filled with pain as he glanced at Catherine. "I have not that right"

"Yes, you *do* have that right, Vincent." Catherine put one hand to the side of his face, brushing gently over his lower lip. "Only you. I give you the right, gladly, freely"

Capturing her small hands into his, Vincent's head went down, as though afraid of his own emotions. "There are so many things I would say to you, so much I want to give you, I can never give you."

"And so many things you already give me, just by being ... with me, as you are, right now." Bending over, she brushed her lips over his hands, kissing the palms with a featherlight caress. He threw his head back, gasping as her soft kiss burned him, sent hot blood coursing through his body as a devouring thirst he could barely control.

"Catherine!"

Drawing her head up with one long finger, Vincent looked into her eyes so deeply, she thought she would surely drown in them. "Your touch is ... Please, you must not ... *WE* must not ..."

Clutching him around the neck with great will and determination, Catherine forced him to look at her.

"Oh yes, I must, Vincent. I love you and I *WILL* touch you! I hope you can get used to that idea. I *WILL* touch you!"

He shuddered, letting his hands fall to his sides. "So be it. As you wish, Catherine. But know this ..."

Looking up, Catherine was not surprised at the desire she saw on Vincent's face. ".... know that your touch not only completes me, it frightens me, at the same moment."

She pulled back, her face closed and scared. "Frightens you? How? Why?"

"You say I ... we, have loved and I believe you." Vincent moved to stand at the edge of the terrace, near where he had climbed up earlier. "But Catherine, I cannot remember this ... joining. Cannot remember any of it and it is destroying me!"

"You will remember, have faith that you will!" Catherine ran to him, taking hold of the edge of his cloak, as he put one leg over the terrace wall.

Looking back at Catherine, Vincent found the words he knew must be said and said now, before he left her this night. As frightened as he was, as terrified as ever, of hurting her, Vincent knew another truth *must* be faced now and dealt with; how much he needed her and desired her would not be almost impossible to deny or turn away from, ever again.

But, they could not *BE* as she - as they *both* wanted, needed to be. Not now, not yet. Perhaps not ever. Catherine must be made to understand this and the reasons behind this denial, as well. These ... limits, must be understood by Catherine and accepted, or they would indeed, have to be apart.

"Without the memories of that ... time to strengthen me, in spite of all you say, all I can feel in you, my fear is still with me. Stills *HOLDS* me bound, suffocating me! Until I *DO* remember. Catherine, until I find the courage to love you as you deserve to *BE* loved"

His eyes held a world of agony, a world of deep and abysmal suffering. "... I cannot come Above, here to this terrace, again. My need of you is too great, too powerful; it will consume me, it will consume *both of us!* This must never happen. Never!"

With a last desperate long look at the woman he loved, Vincent lowered himself over the edge of the wall. "Please forgive me? Find the strength to forgive me and know that whatever happens, whatever path life puts us on, I *DO* love you. I shall always love you."

A broken sob burst through the still night air. Hers? His? Afterward, Catherine couldn't remember who had cried out. But did it make a difference who it was? All the hope, all the dreams only just newborn, lay broken and in pieces at her feet, like the shards of a world that held only emptiness, for her.

Cullen turned and found himself face to face with Mouse. "Hey, where you been, pal? Vincent's been looking for you, Mouse. What have you done now?"

"Nothing. Vincent, huh?"

Cullen nodded, smiling. "Yeah." He patted the blonde man's arm, then jabbed him in the ribs, teasing. "It's been nice knowing ya, Mouse."

Mumbling to himself, Mouse started towards Vincent's chamber, trying on the way, to remember anything he had done that could possibly have him up to the neck in trouble, with his best friend in the world.

He turned into the man's chamber without making a sound, still Vincent heard him.

"Come in, Mouse. You received my message?"

"Ahh, yeah. Did something?"

"You? No, nothing I am aware of ..." Vincent bit back the smile that threatened to turn into a chuckle. "... at least not in the last few weeks."

"Whew. Okay, good. Had me worried ..." Mouse grinned and plunked down on Vincent's bed. "Need something? Taken? Borrowed?"

"No, nothing, thank you, Mouse. There is a project I would be happy to have your advice on and your company, if you have the time?" Vincent spread a large, yellowed map on the desk in front of him. "These lower chambers, didn't you say you had explored these thoroughly at one time, long ago?"

"Yeah, got lost too! Father yelled"

"Hmmm, I seem to remember that quite well. But, now, Father has asked me to do what you wanted to do years ago; examine those chambers and see if they are inhabitable, as you said they were."

"Are! Know it." Mouse held up his fingers, one at a time. Safe. Mostly dry. *BIG* rooms! Lots of water. No pipes, though"

"Yes. Well, that can always be dealt with. I am certain Pascal could help in that area. But, the first order of business is to see exactly how much work would be necessary to make the environment a viable one."

"Huh? Via"

"Able to hold families without danger, Mouse. These upper chambers are almost filled now, to capacity, and more people seek us out, all the time. Father does not want to turn anyone away that truly needs a place, but without the lower chambers, that may come to pass."

"Can't do that! Leave people out there? Cold bad. Alone bad. Scared, worst thing for anyone! You and me - check it out, draw up maps, fix it good for everybody!"

Vincent put one hand on the man's shoulder, nodding his head. "I would like to begin as soon as possible. Can you be ready, perhaps Monday?"

"Okay, fine. Five?"

"No." Vincent smiled. "Make it five-thirty."

"Getting spoiled, Vincent!" Mouse ducked out of the chamber, already going over plans and complicated drawings, in his mind. For a man who was very conservative with words, almost niggardly, at times, Mouse could be quite expansive, when blueprinting *PROJECTS*.

He considered talking; monotonous words themselves, usually a great waste of time, too much time. He would much rather be *DOING* a thing than discussing it to *DEATH* with the council members.

Mouse laughed to himself, knowing Vincent, at times, felt the same way. *'Too many words and not enough action could try one's soul beyond patience'*; Vincent had said that once to Father.

Mouse grinned; he could still hear Father *discussing* Vincent's words, even now. Loud, too!

Jacob Wells turned from the bookcases as his son stepped into the chamber. "Ah, Vincent. Just the one I wanted to see at the moment."

"Father. I have spoken with Mouse; he seems agreeable to the project we discussed earlier."

"Good." The man went to the desk; sitting down as he reached for a rolled up collection of old, fragile looking maps and notations. "As long as Mouse understands what is needed and does *NOT* go wandering off by himself, as he usually does!"

"When he is with me, Father, he is very conscientious, as a rule. Do not be too hard on him, please?"

"I? Hard on Mouse? I love the boy dearly, but at times"

Vincent sat across from his parent, folding his hands over his muscled stomach. "He is no longer a boy, Father. If we can take Peter Alcott's testings as a fact, Mouse is in his early twenties now and surely, no longer a boy."

"Have it your own way, then. Has this ... *MAN* agreed to show you all the caverns, without wasting time and energy attempting to get you to explore them for hiddn wealth or gems ..."

Father shook his head. "Mouse sees pirate treasure everywhere since finding that forsaken old ship last year."

"Yes. But, he may be right after all, Father." Vincent teased. "Why, the Holy Grail may be his next important discovery ..."

"You just get him to follow instructions, please Vincent. I still don't like the idea of you really even undertaking this ... trek, so soon after being ill and you know that!"

"I know that. And yet, *I* must decide for myself if I am healed or not, Father. I know my own strengths"

Jacob looked at his son hard, piercing gray eyes locked to Vincent's face. "Do you? Do you know your own strengths and your weaknesses? Do you really? You don't seem to, at times, Vincent. You push yourself too much, too soon and you could have a relapse! I dread to think"

"Father, please. All will be well, do not worry so."

"When are you planning to leave?"

"In two days; it will take that long for Mouse to gather"

Jacob's jaw clenched. "Gather? *HA!* Take, more likely." He rubbed one hand across his grizzled chin. "Ah well, I leave him in your hands. God help you!"

Vincent started up the steps. His father's question caught him unawares. "Are you going to inform Catherine you'll be away for several weeks?"

"She is coming Below tonight." Vincent's entire body seemed to tense. "She sent a message earlier; she wants to talk to me."

"Vincent?" Father stood at the bottom step, looking up at the man that was still, to him, his child. "... has something happened between you, that troubles you? She *IS* well? I haven't seen very much of her these last days."

"She is well, Father. Catherine has her responsibilities Above, as I do Below, you know that."

"She always made time to be with *you*, Vincent, I also know that. What has happened, between you? Can you tell me?"

"I cannot, I'm sorry. It still brings too much pain to put into words" Vincent shook his head slowly. "Catherine and I must resolve this ... impasse, Father."

"I pray you can, Vincent. For Catherine to stay Above, as she has been, these last days, troubles me. I miss her. I admit that. I miss the woman."

Vincent didn't look back; his hoarsely whispered words hung on the air in the chamber, a long time. "I miss her also, Father, more than you could *EVER* possibly imagine ..."

Hunched over the desk, concentrating all her energies into this dossier, Catherine swept her long hair back behind her left ear with a nervous gesture. This case was nothing but grief! Whichever way she turned, she came up against a brick wall of immovable precedents called the United States Judicial System. Knowing it was the only system this country had and that it had worked for over two hundred years, didn't help very much. When a monstrosity with the name of Louie Montelli used the system to his advantage, outmaneuvering the courts, thumbing his nose at the prison sentence he deserved, Catherine got mad.

Oh sure, the man deserved his day in court, everybody had their rights, even him. But when someone like this man scared witnesses off with threats of retaliation and death, then he gave up those rights.

Catherine slammed the pen to the desk, tearing up the 6th page of yellow, legal paper in the last hour.

"*DAMN IT ANYWAY!*"

"Hey, girlfriend! Who you yelling at in here, ghosts?"

One hand on her heart, Catherine spun around in the chair. "Edie, you scared me half to death! What are you doing here so late? I thought you went home hours ago!"

"Yeah. Well, I *DID* go hours ago and now I'm back, that's all." The woman's bright eyes gleamed with devilment. "Got to meet somebody here ..."

"Meet somebody? Like who?" Catherine pointed a pen at her co-worker and friend. "A guy. It's a man! Come on, tell!"

"It's Andy, okay? Now, before you get your back up ..."

Catherine winced. "Andy Hazen, the *ROMEO* of the ninth floor - *THAT* Andy?"

"Yeah. That Andy. Now, don't you go picking on him, Cathy. He's okay."

"Yeah, I'll just bet he is! A guy like that has more women that he knows what to *DO* it, Edie!"

Flipping through the papers on Catherine's desk, Edie seemed unhappy. "Well, now he's gonna have one more, I guess." She glanced over. "I like him, girlfriend."

"Okay, I give up. I won't tease you anymore." Catherine got to her feet, stretching widely to ease the kinks running along her spine. "But, *IF* that ... nice *MAN* hurts you, I'll ... I'll ..."

Edie laughed. "... hand him his ass?"

"More like his head! You be careful with this one, okay? I don't want to see you hurt, Edie."

"I know you don't, Cathy, and I appreciate your concern, I really do. It's nice to have someone care that much."

Getting to her feet, Edie reached out, hugging Catherine hard for a minute, before starting out of the office. At the door, she stopped, throwing a last remark over her shoulder.

"Sides, *IF* he does hurt me, my Gramma Wylie knows *LOTS* of voodoo spells! *SHE'LL* turn him into a great, big old *TOAD*! See ya Monday morning. Don't work too hard."

Catherine's peals of laughter followed the woman out of the room and halfway to the elevator.

Vincent stood at the entrance to Catherine's apartment looking up at the long, steel ladder. She had not come Below, as she promised to, tonight. Or last night, either.

Knowing she was involved in a very difficult case didn't ease his conscience or assuage his feelings of guilt. Vincent knew why she stayed away, of course he knew, he was to blame.

His words on her terrace that night, struck her like a blow would have. She handed him her heart, all her trust, her love. And what was his response? He gave her regret, remorse and his lack of courage in response to her tender offering. He felt so very alone.

He hung on tightly to the corded steel ropes that supported and moved this elevator beneath his feet. Shaking his golden head with abandon, Vincent swept his cascading hair from his eyes, looking up as he reached his destination.

Jumping to safety easily from the still moving elevator, Vincent started for Catherine's terrace. Knowing she would be asleep this late, still he had to see her, if only to look at her for a moment. Just a moment, while she slept, unaware of his presence.

Dropping lightly to the terrace floor, Vincent crouched listening for a moment to the quiet stillness around him. From this high up, one could barely hear the chaotic sounds of the traffic below. Going quietly to the bedroom window, Vincent looked inside, starved for the sight of Catherine. She was not on the bed; turning quickly, he moved to the other windows. No one. She was not in the apartment.

A worried look bathed his uniquely shaped face. Where was she at this time of the morning? No message had been left for him. Had she gone away, perhaps to Connecticut to see Nancy Tucker, without letting him know? No, she would not do that! But it was nearly two in the morning. *WHERE COULD SHE BE?*

Snarling in frustration, Vincent slammed one hand against the window, then turned on his heel.

Just as he was about to begin the climb down, Vincent saw the living room light go on. Thank God! Before he left, he *MUST* see her, just to look at her would be enough. Moving carefully, Vincent peered through the window just as Catherine dropped her coat and briefcase to the sofa and moved towards her small kitchen.

He waited impatiently for her to return. Finally, she did. Carrying a large glass out in front of herself, Catherine sank to the living room couch and lay her head on the cushions behind her as she closed her eyes. Watching every movement, every gentle intake of her breath, Vincent

felt stinging tears gather at the corners of his eyes.

Moving to stand with his body against the brick terrace wall, he threw his head back. Dear God, how he loved her! Was physical love a part of what he was experiencing now? How did one bear it? How could you exist in such pain as this, the desolation, when you could not be with the one who shared your every thought? The one who held your heart in her delicate, small hands. A low moan escaped Vincent's throat as he stood there, alone in the shadows.

As though sensing Catherine was moving towards him, Vincent shrank back into the darkness as far as he could. There was no time to get away before Catherine opened the terrace doors and leaned against the frame, taking a sip of her drink. Suddenly, her eyes flew open. Cautiously, Catherine moved closer to the shadows that covered him like his cloak.

"Vincent?"

He stepped out with his head down. "I did not mean to startle you. Did not ... mean ..."

Catherine didn't go to him, didn't embrace him as she usually did. She stayed where she was, looking carefully at him; he had said he wouldn't come here again and he *was* here. Why?

"It's so late, even for you. Is anything wrong?"

"No, nothing is ..." He put one hand out to the brick wall, steadying himself. "... everything is wrong, everything!"

"Can you tell me?"

Catherine put the glass to the wrought iron table and sat down; her legs were shaking too much to continue standing up right now.

Vincent moved so quickly, he startled her. He sank to his knees in front of Catherine, dropping his head nearly to her lap.

"I cannot bear to be without you. I do not know what to ... do anymore, or what is true anymore, not without you at my side."

She was so still, he wasn't certain she had even heard his confession. Taking a low, slow breath, Vincent looked up just as Catherine put one hand to her mouth, eyes wide. A muffled sob escaped through her shaking fingers as she reached out with her other hand to touch Vincent's brow.

"It doesn't have to be that way."

She brushed the tangled wildness of his hair away from his face. "You must make the choices, for both of us, Vincent. There's no other way, you know that. We can be together or apart, but *you* must make that decision, I can't do it."

Where he found the courage, he would never know, but find it, he did. His voice was a soft warmth, gliding over her body, as he pulled her towards him with a tortured cry.

"Oh, Catherine!"

Holding her to his heart, wrapping his hands in her hair, he felt at peace for the first time in many days. Many, long, empty and lonely days, without her. Vincent's head went to her shoulder. With trembling lips, he kissed the soft fullness of her throat, still sobbing her name, again and again as his hands gripped her arms firmly, as though never to let her go.

"I love you so much, there are no words ..."

Letting her head drift back, Catherine moved into his touch, the feel of his hands on her at last. She could feel her body responding instantly to his words, and the sweet taste of his mouth as he kissed her lightly again, with more confidence than before.

Vincent felt as though he were a traveler in a new and uncharted land. This journey, he thought never to make. But now he had begun to explore, with much hesitation and care, a path that would either lead him to destruction or salvation.

Knowing how great his fears were, Catherine let him set his own pace. Following his lead as Vincent rose to his feet, she stood with him, letting all her love and her trust, give him the confidence to continue. She shivered slightly in the chill night air. Immediately contrite, Vincent started to remove his cloak, then stopped, looking down at her for a moment.

"Catherine, would you allow me to enter your home?"

"Yes! Oh yes, please." Her joy was very obvious.

Holding her hand, Vincent's jaw was tense with determination. Taking a deep breath, he stepped over the threshold. He had been in this room before, once to care for her after she had been beaten so brutally. The next time, only a week ago, as a patient that needed her gentleness and understanding.

But, this time, Vincent wasn't coming to her aid or seeking comfort in an illness of his own. He was simply doing a thing he knew would bring Catherine great happiness. Vincent was voluntarily entering what he had always considered *her world*.

After checking the double bolt door locks and disconnecting the phone, Catherine moved back where she belonged, in his arms.

"Can I get you anything? A hot drink, something cold?"

Dropping his cloak to the nearby chair, he shook his head.

No, thank you. I don't need anything, Catherine." He looked more than a little uncomfortable for a moment. "... except ... if I may be permitted to use your bathroom, I would be very

grateful."

Sensing his deep embarrassment, Catherine merely nodded and led him through the bedroom. Flicking on the bathroom light, she left him there and went to sit on the couch in the living room.

A natural curiosity overcame his usual reticence when in a strange place. With a calmness that surprised him, Vincent stared into the bathroom mirror. What looked back at him didn't cause him to change expressions in the least.

He was as he was; it was something to be accepted and put behind him. As one put old pains aside, to move forward, to new, wondrous things. As he was moving forward now, with Catherine to guide him.

Suddenly, in his mind, Vincent could hear Father's voice, asking him what he was doing in this place, reminding him of all the dangers and the heartache he was leaving himself wide open to.

Vincent put one hand on the mirror, as though listening to the man's words *'What are you doing, Vincent? What are you doing?'*

A look of majestic peace came over Vincent's face as he spoke aloud, answering the disquieting voice. "I am getting on with my life, Father. Simply getting on with life."

Catherine was standing with his cloak over one arm, stroking it as she would a live thing, as Vincent came from the other room. She ducked her head as a slow flush stained her cheeks.

"I thought I'd just ... hang this up, to keep it from wrinkling ..."

"It would take much to harm that, Catherine. My cloak and I have had great adventures together. It has seen ... much of life. A few wrinkles will not put it at any great risk."

Looking up, she sensed a teasing tone to his words. Settling the cloak back where it had been, Catherine began walking toward him just as Vincent began moving to join her. They met in the center of the livingroom, in front of the fireplace.

While he had been in the other room, Catherine had started a fire and turned off most of the harsher lights; knowing how their glare affected his eyes. Candlelight was more appropriate anyway, as far as she was concerned. Vincent *belonged* in that light, it suited him, it completed the picture she always had inside of her head when she thought of him.

Taking his hands in hers, she drew him down to his knees in front of the blazing fire. The reddish glow of the coals merely heightened Vincent's striking attractiveness in Catherine's eyes. His extraordinarily strange, yet wonderful aura of shy sensuality, never ceased to

fascinate her, to entice her like a moth to the flame that was the man himself.

Vincent was power harnessed with gentleness, sexuality tempered with a sweetness of spirit that was a pull on her heart, as nothing she had ever known before. And this most unique of all beings truly loved only her. For this miracle alone, Catherine deemed herself the most fortunate of women.

Kneeling back to the rug, Vincent looked into the fire; seeming to draw strength from its crackling, blue-white flame. A feeling of peace and contentment washed over him; it was going to be all right. Though still anxious, he was certain he would not injure Catherine, *could* not injure her; he knew this now in the deepest part of all he was.

Catherine lay her head against his arm, closing her eyes. Vincent glanced over, studying her from beneath long, gold-tinted lashes. So exquisite; she was the embodiment of every true meaning given to the word ... beauty. His gaze lingered on her tiny, straight nose, then shifted lower, to her mouth. The pouting, sexual fullness of her lower lip captivated him and stole the breath from his body.

Unconsciously, Vincent ran his tongue over his dry lips. almost with a sense of desperation, he needed to taste the essence that was this bedazzling creature called Catherine. To know her with his mouth, to learn every part of her body with his hands slowly. To savor each touch, each stroke they shared, forever, as the greatest gift that had ever been conceived.

He hungered to lay with her as a man does with the woman he loves; to be naked in her arms, to be joined to her completely as it was meant for them to be. As it *would* be. *WOULD* he *EVER* remember their first time?

"Catherine, come here to me, please?"

Turning her gently, Vincent urged her around to face him. Understanding, Catherine lowered herself to his lap, smiling, as she wrapped her legs on either side of his hips.

Settling his chin against the top of her head, breathing in her fragrance, Vincent sighed in gratification, never wanting to be apart from her again. He held her as he would hold a fragile piece of lovely china or a butterfly. Not wanting to frighten her, he took slow, even breaths, trying to calm the rapid pounding of his heart. Holding her in this way was making him almost giddy with joy. When he thought of doing anything more besides holding her, Vincent's breath caught in his throat.

"What?" Catherine gazed up into his eyes, completely mesmerizing him, as he noted the darker portion of her pupils had dilated, almost totally covering both of her green eyes with a silvered aureole.

She touched the side of his cheek with a stroking motion. "Are you all right?"

Vincent shifted slightly, drawing her closer. "Holding you like this, you must ask? I have never been better, Catherine. My ... love."

Wrapping both arms about his neck, Catherine drew his head down to hers until their mouths were a breath apart. "That's the first time you've ever called me that. I am your love, I'm glad you realize that fact, at last."

"I realized that two years ago, Catherine, on the night I found you in the park. I knew then, you would change my life."

He lifted her chin gently. "You have not merely transformed my life, dear one, you have *become* that life."

Vincent put his hands on either side of her face, drawing her forward almost in slow motion. He watched her with a guarded expression; giving her every chance to stop what she knew he was going to do.

Pressing his mouth to hers in a chaste kiss, he could feel her begin to tremble all over, or was it him or both of them? Moaning slightly, Catherine touched his lower lip with her tongue, with a gentleness that captured his heart.

"My love, my sweet, sweet Catherine"

Shuddering, his arms tightened around her until she thought never to draw natural breath again. He drew back to look down at her with so much love on his face, it nearly overwhelmed her. "Vincent, I love you, so much. I've never been so happy!"

Sobbing, she flung herself against his chest. He held her tightly, knowing the tears falling from her eyes were happy ones; his own fell to the top of her head as he brushed his lips across her hair.

"Never leave me?"

"I could never leave you, Vincent! We are part of each other, don't you know that yet?"

Catherine began raining kisses on his face until he pulled back, laughing, to get his breath. Could one be this happy and not die of it? He wanted to roar of this joy at the top of his lungs. Deliriously happy was not a state usually ascribed to this man; it would be from now on. Oh, indeed, it would be!

It was nearly dawn before Vincent could tear himself away; never had parting from Catherine

been so painful, yet so filled with promise. The final kiss he gave her was from his soul.

Faithfully vowing to return as soon as it grew dark, Vincent made his way home like a drunken man, staggering under his memories of kissing Catherine, of holding her closer than he had ever dared to before.

Knowing she could feel his hard erection at her hip and merely accepting it for what it was, filled Vincent with an almost overpowering exhilaration. Understanding he was loved and received as he was, for what he was, humbled him, silenced him. And set him free.

Without him being aware of it, his feet had led him to the Chamber of Echoes; The Whispering Gallery. Looking down into the void that beckoned all who stopped here, Vincent smiled, then lifted his head towards the music from above.

Someone was playing a radio or perhaps one of the stations on television was playing music all night. The haunting strains of a song he knew well came drifting down into the cavern; one of the wondrous songs from *'The Phantom of the Opera'*.

'...helpless to resist the songs I write, for I compose the music of the night. Close your eyes, for your eyes will only tell the truth and the truth isn't what you want to see. In the dark, it is easy to pretend, that the truth is what it ... ought to be ...'

The words of the song murmured along the edges of his mind all the way to his chamber. Music of the night? Yes, there was music here in the darkness - you could pretend if you wanted, or if you had to. He would not pretend; he didn't have to anymore.

The songs he heard in his heart now, were a balm to his spirit; they were not sad melodies, not anymore. Vincent was listening to music only lovers could hear; the music only those in love could give voice to. His music also had a name, it was called simply ... *Catherine*.

Saturday evening at six, Catherine struggled across her threshold laden down with all shapes and sizes of packages and bags. As she flung them onto the puny little couch, to run her hands over each one, the names listed bespoke of wealth and good taste; Lady Godiva Chocolatiers, Gucci, Armani, Chanel these names made her smile as she began opening bag after bag.

Delving into the one listed as Lady Godiva, Catherine's hand came out clutching a small square of rich looking, dark chocolate, which she bit into greedily. Letting her body slide to the corner of the couch, she sighed ... heaven, she was in heaven. Was there anything else in the world that was as deliciously sinful as these chocolates?

She giggled half aloud - yeah, one other thing *was* this sinful. Vincent - the way Vincent moved when not aware he was being scanned. When he stretched to ease sore muscles that bulged and rolled in his arms and neck, when he threw his head backwards erotically, listening to the orchestra above them in the music chamber ... that *WAS* sinful.

Glad he didn't realize, at least yet anyway, how much his slightest gesture affected her, Catherine let her mind wander as she recouped from her all-morning shopping excursion.

What was it *exactly* about him that beckoned to her so strongly? Was it any one thing more than another, or simply all of him; his voice, that delicate huskiness that resounded in his chest when he spoke her name? Yes, that could be part of his magnetism. Or was it his straight, muscular body? Even beneath all the layers of clothing he habitually wore, as one would a coat of armor, Catherine could tell he was *not* a small man ... anywhere. She had been well aware of *THAT* for some time now. Maybe it was his eyes; for if eyes truly were the windows of the soul, this man's were sensual. He could do more to her with a look that another man could do with a whole evening of compliments and flowery praise.

Was it the gentle swell of his buttocks when he walked, that stole her sanity? Or was it those long, sinewy, muscled legs, never mind those *thighs!* She shook her head as though attempting to clear away a fog. *'Okay Chandler, enough already or you'll attack the poor man before he can get into the apartment tonight.'*

Humming under her breath, Catherine stashed all the packages; some in the kitchen, most in the bedroom, then headed for the shower with a large, new bottle of a delicately-scented oil.

Father stepped to the chamber archway just as Vincent was tying the ascot of a white shirt at his neck.

"Vincent."

"Yes, Father, come in."

Vincent didn't turn, but stood facing the bed. Naked from the waist down, he finished the frustrating ties at neck, then reached for a pair of tawny russet, corduroy trousers as Father sat, watching him.

"So, you have decided then, to go against my advice in this?"

"I told you that earlier, Father. I am going Above, to be with Catherine." Vincent sat on the bed, pulling on dark brown, thigh high boots over heavy cotton stockings. "I may not be home

until early Sunday morning or perhaps"

Vincent's voice lost a bit of its bravado, "...perhaps even later. I will not be swayed in this decision, not this time."

"Yes, I see. So be it." Father looked to the slim volume of poetry on his son's desk, noting well its title - '*Sonnets from the Portugese*'. "If you will not ... reconsider, will you at least give me the courtesy of sending word if you *DO* stay ... longer?"

Father got to his feet just as Vincent wrapped one arm around his neck, whispering, "Yes. Please understand?"

Jacob Wells walked towards the chamber entrance, nodding his head. "I *DO* understand; that is the *reason* for my concern. I pray you do not have cause to regret this ... decision.

Goodnight, Vincent."

"Goodnight, Father."

Pushing back the hood of the cloak from his hair, Vincent stepped to the half-opened doors of Catherine's apartment. Peering in, he caught the fresh scent of pine wafting out in greeting.

Many sizes and shapes of candles lit the room, with a beckoning, amber shimmer. The discreet strains of a Debussy étude filtered from the modern stereo system ensconced on one of the *éteergés*.

Swallowing several times to moisten his suddenly parched throat, Vincent gathered himself firmly together, inhaled a deep breath of air and took one step through the curtained doors. Catherine stood in the far corner of the room, arranging varied shades of lovely roses in a large, crystal vase. Suddenly, she winced, shaking her fingers.

"*OUCH! Damn it!*"

"Do you need any assistance, Catherine?"

He heard her gasp of embarrassment as he went to her side.

"Vincent, how long have you ..."

"I only arrived a moment ago." He looked over to the flowers, then back to her. "They are lovely."

"They are dangerous, as well." Catherine rubbed the end of her finger with her thumb

unconsciously. She was startled as he took her hand into his, focusing his attention there.

Trailing a sharp nail very gently across her palm, Vincent took a sudden breath, seeing drops of blood. One of the rose thorns had cut her.

"What have you done?" he whispered. Lowering his head, he brushed his lips tenderly over the tiny cut, then dipped the tip of his tongue into the warm blood, to wash it away and soothe the pain.

Her gasp of surprise brought him to his senses ... *What* was he doing? Ashamed, he attempted to turn away from her, but Catherine wouldn't let him. Taking his trembling chin into her hand, she held it firmly as she looked up into his face.

The stillness between them was laced with emotion; pulsating with unnatural rapidity. Catherine's eyes were luminous in the candlelight; they took his breath away, leaving him shaking with a desire for her that could no longer be turned aside, by either of them.

"Catherine, I ..." Strangled sounds came from the man as he shook his head, defeated; even his voice had now deserted him.

Catherine put one finger to his mouth, smiling at him, sending to him all her love, all her trust.

"Hush, my love. I know. I understand; did you think I wouldn't, Vincent?"

Rising to her toes, she dropped a sweet, moist kiss on his lips, then stepped back.

Not wanting to cause him to be any more uncomfortable than he already seemed to be at this moment, Catherine laughed nervously.

"Will you take off your cloak?"

Blinking rapidly for a moment, Vincent nodded, then eased the heavy suede cloak from his shoulders. Gathering it into her arms, Catherine lay it on the back of a chair and turned for the kitchen.

"Please sit down, I'll only be a moment ..."

His eyes followed her hungrily, until she hurriedly disappeared into the kitchen. Vincent sat gingerly on the couch, praying his weight would not damage it. He looked about the tastefully furnished room; everything was so shiny, so delicate, like the woman herself. Glancing down at his hands, Vincent was jarred by the truth; the incompatibility of himself, his body and the softly beautiful room he was in. He didn't belong here!

Then, Catherine came from the kitchen and he took his first, really close look at her since entering her apartment. Whatever breath was left in his body deserted him in one, single gasp of pleasure.

The low cut bodice of the dress was edged in tiny rows of soft lace and seed pearls, framing her flushed face. Not knowing materials, as most men didn't, Vincent imagined it to be silk, but didn't dare reach out to touch it and confirm that idea.

The skirt was long and very full; grazing her slender ankles as she lowered herself to the couch beside him. And the color! A shade of blue he didn't know existed; the colors that must be ones of the deepest sea or the heavens themselves. He couldn't know the shade was exactly the same shade as his own eyes. How *COULD* he know that, he never really, *REALLY*, looked at himself.

In an instant, Vincent knew what he had always judged as truth was just that, though he didn't need any confirmations of it. There was *nothing* as lovely, as exquisitely fair, as his Catherine. To know she wore this dress for him, for his eyes for the most part (or entirely to please him?), the rich fullness of her love for him finally gathered about him as a fortress he *could* believe, could *ALWAYS* depend on to be there, for him.

Vincent mulled over in his heart all the promises she had given him as well as those he gave her. To understand each other completely, for Catherine to see him truly as he was; *ALL* of him, good and bad, dark and bright, man, beast, whatever he was. To love him as he was made, love him as much as he loved her.

To trust him and guide him when he faltered, as he sometimes would; everyone did now and then. And when he felt alone, to never, ever leave him, to never let that dark aloneness torture him again. And now ... here, with her in this place, in this sweet moment, Vincent knew every promise, every vow made between them was true. They were destined to be together, joined forever.

As he took the small glass of champagne she offered, Vincent watched Catherine surreptitiously from beneath his long eyelashes. Although he still missed their connection and always would, Vincent could even now feel her happiness that he was here, with her. He didn't need the bond to know her feelings, they were also his own.

His earlier doubts faded as an eruption of love soothed them completely away. Belong here? Yes, he did belong here, for where Catherine was, he *WOULD* be! All at once, he was unconditionally certain; they did *belong* to each other. Past life and death, past earthly limits, he was Catherine's and Catherine was ... *HIS*.

Glancing over now and then at Vincent while they quietly sipped champagne, Catherine wondered what was he thinking of so deeply? His brow was furrowed with a concentration that puzzled her. Was he uncomfortable, did he think being here was a mistake? Please, let it not be that? Finally, she *HAD* to know.

"Vincent, you're so far away. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It is just ..."

Hesitating, he turned to her. Taking her glass from her and lowering it next to his on the nearby table, Vincent took her hand to his mouth, kissing the back of it gently, then turned it over. Nuzzling into her palm, he shuddered as emotions surged up in him in a torrent of passion and need that was indescribable.

"Being here with you, as I am now, my love, was part of the dream I had. To watch that dream unfold ... *become*, is beyond putting into words. I ..."

He shook his head slowly, lowering it until he was enclosed in a golden curtain of softly cascading hair.

One betraying tear ran down his cheek. Leaning forward, Catherine took it on her tongue, cherishing the salty taste of his happy tears.

"The words will come; don't worry, Vincent, you needn't really, you know."

Catherine lifted his head, holding his eyes with her own.

"I share, *KNOW*, all your feelings. Each and every one of them. I do. They are a part of me, too. Don't you know that?"

"Catherine ... " He reached for her, letting her words take away all his misgivings.

As she melted against him, Catherine lifted her chin, her eyes fluttered closed, waiting. His kiss was unlike any before. It was lingering, probing and totally sensual, but gentler than she could ever have imagined.

He tasted of champagne and almonds, his naturally spicy, male scent filled her nostrils as Vincent deepened the kiss; starved for the taste of her on his tongue.

With a breathy sob, Catherine wrapped her arms about the strong column of his neck, weaving her fingers through his burnished, thick hair, Moving as close as she could to him, she arched her back; straining against his chest. Catherine wanted to be absorbed into him, needing him to fill the emptiness of two painful years of denial.

Vincent wanted to crawl inside her, to bury himself there until there was no telling where she began and he ended. When he had felt her respond to him in that way, Vincent gently pulled back from her, needing to confirm it.

Catherine opened her eyes to find him studying her face.

"I cannot stop watching you," he shyly admitted.

Admonishing him with a gentle shake of her head, she took his chin between her palms, kissing the edge of the stubble.

"You look at me, all you want."

With delicate fondling touches, she traced the extraordinarily high cheekbones and hollows of his dear face, stroking at the velvetlike softness of the bristles, that were part of his proud, high-bridged nose. Enfolding his face more firmly into her hands, Catherine used the tips of her thumbs to brush at the copper colored, upswept brows, that arched over trusting blue eyes, like the wings of a golden phoenix.

Vincent's deepset, turquoise orbs grew wide with wonder as her fingers learned him. He groaned suddenly, stunned at the depth of eroticism in her smallest gesture.

Smiling up at him, Catherine kissed each lid, closing them as he murmured softly in total pleasure. His chest began to move rapidly in and out. His breath quickened as he tightened his arms around her; enraptured, a slave to her hands.

"Catherine, what are you doing to me!"

"If you knew how long I had wanted to touch you, in this way ..."

She continued the delicious torment until he thought to surely lose his mind. How could this be possible? By what miracle did she find him the least bit desirable? What Gods had given this woman to him to love?

As Catherine continued her loving assault on his senses, Vincent felt her small hands at the buttons of his shirt. Undoing two slowly, she thrust her hand inside greedily, seeking the warmth of his heated flesh beneath her fingers, running her nails through the thick, curly hair of his chest, with a delightful abandon.

When her lips replaced one hand, Vincent felt a dull throbbing begin deep in his groin; he threw his head back wantonly, needing her to feel him, to desire him. He was desperate for these new sensations. Frantic, nearly wild, a sob of pure, unadulterated joy caught in his throat.

His starved spirit had been denied for too long, this woman's healing touch. Vincent took all Catherine offered him willingly, simply. He needed this, wanted it. *He had earned her love. He ... deserved ... it.*

Watching as his head went back, knowing he was rejoicing in these new sensations as much as she was. Catherine felt a joy so magical, it started her heart pounding almost too rapidly. To be

finally able to give this gift to Vincent was wonderful, to watch his reactions, know his emotions were raging free and rampant at last, thrilled her beyond describing.

Seeing Vincent without the immovable, rigid hold he usually maintained over his deeper emotions, was fascinating to her. But, Catherine also was aware that at any moment, he could still leap to his feet and withdraw from her; he had such inner strength; she couldn't grasp it in her mind, even now.

Cherishing the moment they were sharing together completely now, Catherine ran one hand over his wonderful, heavily muscled chest; searching, seeking. Finding the small nub of softness that was nearly lost in thick curls, she ached to kiss it. Lowering her head to his chest, she tickled one tense nipple with the tip of her tongue, and heard shuddering moans as he enmeshed his hands into her hair feverishly, pulling her even harder against him.

The sounds of rapture emanating from the man made her want to cry, knowing that he had never been touched in this way before tonight. He spoke hungrily, starved for her.

"Yes ... yes ... Touch me, love, touch me ..."

His head swayed back and forth on the couch as Vincent reeled under the hungered invasion of Catherine's mouth. As his every desire began unraveling, flowing to meet Catherine's touch, he was no longer able to prevent its continuing.

Crushed against him totally as she was now, Catherine was conscious of the growing evidence of his aroused passions. Suddenly, at a conscious level, his thoughts mirrored hers; Vincent suddenly emitted a half-strangled roar of shame as he attempted to pull free of her pressing warmth.

As he wrenched sideways, away from her, she held his arm with an almost steely determination; she would not lose him yet!

"Vincent, what is it? What's wrong?"

Leaning forward, away from her, he put one hand to his face, covering his eyes. His voice was panicked, rapsy.

"You must not ... see me like ... this"

Using a strength that surprised both of them, Catherine seized him by the arm, making him face her.

"There is no shame in this, Vincent, it's a normal, natural thing. It happens to men ... all men. You've read so many books, how can you not know this?"

Pushing the hair back from his brow gently, she let her hands wander over his face.

"Can't you tell from my reactions, how blessed it makes me feel, to know you *WANT ME* in this

way; you do want me, don't you?"

He gave her a look of complete incredulity, not quite believing that she had to ask.

"How could you ... even question ... that, Catherine?"

A small, melancholy grin washed over his face, then settled in the turned down curves near his mouth.

"Yes, I want you...."

He gave her a look of sultry innocence; an angel that longed for the fires of the inferno to consume him.

One long finger stroked against the curve of her jaw. His eyes were smouldering sapphires as he cupped his two hands firmly around her small face, drawing her nearer. For a heartbeat, Vincent's eyes explored her face as though seeing it clearly for the first time.

And in the green-grey depths of Catherine's eyes, Vincent found his courage.

"You are so lovely and I do desire you. I need you with a hunger that frightens me, with a passion beyond words; more than even you could ever know. You *must* belong only to *me* and no other."

His eyes searching hers, he whispered, "And more than anything else, my dearest Catherine, I wish to love you with my soul, with everything I am or could ever hope to become"

He lingered over the next words, caressing them seductively with that unforgettable voice. "To love you ... physically ... completely ... with my body ..."

With a swiftness that astounded her, Vincent caught her up in his arms; as she swayed against him, he lifted her from the floor. She was as a feather to his strength, yet he trembled; needing her so, wanting to possess her as his own. Knowing how close to fulfilling that dream they were.

Without further words between them, Vincent strode towards the bedroom, kissing the top of her head lightly as he walked. Catherine smiled into the curve of his neck, breathing in his musky scent, still hearing his love words of a moment ago. Almost deliriously happy, she clung to him until he gently deposited her to the bed.

After removing his socks and shoes, Vincent stood over her, uncertain of exactly what he was supposed to do next. She opened her arms and her lover came into them willingly, in total surrender. With one hand at the small of her back, he caressed her lovingly; increasing the pressure as he did, urging her more firmly against his hard body.

They lay pressed thigh against thigh, heart to heart, belly to belly. Vincent grew unbelievably hard; more rigid, as he rocked above her hesitantly; as though almost expecting her to come

to her senses, to change her mind and push him away, yet hoping she would not. Not now.

He was on fire; his body was a molten river of feelings that were overpowering him. His body called hers; longing for the release only she could give him. Frantic now, to be lost in her firm, warm flesh.

And now, for the first time, Catherine opened herself totally to him, with a kiss that was unlike any given before. Her mouth opened slightly, the tip of her tongue found his, drawing it into her mouth.

With a muted growl, his mouth angled across hers, openly accepting her. Mirroring her gentle sucking motion on his tongue, he continued to deepen the kiss, wanting to devour her. Vincent was an empty man; hollow, a barren desert, without Catherine. He would *NEVER* be without her again.

Drawing back to catch her breath, Catherine fumbled at the remaining buttons of his shirt, her eyes never leaving his face.

"Please?" she whispered. "I must see you."

He got to his knees silently, keeping his head bowed. The selfconsciousness he was experiencing nearly made him bolt from the room. Clenching his hands in the bedcovers, Vincent let her push the shirt from his shoulders.

He closed his eyes, waiting. Would there be revulsion on her face now or fear? When Catherine gasped his name, his eyes flew open, meeting her wide, staring ones. She knelt beside him on the bed, filling her senses with the glorious sight of him.

"My God, Vincent, I can't believe you don't know how incredibly beautiful you are!"

He shook his head. "Catherine"

"You are beautiful, you know," she whispered, stroking his chest, "Yes, you are."

His ambered russet hair flowed like silk over expansive shoulders; those shoulders were very broad, the chest deep and almost too muscled. Vincent's waist was surprisingly slight for one so large everywhere else. And nearly his entire chest and back were covered with varied lengths of gold-red hair.

In the soft bedroom candles, he glowed almost bronze as he finally looked deeply into Catherine's eyes. Trusting her heart, as well as her words, Vincent smiled at her warmly, through grateful tears.

The sheer size and powerful muscles of this man's body utterly mesmerized her, she couldn't take her eyes off him.

"Vincent, you are breathtaking!"

He choked out a sound of embarrassment. "Catherine ..." and lowered himself back to the bed.

A rustling sound caused him to look up just as Catherine pulled her dress over her head and off, letting it slip from her fingers to the floor. Standing before him clad only in a short blue chemise, she arched her chin proudly as his eyes eagerly followed the smooth lines of her body.

Vincent lingered, caressing every part of her from where he was, using only his eyes for many moments, feeling the tension building between them even more. As he stared at her, the man forgot how to draw breath. So lovely, Catherine was so lovely, from her delicate throat, to alabaster white shoulders, to long slender legs. His openly hungry look burned into her, loving her. Wanting her.

Smiling softly, he opened his arms wide, she flung herself across his chest, kissing him wildly on the mouth, on the chin, nibbling at him, nipping his ear, surrounding Vincent with the strength of her love for him. Her belly pressed to the flat, hardness of his, delicacy against rigid power, mouth on mouth, hands intertwined and rushing over them, the sweetness of living what had merely been a dream for much too long.

Catherine snaked one hand between them to touch the buckle of his trousers.

"Take these off, my love."

His blood on fire for her, his body screaming for hers; there was no time to think, no time to fear - anything. Desire erupted through him like a *riptide*; out of all control.

With a long, cleansing breath, Vincent unbuckled the belt and unbuttoned the first two buttons of the pants. A lack of courage overran his resolve for a moment. Shyly, Vincent took Catherine's hand into his and placed it on the waistband of his pants, whispering, "Help me?"

Sliding the zipper down carefully, Catherine was trembling herself as Vincent lifted his hips, allowing her to ease the pants from him. His hands went to the silk chemise.

"I want to see you, please, Catherine."

Sliding the straps down her arms, Vincent let his eyes follow them, first one, then the other. Lifting her hips, feeling the satin of the chemise rustle as his clawed fingers passed over it, she shivered with anticipation. Catherine slid out of the delicate lingerie and lay down on the bed, smiling up at him.

Passion slammed through him with explosive force; his heart beat against his ribcage like a captive bird. The sight of her slim body (*so small!*) enchanted him, his hands dropped to her tiny waist as he ran his tongue lightly over her throat, sucking in the warmth of her flesh.

Catherine sighed in pleasure, loving the feel of his lips nuzzling against her, as well as the bluntness of his sharp, white teeth as he gently bit down on her shoulder. Growing bolder, Vincent began to move downward; first hands, then tongue skimmed each firm breast, the nipple growing increasingly taut in his mouth.

With a moan, he captured it completely; suckling with delighted, thirsty sounds, he savored the taste of Catherine, the scent of her body. She began to move against him almost frantically, her breath quickening as he continued the gentle suckling noises, driving her crazy with longing.

A moist, aching need began to build between her legs; higher and higher his mouth and hands lifted her towards climax. Then, suddenly, he stopped, gathering her close as she trembled, disoriented.

"Why ... did you ... stop?"

"I ..." Overcome with timidity, he pressed his face into her neck, murmuring so low Catherine had to really strain to hear him. "I want to taste all of you."

Understanding his need, Catherine licked softly against his ear, "Do what you want to do, my love. Don't worry or be upset by *any* feelings you have now, Vincent, I feel as you do, want what you want. You would never do anything that I don't want you to. I know it, I believe it. I love you and I'm here ... for you. Please ..." Catherine took his hand and gently guided it down, against her inner thigh. "It's all right to want me in this way ..." Her eyes drifted closed as she waited for him to decide.

With a sound more like a growl than a groan, he rose to his knees to gently spread her legs apart as he nestled between them purposefully. His thighs were hot against hers; Vincent's erection jutted out from his body like tempered steel, quivering with the suppressed need to be inside her. Soon. Soon.

"Catherine, open your eyes"

Just as she did what he asked, he took her hips in his great hands, angling her up to him. He bent his head, the silk mane brushed against her skin easily, erotically, then there was only his hands and the heat of his searching mouth on her excited flesh.

"Vincent!" Catherine dug her nails into the sheets.

Patiently, slowly, he explored the soft skin in the folds of her body. Kissing the most intimate part of her, he breathed in her woman's scent. Almost as if to torment her, he moved just to the edge of where she needed him, then away again as she writhed on the bed. She gasped, pleading with him, needing him with a depth of passion she never knew existed. "Your hands..."

He stroked at the ivory skin now fully exposed, feeling her passion for him in the wetness that coated his probing fingers. In one swift movement of his mouth, he covered her, beginning to stroke her with his tongue, first flattening it, then dipping it into her demandingly, drawing her love, wanting to give her every sensation it was possible to give.

A scream of pleasure was torn from her throat, "*Oh, love!*"

He didn't seem to be listening. He feasted on her, would never get enough of her, wanted more, wanted it all. Wanted it *now*.

Holding her bucking hips firmly, he delved deeply into her core, nuzzling, seeking, taking everything there was to take. Catherine was coming apart with feelings, soaring, powerless against his devouring mouth. Her hips rolled helplessly against him.

"*Vincent!*" She climaxed hard and fast.

He was not prepared for this; eyes wide with astonishment, he moved up beside her, holding her as she shook all over. His expression was contrite, a shamed tone colored his apology.

"What I did ... I could not know ... Didn't mean ..."

Catherine laughed breathlessly. "My love, don't apologize, please. There's no need.

She captured him into her arms, nuzzling hard against his flushed face.

"No need at all, believe me."

His eyes were glittering darkly in his face, "I believe you. What I did, didn't ... offend you?"

"Oh God, Vincent, no, it didn't. Nothing you could do would offend me. I love you. Come here." Catherine opened her arms and he relaxed against her.

Nestling down beside her, he sighed, amazed at the power he had to affect her so deeply. Had he tired her too much, did she want him to continue this another night? Dear God, what if she did? Without being aware of it, he sighed again heavily.

Catherine watched him for a moment, feeling the hard length of him, still enormous with desire, throbbing against her hip. She reached down suddenly, capturing him; taking the pulsating column into her hand, stroking gently from the full, distended head to the rich golden curls at the groin.

When her hand began touching his erection, taking him into her palm, Vincent's back arched completely from the bed. "Uh ..."

He grunted deep in his throat with satisfaction and surprise; a flurry of sharp sounds that weren't quite words, as Catherine rose over him like a temptress sent to demolish his will. Or complete him forever.

After kissing him soundly, she began moving down in the bed; licking, tasting, nipping him, from his neck to inside of his thighs. When her mouth closed around the full length of him and she began sucking on his hard, taut erection tenderly, he thought to surely lose his grip on sanity.

Vincent's nails curled into the sheets as a half roared scream, then love words were torn from him. He writhed beneath her knowing touch.

"Yes ... oh love ... please ... I ... need this!"

His body twitched instinctively; he pulled one knee up and opened his legs. As her hand stroked the soft pendulums beneath his groin, soft snapping growls came from the man as he gave himself up in surrender.

Peeking up, Catherine smiled, victorious, seeing the corded muscles of his neck stand out even more. Hips moving against her, with her, Vincent looked down to see her silky hair spread over his thighs and he was lost.

He pitched backward on the bed; straining his hips towards her mouth, pleading, asking with his body, for what had to be completed, she could not leave him now! He couldn't go on, yet his rocking hips and his own voice begged her not to stop. The undulating rhythm of his hips increased wildly they began moving in ever widening circles.

"Yes, oh ... yes!"

He knew he was on the edge. Licking at his dry lips, he waited for it, needing it, desperate to learn, ravenous to give her everything of himself. The bursting fullness gathered at the head; Catherine tasted his first tangy drops and knew he was ready. She began moving against him harder ... faster, completely surrounding him.

He arched upwards to get deeper into her mouth; stroking, moving with her urgently, savagely, eyes rolling, wild. Breath ragged, he bit his bottom lip, he was being ripped apart with his lusts, until all at once, the blood rushed to his head and he fell gladly into the redeeming fire of her love.

A shattering roar escaped him; unearthly, then a supreme, agonizing sob of rapture. Needing to control her movements on his body, he wrapped both hands in Catherine's hair, to begin rapidly urging her head up and down on him.

The beginnings of a perfect climax hurled him towards an explosive finish. Vincent shouted her name as he filled her mouth with the pulsating jets of his lifesblood.

Catherine allowed his breathing to slow, then gathered him into her arms, rocking him, cradling him against her breast.

"You sweet, sweet man ...," she whispered, kissing his sweat covered brow.

Tears of joy ran from his eyes; Catherine kissed them away with a tenderness that made him only weep all the more.

"Oh my love, what did you do ..."

"Loved you. Shhhhh, I know ..." She kissed his mouth and smoothed the damp strands of hair from his face. "Rest now, my love."

Catherine awoke to Vincent moving against her insistently. He pulled her closer, kissing her neck, nuzzling against her shoulder. As he began licking along the edge of her ear sensuously, he murmured her name low in his throat.

"I need you, Catherine."

She moved even closer to the heat of his body; rubbing her face against his chest, caressing him with her lips, then her hands. Vincent licked along the edge of her throat, tasting salt, then he tasted her once more. She could feel his pelvis begin rocking against her gently yet compellingly.

Vincent's hands moved over her, readying her for his love. He got to his knees before her and with shaking hands, lovingly urged her legs apart. As he leaned forward to claim her mouth, she could feel the palpating tip of his erection nudge at her moist flesh with desire.

"I do not want to hurt you, Catherine. You are so ... small. So fragile."

"There may be some pain, I can't lie about that, my love, but it's only natural. It's ... it's been a long time. Please don't be afraid."

Her words, her loving look, gave him the courage to continue.

"Catherine, my beloved." His voice, like rich satin, steadied her and she opened herself completely to him.

Hovering over her, he took her mouth, urgently flicking his tongue in and out. With a surprisingly subtle, sinuous thrust of his hips that mirrored his tongue's delving motions, he entered her just a little. Gasping, he felt her warm flesh contract around the head of his penis as though welcoming him home.

"Oh, my love"

His head went down, needing to see, having to learn. An excited ardor flowed over him, seeing them joined in this way. Still cautious, he moved forward, a little, then a little more, in gentle increments. His head snapped back; he groaned, fighting desperately not to thrust in too forcefully, praying he *wasn't* too large.

Catherine tried not to cry out, but he saw her tears, her sharp gasp for breath and he froze. "I have hurt you ..."

She smoothed the look of alarm on his face with a loving hand to one side of his face. "I'm all right, Vincent."

"But, I sensed pain. There was ..."

"Remember, my love, I told you there might be? Please, don't stop. I'm fine, really I am."

His chest was heaving broadly with the torment of his restraint. "You are certain of this?"

She reached for him, focusing on his face, letting him see her responses. Pressing her heels into his buttocks, Catherine rocked beneath him, drawing him down, wanting him to learn for himself how ready she was, how eagerly she wanted him.

"Now," she whispered. "Now, my love." She wrapped her legs around his hips as slowly, excruciatingly slowly, he entered her almost completely.

And almost anguished sound came from him as he felt her inner muscles contracting around him. Eyes locked to hers, he shook the damp hair out of his face and rose straight up on his hands.

"My Catherine," he whispered.

With his palms flat on the bed, he surged into her fully, crying out as she sheathed all of him. This act of possession was at last, complete. As he rocked desperately against her, the sounds their bodies made as he moved was exquisite, erotic.

Instinct guiding him now, he kept the friction where he thought she'd most need it, holding himself at the center of her beckoning heat, until she could adjust to his size. They reveled in the feel of each other, the sounds they made, the sensations of being one body, one heart; making memories for *him*. She pulled him to her without words, a siren calling him to his destiny, to his pleasure.

Her hips rolled seductively under his, mustering a rhythm beyond conscious thought. He could not resist the summons; his strokes deepened, increased as he moved against her feverishly. Carefully unleashing his power more and more, Vincent began to tremble; great shudders ran throughout his body. Nothing could have prepared him for this, not for this.

Catherine opened her eyes to find herself encompassed in a curtain of gold, held safe in the bower of his lush, cascading mane. Her eager hands stroked the back of his neck, then his buttocks, pulling him deeper into her. He was completely sheathed inside her, still she wanted more.

His back arched higher and higher, she matchd him stroke for stroke, in erotic counterpoint to

each other. The shared rhythm of their pace became more and more his; the restraints of his motions gone in an instant, replaced by an intense tightening of his thighs as he plunged into her as hard as he dared.

Their eyes locked and held; by silent, mutual assent, the pace quickened. His hair was wild, his flesh gleamed with sweat as he moved frantically against her, withdrawing almost completely, then surging forward again, driving them both mad with anticipation and passion that cried to be released.

She moaned, but he kissed the sound away, his lips nibbling, teasing, until she pulled his hair, drawing him down. Catherine felt him grow impossibly longer inside her, wider, throbbing with impatience.

Her legs lifted higher against his hips. Vincent wrapped his hands completely around her soft buttocks; tilting her hips from the bed, moving with certainty now, dominating the ebb and flow of their ecstasy.

He felt it happening and fought against it frantically, but it was no use. Completion awaited him and his body would no longer be denied. He never wanted this to end, but she called to him, begging for release, crying for him to finish and he was lost inside her.

Catherine clutched at him urgently, taking him as deep as possible until he pulsed against her uterus, filling every empty part of her. Vincent whimpered; hissing sounds came from between his clenched teeth.

He pumped harder into her, roughly now; using all his power, all his potency. He raged to complete this, needing it, wanting it. With a thunderous scream of unrelenting lust, aware of nothing beyond the act of consummation, he exploded into her in jetting spurts of wondrous possibilities.

Still immense inside Catherine, small aftershocks and throbbing contractions, coursed along his body. He didn't want to speak, or move; a wave of satiation washed over him. Slowly turning her, not wishing to leave her yet, Vincent lay nose to nose with her, smiling.

"Are you all right? Oh, Catherine."

"Better than just all right." Catherine nipped along the edge of his jaw. "You are unbelievable."

Bringing one hand to his lips, Vincent kissed her, then nibbled each finger. "So are you. It would seem we are well-suited, my Catherine."

Weaving her legs between his long ones, she sighed and nestled into his arms, sated, replete. His lips pressed against her temple.

"I love you."

One of Catherine's hands combed through his hair, smoothing it.

"And I, you."

Embracing her until they were only one shadow on the bedroom wall, Vincent kissed the top of her head.

"Sleep now, my love ..."

They drifted off together, only to be awakened later with a profound hunger only the other would ever satisfy. The memories of this night would burn between them with a life of its own, forever.

There was no darkness here for Vincent to fear or any hurt for Catherine to bear. Only joy and a love that would never diminish for the rest of their lives. The future beckoned, bright with possibilities as two souls meshed and were reborn.

The dream that had begun two years ago, had come full circle at last. The fear was gone. Only joy remained.

CHAPTER TWO

TIMES OF SORROW

The petite woman walked along quickly, fighting to keep the umbrella from turning inside out in the unmerciful, January wind. Running for the office entrance of the large, grey building in front of her, she clutched her raincoat tightly and dashed into the vestibule with a sigh of great relief.

Scanning the office floor directory with one manicured nail, she found the number and floor of the offices she was looking for and stepped into the crowded elevator, shaking the last of the rain from her coat and handbag.

Catherine Chandler had so many books piled on her small desk, it was difficult to see she was even there, at first glance. Rita Escobar walked towards the desk, craning her neck, gesturing to the woman that trailed after her.

"She's gotta be in there someplace, I would have seen her leave for lunch. Wait just a minute, please?"

Rita leaned over the top of the books.

"Oh good, you *are* here! There's a woman who asked to see either Moreno or Joe, but with John in court and Joe throwing his money away in Vegas, well ..."

Rita hunched her shoulders, frowning slightly. "I thought maybe you could talk to her? She wants a D.A, wouldn't talk to a lowly researcher, like me!"

Closing the folders in front of her, Catherine nodded tiredly. "Sure, send her over. I need a break from *THIS* mess, anyway."

"No luck, huh?" Rita touched at the large pile of reading matter. "Still nothing to nail that crime boss with?"

"No, *MISTER* Louie Mintelli's luck seems to be still holding, the miserable ..." Catherine rubbed at the dull ache behind her eyes. "Send the woman over, okay Rita? Maybe I can still get to lunch before court at two."

Giving her a look of understanding laced with sympathy, Rita motioned to the woman and stepped away from Catherine's desk.

Getting to her feet, Catherine held out her hand. "Hello, my name is Catherine Chandler. I'm an Assistant District Attorney."

The woman gave her a long, slow look, then answered in a noncommittal tone of voice as she hesitated, then took Catherine's hand.

"Hello."

"Sit down, please. I understand you wanted to see Mr. Moreno or Mr. Maxwell. I'm sorry, but Mr. Moreno is in court and Mr. Maxwell is on vacation until next Monday. Perhaps I can help you?"

Catherine sat down at her desk, folding her hands and courteously gave the woman her full attention.

Staring at Catherine silently for a moment, the other woman seemed to come to a decision. She took the chair offered, but didn't take off her headscarf or the large, dark glasses she was wearing. Catherine was a little puzzled - wasn't it raining outside? So, why the '*shades*'?

"Chandler, huh? Not that high society dame, by any chance? Yeah, it's you. I've seen your picture in the paper. What kind of help do you think *YOU* can be, to me?" The woman asked this with extreme rudeness, twisting the ends of her headscarf around and around each other.

Noting her extreme nervousness, Catherine bit back the smart retort poised on her lips and played with the pen on her desk.

"I don't really know *HOW* I can help until you tell me what this is about."

Dark green eyes locked to eyes of the same color as the woman finally removed her glasses.

"Your office wants the scam on my uncle. Well, Miss Chandler, I'm here to give him to you, signed, sealed and wrapped up like a Christmas present!"

Catherine pulled a yellow legal pad in front of her and waited. "Will you give me your uncle's name, please?"

The words were almost spat at Catherine. "*Luigi Montelli!*"

Brushing away tears, the woman took a deep breath and continued, "... so he had my fiance killed ... *MURDERED*, the bastard, just because Tony wanted to go straight! He didn't want any part of my family or his own, the Scarlozzis."

The woman stood at the smudged window with her back to Catherine, staring out at the rain.

"I didn't either. We just wanted to get *OUT* of it, away from the whole dirty business, that's all."

Catherine pulled some tissues from her desk drawer, stood next to the woman and touched her on the arm lightly.

"How do you know it was your uncle who killed this man, Tony?"

Whirling around, the woman nailed her with a hard glare. "Not '*THIS MAN*' - *MY* man! And I *KNOW* Tony *WAS* murdered, because Uncle Louie *bragged* about it at dinner one night. He had too much of my mom's vino and got *REAL* loose-lipped, something he doesn't do, *EVER!*"

Smiling grimly, she slammed her hand down on Catherine's desk. "Right out in the open, like he was *PROUD* of doing it! Then he tells her, she better get *ME* straightened out before something bad happened to *ME, TOO!*"

She pulled a long thick envelope out of her handbag and tapped it on the edge of the desk.

"Before he gets me, I'll take him *DOWN*, family or no family! He deserves it, the man's got away with too much, for too many years. And now, his number just came *UP*. His ass belongs to *ME!*"

She shoved the envelope across the desk towards Catherine and sat back, smiling contemptuously, "And I *give him to you!*"

The crimson-faced little man yelled into the mouthpiece of the phone. "*I don't give a damn HOW you do it, just do it and call me back ...*"

Slamming the receiver down, he looked across the desk to the large, curly-headed man watching him.

"What's happened to people, Franco? Used to be, you wanted a job done, it was *NO PROBLEM*. Today, *everybody* wants a piece of the pie."

He pulled out a fat, round cigar, lit it and blew the smoke towards the ceiling. "Well, I don't *do* mind games, especially with amateurs. Those tough little bastards wanna play hard ball with *ME*, fine! I'll show them who invented the damned game!"

Scribbling on a piece of paper, Luigi Montelli tore it from the pad and threw it across the desk.

"Franco, I want her mouth *shut* and I want it shut *NOW*. Andrea spills her guts, we *ALL* hang, pal. You, me, *EVERYBODY!* If she wasn't family ... Ha, family!"

Reaching into a drawer, the man pulled out a very old, faded picture, pointing one chubby finger at it. "That's *my* family! Momma, poppa, my brother, Angelo; all dead now, may they rest in peace." He made the sign of the cross.

"People you could *DEPEND* on in a crisis like this! They'd never *THINK* of giving *me* crap over money, they were *FAMILY*. See how bad things are here in the states, my friend? At least in the old country, family *COUNTED* for something! Here ... *NIENTE. NOTHING!*"

The tall man unfolded his lithe body and rose to his feet slowly, shaking his head in sympathy.

"When you brought me here, Uncle Luigi, I promised you - you need help, any kind of help, I'm your man."

He shoved the piece of paper into the inside pocket of his very expensive suit. "You've always done good by me, Zio(Uncle) College, clothes, new cars, a nice apartment. So, now I can pay you back a little, huh? If I didn't, your brother, my father, would never rest in peace."

Out of respect for the dead man, they made the sign of the cross once more, hugged each other hard for a moment, then left the office talking and gesturing in a beautiful Italian dialect.

Andrea Montelli looked up as Catherine approached the booth and removed her sunglasses cautiously.

"You're right on time."

Catherine struggled out of her heavy topcoat and sat down gratefully. "I would have been here a little earlier, but the traffic ..." She shrugged.

Catherine held out the small card and scribbled on it. "This is where you can reach me at any time of the day or night. My home number and the one at work. It's a direct line."

Taking the card, Andrea nodded. "Okay, if you say so; you know more about this kind of stuff than I do. He won't get me, huh?"

Catherine reached over, patting the woman's arm. "Miss Montelli ..."

"Don't call me that! I hate my name! Just Andrea, okay?"

"Whatever you say, Andrea. Our office has used this safe house before, we know it hasn't been compromised, at least not yet. You stay there, then as soon as the trial is over ..."

"Your people set me up with a new identity, new passport, anything I need, right?"

"Exactly. You'd never guess how many people are out there, under almost the same circumstances as you ... Andrea. Our office's Witness Protection Program has been very successful with these cases. I hope you'll trust me. If you want to get through this alive, you'll have to trust somebody."

Catherine stirred her cold coffee around in the cup, giving the woman a chance to mull it over for a moment. Her heart was pounding - we can *GET* him, if she helps us, we can really, actually, *FINALLY* get him! Without her, that scum will be back on the streets before I'm even out of the courthouse. God, please, let her trust me.

"Nobody can know where I am, huh? Not even my mother or my friends?"

"No, I'm sorry, but they're the first people that your uncle will go to. Don't you understand? If he knows you've turned state's evidence on him, your life won't be worth anything!"

Andrea lowered her head slightly, her voice soft, muffled. "It's not worth much anyhow, without Tony. I can't get him back, I know that. But, I can make his death *MEAN* something!"

Catherine nodded her head. "Yes, you can. It's all up to you now ..."

The woman got to her feet, shaking her head. "Okay, let's do it, then, before I chicken out."

"Good." Catherine gathered her papers together and snapped her briefcase shut. "Now, stay at the hotel, all right? As soon as I can, I'll be over with the van and we'll get you settled at the ... house. I'll make sure there's plenty of food and whatever else you need."

"A gun I want a gun."

The look of shock on Catherine's face made Andrea Montelli laugh out loud. "What is it, Miss Assistant D.A.? Don't think I know how to use one? Well, I do! My *DEAR* uncle showed me how when I was ten; we used to shoot cans at his country place."

She pulled the dark glasses back on and headed for the door. Waiting for Catherine, she went on, "So, you just get me one, okay? I'm not gonna freak out with it or anything. I just want some protection I can *REALLY* trust on my own!"

"I'll do what I can, but I won't promise anything. you know it's illegal ..."

"I have a permit, Miss Chandler. I'm *NOT* stupid, you know? If there was time, I'd get a gun myself, but there isn't any time, is there?"

"No. You have a permit? That's the truth?"

"Me, lie to the D.A.? Yes, it's the truth!" Her voice was brittle sounding as they stepped into the dark street. "I'll walk from here. It's dark enough, I'll be okay"

"I'd rather drop you off, Andrea, that way I can be sure nothing has happened to you ..."

Andrea looked disgusted. "Okay, babysitter, have it your way then. I'll let you earn your paycheck. Let's go."

Vincent finished his writing and closed the journal. Leaning back in his chair, he shut his eyes, smiling. The thing he wanted to write of in here, he could not, of course. Not all of it, anyway. Catherine. Oh, how he would love to write of her, of loving her!

But, he could do that. Some things were best kept in the private places of the mind. And the heart. Vincent smiled enigmatically; thinking back over these last days. He was the happiest of men, the most contented. Why had he ever been so afraid of loving her, there was no darkness when they held each other, only love and passion. Ah, such passion!

"Vincent, may I come in?"

"Mary. I was told you had gone Above. One of the Helpers is ill?"

Mary looked troubled. "Yes, Mrs. Wu. Oh, the poor, poor soul." She shook her head sadly.

"What has happened to her, Mary? Why, I saw her only last week, she seemed well then."

"She took a terrible fall, the poor dear. Now, she has a broken arm and nobody to help in the

shop. So, I asked Father if I should assist for a while, until her niece gets here from Buffalo. He thought it was a splendid idea. It's been different, I'll say that."

"By the time her niece arrives, you shall be quite good at mixing different teas, I would imagine?" Vincent teased gently.

Mary smiled at him, then laughed. "Oh, yes. But some of the combinations people ask me for! I don't know how they can abuse their stomachs so badly. But, oh, there are such wonderful aromas in the shop, Vincent!"

"Yes, I have been there." His voice grew just a bit husky. "That is where I find the blend of tea ... Catherine enjoys so very much."

Mary got to her feet and removed a small packet from one of her apron pockets.

"Yes, I know. That is why I thought you could give this to Catherine the next time you see her, If you wouldn't mind too much? I'm sure she won't have to wait for it *too long*, will she, Vincent?"

Mary was quite capable of a bit of teasing herself now and again, it seemed. Vincent knew he had been bested. With a broad gesture of chivalry, he took the small packet, making no further comments except a hushed, "Thank you, Mary." He had seen the devillish gleam in her eyes quite clearly.

When Vincent arrived at Catherine's, he peeked into the apartment and noted she was sitting on the floor next to the telephone, talking in hushed tones, shaking her head up and down vigorously, all the while.

"Yes, okay, that's fine. I should be there around four pm tomorrow. Yes, I'll bring everything you need. No, it's no trouble. Fine. Remember, stay in the all right, I'll stop *HARPING* on you. I just don't want anything to be ... All right, see you then. Bye."

She looked up to find him standing just at the doorway, removing his cloak.

"Catherine."

Vincent opened his arms and she flew into them. Taking her off her feet, he held her pressed tightly against his chest.

"I have missed you so terribly!"

"I know, it seems more like two years than two days!" She raised her face to drop soft kisses

along his jaw, punctuating each kiss with a softly spoken word.

"Two ... whole ... entire ... days!"

Pulling back a bit, laughing aloud, Vincent set her to her feet, but didn't release her.

"You've been well?"

"As well as I could *BE*, without you."

She urged him towards the sofa. Sitting in his lap, nestling back against him, Catherine could feel the rise and fall of his chest as she spoke of her miserable day, the pressures, the courtcases; all the mundane things that happened when a person ventured out into *THAT* city. She inquired of Father and others of his world.

Vincent seemed to lose the threads of this conversation more than once as she *tried* to make him even more uncomfortable ... by wiggling down deeply into his thighs, feeling a hefty problem begin for the poor man she was causing so much distress. Catherine knew he didn't want to talk, not *REALLY*, but was trying ... *TRYING* to be polite.

She got to her feet, picking a bit of dust from the rug. "So ... with Joe gone, it's even worse! There's a case ..." She shook her head. "Never mind, I don't want to talk about work!"

Her smoky green eyes flashed as she slowly let them glide over the man's body, seeing his eyes narrow as he realized this had all been a subterfuge on her part. A subterfuge that had worked completely.

Quite innocently, Catherine *BEAMED* at him. "As a matter of fact, do you want to talk ... at all?"

His face darkened noticeably, his words were more snarled than spoken. "*No, not at all, Catherine.*"

Reaching out one large hand, Vincent pulled her into a tight embrace. Holding the other hand gently to the side of her face, he gave her a look of such yearning, Catherine felt a good bit of guilt. When one of his thumbs lowered to her hipbone, to stroke softly back and forth, she thought her knees would surely turn to jelly.

"If you desire it, Catherine, we shall talk later. Right at this moment, I can ... not ... discuss ..."

His mouth came down on Catherine's with an unrestrained hunger that was a bit startling to them both. Two powerful arms held her rigidly locked against his slightly rolling hips. Sliding her hands up under his hair, she clung to him fiercely, digging her nails into the back of his neck.

She loved the feel of him, the barely harnessed energy that emanated from every part of Vincent; the way he felt, the scent of his skin. Dear God, the passion of the man!

Now finally free to love her, he did exactly that, with every nerve in his body, as often as he got the chance to.

She could tell without words, how badly he wanted her right now. Rubbing her hands over his buttocks, she squeezed gently, loving the way the cheeks tensed momentarily in surprise.

Murmuring hoarsely, Vincent buried his face into her neck, trying to calm his breathing. "My love, my love, please, stop" His chest rose up and down almost in spasms, his lips were hot against her throat.

But, Catherine didn't stop; she wanted to find out exactly what reactions she could call forth from this wonderful man; this was as good a time as any to learn.

Going to her knees in front of him, she glanced up with a wicked glint in her eyes. Vincent watched her, waiting, knowing Catherine *THOUGHT* that this night, he would *not* be the dominant partner, but the dominated one. He had a few surprises for the sweet lady, oh yes, a few indeed.

Eyes the shades of turbulent seas gazed down on Catherine.

"I am at your mercy, it would *SEEM*."

Large hands clamped down on her shoulders, shaking with anticipation as she brushed her fingers along the zipper of his jeans.

"Oh! What ..." His eyes went wide.

Suddenly, Catherine kissed the warm skin of his stomach as she unbuttoned his shirt. The words were torn from him; a hissed, yearning sound as he wove his fingers into her hair.

"Yesssss ..."

Deliberately taking all the time she wanted, Catherine eased the heavy flannel shirt from the confines of his faded jeans, noting his irregular breathing as she pulled the shirt free and lowered her hand to the snap of the dungarees.

He was stiff with expectation; nudging impatiently at her hands with his pelvis, kneading her shoulders first gently, then in desperation. He was in agony, the pain of his erection was unyielding. His tortured body couldn't take much more of this! She was moving so slowly, it would drive him wild, had *driven* him wild already.

She was a fever in his blood, a drug; only burying himself in her lush body would ever put this fire out again.

When he heard the single snap released and the swishing sound of the zipper as she lowered it all much too slowly, Vincent lost his patience. Falling to his knees, he pulled her over quickly and into his arms, roughly. "No more, Catherine! No more tormenting me. *COME HERE!*"

He was on her in an instant, pushing her back to the carpet; looming over her, golden, enraged, virile. The quintessence of the word *man*.

Even a shy man only has so much control, so much stamina, or strength to resist desires, as the case may be. As shy as he was, Vincent *WAS* a man; this was the dominant circumstance now, everything else was unimportant.

For, eventually, even a timid or retiring person *COULD* be driven beyond that very emotion, with the proper catalyst. For this man, Catherine *was* the catalyst. He was fire, he was flame. This was Vincent and he would no longer *be* tormented.

Kneeling between her legs, he kissed her again and again without mercy, without giving her a chance to get her breath. Drawing back, he put one hand under her hips and before she knew what had happened, her sweatpants were swept from her body and to the floor. Putting one hand to either side of her ribcage, Vincent gathered the material of her shirt into his palms. The jersey was gone with one quick movement of his hand.

Leaping to his feet, he began removing the jeans silently, his eyes never moving from Catherine's face. Stepping free of his boots, the socks followed them to the floor, then the jeans and lastly, the shirt, were tossed aside casually.

He stood with a leg tucked up against each of Catherine's ankles; hands on his hips, letting his eyes roam up and down her body, letting her be well aware of the enormity of his desire. Giving her without a single word, the promise of what teasing him in the way she had, would get her in retaliation.

Oh God, he was magnificent! Looming over her like a Titan warrior from another world, another time, he smiled with a magnetism that stirred her body, readying her.

Expecting his words to be obeyed, he didn't bother to look back as he stepped away from her for a moment.

"Catherine, *do NOT move!*"

She didn't move. Didn't know exactly *WHY* she didn't, but she didn't. Catherine watched as he paced naked around the room, his heavily laden penis jutting solidly away from his body as he switched off lights, lit three candles, checked doors and jerked the wall socket from the telephone with a self satisfied, rumbling snarl. He would brook *NO* interruption this night. Not even ... one.

In the shadowed light of the candles, he knelt before her, one curved nail stroking tenderly across her breast.

"I DESIRE THEE and I LOVE thee ..."

Catherine shivered in spite of the warmth in the room. The inflection he used on ordinary words could make the flesh on her body goose bump all too quickly. Knowing Vincent was not in the mood for games right now, Catherine decided to find out exactly what he *was* in the mood for.

Putting her hands on his shoulders, she looked deeply into his eyes and slowly raked her nails down each arm *HARD*.

Flinching, a warning snarl from the man told her not to do that again. Two strong arms pinned her hands over her belly. Knowing this woman as well as any man *COULD* know a woman, he was aware she was in a mood new to him. What did she want from him tonight, how did she want to be treated?

He decided to find out. Leaning down, he started to drop a light kiss on her mouth, but she nipped him so hard, he blinked and sat up, roaring. Testing the pain with the tip of his tongue, he tasted blood on his lip. *HIS* blood!

A furied look came over his face; rough she wanted it, then? Rough, it *WOULD* be! Grabbing her so swiftly, she yelped with surprise, Vincent flipped her over on her stomach, pinning her arms at her hips. "

Very well, Catherine. As you do, so shall you accept!"

Lowering his full weight upon Catherine all of a sudden, he heard her grunt with surprise, then go completely still, trembling under his weight, but not wanting him to move away.

Pushing her hair aside, Vincent lowered his mouth to the nape of her neck, nipping the skin, then licking roughly along her ear, whispering, "Be sure of this, my Catherine. If you do *not* want me to continue in this manner, tell me. Tell me now, before this goes any further."

The only answer he got was succinct and very to the point. Catherine bit him on the arm as hard as she could. *That was ENOUGH.*

Wrapping both long arms around her waist, he pulled her up until she was on her knees, open to him completely. At his mercy. "Is this truly acceptable to you? Will you stay like this, for me?"

He released her arms and she put them under her head. Her head bobbed up and down, her reply muffled. "Yes."

Knowing she consented to having him in this way, Vincent took a long, slow breath, then blew out impatiently. Now, he could relax and take his time. He didn't want to hurt her, but he wanted her so desperately, he might injure her if he did not slow down. Never had he felt so

thoroughly aroused so quickly.

Vincent trailed his nails over her back, then kissed each spot he touched lovingly. Leaning over her, caressing the fullness of her swaying breasts with his thumbs, he licked her ear with the tip of his rough tongue, whispering words only for her.

"I had read of this in books, but never thought the pleasure of savoring it would be mine. So long I have wondered, dreamt, of what this manner of joining would bring out in ... me. I feared it, yet I desired it, so much." The words were spoken breathlessly, a little shyly.

Kissing the side of his arm, her trembling words caused him to pull his head back, closing his eyes, fighting off the lusts that said *TAKE HER NOW*.

"I have never ... done this before, my love. I want you to know that. I wouldn't want to, with anyone ... but ... you."

His hips rocked against her as he cautiously probed between her thighs with his fingers; seeking her warmth, needing her moist body to accept his, to tell him she was ready to receive his love.

As he moved his finger gently in and out of her body, Vincent put his head to her back, licking softly, urging her response, needing her tenderness.

"For these two long years, I have turned aside my desires for you, beaten them back, moment by moment. Since I first met you, I have yearned for this loving between us. But only with you, Catherine, only with you could this be done. I worship you."

His hips tensed as he began the penetration. "Oh, how I love you ..."

Rocking solidly against her, Vincent locked his hips, slamming them forward. He surged into her with one single fluid motion, until he was almost fully buried inside her cradling warmth. Catherine urged him to continue moving, wanting him with a fierceness that took her breath.

"All of it, my love, I want all of you, Vincent!"

A tremulous cry of excitement colored his words as he moved his hips in ever widening circles, then short stroking thrusts, snarling as he was accepted, encased tenderly inside of her.

"How I need you!"

Catherine arched backward beneath him as she rested her head on her crossed arms. The feel of his full scrotum rubbing against her so intimately, was weakening her resolve to wait for him; she couldn't.

As the texture and angle of Catherine's body changed under him, he knew it was her time. Vincent worried her breast with his hands, squeezing gently as he moved against her more forcefully.

Slamming into her almost too roughly, desperately he tried to give her all the ecstasy he could possibly bring her. He realized he couldn't hold back much longer. He was enraged, wild to finish, needing it with every part of his body.

Gasping, he fought off an inner pressure that urged him to explode into her. Catherine cried out his name, then went still in his arms, trembling all over as she attained climax.

Her inner muscles went into spasms around his aching flesh; the intensity of her orgasm forced the surrender to his own rapture. Vincent bellowed his joy, following her into completion. Hurling beyond thought, he clasped her by the hips, tipping her down, bringing her buttocks up closer to his phallus.

Head thrown back, eyes wide but unseeing, Vincent's mouth dropped open, desperate for oxygen, as he greedily thundered into her with a animalistic roar of masculine triumph.

Collapsing from the force of his release, Vincent brought her with him as he turned on his side, swallowing rapidly, forcing air into battered lungs. He blissfully kissed the top of her small hand curved into his breast.

"Catherine?"

She nuzzled at him, eyes closed, completely relaxed. "HmMMM?"

He slid his arms around her slowly. "Nothing. Just ... Catherine."

She propped herself up on one elbow as Vincent rolled to lay flat on his back, one arm over his eyes, grinning to himself. She walked her nails along his ribs, causing him to jump instantly, it usually did.

"What are you thinking, Vincent?"

"How much I love you, how much you please me. How contented I am, here, with you."

Two of the bluest eyes she'd ever seen gave her a completely torrid look. Catherine saw a newly unshackled wildness in those glorious eyes; yet there was also such innocence there, she wanted to weep.

Kissing the tip of his lovely furred nose, she hugged him tightly to her heart, saying, "Great minds *DO* think alike...."

Holding Catherine as she slept, he looked down as she turned on her left side, away from him, still clutching his arm, even in sleep. Cuddling up behind her, Vincent curved his body to gently

cradle hers, like a nested set of spoons, one large, one delicate and fragile.

Positioned here in this way, with her, Vincent thought this us what heaven must be like; surely not better than this? To lay sated with Catherine, joined hip to hip, thigh to thigh, drained of strength, yet filled with a love beyond limits; was there life before this? No. Not for him.

Dipping his nose into the sweet fragrance of Catherine's hair, Vincent drifted off to sleep completely at peace with both worlds. All worlds; the mad, bright one of Above, the shadowed, serene one of Below.

Somewhere in the night, they turned as one, to face each other. Even in sleep, hands went to breasts, lips moved over tongues, kisses were placed on warm, intimate parts of bodies; one body pink and yielding, the other tawny and hard. The lovers joined again, floating ... somewhere between the *now* and the *infinite*, between reality and possibilities. Traversing the place where dreams go to be born, where pain goes ... to die.

After peeking through the spy hole, Andrea opened the door slowly and turned back to the pot of coffee beginning to percolate on the stove.

"You're late, as usual, Chandler."

Catherine hauled in a heavy bag of groceries and plucked it to the middle of the kitchen table.

"Yes, I know."

She smiled apologetically, "One of these days, I'm going to be on time for *EVERYTHING* and all my friends will keel over from the shock!"

Andrea Montelli gave a snort of agreement as she began removing cans and boxes from the shopping bag.

"Hey, where's *MY* cream cheese! Lox and bagels are just *NOT* the same without it, ya know?"

Catherine groaned, "Oh damn, I forgot it! Andrea, I am sorry.....,"

Andrea didn't say a word, she kept staring at her and staring and ... *STARING*.

Catherine finally nodded. "Okay, you win; let me finish my coffee and I'll go to a deli around the corner and get *YOUR* cream cheese ... deal?"

"You got it, lady. Bad enough to be cooped up here, day after damn day, at least get me what I like to eat!"

Taking a mouthful of her coffee, Catherine put the cup back to the table carelessly; it hit the corner of the sugarbowl and spilled into her lap. She jumped to her feet, cursing under her breath.

"Oh hell, this is a brand new dress, too!"

Andrea went to the sink and grabbed a cloth. Wetting it with cold water, she held it out to Catherine.

"Too bad, it's a nice dress. Silk?"

Catherine held out the stained yellow material ruefully, "It *WAS* silk, now it's just a ... **MESS!**"

The water only made the stain worse. Catherine shook her head, "Oh dandy." She checked her watch, groaning. "I have to be in court in an hour and the traffic outside is brutal; I'll never make it home to change! Ohhhhhh ..."

While Catherine cleaned up the split coffee, Andrea went into the bedroom. Coming out, she held out a dark green skirt and top to Catherine. "Here, this should fit you."

She waved off the half spoken words of thanks. "Hey, forget it, okay? I just remembered who *GAVE* that to me. I don't want it anyway!"

Catherine nodded. "Uncle ..."

"Yeah. When you're done with it, burn it!"

Thinking it would fit Jamie, Catherine didn't answer, she merely turned and headed for the bathroom. "As soon as I change, I'll get you that cream cheese ..."

Catherine picked up Andrea's raincoat. "May I borrow this for a while? My orange coat doesn't go very well with this shade of green."

"Sure, help yourself. I'm not going anywhere for another ten days."

"I'll just take a five, carrying that briefcase around is a pain sometimes." Catherine pulled five dollars out of her wallet and threw the wallet back into the large, battered leather case. "See you in ten minutes ..."

Outside, a large nondescript van pulled up behind Catherine's car. Looking up at the dark windows of the seemingly deserted building, a small, pimpled-faced man sneered, "You're

positive this is the place, Franco? Ain't nobody in there!"

"Hey, our sources haven't been wrong yet. Just shut up and do what Louie said, pal. You'll live longer that way, Ben."

Franco pulled a small snapshot from his jacket pocket. "Hey, Carlo, come up here."

Another man came from the rear of the van, holding the end of an Italian submarine sandwich. Wolfing down the last bite, he peered over Franco's shoulder.

"Yeah?"

Franco jerked away. "Hey, don't wrinkle the clothes!" He held up the snapshot. "This is the one you have to *persuade* to come with you, all right? She's in there ..."

He pointed across the street with one manicured finger, then opened the door of the van, jumping out. "I have to make a phone call; let Uncle Louie know what's going on. I'll be right back"

Carlo and his partner sat in the van, one fiddled with the knobs of the radio, the other read a Playboy magazine. He held up a picture now and then for his friend's approval.

Carlo suddenly sat up rigidly. Looking out the dirt spattered van window, he nudged the other man in the ribs and held up the battered photo.

"Hey, isn't that her? What's she doing outside? Man, this is gonna be a breeze."

The two men started across the street, jaywalking between the '*hell bent ot hit ya*' cab drivers and the '*take their lives in their hands*' out-of-towners.

They followed the woman in the dark raincoat up the street. When she turned and entered the small deli, they ducked into the alley they had just neared to wait.

Stuffing her change in the pocket of the raincoat, Catherine tucked the small bundle under one arm and felt in the raincoat pocket for the old fashioned latchkey. These stupid things wouldn't have holes, of course, so you could put it on a keyring! No, of course not. She held the key tightly. If she lost it, she'd never get back in that brownstone.

Andrea would have her head on a plate if she rang that shrill bell a second time in one day. Even using it as a warning buzzer didn't thrill Andrea; it scared the hell out of her!

Catherine searched along, letting her thoughts wander. She wondered what Vincent was doing today: if he was stoically teaching a class? And, Joe should be back in two days; wonder if he

has any money left!

"Ohhhhhh. Help me, help me ..."

Catherine froze, peering into the murky alleyway. "Who's there?" She started down the rubbish-covered street.

A large arm came up and around her neck from behind her, dragging some sort of a rag over her face. She tried to struggle, to bite, to *SCREAM*, but her arms wouldn't move, no sounds would come from her throat. Oh no! Dear God, not again!

Collapsing forward like a rag doll onto two muscled arms, Catherine felt everything tilt, then go fuzzy. Suddenly, there was nothing. Nothing at all.

Andrea walked back and forth in front of the window, where the hell was Chandler? Sure like her idea of ten minutes; more like half an hour!

Pulling back, Andrea looked down in horror at a face she knew. Carlo! He and some piece of scum had the Assistant D.A. and were shoving her into the back of a van, like she was drunk or something. Drunk hell, she was out cold! Oh shit, they knew *something*. Did they know she was up here?

"I gotta gt out of this place, fast!" Terrified, Andrea grabbed Catherine's briefcase and coat in one hand, the gun she'd been given in the other hand and ran for the stairs cursing like a wild woman.

By the time she reached the bottom of the landing, the van doors were just sliding shut. Digging into the briefcase for the key to Catherine's car, Andrea hit the street at a dead run. Almost getting hit more than once, she nearly knocked down some jerk walking along reading a newspaper, not looking where he was going.

Franco pulled back muttering about crazy women as the lady flew past him; he looked up ready to say something as he picked up his paper from the sidewalk. "Stupid, damn ..."

A puzzled frown washed over his handsome face. Hey, wait a minute! There was something about the coat, the briefcase. He searched his memory; he'd seen that woman before. Where? *WHERE?*

Suddenly, it hit him; that was the woman that nailed Carlo's brother on the assault and battery charges two weeks ago! He'd been in the back of the courtroom when Miss Smartass came in with her pretty orange coat and oh, so professional-looking, little lady's briefcase.

Their inside man hadn't mentioned *HER* being on this '*witness*' case; wonder if he even knew?

As the woman opened the car and dove inside, Franco ran for the van. Jumping in the driver's side, he pushed Carlo out of the way. "Look out! That's the *HEAT* over there, one of the D.A.'s! I think I'll give her a big *HELLO* from your brother, huh, Carlo?"

The other man sneered, curling his lower lip. "*That's that frigging Chandler bitch, I recognize the car! Let's get her!*"

As Andrea pulled away from the curb, she looked up into the rearview mirror. '*Oh cripes, they were following her! Okay girl, now what? Stay calm here, it's broad daylight. Get into traffic lose them in the traffic.....*'

By the time she reached the Tri-Boro bridge, Andrea was breathing a lot easier; she'd lost them somewhere along Thirty-Sixth Street. '*Whew, that had been too close! Now what would she do, call John Moreno, try and get her girlfriend on the phone, head for her cousin's in Jersey? What in the hell WAS she going to DO?*'

The squeal of tires made her look into the rearview mirror again, just in time to see the van ram into her car. They hit her *hard*, the bump nearly made her lose control of the wheel. Jerking it to the right, she skidded along the metal railing, trying to get away from them, before the bastards killed her on this damned bridge! She floored the engine, hitting ninety as she began to cry quietly, "Tony....."

The thud shook Catherine awake. She looked around the foul smelling van; it was so dark in here, she could barely see. Dear God, where was she? Where were they taking her and *WHY?*

Desperately trying to untie her bound hands from behind her back, Catherine nearly had her fingers around one of the ropes when the van pitched sideways again, throwing her against the wall and onto her side. She winced in pain, trying to get her breath back.

Laughing like a maniac, Carlo urged Franco into action again. "Do it again, man, scare the hell

out of her! Yeah, go! Go!"

Fighting the wheel as the car slid sideways, into the steel railing, Andrea felt more than heard the sound of the blown out tire. As the car began spinning, she held onto the wheel, screaming in terror. "*MOM! TONY ...*," as the car pitched forward.

All any of the witnesses could say afterwards was there was this crazy woman going nearly one hundred miles an hour over the bridge. Her tire blew out, the car spun out of control, hit the metal railing hard enough to split it wide open. The car went over the side, bursting into flames as it hit the water.

As John Morenno reached for the phone, Rita Escobar stood in the office doorway with a file. He gestured for her to sit down. Rita frowned as her boss began a very strange telephone conversation.

"Moreno. Yeah, hi Billy. What! Who did you say? Say that again! Oh God, oh no! No ..." The phone dropped from his hand. The District Attorney for the Borough of Manhattan stared at Rita Escobar, horrified, fighting back tears. "It ... It's Cathy, Rita!"

On the other side of the city, Peter Alcott picked up his messages from the answering service. Muttering to himself, he pulled out the chair to his desk.

"John Moreno? What does Cathy's boss want me for?" He began punching in the phone number impatiently.

"John Moreno, please. John, this is Peter Alcott. What? I didn't understand that last part, say it again. Who? Oh dear sweet mother of ... *NO!* It can't be, it's not ..."

Holding the phone in a viselike grip, Peter fought for control. "Yes, I'll go down. Uh huh, right now. Thank you for calling me, John. Yes, a terrible tragedy."

Dropping both hands to his desk, Peter bowed his head, staring at the phone as it droned on and on, the connection broken. He didn't see the phone he was holding so tightly. He saw a baby, naked as a jaybird, squalling her head off, dangling upside down, while he smacked her seconds old, little red bottom.

Sobbing into his hands for a long time, Doctor Peter Alcott suddenly felt very, very old. Blowing his nose in a linen handkerchief, he pulled out his battered old wallet. Tenderly, with great care, he took out one picture to stare at it, as tears rolled down his craggy, world weary face.

The photo was of a young woman, caught in a very happy Winterfest pose. She smiled back at him from the small photograph, her face glowing. A very pretty woman.

She wore a cream-colored lace dress and long, oval, pearl earrings. Around her neck, hung a beautiful crystal. The gift of the man she loved, sparkled under the tunnel candles.

Peter ran one shaking finger over the woman's picture, touching her face with a sorrow twisting in his heart unlike any he'd felt since he lost his wife. His voice was hoarse, sad beyond describing.

"Oh Cathy. Oh, you poor baby ..."

Switching off the lamp, he put his head down on his folded arms. His shoulders rocked as he gave into the pain totally.

Oh Cathy Cathy ..."

Taking a deep breath, Peter closed the morgue door and leaned against it for a moment. As many times as he'd done this sort of thing as a doctor, he always hated it. now, he'd have one more reason to detest this ... place.

A balding man clad in a white labcoat, waved a greeting from a nearby examination table. "Hi, Peter. It's been a long time. What are *YOU* doing down here, with us *ORDINARY* peasants?"

Peter was grim as he walked across the room and handed Larry, the Medical Examiner, a small slip of yellow paper. "Somebody I know....." He couldn't go on. The man read the note, then nodded.

Getting to his feet, he led Peter towards row upon row of small metal cubicles, each one numbered in large black type. Scanning the numbers, Larry glanced over at his colleague.

"*HELL*, it's too bad. Nobody said she was a relative of"

"She was a friend. I've known her all her ... life." As the Medical Examiner slid a metal cubicle open, Peter blinked back his tears. "I mean ... *KNEW* her."

The narrow metal table containing a dark green bodybag, slid into view. It was partially

covered with a white sheet. Handing Peter the sheaf of papers laying across the cold, lifeless form, Larry then moved away, giving his friend some privacy. Peter seemed ready to keel over from grief.

Stuffing his hands deeply into the pockets of his blood-stained labcoat, the Medical Examiner moved to sit in front of a dish of slides, but didn't really see them. He shook his head sadly - he was in the wrong profession.

Knowing he *MUST* read the file from a professional standpoint, Peter's hand trembled slightly as he scanned each word with care, hoping he *would* find an error.

{ } CHANDLER, CATHERINE: 28, Jan. '90. Probable cause of death-----Auto accident. Caucasian female. Age: early thirties. Eyes: green. Hair: brown. Height: 5"3". No distinguishing marks recognizable. Dental Record: Inconclusive. Ditto fingerprints. (SEE SPECIAL NOTATIONS, PHOTOS and MEDICAL DETERMINATIONS: Pg. 2) { }

Turning the photographs over, Peter's eyes went wide with horror as he forced back the bile rising in his throat and moaned. The snapshot made his stomach lurch. He was nearly sick on the spot. The photographs fell to the floor unnoticed. She was burned beyond recognition. The beautiful brown hair was just about all that escaped unscathed. The green dress; a shade Cathy loved. He scanned the page; further down was a list of articles found on the ... victim.

As he realized no mistake; no horrible but correctable error had been made, Peter nodded his head, gripped by melancholy. Cathy's briefcase; he recognized the charred bits. He'd given it to her when she decided to join the *ORDINARY WORKING PEOPLE*. She took his teasing in stride, she always *DID*. He blinked rapidly for a moment ... make that ... *had*.

And, that orange coat had been onne he'd seen her wear many times. He smiled to himself, remembering the day she lost one button and had him down on his hands and knees in the middle of the Park Plaza Hotel. He felt around in the carpet for it, like a complete idiot, while she taunted him of having *OLD* eyes. He'd give those eyes, up to have her tease him again, just once. Oh ...just one.

Swallowing the lump in the back of his throat, Peter folded the papers back up as he reached for the corner of the white sheet. He *MUST* do this, get through it. Do it *NOW*. He lifted the sheet slowly and unzipped the green bag

From across the room, the Medical Examiner glanced at his friend, just to see how he was holding up through this. He saw Peter touch the woman's hair, then stand there looking away for a moment. He covered the woman's form up carefully and stood over the body for a long, long time, just staring down at it.

The Medical Examiner rubbed his tired eyes. It was times like this, he'd wished he'd taken his

wife's advice and retired early. Hell, he might anyway. He was getting too old for this.

Peter caressed the blonde-brown hair gently, whispering, "Oh my poor baby, the world finally got you. Cathy, why were you going so fast, love? You didn't usually drive like that. Your dad will never forgive me, you know? I was supposed to be looking out for you, I *promised* Charlie that. Guess I didn't do my job very well, this time. Where were you headed in such a hurry? Can't you tell me? *Please* tell me. How do I break this to Jen and Nancy or the rest of your friends? Dear God, Catherine, *WHAT do I say to Vincent? This will kill him! Oh lady, you HAVE to help me with this; I don't think I can do it alone. What do I tell HIM? Oh please, baby. PLEASE?"*

Gripping the sheet until his knuckles turned deathly white, Peter almost lost his mind with grief. You could only hold an ache like this, that cracked your heart wide open, to yourself, for so long. Only so long.

The cries of pain filled the antiseptic air of each and every corner of this sterile, white room as Peter Alcott: Doctor of Medicine, tunnel helper, volunteer fireman, World War Two Veteran and most important of all, Catherine Chandler's godfather, fell to his knees clenching the edge of the metal table.

"Cathy! Why? OH.....GOD!"

His face streaked with tears, Peter Alcott looked up, "Okay, fine. They *SAY* you're such a *merciful* God, you show *ME* the mercy in *THIS*? Can't, can't you? That's because there isn't *ANY*. So, just tell me why? Tell me *WHY!*"

As Vincent came into the room, Father looked away, blinking as he lowered his head. Peter didn't look up at all. Frowning, Vincent took the chair opposite Father's old friend.

"Peter, I have not seen you for a long ..."

Looking closer, Vincent scowled and put his hand on the man's arm as he leaned over him.

"What is it, Peter? What has made you look so terribly sad? I have never before seen you look like ... this."

Father began to say something, but his voice broke. He couldn't tell him. Covering his face with both hands, he leaned back into the chair, silent and still, as tears ran from between his fingers.

Reaching out to him, Peter met Vincent's eyes.

"It's really bad, Vincent. I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, my boy. It's the ... worst thing you could *EVER* imagine happening to ... you."

His words trailed off as Vincent's eyes grew cold and filled with bitter rage. His words were ripped from him slowly. Oh, so slowly, it broke your heart to hear them.

"Please. Do not ... say anything ... else. Not another word, no MORE!"

Vincent leapt to his feet as Peter grabbed him in his arms, trying to hold him. To comfort him, if he could, knowing, of course, that he couldn't. Only one person could do that, she wasn't here. Anymore ...

Father came around the desk quickly, helping support his son as the man threw back his head, held up his clenched fists and began screaming in anger, then sobbing in agony.

"It CANNOT be true, NEVER! Not this, not THIS! I cannot bear this, will NOT bear THIS! She is within ... me!"

Wrenching away from Peter and Father, Vincent began slowly backing away, shaking his head to and fro. He was wide-eyed in horror.

"No, I will not HEAR this, will NOT believe you, Peter."

Vincent fell to his knees, rocking back and forth, holding his stomach as his head went down.

"This is not happening... NOT happening! Catherine, please? Do not leave me here without you? WHY have you left me alone ... again? NNOO ... CATHERINE ..."

People would say later, the keening could be heard all the way to the Great Hall. It blew a chill wind through your bones, just to listen to those tragic, dreadful screams.

The cries went on long into the night; nearly unnerving some, shared by others, depending on how well one knew Catherine Chandler. And how much you loved Vincent.

Joe Maxwell came out of Moreno's office pale, sweaty and wobbly on his feet. Holding one hand to his mouth, bent over almost double, he ran for the bathroom.

Two of the interns ran after him, knowing the man had just learned of his friend's death.

Wouldn't be the same in here without Radcliffe tormenting him and him trying to feed her junkfood all the time. Nope, just wouldn't be the same, somehow. Funny, just when you get life all figured out, it turns on you and kicks you square in the ass.

Sitting alone in the dark, Vincent held Catherine's rose so tightly, it cut into his palm. Not feeling the pain, nor seeing the blood, he stared down at the beautiful ivory rose, not really aware of it. He saw Catherine's face, smiling up into his; shining and full of love, only for him. He murmured half aloud, "Only for ... me."

Tears filled his eyes as he put his head against the back of the chair. Closing them tightly, the salty, bitter droplets fell onto his face, then tunneled their way down to his chest, unnoticed.

"Vincent, may I come in?"

The man didn't move or answer; he didn't hear his father. He was far away, in a world of his own; a world that contained only himself and the woman he loved beyond life, past death.

Jacob Wells sat in the chair across from his son, his face days and nothing he could do or say or *FIND*, look this look off his son's face. Seeing the gaunt, hollow cheeks, the lifeless hair and vacant eyes, Jacob nearly broke down completely.

If this kept up, Vincent wouldn't last the month, this he knew. Although a doctor and a man of healing, he was a pragmatist and also knew there wasn't a single thing he could do to prevent Vincent's death, for if Vincent wanted it so, it would *BE* so.

And tomorrow ... tomorrow Catherine would be laid to rest. Dear God, was there ever such a sorrow as those three words ... laid to rest? That dear, young woman; with so much to give, so much joy, so much *LIFE*. To be struck down in the way she had been, was beyond explanations. To have it end in this way, where was the fairness in this? Where was the mercy or the hope in *ALL* of this?

Vincent would not be talked out of attending a funeral service tonight; Father had seriously hoped he could dissuade him, but knew he couldn't, not in good conscience. This gathering tonight was one of love; it was for Catherine and for Vincent, too, in its way.

The people of this world loved them both, missed them both, for it was almost like Vincent was gone, too. He spoke to no one, didn't leave his chamber, didn't sleep or eat or care about himself. So unlike him, to neglect everything in this way. Grief would do that to a

Jacob wiped tears from his face. Grief would do that to a *MAN* like his son. Grief could destroy

or bring strengths one never knew they had, until necessary to use those strengths. This grief of his son's was destroying him a day at a time.

Vincent had never been one to fear death, at least for himself. All his life had been a struggle of one kind or another, against that darkest of spirits. And now, this dear, gentle soul didn't have the strength left to fight for his own life. It meant nothing to him, without Catherine, sharing it.

Getting to his feet, knowing his son did not hear him, or chose not to, whichever; Jacob started to leave him *BE* or to God, whatever could help him best, at this moment.

"Father ..." The voice was strained and husky with tears yet unshed.

"Vincent, please? Let me help you?" Jacob put one hand on his son's arm. "Do you think ... she would like this, seeing you as you are now?"

"Like it?" He shook his head. "No, Catherine would not like it." He turned the rose over and over in his hands. "But, she would understand it"

Jacob went to his knees beside Vincent's chair. "Is there anything, *anything* I can get for you? Anything at all?"

The answer broke his heart. "Yes Father, get me ... Catherine ..." Vincent flung his arms around the man's neck, burying his face into Father's chest. Hanging on as though it were the lifeline to sanity itself, he sobbed openly now, freeing his grief to the one person in the world besides Catherine who would truly be able to understand it.

Irrational, beyond practical thought, Vincent let his pain free and his only truth; the one thing that kept him from flinging himself to his death in the Abyss.

"I *KNOW* she's out there somewhere! Help me find her? Please Father, help me find Catherine?"

Jacob rocked his son like he had when Vincent was a tiny baby, until his arms grew numb; trying to comfort, wanting to soothe, to help.

But, not helping at all.

Wiping her face on the cool rag, Catherine got to her feet shakily and flushed the toilet. Whew. Five days in a row now; what in the hell was wrong with her? It wasn't bad enough to be in this ... prison, did she have to be so damned sick on top of it?

The men that were holding her wouldn't talk to her - at all. They kept calling her Andrea, for crying out loud; the lunatics! She didn't look anything *LIKE* Andrea. At least, not enough to be mistaken for her, like *THIS*.

When she tried to tell them over and *OVER* her name and the rest of it, they laughed condescendingly; saying they'd bring her a present tonight, one she'd get a *KICK* out of. What were those creeps going to do, roast a baby seal in her honor? Oh, those crumbs, if she ever got out of here, she'd ... she'd ... Catherine sank to the squeaky bed and pulled the covers up to her quivering chin. She'd be so thankful just to get the hell *OUT* of here, she'd probably just bawl like a baby for days and days! *IF* she got out.

With a scream of rage, Catherine threw the newspaper across the room. "*NO. How could they do that!*"

Louie Montelli was free on a technicality; they'd never get him now!

"*Ohhhh, damn it!*" She kicked the side of the chair viciously, then sank into it, thumbing through the rest of the paper. From a small mesh plate in the door, Franco watched her.

"Yeah come on, Andrea, read the paper like a good girl. See what's happened to your old *BUDDY* Chandler? Went and got herself killed. Wasn't nobody's fault; just bad ... tires. Ha."

Resting her head on her hand, Catherine looked for the crossword puzzle; at least there was something to *DO* now, instead of just sitting here like a lump as she had for five nights.

Flipping the pages, she froze, staring at it, horrified. The obituary on page forty leapt up at her.

{ } ASSISTANT D.A. KILLED IN AUTO ACCIDENT

Catherine Chandler, Assistant D.A. of the Borough of Manhattan, was killed instantly, six days ago when her car plunged off of the Tri-Boro bridge into the channel, exploding in impact.

Only child of late Attorney Charles Chandler and Caroline(Kerry) Chandler, also deceased, Catherine had worked for many charity organizations over the years; including The American Cancer Fund, Muscular Dystrophy Association, Make-A-Wish and Greenpeace.

Non-demoninational services will be Friday at nine a.m. at Our Lady of Hope Chapel, with services immediately following at West Chester Memorial Park. In lieu of flowers, donations can be made in her name to the charity of choice.....{ }

She put the paper down, trying to maintain normal breathing. Dear God, what must Vincent be going through and her friends, after hearing about this? But, especially Vincent! What would he do?

She jumped to her feet, pacing back and forth across the narrow room. There had to be a way of of here. There *HAD TO BE!*

Shuddering, one hand over his eyes, Vincent leaned against the tunnel wall. Sinking down, he lay back against the rocks, trying to turn his head away from the words, the music, all of it, all of it!

Father had been right, Vincent knew that now; he should never have attempted to attend this ceremony given for Catherine down here. He put one hand over his heart, breathing as evenly as he could. He actually felt his heart breaking.

He had maintained a rigid posture of denial; of ... detachment, until Eric spoke. Oh God, the child was devastated by the loss of Catherine; he and Mouse had never let go of each other's hands the whole time. When Eric said Catherine must be playing kickball with Ellie now, up in heaven, Vincent had to leave. Blinded by tears, sobbing aloud, he had turned for the way leading out, before anyone could stop him. No that anyone would have; they knew of thought they knew, what he was suffering in this loss. They all loved Catherine, too.

Vincent moaned; a hollow sound, echoing off the thick, stone walls. How could anyone *NOT* love her?

This is where Mary found him. Slowly sinking down beside Vincent, she wrapped him into a tight embrace.

"Shhhhhh, now. Hush. There, there." She began humming softly, trying to calm his shaking boy. But, nothing helped, nothing would ever help.

Vincent let himself be held for a long while; he needed the closeness, the gentleness of a woman's touch at this moment. He let himself be loved as Mary had always loved him; even when almost nobody else but she, Father and Devin did.

Laying his head in the woman's lap, Vincent felt her hand stroke his brow, pushing his hair back, touching his shoulder. Touching. Caring. These were words for the living, not for him. You could not live without a heart. His was lost to him, out there somewhere where he could not hear it beating anymore. Nevermore.

Blowing his nose loudly on a tissue, Joe stepped away from the rose-covered grave with his arm around Jenny Aronson. Jenny was crying so hard, she didn't think she'd ever be able to stop again. Joe held her as they walked toward the black limos.

"Never knew Radcli ... Catherine, had so many friends," Joe said softly.

Jenny nodded, clearing her throat. "I didn't know most of them, Joe, did you?"

"Nope. Pretty mixed bag, though; some in three piece suits, others in work clothes, some looked like they were in rags, for cripes sake! Yeah, Cathy was always one to pick up all the strays, huh, Jenny?"

Jenny took his arm, speaking quietly, calmer for the moment anyway. "That where she found you, Joe?"

Grinning, the man shrugged his shoulders. "How'd ya guess?" Suddenly, Joe burst into tears.

Standing alone, with a waning moon over his left side, Vincent looked down on the masses and masses of flowers, mostly roses, on the new gravesite. Telling himself that this was *NOT* Catherine, but just the ... shell, she walked around in, Vincent touched the stone with trembling hands.

"Catherine, my love. If this *IS* you resting here, *WHY* can I not believe it?

"Is it my own foolishness, my sweet Catherine, to hope beyond hope, that you are *NOT* here, but still alive somewhere; somewhere where I cannot hear you or touch you? Oh Catherine, I need you so!"

He turned, taking a long, loving glance over his shoulder, whispering, "But, if this should *be* your resting place, my love, wait for me? It will not be long, this I promise. I will be with thee and no other, Catherine.

Don't be angry with me, my heart, please? This life is not mine without you to share it. Without your light, I am truly ... in darkness now ..."

The tall shadow moved across the Park slowly, treading as lightly as a spirit, gliding by as quietly as a muted sigh on the night wind; as dead inside as the rustling leaves beneath his feet. And - this night, Vincent truly walked alone.

Just ducking out of sight as a shadow appeared at the edge of the fence, Vincent stood in the darkness, watching, listening. A man he didn't know was unlocking Catherine's burned-out car. Another man stood next to him. A shorter, stocky man, with dark wavy hair and a deep voice.

"I tell you, John, something isn't Kosher here. I can feel it, I can smell it, *damn it!*"

"Okay, Joe. Look, you want to run around like a chicken without its head, be my guest." Moreno put one hand to Joe Maxwell's arm.

"She's gone, Joe, face it, you have to sometime."

Moreno stepped toward the gate. "You read the reports, just like I did. Maxwell; autopsy, witnesses, cripes, thee must be at least a hundred people that *SAW* the damned car go off the bridge with Cathy in it!"

Joe fairly snarled the words. "*And you're SURE it was Radcliffe, huh? You're so damned SURE?*"

"Well, who else could it be, you tell me!"

"I don't KNOW who it is, but it's NOT Catherine Chandler, I FEEL IT; it won't let go of me. I wake up in a cold sweat, KNOWING she's out there and I can't FIND HER! Son of a ... this is the weirdest case ..."

Joe opened the car door, stepping back when pieces of burnt chunks of upholstery fell out at his feet. Vincent watched, gulping, as he tried to focus on the car itself, on *JUST* the car, so he would *NOT* scream.

Muttering and cursing to himself, Joe filled a large trashbag with bits of paper and pieces of he didn't know what else. He carefully picked up the bag of what the *BOYS IN BLUE* downtown called '*crap*,' *NOT* evidence and slammed the car door shut.

Following along in the darkness, Vincent waited while Joe stepped into a small warehouse and pulled the door shut behind him. Clenching, then shaking his right hand, Vincent peered at it for a moment in the light of a streetlamp, noting the size and depth of the slice in his palm with resignation.

Father had always warned him about subway travel, *HIS WAY*, but this was one of the few times, he had ever received an injury doing it. It stung like fire.

Finding no windows or alternate entrance into the warehouse, Vincent's frustrations threatened to boil over as he stood outside. *IF* that man found anything, what would he do with it?

Vincent knew the man in the warehouse was Joseph Maxwell, the other man John Moreno; his sharp hearing had picked up a good deal of their conversation earlier. But, the not knowing

what was happening inside was driving Vincent out of his mind; he had to get in there!

Sitting back on the chair, Joe threw the magnifying glass on the table with a sneer. *"Nothing!"* He scanned the ashes and debris, *'now what?'*

Taking a long, thin metal pointer, he began separating the bits and pieces of materials laying all over the desk, keeping them a bit apart from the package he had retrieved at the police station earlier this evening.

Joe grunted to himself sarcastically; nice, having to do the department's work *FOR* them, as usual! This stuff shoulda been sorted and catalogued days ago. *'What in hell was the matter with those guys downtown? What happened to the old axiom he used to hear from his dad all the time: 'first thing, Joey, ask yourself ALL the questions, get the job DONE, then find the fly in the ointment!'*

'That's what Dad always told him. Pop had been a policeman a long time; he knew what was important - doing a good job and finding answers to impossible questions.'

The man sat forward staring at the table in front of him; he *had* the questions and somewhere on this table, Joe Maxwell knew there *WERE* answers. *'Where? WHERE!'* He looked up, "Hey Pop? Give me a break here, okay? I could use some help!"

He sifted the items again, sighing heavily, it was a good thing he had friends who would put their necks on the line for him; if anyone ever found out he had *'confiscated'* evidence, he'd get his ass handed to him by one John Moreno, awfully quick!

Crunching on a bag of potato chips, Joe stood up and stretched; *'what time was it? It felt like he'd been here for days already.'* Snarling, he slammed himself back on the chair glaring at the ashes and bits of junk scattered before him. *"Come ON, I KNOW you're there! Talk to me, dammit!"*

He started the inventory again; burnt shreds of cloth, the knob of a radio, a twisted U.S. cent, the remained of a charred cigarette, a nub of a tiny earring.....

He grabbed the edge of the table, jumping to his feet, staring down. *'Cigarette? TINY earrings?'* Not only did Radcliffe *NOT* smoke, he had heard her tell both Jenny and Rita Escobar once, how much she *'loathed teeny, bitty earrings. WHY bother wearing them, if they didn't SHOW?'*, was Cathy's philosophy.

A small grin of satisfaction spread over Joe's face. *'OKAY, let us keep our cool here;'* not a lot of evidence, but still, it *WAS* something out of the ordinary, unusual as this whole case had been unusual. He picked up the cigarette and bit of earring and slapped them into an envelope. His voice rang out clear in the small room. *"OKAY! YES!"*

Sorting through the mail, Rita Escobar pushed aside the pile addressed to Joe. *'Brother, he'd handed her a real mess of a job to do. Go through Cathy's files, he said, like it would be easy sorting through everything in there! What did he expect her to do anyway, organize two years of paperwork in twenty minutes! Men.'*

She looked up as Joe approached the desk. "Anything?"

"Not yet." Rita hunched her shoulders. "Might help if I knew exactly what I was *LOOKING FOR!*"

"Hey, if I knew that, I'd have Moreno's job. Just see what she was doing lately, okay?"

"Joe, there's nothing in here like that! You know Cathy, when she had ... a tip or something, you were the last one she'd tell, by leaving it in an unlocked file cabinet!"

Rita threw him a scathing look. " She *KNEW* if you found her notes before she could get the case solved or at least, *organized*, you'd *HOUND* her until she went nuts!"

"Yeah, I know. Radcliffe knew *ALL* my bad habits, or the worst ones, anyway." The man slammed the file cabinet shut. *"That stupid briefcase, why did it have to burn ALL the way up!"*

He strode away, muttering under his breath, as Rita started refiling great piles of manila folders. She should have brought a sleeping bag with her; she'd *NEVER* ever get out of here tonight!

Catherine stood in the bricked up yard and looked up at the sky; going to rain again today, that's for sure. Looking down at the weeds and debris gathered around the small courtyard, she began her daily ritual; walking back and forth, she exercised idle muscles and took deep breaths of fresh air. Or New York air, almost fresh!

With a secret look on her face, she put one hand on her slightly protruding stomach, patting it gently. A peaceful, almost serene expression, came over her tired face, one of joy and yet, one of yearning sadness. Vincent's child; she was carrying *HIS* child in her body.

Catherine Chandler sat down on a bench, looking up at the dismal sky. *'Please, God? If you're up there, get me out of this, so I can go to him and tell him? This baby will make up so much to Vincent, so many years of not knowing who or what, he was.'* Afraid he was not a man, then afraid to BE a man, with her.

She looked down, cupping both hands over her stomach, whispering. "Hello sweet baby. Your daddy is going to be so surprised when he meets you!"

Catherine looked off into the distance as tears ran down her face. "Vincent Wells, this is *YOUR* child. Humans and other... species, do *NOT* crossbreed, my love; kind only goes to *KIND*. Your child tells you, *CONFIRMS* what I've *always* told you, you *ARE* a man!"

Standing with her back against the smooth, high brick wall, Catherine closed her eyes. "I'm here, love. Find me, *please* find me?"

The man stood at the window, looking out over the city as he finished a lukewarm cup of coffee. This work release program wasn't half as bad as he'd been led to believe by other inmates. You got to be outside the prison for the day. To do something more useful than anything he'd found to do inside; got to talk to people who used names instead of numbers; some of them nice, some not so nice. Just people.

Getting up closer to the streaked window, he held his hand, palm up, towards the grayish light. Damn splinter, lodged way in there, the sucker!

Finally digging the thing out, the man started to watch a woman pace back and forth in a yard directly across from him. '*What was she doing out there at this time of year, without a coat on?*' He watched as she turned her face up to the sky, as though searching for something.

As a strangled cry erupted from his lips, his head snapped back to stare at the woman. Heart beating a stacatto rhythm, the man in prison overalls looked unnerved; as if he'd just seen a ghost or a spectre. He *KNEW* that woman, he did! No, that couldn't ... be. Catherine was Olivia wrote that ...

Taking the stairs three at a time, ignoring the shouts of hsi boss, Kanin Evans threw himself at the telephone.

"Be there, Doctor Peter, be there! Dear god, dear merciful God, she IS alive, just like Vincent SAID she was!"

"Yes, yes, Kanin, I hear you, man! Tell your boss to call me. I'll vouch ... Yes, I'm leaving immediately. Kanin, if you only knew Yes, you too, be well. Goodbye!"

Peter Alcott ran from his office, ignoring his overcoat, ignoring his secretary and the surprised stares of his waiting patients. Jabbing the elevator button impatiently, the man was almost hopping up and down as he waited for the thing to reach his floor.

A puzzled look came over him but he shrugged it away, then bit his lower lip, fighting to stay calm. *'Calm, what was calm! He couldn't, he just couldn't BE CALM!*

"Cathy baby, you're alive, thank God, *thank you, God!*"

The other passengers moved aside as this tall, thin, *WILD MAN* threw himself across the threshold of the crowded elevator and stabbed at the buttons laughing out loud - to himself. The other passengers just stared at each other; after *ALL*, this *WAS* New York, wasn't it?

This night, the visions, the dreams, began in the same way they had for weeks now, but quickly evolved into one of lust and aroused passions gone – finally - out of control.

Again, he was enraged as someone, some ... thing, hurt Catherine. Vincent was enclosed in darkness; there was no way out, no one to help. Then, Catherine screamed.

In a cave awash in a sea of blue mist, it grew quiet, still. Silent.

He cried out for her, tried to run to her, but there was no way to reach her, he could *NOT* reach her. No, *NO!* The beast stood between them, sneering, taunting him, enticing him, telling Vincent this woman was *HIS*, Vincent could *NOT* have her.

The mist undulated and shifted, changing from blue to gold, to black, and finally to flame, the color of primal lusts.

Suddenly, Vincent could see himself very clearly; hand raised as though to strike. Strike who? No. Not Catherine! He started to fall. He was falling, falling, taking her down with him to the floor of this cave. He could hear her anguished cries, the screams as she realized he was dying.

The echoes of her cry, *'Not without ME!'* resounded off the cavern walls. Suddenly, everything was sensation and beauty. He felt the brush of her mouth on his, then she probed deeper, deeper, taking his mouth completely with her own, sharing with Vincent, a joy as he had never known in his life.

Raising one arm, half numb with fatigue, he still felt the stirring of his body responding to Catherine's mouth claiming his at last. *AT LAST!*

Vincent wrapped one hand in her hair, binding her rigidly against his tormented flesh. Breath

ragged, he opened his eyes; they pleaded with her, begging her. To do what, he truly wasn't sure. How could he be sure; this man was a virgin. He'd never had a woman before this night.

Seeming to know instinctively, without his words, what he wanted, what he longed for, Catherine quieted him with light touches and the murmured words of love.

Knowing this was his first time, she wanted Vincent to feel the pleasure, the complete ecstasy, that waited for him, as fully as he could. Even though not at the peak of his stamina, she could see how excited he was, now masculine. His penis extended straight out, away from his body, as though seeking the heat of hers. Catherine knew Vincent wanted her and that here, now, he would have what he *must* have.

Slowly moving upwards, she sat across his legs pulling off her heavy orange sweater, then sliding out of her boots and skirt quickly, needing to be as close to him as possible. Eyes glittering, needing her with a wanton heart, he watched every movement, seeing the lush skin, the soft curves of her breasts. Vincent saw ... *FELT* everything.

Looking up at her, he couldn't speak, couldn't move; he was bedazzled by her, hungered for her mouth as it hovered so close, a breath from his.

Grunting with need, the rutting nature of his passions took over entirely. He reached for her again, pulling her down across his chest with an urgency known to man since the beginning of *ALL* things.

Catherine eased herself down, gently undoing his tattered pants. After removing his torn shirt, she plunged her fingers into the wealth of coppery gold, thick hair covering this man's breasts; sinking her hands into the denseness, loving the sensuous feel of it under her palm.

When her mouth closed over one of his rock hard nipples, he gasped and arched his back, seeking more. Catherine licked the dimpled flesh, nipping it, sucking the quivering nub roughly into her mouth.

Now agonized, his penis pulsating and rigid with need, Vincent rocked against Catherine, shuddering, desperate. Snarling seductively, licking dry lips, he bared his teeth as he gripped her upper arms almost painfully. He needed her and was showing Catherine for the very first time, *exactly* how *much*.

With a gratified sigh, Catherine ran her fingers lightly up the head of his elongated penis; loving the angry red tinge of the inflamed head. It pulsed and twitched when she kissed the tip, then blew her warm breath over it. The man in torment groaned beneath her knowing hands.

Bending down to lick at the small slit, she tightened her grip on him as he grew impossibly thicker in her hand. Her fingers couldn't encircle him, he was as massive here as everywhere

else. Gloriously, his penis emulated the rest of this majestikly framed man.

She moved to the golden, curled pubic hair to begin tickling his scrotum; pinching each one gently, then a bit harder. The delicious torment of everything she was doing, caused Vincent to arch completely off the floor. Eager to be taken, he offered himself to her totally, in abject surrender.

Putting both hands at her hips, Vincent lifted her slightly and slipped one probing finger into her body, wild to discover every part of her, ripe to have her. The glossy slickness of her coated his finger, urging him to delve deeper, harder, as she threw her head back, crying his name.

Frantic now to be inside her, Vincent lusted after her with a ravenous heart, uncontrollable with his need to possess her completely. It was past time. Panting in short, breathy growls, he instinctively gripped his penis firmly in one hand, positioning himself perfectly, waiting impatiently to complete this most intimate act.

Catherine eased down onto him just as he convulsed, surging upwards into her; filling her totally in one perfect, demanding thrust. Green eyes smoky with desire, locked to blue ones starved for pleasure, as their love was consummated.

Vincent began rocking his hips sensuously, responding to the wonder of Catherine mounting him. He was lost in the miracle of her; possessed by this woman as man has been captivated since first learning the pleasure a woman could bring him. And, the joy he could give, in return.

Greedy for her touch, her tongue, Vincent moaned as she lowered her mouth to his, tasting, licking, stroking as she moved along his jaw, down his throat, nipping at the skin, sucking it delicately.

Suddenly, his eyes went wide, staring; he *HAD* to move, had to move ... and take her.

"NOW!"

Stimulated beyond thought, beyond tenderness, the word was torn from him as he turned her beneath him with a fluid movement of his hips and hands. Even as he turned her, Vincent immediately began rocking in grinding, furied rotations.

Twisting his hips into hers, breathless with excited arousal, he captured her behind into his large hands. Lifting her towards him, Vincent yanked Catherine's hips up and over his thighs.

He felt so *good*. She dug her nails into his upper arms savagely as she wrapped her legs completely around his waist, only now realizing the full extent of his man's power, the urgency of his hunger.

Whatever he was, Vincent also was a completely dominating male of his unique species and

only she would ever know how this man made love; with everything he was, every part of himself, giving pleasure beyond definition.

An explanation of primal lust burst from his lips as he continued pumping furiously. Snarling, dominated by the orgasm rising to overpower him, he knew it would be on him very soon.

Trembling above her, Vincent was taken by passion he never knew existed. Not like this, never like this. Now he *knew* these passions; how had he lived without this pleasure? *HAD* he truly been alive at all?

Encasing his buttocks in her hands as much as possible, she felt them tense, then release with each rapid, exploring thrust. She held him bound with her legs and feet, seeking the point of friction she knew would take her over the edge, into completion.

Vincent controlled the pace. Clenching her with his large palms, he urged her pelvis down, angling her precisely, readying her to receive his sexual offering. He was here, for her, *ONLY* for her.

She was eager for him, waiting for him. Vincent felt the satiny wetness of her coating him completely, drawing him deeper and harder into her. He sensed her topple over the edge and kissed her throat wildly as he lowered himself completely onto her, covering her from thighs to breast with his loving weight.

Nipping her ear, he fought his own need for release, wanting to satisfy her before himself. As he pleased Catherine by moving his rough tongue over her breasts and belly, she climaxed, trembling under him, sobbing his name with joy.

It was his time. He told her this breathlessly. "Can you be still for me, love, for now?"

He felt her tremble under him, keeping herself still as he desired, Vincent pulled almost all the way out, testing his control, loving the feel of her inner muscles contracting around him again and again, pulling at him, calling to him as he dove into her.

"Ah, yes!" His words of love were husky, feral. "Be still, my Catherine, it begins for me ..."

Not breaking the skin, he bit her neck, holding her suspended beneath him as for her very life, opened to receive all he offered. Waiting for the orgasm to take him, he begged for rebirth and the experience of achieving ecstasy.

Hurtled toward climax, relinquishing his hold on Catherine's throat, Vincent threw his head back. Mouth open, desperate for air, he bellowed in disbelief at the depth of this pleasure. As he pouted sexually, his head drifted down; he closed his eyes, trembling.

Barely moving, he began to instinctively take short, careful strokes for heightened satisfaction.

As he bit his lower lip to the point of pain, Vincent was flung into the shimmering light; attaining finally, that miraculous state known as *rapture*.

Now, there was nothing but the exquisite sensation of releasing copious amounts of his most intimate self into the one he loved.

Sowing it in Catherine's willing body, he filled her in spasmodic eruptions with nearly endless bursts of opaque seminal fluids.

The years of isolation endured by this majestic and extraordinary proud man, ceased to be.

Man, beast or combination of the two, dark and bright, poet and prince, human or other worldly; call him what you will ... Vincent was *free*.

He woke up, staring at the darkness in front of him as the visions ended. Covered in an exquisitely thin film of glistening perspiration, Vincent put his head in his hands sobbing. He wanted to *tell* her, needed to shout the words *only* to her, in joy, "*Catherine, my love, my life, I HAVE remembered!*"

Vincent sat on the bridge in the Whispering Gallery, head bent, listening to the disjointed sounds of the city above his head. Unconsciously, he touched at the small cloth sack hung about his neck; three weeks today, Catherine was gone three weeks now.

His head went back as he shut his eyes; why was he alive? What purpose was being resolved by him surviving as he was? He looked down into the Abyss at his feet. Go ahead, then - jump. Why didn't he jump? There was nothing holding him here, not really. Or was there?

He got slowly to his feet and headed for his chamber. Just at the juncture of two tunnels, he thought he heard a sound or a ... presence out there.

"Who is there?" Nobody answered.

Everything was silence. All around him, there was nothing, nothing but his own resounding heartbeat. Then, he heard the slight disturbance again, directly behind him. Snarling, Vincent whirled around, teeth bared, hand raised to strike if an intruder lurked in the veil of mist surrounding him, down here.

Again, he found himself alone. Vincent stood in the center of the path, head down; the shroud of golden hair swept forward, covering his face. Alone.

Two weeks earlier, Father had heard Vincent's cries in the night and come into his chamber, seeking to comfort him. Father told him, he never would be alone, not really, as long as he had

Catherine in his memories. Well, he had those memories, at last. He knew what happened to him and to Catherine, in the cave. But memories did not keep you warm on a cold, dark night, or ease the pain merely living could bring. Right now, his memories brought no joy.

Vincent walked on, his thoughts scattered, undirected. Nor could memories fill the emptiness inside a ... man who had only just discovered what the words, *'making love,'* truly meant for him. It meant holding Catherine, loving her, touching her pale, cool arm, tasting her mouth, to press her to his breast in the darkness. To surround her gently.

To breathe in her scent, learn Catherine's body completely with his own, as they shared their love, one with the other. Memories? Yes, Vincent had memories - they were *destroying* him.

Only last night, he had gone once more to Catherine's terrace, searching for some small part of her to be there, waiting for him. But, the place was sealed as a ... tomb would have been. Her flowers and plants were gone, who had taken them? The shelves, the mantle of the fireplace, the top of her bureau - all empty.

Who recently sat here, packing the things that belonged to Catherine, a friend? Many friends? Who? Did they mourn their loss, as he did? *Could* they mourn as he did?

Lifting his head as an emergency message came reverberating over the pipes, Vincent listened carefully for a moment.

"No!"

He staggered back against the stone wall, crying out, then flung himself forward, leaping obstacles, lurching against walls, as he sped down the tunnel corridor.

The message had been for him; a code used only in times of disaster or death.

' V. Urgent. Father's. NOW'

'Please, no more pain, no more grief for anyone?' As he ran, Vincent said his own sort of prayer, was it a selfish one - let there be no more misery in his life? He felt on the brink of the Abyss now. One more push, one more heartache and he would slip over the edge. Or perhaps, jump? To him, at this moment, that idea was not ... distasteful.

As he reached Father's, Peter turned from the desk at the same time Jacob did. Vincent stood at the top of the steps.

"Tell me?"

"I" Peter held out his arms, unashamed of the sobs choking him, as he continued.

"Catherine's ALIVE!"

If you *HAVE* ever seen a miracle for yourself, or witnessed the birth of a child or had a dream fulfilled, you thought *NEVER* to have as reality, then you *know* what *this* man's expression was

at this moment. How Vincent appeared, as he stared down at Father and Peter Alcott. He looked stunned, frozen where he stood, for a moment, as though trying to assimilate, trying to *BELIEVE* what had just been told him.

Then, with the look of a man who has just been handed a faerytale of his *very own*, Vincent flung himself headlong into Peter and Father's waiting arms with a cry that would have, if you'd heard it for yourselves, either broken your heart or made you giddy with happiness - for his sake.

CHAPTER THREE

SO MANY GIFTS

The man waved to the reporters to gather around, his bodyguards watched each one of them very carefully, with one hand pressed to the gun each man cradled inside their topcoats.

Inside the courthouse, the final hearing had just ended. All charges and specifications of the State versus Luigi Montelli, had been very reluctantly, dropped. Luigi Montelli was free again; the District Attorney's office had failed, once more, to get this head of a major crime syndicate, into a situation *THEY* could win.

As the swarthy little man gave an interview and chomped on a cigar half as big as he was, many onlookers gathered around to get a look at the '*CRIME LORD of New York*' as the newspaper reporters had dubbed him, many years ago.

In with those onlookers, stood Joseph Maxwell of the District Attorney's office. He wasn't smiling, wasn't doing anything actually, just standing there, staring at what *HE* dubbed '*the sewer SNAKE of the world.*'

Just as Louie Montelli started down the courthouse steps, Joe broke through the throng, gesturing to him. The man's bodyguards started shoving Joe out of the way so they could get their boss safely to his limo, but, Montelli waved them off, smiling at Joe. Wanting to hear what *MR. BIG LAWYER* has to say *NOW*, he got next to Joe and grinned widely. Joe thought to himself, *He still looks like a damn sewer snake.*'

Mr. Montelli put on his best '*reporter*' voice, enjoying this scene; *knowing* how uncomfortable this *LOSER* from the D.A.'s office was right now. "Well, well, look who's here! My old *PAL*, Mr. Maxwell of the D.A.'s office. Hey, you look a little green, old *PAL*. Whatsa matter? Things didn't go too well in court for you today, huh? *AWWWW ...*"

Reaching out, Montelli pinched Joe on the cheek almost viciously, as the man snarled at him.

Louie shook his head in *SYMPATHY*. "Don't feel bad, Joseph, you did your best. But when you *don't* have a witness, you *don't* have a case, huh?"

Joe pulled away; he wanted to hit him. It had been a long time since he had wanted to hit *ANYONE* as badly as he wanted to smash this bastard right in the mouth. To *HELL* with reporters, to hell with John Moreno! Joe tensed his fists. '*Just one shot, just let me get in one GOOD shot before his goons get me, please God?*'

"*You're SLIME, Montelli and everyone here ...*" Joe gestured to the gathered crowd ... "*KNOWS exactly WHAT you are, you bag of garbage! And someday, there'll be a witness to ALL the killings. Somebody who WON'T be afraid of you or your HIT MEN over there. One you can't GET to, one you can't scare off and on THAT day, MY old PAL ...*"

Joe pinched the man on the face a *LOT* harder than the man had done to him, "*... on THAT day, I'm gonna make sure you FRY, you son of a bitch!*"

Then, as the saying goes - all *HELL* broke loose in a hurry. Joe Maxwell jumped on Montelli, the bodyguards jumped on Joe. The police jumped on the bodyguards. There were screams, cameras flashed, everyone was swearing and yelling at everybody else.

If they could fashion a picture dictionary showing a photograph to *mean BEDLAM*, this scene is what *WOULD* have been on the page.

Somewhere, near the back of the crowd, a tiny woman with a cane, dressed entirely in black, slowly approached the men locked in battle against each other. She was just an old lady, nobody paid much attention to her as she gently, but insistently, pushed her way through to the front of the mob.

Angelina Scarlozzi managed, after a moment, to get right next to Luigi Montelli. He was trying to get to his limo while his men took care of Maxwell; he brushed right by Angelina without a glance. Too bad he did that.

Making the sign of the cross on her own forehead, she looked towards the sky for a moment, then stepped in behind the temporarily unguarded Mr. Montelli. From inside the head of the cane she was carrying, Angelina pulled out a long, thin, double edged stiletto knife. With a scream of "*ASSASSINO, I will see YOU in HELL!*" Tony Scarlozzi's mother quickly plunged the knife directly into the middle of Luigi Montelli's back. "*Andrea's missing, my Tony is dead and so are YOU!*"

Scratching his head, waking up with a yawn and a shake of his shoulders to get the stiffness out, Franco sat on the edge of his king-sized bed and tried to pull himself awake a bit more clearly.

'What a night! Mama MIA, could that broad screw! Three times, he 'got off,' three! Not too bad! Ha. Oh well, she'd been paid good money, she SHOULD work hard for it. Ha; wonder how much she was ENJOYING that money today?'

He laughed to himself, feeling good about last night. When *HE* shelled out good money, whores better *DO* what they were *PAID* to *DO*. What'd they think, *THEY* had the right to *FEELINGS* or something?

Well, last night he'd paid for what he wanted done; it was worth it. He *liked* to get rough with the bitches; they *ALL* yelled, be *HE* knew they all loved it!

An expression of diabolical cruelty washed over his handsome face; he was pleased with what he'd done to that broad last night.

Laughing again he thought about her using the money *HE* gave her to repair the cuts to her lovely face. Franco wore a satisfied expression, which made him look exactly like the attractive ball of slime he was.

He peered over at the bedside clock. *OH shit!* Uncle Louie was gonna *KILL* him, he'd missed the final day of court and after promising to be there for his uncle's *MOMENT OF GLORY*, over the United States Judicial System, too. Now, what in hell would he *TELL* the man?

"Ah ..."

Disgusted with himself, Franco aimed the remote control at the television set and clicked it on. Feeling with his toes for the velvet slippers, he located them, shoved his feet inside and shuffled towards the bathroom, glancing over his shoulder at the news.

Cripes, *ANOTHER* news bulletin? Now what, somebody else taken hostage, another crisis somewhere in Europe, some hick king of some hick country shoot himself in the foot before going to the opera?

Making a rude gesture in Italian that meant *'get screwed'*, he sneered at the woman reporting the news and stepped into the bathroom. "Ah, shut up, you ugly bitch, who gives a....."

'And in local news, suspected crime syndicate leader, Louis Montelli, was killed at noon today, as he stepped from the courthouse'

Screaming in disbelief, Franco swallowed the toothpaste, grabbed a towel and stood in the bathroom doorway, shaking all over.

A look of unconditional horror etched his handsome, very pale face as he listened to the rest

of the bulletin. Uncle Louie's friends didn't like Franco; they thought he was a smartass who didn't have enough respect for his elders.

Suddenly, the man looked terrified. He knew they'd find a way to blame this assassination on *HIM!* He also knew one more thing. He knew ... he was a *dead man*.

Gagging, he put both manicured hands to his attractive mouth and just reached the toilet in time, and was immediately and violently sick to his very handsome stomach.

Carlo looked up as his friend ran into the room. "Hey, what in hell....."

"Turn on the radio, man. Turn on the damn radio! Listen....."

After listening carefully to the same news their friend Franco had just now heard, the two men stared at each other, then shrugged their shoulders. Somebody else would take Montelli's place, they knew that. Hell, one boss was the same as another, when you were only a little dish, as they were.

Carlo jerked a finger towards a nearby door. "What's gonna happen to her now?"

Before the other man could say anything, the phone rang and he picked it up. "Pronto(Hello). Yeah, we just heard it. Yeah, too bad, Franco, your uncle was okay, man. Huh? *What* do you want done? I can't! Are you crazy, man, her Uncle headed the ... Okay, you're the boss as far as I'm concerned. But you gotta get up here, for me to do it. I'm not gonna take the *HEAT* for *THIS!*"

He listened for a moment, then replaced the receiver as he reached into his pocket for a cigarette. His hand trembled, just a bit and Carlo noticed it.

"So, what's going down? Was that Franco? What'd he say, Ben?"

Stubbing out the freshly lit cigarette, the other man jerked his head towards the door to his left. "That man is a nut case! *HE'S* gonna waste *HER!*"

Catherine eased away from the door. Backing up until she stood leaning against the far wall, she sunk down in the corner in a crouch. Oh God, they'd killed Montelli! This whole thing must be about him!

Now she knew exactly why those goons out there kept calling *HER* Andrea; they thought she was Montelli's niece. That's *WHY* they kept her alive, orders from Montelli and now, *HE* was dead!

Reaching into the pocket of her skirt, Catherine clenched her hand around the one thing they hadn't found when they'd shoved her into this room.

The crystal Vincent had given to her on their first anniversary lay in her hand. She wove her fingers around it, squeezing it tightly as she put her head back against the wall and shut her eyes.

What a nice mess. She knew she was somewhere just outside of the city, but that's all she knew.

'Well Chandler, this time you've outsmarted yourself, lady. Sure, don't tell Moreno about YOUR witness. Be really bright and leave no trail. Don't leave any records in the office about the safe house or Andrea. Oh no. Wonderful.'

'So, now you're the big shot; YOU were going to get Montelli when NOBODY else could, right? Well? Who got WHO! Chandler, you idiot! Sure, keep ALL the evidence, all the important papers, that should have been left for Joe or John, in that damned briefcase! Keep everything in there! Now, it's probably in Montelli's hands or at the bottom of the river.'

Catherine shook her head slowly, Andrea. Poor woman; she didn't even know what had happened, probably. They were out for me and got her. Just because we look a little alike, they killed her or forced her onto the bridge and *CAUSED* the accident.

Pulling the blanket over her shoulder to ease the dampness of this place, she got to her feet and stared through the steel, mesh material that covered the small window in the room. Catherine blinked back her tears and bit her bottom lip as a sense of hopelessness rushed over her. She had a faraway look on her face; as though seeing something or somebody only she was able to see clearly. Yes, clearly.

She would always see him clearly. The picture in her brain matched the one etched on her heart. Even here, now, Catherine could see that beautiful mouth smiling down on her; quivering just a little when she ran her finger over it.

Reaching up to hug him as he bent over to embrace her. He had to bend over so far. Vincent was a tall man. And when he looked at her like he could see her soul; right down into her heart. His eyes; did anyone have gentler eyes? Or eyes that would look just *that* color when he was very sad or very angry, especially with her? Those eyes would *FLASH* and she was a goner!

Catherine blushed a pretty shade of pink, thinking of the first time he had let himself make love to her. As many women did, she now took inventory of her lover, looking for the flaws *ALL* men had, even Vincent. But, right now, she couldn't for the life of her, remember even one.

But, there were things she *DID* remember:

The glory of him; the strength he had, how gentle he could be. And how passionate. How completely masculine he was. How wonderfully demanding he could be.

The great hairiness of him rubbing against her skin; that wonderful itchiness he brought her when he lay on her completely. *ALL* his hair; that on his head, his legs, his hands.

Oh, his hands! When he touched her! Was there *anything* as wonderful as those hands? Maybe his eyes?

The look in his eyes as he loved her with his body; the way he moved against her, with her. That delicious little whimper that escaped his lips just before he climaxed. The exquisite frenzy in his voice, when they finished together, as they usually did. Oh, the way he *FELT* inside of her!

The adorable nuzzling he loved to do when in a playful mood. The way he looked when she had truly worn him out! The smile on his face and in his eyes when he knew he had worn her out, too.

The way Vincent laughed when he really wasn't thinking about his teeth showing; Catherine *LIKED* his big, white teeth! Even when he nibbled on her a *bit* too enthusiastically, she did *LOVE* those teeth!

The delight she knew he received from the smallest of gifts, the joy that filled him when able to give a gift back to her. She smiled, wondering how he would react to the gift she had for him now? This is one gift he had already given and she was going to take her time, giving it back. About seven months time. If she had the time, that is.

A soft weeping sound filled the room as Catherine sunk down to the edge of the bed, then collapsed onto the pillow. She began to cry her heart out for the one thing she would really, really miss in this world.

"Vincent? We are going to have a child. I *must* tell you this, have to see your face when I *TELL* you this, Vincent! Where are you? I *NEED* you!"

Peter traced his fingers over the pencil drawing of a map one more time, just to make sure the man at his side had all the information he would need. "Now, Vincent, the way Kanin told me ... this yard is surrounded on three sides by an eight or nine foot brick wall; the only way in or out, seems to be through the house itself."

Vincent nodded. Bending forward, he studied the drawing intently. "Yes, I can see where the

entrance to the house is, in the back. It isn't too visible, with the shrubbery planted there; though the doorway seems to have many lights around it. There is no full moon tonight; that will help. I *MUST* get over that wall without being seen."

He looked to the man in the chair next to him. "I must admit, Father, waiting until dark does seem to be the only viable solution."

Jacob grunted rudely. "Truly, the *only* solution is if you wouldn't take this *whole* rescue attempt onto your own shoulders Vincent. Why you couldn't leave this for the authorities, as I wanted you to. Peter could ... tell ... them something! *WHY* must *YOU* always ... Never mind! Let's just get this *DONE!*"

Jacob Wells put one hand on Vincent's. "I want to see you *AND* Catherine back safely, you know that."

"Yes, Father, I know that," Vincent nodded.

He turned back to the doctor. "Did Kanin give you any more information that would be useful?"

"Yes. All along the top of the wall, are sharp pieces of iron; almost like spikes, Kanin said. After I spoke to my friend on the Statehouse and he spoke to the prison warden; explaining as much as he *could* of what was happening here, the man let Kanin out for an hour on his own recognizance. He went back and walked all around the place."

Peter pointed to the map. "See? He's marked every single weak spot he saw in the security of the house. I hope it's enough."

Vincent tucked the paper into the belt of his trousers and reached for his cloak. "It will have to *BE* enough. I must go, it will be dark soon. I cannot wait any longer!"

He stood at the top of the stairs for a moment, looking down at the two older men. "I shall be back as soon as I can and I *WILL* have Catherine with me."

He took a deep breath and released it. "I *WILL!*"

After Vincent rushed out, Peter and Jacob were very quiet for a time; then Peter looked at his friend solemnly. "If the *slightest* thing goes wrong ..."

"They shall both die. Vincent knows that, Peter."

Jacob folded his hands and sat back at his desk, shivering slightly in the chilly room. "He accepts that possibility. He would rather die *WITH* Catherine than live without her for one more day."

He looked over at Peter, blinking rapidly, fighting off the urge to scream at the top of his lungs. "*I did not even TRY to dissuade him in this; I KNOW my son! Without Catherine, he would be ...*

gone soon enough, as it is. He ..."

Closing his eyes, Father tried to say something also but, he couldn't. Fear could do that, steal your voice.

The men sat together for a long time. Two old friends sharing a silent hope or prayer or perhaps just keeping a vigil as only they could, for people they loved. They nursed small glasses of port wine, each man listening to his own heart and keeping his own counsel.

Slamming the door to the car, Franco walked quickly toward the small stucco house and banged on the locked front door as he peered through the glass.

"Carlo, Ben!"

Carlo opened the door, but cautiously kept the slide bolt on. One finger around the hammer of the gun in his jacket pocket, he cast a glance both ways suspiciously. "You alone?"

"Who the hell do you think is with me, the President! Let me in. Open the damned door!"

"Awright, awright, don't blow a fuse ..."

Franco immediately grabbed Carlo around the throat.

"Hey, look. I'm in NO mood for any shit, okay? Now, where's Ben?"

"In the back, with her highness, I think."

Carlo grinned. "Hey, know what I think? I think she's knocked up! That should make her family *REAL* happy; wait until they find out!"

Franco patted the small bundle as he took it out of his pocket. "She won't live long enough to *FIND OUT* what her family will do. We can't have her going to the cops. We let her go now ..."

"Yeah, yeah. Okay, but do" Carlo looked sick to his stomach. The man had a wife and a kid of his own; he hated this. "Do it quick, okay, Man, I said I think she's ..."

"I heard you. So what? Unless it's yours, you got no problem!"

"You gonna make it look like an accident?"

"No! I'm going to make it look like suicide, pal. That's how broads knock themselves off, didn't you know that? They slit their wrists"

"Oh hell, that's gonna be messy!"

Franco unrolled the small bundle and took out his father's razor from the old country. "Not the way I do it, it's not. I know *EXACTLY* how to cut her, so there's hardly any blood at all."

Carlo gulped and tried looking disinterested. "You done this kinda thing before, huh?"

Not answering, Franco ran the edge of one thumb over the shiny blade as he polished the end of the silver handle with a piece of chamois. The first time he had used this, was when he was only fourteen. The kids knew not to take his lunch money a second time, when they found their ringleader the day after he took Franco's.

The boy had been so neatly cut, you didn't notice the slice until the cops went to move him and his head fell forward. From along the back, ear to ear, the boy was cut wide open. You didn't see the blood until you moved him. Then, it was all over you.

After that, Franco found it got easier and easier; by the time he was twenty, he already had a reputation as a good hit man. Even in college, he hadn't lost his ... touch. If he asked a girl out and she said no, she didn't live to say yes to anybody else.

Yes, this man was very good at his ... job; he had had many years to perfect his profession. Practice made perfect, after all and he was *PERFECT* at what he did; he enjoyed it. Especially the look in the eyes of each victim, when they realized they were going to die. He couldn't remember the names, but the eyes - ah, that was different.

Franco was an educated man, a very intelligent man and a good-looking one, in a darkly sinister way. He was his mother's pride and joy, this man; this only son. He was a painter, a connoisseur of good food and good wine. A poet, and a man women loved being with, but *only once*.

He was an expert chef, a gourmand. He could cut meat - very well. A whiz on a computer and very affable to his friends, his male friends. Franco was a complex human being, very - *DEEP*.

He was also a psychopathic monster.

This was a man who loved hurting women. Of course he would love that, most of them were no match for his strength, now were they? And he *never* went up against men. Remember? This is *NOT* a stupid man we are discussing. He was smart, everybody said so.

Tonight, Franco would find out just how smart he was.

Watching as the man pulled into the driveway, shut off the engine and looked around before he got out of the car, Vincent noted the size of him, but took no other notice for now. He was

concentrating on the house itself; looking at the windows. All dark but three. Behind one of those lights, was Catherine.

He gripped the edge of the building for a moment to regain his composure; he *must* stay calm now! But, to have her so close, so close ...

Pulling his hood as far forward over his hair as possible, Vincent started across the dark, empty street towards the rear of the house.

With a startled look, Catherine jumped to her feet as the two men entered the room; she hadn't even heard the door being unlocked.

The taller one of the two smiled at her disarmingly and held out his hand. "Andrea, I'm your cousin Franco. We met before, remember? When I first came to America to stay with Uncle Louie? Been a long time, cara (dear one!)"

Ignoring his outstretched hand, Catherine shrank away from him. There was something completely evil about this man, she sensed it, she could almost smell it. "I am *NOT* your *DEAR ONE* and I am *NOT* your cousin."

Catherine spat the words at him. "*I am NOT Andrea, damn you!*"

Franco moved quickly, almost catlike and grabbed Catherine by the arm, shaking her. "Sure! Well, pretty lady, ya sure *look* like her. You and I used to get along better than this, Andrea baby."

Franco smirked at her. "Except the time I tried to give you a *feel* and you told your *DADDY*. Took me a long time to lie my way out of a beating, you bitch! You deserved what I gave you for that!"

Watching her reactions, Franco slipped the razor from his pocket, smiling at her. Then, he frowned, why wasn't she screaming? She did the last time she saw this razor. Oh boy, had she screamed then! He backed Catherine into the corner of the room near the window.

Holding the razor at her throat, he leered at her, then put the tip of the blade down to her left breast slowly, loving it when her eyes widened with apprehension.

"How's your little scar, babycakes? Still a thin little line or did it stretch when your tits got bigger?"

Catherine never took her eyes from the razor as she answered slowly, carefully. "I don't have any scars there."

"Don't tell me *THAT!* I gave it to you ..."

Franco ripped the bodice of the dress almost completely open and shoved one hand inside crudely. Wanting to fight him, yet not wanting to take any chances of injuring the child she carried, Catherine put her hands on top of the one at her breast.

"Please? Don't?"

He laughed. "That's what you said last time." The blade moved just enough to slice through the small hook at the front of her brassiere. "That's what they *ALL* say ..."

He looked down grinning. Then, he got a look on his face that would have been funny under different circumstances. He stammered, he stuttered, and backed away from Catherine.

"You're NOT Andrea! NO SCAR!"

"N ... no."

He whirled to face Carlo and began advancing on him like a tiger stalking a deer

"Who is this bitch! You stupid"

Carlo went to his knees as the fist caught him on the edge of the jaw.

"You and your idiot friend! You grabbed the wrong woman!"

As Franco lunged at the man again, the mesh at the window hit him on the back of the head as Vincent burst into the room. Standing in front of Catherine, his eyes narrowed to slits as he slowly ran them over the two men he faced judging, waiting, watching. Preparing to protect Catherine at all costs, defend himself if he had to, or to kill them if he must.

The choice was now in the hands of the men staring at him with open horror registering on their faces.

Carlo reacted first; he jumped to his feet yelling in hysteria, *"What in hell IS that! Let me out ..."* Carlo wanted to find Ben and *GET OUTTA* there.

Trying to shove Franco out of his way, Carlo made for the door; he wanted nothing to do with this! That face was every nightmare he'd ever had in his life, come *TRUE!*

Vincent stood with his arms out to his sides, still in front of Catherine. Franco noted this with interest; so, this thing was here for the broad, was he? She had some strange looking friends or was this monster something *else* to her? He got a very peculiar look in his eyes as he tried *PICTURING* them in a bed, screwing. That was unnatural, that was *DISGUSTING!* He eyed the thing carefully.

"Somebody messed with your *DNA, freak.*"

Vincent didn't respond; he didn't answer imbeciles. Especially ones holding razors.

Franco tried again, liking this, feeling as almost euphoric sense of superiority to the beast in front of him. He also didn't see any weapons on this whatever it *WAS* standing there, eyeing him very calmly. Too damned calmly to suit him!

But, over and above his panic at the moment, was one single overriding fact. Franco was insane and thinking like that kind of person, he reasoned to show fear of this beast, would be weakness. And he was *NOT* a weak man, just a mad one.

He was about to see how strong the thing was by shoving a chair at it, seeing how it moved. Just like stalking wild game in Africa; he'd done that once. But, before he could move, Vincent warned him in a low, very careful tone.

"Stay where you are."

"W what? So, you *DO* talk."

Edging sideways, Vincent didn't have to tell Catherine to hang onto him, she was doing that. For her life. He moved slowly towards the window, body tensed for any movements.

Franco eyed him, saying nothing at first, then he did something strange, or Vincent thought so, at first, not knowing the nature of *THIS* beast. Franco laughed.

"Oh, I can't let you out with her, freak. Wouldn't be right. There's a lot of people out there. Can't have you eating them!"

To Catherine, some of what happened after that, would always remain a blur - disconnected. Franco leapt at Vincent as he brought his arm up from his hip, going for his throat with the razor. Vincent pushed Catherine closer to the window, "*OUT! Catherine, get OUT!*"

Snarling, he threw his arm up just in time to deflect the blade from his throat, but not from his arm. He bellowed in rage as the razor sliced him open on the forearm to the bone. As the excruciating pain hit him in rolling waves, Vincent knew an artery had been severed.

Catherine screamed. It took Franco's attentions off of Vincent just long enough, that scream. The man flicked his eyes towards her. By the time he looked back, Vincent was in ... his ... face.

"*NO!*" Now, Franco was terrified.

Along the back of Vincent's mind was one thought; get Catherine away from here. Get her away before he lost too much blood or the man killed him. He must get her away from *here!*"

"Catherine, go! Please *GO!*"

She went as far as the smashed window, but didn't climb out of it. "*NO!* Come with me, Vincent, come!"

She reached for him, but he shrugged her off as Franco made a very foolish move; he aimed

the razor at Vincent again. This time, Vincent moved forward, lashing out with both hands. First the right, then the left clawed hand swept sideways, then in an upward motion.

Catherine winced, trying to stay calm, knowing she must stay calm, for their sake and for the sake of their unborn child.

Holding his throat, staggering backwards, Franco fell towards the floor with a reverberating, oozing noise coming from his mouth. Hitting the side of the bed with his back, he pitched forward onto his face and lay still.

Catherine ripped the hem from her skirt and tried to coil it around Vincent's injured arm; *'Oh God, it looked terrible, terrible!'* She couldn't stop the blood!

"Catherine."

Hands shaking, she didn't look up as she worked on him. Bending her head, Catherine kissed his damaged arm, tasting the salt of her own tears.

"I love you." She kissed the side of Vincent's face softly. "Hold still, I love *YOU*."

Wrapping the uninjured arm around her waist, he held her quietly for a moment, just held her and tried to calm his breathing. She was here, she was safe and in his arms again. All at once, his pain wasn't as bad. All the piercing agony of these last weeks seemed to fade and grow a bit dim. Catherine *WAS* in his arms again, that was all that was registering in his mind at the moment. In *HIS* arms!

Who moved first, neither knew. Vincent heard the sound as Catherine saw the moving shadow. With a howl that surely came from the nether world, Franco came up from the floor screaming like all the hounds of hell and threw himself on Vincent savagely. Caught off balance for just an instant, Vincent hit the wall behind him with an enraged snarl.

Knowing he was a dead man was already predestined, Franco wanted to take this monster to hell with him. For someone who had just been struck down as he was, this crazed man had the strength of three men.

He hung onto Vincent's back like an omnivorous gargoyle, biting him, tearing at his face with his manicured nails, trying to reach for the jugular, to rip him apart with his bare hands.

Reaching around from the left, Vincent tore the deranged man from his back and flung him away as you would a scrap of filth. The man's head hit the opposite wall with a loud cracking sound. Vincent knew without examining him, that the man had broken his neck and tonight, there would be one less evil in the world.

When the lights were out, Catherine climbed through the window and turned, waiting for Vincent. They were in each other's arms before his feet hit the ground.

"Oh my God, Vincent!"

He kissed the crown of her head. Enfolding her into his arms, Vincent began to slowly rock her back and forth, unable to speak. Unable to say or do anything for the moment, he held her. Just held her tightly as he felt his heart receive her love and grow warmer instantaneously.

Finally, he found the courage to release Catherine just enough to look down at her, but held her arms in a grip of steel as he did it. Irrationally, he was terrified that if he eased the hold, she would disappear again before his eyes and he would die where he stood.

"You're not injured, my love?" He sobbed with joy, seized her to his breast, repeating, "My love, oh my love ..." as he kissed her face again and again.

Catherine wept quietly as she pressed her mouth to his; wanting to crawl inside him and never come out again. He felt so *good*, so solid, she couldn't get far enough into his body, his arms. She wanted to bury herself in his smell and his taste and wipe out these last weeks forever from their hearts.

Scooping her up carefully, as one would a treasure; Vincent made his way quickly to the alley across the street. As he hurried along, he thanked God for the darkness of the night sky, for the cold that kept people indoors on nights like this, thanked Him and any or all Gods for giving him back his life. For existing without this woman would be *no* life at all, not for him.

There were other gifts, so many gifts he knew would come to him, with Catherine in his life, but none were as great as the gift she gave him every day, with every look, every touch of her hand on his.

Catherine gave to Vincent the gift of seeing *all* he was and still loving him, still wanting him. Seeing all he'd *NEVER be* and saying it didn't matter to her in the least; he was all she needed. For seeing into his heart and setting his soul free to soar.

For seeing him as simply the *man* she loved.

CHAPTER FOUR

TO LOVE FOREVER

They had nearly reached the warehouse when Vincent began to shake so badly, he couldn't prevent Catherine's becoming aware of it; as if she didn't already know. Biting down furiously on the inside of his jaw, he fought off the billowing waves of pain and struggled desperately, to keep from falling.

Carefully trying to support as much of his weight as she could, Catherine kept glancing up at

him as they stumbled along the dismal alleyways of the celebrated city of Manhattan.

"Are you all right? Do you want to stop for a minute, Vincent? It's safe here."

"No, please Catherine, I must *NOT* stop, for if I do, I will never begin again this night. Please, we must get as far as we can, before I ... Before"

Saying no more, Vincent took a guarded breath as he fought off the bout of nausea rising in his throat and struggled to keep his thoughts focused on the immediate dangers.

'I can get her home, if I'm careful and don't stop. I can take care of myself, but I MUST get Catherine home.'

Inside his cloak, he could feel the blood running down his arm and onto his trousers; there seemed to be more all the time. The pants were sticking to his thighs and becoming stiffer and stiffer second by second, from the blood.

He knew the situation was not good for him, but also knew, she wouldn't leave him here as he was about to suggest. He knew what would happen to him, if he were ever caught Above. He didn't allow himself to dwell on those thoughts. One thing at a time. Keep walking, don't stop, don't stop ...

Realizing she had not been as far out of the city as she assumed, Catherine began to recognize more and more buildings as they advanced slowly toward the nearest entrance, that would lead them into the tunnels and safely *home*.

Nudging one shoulder harder under his arm to support him, Catherine said nothing aloud when the sudden move she made caused a moan to escape his tightly clenched teeth. *'Oh please, let me find the opening, where's the damned opening to the building? Where IS it?'*

She froze suddenly, throwing Vincent off balance completely. Turning on his side to protect her from his weight, they tumbled down to the wet cement together. He gasped as a knifing pain tore through him.

Catherine held her hand firmly over his lips, whispering, "Vincent, please, don't make any noise! I heard something! Somebody's out there, off to the right side. Can you see them? I can't see much in this darkness."

He didn't answer her immediately; he couldn't. Trying to shake off the fatigue that was numbing his limbs, Vincent edged his back up against the walls of the nearest building. As Catherine's fingers bit into his hand, he heard the sounds for himself and snarled menacingly ahead of him into the murkiness.

"Hey, Vincent, It's Cullen and Mouse. Where in hell ..."

"Here!" Propping Vincent up, she ran towards the voice and bumped heads with Mouse; it was

a tossup as to who scared who the most.

"WHO?"

"Me!"

"Me WHO?"

"Catherine!" She took the man by the front of his clothes and yanked him forward. "Vincent is hurt! Help me ..."

From the other side of Mouse, another voice called out.

"Cathy, it's Cullen. Where is ..."

"Here! He's over here!"

Vincent wanted to weep with relief as he recognized the two men reaching down to him.

"Catherine?"

He twisted away, searching for her. Not one step would he take without her.

A small, cold hand brushed against his face as the men tried standing him up on his feet.

"I'm here."

Vincent's head went down and he allowed himself to be half carried, half dragged into a building across the alleyway. Cullen closed the door to the warehouse behind them quickly. One thought kept swirling around in Vincent's head like a ghostly omen. He had lost too much blood this night.

As the sounds around him seemed to take on an echo, he battled to stay awake one more minute, just one. They must see to Catherine first, make certain *SHE* was well, before him. He put one hand to his chest, fighting for each word.

"Mouse, tell Father ... Take care ... Cath"

Sounds buzzed in his head; he could not shake them away. A whirling blackness filled his eyes. And for now, the assault against pain, was lost by the man.

The trio all went down to their knees with him, trying to protect him from further injury, as Vincent pitched forward onto the dirty floor of the warehouse.

Something was holding him, binding him. He tried to move again, then again, but it was useless. Useless!

"No. Let me *GO*. Please, I must find her! Catherine? Catherine! She is out there, somewhere, alone. She ... needs ... me. Please, I must go to ..."

Jacob looked dreadful; this is what Peter thought as he helped him turn Vincent over on his left side for a second injection.

"Jacob, let me do this. You haven't left his side for four days, now. My God, man, are you trying to kill yourself?"

"... trying to save my son ..." Jacob sat on the chair next to the bed and brushed a hand over his face wearily, then shrugged off his friend's concerned hand. "Let me be! I'm all right!"

Peter gestured to William and Jonathan at the doorway, beckoning them over. The trio whispered quietly together, pointing to the bed, then Jonathan nodded and left the chamber at a dead run.

As he nearly bowled her over outside the room, Catherine put one hand out in front of Jonathan, frowning. She had almost spilt the soup everywhere.

"What's wrong? Not Vincent?"

"No. Father." The teenager looked disgusted. "He won't rest, yells at Peter if he asks him to. Almost took Mary's head off a while ago! She looked awful mad."

"Oh, yes, I was there, she *WAS* upset." Catherine smiled tiredly. "Where are you going to now?"

"Gotta get something for the doc ..."

Grinning, guarding his secret well for a young man, Jonathan disappeared around the recess of the corridor; Catherine smiled as she heard the sounds of him and Mouse surprising each other. Two voices rang out, one high, the other higher.

"YAH."

"Oops, sorry Mouse. Get outta my way ..."

"Almost killed me! Kids ..."

Rubbing the side of his head, Mouse looked up to find Catherine smiling at him. "Are you all right, Mouse?"

"Yeah, okay." He smiled ruefully. "Until next time." He tried to keep up with her as she strode

down towards the hospital as fast as she could, without spilling the tray she held. "Vincent up yet?"

"No Mouse, not yet." Catherine sounded as tired as Father, worse, thought Mouse, as they neared the hospital area. Vincent sick. Father worn out. Mary mad. Catherine unhappy. Not good.

Setting the tray down carefully, Catherine stood behind Father, staring down at the man she loved.

"He's still sweating so badly ..." Reaching out one hand, she felt his head. "He's so cold, Father, *WHY* is he so cold?"

"It's the nature of the fever, Catherine." Father wrung out another cold cloth and lay it across his son's temple. "Sometimes, ice has"

He reached for the pan of water again, shaking his head.

"With others, I could administer aspirin or antibiotics, but with"

Jacob slammed the pan filled with water to a narrow table, almost tipping everything over onto the floor in his anger. His anger at himself, for being so damned helpless at this moment.

"Cold cloths are NOT going to help him at all. I know it, you know it." Father hung the ends of a stethoscope in his ears. *"Even Peter finally admits it is hopeless, unless we can find something to break this fever!"*

"Ice, perhaps?"

"Yes, in the past, ice has helped some, with Vincent. But, with the fever this high, I don't *KNOW* whether ice would help or possibly Jacob shook his head. "It's too much of a risk at this late stage, to even discuss it."

For a small woman, Catherine was surprisingly strong; Jacob Wells found this out now, as her fingers clamped down on his arm so hard, he winced.

"Wouldn't it be better to try something that *HAS* worked, than to just *STAND HERE* and watch him *DIE!*"

"Catherine!" Jacob helped her to the chair. "Whatever can be done *WILL* be done, I assure you. You mustn't upset yourself ..."

Now Father found out another thing he had not known about this young lady. She could yell.

"UPSET MYSELF!" She looked around the room as if searching for something to throw. At him! *"I AM upset! He loses almost half of his blood and survives it, only to be struck down by a ... a ... DAMNED children's COLD!"*

Catherine got to her feet and went to the bed. Standing over Vincent, she turned to look at Father over her shoulder. "Please, isn't there *anything* we can *DO*?"

"I was about to say the same thing, Cathy." A new voice entered the ... disagreement.

Peter Alcott entered the room accompanied by William, Jonathan and Mary.

Jacob frowned. '*What was this then, the committee to get HIM to sleep?*'

Then, he noticed others of the community standing in the doorway, silently watching and waiting. '*Waiting for what?*'

"We're using the ice." Peter stood next to his friend and colleague, looking at him. As though waiting for either an argument or agreement. They had discussed all this days ago. Four days ago, to be precise.

Vincent was barely conscious from the shock of losing so much blood, when half of the tunnel's child population came down with the flu, which Vincent, in his weakened condition, caught almost at once. He had lain here now, like this, for four days. It could not continue much longer.

Jacob's eyes roamed from Peter's to William's and finally, to meet Catherine's anguished ones. She didn't say a word, she didn't have to.

Jacob nodded, "Very well, the ice then. Will you have everybody get a pail"

"It's already been done. I sent Jonathan up to Henry's store; He had lots of ice in the vegetables. Doesn't need it at this time of year; was just about to drain it out, as a matter of fact. Good thing I sent Jonathan when I did!"

'Peter seemed rather well pleased with himself,' thought Father, as he supervised William and Cullen lifting Vincent onto a rubber sheet.

Once he was settled down onto it, Father began curving up the sides of the sheet into long rolls, to keep the ice from escaping too far. "All right, that will do."

He waved towards the people in the chamber entrance. "Start bringing it in, please."

Catherine sat on the chair next to the bed, one hand on Vincent's, the other holding a slim book. "... the way we opened up, to let each other in. And the way we closed again, like petals, not like people. We were there, you and I ..."

Her voice faltered momentarily, then she continued. " ... I wonder if we'll ever ... climb that high ... again?" (*Merritt Malloy---"To him, who never sang, for me."*)

"Yesssssss ..."

Catherine was so startled, she dropped the book completely.

"Vincent?"

"Uhhhhhh" He rolled his head on the pillow endlessly, as though fighting against something, or *TO DO* something. "Ca ... Catherine?"

'Oh God, that voice!' She went instantly all goose bumps and leaned over to brush the hair off of his brow. "I'm right here."

"Do not ... leave ... me, Catherine ..."

"Never, I promised you that. Remember?" She fought back the tears. "I'll never leave you again, Vincent. Rest now, my love. Rest ... now."

Kissing his face softly, she saw a serenity close over it that had not been there a moment before.

Catherine reclaimed Vincent's hand, raised it to her lips and kissed each finger over and over again, until his breathing calmed noticeably.

"Yes, my heart, you're right. We *WILL* climb that high again, Vincent. We'll do it together, I promise you that. We *will*."

Looking up, he saw Catherine standing in the doorway with a large pitcher of ... what?

"Vincent, Mary says you must drink all of this, for Father."

He looked into the large, metal container, then frowned. "What is it, Catherine? Do you know?"

Smiling, she shook her head. "Oh no, you don't! Drink some first." She held out a large glass towards him.

Taking it very reluctantly, Vincent looked down into the pale yellowish drink. "I suppose I must ..."

Making a face that was *VERY 'put upon'* at the woman he loved, Vincent tipped the glass to his lips, tasted the ... concoction, then blinked rapidly. "Oh, this *IS* vile, Catherine. It *TRULY* is."

He held out the glass towards her, hoping to be rescued. But, all she did was refill it again! *'No, this was not to be borne.'*

"I should say thank you, but I simply ... cannot!" He peered up at her from beneath his lashes.

"I ... do wish, however, that I knew exactly *WHAT* I was consuming?" He waited. No answer. Wonderful.

Shaking his head, Vincent sneered and polished off the rest of the horrible tasting *STUFF*. As she reached for the glass, he held his hand over the top, his eyes pleading. '*Oh please! No more. It is poisonous!*'

She laughed softly. "Oh, all right. Have the rest after lunch, then."

"*IF* I live to *EAT* lunch. *NOW*, may I know *WHAT* it is called?"

She ticked off all its good contents on the tips of her fingers impishly. "It's got minerals, vitamins and potassium and ..."

He didn't *CARE* what it *HAD*. "But, what is it *CALLED*, please, Catherine?"

"Gatorade." She bit back a howl at the *LOOK* on his tawny face. '*Oh, the poor dear man.*'

For a moment, he said nothing, seeming to deliberate on her words, thinking to himself. As she opened the book to begin reading to him again, his wry comment nearly made her fall off the chair, laughing hysterically.

"*My love, I believe someone left the.....'gator' IN that BATCH. Tail and all!*" He shuddered.

Father smiled warmly at Catherine as she entered the communal kitchen arm and arm with his son.

"Ah, your first day up, Vincent. How are you feeling?"

"Tired, but it is good to be up and about. And *WE* are hungry, Father."

Catherine grinned. The peals of her laughter made Vincent think of crystals, glimmering in the caves Below; tinkling ever so softly if you touched them in just the right way with a fingernail. There was more beauty in the joy of her laughter than in all the wondrous stones in all the caves anywhere, at least to him. It added to *all* his memories.

For earlier, this day, he had told her - he remembered the cave, he remembered the beast and Vincent also remembered the most magnificent gifts she could ever give him; her trust, her heart and her love.

It hadn't been as difficult to tell Catherine he had remembered everything, as Vincent thought it would be. It was as if she knew somehow. But, no, that couldn't be true; how could that be possible?

Yes, they loved each other, but there was no bond, not anymore. As grieved as he was at its loss, Vincent knew he had gained something even truly, more incredible; at last, a life of his own to be lived. And oh, what a woman to live it *WITH!*

And, as he had finally stammered and choked the words from his breast, Catherine had thrown her arms around him; startled him a bit actually, with the force of her hug.

"Oh, my love." Catherine put her hand to his beautiful mouth. "I knew you would remember. I was so sure of it, Vincent!"

"I was not as confident as you, Catherine, that I shall have to admit." He looked down, hiding his expression under a curtain of long, golden hair. "But, to learn of it, to think back on that time, with you, there, astounds me ..."

Trying to find the words, he didn't know he really already found them. "...humbled me. And set me ..."

She held shaking hands to either side of his face. "Set you free, my love?" The happiness in her voice was unmistakable; it glowed around her.

Vincent put his hands over hers slowly rubbing his thumbs back and forth. "I shall love thee with everything I am, every part of my soul, my body, until I am dust. And if you will have me, I will cleave only to you, as long as you will permit it."

Not able to answer him now; for speech seemed beyond her at the moment, Catherine clung to him, kissing his face, stroking her hands through his beautiful hair, until he relaxed in her arms. And then, began to cry.

".....so many gifts do I bring thee. And for only this moment in time, do share all I am with thee, truly. The truth of my passions be thine. My soul, many gifts has thee brought me, thy sweetness, caresses and love. The gifts of a thousand tomorrows, returnth full measure....." (Trisha herself)

Catherine felt his eyes and glanced up, smiling. But the smile faded quickly. Vincent seemed melancholy; sadness surrounded him. She leaned over to him, putting one hand on his knee. "What?"

"So many ... gifts, Catherine?" His head went down. "Would that we could share them forever ..."

"It is forever, Vincent. Believe that. Please, believe that." She looked up at him troubled; *'what had made him so terribly sad?'*

"Tell me."

He put his head back against the bed, sorrow flooded through him, making his voice husky.

"I ... I see you, in the sunshine, with young children. Playing, laughing with them, as you should *BE*. The oldest, a boy ..."

There was an eternity of sorrow in that voice. "... he looks like you, Catherine. Strong, straight limbed, a handsome child. You *deserve* that happiness and so much ... more."

Vincent couldn't go on; his heart was breaking. He believed in visions at times. This time. And there, in those prophecies, he saw himself. Himself, in this place, years later. Alone. So terribly alone.

Was this then, the truth, the ending for him? Not being clairvoyant, who knew? Vincent? No, not really. Only God knew these things and as invincible as this being was, he was *not* God.

Catherine looked around them; such beauty, even in this small chamber of his. Here, is where he told her the first time of the pleasure she brought to his life; also here, they wished, they dreamt, for tomorrows they could share completely.

Catherine smiled to herself, yes, it was lovely here, these stone walls held a glorious silence, a peace and tranquility, she'd never found anyplace else.

She'd traveled, done things, lived in elegance most people would never know; yet here, deep in the earth, was home, to her.

For here was beauty, in its truest, most relevant form. This small hole in the earth had serenity of spirit. Here, there was time; time to ponder, to enjoy, to live.

Here, in this place, was *everything*. Here, was Vincent. All she ever wanted to do was spend her life Below, in his world, with the man she loved.

Well? Was it time to help make this dream completely into truth? She looked at Vincent; he was so weak yet from his illness and the injury he had sustained, rescuing her. Much of his strengths had been taken from him, temporarily.

He sat quietly, head bowed slightly, as though ashamed; thinking he was denying her something she needed or longed for, by loving her as he did. Vincent thought of that sunshine, those children, all the things she could *never* have. Not with him.

Catherine didn't have to hear the words; she knew his heart, after all this time. She had known his heart, from the beginning. Why wouldn't he *let* himself know hers? She decided, yes, it was time to end that pain or as much as her news could end it, for Vincent. For both of them.

She put one hand to his lips, brushing her fingers lightly back and forth, feeling him tremble as she did it.

"I see that child you spoke of, Vincent. Yes, he *IS* like me, but oh, so much more like his father. A wonderful child, a truly special child, Vincent."

"Yes, I ... know." He wanted to run, to scream; her voice when speaking of the child, was the happiest it had ever been. And yet, her voice was destroying him a word at a time.

She forced his head up gradually, needing to see his eyes. "Our child, my love. I am carrying that child already, Vincent." Catherine put his hand to her stomach. "Here, in my body, is *your* child."

He didn't move, didn't react for a moment. Then, he looked at her as though she'd reached out and struck him! Oh no. She had thought to make him happy. He looked terrified.

"Vincent, tell me this makes you as happy as it does me?"

Shaking all over, he got to his feet as though in great pain. Standing at the edge of his desk, he leaned forward on it, gripping it so hard, she saw the wood begin to split. What was he thinking? What was he feeling?

"And this ... child, makes you feel happiness, Catherine?" He whirled around, eyes unyielding, body taut with pain. "To have a child of MINE! How could I! How COULD I trap you in this way, in this LIFE!"

"No!" Her voice frantic, yet angry too, Catherine faced him, yanking hard at his shoulder, making him *SEE* her. "You listen to ME, Vincent! This is the twentieth century, no woman has, HAS to have a baby, unless she chooses it!"

Oh, she was livid. "How DARE you! I tell you the greatest joy of my life and you say I'm TRAPPED, Vincent? Just get that idea OUT of your head. Now!"

Vincent stared at her, alarmed; never had he seen such anger in Catherine before. It was not only surprising, it was a bit ... frightening.

But, was she being totally honest with both of them? Did she truly want this child or was it to make him happy, simply to give

"Ahhhhh!" He held the sides of his temples, breathing deeply, fighting not to scream. Catherine grabbed him and sat him on the bed. Oh God, what was happening to him? Gripping his chest, he moaned, then began sobbing; deep wracking sobs that unnerved Catherine. She pried his hands from his abdomen; was something there?

She ran her hands over his chest, down to his sides. "Pain? Vincent, tell me!"

"It ... passes, Catherine. Do not be alarmed."

"Shall I go for Father?"

Catherine made as if to run, but the ecstasy in his voice stopped her dead in her tracks.

"I do not *need* Father. I do not need *ANYTHING* but *YOU!*"

Springing to his feet so quickly, he startled her, Vincent swung her up into his arms. Throwing his head back, he laughed aloud, laughed as though mad, crazed. He *ROARED*, full-throated, until the walls around them seemed to palpitate with his ... madness!

Catherine hung onto him, trying to think! Then, she gasped as grabbed his arm; terrified as a wave of scalding heat ripped through her chest, full force. She threw her head back, swallowing rapidly and tried to calm her heart. It was thudding against her ribs.

"Vincent, what ..."

"It is the *CHILD!*"

Vincent pulled her to her feet, but almost crushed her with his arms, in a hug that left Catherine no breath in her body.

"Catherine, our child just *TOUCHED* me! Here!" He touched his heart. "Touched me!"

She really never did understand the bond, not entirely. She still didn't. "But, what who ... Vincent, who touched *ME!*"

He looked at her, just looked at her. Then, at last, he saw the incandescence in her eyes, and knew that she knew who had touched her.

"The ... child?" Catherine was almost afraid he'd say no. She wanted this to be for *BOTH* of them; how could he *NOT* want something like *THIS?*

Guiding her to sit down, as though suddenly remembering her *CONDITION*, Vincent put one hand at her stomach, the other at her waist and dropped a gentle kiss to her mouth.

He tilted his head slightly towards her already rounding tummy as though listening. She stayed quiet and still, knowing somehow, that this was important.

"I can feel the baby, Catherine."

"How? With your mind?"

"Yes. And deeper, in my heart. Close your eyes, love. You must learn, as well, to hear ..."

Leaning back against him, she did as he told her to. Feeling not a little uncomfortable, she listened, but all she heard was both of their hearts, beating in the usual way.

She tried harder, closing off her mind to everything except his voice, soothing her, helping her as he brushed his lips over her ear.

"Hear the child, my love. Hear ..."

"Oh!" Catherine put both hands on her stomach, eyes wide. "I think ... No. Yes!"

Vincent and Catherine laid their hands on her stomach together, as one. Moving their heads

until their foreheads touched, they seemed to leave the tunnels in spirit; to journey to a special place only they could ever go.

Catherine and her Vincent were learning their child's rhythms and heartsounds. Sitting as they were, they were formed almost as a heart. Like a curved heart, as they quietly welcomed their child as only they could.

In this child, were the generations yet to *BE*, yet to know conception. A new lineage would walk the earth; a race of beings golden, loving and gentle. Oh, so gentle. Sired by Vincent, out of Catherine. Forged with passion. Strengthened with their Father's courage. Made *possible* with their mother's love of a very special man that would be known through the ages simply as ... *VINCENT*.

And, in that quiet place, in his world, the rest truly *was* silence. Ah, but *this* silence, was one *created* of *JOY*.

EPILOGUE

And in her time, Catherine gave birth to the child and he was called Jacob, after his grandfather, and his middle name was Vincent, after his father.

He was the first, but there would be others. Their names would also be registered in the tunnel journals and in their parents' hearts forever; Sarah Caroline, Devin Charles, Christopher Joseph, Winslow Garth, Kanin Samuel and Regina Mary. As it had been preordained, long ago, so it came to be.

And, this miracle began with that first step. A step by a strange and exceptional being, on a dark and disquieting night; through a park filled only with aloneness, for such as he.

But, Vincent knew, in the deepest part of all he was, one irrational truth. That she *had* to be out there. Somewhere out there, was the woman that would change his life - forever. One to bring him everything, including his destiny.

As he trudged towards his home in the tunnels that extraordinary night, he thought to himself, "You *are* out there, this I know. You *ARE!* You *must* be out there ... *somewhere!* Wait! Please wait for me?"

For I *SHALL* find you!

THE END