

I KNOW YOU'RE OUT THERE SOMEWHERE

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CHAPTER ONE

REBIRTH

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

"Vincent! **VINCENT!**"

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

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

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

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

The beast that now had mastery of Vincent knew not the meaning of love - not the true meaning. The emotion called hope, to the enraged force that ruled now, was merely a word; a human word that held no interpretation for **him**. Yet, even a beast can suffer anguish, can feel the end of possibilities that had once been held most dear. This is what Vincent felt as he lay there dying. Breath ceased; the beat and soft rhythms of a great heart shuddered, and then all was still.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

for both of them. Could she do this for them? *COULD SHE?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

for it, but she better find some and very quickly, before Vincent sensed things he should not.

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

She was putting all her cards on the table, to use a gambling phrase, for this was a gamble. A big gamble. There were four aces in the deck and right now, Catherine knew she needed them **ALL!**

Joseph Maxwell looked up, then smiled, as Catherine stuck her head around the edge of his door. "Joe? Got a minute? I'd like to talk to you, it's very important."

Leaning back in his chair, Joe put both arms behind his head, grateful for the interruption. "Sure, always got time for you, Radcliffe. Besides, this case is gonna kill me! Sit down, take a load off."

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

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

"Okay. Tell me whatever you can, tell me what's wrong, Cathy?" He waited, sensing she needed a few moments to get her act together and give voice to her troubles, whatever they were.

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

She looked away for a moment, then continued, trying to be as honest as she could be, under the circumstances. "It's taking too much out of me, as well as hurting people I care for. People I ... love. I hope you'll understand, I don't want to quit, but if I stay ..."

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

For a moment, Joe didn't know **WHAT** to say. He'd never seen this strong lady this upset before, except when she lost her father. Ah hell, just when he had a new person broken in and doing a great job, they wanted to quit doing that job! He shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of acceptance; better having her work inside than not at all, she **WAS** good at what she did.

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

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

"Relax. No big deal." He grinned at her. "Rather have you tell me this **GREAT** news now, then have it waiting

for me when I got back! So, when would you want to drop the field work? Next week, next month?"

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

He nodded. "Montelli, right?"

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

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

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

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

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

So have you, pal. So have you."

As his sensitive ears picked up the slow, shuffling gait, Vincent knew it was his father. Capping his pen and putting it on the desk beside his journal, he glanced up smiling just as the man entered the chamber. "Father, it is late. I missed you at the evening meal. Please sit down, you seem very tired."

Carefully easing his sore leg out before him, Jacob Wells sat in the chair across from his son. Vincent noted his shoulders dropping in fatigue. "Did you have dinner at all, Father?"

"Oh yes, William was kind enough to save me a bit of stew." He passed one hand over his eyes. "I don't think you have heard, Elizabeth is quite ill. There was a message from her earlier, while you still slept. I was here, with you, when it came over the pipes. When Elizabeth asks for me, I know it is serious; she can be ... quite stubborn about caring for herself, you know."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hmmmmm, that was also my thought."

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

"I understand why you cannot."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shaking all over, Vincent sat up in bed, staring at the pictures still winking out slowly in his mind, still able to see the horror of them before him. Would this never end? Why was this happening to him, to Catherine? What did the dreams mean? *WHAT?* With a shudder, he lay back on the pillows, staring at the ceiling until he could breathe almost normally once again.

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

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

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

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

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

Just as Catherine entered the chamber, Father was coming from the second level, arms loaded with books. Reaching out to help him, her eyes were filled with concern. "Good morning, Father. I came to spend the day with Vincent as he agreed to yesterday, but he's not in his chamber. Do you know where he is, is he all right?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

was on his face, it frightened her.

Catherine dropped down next to him, leaning back on a large boulder.

"Vincent. Good morning."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leaping to his feet, turning away from her to gather his emotions in a firmer grip, he tried again. "What we shared has forsaken me, Catherine. Our bond ... the connection we had ... is gone."

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

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

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

Catherine gathered him into her arms as glistening teardrops ran down his face. There was a sorrow in Vincent's voice, an emptiness, that went beyond pain.

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

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

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

She embraced him with her soul. "For people who feel as we do for each other, there can be no true

aloneness, Vincent. I am always with you, as you are with me. Can't you see that? Can't you feel it?"

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

"I will ... try. I promise to try, Catherine." His arms came up hard around her waist, pinning her against him for a moment before dropping away hurriedly, as though afraid of hurting her.

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

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

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

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

Giving herself a mental shake, Catherine turned her attentions back to her book. Jenny had given this to her last month; now was the first chance Catherine had had to read it. This stanza was called '*Before You*'. She thought it was beautiful; the words perfectly in tune with her feelings for the man sitting opposite her on the bed.

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

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

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

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

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

and has.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"When you were so ill, in that cave, Vincent, I was with you. I ... stayed with you all night in there. Did anyone tell you?"

"Yes. Mouse did."

"Not Father?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Catherine threw herself against his arm, sobbing, trying to turn him from the wall. "Vincent, look at me, please look at me! Is there fear on my face or revulsion or pain? Or anything other than joy? I love you. Vincent, *I love you with everything I am or ever hope to become. I love you!*"

His head down, the words seemed to come from a place within him, Catherine did not know. "The shame I feel at this moment, is unimaginable. I have no memory of this. None at all! What can't I remember this, of all things - *HIS?*"

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

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

"No! Vincent, no! You're not listening to me, not hearing the *WORDS.*" Desperately trying to remove the look of panic on his face, Catherine dug her nails into the flesh of his hand. "You loved me as a man would have loved me, Vincent."

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

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

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

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

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

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

He pulled back gently, gazing down at her. The look of sweet shyness laced with passion in his eyes he made

no attempt to hide this time, made her so deliriously happy, she flung her arms around his neck with total abandon, sobbing with pleasure.

"Hold me, Vincent, just hold me!"

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

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

"Hey, Cathy! Over here ..."

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

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

Catherine slid into the booth opposite her old pal and reached for the menu.

"I'm starving! Did you order yet?"

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

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

Sitting back with a groan, Catherine picked at the last bit of bread and put it down. "Oh, I can't swallow another bite or I'll explode!"

Jenny wiped her mouth on a lined napkin and took a long swallow of iced tea. "I've never seen you eat like that, Cath. God, where do you put it? I'd weigh a *jillion* pounds if I ate as much as you just did! *TWO* desserts?"

"Oh, don't remind me! I'll have to live on lettuce and water the rest of the month! Ohhhhhhh." Catherine settled down against the booth's smooth leather back. "Before I forget, Jen, thanks for that book of poetry. You'll never know how much I really appreciated it."

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

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

her in return?"

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

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

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

"Hey, tell me who he is?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Catherine ..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And so many things you already give me, just by being ... with me, as you are, right now." Bending over, she brushed her lips over his hands, kissing the palms with a featherlight caress.

He threw his head back, gasping as her soft kiss burned him, sent hot blood coursing through his body as a devouring thirst he could barely control. "Catherine!"

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

Clutching him around the neck with great will and determination, Catherine forced him to look at her. "Oh yes, I must, Vincent. I love you and I *WILL* touch you! I hope you can get used to that idea. I *WILL* touch you!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nothing. Vincent, huh?"

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

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

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

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

"Ahh, yeah. Did something?"

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

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

something? Taken? Borrowed?"

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

"Yeah, got lost too! Father yelled ..."

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

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

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

"Huh? Via ..."

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

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

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

"Okay, fine. Five?"

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

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

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

Mouse laughed to himself, knowing Vincent, at times, felt the same way. '*Too many words and not enough action could try one's soul beyond patience*'; Vincent had said that once to Father. Mouse grinned; he could still hear Father *discussing* Vincent's words, even now. Loud, too!

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

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

"Good." The man went to the desk; sitting down as he reached for a rolled up collection of old, fragile looking

maps and notations. "As long as Mouse understands what is needed and does *NOT* go wandering off by himself, as he usually does!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"When are you planning to leave?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I cannot, I'm sorry. It still brings too much pain to put into words ..." Vincent shook his head slowly.

"Catherine and I must resolve this ... impasse, Father."

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

I admit that. I miss the woman."

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

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

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

Catherine slammed the pen to the desk, tearing up the sixth page of yellow, legal paper in the last hour. "*DAMN IT ANYWAY!*"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Getting to her feet, Edie reached out, hugging Catherine hard for a minute, before starting out of the office. At

the door, she stopped, throwing a last remark over her shoulder. " 'sides, *IF* he does hurt me, my Gramma Wylie knows *LOTS* of voodoo spells! *SHE'LL* turn him into a great, big old *TOAD!* See ya Monday morning. Don't work too hard."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

eyes.

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

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

"Vincent?"

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

Catherine didn't go to him, didn't embrace him as she usually did. She stayed where she was, looking carefully at him; he had said he wouldn't come here again and he *was* here. Why? "It's so late, even for you. Is anything wrong?"

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

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

Vincent moved so quickly, he startled her. He sank to his knees in front of Catherine, dropping his head nearly to her lap. "I cannot bear to be without you. I do not know what to ... do anymore, or what is true anymore, not without you at my side."

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

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

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

"Oh, Catherine!"

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

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

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

with more confidence than before.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Taking his hands in hers, she drew him down to his knees in front of the blazing fire. The reddish glow of the coals merely heightened Vincent's striking attractiveness in Catherine's eyes. His extraordinarily strange, yet wonderful aura of shy sensuality, never ceased to fascinate her, to entice her like a moth to the flame that was the man himself.

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

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

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

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

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

"Catherine, come here to me, please?"

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

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

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

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

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

Wrapping both arms about his neck, Catherine drew his head down to hers until their mouths were a breath apart.

"That's the first time you've ever called me that. I am your love, I'm glad you realize that fact, at last."

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

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

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

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

Shuddering, his arms tightened around her until she thought never to draw natural breath again. He drew back to look down at her with so much love on his face, it nearly overwhelmed her.

"Vincent, I love you, so much. I've never been so happy!"

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

"Never leave me?"

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

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

It was nearly dawn before Vincent could tear himself away; never had parting from Catherine been so painful, yet so filled with promise. The final kiss he gave her was from his soul.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What was it *exactly* about him that beckoned to her so strongly? Was it any one thing more than another, or simply all of him; his voice, that delicate huskiness that resounded in his chest when he spoke her name? Yes,

that could be part of his magnetism. Or was it his straight, muscular body? Even beneath all the layers of clothing he habitually wore as one would a coat of armor, Catherine could tell he was *not* a small man ... anywhere. She had been well aware of *THAT* for some time now. Maybe it was his eyes; for if eyes truly were the windows of the soul, this man's were sensual. He could do more to her with a look that another man could do with a whole evening of compliments and flowery praise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Goodnight, Father."

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

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

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

"Do you need any assistance, Catherine?"

He heard her gasp of embarrassment as he went to her side. "Vincent, how long have you ..."

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

"They are dangerous, as well." Catherine rubbed the end of her finger with her thumb unconsciously. She was startled as he took her hand into his, focusing his attention there.

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

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

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

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

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

Catherine put one finger to his mouth, smiling at him, sending to him all her love, all her trust. "Hush, my love. I know. I understand; did you think I wouldn't, Vincent?" Rising to her toes, she dropped a sweet, moist kiss on his lips, then stepped back.

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

"Will you take off your cloak?"

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

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

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

Then, Catherine came from the kitchen and he took his first, really close look at her since entering her

apartment. Whatever breath was left in his body deserted him in one, single gasp of pleasure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nothing. It is just ..." Hesitating, he turned to her.

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

"Being here with you, as I am now, my love, was part of the dream I had. To watch that dream unfold ... *become*, is beyond putting into words. I ..." He shook his head slowly, lowering it until he was enclosed in a golden curtain of softly cascading hair.

One betraying tear ran down his cheek. Leaning forward, Catherine took it on her tongue, cherishing the salty taste of his happy tears. "The words will come; don't worry, Vincent, you needn't really, you know."

Catherine lifted his head, holding his eyes with her own. "I share, *KNOW*, all your feelings. Each and every one of them. I do. They are a part of me, too. Don't you know that?"

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

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

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

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

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

Catherine opened her eyes to find him studying her face.

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

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

"You look at me, all you want."

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

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

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

"Catherine, what are you doing to me!"

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

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

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

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

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

Watching as his head went back, knowing he was rejoicing in these new sensations as much as she was. Catherine felt a joy so magical, it started her heart pounding almost too rapidly. To be finally able to give this gift to Vincent was wonderful, to watch his reactions, know his emotions were raging free and rampant at last, thrilled her beyond describing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Can't you tell from my reactions, how blessed it makes me feel, to know you *WANT ME* in this way; you do want me, don't you?"

He gave her a look of complete incredulity, not quite believing that she had to ask. "How could you ... even question ... that, Catherine?"

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

"Yes, I want you ..." He gave her a look of sultry innocence; an angel that longed for the fires of the inferno to consume him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They lay pressed thigh against thigh, heart to heart, belly to belly. Vincent grew unbelievably hard; more rigid, as he rocked above her hesitantly; as though almost expecting her to come to her senses, to change her mind and push him away, yet hoping she would not. Not now.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He shook his head. "Catherine ..."

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

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

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

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

"Vincent, you are breathtaking!"

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

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

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

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

Catherine snaked one hand between them to touch the buckle of his trousers. "Take these off, my love."

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

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

on the waistband of his pants, whispering, "Help me?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Understanding his need, Catherine licked softly against his ear, "Do what you want to do, my love. Don't worry or be upset by *any* feelings you have now, Vincent, I feel as you do, want what you want. You would never do anything that I don't want you to. I know it, I believe it. I love you and I'm here ... for you. Please ..."

Catherine took his hand and gently guided it down, against her inner thigh. "It's all right to want me in this way ..." Her eyes drifted closed as she waited for him to decide.

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

"Catherine, open your eyes ..."

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

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

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

"Your hands ..."

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

A scream of pleasure was torn from her throat, "*Oh, love!*" He didn't seem to be listening. He feasted on her, would never get enough of her, wanted more, wanted it all. Wanted it *now*.

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

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

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

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

Catherine laughed breathlessly. "My love, don't apologize, please. There's no need," she captured him into her arms, nuzzling hard against his flushed face. "No need at all, believe me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Peeking up, Catherine smiled, victorious, seeing the corded muscles of his neck stand out even more. Hips

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

"Yes, oh ... yes!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tears of joy ran from his eyes; Catherine kissed them away with a tenderness that made him only weep all the more. "Oh my love, what did you do ..."

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

"Rest now, my love."

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

"I need you, Catherine."

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

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

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

"There may be some pain, I can't lie about that, my love, but it's only natural. It's ... it's been a long time. Please don't be afraid." Her words, her loving look, gave him the courage to continue.

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

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

"Oh, my love ..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My Catherine," he whispered.

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

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

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

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

His back arched higher and higher, she matched his stroke for stroke, in erotic counterpoint to each other. The

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One of Catherine's hands combed through his hair, smoothing it. "And I, you."

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

"Sleep now, my love ..."

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

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

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

END