

O SWEETEST SONG VERSE THREE

LOVE WITH ALL THE TRIMMINGS

by Trisha Kehoe

*For, I'll decode every breath and every sigh til your every lover's wish is fulfilled before it's made.
Toss in some jealousy and doubt, should it be required--not rest till there;s nothing else desired.
Thus, loving as I do, never, never, will you ever be untrue, having love with all the trimmings waiting
home for you.*

Smiling at his beloved as she entered the chamber, Vincent shifted the small bundle of energy named Jacob to the crook of his left arm as he reached to embrace Catherine with his right one. "Good evening, my love."

Catherine hugged him in return. "Hello, guys. How are my two wonderful men tonight?" She reached out and ran one hand over her son's face.

Vincent smiled at her quip. "We... guys... are well. I apologize for not meeting you at the threshold, but just as I was about to leave, Jacob decided to knock everything, including the inkwell, off of my desk onto the floor."

Rolling his eyes quite dramatically, looking put upon, he continued, "And *then*, he tried to drink the ink!"

"Vincent?" Catherine teased, "Is that the latest diet here in the tunnels ... ink, instead of milk?"

All she got for a response was a grunt as Vincent tried to keep his squirming son from climbing out of his arms and up to the top of his head.

"Great God and all the saints in Heaven, this child is never still!" he groaned.

"Must be in the genes. Easily excited, just like his father." Catherine glanced slyly at Vincent as she dropped her briefcase and pocketbook to a nearby chair.

Giving her what she termed '*the look*,' ignoring her obvious taunt, Vincent asked, "And your day? It went well? I felt your unrest earlier." His eyes were full of loving concern as he dropped a kiss to the top of her head.

Catherine snuggled up against him. "Oh, the morning was okay, but the afternoon was a mess!" She sniffed indignantly. "Joe was on his high horse all afternoon, insisting I lost the Mills file, and it was on *his* desk all the time! Maybe if he cleaned that tar pit once in awhile, he'd be able to find things! And to top it off, he had the gall to give me a work load from hell for the weekend, knowing I was going to be spending time..."

When Jacob reached out his chubby arms towards her, impatient to be held, Catherine's train of thought changed, as did her priorities. Her morose expression altered to one of happiness as she embraced her baby.

"Hi, you little imp. Come here and give Mommy a big kiss."

Throwing himself into her arms, Jacob did just that. Drooling as all teething children did at this age, the boy laughed as he snuggled into his mother's arms. Reaching out to his father, Jacob grabbed a handful of his favorite toy - Vincent's hair. Wincing slightly, easing his hair free of his son's grasp, Vincent nestled both the boy and Catherine into his lap as he sat in the chair by his desk.

"Well, you are home now and safely away from your office." Vincent tightened his embrace. "Your workload is a predicament easily remedied."

"Easily remedied?" Catherine pouted. "I'll be buried in these files all weekend!"

"Not necessarily," Vincent replied. "Perhaps if I assist you, the burden of work will summarily decrease?"

Catherine jabbed him lightly in the ribs. "If you help me, I won't get any work done at all!" Eyes aglow with possibilities, Vincent looked at her knowingly, agreeing. "I know, but think of the time you'll have, explaining that to Mister Maxwell. You could always tell him that you had... other priorities."

Having no answer for that, Catherine nestled against him, stroking Vincent's hair with one hand, she rested the other on their baby's diapered bottom, sighing, "Oh, it's so good to be home."

Taking one hand in his, Vincent kissed the tip of each of Catherine's fingers. "It is good to have you home - always."

He sighed heavily. "Our day was rather like your own, in its way. Our son and I had a rather... disquieting... time with his grandfather. It was a thoroughly disconcerting morning."

Leaning back, weaving one hand through his hair, Catherine looked up into Vincent's eyes, smiling as they darkened with barely restrained desire.

"Disquieting in what way? What happened?"

Vincent shook his head in exasperation.

"Our son decided that he would rather dine on one of his grandfather's books than have it read to him," Vincent explained, unable to conceal a look of bemusement.

"Oh no!" Catherine gasped. "Father must have been livid!" Taking Jacob to the bed, she gathered up the pillows and lay down to ease the tenseness in her back.

"No, not really."

Grinning openly now, Vincent displayed his wonderful teeth with none of his usual reticence.

"Livid came a bit later when our son humiliated me further, by attempting to chew on Father's very bristled chin."

Disregarding Catherine's delighted howls, Vincent spoke as solemnly as he could, given the circumstances.

"It wasn't humorous, Catherine. It was quite a scene. Father needs his chin."

Meeting her eyes just as she wiped tears of laughter away, Vincent's shoulders began shaking suspiciously. As a rumbling roar threatened to burst to the surface, he collapsed next to Catherine on the bed, rocking back and forth gleefully.

"Oh, if you could have seen Father's face as he tried to save his beard! He looked quite disenchanted with his ordeal, remarking that being a grandparent at times did seem to have its... drawbacks."

Trying to look serious and failing miserably, Catherine giggled.

"Oh, the poor man, he's had a lot to put up with since I moved Below, hasn't he?"

As an unexpected look of pain swept over Vincent's face, she tipped his face down to search his eyes. "What is it?"

Vincent shook his head slowly, unable to answer. Waiting, Catherine stroked the side of his face, knowing he would voice his thoughts eventually. Vincent looked a bit ragged about the edges. Coping with a baby has got to be a hassle at times, even for him, although he would never have admitted to that fact.

Even now, after all these months of being totally united with this oh, so special man, Catherine knew there were days when Vincent was still a bit overwhelmed by all the changes in his life. A child of his own and her living with him brought him joy, this she knew, but even Vincent got fatigued sometimes from all the responsibilities he shouldered. Lying quietly beside him, Catherine rubbed her hand along Vincent's back, then lower to his thigh, loving him so much it hurt. It physically hurt. But, as Bridget O'Donnell had remarked, *'Twas such a sweet pain.'*

Relaxing against her, loving her hands on him, Vincent sighed audibly. "Oh, Catherine, how I love your touch."

"As I love yours." Sweeping his lush hair back away from his face, she urged, "Tell me what you're thinking."

"Of our lives... of Jacob..." Vincent's eyes glowed as they focused on Catherine's face. "Of loving you,

of having you here with me as you are now in this way... in my arms... in my ... our bed."

As their son seemed content to lay quietly next to them, listening to the two people he loved even more than his favorite teddy bear, Vincent slid down in the bed until he was nose to nose with Catherine.

Brushing his mouth softly over hers, he continued, "I sometimes lay here at night in bed, thinking to awaken one morning and find that this life with you has all been a dream, a beautiful, breathtaking spell. But then... then, I look over from my pillow and you are here, next to me."

"I'll always be here," Catherine promised, as she moved her fingers along his thigh. "Always. There's no other place for me, Vincent. There never will be." Undone by the look of love she gave him, Vincent wrapped Catherine into a fierce embrace, completely overcome.

Shifting closer to him, she spoke aloud without realizing she did it. "With you, I have love with all the trimmings..."

Vincent pulled back slightly to give her a puzzled look. "I don't understand what you mean by that phrase, my love."

"Oh, it's just the title of a song, that's all. But, the words fit us. They really do. Especially now."

"Can you tell me these words?" Vincent asked, completely enthralled.

Each and every unknown part of Catherine's life she shared with him, even a song she enjoyed, made Vincent feel that much closer to this beautiful woman. How had he lived before having her in his life? Indeed, had he been alive, at all? As Catherine began to sing the words, Vincent pulled her more solidly against his chest; loving the feel of her, the sense of her that surrounded him. Her love gave him so much... It gave him life itself. It always would. Her love and her trust were things he would never take for granted... never. Others had untold riches, endless wealth, jewels, thrones. Vincent didn't need any of these treasures; he had his own... he had the best of them all.

Only **he** had Catherine. Calming his trembling by sheer strength of will, listening to her soothing voice, Vincent turned away from the darkly brooding thoughts of the time he'd nearly lost this woman; of the year he'd nearly lost everything.

When the song ended, Vincent thanked her for sharing it with him, then seeing their son had fallen asleep, he rose, picked Jacob up and started toward the small antechamber adjoining theirs. After placing their child in his cradle, Vincent re-entered the chamber just as Catherine was changing her clothes. After helping her remove her jacket, he went to his knees and took off her shoes; laughing along with her when the hair on his hands tickled her toes.

Looking up at her, Vincent's expression grew serious. "I understand now what you meant about the words of that song, my love. The words do fit our life, don't they? When I think of all the time wasted... I wasted, because of my doubts and fears..." He hesitated, consumed with guilt.

Catherine touched his face gently, sensing his remorse. "That time wasn't wasted, Vincent. We learned from it. The doubts and the fears were overcome, yours and... mine."

"Yours..." Taken aback, Vincent's eyes searched hers. "I didn't know you had any fears, regarding me."

"Oh, not **of** you. But, I wasn't sure I'd be able to live here with you, like this. I failed the first time I tried, remember?"

Nodding, Vincent replied, "Yes, of course I remember. But, that was a time of much turmoil for you, Catherine. The loss of your father frightened you. It was not the right time for us. Not then."

"Yes. Well, now is the right time?" Catherine hugged Vincent so tightly he grunted, surprised at her strength. "I've learned that without you, there is no life for me anywhere, not anywhere at all. I love you so much, Vincent."

"I know." He looked at Catherine so yearningly, she shivered. "Your love is reciprocated... without end."

Losing herself in the only pair of eyes that could always take her breath away, Catherine stretched widely, arching one eyebrow at him. "Now, speaking of love with all the trimmings..." Murmuring

words only Catherine would ever hear, Vincent gladly, joyously, allowed himself to be drawn into the web of the exquisite seductress luring him down on the bed.

Later that evening, after Catherine had fallen asleep in his arms, Vincent scanned her body contentedly. Watching her breasts rise then fall, moving slightly as she breathed, in and out, he thought, *How courageous this woman is. It is astounding to have such a woman love me as she does; to love me enough to bear my child; Oh such a beautiful child. Catherine gave up her world to live in mine, vowing it wasn't a world that held anything in it she needed anymore.* He studied her face as she slept. *Dear God, what have I ever done to deserve such a woman?* It had taken almost three years, but finally Vincent had allowed himself to believe Catherine's words were the truth. His trust in her freed both of them. Vincent lifted his head, smiling at the memory. Catherine's love freed both of them, with a bit of help from Narcissa. As sleep claimed him, Vincent's thought drifted back over the years preceding this was.

THE FIRST BREACH IN THE WALL...

"Catherine, what have you done?!" As Vincent's moist tongue gently brushed the center of her palm, Catherine froze, not daring to believe he was touching her in this way. Feeling her trembling, thinking it was in apprehension, or even fear of him, Vincent lifted his head, meeting her wide-eyed stare. Unable to prevent it, he swayed toward her for the space of a single heartbeat, then made as if to move away; unhappily aware of the situation he'd created with his lack of restraint.

He was mortified. *Dear God, what had he just done?*

Capturing his chin between her fingers, Catherine stared into Vincent's face, searching for an explanation. She had to know! Had he kissed the blood away from her skin impulsively, or had it been more than an instinctive gesture?

Oh, please, she thought, let what I'm sensing in him be true. Vincent DOES love me, I know he does. Let him show me. Oh please, let him tell me... now. The jangling of the doorbell broke the spell, once again leaving Catherine thwarted in her attempts to lead the one she loved towards a more solid, loving and less confined relationship.

Every time they finally managed to take one step forward, she and this beautiful man she loved were always pushed back two steps. The damnable ringing of her telephone, the doorbell or life in general intruded, shattering the moment of longing between them. Catherine knew Vincent not only loved her, he wanted her very much. Although he seemed incapable of giving voice to his feelings yet, or was unwilling to, fearing rejection, she knew he did love her. She was a woman, how could she not know that? That night, as she bent to answer the door, Catherine vowed that she'd find a way through the seemingly impenetrable barriers that stood between them. No matter how long it took, no matter what sacrifices had to be made, she would make them. For him, she would!

THE SECOND BREACH...

Catherine looked over to Vincent from where she was sitting on his bed. Her voice was filled with longing.

"And when he kissed me, just for an instant, some small part of me responded, and I wished...I wished it was... you."

As she spoke the dearest dream of her heart, and of his, Vincent's eyes blazed into Catherine's. *She wished Elliot's kiss had been HIS instead? Could that be true? As Vincent's eyes searched hers, he knew in an instant that her words were not merely words. She did desire him. Him... not Elliot Burch!*

A hard core of envy began to dissolve from around his soul as Vincent felt her words heal his despair. Though his left palm still bled and the pain went deep, the pain and grief he'd felt to his soul eased. The gift Catherine gave Vincent with her quiet words left him bereft of a response. *What could he say to her?*

When she had gone Above for the night, Vincent sat in his chamber quietly pondering Catherine's words for many hours. *Did she realize what her words meant to him, he wondered? How much joy they brought; yet how much pain?* Vincent lowered his head to his palms. Shame decimated him. He had doubted Catherine and had been suspicious of her relationship with Elliot Burch! He had been envious... jealous. **Jealous!** The humiliation he felt lingered still, dishonoring him... dishonoring Catherine. *How could he have doubted her?*

This beautiful woman gave him everything... everything. Her trust, her confidence, her love. Wasn't that enough? How greedy was he, Vincent wondered, not to be satisfied with what he already shared with Catherine? He knew he would have to be satisfied with the warmth of her devotion and caring. To even dare to dream of more than that, was something he must never do. Yet, dare to dream of her in a physical way was something Vincent had been doing more and more these last months. Those wondrous, yet oh so envious dreams, were destroying him an inch at a time.

When the sensations of what had passed between Catherine and Elliot earlier this night swept through him, Vincent thought the pain would rip his soul in two. He'd been unable to breathe at the moment Elliot's lips claimed Catherine's. To taste her... For a moment, Vincent had been certain his own envy would reach out and crush him as that kiss tore through his heart, he'd felt it that strongly. At that moment, he had wanted to die. The agony of feeling that kiss was nearly the end of him. To know Catherine's mouth was pressed to that of another.

A look of irony passed over Vincent's face. Just then, he'd almost thought of himself as a man. How incredible. It was almost... amusing. *Was he beginning to believe Catherine's truths then, instead of those he'd held sacrosanct his entire life? He wanted to believe her words. Was he a man?*

Catherine said he was, but Father wasn't quite as certain. Father was a doctor, a man of medicine. Surely he would know, wouldn't he? Resting his head against the back of his chair, Vincent's long, amber-colored hair cascaded down over his shoulders as he gazed at the vaulted ceiling over his head.

His eyes filled with tears of hopelessness. *Dear God, what was the answer?* Vincent knew he and Catherine must find a solution to his disharmony between his head and heart before he lost not only his mind, but everything he held most dear... Catherine. *How he loved her!*

A frustrated rumble rose from Vincent's chest. He'd sought answers to the dilemma facing him in books, in retrospective reasoning, and in discussions with Father. If there were answers to be found, something kept him from unearthing them.

What were he and Catherine going to do? She needed love, emotional and physical love. Vincent wanted her so desperately, it went beyond sensible thought. What could he do to end this cruel and frustrating impasse? How could he smash the barriers that separated them when he didn't know for certain he would not harm her in any way?

Catherine's words resounded in Vincent's head again and again. 'I wished it was you... you... you...' until he thought to go quite mad. With no true purpose or direction intended, Vincent's body exploded from his chair. Jerking the cloak free from where it hung, he strode from the chamber

Eyes opaque with the curse of cataracts looked up to the ladder that led into this humid grotto.

Smiling in welcome, Narcissa put one hand on the shoulder of her favorite tunnel resident.

"Vincent! How long it has been since your feet last led you here to visit me. It is good to see you."

Returning the comforting touch, Vincent lowered himself to one of Narcissa's rickety chairs, hoping it

would suffer his weight.

"And you, Narcissa? Are you well?"

"Ah, as well as I can be for one so old. I am... as I am." Narcissa put the wooden bowl, part of the stock and trade of her rituals, to one side and sat down facing her troubled friend. "Now, tell me. Why has despair led your feet here this night, child?"

"You sense that in me?" Vincent questioned, his voice shaking.

"Vincent," Narcissa wagged her finger at him. "You cannot conceal your misery from me as easily as you usually manage to hide it from the Father. I know you."

"Do you, Narcissa? Can you?" Vincent's words were said with bitterness and self-loathing. Narcissa waited for Vincent to continue, but he said nothing more.

Reaching up around her neck, Narcissa removed a small pouch, opened it and cast several unidentifiable bones to the table. A look of horror came over her face.

"This tumult within you will destroy both you and the woman you love. It will strip your soul, Vincent. Heed my warning." Narcissa brushed her fingers over his heart, tapping lightly. "The conflict here will demolish you and all you love if you allow it to continue much longer. Be cautious, Vincent. I cannot warn you again."

"The... conflict, as you call it, has already defeated me, Narcissa." As Vincent lowered his head dejectedly, his billowing mane fell forward, shielding his face. "I would be lost without Catherine, yet if I dare to love her as she deserves to be loved... it could mean her death." Vincent felt the tears well up in his eyes. "Narcissa, I cannot fight my way through this, or find a path that leads me safely around my fear toward the light of Catherine's love and what it would bring to both of us." Scalding tears fell to his suede cloak as he whispered, "There is no path. None that is safe for Catherine."

Turning her head away, looking to a place only she could see, for a moment Narcissa said nothing; as if she were making a momentous decision. With a murmur of unintelligible words, she got to her feet. Going to a battered, square oak trunk, the conjurer of the tunnel world opened the creaking lid and peered down into the chest's contents. Lifting out a small vial filled with purple liquid, Narcissa turned and purposefully lay the bottle in Vincent's palm.

"You need sleep. Drink this tonight. It will bring sleep. It will also bring you into the realm of dreams. Dreams unlike any you have ever had before."

Staring down at the thick fluid, Vincent's voice sounded just a bit skeptical. "I know you mean well, Narcissa, and I do thank you for your effort on my behalf, but how can this elixir bring any consolation? Dreams are merely dreams, not reality. They solve nothing."

"No?" Narcissa smiled at him shrewdly. "Then you have been dreaming the wrong dreams, child. You've dreamt Father's dreams and Devin's, and those of others in your life. Now, Vincent, it is time you dreamt your own."

Back in his chamber, Vincent, for the first time since he was very young, didn't toss and turn as he usually did before finding respite in slumber. The liquid given him by Narcissa had tasted surprisingly sweet, not bitter as he'd expected it to be. He'd done exactly as she'd instructed him to, finishing every drop in the small vial before laying it on the desk next to his bed. Sighing heavily, Vincent ran his tongue over his lips and rolled onto his right side. Folding his arms across his breast, he was quickly and deeply asleep.

THE TRIMMINGS...

A presence in the chamber brought Vincent awake. Jolting upright on the bed, his eyes darted back and forth around the room. Someone was here! Leaping to his feet, a growl of forewarning tore from

his throat.

Just at the edge of the statue of Justice near the chamber entrance, Catherine stepped quickly out of the shadows, whispering, "Vincent, it's me, Catherine. I'm sorry if I startled you."

"Catherine," Vincent gasped, as he struggled to calm his pounding heart. "What...is anything wrong? Why are you..." He swept one hand before him. "Here?"

"I... I'm not sure. One moment, I was asleep..." She looked confused. "The next, I was standing outside of your chamber. Something... a voice... called out to me, saying you needed me. That I must come down, and right away..." Reaching out, Catherine touched Vincent gently on the shoulder. "I'm fine, if a bit baffled. Are you all right? You look slightly dazed."

Realizing that he was dressed only in his nightshirt, Vincent blinked, embarrassed. Yanking the quilt from the bed, he wrapped it securely around himself.

"Yes, I am fine...now." Shaking off the last residue of sleep, Vincent came more fully awake.

Narcissa's potion had been quite strong, yet he couldn't recall any of his dream. How disappointed Narcissa would be to learn her powers weren't all she thought they were.

Seeing he was still disoriented, Catherine apologized. "I'm sorry for disturbing you." She turned for the chamber entrance. "I'll go..."

"No," he whispered, the tone one of entreaty. "Please do not go. Can... can you stay for a little while? Talk with me? Perhaps we can discuss what... what exactly disrupted your sleep..." Vincent waited, his face awash with yearning. *Just to have her close would ease his disquietude*, this he knew. A feeling of selfishness swept through him.

"I am... sorry, Catherine. It was thoughtless of me to voice such a request. I look into your eyes and can see how tired you are."

"Don't apologize, Vincent," Catherine replied. "Yes, I was tired, but I'm not now." She smiled at him warmly. "I'd like to stay. It's not often we get a chance to talk here alone, without..."

"Alone, without constant imediments to privacy?" Vincent finished her thought.

"Yes."

Turning his desk chair to face Catherine, Vincent settled his long frame into it. He motioned toward the bed. "Please sit down. I don't know exactly what or who brought you here tonight, but I am glad to see you. To have you here again so soon is..." His voice trailed off.

A sense of embarrassment replaced Vincent's excitement at having Catherine with him again so unexpectedly. Nervously wetting his lips with the tip of his tongue, easing their dryness, Vincent looked at the woman he cherished beyond life.

"Would you like to tell me of the sounds you heard that urged you here tonight? Or we could speak of... other things?"

"Other things?" she repeated thoughtfully. "Yes, I would like to discuss something with you, Vincent." Sitting on the edge of the bed, Catherine laughed softly. "Deja vu. It seems I was just sitting here like this a few hours ago."

"Yes," Vincent's eyes met hers for a moment, then darted away. "I... remember."

"I know you do." Catherine's eyes lowered to Vincent's fingers, they were curled tightly around the arms of his chair. Reaching over, she touched him lightly on the back of one hand. "Since you've given me the opportunity, I think we should talk about what I said to you earlier tonight..." Her voice trailed off as his face took on a closed expression.

Catherine knew Vincent was shielding himself from her emotions. His voice was awash with pain as he finally replied, "What would you have me say to you?"

"Tell me how you felt when I told you I'd wished it was you kissing me, instead of Elliot."

"Tell you... how..." Vincent's jaw muscles visibly tightened. "There are no words for what I felt at that moment." His voice was husky as he answered; disheartened. "Even if I could clarify them, some of my words would frighten you, Catherine. They... they frighten me."

Looking at him calmly, Catherine answered. "You give words too much power over you, Vincent."

"Words can only frighten you if you allow them to. There is nothing between us that can't be talked about. Nothing you could say to me would ever make me fear you, or turn away from you, you know that."

When Vincent didn't answer, Catherine tried again. "Did you want to kiss me?" she asked again, barely keeping her emotions from flooding their bond.

The single word was said so shyly, so hesitantly, it nearly broke her heart. "Y... yes..."

"What stopped you?"

Vincent looked away, unable to meet her eyes. "Stopped me? You know what stopped me. Fear."

"Fear of what would happen, of what could happen, if you listened to your heart instead of your head? Your apprehension of hurting me holds that much sway over you, then?"

Vincent nodded silently.

With a determined look, Catherine got to her feet. Moving to stand behind Vincent's chair, she wrapped both of her arms around his neck, feeling the muscles tense as she did.

"Vincent, I know your fears bring you great pain and anguish. I've told you time and again, that you could never hurt me. **Never**. How can I make you believe that?"

Fighting to deny what her touch did to him, Vincent closed his eyes. "There is no way to... to make me believe what I cannot bear to even think of!" He leaned forward slightly, thinking to free himself of Catherine's arms, but she held onto him.

"Yes, there is. I've heard it said that seeing is believing..." Moving to stand in front of him, Catherine touched the edge of the quilt Vincent had wrapped around him. "Do you really need this?"

"I... I am not clothed properly for your company." Vincent's face wore a look of utter astonishment mingled with alarm. He clutched the end of the quilt closer. "Catherine, please... don't..."

As if she didn't hear him, Catherine continued to hold one edge of the quilt as she spoke. "Did Father ever tell you of the dilemma he found himself in the night those horrible people invaded the tunnels? The night that disturbed child shot you?"

"No," Vincent replied. "He merely said that with the help of a competent nurse, he removed the bullet from my shoulder without too much blood loss."

Catherine smiled down at him. "Vincent, *I was that 'competent nurse'*. I asked Father not to tell you. I didn't want to distress you. Now, I think it's time you learned all of what happened that night. I wouldn't leave you; even when Father ordered me out of the hospital chamber. I didn't leave. How could I? Mary wasn't here, he had no one to help him. I insisted on staying. So, knowing you would bleed to death while he argued with me, Father didn't have much choice in the matter. He let me help him.

Breathing harshly, Vincent gripped the arms of the chair even more firmly. "**He let you help?** What did you... do?" he asked, not really wanting to know. He felt sickened as bile rose in his throat.

Catherine had seen him! No... No!

Catherine's voice was gentle. "The bullet had gone very deep, Vincent. I helped Father remove your vest and your shirt. I have seen you, your chest, your abdomen and your arms. There was nothing about you that frightened me."

His moan of shame brought Catherine to tears. She clasped his hand with hers. "Vincent, there is nothing... nothing... about your body that is not pleasing to me. Do you hear me? To me, you are beautiful. You always will be."

"How could Father do that? How could he allow you to see me, knowing my wishes in this matter?!" Vincent leapt to his feet as though to run from the room.

As he did, his feet tangled in the quilt. He ended up sprawled backward on the bed, looking up into Catherine's tear-stained face.

"Oh, Vincent..."

Just as he flung one arm over his face, he managed to gasp, "Please, leave me now. You must..."

"Why must I go?" Hoping to ease his feelings of embarrassment, Catherine gathered Vincent into her arms. "Why do you always send me away at the very moment you need me with you the most?" "You must not see me... like this." Turning on his side, away from her, Vincent's words were a snarl of agony. **"Leave me ...NOW!"**

"NO!" Catherine sobbed. **"Not this time! Not ever again!"** Edging closer to him, she touched one side of Vincent's face. "I love you as you are. I love your long, beautiful hair, your wonderfully expressive hands, your eyes. Your teeth fascinate me. I want to touch you **everywhere**. I love all of you, Vincent. **ALL** of you!"

With catlike agility, Vincent snatched one of Catherine's wrists between his fingers. Curling his nails into her skin just enough to make her conscious of them, he snapped, **"So, you love these hands?"**

"Yes. They are a part of you."

Knowing she must face the truth at last, Vincent dug his nails in a bit deeper. **"And if I should try and love you, and my nails should accidentally injure you, would you still love me then, Catherine?"**

"I won't answer such a question, Vincent."

His eyes bored into hers relentlessly. "Why not? It is a possibility." Vincent splayed his fingers out on the bed between them. "These hands were not made for loving a woman, they were made to tear flesh, to maim enemies."

Brushing away his tears, Catherine lay her mouth against his ear. "You have just answered your own question, my love. Yes, your hands can hurt... **enemies**. And that very reason is why you could never hurt me. Your hands are powerful, they can hurt or even bring death when necessary to anyone threatening; to an enemy."

Gently, Catherine kissed Vincent's face. "Oh love, don't you see? I am not an enemy. I'm not a threat. You love me. I **know** you love me. And that exceptional mind of yours has to accept fact as fact. When you love someone, there is no enemy, Vincent. There is only love."

Keeping his face turned from her, Vincent argued, "Yet, at the height of passion, does not all thought of a conscious level cease to exist? At that moment, would I remember where I am, what I'm doing? Who I am?"

"Yes, I think you would. Especially you... especially where I'm concerned," she insisted. "For you know how incredibly strong you are. To be aware of your strength, to have control over everything you do, gives you mastery over your own body. Can you believe me?"

Eyes frantic with hope, Vincent rolled over to face Catherine. "I want to believe you. Oh Catherine, how I wish I could..."

Seeing that her words were getting through to him, if only a little, Catherine pressed him her final argument quickly, without warning. Gripping Vincent by the hair firmly with both hands, she kissed him hard on the mouth. Startled, Vincent began pulling away, but wrapping both arms fiercely around his neck, Catherine hung on, still kissing him. She probed between his lips for the tip of his tongue delicately, knowing he was already unnerved as it was from just the first kiss.

With her mouth hovering against his, Catherine whispered, "Don't be envious of something that is only yours to begin with. Vincent, I want your mouth on mine, nobody else's. Please? Don't agonize over what might happen. I'd never reject you, **never**. Oh love, kiss me."

With a moan of capitulation, Vincent ran his hands up Catherine's arms to her shoulders, pressing into the kiss fully with all of his energy. When that still didn't seem to get him close enough to her, he dropped his right hand to her waist, holding her firmly against his shaking body. Weaving the other hand through her hair, Vincent desperately tried to deepen the kiss.

His mind was whirling with colors that to him, were Catherine. Red, blues, golds, shades of purple, all ran together in Vincent's head, until all he was aware of was her mouth, her smell, her touch.

Catherine was in his head, in his soul, controlling him, teaching him... bringing him fully alive. From this point, Vincent could either move towards love or away from it forever. He chose the harder path...

for him. He moved toward love. As his body relaxed, Vincent let all of his apprehensions, let all the confusion go and trusted Catherine to keep them both safe.

Kissing the edge of her ear, he groaned, "I love you. Oh Catherine, how I want you... need you. Complete our bond, bring it full circle? Love me, teach me how to love you. What to do?"

"Yes, my love, my beautiful Vincent." Catherine's fingers began edging down. First teasing at the bottom edge of his nightshirt, she then slid one hand underneath, touching Vincent as no woman had ever touched him before, as no other woman but Catherine would **ever** touch him again.

Sobbing with joy, Vincent arched his back, trying to bury his body in her gently moving fingers. "Yes. Oh, dear God! Again, yes, oh please, again!" As her love drew him onward, Vincent knew he was safe. He was home and had at last found and claimed his destiny. A woman... his woman... was touching him. With great patience and understanding, Catherine led Vincent forward in the next hours before dawn. They learned each other as all new lovers should, slowly, carefully, savoring each moment, sharing the joy, the wonder of each new discovery.

Catherine's body was lovely, warm and soft. With each piece of her clothing he shyly removed from her, Catherine felt his heart hammer against his ribcage harder and faster until he thought he would surely die of the pure pleasure of looking at her; of touching Catherine's body as he had never even dared to dream of doing. Her breasts were smooth and firm, the skin there warm against his palm as he hesitantly moved his thumb back and forth over the stiffening nipples. And still he wanted more. Easing down to rest half of his body on top of Catherine's, Vincent brought one of her breasts to his mouth. He began suckling gently, loving how she arched against him, needing more. More is what he gave...

The aroma of her sweetly-scented femininity enticed him. He was ravenous to savor all of this woman. Seeming to know intuitively what Catherine needed, he angled his mouth and began moving his tongue over her body. He was like one who had been thirsty his whole life. Catherine's acceptance and belief in him called forth something within Vincent that was essentially primal, yet not menacing in the slightest way.

He wanted to please her. This was a natural, normal drive. Vincent wanted to bring only pleasure to the one he loved, and that is what he would do.

When Catherine induced him to move higher on the bed, he did as she asked willingly, eagerly, having to know, anxious to learn everything. Everything.

As her small fingers knowingly enclosed his most private part, to caress his swelling solidity and slightly distended testes, Vincent nearly lost all power of rational thought. To be touched like this! To at last know what a woman's hands felt like against his body, was a sensation he had thought never to experience. And, as she had promised, Catherine's hands did not bring forth any beast from this special and unique being. There was no beast here in this chamber. There was only Vincent and his Catherine; lovers sharing their bodies, learning how to trust. Two courageous and special people now hovered on the brink of a fulfillment that would blossom from a bud of yearning, into a miraculous and wondrous rose of unconditional union.

As Catherine brought her feet up around his behind, Vincent centered his body carefully between her legs. For a moment, a look of uncertainty crossed his flushed face.

"Catherine, help me?"

Wrapping her fingers around his hips, his beloved brought him down to her until the crown of his phallus was nestled safely within her body. The sensation, the pleasure of being held thus was incredible. Vincent knew he was wanted, he knew he was loved.

As his masculinity throbbed, then lifted away from his body with a sense of urgency, seeking to go deeper, Vincent knew he had to move. Now he couldn't... wouldn't stop. Closing his eyes for a

moment, he took a long, deep breath. Holding it for the span of a single beat of his heart, Vincent exhaled and slowly sheathed himself fully in Catherine in a cautious, up and down rocking motion. The result of his action was immediate and wildly arousing. Their mutual cries of ecstasy nearly toppled Vincent over the edge of restraint. He fought to control what they both knew would be a swift and powerful orgasm. He needed this - they both did.

Catherine knew that for Vincent this first release would be quick. She explained quietly, reassuring him that everything would be all right. A rapid completion, the first time a man made love, was almost always anticipated. It brought no shame to him if that happened. Her reassurance freed him. His eyes never left hers as Vincent began to intensify his thrusting motions. Momentarily past the point of verbalizing his thoughts, he was at the edge of his passion. Even for him, there was a point beyond where desire would not be contained or denied. Gentility was, after all, merely a word, and hers... now... with Catherine, Vincent had no need of words. And his gentility was an innate part of Vincent, although until this moment, he had never really known that.

But, this was Catherine... he *would* be gentle. Lifting her body in trembling fingers, Vincent brought Catherine's hips completely off the bed, into his arms. His stroking deepened to a furied pace as she kissed his breast, his arms, any part of him she could reach. A consuming heat flared outward from Vincent's groin. It expanded tenaciously, developing moment to moment. Provocative, desire called to him, luring him to a place he'd thought never to be.

Ah... so this was passion! As his head went back, the muscles all along his powerful neck tensed. Instinct took control. As Vincent's hips tilted down, rocking harder and harder into Catherine's welcoming heat, his eyes went wide... staring into nothingness as he grasped what desire in all of its myriad forms could do.

Knowing he was struggling against fulfillment, still fearing the loss of all restraint, Catherine sobbed his name, pleading with him.

"Now, love. Don't deny what you need, what you must have. I want all of you, all of you..."

"Catherine...?" he moaned, locking his eyes to hers, fighting to hold back. "Catherine..." he repeated, this time as a sob of disbelief. He began tumbling into a void that stole his very will. Hunching his shoulders, Vincent's powerful back arched.

With a final cry of her name, "**Catherine!**" Vincent plunged into the radiance of her love. Releasing all authority over himself into her custody, Vincent's orgasm was explosively intense. As the ejaculation seized him to the soul, he barely heard Catherine scream his name as she achieved completion in the same moment he did.

Shuddering, as the last minute shocks of consummation coursed through him, Vincent rested his forehead against Catherine's, fighting for breath. Tears of joy ran freely from his eyes to rest warm and cherished upon her breast. Still breathless, he pulled back slightly to look down into Catherine's shining face, meeting her smile of triumph with one of utter amazement. Closing his eyes, Vincent buried his face in Catherine's shoulder, unable to speak. Wrapping her in his arms, he held her against his fiercely pounding heart.

Stretching widely to ease the tightness in his arms and neck, Vincent didn't open his eyes... not yet. He felt deliciously lazy. Yawning, he stretched again, and smiled. Ah, he felt... Vincent chuckled deep in his throat. He wasn't sure how he felt! Could passion be called delicious? Was it a suitable word for what he was feeling at this moment? Without rolling over, he reached out to the pillow next to him, whispering Catherine's name. There was no answer. He was alone. Alone! Sitting up in the bed, he looked about the chamber. Eyes darting frantically left, then right, he called out again.

"Catherine? Where are...?"

Vincent's glance settled on the small vial Narcissa had given him. Groaning in disillusionment, he lay back on the bed, weeping.

"No. It could not have been merely a dream. No. **NO!**" Curling onto his side, Vincent reached for the pillow next to him. Holding it tightly, he began to sob bitterly, frustrated to the heart. As his nose burrowed into the pillow, he blinked, then held it out to look at it.

Catherine? Yes. It was her! He could smell her scent on this pillow! How could a dream do that? The glint of something caught his attention. Laying one hand on the rumpled sheets, Vincent picked up the long strands of light brown hair and held them out, studying them.

Many things could be dreams; Wishes... longings... They could all be dreams. All things were possible, in one's own dreams, but... Vincent laughed aloud as he let the strands of hair caress his face. What sort of a dream was still with you when you woke up? What sort of dream left its fragrance when it came to an end? What dream left such tangible things as the hair of your beloved next to you, on a pillow?

Coming back to the present, Vincent curled his body towards Catherine's and began drifting toward sleep once again. Resting his hand against Catherine's slightly rounded tummy, a satisfied smile curled into the deep furrows running along each side of Vincent's mouth. Lastly, did any dream leave you with a beautiful and energetic child safely asleep in his cradle... and another baby on the way?

END