

Passion One

by Trisha Kehoe

Preface

After the times of loving come the quiet moments; those wonderful yet wistful bits of eternity when bodies resume their physical separateness. In that stillness, as you embrace the one you love, something hovers close waiting to be acknowledged - and hoping to be liberated.

Some night when all is tranquil, lay very still and listen carefully to your thoughts and emotions; truly listen. Do you recognize what calls to you? If so, can you acknowledge it - even to yourself?

Just as there is no such thing as a 'perfect life', neither is there perfect harmony of spirit, yet if you dare come to terms with yourself as a person, you can get a bit closer to that serenity. So now, 'go with courage and go with care: If only for a moment, close your mind and thoughts to outside influences and open your soul as fully as you can. inhaling deeply, close your eyes and take slow, even breaths. Now, do you hear what calls to you? Music is not the only thing that you can 'hear if you try' or if you truly **want** to. Listen. There - between the beats of your heart - there it is. It's always with you, isn't it, the sensation of something 'missing'?

Love means so many different things to each of us, doesn't it? To some, love is a 'safe shore'; a place that we trust and know as well as we know the rhythms of our own hearts. To some, love is a hand to hold when the way is darkest; to others, it's a voice that soothes us when our spirits are most troubled. If you are one of the lucky few who have that kind of love in your life, cherish it, hold it close - always; especially when the 'hunger' reaches out for *you*, and it **will**.
Oh, It will.

Seeking acceptance, that emotion waits eagerly, hopefully, night after night, year after year, for each of us to accept what it is and to admit that it lives within us. In that region of our secret self few of us ever find the courage to share with others, even those we most love, a desperate longing rushes through us. Thunderous, relentless in tenacity, the need for a completeness that is... more than love... probes at our control - and tests our limits.

Some concepts, some thoughts, outdistance hope and dreams - even interpretation. Beyond a conscious need, caged and cloistered by our own inhibitions, burns a fire deeper than all others: eternal and unrestrained passion.

When that aspect of loving knocks at the door of your heart, do you have the courage to let it in? Oh, I hope that you do. I hope that you can.

'True passion isn't reaching out to stroke another person's hand; it's reaching out to stroke their very soul.' - p.a.k.

'PASSION!'

by Trisha Kehoe

CHAPTER 1

Wrapping a quilt more securely across her breasts, Catherine huddled down in the large chair close to the bed that she usually shared with Vincent. Settling back, she sighed restlessly and closed her eyes, trying to will herself back to sleep, but knew that her efforts would prove futile. Once again, for the third night this week, she was unable to truly rest.

Shivering slightly and burrowing the tip of her nose down into the thick quilt, her eyes mirrored her concern as she stared at the man sleeping opposite her. To see Vincent laying there now, so serene, was a blessing after the three previous nights. Oh, how she wished she could determine what was happening to him! Since her return, he'd grown even quieter than usual, and he never seemed to smile anymore. Even when asleep, he always looked so troubled. What was tormenting this gentle soul to such an extent that now it even invaded his dreams, giving him no respite?

Furrowing her brow, Catherine searched her thoughts. Was he concerned for their son in some way that he couldn't or wouldn't speak of? Was he displeased over the 'fact' of Jacob? No, that couldn't be it. In the past two months, Vincent had summarily come to terms with the reality of being a father - or said that he had, at any rate.

A warm sensation spread through Catherine as she thought of the two men she most loved. Her 'little' man, Jacob, was such a good-natured baby. He rarely cried unless he was hungry or wet, ate every scrap of food that was offered to him, and wanted to be nursed every two hours, the hungry little dickens!

Trying to find a comfortable spot in the chair, Catherine wriggled this way and that before settling onto her left hip. Jacob already seemed to have an empathic connection to his daddy. Would she ever get over her slight feelings of envy about that, she wondered?

Smiling, she focused on the larger of the two men in her life.

Surprising her, for she'd been very uncertain of his possible reaction on discovering that he was a father, Vincent had been ecstatic and more than a little astonished by it all! She had truly expected his initial reaction to be rather less than enthusiastic, but after listening to what she had to tell him of the cave and coming to terms with the truth of her words about what happened there between them, in his own inimitable, pragmatic way, Vincent had accepted fact as fact.

The expression on his dear face, announcing both wonder and a pride that he just couldn't contain the first time that he held his newborn son to his breast, had made Catherine want to weep in sheer happiness. She had always longed to give the one she loved such a moment for himself and she had finally done just that. Yet, how like Vincent to think it necessary to mask his deeper emotions even from her, as though he considered them to be inappropriate or wrong somehow; imagining that he didn't have the right to feel such things.

And still, after all that they'd been through, there were times when he seemed to distance himself from her on an emotional level even more than he had in the past. *Why?*

Leaning on the arm of the chair, Catherine propped her head on one hand, trying to find a reason for the way that Vincent had been 'treading lightly' around her these last-weeks. Was he afraid of allowing himself to get too close, thinking that someday she might choose to return to her life Above and—break his heart? No, that couldn't be it. He knew that she would *never* leave him again. He must know that!

Maybe Vincent missed a certain amount of privacy he no longer had? Catherine was certain at times, although he would never have acknowledged the fact aloud naturally, when the poor soul must feel a bit 'infringed upon' with her and their son sharing his very small and somewhat cluttered chamber. That was to be expected. Vincent's way of life, and hers, had undergone some quite astonishing changes in an uncommonly short period of time.

Chewing on the inside of her jaw, Catherine lay her head against the back of the chair, deciding that it couldn't be a lack of privacy that was troubling him. After all, it wasn't as if Vincent had been forced to share his chamber; that was a choice he **made**; one only he *could* make.

Staring at the ceiling, she tried to 'hone' in on what could possibly be upsetting him, but it was no use - she was stumped, at least for now. Letting her thoughts drift to a happier time, Catherine let her body relax completely. Oh, it was so good to be home again, and safe at last here with Vincent. This chamber, *his* chamber, was home now. He was glad to have her here with him, this she knew. Through their restored bond, which had intensified beyond anything either of them could have hoped for, she discovered to her wonder and delight that she could actually *feel* his relief to have her and the baby living with him in his world.

When Vincent found her, rescued her and brought her and his son home, she had been more or less prepared for the reality of being ensconced in one of the guest chambers, at least temporarily, but that hadn't happened. An immensely pleased look came into Catherine's eyes as she recalled what **did** happen...

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After examining Catherine and the baby, Father turned to wash his hands in a basin of hot, soapy water. "Well, Cathy, all things considered, you and my, ahem, grandson, seem reasonably fit."

Walking toward her drying his hands on a towel, he afforded her a look of genuine affection. "Now then, shall we see about getting you settled in, at least for tonight? I'm certain that Mary has seen to the preparation of a suitable chamber for you by now."

Making the 'grand' gesture of escorting her personally, the tunnel elder offered her his arm and started to say something more, but a large, clawed hand coming to rest on his shoulder deterred him.

"No, Father." Facing him, Vincent's eyes locked to the older man's. "Not this time." Openly challenging his authority on this particular occasion, he reached out and gently disengaged Catherine's hand from Father's.

Cautiously nestling his newborn son into the crook of his left arm, Vincent laced the fingers of his free hand through hers, and without a backward look or further word of explanation to his utterly astonished parent, led her purposefully out of the hospital chamber.

Peering back over her shoulder, Catherine fairly beamed at the stunned looking man watching them leave. "Thanks for everything, Father. I'll see you in the morning. Good night."

"Yes, ummm, goodnight, Cathy. Vincent, I'd like to have a word with you at your earliest convenience."

Nodding, Vincent paused, but didn't turn around. "Yes, I had expected as much. Good night, Father."

"Good... night," came the terse reply.

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Midway between his chamber and the few kept for visitors, Vincent hesitated for a moment as though undecided, then seemed to make up his mind. Leaning back on a seldom used length of pipe to give Catherine a moment to catch her breath, he looked down at the baby, cuddled him close, but didn't say anything.

He didn't have to ask the question aloud; perhaps at the moment words were beyond him, but to Catherine the invitation was there, in his eyes. All of his emotions, as well as his heart-wrenching vulnerability, radiated from their crystal depths.

She knew, of course, that he was giving her the privilege of making the final choice, as he should - and would, being the gentleman and gentle man that he was.

Putting one hand to the side of his face, she looked up at him, whispering earnestly, "I love you so much."

"I... know." Although he responded quietly, Vincent's tone was steady; resolved. Reminding her of another night, he continued, "'Whatever happens, whatever comes, know that I love you', Catherine. Always."

With those words, she felt an enormous burden lift from her soul. "All that I've ever wanted is the chance to be with you; truly with you."

"That is also the wish of... my heart." Releasing the breath that he seemed to be holding; Vincent's eyes were luminous and oh, so blue, as they met hers.

"Come, it's time to go... home." Shyly ducking his head, he reclaimed her hand and continued down the corridor.

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Entering his chamber, Vincent handily dumped out a bureau drawer, removed two quilts from his bed and folded them. After settling one under the baby, he diligently tucked the second one around him. Reaching down, he stroked the side of his son's face very softly with the pad of his forefinger. His voice, when he found it, seemed unusually husky, even for him. "He is... very beautiful."

"I think so, too." Coming up behind Vincent, Catherine rested her head on his arm. "But, that doesn't surprise me. After all, he has an incredibly beautiful father."

Having no answer for that, Vincent knelt in front of his son, his eyes shifting dubiously from him to her, then back again. How could she compare him in any way to this lovely child? As Catherine reached down and let her fingers drift over his hair, sensations of deep pleasure raced through him. Oh, how the mere touch of her hand overwhelmed him, as did her tenacity where he was concerned.

Barely managing to keep his voice even, Vincent began, "I had always considered many things to be beyond the realm of possibility - for me. To have a son..." Eyes awash with conflicting emotions searched hers. "There is no way to thank you for such a gift."

"Yes, there is." Cupping his chin in her hand, Catherine tilted his head back. "You could begin by kissing me hello."

Capturing her hand into his, Vincent rose to his feet. It was then that he reached for her - truly reached for her - as he never had before. Backing away so as not to disturb the baby, he drew her towards him agonizingly slowly until their bodies were pressed tightly together.

"Catherine," he whispered hoarsely, their lips a breath apart, "for both our sakes, you must be certain of this path; once this choice is made, there shall be no turning back. Not this time."

"I'm more certain of this than I've ever been of anything in my life." Her eyes caressed his mouth. "This is the only path that leads me to you. I made my choice three years ago, Vincent, you know that."

"I have loved you for so long, and... wanted you." As he moistened his lips, an excitement surfaced in Vincent's eyes that Catherine had never been conscious of before. Being a woman who had known other men, she instantly recognized the expression for what it was: Passion. That look told her more than any words ever could have.

Thinking of all that he had come so close to losing, Vincent's heart lurched. "Thank God I found you alive! Oh, my love, my life!"

In the space of a single breath, the distance that separated them was merely a memory. Swaying toward Catherine, he brushed her mouth with his. Then, straightening to his full height, he blinked, looking more than a little unnerved.

Swallowing hard, Vincent ran the tip of his tongue over his lips. Taking the taste of her inside, he savored it for a moment, then lowered his head toward her a second time and waited, imploring breathlessly, "Again? Please?"

Placing one hand at the back of his neck, Catherine buried the other one in Vincent's saffron-tinged hair. Happily obliging him, she kissed him until they were both left shaken to the soul.

Aware naturally, that this courageous woman had suffered great stress at the hands of a lunatic and needed time to heal, as well as to regain her strength, Vincent released her, sighed and turned away trembling all over. Knowing that now wasn't the time to pursue 'this' any further, he closed his eyes and struggled to rein in his passion. Merciful God in Heaven, he was positively starved for her. Motioning to the bed, he stammered, "Y...you should rest now."

"Yes, I know." Praying that he wouldn't have the heart to leave her alone - not now, Catherine glanced at the bed, then back at him. "Vincent, I don't want to be alone tonight."

"I don't want you to be alone, ever again," he whispered fiercely, then gestured to the chair beside his desk. "If you would permit it, I shall sleep there."

"No, love," Catherine entreated, "I need you closer than that."

Slowly lifting his head, Vincent felt as though he were drowning in a sea of smoky green. He was truly surprised to find that his heart was still beating normally; that it hadn't burst from utter joy. "In the... bed, then?"

"Please?"

"As you... wish." His lisp and slightly thick articulation betrayed the extent of his emotional struggle. "It's very late."

"But, I'm not a bit..." Her efforts to keep from yawning made Vincent laugh softly. "...tired."

"Oh?" Smiling rather self-consciously, astonishing her with a full view of magnificent teeth, Vincent tilted his head to one side and gave Catherine a look of barely contained hunger. "There shall be other nights, my... love, an eternity of them. That, I promise you."

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Returning to the present, Catherine sighed happily. She was *home*, and as far as she was concerned, she was planted here like a, a, **rock!** Still, there were moments in her new life, as expressed in a poem, that 'tried not only men's souls,' but also women's. In her apartment Above, she'd never dealt with tripping over mud-caked work-boots, or coming home to find maps, tunnel schematics and the like, on her bed; or nasty little raccoons named Arthur curled up in the middle of *her* pillow taking a flipping nap!

And of course, there was also the fact of 'personal space'.

Recalling what had happened earlier this week, she flushed deeply and muffled a fit of giggles in the edge of the quilt. Storage space was definitely a matter of concern for the future, she thought, making a mental note to herself: 'you don't live alone anymore, Chandler. Here, you simply can't leave your underwear out in the open!'

Thinking back on the incident now, it seemed amusing, but it hadn't been then, at least not as far as Vincent was concerned.

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On her sixth day home, after nursing the baby, she had decided to take a quick shower. Once assured that Jacob was safely ensconced with Mary, Vincent offered to go to the kitchen to get some freshly baked scones and tea while she bathed.

Returning to the chamber almost on his heels, Catherine reached the entrance to find him standing with his hands on his hips staring down at the bed. At that moment, Vincent hadn't seemed to be aware of her presence. Perhaps right then, he wasn't conscious of *anything* but what lay on top of the quilt.

Looking curious, and more than a little ill-at-ease, his attention had been riveted on two frilly bits of pale blue silk. After giving her camisole and panties a guarded inspection, the look on his face saying... multitudes, he edged one trembling finger along the delicate lace. Curving a nail under them, he brought the pieces of silk up to his face, studying them in the light streaming through the stain-glass window behind the bed.

Oh... LORD. Before she could say anything, or do anything to alert him to her presence, he held the underwear out between his thumb and forefinger turned toward her newly installed bureau near the foot of the bed - and found himself face to face with her.

Affording her a totally disconcerted look at being 'caught in the act', Vincent seemed to have great difficulty in deciding where to look next, or what to say. Inspecting his boots at great length, the poor embarrassed dear had gone a quite appealing shade of gold-tinged pink.

Taking a halting step backward and mumbling something unintelligible under his breath, he dropped the bits of silk as if they were on fire and bolted past her, out of the room.

Catherine had called out after him, but Vincent hadn't answered her. Perhaps he couldn't. At first, she honestly didn't understand why he was so upset. After all, it was only clothing; there was no reason for him to feel that he'd done anything 'wrong' in simply touching it. Then, she suddenly realized that was *exactly* how he felt.

It had taken her shy love almost two hours to muster up enough courage to face her again. Hesitating at the chamber entrance as though unsure of his welcome, Vincent had begun apologizing to her; apologizing for something so innocent!

At that moment, knowing him as she did and loving him so much, Catherine sensed the scope of his inexperience regarding women had never been more painfully obvious to him, or more intolerable. Conscious of his emotions at all times, especially when he was feeling awkward or unsure of himself, her heart had gone out to him. Trying to project all of her love and understanding into the gesture, she'd wrapped her arms around his tensed frame and stopped his breathless words of apology with a gentle kiss to his mouth; the only kind he would accept from her now. That had seemed to help, but he'd made no move to deepen the kiss - or to prolong it.

Other than the night he'd found her and really kissed her for the first time of his own accord, Vincent never let himself kiss her in that way again, for the next morning he'd seen for himself what his ardor had done. Horrified to find her mouth swollen and a small bruise on the nape of her neck, and realizing that he had caused it, he'd refused to listen to her explanations

when she tried to tell him that from time to time, this sort of thing could happen when lovers became 'overly enthusiastic'.

As far as Vincent was concerned, her 'injuries' served as mute but utterly damning testimony to yet *another* one of his differences. Paling visibly as he expressed that thought, he vowed there and then that there would be no more such incidents, ever.

Being totally realistic, or so he imagined, the man she loved had then insisted that his mouth was too coarse for anything but the most guarded of kisses, and that his work-calloused hands were far too abrasive to touch her delicate skin. Staring down at his claws, the inference clear, Vincent had seemed glumly reconciled to the obvious...

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Thinking back on that day now, a very determined look came into Catherine's eyes. Well, Vincent may be reconciled to not touching her or allowing her to touch him, or even to see him without clothing, but she sure as hell wasn't! Still, she didn't force the issue then; she couldn't. Knowing that the one she loved could be exceedingly obstinate when he chose to be, she'd held her tongue, and bided her time. And since that morning, she'd been very careful to keep her more intimate attire *out of sight*.

Catherine knew that Vincent's habits and concepts were a deeply ingrained part of who and what he was - or what he considered himself to be. It would take her more than a few months to smooth away a lifetime of self-doubt and timidity; especially where women were concerned.

This shy and sensitive being had lived alone for over twenty years. He wasn't accustomed to sharing his life, much less his bed, with anyone, except an older brother, and as far as she knew, most older brothers, especially in this world, didn't wear silk underwear - unless Devin was even more modern-minded than she assumed.

Smiling at the notion of either brother parading around in silk BVD's, Catherine put one hand to the back of her neck. Rubbing to ease the stiffness there, she focused her attention on Vincent and the amber glint of light threading through the stain-glass window behind him.

Curled up on his right hip facing her, Vincent had one long arm flung out across her pillow, the other lay tucked up firmly under his chin. Stealing across the bed like diaphanous, probing fingers, the soft luster came to rest on his sleeping form. Seeming to caress him adoringly with a lover's touch, the glow accentuated the contours of his face, softening his uniquely angular features.

Unwilling to let the opportunity pass, for rarely did she have a chance to scrutinize him this closely without him catching her at it, Catherine leaned forward and stared at Vincent. He was truly beautiful, and so very precious to her, she blinked back tears of happiness. She was finally here with him, as she'd always hoped to be, and now nothing would ever come between them again. Nothing and no one, not even...

Made somewhat uncomfortable by what she was thinking, Catherine admitted to one certainty that would never change: Although she loved their son dearly, with her whole heart, no one, not even Jacob, would ever capture the special place in her soul or in her thoughts that belonged only to Vincent. He was the most important part of her very existence; that would never change.

He would never be ignored or neglected, as she'd seen happen to many of her friends' husbands when a child was born.

Recalling the expression of mingled joy and longing that she'd seen in Vincent's eyes the day he accepted her invitation and stayed in the room, watching silently as she nursed his son for the first time, right there and then Catherine had made a promise to herself, one that she fully intended to keep: she would never let him feel, even unintentionally, that he held anything less

than first place in her heart. Vincent not only needed to know that, he must learn to believe that he deserved it.

Selfish of her? Perhaps. Catherine hoped never to be punished for her vow. To think of ever losing Jacob caused her heart to constrict, but if that ever happened, God forbid, she knew that she could go on; that she'd survive and learn to endure the pain somehow. But, should she ever lose Vincent, that would be the end of her, truly the end. She simply wouldn't have been able to endure that.

He was the reason she woke up smiling in the morning, the reason she slept soundly at night. His love sheltered her, centered her. Whatever strength she had, he gave her. She wished that he could accept that – and believe it. Someday he would, even if it took her the rest of her life to convince him.

"Catherine..."

When Vincent murmured her name in slumber, Catherine's full attention was brought back to him. Seeming to have withdrawn from whatever dreams were troubling him, at least for the moment, laying there as he was now, quiet and so still, he looked incredibly young, innocent and oh, so appealing; like a little boy who had played long and hard, and was now recouping his energies for whatever adventures tomorrow would most certainly bring.

Unable to take her eyes off of him, Catherine edged forward a bit more. Resting her chin on the palm of her hand, she noted the rise and fall of Vincent's broad chest, and each slow, steady breath he took and expelled, as well as the abundance of topaz-hued curls that had escaped the confines of his bulky, cotton nightshirt.

Eyeing the dense curls somewhat covetously, Catherine considered herself a very lucky woman. There was no one else like him in the world; there never would be again, and he loved her. Her.

Caught up in some illusion that seemed to include her, Vincent's pelvis arched forward as he moaned her name a second time. "Oh, Catherine..."

Watching him, she barely remembered how to take a breath. What on earth was he dreaming about? Just then, the tip of Vincent's tongue came into view from in between sharp canines. After moistening his lips, he moved his tongue slowly in and out of his mouth, seeming to emulate the gentle rocking motion of his hips.

Oh... God. When he did that, Catherine knew *exactly* down which path Vincent's dreams had taken him! Caught off-guard by this completely unexpected turn of events, she gripped the arms of the chair so hard her knuckles turned white.

With Vincent's urgency and desire flowing toward her through their bond, making her tingle, her heart-rate accelerated. How she wanted him. Unsure of what to do, she reached toward him, then drew her hand back, waiting to see exactly how far he'd allow *this* to proceed before he woke up!

Murmuring something indistinct low in his throat, Vincent flung himself over onto his back, bringing the jumbled sheets and blankets with him. With his lower body now fully visible, his left hand crept down between his thighs. Locating his penis, he grunted, the sound one of satisfaction, and cupped it firmly in his left palm. Settling back down, he resumed his increasingly sensual movements.

Oh, no, he... wouldn't. Watching him, Catherine's eyes went wide. Oh, yes he would! He **was**! Flushing deeply at being witness to an act both private and intensely intimate, she ducked her face into the quilt, but that didn't help very much. She could cover her eyes, but nothing short of fleeing from the chamber could prevent her from hearing every creak of the bed, or each thrust of Vincent's hips as they drove upward; or suppress the gasps of pleasure rising in his throat.

"Yes love, please, like that...!"

From behind the quilt, Catherine heard Vincent's breathing become more and more irregular; each rotation of his pelvis more deliberate, more impassioned. She knew that if he didn't wake up, and soon, he would surely ejaculate. The thought of that happening while she simply watched, instead of experiencing his release within her, was too much to be borne!

Nibbling at her bottom lip, she peeked out over the top of the coverlet she had her fingers clenched in. *Please* let him stop now, before she lost her mind! Maybe she should wake him, or should she just let what was about to happen... happen?

After all, everyone freed themselves of sexual tension in their own way; there was no shame in that, but to be witness to such an act of aloneness on Vincent's part was devastating. Swiping at the tears of regret that were running down her face, Catherine sniffled quietly and decided to let matters take their own course. Vincent had needs of his own to meet and he certainly hadn't been able to fulfill those needs with her.

Still, she felt guilty that he had to resort to self-stimulation. Was any of this her fault in some way? Had she been too forceful with him in their attempts at lovemaking? Dear God, what was the answer? Moaning softly, Catherine clutched at her stomach. To be here right now, in this chamber, hurt. It hurt so much. If Vincent woke up now, she could pretend to be asleep, thus saving him any undue embarrassment, so please, *please*, let him wake up!

As though responding to her prayer of desperation, Vincent whimpered deep in his throat. "Hmm..." Easing his hand away from an astounding erection, he curled back over on his right side again.

Releasing a grateful breath, Catherine slowly let her body sag back in the chair. Wrapping both arms about her middle, she hugged herself tightly and closed her eyes as memories of their attempts at lovemaking blossomed in her thoughts.

Realizing full well that being who he was and innately sensual, Vincent must suffer from the same emotional needs and stress that all men experienced; even though he was certainly *not* just 'any other man'. So far, their attempts at lovemaking had been inadequate at best, as well as deeply humiliating for him.

Although they'd been together every moment since her return, for the first month she'd been healing from Jacob's birth, and still very fragile from her ordeal Above. Knowing that she needed to recoup her strength, she and Vincent more or less resigned themselves to waiting. Catherine scowled. 'Waiting'. Oh, how she *loathed* that word!

At long last, on the night when Vincent found the courage to make the first overtures of a sexual nature, he couldn't complete the act - not really. Becoming more embarrassed by the minute, and nearly overcome with self-reproach, he had tried three times and failed.

Although she was understanding and patient each time it happened,

Catherine couldn't help but feel every bit as frustrated as Vincent did as each time, no matter how much he struggled against it, he reached the threshold of penetration only to suffer the distress of ejaculating prematurely.

When he jerked away from her after the first failure and rolled over to his side gasping an apology, Catherine had taken matters into her own hands. Thinking that Vincent's fear of interruption by anyone, especially Father, at the most inopportune of moments could be causing him great anxiety, as well as be emotionally inhibiting, she had asked him to drape a blanket over the entrance to the chamber, which he'd done; but it hadn't helped.

The second time Vincent had tried to love her brought the same result, leaving him even more irate and upset with himself. Holding him as he wept bitterly, she had tried to calm him by

explaining that at times a man's size, excitement, and inexperience could cause this sort of thing to happen; that it wasn't anything to be embarrassed by or ashamed of. She promised that together they would find a way to overcome this temporary setback.

Trusting her to know more about these matters than he did, and believing in her with all of his heart, Vincent hesitatingly made a third attempt. When the same thing happened again, it defeated him. With a despairing cry, he'd leapt out of the bed, yanked on his clothing, boots, and cloak, and strode out of the chamber snarling to himself.

When he still hadn't returned at dawn, Catherine had known that Vincent would make no further attempts, at least not right away, but he hadn't touched her again since then, or allowed her to touch him!

Recalling the look of agony in Vincent's eyes that night made Catherine's jaw tense angrily. It was so damned unfair! She was certain that he loved her and wanted her as much as she wanted him, but he just couldn't seem to get beyond a certain point before premature release. Why did that keep happening? Why! Was it the dreams? Did his inability to consummate the act of love have anything to do with them? Had they started the very night he found her and brought her home? If so, why had they begun *then*? What triggered them? When would they end? Or would they ever end?!

That first night in Vincent's chamber had been everything she had always hoped it would be. In so many ways, it was her dream, and his, coming true at last. Holding each other close until the dawn, they shared their thoughts, their despair over the months apart that had almost shattered them, and the wonder of having a son.

Throughout the night, they had clung tightly together, fearing that if they let go of each other even for a moment, they'd wake up alone again. Finally, they had drifted off to sleep wrapped in each other's arms.

Hours, or perhaps it was only minutes later, she wasn't sure, Vincent had started shouting, which had startled her half out of her wits! Bounding off of the bed, he'd stood trembling on the icy chamber floor.

Taking a quilt and wrapping it around Vincent's shoulders, she had tried to both comfort and calm him down, asking what was wrong, but he refused to discuss it; only saying that she mustn't worry. Not worry! She loved him; how could she see his unrest and not be concerned?

Catherine stared into the shadows of the chamber as though seeking answers in their muted tints of grey. Why did these nightmares torment Vincent so, night after night, week after week? What were they about? When they continued to plague him, he seemed to withdraw from her emotionally and grow more and more agitated, which had frightened her. She had no fear of him, ever, but she was afraid for him.

Resting her head against the back of the chair, Catherine tried desperately to put her thoughts in some sort of order. She was an attorney, and if she said so herself, she had a remarkably analytical mind. Surely she could find some answers if she just concentrated on the problem long enough and hard enough.

What was so distressing about his dreams that Vincent wouldn't discuss them - even with her? They'd always shared everything before. Catherine frowned. It wasn't like him to keep secrets from her, but from past experience she knew better than to pressure him. Vincent could be very difficult to deal with when he chose to be, as well as inordinately stubborn. His years of abstinence in a sexual way made that fact exceedingly obvious. Where another man might have acted on his need of a woman, he didn't budge an inch. He didn't even acknowledge that such urges existed within him. Oh, he was strong-willed, all right!

And, being a woman, Catherine knew when a man was attracted to her, as Vincent had been from the very beginning. Sometimes, she couldn't help but wonder if he would have ever made love to her if she hadn't taken the first step and 'forced his hand', so to speak?

Glancing over at Vincent and noting his calm, even breathing, Catherine smiled. Well, he was hers now anyway, and that was all that mattered. Seeing that he seemed to be sleeping peacefully, and assuming that at least for the time-being all was well, she decided to go to the kitchen for a glass of milk.

Maybe that would help her sleep.

Quietly pulling on a woolen robe and tying it at her waist, she tiptoed out of the room...

"No, I cannot! I **must** not!"

As she stepped into the corridor, Vincent's cries ripped through the chill night air, bringing Catherine up short and raising the hair on the back of her neck. Oh dear God, not again!

Hoping that she'd be able to calm Vincent down before Father and the entire tunnel community heard him and came to find out what was wrong, she spun around and sped back into the room. Thank God the baby was a sound sleeper!

Closing the curtain behind her, Catherine hurried toward the bed. Touching Vincent lightly on the arm, she tried to soothe him. "My love, you're dreaming. Shhh."

Catching her off-guard and nearly toppling her from the bed, Vincent pushed her away from him. Gasping in surprise and barely managing to maintain her balance, she grabbed at the edge of the bookcase just behind her. Good Lord, what was *that* all about?!

"Leave me, now!" Still in the grasp of some disquieting nightmare, Vincent thrashed back and forth. "Catherine, you must stay away! I, he, could harm you while I am like this!"

Hoping to comfort him, she reached out and began to gently stoke his damp forehead, but her touch only seemed to make matters worse. Rocking back and forth on the sweat-soaked pillow, the man she loved wrapped both arms across his stomach as his cries intensified. "No. God... no! It's him, *him*, not me! Forgive me? Find it in your heart to forgive me for what I'm **feeling**, for what I'm **thinking**?! Run, Catherine, **run**...!"

At the same instant that Vincent bolted upright on the bed, Catherine placed her hands over his, murmuring reassuringly, "It's alright, everything is alright. It's only a dream." She shook him gently. "Vincent, wake up."

"Such emptiness is unendurable! Who...?" Startled blue eyes met hers. "C...Catherine?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"Oh, thank God!" Slumping against her, Vincent buried his face into the nape of her neck. "I dreamt that I was *there* again, in... that place. Despair was crushing me. I, I couldn't wake up." A deep shudder shot through him. "Oh, these appalling dreams!"

"I wish that I could help you." Smoothing back his wild, ruffled mane, she spoke softly, trying to quiet him. "You must talk with someone about what's been happening to you night after night, Vincent. Why can't it be me?"

Straightening, he shook his head slowly back and forth. "There are no words to describe this. These visions shame me, Catherine." A sob welled up from a place deep within him. "And they remind me."

"Of what?" Recalling these last two months and some of the phrases Vincent had shouted while asleep, she tried to comprehend what he was trying so hard to give voice to without actually saying the words.

Most of his agitation seemed to be of a purely emotional nature. Then, just that quickly, she knew. No. No! He was denying his innermost feelings again!

To think that Vincent would do that, knowing full well what the consequences could be, alarmed her. He mustn't **ever** do that *again*! To spare her, or so he thought, he had negated his feelings towards her for over three years, and it had nearly destroyed him.

Pushing the hair back from his damp forehead, Catherine observed, "Your dreams are about the cave, aren't they, and what happened there between us?"

Unable, or unwilling to acknowledge that, Vincent looked away. Not answering, he eased free of her embrace, swung his long legs over the side of the bed and sat up.

Concerned for his state of mind, as well as his physical well-being, Catherine knelt beside him. Studying Vincent's profile and his slightly pouting lower lip, she tensed her jaw to keep from screaming. No more. Please, no more? He was just beginning to heal. They both were. A year ago, Vincent's illness, and all that had happened then, to him, to both of them, had nearly killed him. Now this! Was there *never* to be an end to what this man had to endure, what he must suffer? Damn it, **enough**!

Letting his head fall forward onto his palms, Vincent took deep, slow breaths and tried to stop trembling. What was he going to do about these images in his mind? What *could* he do about them? There was no way to control one's dreams, at least none that he knew of, and these visions were savage; not those of a man.

Not those of a man?

Suddenly nauseous, Vincent gulped and fought off the urge to retch. Oh God, his thoughts were degrading, poisonous! Yet, he must face the fact that Catherine had the right to know about these visions, for they were *about* her. He must discuss the truth of them with her, this he knew, but how could he voice such debasing truths aloud? With no experience in matters of a sexual nature, he had no words for something so terribly intimate.

A growl of self-reproach escaped Vincent's tightly clenched teeth. There were no words, not for this. Well, blast it, he'd better find some and quickly! He owed this woman so much; he owed her everything. Hadn't they promised to always share the truth with one another? He must tell her about the dreams that were decimating him, no matter how painful it would be for him to admit the details aloud.

Swallowing several times to ease the dryness in his throat, Vincent struggled to find a way through his dilemma. How could he and Catherine share any kind of a life if he couldn't open his heart fully to her now, when he most needed to? In the end, he knew that his choices came down to one and one only: He *must* tell her everything. Everything.

If he couldn't be honest with her, then he'd have to force her to seek a life away from him. 'Away from him'?! The idea of losing Catherine a second time hit Vincent like a physical blow to the pit of his stomach. There were no other options; he must tell her about the dreams.

Staring at his hands for a moment, then slowly exhaling and looking up, he shifted on the bed until he was face to face with the woman he cherished more than life itself. Taking Catherine's hands into his, Vincent took a deep breath, releasing it with the words, "Before speaking of the... dreams, first I must ask for your forgiveness for disturbing your rest again tonight."

"There's nothing..."

"Catherine." When she started to protest, the look in his eyes silenced her. "I'm aware of the many nights you've spent trying to sleep in a, a **CHAIR**, because of *me*."

"Not...that many," she offered lamely.

"Even one is **too many**." With tears shining in his eyes, Vincent glanced down at his hands. "I wanted you to share my life and my ... bed, then drive you from it with my restlessness. How could you suppose that I wouldn't know what's been happening these many nights?" Eyes bathed in anguish peered up at her.

"Between my inability to love you as you deserve to be loved, and these hideous nightmares, I know what I have caused you to endure, and I'm... sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry for something that you can't help." Running one hand down along his spine, Catherine rubbed Vincent's back and waited for him to voice the rest; to bring this out into the open and be *done with it*.

Choking on the words, he forced himself to say them. "In the dreams, I hear a voice." Hesitating for a moment, he looked up at her. "Your voice."

"Mine?" Catherine echoed, looking perplexed. "What am I saying?"

Struggling for composure, Vincent closed his eyes. "The first thing I remember hearing are the words, 'you can't', then you screamed 'no' again and again."

"Yes." Thinking back to that night, she nodded. "I begged you not to leave me; that's when I said 'you can't'. But Vincent, there's more. Don't you remember what I said to you after that?"

"No," he answered dispiritedly. "Some of the events of that time are still quite vague." Forcing himself to maintain eye contact with her, he implored, "Tell me now?"

"When you fell, I thought you were... dead. I'm not sure if I said the words aloud, but I knew that if you died, then so would I. I think I said 'not without me.'" Catherine's lower lip began to quiver. "But you died, Vincent; you died! At that moment, I never felt so alone in my life, or so scared; so lost."

Smiling faintly, Vincent put his hand over Catherine's small, cold one. "Your faith brought me back."

"It wasn't only faith." She squeezed his fingers. "Love brought you back to me." Eyes bright with emotion scanned his face. "It was *love*."

"Yes," Vincent conceded, "it was," still overwhelmed by the fact that this exquisite woman actually loved him. "You refused to let me... leave you."

"I *couldn't* let you do that," Catherine sobbed, tightening her grip on his fingers. "You're everything to me."

Peering up at her through his bangs, Vincent murmured, "Everything?"

"Oh, yes," she breathed, brushing her lips over his fingers. "Don't you believe me when I say that I need you and love you more than anything else in the world?"

"I believe you," he replied softly. "Having your love is the center of my existence. It's much more than I... deserve."

"You must stop feeling like that," Catherine insisted. "Vincent, you deserve everything that life has to offer. You're the kindness, gentlest man I've ever known, or will ever know." Reaching up, she moved one finger along his soft lower lip. "What you give to me, to all of us, is more than we deserve."

"Yet, to love me, Catherine, is to gamble on my being able to control my... other instincts. To love me, there are risks you must take."

"No, they aren't." She gave him a look of absolute trust. "I risk nothing."

"That's not true. You risk your very *life*. We must both face the truth of that." Staring at the ceiling above them, Vincent went on, speaking so softly that Catherine had to strain to hear him, "Even though I know in my heart that I didn't hurt you in the cave that night, my head refuses to

trust my heart." He sighed wearily. "I fear that the dreams may continue until the two are reconciled, or until..." His voice trailed off to an uneasy silence.

"Tell me what you see in your dreams? Maybe sharing them will help."

Examining her small hand that lay nestled within his grasp, Vincent nodded. "I'll try." Taking a deep breath, he gathered his courage. "The first thing that I'm aware of is the... blood."

"Whose blood?"

"Yours, mine; I don't know." His eyes went to his nails. "I only know that it seems to be all around me - around us. I see you above me, I feel your hands touching me, then everything turns the color of flame." His body began trembling. "The flames begin to sear my skin, and I can feel myself falling into... nothingness. At that moment, I reach out and..." As the images intensified, Vincent shuddered.

"Go on," Catherine prompted. "What are you reaching for in the dream? It is me?"

"Y...yes."

"What happens then?"

Shrinking away from her as the images became more and more defined, Vincent buried his face in his hands. "**NO!** Please, don't ask me to speak more of this? I can't. Catherine, I can't!"

"It's all right. In time, the words will come." Gathering Vincent into her arms, she rocked him gently back and forth until his trembling eased.

As though she were the bedrock of his sanity, he clung to Catherine as if for his very life. "I fear what these dreams foretell of. If they persist, I would understand if you chose to return to your... life Above."

"My life Above!" Catherine gasped. "You must *never* say that again! Do you think I'm so shallow that I'd allow you to endure this *alone!*?"

He'd only meant to tell her that she wasn't bound to live a life with him that was incomplete, and she'd misunderstood his intent. Mortified, Vincent sat up and whispered apologetically, "I never meant to hurt you, you know that."

"Yes." She gave him a resolute look. "But you did. Promise me that you'll never speak of me leaving you again?"

'But, what if...'

Gripping his chin tightly, Catherine persisted. "Vincent, I want to hear you say the words. Promise me."

"I... promise," he murmured, his tone nearly breaking her heart.

"Good. Now, come here to me." Opening her arms, Catherine smiled as Vincent settled down into his previous position on her lap. Holding him close, she whispered, "Rest now, my love. We'll get through this together; we *will*. Try and sleep? I'm here and I won't leave you. You're safe. You're safe now."

Sighing wearily, Vincent closed his eyes. '**You're safe now.**' Those three simple words meant so much to both of them. Nearly four years ago, here in this very chamber, he had said those words to Catherine. Now, she used them hoping to comfort him. Oddly enough, they did. It was true - he was safe, at last. Here with Catherine, he would always be safe; he would always be loved. Snuggling into her embrace like a small, hurt child, Vincent found comfort in the tranquil rhythms of her heart against his ear, and her words of trust and loving reassurance. Burrowing into her lap, he slowly relaxed.

Cradling him to her breast and crooning a much cherished lullaby, Catherine pulled the covers up over them, thinking, 'Tonight we've made a good beginning, my love. I won't give up on you, or on our dream of a life together. I can't. And I won't let you give up on yourself.'

Hearing noises as he entered the library, Jacob Wells glanced up at the tiers of books lining the upper level, his eyes searching the shadows. "Who's up there?"

From behind one of the dust-covered racks, a voice drifted down, followed by the sound of books being shuffled back and forth. "Hello, Father, it's only me."

"Ah, Catherine." Locating her in the gloom, he smiled. "How are you this morning?"

"Fine, thank you." She started down the stairs with an armful of books. "And you?" Aware of his hesitant descent into a chair, Catherine frowned. "Is your hip troubling you again, Father?"

"Hmm, a bit," he admitted, wincing. "One of the 'rewards' of attaining my exalted age, I imagine."

Laughing, she reassured him, "You're not *that* old."

"I'm not?" He eyed her over the rims of his spectacles. "Right now, I feel as ancient as the stones in these tunnels."

Laying her books on one corner of Father's desk, Catherine noted his fierce scowl. Oh, oh, somebody was in trouble. "Bad morning?"

"Humph! Yes, you could say that. Any morning that begins with a contest of wills - or *won't's* with Mary, usually goes straight..." Looking up, he frowned. "What *is* that expression that's so popular with the younger crowd these days?"

Examining her nails, Catherine tried not to grin, offering, "Down the tubes?"

"Yes, that's it, 'down the tubes'." Swiping off his glasses, Father threw them down on the desk with an unusual carelessness. "That obstreperous woman! Knowing full well that her temperature is still somewhat elevated due to a recent cold, Mary still insists on doing more than she should!"

"Everyone down here does that," Catherine observed casually, "including you."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well..." She gave him a wry look. "...your hip is probably much worse than you're letting on, yet I don't see that stopping you from getting things done."

Letting the remark pass, and thinking it wiser to change the subject, he motioned to the stack of manuals that she'd brought down from the upper level. "Are all of those for you, or are they for Vincent?"

"They're mine." Tapping the cover of the top book, Catherine explained, "I'm reading up on the human psyche."

"Ah, yes, a most worthy pursuit." Steely grey eyes scrutinized her. "May I ask for what purpose?"

For a moment, Catherine didn't answer. Shrugging, she settled into the chair opposite him. "Just for a diversion. Vincent's working in the lower areas all day today, our son is asleep, and I didn't feel like tackling laundry right now, so I decided to read for a while."

"I see." Sensing her duplicity, Father pursed his lips. There was more to this than she was telling him.

Catherine's question caught him completely off-guard. "Father, how do you handle fear?"

"Fear? What sort of fear?"

"Oh, just the ordinary kind."

"That is a luxury I rarely allow myself this late in life," he retorted. Fear, indeed! Then, realizing her question had been in earnest, the tunnel patriarch softened his tone, adding, "I suppose I face whatever is disturbing me, and try to get beyond it somehow, like everyone else. Why do you ask?"

"I'm just curious. That's what I do, most of the time anyway," Catherine remarked. "Yet, some fears are terribly difficult to overcome, or even to discuss with those you love the most. Still, wouldn't you agree that people have to face what's troubling them not bury their emotions or deny that they even exist?"

"Of course you have to face them! You of all people must know that, after what you've endured, Cathy. Ducking the issue only serves to acerbate the situation, and turning away from the truth resolves nothing."

"I agree." Getting to her feet, Catherine smiled and picked up her books. "Thank you for your counsel."

"You're welcome, I'm sure." Eyeing Catherine's retreating form suspiciously, Father pursed his lips. What a bizarre conversation. Why did he have the distinct feeling that he'd not only just been out-witted, but quite nicely fleeced in the bargain?

"But, don't you see that it's the only way?"

"No!" Hoping to avoid a direct confrontation with Catherine, Vincent turned on his heel and faced the chamber wall. How could she ask this of him?! Not turning around, he repeated the thought aloud. "How can you ask me to go back to that... that... *wretched* place?! I shall never go back there again!" A massive fist impacted harshly against the wall. "Never!"

"Even if going there meant an end to what you're suffering with these nightmares?" Catherine asked, continuing, "To bring an end to the dreams and get beyond the panic they cause, you must go back to where all of this began, and I'll go with you."

"Please," Vincent beseeched her, "stop *now*."

"Won't you give us this one chance?" she begged. "I know that Mary would be happy to care for Jacob while we're gone, and Mouse could help carry down the supplies that we'd need. We could have some time alone together to try and work this out."

His tone was highly skeptical. "How could going there, to that dreary place, possibly help?"

"You told me that your nightmares seem to begin and end in the cave. Maybe that's where the answers to many of the problems are too, down there." Trying to convince him, Catherine gripped Vincent's arm. "Don't you see that you must go back there with me to resolve this, or at least get... things... out into the open?"

Glancing over his shoulder, Vincent's eyes blazed into hers. "What sort of 'things'?"

"What you refuse to discuss; your deeper feelings about me."

Fighting to contain both his anger and humiliation, Vincent tensed his jaw. "There are some things that cannot *be* discussed as one would discuss the time of day or the weather, Catherine." He gestured to himself. "My feelings are precisely that - mine! I share them when I *choose* to share them, not when I am being pressured into it."

Taken aback by what he'd just said, the obvious anger in his tone of voice and knowing that it was directed at her, made Catherine fear that this time she'd gone too far. Yet, this *had* to be said. "Vincent, you're not being fair to either one of us. Of course your thoughts are private, and under different circumstances, I'd never trespass beyond the limits you set regarding them. But, if you can't or won't face your innermost fears and conquer them, you'll *never* have any peace of mind, and if you don't, then neither will I."

"Enough." Moving away from her, Vincent clenched his hands into fists and leaned forward on his desk. "Knowing how I feel on this issue, *why* do you insist on pursuing this?"

Feeling that she must say the words, Catherine kept her voice steady by sheer determination. "Because I love you and I want you to be able to return that love completely, as you haven't been able to... yet."

"So," Eyes bleak with despair narrowed as they locked to hers, "it's finally said then, is it?"

Catherine held her ground. "Yes, it's finally said. Vincent, we have to talk about this. I don't mean to cause you pain by asking you to face the truth, but you must face it. This tension between us is becoming unbearable, and we both know that it's only going to get worse every day and...every night."

"I know that I promised never to mention it again, but perhaps it would be better if you went..."

"No!" she gasped, "Don't say it! Don't even think it! Dammit, why are you trying to push me away *again*? My leaving is not an option, Vincent." Taking a deep breath, she asked, "Are you content with our lives as things stand now?" When Vincent bowed his head but didn't reply, she went on, "If you can honestly tell me that you are, then I'll let the matter drop here and now, and I'll never mention it again."

Coming around the side of the desk, she stood as close to him as she could get without actually touching him. "Are you satisfied with the way things are between us?"

"This conversation will end... *now*! There are limits to my patience, even with you!" Vincent shouted, startling them both.

Trying to calm down, he clenched the sides of the desk. Each word Catherine said was like a dagger of reproach ripping into his soul. Even if she didn't mean to hurt him, her words were tearing him apart. He couldn't withstand any further assaults. "If you persist in this, then you force me to leave the room."

"No, you won't!" Casting him a look of utter fury, Catherine reached across the desk and grabbed his hand. "Not this time! Whenever things get too intense or too intimate for you, you run away from me! You won't do that to me again, or to yourself! You've got to stay here and face this."

His voice seemed on the verge of shattering. "Oh, I can face it; I just cannot... discuss it."

"You must!" Her despair quite evident, Catherine softened her tone, imploring, "Vincent, how much longer do you think we'll be able to endure this until the strain between us smashes everything we've fought for? Haven't we suffered *enough*? Don't we deserve more than this... this half life we've been living? We need some serenity in our lives. We've earned that, at times with our very blood! Dear God, we've been through so much!"

"Yes, we have. *You* have." Sinking down to the side of the bed, Vincent fought off a sense of failure. He was going to lose her if this wasn't resolved. He knew it, he could feel it. "Why do you stay with me? Why do you put up with so much?"

"You know the answer to that." Settling down next to him, Catherine stroked his shaking fingers. "My love, there's so much that I want to give to you, that I can't give you until you can reach for me and tell me what you want, and how you feel when you hold me in your arms."

"What you're asking me to describe..."

"Is your passion." Gathering all of her courage, Catherine put one hand to the side of Vincent's face and forced him to look at her. "My love, are you as hungry for me as I am for you?"

"Hungry? Such a strange word to describe love." Although his voice was steady, Vincent's eyes betrayed his uneasiness. "Is that what you sense in me - hunger?"

"At times, when you're not governing your emotions too closely. But only you know the truth within your own heart. That's what I'm asking you to share with me - the truth; to tell me your how you feel where I'm concerned. There are so many words to define love. It means different things to each one of us."

"Yes, it most certainly **does**." Getting to his feet, Vincent turned away from Catherine and walked unsteadily toward the chamber entry, his tone bleak; one of finality. "For both our sakes, I wish that I could discuss everything that the word 'love' means to **me**, on a more... intimate level."

"We promised never to hide the truth from each other," she whispered sadly, fighting back tears.

"Did you imagine that I would ever need to be reminded of that promise?" Pausing in the doorway, Vincent clutched the stone walls on either side of the entrance in a steely grip, as though needing their solidity to keep him from screaming aloud. He could feel Catherine's despair and it was killing him. Oh dear God, such agony! His chest felt tight, as though his heart was about to burst or break. Either way, he believed that he might just die exactly where he stood.

Resting his forehead on the cool stones, he pleaded, "I hope that one day you will find it in your heart to forgive me for defiling my pledge to you, but I cannot speak of my deeper emotions and feelings. I simply... can't."

"But why?"

"To declare them aloud, I must first *acknowledge* the hunger and the **passion** that you spoke of. To do that, Catherine, would be to lose myself **in it**, and that is the one thing **I must never** do."

"Please, don't go!"

Blinded by tears, Vincent stumbled out of the chamber.

CHAPTER 2

Ten days passed; days that proved to be terribly unhappy ones for Vincent and Catherine. The strain between them expanded, seeming to stretch like an overwound elastic band that merely needed one more twist to snap it past the point of mending.

Although they slept in the same bed, ate their meals together in the communal dining room, and seemed to converse as usual, those that loved them knew that things just weren't as

they should be - as they'd always been, until now. Yet, respecting their need for privacy, no one interfered nor offered advice.

Even Father, thinking that all young couples had their share of squabbles, and that this time, he must let them resolve them alone, wisely kept his own counsel - and his distance.

This continued into the evening of the tenth day. Then, events came to a head.

"Catherine?"

Still damp from his shower, Vincent entered his chamber, pulled off his soiled work boots and tossed them onto a piece of canvas put there for just that purpose. Scanning the shadowed room, his eyes grew concerned. Where was Catherine? She hadn't responded to his message on the pipes earlier and it appeared that she still hadn't returned to the Main Hub.

Glancing toward the mantel and a large walnut clock, Vincent noted the time. Six p.m. Where was she? Anxious, but as yet not overly alarmed, knowing that if she had been in any sort of danger, he would have felt it instantly, he inclined his head and listened to sounds only he could hear - the heart-sounds of the two most significant people in his life.

Ah, yes, Jacob. Vincent smiled as the rhythm of the baby's heart thrummed reassuringly. He appeared to be sleeping. What with all of the tunnel children and many of the adults always eager to entertain him, Jacob must have had a very busy day indeed.

Knowing that the boy was in good keeping, he turned his attentions to the woman he loved. Closing his eyes, he continued his exploration of the bond. Catherine was well, but seemed to be a surprisingly great distance away. A perplexed expression crossed his face. Would she have gone Above?

Expelling a rough breath, Vincent flung himself down into the chair at his desk. Who would have reproached Catherine if she left him for good after all that had transpired these last days? But no, even as displeased as she was with him, she would never have gone Above without letting him know. She just wouldn't do that, not after what she had been through up there only months before.

Would she ever feel at ease in that world again, he wondered? Perhaps, in time. Frowning, Vincent tried to decide how he felt about her going back Above even to visit friends. Catherine must be free to live her life as she wished, of course, but it must be a *safe* life from now on - for both their sakes.

Settling forward in the chair, he leaned on the desk and tried to focus his thoughts. Never mind what Catherine 'might' or might *not* do, where she was now was the issue at hand. He concentrated harder. Perhaps she was on the way home now? An exasperated growl escaped Vincent's tightly pursed lips. No, she wasn't on the way home; their connection told him that she was moving further and further away by the moment!

"Where is she going?!" he muttered half aloud. Starting to feel very apprehensive now, and more than a bit puzzled, Vincent folded his hands one over the other and scrutinized the room, first to the left, then to the right, without knowing exactly why he did it. When his eyes came to rest on the desk he was sitting at again, and the envelope that had been there all the time, exactly in the middle of it, he scanned the handwriting. Recognizing it at once, his anxiety eased just a little.

'Dunce,' he thought, censuring himself, 'any closer and Catherine's message would have burnt the tip of your nose.'

Picking up the vellum envelope with his first initial on the front, he caressed it with his thumb for a moment, as though uneasy about the possible contents. Catherine had vowed never to leave him. Could she have changed her mind? Unable or unwilling to face him again, would she say goodbye to him in a note?

'That's preposterous. Open the note, read it, and stop this absurdity.' Slitting the flap of the envelope easily with one nail, Vincent quickly scanned the contents:

Dearest –

I've gone to the place that we spoke about. I'll be waiting there for you to join me – or to escort me home.

Love, Catherine

"Oh... hellfire and damnation!"

With those unfamiliar expletives, Vincent bounded out of the chair. Angrily clenching his jaw, he stuffed the ends of his shirttail back into his pants with one hand, grabbed his boots with the other and jammed his feet back into them. Throwing his cloak over one shoulder, he stomped out of the chamber muttering, "Oh, that, that **vexing** woman!"

Carefully unloading the last of the supplies, Mouse turned and grinned at one of his favorite people in the world. "Well, all done. Lotsa neat stuff."

"Yes, there is." Smiling back, Catherine patted him on the arm. "You did a wonderful job, Mouse. Thank you." Eyeing her wristwatch, she advised, "It's getting rather late. Jamie will be worried about you."

A slight hint of embarrassment crossed Mouse's face. "Jamie's always worried."

"It's a woman's job to worry," Catherine teased, "especially one who cares about *you*."

Sighing, Mouse seemed to accept that. "Oh, well. Love her. Gotta put up with her."

Laughing at the chagrined look he gave her, Catherine remarked, "Well, she loves you too, you know."

"Yeah." A worried expression crossed Mouse's face. "Father says she'll be sorry she loves me when one of my 'schemes' blows her to Kingdom Come." As Catherine seemed to choke, he shot her a puzzled look. "Where *is* Kingdom Come - exactly?"

Suppressing an urge to hug him within an inch of his life, she gestured toward the world Above. "Oh, up there, I guess."

"Topside?"

"No, even higher. Somewhere near Heaven."

"Oh, **way up**." Peering at the rock ceiling, Mouse thought it over for a minute, then shook his head. Nah, couldn't blow Jamie up that high. He glanced up again. Well...maybe. Bet she'd be awful mad at him when she came back down! But he'd say 'sorry', and kiss her, and...

Suddenly uncomfortable with his own thoughts, he inspected the gloom surrounding them and changed the subject, whispering, "Quiet here. Too quiet."

"Yes, it is," Catherine agreed, then gestured to the stack of provisions. "But, I have a cassette deck, wonderful music tapes, a few books and plenty of candles. Those will make it more 'friendly' in here."

"Maybe." Mouse answered dubiously. He didn't like this place even a little bit. Made him remember. Made him sad. Sadder than sad. Why was Catherine here? Why had he let her talk *him* into bringing her here? Dumb move. Really dumb. But, she asked so nicely and always smelled so good, how could he say no? Couldn't say no, not to Catherine! But, he *had* to know why she was here. "Why this place," he asked, grimacing.

"My reasons are... private ones, Mouse, I... I'm sorry, but I can't discuss them."

Secrets? Oh. Those he understood. Nodding his head, he moved toward the entryway. Starting to say something, Mouse hesitated, then said it anyway. "When Vincent came here, bad time, real bad. Scared me to see him sick. He never gets sick."

"Yes, I know." Nibbling at her lower lip, Catherine shivered. As if she needed to be reminded of that time. "I was scared, too." Managing a wan smile, she continued, "Thanks again for helping me bring everything down."

"Welcome," Mouse replied, smiling, and remembering his manners for a change. Then, he decided to give it one more try. "Don't stay here, Catherine? Spooky place."

"Hopefully I won't be alone for too long."

Mouse shot her a startled look. "Vincent coming down **here**?"

"Yes, h... he... is," she stammered.

His skepticism was quite evident. "You sure?"

Mentally, Catherine crossed her fingers. "I'm certain that he'll be here soon." Adding silently, 'I hope.'

"When Vincent finds out I brought you," Hesitating, Mouse gulped. "...he's gonna pick me up and fling me into the Abyss for sure. No more Mouse."

"He won't blame you," Catherine promised, hoping to reassure him - and herself. "I left him a note that explained... everything. You got me here safely. I'm sure that Vincent will appreciate that."

"Hope so." He didn't look convinced. "Hope he 'preciates it enough to save my skin." Sighing, her young companion turned on a strange looking, homemade flashlight. "You asked. Couldn't say no. But, don't like leaving you here."

"I'll be just fine. Please don't worry." Reaching out, Catherine put one hand on his shoulder. "You won't forget your promise, will you?"

For a moment, Mouse was clearly puzzled. Promise? What promise? His eyes shifted left then right for a moment, then he nodded. Oh, that promise. "Only tell Father." He looked to her for confirmation. "Right?"

"Right," Catherine agreed, then gave him a knowing look "Do you have the note that I wrote to him in a safe place?"

"Sure, I... think." Mouse patted one vest pocket, then a second, and finally a third before locating Catherine's note. Whew! "Find Father quick, give him the note, and leave even quicker!"

"Yes, that... might be for the best." Tugging firmly on his sleeve, she reminded, "And, you've promised not to read the note, Mouse."

"But," He shot her a look of dissent. "...good to read. Father said..."

"Not this time," Catherine interrupted, insisting, "I don't care *what* Father said. I want you to give me your word. Only he is to read my note, okay?"

Mouse looked extremely disappointed. "Okay, promise." That said, he scooted out of the cavern. "Bye."

"Goodbye." Once he'd gone, Catherine turned toward the provisions. 'Now, let's see what's going where.'

* * *

Striding along purposefully, Vincent approached the final turn towards the one place in the world he most detested going. Still muttering to himself, as he'd been doing since leaving his chamber, the expression in his eyes was one of indescribable anger; each step he took seemed to intensify it. Never had he been as furious with Catherine as he was at this moment.

"Hmmm." Stopping for a moment to catch his breath, Vincent put a shaky hand to his breast. Exhaling roughly, he swallowed the bile rising in his throat. Feelings of rage and betrayal had made him physically ill. He could actually feel his anger surging through every part of him, causing him to tremble until even his knees began knocking together.

Why? *Why* was Catherine forcing this issue? Vincent's mouth tightened grimly. Well aware of his decision, what did she hope to achieve by ignoring his wishes?

Her actions this day had only succeeded in making him absolutely furious with her!

Taking the final turn, Vincent curled his nails into the palms of his hands. Certain that there would be an unpleasant confrontation as soon as he came into Catherine's view, he strengthened his resolve. This was one instance when he wouldn't, couldn't, yield to her, for to do that now could prove exceedingly dangerous - for both of them.

As much as he abhorred conflict, especially with the women he loved, Vincent knew that this time he would have to close his heart against her. She was using coercion to get her own way, and that he simply **would not** tolerate! How *could* she do this to him?!

An expression of abject misery came into his eyes. Knowing beforehand that he'd be hurt by her actions, how unlike Catherine to go to such extremes. Grunting to himself, Vincent finally admitted that the situation between them had taken an entirely new direction. Now it wasn't only sexual, it had become a clash of wills.

Grinding his teeth together - a habit he had at times of inner stress, he resigned himself to the inevitable. In forcing this issue, Catherine had brought this contention upon herself. Well, he would end this soon enough! She must see things his way this time, and come home with him - *now*. There'd be no more said about this, ever.

Vincent's hand closed around the note in the pocket of his cloak. She had invited him to escort her home. **So be it.** That was *precisely* what he intended to do.

Rounding the bend leading down to the cave, Vincent paused mid-step and sniffed the air. Was that stew he smelled cooking? He inhaled again. Yes, it was stew, and it smelled delicious. Rumbling, his stomach reminded him that he hadn't eaten for nearly ten hours.

Standing at the entrance to the cave, he noted the pastel quilt hanging over the opening, as well as the soft flicker of candlelight that seemed to be beckoning to him. And there was something else in the air. Pausing with one hand clenched in the quilt, Vincent inhaled again. Flowers? It *was* flowers! What did she hope to accomplish by this gesture? His nostrils flared angrily. He wasn't in the mood to smell flowers!

Eyes glittering ominously, he took a deep breath and shoved the quilt to one side. Catherine's actions had blatantly asked for war, and by God, war was exactly what she was about to get!

Having both sensed then heard his approach, Catherine nervously faced the doorway and waited for Vincent to enter the cave. She knew what she wanted to say to him - if he gave her the chance to speak at all.

From the emotions he'd made no attempt to hide, she sensed that he was more than a little upset with her, and prayed that what she'd decided to do and how she was going to react to **whatever** he said, would work. It had to, for she doubted she'd be given a second chance.

When the quilt was shoved aside and a bone-jarring growl split the air, raising goosebumps on Catherine's entire body, she gulped anxiously but stayed exactly where she was. The next moments were going to be both difficult and extremely painful - for both of them.

"CATHERINE!" Straightening to his full height as he entered the room, Vincent greeted her with a look of absolute rage, bellowing, "How could you *do* this?! Knowing full well that I couldn't leave you alone down here, how dare you force me into this position!"

"Hello, Vincent, I've been waiting for you." Not acknowledging his censure, nor his grating tone of voice, she gestured to the campfire. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

When the only response she received was a resounding snarl, she turned, knelt in front of a basket of food and took out two bowls and a large thermos. "I was just about to have some supper. Have you eaten?"

"I'm not here for *food*." The expression in his eyes was thunderous. "I've come to guide you home, as you requested, and I certainly don't want a, a, blasted cup of TEA," he sneered.

Catherine bit the inside of her jaw. A 'blasted' cup of tea? Oh, he was mad, all right. "Oh, I see." Not looking up, she took the cover off of the pot of tea and began to pour it into a metal cup. "Very well, I'll start packing up as soon as I've finished my tea."

"There's no time for that," he declared rigidly. "We shall be leaving **now**."

Stiffening at the imperious tone to his voice, Catherine kept her face hidden and arched one eyebrow, thinking, 'Oh, we will, will we? We'll just see about that, you... you big curmudgeon!'

Just as she made up her mind to hurl the teapot at Vincent's obstinate head, the hot water from the kettle sloshed over onto Catherine's fingers, both startling and scalding her. "Ouch!" Wincing, she popped her fingers into her mouth. "Umm..."

Starting toward her, Vincent froze mid-step. Ohhh... no. Scowling at her, he decided to ignore both her look of distress and tear-filled eyes. No, no, NO! Refusing to 'rise to the bait', he folded his arms across his chest, eyeing Catherine stonily as she waved her fingers in the air and then blew on them.

A look of cunning resolution swept over Vincent's face. Women and their tricks! He'd read of *this* behavior in books. On endeavoring to get their own way in things, and realizing that the battle was lost, females had used ploys such as the one Catherine was using on him now, since the dawn of recorded time. Well, _ wasn't about to be duped by such obvious subterfuge!

Then, startled by the sudden rush of pain emanating from Catherine, Vincent put one hand to his breast, gasping as her anguish hit him full force. This wasn't artifice, she was really hurt!

Ashamed of what he'd been thinking, he swiftly closed the distance between them. "Let me see what you've done?" Dropping to his knees beside her, he took Catherine's small hand into his and inspected the burn closely. "It's only a slight blister, but it should be treated as soon as possible to guard against infection." Somber blue eyes met hers. "Did you bring any medical supplies with you?"

"Y...yes." When the cool tunnel air hit the wound, Catherine flinched, then pointed towards the small antechamber. "The First Aid kit is in there, in my backpack."

On entering the smaller chamber, Vincent couldn't help but notice the way she'd arranged the quilts and pillows into a warm, inviting bed, and at the top of the combined pallets lay the bouquet of flowers he'd smelled earlier. Lilacs. A slight smile smoothed away the rough edges of his scowl. How like her to think of even the smallest detail.

He eyed the bed again. It looked comfortable and so welcoming, so inviting. 'Enough of that!' Pushing such thoughts to the back of his mind, he retrieved the salve from her pack and quickly left the chamber.

Watching Vincent from beneath her lashes as he walked toward her, Catherine noted his slightly relaxed posture. A moment ago, before he managed to contain it, she'd felt something quite wonderful emanating from him, and was glad now that she hadn't bashed him with the teapot.

And although burning her fingers was an accident, she couldn't have hoped for a more auspicious one, for it seemed to have eased the tension between them - at least a little bit.

As he knelt down next to her again and pried open the tube of ointment, she whispered, "You're very angry with me, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. Under the circumstances, did you expect me to be otherwise?"

Glancing up, Vincent's eyes locked to Catherine's for a moment, then shifted to the chamber just behind her to focus on the bed. His eyes narrowed. That bed. Her in that bed with him, making love, taking each other again and again. He could see his body thrusting into her heat, driving harder, deeper, taking her in ways that went beyond rational thought; loving her with his hands, his mouth, his...

Mumbling some nameless expletive under his breath, Vincent fought off a tide of swiftly rising passion. That bed. That inviting, **damnable** bed! Struggling to disregard the image of how Catherine would look laying there in his embrace, he found it increasingly difficult to keep his thoughts on the task at hand. Feeling an uncomfortable and extremely powerful ache developing in his groin, Vincent tensed his buttocks. '**Stop** thinking. Stop **feeling**. Stop **wanting** to *do* what you can **not** do!'

"Please... hold... still." Gripping Catherine's fingers almost too tightly, Vincent exhaled roughly and began to apply the salve to her fingertips. Once he was satisfied that he'd done the best he could, he swayed to his feet, desperately needing to put some distance between them, and right **now**.

Reaching out, Catherine gripped the edge of his cloak. "I know that I've disappointed you, but I couldn't think of any other way to get you here. I was certain that once you **were** here..." Her voice trailed off.

"...that I'd give in as I usually do?" Dispirited eyes met hers. "Did you think to cajole me into accepting this situation once I had arrived?"

"I, I had hoped to convince you to stay, at least for the night," she admitted softly.

"No, Catherine, I cannot remain **here**."

Her eyes pleaded with him. "Not even long enough to have some supper? You must be hungry." Appealing to his 'tunnel instincts', she observed, "It would be a sin to waste so much food."

"Yes, it would be quite wasteful, and I find that I am a bit hungry after all." Seeming to agree, Vincent's stomach gurgled again embarrassingly loud. Hungry? He was ravenous. Sharing her meal was safe enough, surely? With that thought, he relented. "If there's enough, I would like something to eat, thank you."

'Oh, there's plenty!' Catherine affirmed. Smiling happily, she unscrewed the thermos, emptied the remains into the enamel pan, arranged the bowls and spoons on a clean linen napkin, and then began slicing up a small loaf of bread.

The fact that she had thought to bring **two** bowls with her didn't escape Vincent's notice, but he didn't comment on it. Sniffing appreciatively, he peered down into the pan, inhaling the spicy aroma. "That smells marvelous. What kind of stew is it?"

"Mulligan," Catherine announced, adding proudly, "I made it myself earlier today. I only have to reheat it." Dipping a ladle into the pan, she looked up. "Would you like a small bowl or a big one?"

Seeing the pride in her eyes on being able to tell him that *she* had made this, Vincent suppressed the urge to smile. This was the first meal that his beloved had prepared Below entirely on her own. Usually, as she told him huffily one night, 'when I'm in the kitchen, William 'hovers' and he makes me so nervous I can't think, much less cook anything!'

Praying not to rue his decision of sampling her 'creation' later on, Vincent replied, "I'll have a small bowl please, to begin with."

Stacking the bread, Catherine observed, "Wheat bread is your favorite, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"How many slices would you like?"

"Two please." He could have eaten at least four, but it was a very small loaf.

"Sure, coming right up." Wielding the bread knife expertly, she nodded toward the nearby wall. "Why don't you sit down and make yourself comfortable while I finish this?"

"Very well." Knowing that he shouldn't be here in the first place, and that given his highly aroused state it was dangerous to stay, Vincent added reluctantly, "After we've eaten, we should go."

Catherine's heart leapt. He'd said 'should', not 'must'! "All right, Vincent," she answered softly, hiding her emotions, or so she thought. "If that's what you want."

Want? No, that wasn't what he 'wanted', but it was what he had to do. Feeling a surge of hopefulness sweep through her before Catherine managed to contain it, Vincent noted that his hand shook as he motioned to the smaller chamber. "I'll pack all of... that... back up for you as soon as we've finished our meal."

Unable to trust her voice right then, Catherine nodded her head and said nothing.

After shrugging out of his cloak, Vincent lowered himself to the cavern floor. Leaning back, he positioned his long legs out in front of him, eyeing her somberly as she handed him a bowl and sat down next to him.

Wiping his mouth in the napkin she'd provided, Vincent handed Catherine the empty bowl. "Thank you. That was quite good."

"You needn't sound so surprised," she teased lightly, "I knew it was good when you asked for thirds."

"Hmmm." Wanting to loosen his belt, but thinking better of it, he inspected the cave, observing, "You've made a great many changes to this dreary place in a very short time."

Sensing his discomfort, Catherine fought off the urge to throw herself into Vincent's arms and beg his forgiveness for making him come back here. "I hoped you'd be willing to stay for a while and talk."

The look Vincent gave her defined the word desolation. "The location doesn't alter the facts," he stated grimly, his tone one of reproach. "There are issues that I simply cannot give voice to, here or anyplace else; especially when I feel as though I'm being pressured to do so."

"I realize that by forcing this issue, I've caused you great distress and hurt you very deeply, Vincent. For that, I'm truly sorry."

Bending his head, he examined the ties of his vest. "I know that you are."

"Can you ever forgive me?"

"I already have." Still playing with the leather thongs, he murmured, "I can forgive you anything, Catherine."

Moving to kneel in front of him, she put one hand on Vincent's knee. "I know that this situation is very difficult for you, but can't you see that I was only trying to breach these, these, walls that you keep building between us?"

"What walls are you referring to," he asked dispiritedly, "those that I deem necessary for your protection?"

"But I don't need protection!" Catherine insisted, "So why are those barriers still there after all that we've been through?" She put one hand to the side of his tense jaw. "And why is it that every time I manage to break down one of those walls, you erect a new one? Why do you **do** that?"

"I keep you safe from *me* behind those walls, Catherine, as you well know, and I keep you sheltered from my more harmful thoughts, and my... dreams."

Sweeping the hair back from his forehead, she asked, "Can't you tell me what troubles you so about them? Please?"

Wanting to pull Catherine to his chest and kiss her until neither of them could speak lucidly, Vincent inspected the tops of his boots, thinking, 'Oh God, please, *please* let her stop now, before the pain in her voice crushes me!' "I don't think it wise to pursue this conversation any further; not here, and not... now."

"Vincent," she implored, nearly frantic to make him hear her, "if you can't, or won't, be honest with me here, now, then where is the hope? Where will this lead in the end, but to more sorrow for both of us?" Edging closer, Catherine gripped his hands as tightly as she could. "Won't you try and tell me what you're feeling? Haven't I earned that much?"

"Please, say... no more?"

Realizing that this was getting her nowhere, Catherine took another tack. Before he could protest or make any move to prevent it, she eased down onto Vincent's lap - facing him. "Shall I tell you *my* feelings then; how I feel about you?"

Putting one finger to his warm lower lip, she stroked it gently. "I love the taste of you; the feel of you; the smell of you in my nostrils. Sometimes, when you're asleep, I lay very still next to you and just listen to you breathe. Just to cuddle close to you and know that I'm not dreaming, means so much to me."

Finally getting the words past the lump in his throat, Vincent murmured, "And also to... me. To know that you are there, *truly there*, close to me at night, is more than I've ever dared to wish for."

Catherine's heart was pounding so hard, she thought surely he must be able to hear it. Vincent had just taken the first step - the hardest one of all, for him. He **was** talking.

Resting her mouth against his ear, she crooned, "I love your body; the way you move, the way you walk. I long to touch you everywhere, to show you the depth of my love, and have you return that touch to me." Taking his hand, Catherine placed it on her left breast. "I want your hands all over me, and I want to run mine all over you, my love. Sometimes, I want to scratch you, and even... bite you."

That got his complete attention.

"B... bite me?!" His head jerked up. Utterly astonished, he cast her a wide-eyed look, stammering, "You would actually d... do... that?"

"There are moments when I've been tempted to do exactly that, believe me." She smiled at him, admitting, "I'd like to leave my mark on you so that every woman you meet will see it, and know that you **belong** to *me*."

The feel of Catherine's soft breast beneath the palm of his hand was chipping away at Vincent's control. As though they had a will of their own, his fingers curled in slightly to cup the fullness there; wanting to do more, oh, so much more.

Watching her through eyes that had narrowed to slits and darkened to the shades of a tempest-tossed sea, Vincent thought, 'Belong to her'? Catherine felt as covetous of him as he did of her? Was this possible? That was a feeling that he knew *quite well*. "I affect you to that extent, and it doesn't embarrass you or trouble you to admit it aloud?"

"Why should it? It's a normal reaction." Holding Vincent's focus, Catherine repeated, "It's a **normal** reaction."

"I believe you." His eyes flashed dangerously. "I do."

"I'm glad." The intensity of his gaze made Catherine's heart batter against her ribcage. There, in those extraordinary slanted eyes, were so many emotions, announcing not only how much Vincent loved her, but how desperately he wanted to make love **to** her right now.

In that same moment, she knew he had not merely listened to her words, he'd begun to yield to the truth behind them. She felt a strange, glorious excitement rushing through their connection and it was coming from him, which in turn, aroused her.

Sensing that the walls that had isolated them from each other's deeper feelings for far too long were starting to crumble, and that he was *allowing* it to happen, she watched Vincent's eyes, hoping, praying.

Feeling her trust and her faith in him override many of his apprehensions, Vincent didn't look away from her - not this time. Catherine wanted to know him; his secret places, his passions - every part of him. How many times had she pleaded with him for that, and how many times had he denied her access to the more private regions of his heart?

Well aware of how much he hurt her by keeping his more intimate thoughts to himself, Vincent simply couldn't continue doing that to her any longer. It wasn't fair to her - and it wasn't fair to him. Beginning now, at this moment, there would be no more denial, no more turning away from her love. **No more.**

Putting one hand to the back of her neck, he smiled down at her. His voice, when he found it, was even throatier than usual; like thickened honey that had simmered far beyond the boiling point. "Do you have any conception of how deeply I love you, and how **much** I want you at this moment?"

Catherine blushed. "I... think so." Sitting in his lap as she was now, with his erection pushing at her bottom, it would have been quite difficult not to have known just about 'everything' Vincent was feeling. Unable to help herself, she tensed her buttocks.

"Hm..." As his head went back, a rueful moan escaped Vincent's throat. "Oh, yes." Drowning in sensations, he fought to calm down. No, not yet. Not yet.

Slightly relaxing his hold on her, he took several steadying breaths. How had such a woman as this come to be, he wondered? What gods had made Catherine Chandler and then deemed him worthy of her love and devotion? Whoever They were, wherever They were, could They see him now and know the scope of his gratitude?

This beautiful woman had the courage to see him as he really was and love him in spite of it. A tiny smile buried itself in the corners of Vincent's mouth. Or did she love him not in spite of his differences, but *because* of them?

Knowing all that he was, all that he could never be, didn't matter to this woman - **his woman**. Catherine trusted him without limits, totally, with her whole heart and soul; indeed, with her very existence. Knowing that, could he do any less for her in return?

He might not be able to say the words yet, but he knew that he really didn't have to say them. This was *Catherine*; she understood his fears, as well as his needs; she always had. How patient she was with him, how accepting.

Nuzzling his nose into her lemon-scented hair, Vincent recalled a piece of poetry by Elizabeth Barrett Browning that declared, 'God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame.' Only now did he comprehend the actual meaning of those words. To him, this woman was truly just such a gift; one beyond measure.

When he was given such gifts as those that Catherine gave him every day since the night he'd found her in the park, wasn't it only just and right to reciprocate in kind, and show his gratitude?

Vincent's heart began to pound much too fast. **Wasn't it past time to honor her gift with one of his own; with one made not of flowery prose nor meaningless platitudes, but of courage?**

Taking the 'leap of faith' that he'd written of once, in a letter to Catherine, Vincent allowed his emotions to rule him completely, as never before and handed her his heart for eternity with the words, "I have never allowed you to grasp exactly how deep our bond goes, my love, or to what extent it controls my more... intimate needs. You've always vowed that you want only the truth between us. So be it." Tipping her chin up, Vincent stared into her eyes. "My rose, is this what you wanted to know?"

Meeting his gaze, Catherine's eyes widened. There it was again, that turbulent wildness! "Yes. Oh, yes!" she gasped, realizing that he was finally moving beyond all of the boundaries. The walls were gone, all gone. **He was letting go of the fear.**

After nipping at his bottom lip, she slowly drew her tongue across it, breathing into his open mouth, "A few days ago I asked you if you were as hungry for me as I am for you. Do you remember?"

Slowly unraveling from the inside out at the scent of her in his nostrils and the taste of her in his mouth, Vincent tightened his hold on her arms. "I remember every word that you've ever spoken to me, Catherine."

"Can you tell me now what you couldn't tell me then? What's been haunting you night after night is your passion for me, and the shame you were feeling because of it, isn't it?"

Resisting the urge to yank her to his chest, he barely managed to whisper, "Yes."

"Does it frighten you to want me so much, and in that way?" Already knowing the answer, Catherine wanted him to say the words aloud; to admit them and get beyond them once and for all.

For a heart-wrenching moment, she didn't think that he'd be able to say them, but then, quietly and very slowly, Vincent spoke, and purged the silence between them forever. "The... images of what I see myself doing to you, the passion these scenes invoked, and the lust, horrified me. Catherine, I was certain that should you discover the path my thoughts were taking, it would prove offensive to you. How could I know..." Hesitating, he struggled to conquer the last of his inhibitions.

Waiting for Vincent to continue, Catherine held him tightly and put her ear to his chest. Listening to the fierce thudding of his heart, she said an unspoken prayer of thanks that the first 'breach in the walls' had just been surmounted. Now, everything would be alright between them. From this point, the only way for him, for both of them to go, was forward.

"I knew nothing of love in the physical sense," he continued hoarsely. "How could I know whether or not *my* passions were normal ones? I had *no way* of determining such things." Fighting back tears, Vincent sighed heavily. "Assuming that no woman could, or would, ever want me in a... worldly way, I had resigned myself to never knowing such things as love and passion." He smiled softly. "And then, **you** came into my life."

"And you fell in love," she stated quietly.

"Yes, oh... yes." Eyes ablaze with hunger met hers. "I was **consumed** by it." Remembering Lisa, he swallowed hard, admitting, "But, I feared rejection."

"Oh, Vincent, why didn't you trust me? I could have helped you if you'd let me."

"Then, I couldn't allow you **that** close. And even though I have *always* trusted you, I believed that your vision of... me, was clouded by emotion. I convinced myself that it wasn't **me** that had these thoughts. In my mind it was another... part of me... who wanted to touch you in ways that I had always considered to be... bestial."

Pausing, Vincent seemed to search his thoughts for a moment. "Yet, in some of the books that I'd read, people in love *do* touch each other as I have wanted to touch you."

"But the fear stopped you?"

"Yes, and my trepidation." His eyes turned grim. "Although you've always believed me to be a man, I doubted the accuracy of... that. And even if I am a man, other men do not have *my* hands, nor do they have my mouth, or my inherent differences."

Holding them out before him, Vincent circumspectly examined his hands. "Even though you've told me many times that these belong to you, their actions are mine, and only mine." He put one hand to his breast. "Mine is the soul enclosed within this body. Yet, through your faith in me, I've learned to accept that the heart beating in here *isn't* that of a beast, nor of a monster; only that of someone who has traveled a 'different' path towards masculinity."

Looking into the shadows surrounding them, Vincent shuddered. "In my dreams, I imagined myself loving you in ways that seemed cruel, base, and told myself that it wasn't me doing this, but some nameless 'thing' that lives within me. Yet, that's only a half truth." His voice faltered for a moment. "It... it is **I** who wants you, has always wanted you in that way, Catherine. *Me*. The part of me that I've always feared, is where **my** passion **lives**. It's time to face that truth at last; one that I've denied my entire life. If there is darkness within me, then those shadows are mine, they **belong to me**. The emotions are also mine, as are the consequences of what those emotions invoke."

"And now you can face that knowledge without fear," she sighed thankfully. "I'm so glad that your anguish is ending at last." Putting one hand on Vincent's arm, she smiled up at him. "You've won."

"With your help, we both have. In the end, it was your love and trust that truly set me free, Catherine. You defeated me, forcing me to admit that you were right all along."

"About what?"

"About my... humanity." The tears that rimmed Vincent's eyes were ones of joy. "By having my child, you proved once and for all that everything you vowed is true. I *am* human. Different, certainly, but nonetheless a man. I must be, for Jacob is a human child. A **human** child," he declared hoarsely. "Only a man can furnish the seed for such procreation. Beasts can't do that, neither can... monsters."

"Vincent, don't call..."

"Please," he interrupted gently, "I have to say these words - just once. Although my needs may be unlike those of other men, I have come to know that those desires aren't 'wrong' or 'bad'; they are simply *my* desires."

"Oh love, you can never know how grateful I am that you're finally able to share your thoughts with me. But, believe me when I say that what you feel isn't that different from other men; perhaps only more... powerful." Hugging him close, Catherine admitted, "I have those same needs, and sometimes they're overwhelming. I have the same hungers that you do, the same drives all lovers do. Yet, people can fear their emotions so deeply, they deny them at times, not wanting to believe that such feelings can exist within them."

"Yet, they *do* exist," Vincent agreed throatily.

"Yes. We give these feelings many names, calling them passion, lust, hunger; any number of things. But the source of these drives is one and the same: love."

"Still, your passions aren't harmful, Catherine," he observed sadly. "To admit them and free them, would bring no pain to me, as mine could to you if I should disregard caution."

"To free your passions could *never* harm me," she insisted. "When I look into your eyes, Vincent, I see so many dreams there that you've never told me of. I want to know them. If you'd let me, I'll try to change those lonely, barren dreams into something very special. You deserve that and more; so much more."

"Do I?" After so many years of doubting just about everything, it was still hard not to be a bit skeptical.

"Instead of trying to make you believe that, it's past time that I proved it to you." With that, Catherine buried her fingers into his hair. Tilting her head back, she met his eyes. "Kiss me. Oh love, kiss me as you did the night you found me, and brought me and our son home?"

When Vincent seemed to hesitate, she tightened the hold she had on his hair. "Don't *think* about it, or try to rationalize it. Don't agonize over it. Just do it."

Groaning deep in his throat, Vincent curved one hand around her waist. "Dear God, I need you so much," he gasped, taking her mouth with a hunger that far surpassed anything she had ever experienced.

Probing urgently between her teeth, Vincent grunted in pleasure at the feel of her tongue dancing along his. Yielding to the sensation, he suckled harder, drawing it into his mouth, but even that didn't satisfy him. Seeking to deepen the kiss even more, he crushed Catherine to his chest, claiming every part of her as belonging to him with his hands, his mouth, and his body.

Vincent's tongue was deliciously rough, warm, and he tasted like a sumptuous blend of pears laced with cinnamon. Catherine knew that she'd never get enough of his kisses, nor of him. She felt as though he was consuming her and she let him, willingly... joyously.

When he gasped and eased slightly away to take a breath, she put one hand to his heart. "Vincent, I've never really seen all of you. Please let me see you now, and touch you?" Unable to endure the clothing between them a moment longer, Catherine's fingers went to the ties of his vest. "Please?"

Surprisingly enough, he made no move to stop her. Praying to see no disillusionment in her eyes, Vincent nodded, imploring silently, 'God, give me the courage to let this happen, I beg You? To stop now would surely cause my heart to break.'

When he offered no resistance, Catherine nimbly undid the thong ties of his vest, then moved to the buttons of his shirt. Pushing it aside, she eagerly caressed his skin, enjoying the feel of it against her palm, and the dense profusion of amber curls that surrounded small, flat nipples. "Your skin feels wonderful, Vincent, and incredibly warm."

"Is it, my Catherine?" Pressing into her touch, he closed his eyes. She wasn't repulsed by him; she actually seemed to be enjoying 'this'. As her hands moved over him, Vincent lay his head back against the rocks, savoring the sensations rushing through him. Yes, **yes**, *this* is what he needed; her hands on him, her mouth on him.

And as much as she needed to touch him, it was surely only half as much as he wanted to touch her. At a loss as to how to accomplish this with his hands shaking as they were now, he groaned hungrily.

Hearing him, Catherine kissed her way up from the center of his chest to the edge of his mouth then eased back, smiling encouragingly. "Tell me what you want?"

"To see you, to touch you." Moving his mouth to the curve of her ear, Vincent nibbled lightly on the warm flesh there, the rest of his plea a hoarse whisper. "To be naked to your eyes and unafraid. I need that beyond... anything." Brushing one hand over the front of her blouse, he gulped, achingly aroused at the feel of her taut nipple beneath his palm. "I long for the taste of you in my mouth," he moaned, "to have you lying naked in my arms beneath me, knowing that you trust me without question, and would deny me nothing I would... have."

Moving his fingers to the front of her blouse, he slowly began to undo the buttons, trembling as she copied his movement by loosening his shirt.

Closing his eyes as her hand pushed the shirt off and caressed his bare chest, Vincent shuddered. Oh, at last, at last!

Sliding the blouse back, then down over Catherine's arms, he rubbed his thumbs lightly across her shoulders, the curve of her elbow, then lower, to the curve of her breast. So soft. So responsive to his touch. As the ache in his groin grew even more unbearable, Vincent's entire body jerked involuntarily then seemed to turn to liquid heat. It was time, but not here; in the bed, that wonderful, exquisite bed.

"Catherine, allow me to carry you?" Not waiting for a reply, he swiftly captured her around the bottom and lurched to his feet. "Please tighten your legs around my waist?"

Doing as he asked, she wrapped her legs around him, trembling as his pelvis rocked forward as if trying to merge their bodies right through their clothes. Thrusting harder, then harder still, Vincent whimpered softly deep in his throat, the sound one of joy mingled with self-mocking irony. "Oh, my love, the feel of you steals my breath!"

Crossing the floor of the cave in three long strides, he lowered her swiftly to the abundance of quilts and followed her down. Being well-read on the subject of lovemaking, even though not overly experienced, Vincent presumed that his first release would be upon him almost as soon as

he entered her, and was more or less resigned to it. But this time, his seed would not be scattered ineffectually or prematurely, it would be sown within the body of this exquisite woman. Somehow he knew that there would be no failure tonight as there had been in his three previous attempts.

As usual, Catherine had been right; the dreams had caused not only his deep anxieties, they had also been inhibiting him. That wouldn't happen again, ever. She knew about them now, what they meant and what they invoked in him. There was no reason to be afraid anymore or sickened by his emotions. With her compassion as his guide, he had come face to face with his demons at last, and as the adage went, 'sent them packing.' All that Catherine had ever asked of him was his love, and he'd waited so long, too long, to grant that wish. **No more waiting.**

Moving one hand to her hip, Vincent gazed down at her, his eyes shining like silver prisms in the half-light of a single flickering candle. "My love, help me by lifting your hips?" When she did, he slid his hand to the front of her jeans, unbuttoned them, then eased them down her legs and off.

As he gazed at her body openly for the first time, Vincent's blood pulsed like wildfire through his veins. Catherine had such wondrously fair skin. He stroked gently over her hipbones. She felt like velvet. Lovely, so lovely. When his hand came to rest on her thigh, he eyed the scrap of pale-blue silk that barely covered her woman's secrets and chuckled to himself. Ah yes, he was well acquainted with this particular article of clothing. They were the same pair that he'd been 'caught' examining mere weeks ago.

Gently easing his forefinger under the lace, he glanced up, his expression unreadable. "I remember these."

"Y... yes," Catherine stammered, blushing a pretty shade of pink, "I thought that you might." Watching as Vincent moved his hand down over her thigh, then between them, slowly moving nearer and nearer to her heat, she tensed expectantly.

Knowing him as she did, what had ever made her suppose that she'd have to encourage Vincent, or lead him in any way? To find herself instead under his absolute authority was wonderful, if a bit unnerving. Although the look in his eyes was shyly eager, he seemed to be utterly in control, confident both of his abilities and of his power over her.

As her passion rose to meet his, a pulsing ache began deep inside of her womb. Expanding outward, it heated, warming her skin, then seemed to set her body on fire. She wanted to have Vincent inside of her so *much*. Aching for him to continue, she waited.

And continue - he did.

"Your scent has haunted my dreams for so *many* nights." Whisking the panties down to her ankles and off, Vincent lifted the bit of silk to his nostrils. Flashing eyes claimed every part of her as he inhaled deeply. "This fragrance I would learn more of, at... another time."

Compelling him to act, desire seized at the center of his groin. Reaching down, Vincent undid his ornate belt buckle, then slid down the zipper of his dungarees. Taking Catherine's hand into his, he kissed her fingers then licked each one delicately with the tip of his tongue. Easing them down his left thigh and across the front of his pants, he pushed her palm into the hardness there, his voice shyly eager. "Please? Touch me?"

Caressing him lightly, Catherine moved her other hand to his shoulder, stroking her way down along his flank, his lower back, and finally down across his tensed buttocks. Curling her fingers into the short, bristled hair there that tickled her palms, she sighed. "Oh, I've waited for such a long time to caress you like this."

Curling his pelvis forward, wanting more, Vincent let his eyes drift closed. As much as he wanted to respond, he couldn't, not right now. Her hands were exciting him to the point where simply remembering how to breathe was taking all of his concentration.

When Catherine's fingers gently tightened around the cuff of his phallus, he arched upward, favoring her with a full-throated growl. Pressing forward into her palm hesitantly at first, then again and again more and more forcefully, each thrust was splintering his control, yet making him more sure of himself - and more fiercely aroused.

Feeling the need to ejaculate induce an exciting tenseness at the center of his scrotum, Vincent struggled against the urge to let it happen, needing the release so badly he thought surely to die if he didn't have it soon. Tensing his buttocks and trying to regain control, he dragged air into his lungs. Imprisoning Catherine's wrist in a shaky grip he implored, "Wait, please? Not like... this?" Pushing off his boots, he took her hand, put it at the waistband of his dungarees and lifted his hips, the invitation explicit.

Sliding the jeans down over Vincent's slim hips, Catherine cast them to one side and ran her hands over his chest, then down along his firm belly. Eyeing his jutting erection, she moaned softly, never wanting anything in her life as much as she wanted this powerful man.

Feeling her acceptance warm him to the deepest part of his soul, Vincent angled his head back and shook it forcefully, causing his mane to glide over wide shoulders and halfway down his back. There was a look of barely harnessed wildness about him now; as though the past, with all of its pain and denial had been swept away, leaving him free to love as he had always dreamt of, and **deserved** to love.

Turning the color of turbulent blue smoke as he sat back on his heels staring at her, Vincent's eyes seemed to shimmer then spark to flame as they locked to Catherine's, causing her breath to catch deep in her throat. "And now, beloved, open your soul to me, as I share mine and all that I am, with you."

Bringing her up into his arms, he started at her mouth, tasted his way down to the curve of her shoulder and then her throat. Drawing his tongue over the fragile pulse here, Vincent sucked gently for a moment before continuing his journey towards rapture. Stroking and caressing, he moved his large hands very slowly over her body, first to the curve of her thigh, then her rounded bottom, and finally to her breasts. At the feel of her nipple hardening beneath his stroking fingers, he moaned impatiently, "I want to taste you."

Inclining his head, he cupped her breast firmly and captured the puckered nub between his lips. Losing himself in the pleasure racing through every part of him, Vincent suckled deeply. Taking his fill, he nourished himself as he had never dared to dream of. Ah, her scent was exquisite, her taste beyond his wildest imaginings.

Placing one hand under her small form, he lifted Catherine easily into his lap, continuing to taste and tease, discovering what pleased her, as well as what brought the most pleasure to **him**.

Swept away in the desires he aroused in her, Catherine moved her hands over Vincent, first to the taut, hard muscles of his shoulders, then his chest, and then lower to the very heart of the man himself. Rubbing her hand over the coarse hairs of his groin, she splayed her fingers wide, trying to caress as much of him as she possibly could.

Unable to help himself, Vincent thrust upward to meet her touch, a soft whimper rising in his throat. "Hmm..."

When his warm, seminal fluids seeped down between her fingers, Catherine's heart went out to him. Catching the droplets in the palm of one hand, she rubbed them gently back into the tip of his penis and kissed the side of his face, whispering, "Vincent."

Giving her breast one last, loving caress with the tip of his tongue, he lifted his head almost in slow motion. Panting open-mouthed, he shook back his long hair and looked up at her, the question in his eyes.

"Nothing, just 'Vincent'." Keeping her right hand where it was, she moved the other to his mouth, gasping in surprise as he captured her fingers between his teeth and sucked them gently for a moment before releasing them.

"Again," he urged. Searching fingers stole down along her stomach, then lower still. "Say my name again?"

"Vincent."

Edging down her thigh, one stout finger curled into her moist cleft. "Again," he demanded hoarsely.

Twisting both hands into his hair, she arched against him. "Vincent!"

As Catherine's love and need of him snapped their bond taut, invading his soul, Vincent's senses were assailed from all sides. The scent of her body, her cries of his name, and the knowledge that she was his... his... sent a rush of adrenaline pumping through his veins.

Beyond thought, an urgency rose from within, compelling him to act. Ripping away the last of Vincent's control, the hunger to unite his body to this beautiful woman's reached out and took him. The interval of foreplay had produced the desired intent. There would be no more waiting.

Pressing Catherine back to the mattress, he settled between her thighs and put his hands behind her knees. Tilting them to the sides, he moved closer. "I need you so much, it ravages all thought of anything else."

Illuminating his features, the candlelight had turned Vincent's face and form a burnished, amber hue. His voice was sensual, erotic. "I yearn to lose myself in your body and in your love. Oh, how I have longed for this."

His sensuous tone made Catherine's heart constrict then begin thudding like a trip-hammer. Aching to receive him, her womb moistened in readiness. Wrapping both of her legs firmly around his bottom, she curled her fingers into the back of his thighs. "Show me how much you want me, how much you love me."

Rocking forward, Vincent bit his lower lip as her sleek channel enclosed the overlaying crown of his phallus. Tensing his body, he whimpered, the sound both ferocious and wonderful, and pressed inward. Embedding himself in her warm, wet heat, his knees pushed Catherine's wider apart as he arched his back. Instinctively finding his rhythm, he tried to go deeper. Oh God, the sensation... the **sensation**.

As though seeking to heighten both her pleasure and his own, Vincent looked down at her through eyes dusky with passion. Growling, he thrust out his lower lip and began moving within her harder, quicker, more and more forcefully.

Moment to moment, his excitement intensified to one of fiercely explosive desire, until there was nothing else that mattered to him but **this** reality, **this** moment... **this** woman.

Beyond the power of verbal expression as the need for release took him unconditionally, soul, substance and concepts, Vincent wedged his hands tightly under Catherine's shoulders, holding her as though unconsciously fearing that she'd leave him before he could finish.

Gripping her as hard as he dared, Vincent held her tightly beneath each powerful drive of his pelvis. 'She's yours, take her!' screamed a voice inside his head. 'Now!'

When his hands tightened at her shoulders and small gasps of pleasure erupted from Vincent's throat, Catherine's mind went back to the first time that they had physically joined their bodies. Whether through excitement or simply on instinct alone, just before reaching the point of ejaculation, he'd held her then in exactly the same way he was holding her now.

Certain that he was on the edge of his passion, she knew his release would be both forceful and very soon. Seeking to make it as enjoyable for him as she possibly could, Catherine locked her heels around his quivering buttocks, begging, "Don't fight it, Vincent. Let go, let it happen."

"Catherine, I can't stop moving!" Gruff and highly unsteady, his voice seemed to come from somewhere far off in the distance. "I love you... I love you so!"

Rising to meet each downward lurch of his pelvis, she moved in perfect counterpoint to him. He felt so good, so solid as he rocked into her, and so wildly aroused. Unaware of doing it, Catherine dug her nails into Vincent's tensed forearms as her inner muscles contracted around him, inducing his release.

"Vincent!" Crying his name as each drive of his body lifted her higher and faster, Catherine shuddered. Swept up in the moment, her own passions and his, she arched to meet him. Climaxing hard and fast, her womb convulsed again and again around his unyielding length.

Savoring the sensation in every facet of his being, Vincent bared his teeth, hissing, his eyes snapping shut as his beloved's moist heat devoured him. Yes, this is what he sought, her fulfilment before his.

Beyond reason or logic, an urgency unlike any he'd ever known existed swept through him. Building moment by moment, it seized at the center of his groin. Expanding outward like fingers of flame, the pressure increased, taking his will, and all that was left of restraint. Now - was his time.

Begrudging the loss of contact, yet needing a moment to gather himself for the ultimate, adoring invasion, Vincent eased all but the immense knob of his erection out of her still convulsing channel. Looking down to where they were joined, he made no effort to conceal the excited grunts that exploded from between his teeth.

Vanquished by the sight of his thick shaft glistening with her wetness, the erotic blend of his own tight pubic curls meshed to those of honey brown, and the reality of his slim pelvis locked firmly to Catherine's much smaller one, Vincent trembled uncontrollably and eased forward again.

Stroking slowly up and down, he made no attempt to stifle the moans escaping with each breath he expelled, thinking to surely lose his mind at the feel of her body taking him deeper, then deeper still. This felt good, it felt right. He wasn't dreaming. This time he wouldn't wake up frightened, hollow inside, and disgusted with himself. **Not this time.**

Living the slick sound their bodies made as he rolled his hips, he repressed the urge to submerge himself in her yielding heat and expel his seed. A look of desperation laced with one of wantonness came into Vincent's eyes. He was close now, so very close. Yearning for the sensation to the depths of his soul, he jerked straight up on his palms and began pumping furiously.

In the dreams, when he made love to Catherine, he had envisioned blood. Now he knew that it hadn't been blood he saw, it was colors - ah, such colors! Adrift in tints of red and purple, shades of passions that coalesced, shimmered and then exploded outward in his brain, Vincent lost himself in the feel of her, in the softness and scent of her body, and at last, in his own appetites.

Lifting Catherine's hips into his hands, he snapped his pelvis down hard at the same moment. Hunching his back and rising to his toes, he began to stroke more and more urgently, once, then again, then a third and final time, crying out, "Hold me! Tighter! **Tighter!**"

Deep within her, Catherine felt him expand even more, filling every empty part of her. Gripping him around the hips, she curled her fingers into Vincent's swaying bottom as he rocked harder and faster above her, each drive of his body pushing her legs wider apart, every rotation of his pelvis more primal than the one before; more carnal, more provoked.

Keeping a rhythm that he knew would induce ejaculation, Vincent increased the pace even more. Tossing his hair back out of his eyes, he bit down hard on his lower lip. Letting his head drop forward, he surrendered to a power more potent than anything he'd ever experienced. Feeling his testes lift, then tighten closer to his body, he whimpered, knowing that it was beginning. The journey into rapture would be upon him at any moment. Any...

Suddenly, without warning, his shoulders bunched and his back arched fiercely. Tossing back his head, he bellowed, the sound transforming into a roar of pleasure as ecstasy reached out, consuming him in a torrent of heat. Instinctively, Vincent's body recoiled then pushed forward hard, spilling its thick essence in a pulsating, furied release.

Several minutes passed before Vincent found the strength to attempt any semblance of coherent speech. Loathe to move, but thinking that if he didn't, he'd cause Catherine needless distress, he glanced down, flushing as their eyes met and held; even now so endearingly shy. She looked so small laying there smiling up at him. So fragile. So incredibly lovely.

Moistening parched lips with the tip of his tongue, he stammered self-consciously, "Y...you must be extremely... uncomfortable." Not waiting for a response, a resigned expression came into his eyes as he began easing away. "I'm far too heavy."

"No, you're not. You feel wonderful," Catherine vowed breathlessly. "You *are* wonderful." Hoping that he'd accept that as the truth, she rubbed her hand along his flank and then upward into his tangled mane. "I've longed to hold you like this." Dropping feather-soft kisses to the center of his damp chest, she licked at the salty-tasting beads of perspiration. "I wish you'd stay where you are. Please?"

After eyeing her uncertainly for a moment, Vincent relaxed, unable to deny her - or himself, the pleasure. "As you wish." Carefully sheathing his semi-erect penis within her again, he shuddered deeply, unable to help it, and buried his face into the warm skin at her throat.

Laying there, quiet and at peace in Catherine's embrace, Vincent tried to sort out the emotions rushing through him. Never had he felt so whole, so complete, or so utterly accepted before in his life.

Snuggling a little closer, he edged the tip of his nose into the pulse at Catherine's throat. To be held like this in her arms was the miracle of his existence. He felt as if he'd just been reborn. A tranquil smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. So then, was this what the poets meant when they wrote odes to 'inner harmony'? If so, he could get quite used to this.

All of the years of despair and sacrifice he and Catherine had endured seemed to vacate his soul, bringing a sense of unity and serenity he'd thought never to find. Drifting away to a shadowed place in his sub-conscious, Vincent's feelings of self-doubt, fear and unworthiness diminished, then began winking out like tiny flickers of light, with no one to mourn their passing.

Although he would abhor parting from her, if he should die now, in this woman's arms, he knew that he would face death unafraid, for he'd seen what Paradise could be, even for... him. He'd trod the path of that Heavenly garden only moments ago, with Catherine, in Catherine, and it was exceedingly beautiful.

Feeling himself hardening again, Vincent tensed his buttocks. Oh, no, not so soon?! Catherine must be tired; surely she wouldn't welcome his 'attentions' again this quickly.

But he didn't know his lady as well as he assumed he did. Knowing him to be a sensual man, Catherine had been prepared for just such a thing to happen, and was waiting eagerly to have him

continue making love to her. When he took a labored breath and started to sit up, she tugged gently at his hair. "Stay?"

"But, my weight must be causing you to suffer grievously, beloved. It's a wonder that you can breathe at all, under... me."

"Vincent, I'm fine, really I am."

Knowing that there was no way to conceal his erection short of leaving her and the thought of doing that was repugnant, Vincent flushed a glorious shade of rose-tinged gold. "I'm... sorry."

"For what?"

Unable to help himself, he pushed down gently. "For... this. Does this, this, hunger never abate?"

"Do you want it to?"

"For my sake?" He tried not to smile then smiled anyway. "No, for yours."

"Well, it might." Sweeping his bangs away from his eyes, Catherine beamed at him. "In about fifty or sixty years."

A rueful grunt escaped him. "I shall never survive it. Yet, I..." Hesitating, Vincent seemed a bit unsure of himself.

"Don't be afraid of the words, my love."

Eyes bright with passion swept over her face, then down along her breasts. "I cannot deny it, nor can I constrain this craving for you. I want you again," he admitted, sighing heavily.

"Vincent, there's nothing wrong in feeling like that. If you didn't I'd have been very disappointed."

"Yet, I know that your legs are... fatigued," he observed uneasily.

"A little," Catherine admitted, "But, there are other ways to both give and receive pleasure. Here, let me show you. Stay close." Urging him over onto his back, she straddled him and tightened the fingers of one hand in the dense mat of hair on his chest. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes - always."

"Good, now try and relax." Slowly easing away from him, Catherine moved one hand between his legs. Encircling his penis, she began to gently stroke up and down

As a deep shudder passed through him, Vincent lifted his head and watched what she was doing for a moment, then groaned, shut his eyes, and collapsed back to the pillow gasping for breath. Good God, she was driving him mad! His mind reeled as concepts of gentility warred against stronger, purely virile ones. 'She must stop, now. My control is too tenuous, too uncertain.'

'No,' came a voice from within, fighting for dominance, 'I need this. I *need* it! Let her do this, let her finish! You mustn't stop her, you can't. **You can't!**'

When Catherine's hand tightened and moved down along the base of his shaft, Vincent's eyes flew open, his voice an impassioned cry. "Please, Catherine, no; I cannot..."

"Shh, it's all right love, don't fight it."

Loving how his organ thickened and jutted away from his body under her tender fondling, she deepened the touch. Intensifying his pleasure and her own, she ran one nail carefully over the sensitive tip of his erection, then dipped into the puckered slit.

"Hmmm." Growling deep in his throat, Vincent cupped her breasts firmly in his hands and tried to keep his lower body absolutely still. Allowing her to set the pace in their lovemaking, he

fought to keep his more dominant appetites in check by taking deep breaths and tensing his buttocks, trying to focus on her needs and emotions instead of on his own.

When she realized what he was doing, Catherine leaned forward to whisper in his ear, "Vincent, don't hold back? You don't really want to, do you?" Not waiting for an answer, nor truly expecting one, she tested his resolve by guiding the tip of his penis leisurely down along the inside of her left thigh, to the center of her femininity as if to take him inside, then moved away again, forcing a grunt of impatience from in-between his tightly pursed lips. "Say the words," she breathed into his open mouth. "You long to say them, don't you?" Teasing him mercilessly, she moved her tongue over his cleft upper lip, then nibbled at the soft pads. "**Don't you?**"

"Catherine!" Capturing her lower lip between his teeth, the expression in Vincent's eyes as they locked to hers was frantic, hungered; astounding.

Biting down gently, he flicked his tongue into her mouth once then again even more deeply, and eased away, gasping, "I'm **on** fire for you! What have you done to me, what have you **done**?!"

"Shown you a bit of *my* 'darkness'," she replied softly. "How much do you want me," she asked, wanting him to keep talking, cherishing the frenzied look in his eyes, and the gruff resonance in his tone of voice. "Tell me?"

"I want you... beyond **thought**. I'm too aroused, **too** close!" Vincent slid his hands quickly to her smooth bottom. "Catherine, please, **please**, join our bodies, for I'm not certain that I can contain my release much longer?"

As his hands urgently lifted her into position, Catherine distributed her weight to her knees. Lovingly sheathing his penis, she clenched her inner muscles tightly around the pulsating hardness. Reaching down to caress his scrotum, she fondled the delicate sac gently. "Does this bring you pleasure, love?"

Gasping, "Yes!" Vincent closed his eyes and arched upward, matching her downward thrusts with exquisite ones of his own. Gripping her around the buttocks as firmly as he dared, he yanked her closer, wanting to lose himself in her. "You feel so good!" Fondling her left breast in his free hand, he pleaded breathlessly, "Keep moving. Oh yes, like that! **More**. Take me deeper. Deeper!"

Sliding one hand down over the tensed muscles of his left calf, Catherine wrapped her fingers around it and leaned back. Angling her pelvis for the deepest penetration possible, she watched Vincent, loving it as the look on his face went from one of amazement to utter delight, then from joy to unabashed passion.

The corded muscles running along both sides of his neck tightened then relaxed with each drive of his pelvis, his shoulders bunching and straining as they jerked from the mattress. Gliding his tongue in and out of his mouth in counterpoint to his rolling hips, Vincent had a look of wildness about him now; as if the last remnants of restraint had been completely ripped away, leaving only a man on the edge of indescribable rapture.

Leaning forward again, Catherine urged, "My love, look at me?"

Doing as she asked, eyes sooty with hunger, the irises large and almost black, tried to focus as they met hers. "My Catherine."

"Yes, yours, and you're mine." Grazing his upper lip, she bit down gently then pressed the tip of her tongue into the highly sensitive cleft suddenly and quite hard.

Vincent's reaction was immediate and purely instinctive: he grabbed her by the arms, pulled back and growled. Locked to hers, his eyes shifted from the color of a winter sky to that of burnished sapphire. Delighting her, another growl rumbled upward from his chest, then another. Glittering canines came into full view as a third growl, one of unconditional domination, echoed throughout the chamber.

By unspoken, mutual consent, he quickened the pace as though incapable to doing otherwise. Playing off of one another now, their bodies were in command. Bringing both of his knees up sharply and edging them wider apart, Vincent unleashed a low, satisfied grunt. Yes, this was the angle he needed.

Twisting his fingers tightly into Catherine's hair, the rhythm of his hips became more and more frantic, the cadence increasing, increasing, fast and deep, hard and unyielding. Enticing him beyond all limits, his need to take her obliterated all semblance of control. He couldn't think, couldn't breathe, **couldn't stop**.

At this moment, as lost to himself now, inside of Catherine, as he'd been in his dreams, all that Vincent was truly aware of were her cries of ecstasy mingling with his, her softness pulsing around him, heightening his pleasure, inducing his ejaculation, and then, just as he'd experienced it in the dreams, there was... nothingness.

Toppling over the edge with her, Vincent dug his heels into the mattress and arched upward. Turning his face to the pillow, his bellow of deliverance was only half muffled as all the fluids in his body seemed to ignite to the boiling point, then explode outward.

Coming back to himself from where passion had flung him up hard against the gates of paradise, Vincent grunted, surprised as fiery starbursts of ardor spread all along his groin. What in the world was that? Tensing his stomach, he chuckled as the feeling raced through him again. Ah, what an indescribable sensation! More than a little surprised to find himself not only winded but utterly, wonderfully satiated, he snuffled, laughing quietly as he blew the breath back out.

Hearing him, Catherine chomped down on the delicious fuzziness along the edge of his jaw. "What?"

Shaking his head, Vincent drew her closer and swallowed hard, unable to speak. How could he define such feelings of satisfaction to Catherine without sounding incredibly foolish? How could he tell her that he felt as though every bone in his body had turned to lumpy oatmeal; or that the one part of his body that wasn't lumpy, seemed to be quite... limp?

Biting down on the inside of his jaw, he tried to rein in a maddening fit of the giggles. Oh, how embarrassing, men didn't giggle! And even if *they* did such non-virile things, *he* most certainly didn't. Tensing his buttocks as he felt his erection diminish even more, Vincent sighed, resigned to the inevitable. Ah well, as the maxim went, 'whatever goes up, must come... down'.

"Miff!" Biting down hard on the inside of his jaw in an effort to contain an explosion of laughter, he turned his face to the pillow, clutched it tightly, and ground his teeth together. 'Oh Lord, please, not again?'

Feeling some very strange emotions coursing through their empathic link, Catherine frowned. What on earth was Vincent thinking about? Leaning up on the middle of his chest, she studied his face. What was wrong with him? He looked just about ready to cry, or explode, or **something!**

"Vincent?"

"Mmm...!" Trying to muffle the sound, and failing miserably, Vincent clenched his teeth, admonishing himself, 'See? She heard you that time, so stop making those vexing noises!'

"Hey?" Feeling very left out of things, Catherine nudged him in the ribs. "Come on, share. What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Everything."

"Are you alright?"

"Y... yes. No. I'm not... sure." Astounding her with the widest and silliest smile she'd ever seen on his face, a delightful sound rumbled up from Vincent's chest. Managing to relinquish his stranglehold on the somewhat mauled looking cushion, he glanced up. The intensity of his gaze and the sated look on his face made Catherine blush. "But, I believe that I'm quite a bit more than merely 'alright'," he replied) fighting to keep from chuckling again.

Easing Catherine slowly over onto her back, Vincent shifted his weight and knelt between her legs. Aware of her eyes on him, he extended both arms high over his head and stretched widely, giving her a splendid view of his upper torso as the muscles there bunched and released. Ah, yes, that was better. Tilting his head back, he shook it vigorously from side to side, sending long, strawberry-gold colored hair flying in all directions.

Catherine eyed him happily. God, he was gorgeous! Oh, that body! Those muscles! He was...

Wait a minute here. As her eyes narrowed, the expression there went from one of fascination to utter disbelief. He *knew* that she was watching him and he was showing off! Well, well. Keeping her voice very even, she smiled, asking, "How are you feeling?"

After twisting his head this way and that to unkink his shoulders, Vincent gave her a look that settled in somewhere down around Catherine's toes. "Surely you already know how I 'feel', don't you; in all of the ways that count?"

Stammering, "Y...yes," Catherine cursed silently as she blushed again. Oh, those eyes could read her very soul. One look from him and she was stuttering like a love-stuck schoolgirl! Averting her eyes, she worried her lower lip thoughtfully for a moment. So, Vincent was learning how to tease, was he? Okay, she knew how to play that game quite well...

Caressing his leg with the tip of her finger, she remarked casually, "You must be tired."

"No, not really. Only... temporarily debilitated." Slanted eyebrows arched even higher. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no 'special' reason."

Feeling himself hardening again, (Ah, yes, that was more like it), he afforded her a look of downright, forthright lust. Drawing Catherine down on the mattress until they were pert nose to fuzzy one, he nibbled at the edge of her chin. "No special reason, hmm? Liar." After sliding his tongue over her lips, his tone softened to a whisper. "Would you have me make love to you again so soon?"

"So soon," she teased, "We both know that you never really stopped, now did you?"

A puzzled frown swept over Vincent's face as he pulled back. "I, I don't understand your meaning."

Hunching her shoulders, she arched an eyebrow at him. "All of that, ummm, stretching you were doing a moment ago."

"Yes, what of it?"

"Now really, my love, I'm not a fool."

"Of course you're not." Now he looked even more confused. "Catherine, what are you trying to say?"

"Only that showing off your body like that was incredibly sexy."

"Showing off!" Vincent gasped indignantly, "I was m... merely relaxing!"

Got him. "Of course you were." Smiling impishly, Catherine did a bit of stretching herself until she thought Vincent's eyes would surely pop out of his head and roll onto the floor. Arching her back to afford him a better view of her breasts, she reached behind her and fluffed up her

hair. "Did you think that I wouldn't know that your 'relaxing' a moment ago, wasn't largely for my benefit?"

When Vincent flushed and seemed to choke, Catherine reached out and pulled him half on top of her. Nudging him gently in the groin, she swept his bangs back, noting that they'd need cutting again soon. "Don't be embarrassed by showing off a little bit, just for me. It's a natural thing to do."

"But, it was so unlike me to do such a thing," he replied, looking mortified.

"Oh, Vincent, don't you know - can't you feel, how happy I am that you're comfortable enough now to tease me too, just a little? Besides, I love watching you move. You have a beautiful body." Winking at him, Catherine laughed. "As if I've never told you *that* before."

Falling in love all over again as his beloved's understanding wrapped around his heart, Vincent tried not to smile, but couldn't seem to help himself. He'd been smiling quite a bit more lately than he'd ever done before in his life, and it felt **good**. "I should never have teased you, Catherine. I tried to suppress the urge, truly I did."

"But why?" She gripped the center of his chin. "Vincent, you haven't done anything **wrong**. After making love, it's natural for people to tease each other and laugh about doing it. It's **allowed**."

When he nodded and seemed to accept that, Catherine nudged him in the groin again. "And while on the subject of making love, you didn't answer my question. Do you want me again so soon?"

"**Want** you," he mocked affectionately. Leaning over, he curled the tip of his tongue along her left ear, grazed it lightly with his teeth and flexed his hips, confessing, "We both know that I shall *never* get enough of you, or of... this."

Loving the whump of his heart pounding against hers, Catherine felt his maleness demanding attention again at the center of her belly, but before she could reach down to help and encourage his entry, Vincent stopped moving and lifted slightly away.

"What's wrong?"

"N... nothing," he managed.

"Then, why did you stop?"

"I..." Swallowing nervously, he murmured the rest of the words half aloud; as though he had misgivings about saying them at all. "Earlier, I spoke of a, a scent that I wanted to learn more about."

"I remember." Without realizing she did it, Catherine held her breath and waited for him to say the words; knowing he needed to hear himself say them.

"May I..." There was a long pause. "It would bring me infinite pleasure to love you with my... mouth if you would allow it?"

Tugging on his hair until he looked at her, Catherine opened her heart and her thoughts to him, wanting Vincent to feel the sincerity of her words as well as hear them. "Any need you have - any need, is understood and accepted. I love you. There's nothing that you could ever ask of me that I'd consider 'bad' or 'improper'." Her fingers tightened in his hair. "I've wanted to love you in that way too, for a very, very long time."

His eyes imprisoned hers in a blaze of blue. "You would enjoy doing that?"

"Very much."

Seeking to overcome his ignorance in such things, Vincent eyed her silently for a moment. Well-read on the subject of 'equality for women' and the ERA, he prayed she wouldn't find his

questions boorish or displeasing. "And women do such... things willingly, without being asked? Their passions are that strong?"

"Uh huh." Rejoicing in the fact that Vincent was finally able to ask such questions, Catherine smiled at him. "What I feel for you is every bit as powerful as what you feel for me. Women who love their men as deeply as I love you, do that and more; so much more."

"I see." Deciding to find out for himself what 'more' encompassed, exactly, Vincent sat back on his heels, observing, "Although I've never thought it wrong for *others* to love in that way, I've never dared to hope for such... freedom." An expectant look came into his eyes. "Yet, I've dreamt of it many times, and longed to know the delight of joining our bodies, as well as our hearts, in such a way."

Wondering exactly what kinds of books he'd been *reading*, Catherine urged him onto his back. "And now, at last you can turn your dreams into truth."

Laying there, watching as Catherine eased behind him, Vincent's eyes turned lucent in the soft light, his excitement obvious. "This intimacy is one I have ached for, dreamt of, but thought never to know. Teach me? Make me yours tonight in all of the ways that I've been dreaming of for such a long time?"

Parting his legs, he lowered them to the mattress and closed his eyes, eagerly awaiting the caress that would both free and decimate him. Yet, when the touch came, Vincent still wasn't prepared for it, crying her name aloud as Catherine drifted lower across his body to press soft, sweet kisses first to his navel, then his taut belly, then lower still, slowly edging her way down. Moving both hands to his powerful thighs, she brought Vincent up to her mouth, hungry to taste his very essence.

The firm, bronzed muscles of his stomach quivered as she raked her fingernails through the hair there, then moved them to the thatch of dense curls embracing his groin. Nuzzling gently, she tasted and teased, then slowly tormenting him to the brink of madness, she grazed him deliberately with her teeth and drew him into her mouth.

At the feel of Catherine's tongue whispering along his scrotum, Vincent arched upward, his hips bucking wildly out of control. Merciful God, the feeling - the feeling! The exquisitely explicit noises she was making as she suckled him had driven him beyond the power of speech. 'More!' his mind screamed, 'more, more!'

Shuddering, he fought the urge to ram his hips up and embed himself completely between her lips. This was torture; sweet, searing torture. Finding his voice, he gasped, "Let me, oh please let me," and began returning her moist caresses.

At the feel of his warm breath on her tummy, Catherine gasped and tightened against him, whimpering deep in her throat at the feel his mouth on her, raining hot, wet kisses everywhere; first to her stomach, then to her breasts, down her thighs and between them, then lower still.

Wetting his lips, Vincent parted the delicate folds of her vulva with the pads of his thumbs and growled hungrily, sending shivers racing along Catherine's spine.

She'd never been loved like this before; she'd never wanted it until falling in love with this oh, so special man. Her innocence, in a sexual sense, was something that she couldn't offer Vincent, for she'd known other men, but this moment, *this* loving, was **his**, and **only** his.

When the tip of Vincent's bristly nose nudged repeatedly at the sensitive bud of her womanhood, and his warm, slightly rough tongue probed greedily at the tenderest part of her body, Catherine cried out, which seemed to inflame him. His snarls grew louder and more assertive as he captured her around the behind and yanked her lower body impatiently down to his mouth.

Firmly inside of her now, Vincent angled his head to one side and tried to go even deeper. He wanted this so **much**. He was starved for tastes and sensations that he had been denying himself for far too long.

Emulating him, Catherine began suckling harder and faster. Relaxing her throat, she tried to encircle as much of him as she could. As she did, Vincent's legs thrashed wildly, his thighs tensing and releasing at either side of her head.

Whimpering in his need, the one she loved began serenading her with soft, low sounds of pleasure; sounds that swept away the last of Catherine's restraint. Weeping for joy, she soared to an ecstatic release that seemed to go on and on.

As her orgasm induced his, Vincent began to roll his hips impatiently. Quickening the pace, he eased away from her long enough to sob, "Easy, love, along the crown. Yes, yesss, like that..."

Body quivering with the effort, he rocked from side to side, then bucked like a wildly provoked stallion. Gripping Catherine's bottom tightly, he plunged his tongue into her feminine scent again and again, his hips grinding harder and faster towards their goal.

Glistening beads of perspiration dotted Vincent's skin as he fought to delay his climax for one more second, far one more beat of his heart, but when the tip of Catherine's tongue pressed into the highly sensitive slit at the top of his penis, he lost what little control he still possessed.

Feeling his scrotum lift and tighten to his body as the need to ejaculate reached out and seized him, enraptured sobs escaped his throat as Vincent drove upward, convulsing again and again in the oral embrace of his best beloved.

Laying with one arm tucked under his head and the other enfolding Catherine to his heart, Vincent stared at the stone ceiling above him, a look of chagrin on his face. Was she upset with him, he wondered? How could he have known that loving him as she'd done would induce him to want... more?

Unable to stop himself, as soon as he'd recovered his wind, and his senses, he'd risen over Catherine and joined their bodies again with great haste, driving her down into the mattress under the force of his thrusts.

Thinking about that, Vincent chewed on the inside of his jaw, berating himself. He had been much too aggressive! Was there no end to his lust?! He frowned apprehensively. Had he indeed, gone beyond all acceptable limits?

Sifting through the many emotions that were floating through the bond like rose petals on the wind, he scanned Catherine's emotions intently for a moment, then relaxed. She seemed well, and not at all angry. In fact, she seemed incredibly content. Relieved, Vincent wrapped one arm around her waist and drew her closer. Ah, to feel such satiation was splendid! Was this how all men felt after such impassioned unions? How marvelous for them if they did. How sad if they didn't.

Playing with the matted hair on Vincent's chest, Catherine tensed her muscles, then grimaced to herself, unable to stop Vincent's warm seminal fluids from escaping and puddling on the mattress. Oh well, his side of the bed was going to be a bit damp tonight.

Twisting his tight curls around her thumb, she leaned up on his chest and smiled at him. "Are you going to, ummm, *rest* now, for a while?"

Vincent peeked up at her from under his bangs. "Yes, I would imagine so, and I apologize for the, ah, aggressiveness of that last joining. Was that..."

"Normal? Uh huh. And believe me, there's no need to apologize. I loved it, so hush." Reaching down, Catherine wriggled one finger into the middle of Vincent's navel, giggling as he jerked slightly away from her and grunted. Aha, so he **was** ticklish. Something to remember for later.

Holding her close, Vincent seemed to drift off to sleep for several minutes, then he sighed, whispering half aloud, "...this place."

"What about it?" Glancing up, she frowned, puzzled at the melancholy look in his eyes. "What are you thinking about?"

"You." Tightening his hold, Vincent placed a gentle kiss to the top of her head. His body seemed to stiffen for a moment then relaxed again. "And, I'm thinking about the last time I was here."

"With me," she stated matter-of-factly.

"No, that wasn't the last time, Catherine."

Her eyes searched his. "You came here again? Why?"

For a moment, Vincent didn't answer. Leaning up on one elbow, he put one finger to the side of Catherine's face. Caressing the strong line of her jaw, he let his eyes drift over her throat, examining the delicate shading of her skin tones. Moving his hand to the side of her head, he stroked the hair back from her forehead with the tip of a curved nail.

His voice, when he found it, seemed on the verge of shattering. "Unable to bear the aloneness and the feelings of guilt that were destroying me when I was unable to find you, I came here one night, hoping to recapture any part of you that still remained. At that time, I thought that you were... lost to me." He simply couldn't bring himself to say the word 'dead'.

Swallowing hard, Vincent gulped back rough sobs. "Bitterness and grief had imprisoned me in a world made up only of hopelessness. Thinking never to see you again, at least in this world, I prayed to die so that I could be with you. There was nothing here that mattered anymore; nothing to draw even the slightest comfort from."

"Oh, my poor love." Taking his hand, she drew it to her mouth and kissed it gently. "How you must have been suffering."

Nearly taking her breath away, Vincent reached for her, yanked her to his chest and hugged her unusually hard. "Kneeling in the outer chamber, I dug my hands into the sand and thought of all that we'd shared, as well as the things we'd been unable to share due to my fears. Blinded by tears, at first I didn't see your crystal laying in the dirt." His voice broke. "In the dirt!"

"All I could see were images of you; all I could hear was your voice calling out to me, reminding me of happier... times. I could see you running to meet me the morning that you returned from Nancy Tucker's; I could still feel your body in my arms as we danced at... Winterfest; I could still taste you in my mouth from the kiss that you gave to me the day you went back to your world, after losing your father."

"There were so many images, and they brought a depth of pain that I had never known existed. As words and illusions hammered at my soul, a, a darkness seemed to sweep me away for a time."

Knowing exactly what he meant by 'darkness', Catherine swallowed hard and tightened her grip on him. "Oh God, that must have been terrible for you."

"It was," Vincent replied heavily. "When I came back to 'myself', I was hunched up on my side. It was only then that I noticed something glittering in the dirt. It was your crystal. As I picked it up, I remember thinking that a **madman** had taken the most important thing in my existence

away from me. A ruthless **monster** had taken everything, EVERYTHING, and left me only this small bit of stone in return for what he had so viciously stolen!"

"What I felt then, at that moment, went beyond suffering," Vincent intoned grimly. "It was indescribable. I began reliving some of what happened here between us. I still couldn't remember all of it, but I remembered enough to... break my heart all over again. My thoughts were crushing me and I let them. I let them! I *wanted* them to destroy me, or at least carry me so far into madness that I wouldn't be able to *feel* anything anymore."

Kissing the halo of golden hair at the top of Vincent's head, Catherine whispered, "I know those feelings, too. Those months were as empty for me as they were for you. Perhaps if we keep talking about them and come to terms with what we've been through, the pain will lessen in time."

Eyes glistening with tears met hers. "Having you back home again, and a child of our own, eases the anguish a little. I..."

When he seemed unable to continue, Catherine kissed away the wetness on Vincent's tear-stained face. "Love, I know that it hurts to speak of it, but can you tell me any more of what happened in those months? You need to rid yourself of those memories; to wash your soul and mind clean of them forever."

"Yes, I do need to be rid of them. I must speak of that time aloud just once, but *only* once." Exhaling slowly, he began, "A few days before I came back here, my thoughts turned self-destructive, malignant."

"What in particular brought on these feelings?"

"The moon," Vincent whispered against her heart, "that glorious, *hideous* moon. On one of the interminable nights when I was still searching for you, Father persuaded me to join him up in the Park. We'd gone there once before, he and I, when I was recovering my strength. That night, we discussed some of what had happened to me. It helped, a little.

"The second time we came Above, Father and I stood in the culvert arm in arm, alone in the chill night air. The moon overhead was vague. Drifting in and out of the clouds, it seemed to hang suspended in the sky like a saffron colored ornament, but it no longer held any fascination for me."

"But why? You've always loved it so."

"I didn't love it then," Vincent rasped, his voice rising angrily. "That particular night, I stared up at the moon and I loathed it! Standing there with Father, I thought of the times that you and I had explored the Park together with moonlight as our only guide. We shared so much of ourselves on those walks; speaking of our dreams, and of all the intimate things that only... lovers... express aloud to one another."

Gesturing toward the ceiling, Vincent curled the fingers of his left hand in a way that Catherine knew quite well. In the past, that gesture had meant death to several enemies when he struck.

When he spoke again, his voice gave new definition to the word 'rage'. "That **wretched** moon! I looked at that pale thing hanging there in the sky and wished that I could reach out and bring it **CRASHING** to the earth with one blow!"

Grasping his chest as if to keep his heart from bursting, he took a slow, steadying breath. "By that time, you'd been missing six months. Six endless, despairing months! You weren't there to see the moon with me. How *could* it still be shining? Oh, how its pale luster taunted me. It had no right to shine, no right! Fury overwhelmed me. I begrudged the moon, the stars, the earth itself, the right to be!

"Central Park and the streets of this city that I had always enjoyed traveling now meant nothing to me. Instead of a refuge and an escape, of sorts, they'd become barren and desolate places that only served to remind me of all that had been lost, when I lost you."

A haunted look came into Vincent's eyes. "Feelings of malice towards things and places I'd always loved in the past, caused me to nearly end my life. There was nothing left in my heart of love or mercy, for anyone; only resentment and rage lived within me. Oh, Catherine, such a... terrible rage."

She gripped Vincent's hand as if to remind him that she was here beside him. "Those days and nights must have been unendurable, yet you didn't give up, Vincent; you jeopardized your life to find me."

His reply was solemn, resigned. "To have done less, I would have jeopardized my soul. There was no choice. I had to find you, or perish in the attempt."

"And do you still hate the moon, even now?"

"No." Touching one hand to Catherine's hair, a loving smile sliced across the anguish on Vincent's face. "Soon after that, I did find you. Holding you in my arms now, like this, and loving you as I do, as I just... did, how could I hate anything or anyone? The joy of having you with me again changed... everything."

"What about the memories of the night that we created our son? Did you ever tell Father all of what happened here, between us?"

"No. As much as I wanted to tell him, I couldn't. He asked me twice. The first time he did, I was truthful, telling him that I remembered nothing of that night, or of the cave. The second time he asked, I, I lied to him. I'd never done that before," Vincent admitted sadly. "I told him that I still had no memories of what happened here."

"Why did you feel the need to do that?"

"Because it was too private, Catherine; it was an intimacy that I simply couldn't speak of with anyone, even him; especially him. There was only one person that I could have shared such feelings with, and that was you." Vincent's face seemed to crumble. "But I didn't *have you!*"

Shifting his weight, he rocked to his knees and brought Catherine up with him. Wrapping both arms around her waist, he put his ear to her heart as if to reassure himself that she was truly here with him, and alive, before he could speak again. 'Bits and pieces of images drifted through my mind, and I finally faced the truth of them. To save my life, you reached out to me with love, risking everything for... me.

"Your love humbled me, Catherine, it... silenced me. To be able to love a woman physically was a possibility I'd been seeking my life long, thinking never to find it. Having you care for me in that way was wondrous, a miracle, yet so painful to dwell on, I thought to surely die of the ache. To imagine never holding you in my arms again, never to feel the beat of your heart *within* mine ever again, was unendurable! I couldn't bear it. Oh, I couldn't bear it!"

Embracing him fiercely as if to protect him within the shelter of her arms, Catherine brushed her mouth over the top of Vincent's head. "That part of our life *is over*, Vincent. It's over. Let go of those memories. Let go of the pain." She tightened her hold on him, her covenant an impassioned whisper, "I'm here. You'll never have to be alone again, never; I *promise*."

Closing his eyes as her affection and quiet words restored his serenity, Vincent felt his body relax. Suddenly aware of a weariness in Catherine's tone of voice that she was attempting to hide, he placed a gentle kiss on the center of her tummy and then got to his feet.

Watching as she tensed her jaw in a futile effort to stifle a yawn, he tilted his head to one side, smiled, then swept her up into his arms. "I can feel your weariness, beloved, and know full well how tired you must be after... due to... what I..."

Snorting to himself at his own ineptness, Vincent left the thought unfinished. Turning, he took the few steps necessary and gently deposited her on the mattress. Pulling the covers up to her chin, he stroked the middle of her forehead, whispering, "Rest now, my Catherine," smiling as her eyelids flickered once, twice, then stayed shut.

"You, too." Reaching out, she let her fingers drift over his thigh and patted him on the knee. "Happy dreams, Vincent."

"Oh, I'm certain they shall be exceedingly happy ones."

Settling down next to her, Vincent carefully placed one long leg over Catherine's, even in sleep loathe to be any further apart from her than that. Sighing wearily, he closed his eyes. Indeed, it had been a long day. An enigmatic smile disappeared into the deep furrows along the sides of his mouth. A long and incredible one.

The last words that Catherine remembered hearing were spoken in a husky, love-rumpled voice.

"Sleep well, beauty. Sleep well."

Chapter 3

Coffee. Coffee?

Edging her nose out from beneath the blankets, Catherine sniffed again and rolled over onto her back. It was coffee. Yes! And something else.

Inhaling deeply, she sat up. Oh, yum! Vincent was toasting the muffins she'd brought down with her. Her eyes gleamed hungrily. Right now, she could have eaten a rock sandwich and relished every bite of it.

Blowing her bangs out of her eyes, she peered into the dim light of the cave. It was true, she was here. All of the images inside of her head hadn't been dreams. Vincent had really made love to her. Smiling, she stretched. Oh, she felt wonderful! A bit sore, perhaps, in 'certain' spots, but she cherished every little ache. When he made love, he made love.

Wondering what time it was, Catherine eyed her wristwatch, then grimaced. Good Lord, she'd been in la-la land for nearly five whole hours! 'Okay Chandler, time to get your lazy Lush up.'

Noticing the glint of something shiny, her eyes came to rest on the small tin basin next to the bed. Reaching out, Catherine touched it carefully. Just as she'd suspected, Vincent had even provided her with hot water for bathing. Dipping her fingers into the bowl, she raised them to her nose. Oh, that dear soul had even poured some of her cologne into the water.

Grinning like an idiot, she picked up Vincent's pillow and hugged it for all it was worth. Oh, that man. Had there ever been anyone as kind-hearted as that beautiful man? She didn't think so. And didn't such kindness deserved to be rewarded?

After stretching the kinks from her back, she got to her knees and reached for her tote bag. There was something special in there that she'd hoped to have a chance to wear, and she was dying to see Vincent's reaction to it.

Muttering, "Oh, I hope I remembered to pack it," Catherine poked around in the small valise and pulled out a blouse of stone-washed, lilac colored silk and then the matching pants. Oh yeah, this was perfect! With the campfire that Vincent surely had going full blast by now in the outer

chamber, for her sake, if not his own, for he was rarely cold, this costume was warm enough and just the thing for breakfast in bed - or breakfast in 'cave', as the case may be.

Holding the blouse up to the waning candlelight, Catherine examined it closely. What a lovely shade, and the material felt wonderful. Certain that Vincent would agree with that when he touched it, she smiled slyly. Although he never would have admitted it, perhaps even to her, he had a distinct admiration for soft, silky things, whether it was clothing, scarves or anything else. Was that why he'd been so intrigued with her underwear a few days ago? He had incredibly sensitive hands. Maybe that explained a lot of things.

A warm flush spread from the center of her breasts to the top of her head as Catherine pictured Vincent caressing this outfit and then removing it to touch her. That was precisely why she'd chosen it in the first place; to please him.

She eyed the top again. It looked like just an ordinary piece of clothing at first glance, but once she stood in the light - watch out! Then, her entire body would be quite clearly silhouetted.

'Now, let's go and find out exactly what kind of a reaction this gets!' Starting to reach for her shoes, Catherine hesitated and eyed the entry leading into the larger cave. Nope, no shoes; just silk and bare feet. Yeah, that was the right combination.

Licking crumbs from the muffins off of his nails without the slightest qualm, Vincent sat back on his heels and inclined his head towards the smaller chamber. Catherine was awake. He'd felt the stirring of her emotions for the last ten minutes. Whatever she was thinking about seemed to have made her very happy.

Pursing his lips, he smiled. Perhaps it was the smell of coffee that had finally stirred his beloved lazybones. Hoping for just such a reaction, that was why he'd positioned the pot as close as he could to the other chamber in the first place. To his everlasting shame, he had purposely set out to wake her up! Feeling more than a little guilty, Vincent sighed. What a mean and selfish thing to do. But, Catherine had been asleep for nearly six hours, and it was incredibly lonely here without her. He wanted to talk to her, be with her. Growling to and at himself, Vincent faced the truth. Oh, all right, he wanted to look at her.

Wrapping the toasted muffins in a large clean handkerchief to keep them warm, he laid them to one side just as Catherine called out, "Hello, love."

"Hello," he rumbled, "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a stone. But I only wanted to take a nap, not sleep for nearly five hours!"

"Six," Vincent muttered half aloud.

"What?"

"I said, you slept for six hours, Catherine."

"Oh. Well, why didn't you wake me up?"

Not answering, Vincent had the good grace to wince as his conscience nudged him.

"Whatever you're cooking out there, it sure smells good!"

"It's only muffins, Catherine," Vincent replied in a self-deprecating tone, "Accompanied by coffee and a bit of the dried fruit that was in the basket. Nothing 'special'."

"Oh, yes it is! To wake up and know that breakfast is ready is a real treat!" A surge of exuberance swept through the bond. "You're an angel, that's what you are!"

"A... what?"

"You heard me!"

Eyes laden with disbelief glanced over at the entrance a second time. How could she call *him* an...

Stop it - **now**. It would serve no good purpose to argue the point. Arresting his innate skepticism of the way he saw himself opposed to the way Catherine saw him, Vincent conceded defeat with a slow shake of his head. He may as well accept the way she perceived him and learn to live with it, for he knew that where he was concerned, Catherine could be surprisingly adamant. To her, he was and would always **be** 'special', and that was all there was to *that*.

Not wanting the Gods to perceive his emotions and begrudge the gift They had given him in this woman, Vincent ducked his head. Concealing the expression of utter joy on his face, he poured out two cups of coffee. What an extraordinary feeling for him to be considered, in any **way**, angelic.

Catherine's voice interrupted his train of thought. "Vincent?"

"Hmm?"

"Would you enjoy listening to some music with our breakfast?"

"Why, yes, I would."

"Good. My cassette player is out there someplace. If you can find it, why don't you put in a tape?"

"Have you any particular one in mind?"

He waited as she took a moment to deliberate.

"Yes, I do. Please find the one marked 'Journey', and play side two, will you?"

"As you wish."

Readily finding the tapes and the cassette player, Vincent examined both of them closely for a moment. After noting the instructions listed on the side panel of the machine, he carefully pried the lid open with the tip of one nail and slipped the tape inside.

Expecting to be greeted with a sonata, he gave the machine a startled look when contemporary music blared forth. Blessed Saints in Heaven, what had he **done** to the thing?! It was on deafen volume!

Snatching the tape cassette to his chest in a vain attempt to muffle the sound, Vincent frantically moved the buttons this way and that, then sighed gratefully as a less teeth-jarring resonance wafted forth:

'Lying beside you, here in the dark, feeling your heart beat
with mine. Softly you whisper love so sincere;
how could our love be so blind?

We sailed on together, we drifted apart,
and here you are by my side.

So now, I come to you with open arms, nothing to hide,
believe what I say. Here I am, with open arms,
hoping you'll see what your love means to me -

Open arms. '

Entering the room, Catherine found Vincent standing with his head thrown back and his eyes closed as if immersed in the lyrics and sweet resonance of the music.

Coming up quietly behind him, she hugged him around the waist and rested her cheek against his broad back, whispering, "My thoughts exactly."

Reaching down, Vincent trapped her small hands beneath his. "Such poignant words; sad, yet beautiful."

"They remind me of us," she observed softly.

Eyes still closed, he nodded. "Yes."

Starting to turn toward her, Vincent hesitated as Catherine tightened her embrace. "Stay like this, just for a minute? I love holding you."

Putting one hand at her hip, he started to say something, moved his fingers over the material, and paused. Such a delicate fabric. Opening his eyes, Vincent glanced down to Catherine's left sleeve, then smiled. "Silk?" he offered.

"Uh huh."

He swept his eyes over the cloth. "What a lovely shade. It reminds me of an exotic flower; a picture I saw once long ago, in one of Devin's National Geographics. I believe the book called them cymbidium orchidi?" He looked to her for confirmation.

"It's a bit easier to just say orchids," she observed, smiling. "They grow mostly in warmer climates or in hot-houses. It takes quite a lot of effort to make them bloom properly."

"Such flowers must be very fragile." Turning to face her, Vincent scanned the lustrous blouse, then inspected Catherine's loose flowing trousers with an appreciative gleam in his eyes. Continuing downward, he examined her bare feet. So tiny, so delicate in appearance. He could see the fragile bone structure and tiny blue veins from here. Oh, how lovely; her toenails were painted an unknown shade of pale rose.

Finding it unfathomable as to why women would paint their toes, Vincent also found it to be extremely sensual. Realizing that he'd been staring at Catherine's feet quite rudely and for a very long time, he quickly lifted his head. Wanting to both satisfy his curiosity and clear his thoughts, he asked, "Do orchids smell as marvelous as they look in books?"

"No, they rarely have any scent at all," Catherine answered quietly, saddened to think that a man who appreciated beauty in all forms had known many of them only in books. Someday, she promised herself, she'd find a way to get him safely to a hot-house so that he'd be able to see such wonders for himself. She *would* find a way.

Moving to stand in front of him with her back to the campfire, she tilted her head back and looked into his eyes, teasing lightly, "So, do you approve of my choice in what's proper for a cave breakfast?"

For a moment, Vincent just stared at her, trying to draw breath back into his lungs. What had happened to her clothing? It seemed to have almost entirely disappeared! Scanning the outline of her figure through the lustrous fabric, he moved his eyes slowly over her body. Ah yes, he liked this outfit very much; very much indeed.

Finding his voice, he murmured, "Yes, I think your choice of wearing apparel is exactly right for... this occasion."

The sparks of flame in the gaze that held hers and the expression on Vincent's face told Catherine that he more than merely approved; he was dumbfounded.

Just as he was about to clarify that approval with action, Vincent noted Catherine peering over at the campfire, and felt rather ashamed of himself. Why, she must be starving! With his mind on his own 'appetites', he hadn't given a thought to her needs!

Taking Catherine by the hand, Vincent marched his famished lady over to the campfire, urged her to sit down, then offered her one of the muffins and a steaming mug of coffee, advising, "It's very hot and quite strong."

"Good, that's just the way I like it. Thank you." Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply. "Hmm, I needed this."

Sitting down beside her, Vincent drank his coffee, watching with interest as Catherine broke her muffin in half, raised it toward her mouth, then hesitated. Looking around, she pulled the small cache of remaining foodstuffs over to her side and began to poke through them.

"What are you looking for?"

"Raspberry Marshmallow Fluff."

"Fluff," Vincent echoed, looking utterly baffled. "Is that a type of food?"

"Yes, but I'm sure that William wouldn't think so," she sneered, continuing to rummage through the provisions. "I thought I packed a jar of it. I love it on muffins." Bringing her hand out of the bag, she eyed a small pink container, exclaiming triumphantly, "Aha! Gotcha!"

Grimacing as she reached for a knife, Vincent kept his consternation to himself as he recognized that... stuff. Although many of the tunnel children seemed to enjoy it on peanut butter sandwiches, to him it looked absolutely nauseating; somewhat like the pink-tinged putty that was used to repair leaking pipes. Watching as Catherine slapped a clump of the gummy substance onto her food, he commented dubiously, "I've never seen anyone eat... that... on a muffin."

"Well, it's usually eaten with peanut..."

"Yes, I know. How does it taste?"

"Good, but it's very sweet." Licking the excess subject in question off of her fingers, Catherine asked, "You've never had it?"

Oh, oh. Now he was in for it. "Ah, no, I haven't had that particular... pleasure," he responded warily.

"Well, you've been missing a real treat!" Uncapping the jar again, she slathered the other half of her muffin with the repulsive, adhesive-like mess and then held it out towards him, urging, "Here, try it."

"Thank... you." Staring down at the muffin in his left palm as though half expecting it to dissolve his skin, Vincent offered lamely, "Actually, I'm... not all **that** hungry."

Swallowing the breakfast 'treat' she already had in her mouth, Catherine took a swig of her coffee before asking, "Oh? Have you eaten already?"

"Well, that is..." Now, Vincent found himself in a dreadful predicament. To say no, meant he had to eat this 'thing'. To say yes, and *lie*, told his beloved that he hadn't had the courtesy to wait for her before dining.

Finally, he admitted, "Actually, no, I haven't eaten, but I can't..."

At the puzzled look she gave him, Vincent sighed resignedly, broke off a piece of the muffin and slowly raised it toward his mouth.

With a dismayed, "Oh God, no!" Catherine snatched the food away from him, leaving Vincent with nothing but a stunned look and a mouthful of air.

Blinking away tears, she knelt in front of him and put one hand to the side of his face, her expression one of earnest apology. "Just to please me, you would have eaten **that** and said *nothing*, wouldn't you?"

"Yes." Thinking that he wouldn't have been able to say anything for quite a while, Vincent caught the small beads of wetness on the tip of his fingernail and gave her a look of affection laced with understanding. "I'd do anything within my power to please you, you know that. Always."

"Oh sure, even..." Catherine's bottom lip began trembling, "...even choking on raspberry Marshmallow Fluff rather than hurt my... f... feelings! Oh, love, please forgive me," she asked, sniffing, "I forgot all about your, your teeth."

"I know." Wiping the remains of Catherine's breakfast off of her quivering chin, Vincent gave her a rather enigmatic smile, then pulled her forward into his arms. Hugging her surprisingly hard, he murmured, "And in 'forgetting' about them, you have paid me one of the finest compliments I've ever received."

Chapter 4

'Whispers in the morning, of lovers sleeping tight,
are rolling by like thunder now, as I look in your eyes.

I hold on to your body and feel each move you make,
your voice is warm and gentle; a love that I could
not forsake.

'Cuz I'm your lady, and you are my man. Whenever
you reach for me, I'll do all that I can.

Lost is how I'm feeling, lying in your arms.
When the world outside's too much to take,
that all ends when I'm with you.

Even though there may be times, it seems I'm far
away, never wonder where I am, 'cuz I am always
by your side.

'Cuz I'm your lady and you are my man. Whenever
you reach for me, I'll do all that I can. We're
heading for something - somewhere I've never been.

Sometimes, I am frightened but I'm ready to learn,
for the power of love.

The sound of your heart beating, made it clear
suddenly. The feeling that I can't go on is
light years away...'

Losing herself in the piece of music playing on the tape machine, Catherine lay back against Vincent's chest. Curling her fingers through his, she sighed happily. "It's wonderful, isn't it, being here like this?"

"Yes, and so completely unexpected." Glancing around, he eyed the campfire, the stacked coffee mugs, and then the smaller chamber. "You can imagine my surprise to find myself so comfortable here, of all places."

A sudden sensation of melancholy wafted through their bond, then Catherine murmured half aloud, "I do miss our son, though, very much."

"Hmm, so do I." For a moment, Vincent said nothing more and seemed to be very far away, then sighed contentedly. "Ah, yes, there he is..."

Half turning in his arms, Catherine gave him a puzzled look. "There who is?"

"Jacob. He's well and sleeping soundly."

"Jacob our son, or Jacob the Patriarch?"

"Our son," Vincent replied, chuckling. "The manner in which you said that, sounded like something out of the Bible or an ancient Egyptian scroll." One golden eyebrow arched. "Are we a dynasty then?"

"In a way," Catherine replied, then defended her statement. "Jacob is our guarantee of life everlasting, as all children are to their parents. His birth is the pledge of tomorrow." Half turning, she smiled up at him. "Our child is the continuance of something bright and beautiful in the world." Running her hand over Vincent's tawny hair, she went on, "It's said that a child is God's way of telling the world that it deserves another chance."

"Yes, another... chance." Vincent murmured. "The same chance that I received when I found you alive. It's hard to imagine that only three years ago, I considered myself to be the last of my 'kind'." Adoring eyes met hers. How do I tell you? What mere words can describe how it feels to know that I'm not alone anymore; that now I, I have a family to care for?"

As he continued, Catherine thought she would surely drown in his brilliant, crystal blue eyes. "Because a woman had the courage to love me and be...patient, I'll never be alone again. There are no words for such a gift."

"Oh yes, there are, dear heart - you just found them," Catherine replied, snuggling closer. "And if that was a thank you, Vincent, it was the nicest one that I've ever received. And you're very, very welcome." Taking a deep breath, she tried to keep her voice steady. "I can't make any promises, mind you, but the next time, I'll try very hard to give you a daughter."

For a moment, an eternity, Vincent said nothing. Staring straight ahead of him, perhaps perceiving omens and predestinations only he was capable of, it seemed as though he was scarcely breathing. Then, looking deeply into her eyes, he handed Catherine the whole world on a plate. "Yes, a daughter would be most welcome, the next time."

"Yes, oh yes!" For a moment, Vincent thought that the force of Catherine's enthusiastic hug had truly cracked his ribs. "Oh, I was so afraid that you'd say no!"

"I very nearly did," he admitted. "Then, I realized that it's already too late to say no on that particular subject." Smiling shyly down at her, Vincent made no effort to hide his flushed face. "The 'next time' may already be a 'fait accompli'."

Catherine fairly beamed at him. "And then some. But if you could change that, even now, would you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Would you rather not have another child?"

Placing one hand on her tummy, Vincent gave her an intensely profound look, announcing solemnly, "Eleven."

"Eleven what?"

"I believe that we shall have eleven children, my dear, all in all; including two sets of twins."

"Eleven? And t... two sets..." Gulping, Catherine looked startled, her eyes darting from her stomach then back to him. Yes, she wanted more children, but eleven? She'd be knee-deep in diapers **forever!** "H... how do you know?"

Vincent shrugged. "I don't. I merely wanted to see your reaction."

"You what! I can't believe it! You got me!" Pulling back laughing, she swatted him on the arm. "Oh, you! Whatever made me think that you didn't know how to tease? You're too good at it!" Hesitating, Catherine frowned and gave him a highly suspicious look. "You were only teasing me, weren't you?"

"Was I?" The expression on Vincent's face told her absolutely nothing. She was in love with a *!*c&& Sphinx!

"Vincent!"

Nimble dodging another whack on the forearm, Vincent leapt to his feet, picked up some of the camping gear and started towards the antechamber. Pausing at the entrance, he half turned, glanced back over his shoulder and tilted his head, his invitation obvious.

He didn't have to ask her twice.

At the entryway, Catherine stood, watching silently as Vincent packed away some of the excess gear. Thinking that she'd misunderstood his intent, her heart sank. He wasn't going to make love to her again, he was preparing for the journey home. Oh, not so soon?

Nibbling at her lower lip and feeling more than a little ashamed of herself, she started gathering up her belongings. She and Vincent had duties that needed attending at home, as well as a child to see to. How could she be so selfish as to put her own needs above others? That was not a very 'tunnel-like' attitude to take.

Just as Vincent bent over to retrieve one of his boots, Catherine eyed him again, intrigued by the sight of his firm bottom as it dipped and swayed, tensing and releasing as he moved. Oh yeah. He had a glorious butt; he had a glorious everything! How could she not want to be alone with him at every opportunity?

Keeping his head down, Vincent focused his attentions on the tasks at hand, but his thoughts kept straying to... other things. Before Catherine managed to cloak her disappointment behind a wall of feigned acceptance, he'd felt her yearning, and knew that she wanted to remain here for a while longer. How could he not know her thoughts, especially when they mirrored his? He didn't want to leave either; not yet.

Furrowing his brow, Vincent let the pair of boots he was about to put on fall back to the ground. Why should they leave if they didn't have to? Catherine had assured him that Father knew where they were. As yet, there had been no messages sent down asking him to return, so there couldn't be any emergencies that weren't being taken care of.

Although he knew that Catherine missed their son as much as he did, Jacob was well and seemed quite content to remain a while longer in the protection of Mary's loving arms. Why not stay? An inner voice nudged at his conscience. 'Because Father will be waiting for you, that's why, and by now, he's probably livid! So, if you don't want his wrath coming down on your head, you'd better start home in one quick hurry!'

'No.' Eyeing Catherine from across the room, a hint of a smile came into Vincent's eyes a moment before it touched his mouth. No! He didn't want to leave, and neither did she, so for once in his life, he was going to do *exactly* what he wanted to do...

"Eeek!" Letting out a whoop of surprise as two muscled arms lifted her from the cavern floor, Catherine's expression was one of delighted surprise, she laughed, asking, "What on earth are you doing?!"

"Holding the woman that I love in my arms. You're not going to pack that quilt, so please put it down," he ordered.

"I'm not?" She immediately let the coverlet drop to the floor. "How come?"

"Because you shall need it later on tonight. This cave is quite chilly."

"Are you saying...?" The happiness in her voice told Vincent that he'd made the right decision. "We're really and truly staying?"

"Really and truly, but only if you want to," he announced, his tone lightly teasing. "But, of course, if you'd rather leave..."

That's as far as he got.

"Rather leave?! Oh, you devil!"

Digging her fingers into his ribs, Catherine shrieked again as Vincent collapsed on the mattress with her at his side, howling Clouting him playfully on the arm with the folded quilt she was holding, indignantly, "Nuh! Cease tickling me, you, you **irascible** woman!"

After a 'catch as catch can', kiss and tickle contest that lasted nearly twenty minutes, Vincent lay back on the mattress with Catherine tucked under his arm and put one hand to his chest, gasping, "Oh, my poor ribs! You are much stronger than I'd assumed, and even more cunning."

"I sure am, and I can be very determined, too, when it's necessary." Wriggling one finger into the center of his belly button, she poked it. "Remember that."

"I shall." Trying to look austere, Vincent kept his tone of voice very stern, but didn't fool her in the least. "Am I going to be allowed to rest at all tonight, or am I going to be tickled to utter distraction?"

"That all depends. If you promise to make me some coffee in the morning, I might give your ribs a rest." Reminded of something else, Catherine went on, "Oh, speaking of resting, I almost forgot to tell you; when you were sleeping earlier, you began tossing and turning. Thinking that you were having another one of those wretched dreams, I nearly woke you up. Then, I realized that you weren't yelling this time - only talking to yourself."

"Talking to myself?" Vincent repeated, frowning. "That's something that I rarely do. If I alarmed you, I'm sorry."

"There's no need to apologize." Smiling, she patted his hand. "I rubbed your back for a few minutes and you settled down again."

"Thank you. For some unfathomable reason, I enjoy having my back rubbed, but other than you no one has ever done it, except Mary. Even though I was quite young, I recall the sensations of peace it brought."

"Oh? I'll gladly do it again, anytime you want me to."

Bending down, Vincent put his mouth very close to her ear, murmuring, "My love, **you** can rub any part of *me* that most pleases you, whenever you wish."

"I'll make a note of that," Catherine replied, seeing no need to mention that she'd rubbed a lot more than just his back, and for a delightfully long time. When Vincent finally rolled over onto his stomach grunting to himself, she remembered wondering how he could sleep on the erection her busy little fingers had produced? Good Lord, he must have been very uncomfortable. She wished he hadn't rolled over, because she had wanted to 'play' some more. She liked touching him, and seeing his...

Vincent's question jerked her back to the present. "Could you make out what I was saying?"

"Huh?"

"In the dreams," he prompted gently, "what was I saying?"

The slightly glazed look in Catherine's eyes mystified him. What on earth was she thinking about? Waiting patiently for her to respond to his question, Vincent found himself immensely curious as to what thoughts could have produced that expression, and why was she blushing? Perhaps later, he would ask her to explain. He glanced at her and then quickly away again. Or better yet, perhaps it would be more judicious to mind his own business.

It took Catherine a moment to focus her thoughts. Finally she replied, "I couldn't make out everything you said, but you kept repeating my name over and over again." Turning to look up at him, her eyes mirrored her concern. "Were you having bad dreams again, or some good ones this time?"

"I don't remember. But, if you were involved, I'm almost certain that my dreams were delightful ones. How could they not be?"

She beamed at him. "Thank you.

He tilted his head thoughtfully, "Yet, I do recall sensations of deep pleasure..."

Oh, oh. Catherine held her breath.

"...but nothing more than that. When I awoke, I felt almost euphoric, highly exhilarated; but for the life of me I can't remember the dreams that brought such aftereffects."

Whew. Not quite meeting his eyes, she observed, "Perhaps the nightmares won't ever trouble you again."

"There's no reason they should," Vincent replied, giving her the crooked little smile that she adored. "Not anymore."

"All of the misconceptions those dreams brought are resolved now, aren't they, and all of your questions are answered?"

"Most of them are, yes."

She frowned slightly, but didn't ask. When he was ready to discuss what he meant by 'most of them', he would, and not until then. Changing the subject, Catherine took his hand and placed it on the middle of her thigh. "So, do you really like this outfit?"

"How could I do otherwise?" Vincent's tone of voice was particularly husky. "It contains my most precious treasure: you." Reaching out, he started to caress her body through the fabric, then paused and eased his hand away.

"That felt wonderful. Why did you stop?"

"My nails could do irreparable damage to such delicate cloth," he observed sadly.

"Oh, my love." Shifting in Vincent's arms, Catherine turned to face him. Taking his hands, she kissed his fingers then pressed them to her heart. "I never want you to be afraid of damaging *anything* that I'm wearing. Clothing can be replaced, your feelings and love can't. Besides, I chose this outfit especially for you, Vincent, and if you want to touch it - and me, then I wish you would."

"Oh, I want to touch you, my dear. I want to do that, and so much more." Resting his left cheek on the top of her head, Vincent began slowly moving his hands over her.

Cupping the softness of Catherine's breasts in his palm, he hefted the fullness, loving the feel of her. Groaning deep in his throat at finding himself quickly and fiercely aroused, Vincent kept moving his hands. Inducing her nipples into delightful peaks, he resisted a sudden urge to rip the blouse open and draw her firm, warm flesh into his mouth. Shuddering, he tried to keep his pelvis from jerking upward. Oh, how he yearned to taste her, to have her - to lose himself inside of her.

Moving his hand across the front of Catherine's blouse, he ran his thumb along the buttons, his tone breathless, almost a sob. "I want to see you. May I unbutton this?"

"You don't have to ask - you never did." Drawing one hand down behind her, Catherine stroked the center seam of his pants and curled her fingers into the hardness there. "I want to see you, too, and touch you."

"Oh, yes, please." Releasing Catherine with a fierce kiss to the nape of her neck, Vincent swayed to his feet. Under her watchful gaze, he shakily balanced himself with one hand on the stone wall. Glad that he hadn't put his boots back on, he yanked off his heavy woollen socks. Tossing them aside, he quickly unlaced his vest, unbuttoned his shirt and peeled them off together.

When his hand went to the belt at his waist, Catherine reached up. "Let me?"

Getting to her knees in front of him, she agonizingly slowly unlaced the three metal hinges on his belt then eased it from the loops. After carefully sliding the zipper down over his thickening erection, she slid one hand inside to caress him. "Do you know how much I love seeing you like this, and knowing that it's because of me?"

"I have felt like this about you for far longer than you would believe, or that I would care to admit to." Claspng her by the shoulders, Vincent met her eyes with a look of quiet desperation. "If you could know how many nights I spent alone in my chamber, imagining your hands on my body, loving me, touching me as you are now." He shook his head, his voice tinged with regret. "So many endless, empty nights."

After slipping the pants down over Vincent's hips, Catherine placed her hands firmly around his buttocks and drew him toward her, promising, "No more empty nights, my love. No more, ever again..."

Drowning in a sea of overpowering sensations, Vincent's eyes closed as her mouth lovingly encircled him. Oh yes, yes; to be free to enjoy such caresses and to be able to return them, completed him and made him whole. Not only giving him the destiny he'd always sought, being able to receive and return the love of this woman full measure granted him his humanity - and liberated all of his long repressed passion.

Buffeted by emotions that rocked and battered at his consciousness, demanding everything, Vincent swayed to his knees before the woman that he loved and leaned back on the palms of his hands, his very posture telling her what he wanted. Rolling his hips upward, his pelvis drove hard to meet each sweet touch of her lips as though already engaged in the act of love.

All at once, Vincent's eyes flew open. Sensing Catherine's longing for him coursing their connection, a glimmer of reticence edged upwards to a conscious level from within, causing him to stay the motions of his body. What of her feelings, what of her needs? Was he that self-serving, that he could forget all about her?

Putting one hand to his breast, Vincent swallowed roughly and tried to coax his heartbeat down to a more familiar tempo. Never wanting her to stop, yet knowing that she must, and right now, he jerked forward and grasped Catherine by the wrist, gasping, "Wait."

Sliding one hand along the waistband of her pants, he gathered the folds of the material between his knuckles, announcing resolutely, "Your choice of apparel is highly pleasing to me, but these pants are in my way, and I want them off... **now.**"

A bit surprised, but thoroughly enjoying this new side of Vincent, Catherine lifted her hips as he slipped the silk garment down to her ankles and cast it to one side. Focusing next on the buttons of her blouse, he quickly flicked them open and parted the folds of the shirt.

Drawing the pad of one finger slowly over her breasts, Vincent's words were softly beguiling. "Thy skin is like the petals of the fairest rose, so supple to my touch, so enticing to my

senses. It pleasures me to gaze upon thee." His fingers edged lower. "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine."

Recognizing the last of his words as coming from the Song of Solomon, Catherine opened her arms to him, responding softly, "Then, set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is as strong as death." Drawing him toward her, she continued, "Thy visage is more than air and water to me."

After tasting and kissing his way from her breasts to the edge of her shoulder, Vincent drew his tongue over the lobe of Catherine's ear. Laying half on top of her, he shuddered, closed his eyes and lay very still as a sudden need - a different need, flashed into his mind. Pulsing through him, a crimson haze, one that contained the last of his unresolved dreams, impacted in a blaze of heat upon his consciousness.

Sensing that he was momentarily lost in some sort of self-introspection that only he could resolve, Catherine drew Vincent into her arms, cradling him as she would have held their son. Whatever he was thinking about seemed to be making him anxious, but it was also arousing him. This she knew from the enormity of what was throbbing against her belly. Vincent was not only hard, he was also incredibly wet.

Putting her mouth to his ear, she whispered, "When you can find the words you're searching for, I'm here, and I love you very much."

Unable to respond except by a quick nod of his head, Vincent captured her left hand into his. Curling their fingers together, he exhaled deeply and confronted the one vision, the one dream, he'd never dared to speak of: his yearning to possess Catherine with every part of himself. He longed to reach out now and stroke her soul with his; to reveal to her the shadowed places within him that no one had ever seen except at times of pain and decimation.

There was a need within him now that brooked no quarter and would not yield to intellect or logic. That part of him that was untempered by the teachings of a lifetime called out to be acknowledged, nourished and finally satisfied. Could he do this? Did he dare to reveal *that much* of himself even to Catherine? If he found the courage to share the last dream with her, would it disgust or offend her?

His beloved had vowed more than once that for him to be whole and at peace, he must face certain 'truths' about himself and come to terms with them. Her love and faith in him had opened doorways he'd thought never to be opened, and he had passed over those long-feared thresholds one by one. This woman had taken him by the hand and the heart, and shown him just what was truly possible with love.

Laying here now, at Catherine's breast, Vincent steeled his mind and opened his thoughts to a fire that was stirring in the center of his soul, knowing that once and for all time he must dominate the last and greatest of all his inhibitions. Even though he now believed that all things were possible, even for him, he knew that without trust - unconditional trust, whatever had been gained these last hours simply wasn't enough; it wasn't complete. He must have faith in Catherine now, and believe that she accepted all of him as he was, what he was, and *who* he was.

She had always thought of him as a man. Simply that: a man. How many times had she tried to convince him that whatever he asked of her, she would not refuse? How many times had she begged him to take his own pleasure, not as a gift she gave, but as his right? Was there nothing he could not ask of her? Did she truly see him as he needed to be seen, and accept him completely, utterly? It was time to find out.

When Vincent finally spoke, Catherine noted that his tone was almost a whisper; breathless - as if the words were being torn from him. "Earlier, you asked me if all of the dreams were resolved."

"Yes." Her fingers drifted through his tangled locks, both soothing him and coaxing him to continue. "Are they?"

"No, not all of them. There is one that will not leave me in peace. It persists even now. Especially now."

"Tell me?" When he didn't respond, Catherine tipped Vincent's chin up and looked into his eyes. "If you can't tell me, then show me?"

Slipping his hands around her hips, he urged her over onto her tummy and lay on his left hip behind her. Bending over her, he kissed his way up along the center of her spine all the way to the slim column of her neck. "This is the dream that I couldn't speak of before. This is the one left unanswered. I want to love you like this. Like this," he repeated, sliding one hand between her thighs. "First with my hands, and then with my body. If you would forbid me, do it... now?"

Probing gently within her, Vincent groaned softly as Catherine's inner muscles tightened around his finger as she arched her back. Telling him without words that she was more than willing to do whatever he asked of her, after running one hand down over his thigh, she gathered one of the bed pillows to her chest, clutched it tightly and waited for him to decide whether or not to continue.

Sliding between her legs and putting one of his fingers over the other to protect her delicate flesh from his nails, Vincent delved within her again and again, needing her wet enough to ease his entry, and needing it soon.

When her readiness coated his fingers, he groaned her name again and again, the words burning his throat. "Catherine... Catherine... the feel of you steals my will, your scent entices me beyond anything I have ever known!" Trembling, he pressed his fingers in just a bit more. "Let me me guide your body..."

When Vincent moved her knees closer together and distributed his weight behind her, Catherine wished that she could step back somehow, just for a moment, and view the scene that was being played out. To be able to feel the velvet-soft hair on his inner thighs caressing her skin, holding her confined by the powerful columns of his legs, to hear his gasps of excitement, and feel his hot breath on the back of her neck, were the most completely erotic sensations she had ever experienced, as well as the most sexually arousing.

To enhance both his pleasure and her own, she drew another one of the bed pillows into her arms and rested her lower body across it, bringing her hips up to him in a posture of complete submission.

When she did that, Vincent's eyes narrowed impatiently, each breath he took and exhaled more ragged than the one before. He could wait no longer.

"Please raise up on the palms of your hands?" Saying that, he moved directly behind her. With one hand around her waist and the fingers of his other hand cradling his penis, he moved to join their bodies, then frowned. Pulling back, he looked down and sat back on his heels.

"Vincent?"

"Yes, love, please give me a... moment."

Knowing it to be a normal response to sexual stimulation, Vincent eyed the seminal fluid already seeping from his phallus without shame, then quickly rubbed the glossy wetness back into the tip with the pad of his thumb. Kindling the flames of his own desire, he forced himself to keep his eyes open, watching as he rolled the fleshy part of his thumb back and forth along the crown of his penis again and again.

Savoring the pleasure with every fiber of his being, a soft whimper escaped Vincent's tightly pursed lips. "Hmmm..." To be able to touch himself openly and without shame was enjoyable and oh, so gratifying, but it wasn't enough - not anymore.

Although he'd masturbated as the necessity arose over the years to relieve inner stress, he'd always felt shamed by the act. Bringing himself to orgasm had been the only avenue open to him then, and he took it when he had to. Now, it was no longer necessary. The seed that had been spent wastefully in years past could now nurture a child; had already nurtured one because of the trust of one woman. **His** woman.

Rising back on his knees, Vincent leaned forward over Catherine again. Whispering, "I love you," he clutched his penis firmly in his left hand, positioned himself, then slowly eased forward to guide the rigid staff just into her wetness. Ah, it felt so good.

Barely able to contain the urge to thrust forward, submerge himself and take her immediately, Vincent's entire body trembled with the effort he was making to temper his lust with patience.

In the dreams, this was the position of mating that he'd feared the most, thinking that to love in this way would bring out a side of him that was crude and coarse. Although he felt something rising in him that he knew well and had always feared in the past, this time Vincent accepted it for what it was - a part of him. Not governing him, nor dominating him, it was simply... there. The side of him that was 'unique' would *always* be with him, but that certainty no longer frightened him, nor would it ever again deter him from having the one thing he wanted most in the world: Catherine.

Joined to her as he was now, Vincent felt no malevolence reach out to ravage him, or to hurt her in any way. Her words had been the truth; no part of him could ever hurt her. Here, in this place, at this moment, there were two people making love. **Two people**. No one else. *Nothing else*.

Bending forward over Catherine, he supported her swaying breasts in a caressing palm, preparing her with the words, "Be still now, love, just for a moment." Locking one forearm around her waist, he tensed his pelvis, tilted hers up and slid deeply inside. "Ahh...!" Thrusting hard, then harder still, he quickly found his rhythm and deepened the strokes.

The first drive of Vincent's hips, dominant and utterly demanding, caught Catherine off guard, lifting her completely from the bed. Taking a firmer grip on the mattress, she redistributed her weight to her knees. Now adjusted perfectly to his forceful drives, she met each thrust, receiving him eagerly, which seemed to intensify his ardor. Arching and dipping her spine in cadence with the fierce rocking motions of Vincent's hips, she took all of him, matching him stroke for stroke, hunger for hunger, and passion for passion.

Abandoning himself to the feel of her softness sheathing his sex, Vincent eased his hold on her waist and shifted to a more erotic caress. Pressing his fingers in at the juncture of her thighs, he gently fondled the pulsing nub there and tightened his body the length of hers.

Very close to ejaculation now, he cherished the feel of his belly sliding along the softness of Catherine's flesh. Enjoying the differences in the textures and scents of their melded bodies, he leaned closer to touch his tongue to the curve of her ear. Biting down gently, he moaned, "Give me your love? Show me how much I please you, for your climax shall induce mine." The pressure of his fingers between her legs turned to one of urgency, probing harder and faster at the center of her heat. "Now, now, give it to me - help me

Vincent's sweetly imploring tone, telling her what he needed, combined with the way he was touching her, plundered Catherine's will. Rotating her hips, she arched backward to meet his downward motions once, then again, digging her nails into the taut muscles of his forearm. Shuddering, she surrendered completely to the force of his passion, her womb seizing around him as all of the blood in her body seemed to rush to her head. Sobbing his name joyously, she fell forward in his embrace.

"Oh, how I love you, how I want you!" Binding her to him desperately, Vincent straightened and began to take short, jabbing strokes, heightening his pleasure.

Enraptured by the sensation of her moistness caressing his rigid crown and the soft, slick noises their bodies made as he rolled his hips, he spread his legs as wide apart as he could. Using his great strength to lift Catherine higher with each upward drive of his body, he was swept up in the sensation of entering her, withdrawing, then gliding forward again.

With one tensed forearm clasped around her waist and the other gripping her at the hips, he fought to delay his orgasm as long as he could. Tossing his hair back over one shoulder, Vincent opened his eyes - which proved to be his undoing.

Illuminating his form and Catherine's, tiny fissures of light from the embers of the dying campfire in the outer room danced along the walls. Elongating as he watched them, the shadows on the stones stilled as he did, then moved again as he moved, darkly mirroring the tightly locked together forms swaying before them.

Finding the sight not only immensely stirring but also utterly arousing, Vincent couldn't tear his eyes away from the imagery. Coming face to face with them and the reality of exactly what he was doing, he watched the outline of his shoulders when he hunched his back, then let his focus slide from the curve of his belly where it was locked to Catherine's buttocks in a posture of orgiastic wantonness. Oh, he loved this - he reveled in it.

And just that quickly, witnessing this act of copulation with his own eyes unraveled the last of Vincent's restraint.

"It begins," he groaned thickly. "Oh, my love, tighten around me as much as you can, quickly... quickly! Hold me, hold me tightly!" When she did as he asked and tensed her inner muscles around him, Vincent tipped his hips up. Trembling against her as a familiar pressure built to one of necessity along his spine, an ecstatic sob rumbled from his throat.

Gathering his beloved into a tight embrace, he flattened his body to hers, moaning at the feel of his swaying testes impacting against her soft bottom with every roll of his pelvis. Seeking desperately to assuage his hunger, he locked his thighs solidly around her in a position of utter dominance.

"Catherine," he groaned, preparing her, "my release is very close. I don't know how much longer I can..." Stilling the motions of his hips for a single beat of his heart, Vincent's huge frame trembled in protest. 'No,' an inner voice demanded urgently, 'don't stop! Finish it. You need this. **We need this!**'

As the world seemed to tilt crazily and a lucent haze rose before his eyes, Vincent rocked forward again. With the need to achieve orgasm directing the actions of his body, his passion erupted outward. Straddling Catherine fiercely, he lifted to her once, again, then a third and final time. "Accept me - **now!**" Shuddering magnificently, he expelled his semen in a generous, sweetly pulsing warmth.

Panting open-mouthed and quivering with the effort it took not to collapse on top of Catherine with his full weight, Vincent tilted his body to the left. Unable to forbid himself the pleasure of one final, almost savage thrust, he continued moving within her, rolling his hips desperately as they tumbled sideways to the mattress.

Content to stay exactly as they were for as long as Vincent wanted to or needed to, Catherine lay her left cheek against one of the pillows and smiled to herself. Every muscle in her body was shrieking at her and she ached all over, but she considered it well worth it to have such a fantastic lover. She didn't give a tinker's damn how sore she was, and if she did wind up having eleven children, well then, she had them. Everything considered, raising eleven of his babies would be worth every single, nasty little stretch-mark that she ended up with, so there!

Feeling a surge of contentment rushing through their connection, Vincent tried to hone in on Catherine's emotions, but was still a bit too disoriented to focus his thoughts. Resting his mouth at the curve of her left ear, he found just enough breathe to ask, "Are you... alright?"

"Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?" A small hand reached around to pat his knee. "I'm perfectly wonderful." Stretching a little further, she curled her fingers into his belly and scratched it lovingly. "How are you?"

"I'm not sure." Very glad that she couldn't see his face right now, for he was blushing furiously, Vincent kissed the edge of her left shoulder. "Perhaps a bit unnerved by what just... happened."

"Why?"

"I was much too... forceful."

"You were **not** too forceful, you were passionate." Sighing happily, she continued, "There's a distinct difference in the two, believe me." Feeling his erection diminish, Catherine tensed her body. "Whoops."

"Exactly." Wincing as his dwindling flesh betrayed him, Vincent chuckled. "Farewell, my lovely."

"For now."

"Hmm."

As Vincent gently withdrew from her body, Catherine turned and brought one leg up over his right hip. Sighing, she wrapped her arms around his still trembling shoulders. "Oh, my wonderful, beautiful man." At the feel of his tears on her breast, she kissed him on the middle of the forehead, both eyelids, and then the tip of his nose. "Why are you crying?"

"For joy." Weeping quietly, Vincent wrapped her in his arms and nuzzled into the warmth of her body. "For the sheer, utter joy of knowing that I am finally and forever **free**."

Taking a last look around the outer chamber, Catherine picked up her backpack and hooked her free arm through Vincent's. "I'm ready when you are, I suppose."

Letting his eyes stray over her love-swollen mouth and then lower, to the small bruise on the nape of her neck, he shook his head, but said nothing.

Following the path his thoughts were taking and knowing exactly what he was thinking, Catherine rubbed her hand up along the middle of Vincent's back. "Stop."

"Stop what?"

"You know what. Worrying about me." Smiling up at him, she rocked back and forth on her heels. "I'm *fine*, really I am."

Knowing that she was being completely honest with him, Vincent's posture relaxed slightly. Giving her a somewhat shy look, he put one hand to his heart. "I can feel your contentment here."

"Yes, I know." Inspecting him matter-of-factly, Catherine smiled at the somewhat love-tumbled expression on Vincent's face. He looked utterly done in and very sleepy. Noting that two of his shirt buttons were in the wrong holes, giving him a wonderfully disheveled look, she bit back the urge to comment on it directly, saying only, "And even though I can't actually feel your contentment, I can, umm, see it."

"Oh?" Glancing at her, Vincent followed the path her eyes were taking. Oh, Lord. Shaking his head, he undid his shirt buttons and properly realigned them, remarking wryly, "It appears that I am not quite myself today."

Thinking that he looked absolutely adorable, but not daring to tell him that, at least right now, Catherine moved her fingers over his back then down his arm. Stroking it lightly, she asked, "And how are *your* wounds this lovely morning? I seem to remember scratching you, here and there.""

"Hmm, you did." Pursing his mouth and shrugging, Vincent tried not to smile. "My 'wounds' are throbbing nicely, thank you."

Bumping his hip with hers, Catherine giggled. "Yeah, but I'll be the one wearing high collars for at least a week. If Father inspects either one of us too closely, there's going to be hell to pay."

"No, I don't think so." Reaching down, Vincent picked up the last of the supplies.

"You don't? Why? What are you going to tell him?"

Seeming to consider that for a moment, Vincent tucked the supplies under his right arm. Taking her by the hand, he gave Catherine a look that warmed her from the top of her head to the tips of her polished toenails. "Knowing my reticence to discuss matters of a personal nature, I doubt that Father shall make any inquiries about what happened here between you and I."

"And if he does?"

"If he does, then I'll simply tell him that when people love each other as much as we do, Catherine, some situations can turn rather..."

"Ardent?" she offered, casting him an impish grin.

Laughing out loud, Vincent escorted her from the cave before answering. Straightening as they entered the corridor, he arched an eyebrow at her. "Yes, quite delightfully ardent, **my** Catherine, as I shall demonstrate to you again tonight in our chamber, and at every *possible* opportunity for many, many years to come."

"Promise?"

"Oh, yes. Willingly do I vow to keep this covenant between me and thee." Tilting her chin up, Vincent's eyes seemed to radiate heat as they met and held hers. "You see, my rose, you have removed all of the barriers behind which I contained my secrets." His eyes lowered to her mouth. "Knowing me as well as you do... now, you must accept what you have done, for there is no turning back."

Wrapping both arms around her, Vincent crushed her to his chest, whispering, "Know this, Catherine; I am not only the *man* who loves you as no other will ever love you, I am also a **uniquely** passionate one."

Far down the corridor, Mouse halted mid-step. Oh, oh. Hearing Vincent and Catherine approaching, he turned on his heel, beating a hasty retreat before they learned of his presence. Father had told him to 'check' on them. Didn't want to do that, but arguing with Father only wasted time, and words! Looking back over his shoulder, Mouse listened to the sounds of laughter echoing along the drab stone walls for a moment, then nodded. Sounded happy - *real* happy. Good. Now, he could tell grumpy old Father that Vincent and his Catherine were on the way home and that they were fine. Just fine.

Grinning to himself, Mouse scurried along the pathway muttering half aloud, "About time, too!"

END