

A Land More Kind Than Home

by Joanne Grier

Chapter 1

“I should never have come! You need your sleep. You need to rise early to reach the airport.” His words sprung from his intelligence, but the tight mask worn over his tumbling emotions – the heart which loved without reservations, living and needing always to be with Catherine, to have her near – slipped precariously as his desperation surfaced.

“No! I’m glad you came. Please don’t go.” Her hands lay against his heart, “I can sleep on the plane. Being with you is more important than sleeping. Our time is so limited,” she pleaded. “It’s worth any price!” Smokey green eyes looked on kaleidoscopic blue, piercing the façade of his countenance as her love cascaded in a fiery scorching flame burning within the depth of his soul.

Catherine’s arms slid around Vincent’s waist as he wrapped his arms around her shoulders, drawing her against the frenzied hammering of his heart. Their weeks had been filled with small disasters in their individual worlds, allowing only brief hastily-stolen moments. The hurried minutes together left them bereft of warmth, a cold that seeped into their collective hearts melting only in the glow of being together.

A rumbling sigh exploded from the depth of Vincent’s throat, echoing moments later as Catherine’s own sigh joined in counter harmony as they settled against each other. Their impending parting fueled their desire making these moments bittersweet.

“Is Father feeling better?” Reluctantly she lifted her face from the warmth of his chest, feeling his fingers quickly relinquish their tender caress of her hair. Worry and concern were clearly visible as she stared into his eyes.

“Peter says he has never known a worse patient, but Father is improving and will soon be able to resume his duties. Communication on the pipes is chaotic as

Pascal and several of his best students have the virus.” Tightness claimed his smooth voice, allowing his slight lisp to surface.

“Pascal is sick, too?” she cried in alarm, “When did he become ill?”

“Two days ago. He’s very weak and quite miserable, but is determined to assume his duties in the pipe chamber tomorrow.”

“I wish I didn’t have to leave so I could help you. Eleanore has always been like a mother to me and I must be with her during her surgery.”

“I know. It’s your duty to be with Eleanore though this difficult time.” He understood her sense of obligation and loyalty, but his heart protested the idea of her being thousands of miles away from him.

“I don’t remember a part of my life that didn’t include Eleanore and her family. She and my mother were college roommates and they stayed in touch after graduation. Like Jenny, Nancy and I did,” she added with a happy grin. “When mom and dad got married and I came along, it seemed like Eleanore and Edward adopted us, too, and we became one large family, or at least that’s how I always thought of them as part of my family.” Catherine’s expression was joyful as she spoke sharing another aspect of her world with Vincent.

“We shared holidays together. They came east for Thanksgiving to be with Edward’s parents and then we spent every other Christmas at their home. I went out to spend part of my summer vacation with them lots of times and David and Sandy often came for a week or more in the summer before they visited their grandparents.”

“It’s easy to understand your closeness to Eleanore and why you must be with her during her surgery.” The commanding blue eyes glowed warmly as Vincent adjusted his arms to hold Catherine more closely. There impeding parting weighed heavily upon his heart making this separation more difficult.

“I need to be with her not just because it is my duty, but because I love her so much. She stepped in after my mom died, phoning, sending notes, and just being there for me not only during my grieving but afterwards. She became a substitute mother and even though she was two thousand miles away, I always knew she

would be there when I needed her. I felt less lonely because of Eleanore and her encompassing love.”

“Would you like some tea? It’ll only take a few minutes to fix and I’m certain you haven’t been eating properly because of all your extra duties.” She observed him openly, noticing his face was thinner and there was a tiredness around his eyes.

“Yes, thank you, tea could be nice.” He gently covered her hand, brushing his lips across her fingertips in an unconscious gesture which belied the calm exterior he tried to maintain.

Hugging him lightly, Catherine slipped from his arms, their hands clinging momentarily and giving silent voice to their reluctance to separate. She slipped through the open balcony door, moving silently through the dimly lit apartment toward the kitchen. Putting the water on to boil, she turned to gather cups and the teapot. Checking the cookie tin Catherine found there were still two cookies and, knowing they were Vincent’s favorite, she placed them on a small plate on the tray.

Vincent sat against the balcony wall enjoying the panorama of lights. His thoughts drifted toward the tunnels and the multitude of problems there since the virus had stricken their ranks. The virus-like symptoms had struck the community two weeks previously, taxing their modest resources as they battled to restrict the spreading illness. They were winning the battle, according to Peter, but then yesterday Mouse, Jamie and William were complaining of not feeling well. Nearly 36 hours had passed since he had more than 30 minutes of uninterrupted sleep. He was exhausted but when Catherine’s message had come, his need to be with her was far greater than his need for sleep.

Catherine returned carrying the tray and their conversation resumed as they discussed how the virus was decimating their ranks and making every one grumpy as they all were doing double duty.

“I have found myself short tempered and I owe several apologies to people I did not treat as kindly as I should have as I hurried to get here this evening.” His voice was softer than normal indicating his discomfort at his having been less than polite to his friends.

“Are any more of the children ill?”

Grateful for the distraction of how warm he felt with Catherine's body pressed tightly against his, "Eric has been withdrawn, fearful of his friends' health as he remembers all too clearly how Ellie died. Both Mary, Peter and I have tried repeatedly to reassure him this illness is completely different from the plague."

"Oh, poor, Eric. I wish I could be there to help comfort him. He's so young to have had his world shattered. He's special and I'm very fond of him."

"I know," his gaze lingered on her face. He wanted to memorize the special look as she spoke of Eric. "It's a mutual feeling I can assure you. I rarely see Eric that he doesn't speak of you, wanting to know when you will again come to visit him."

"When I return I'll make it a point to spend some special time alone with him. Perhaps," she mused, "I could even take him to a movie or a game so that we'd have time alone together."

Perhaps it was their impending parting that softened his resolve, but when Catherine asked he agreed to go inside her apartment to escape the cold night air.

They settled to talk of the many events that had happened over the past week and slowly they lapsed into silence. Vincent was startled awake, momentarily bewildered to find himself in Catherine's apartment with her curled in his arms. He held her for several minutes longer, and then effortlessly rose, cradling her tenderly in his arms as he carried her silently into her bedroom. He stood for several minutes after pulling the blankets over her, drinking in the sight of her, startled as always by her beauty and finding it deeper, more profound as her features softened, relaxed in sleep. He bent to lift a velvety strand of hair from her face. "Sleep well, Catherine," he whispered. As he started to rise Catherine turned, captured his hand with her own, brushing her lips against it, drawing it beneath her chin.

Transfixed, he stared at the sight of his large hand tucked so intimately against Catherine's throat. His hand burned with the warmth of her skin but he was powerless to do more than stare. As his emotions swirled about and within, testing his resolve, the knowledge he had lived with daily surfaced: that he was not like others and had no right to such love. "Yet how can this be that Catherine loves me, seeks my touch and tells me I am beautiful. How?" he wondered. Cautiously, he

withdrew his hand and, once free of her touch, he was shaking with cold while his forehead was damp with sweat. He stood for a moment longer then silently moved to the living room, tested the door locks, gathered his cloak and walked to the balcony.

Chapter 2

The flight was longer than Catherine remembered and she was relieved when she was able to deplane. Retrieving her luggage and finding a cab consumed her waning energy.

Eleanore greeted Catherine warmly and sent Milly to take her luggage upstairs and unpack. “We have several hours before we need to leave for the hospital. I tried to arrange to be admitted tomorrow morning, but my doctor wanted a couple of new tests done so I must be admitted tonight. I was hoping we would have this evening together to visit and catch up.”

“This room and your home have such warm memories for me,” Catherine said. “It’s just as I remember. Dad and I had such good times here with you.”

“Yes, we certainly have a lot of shared memories,” Eleanore replied as she took Catherine’s hand. “I want you to make yourself completely at home while you’re here,” she added, “Everything is to be used and enjoyed. You know how I feel, nothing is off-limits and I don’t believe in saving things for special times. As far as I’m concerned, every second is special.”

The time passed quickly and soon they were on the way to the hospital. Catherine stayed until the nurses finally asked her to leave, long after visiting hours were officially over. Kissing Eleanore’s cheek, she slipped off the bed and embraced her warmly. “I’ll see you first thing in the morning, before you go up for surgery. Sleep well.”

Upon her return Catherine found Milly, already dressed for bed, waiting in the living room. “How was she, Miss Catherine, when you left her?” she asked. “I hope she wasn’t nervous.”

“She was in good spirits and wasn’t overly concerned about the surgery,” Catherine replied, as she settled into the chair opposite Milly. “Her doctor was in,

said her new tests were good and for her to get a good night's sleep. In other words, she was typically Eleanore, facing what must be faced squarely and calmly."

Milly smiled at the good news. "There are some cookies in the kitchen. I seem to remember that you always enjoyed milk and cookies at bedtime. "

Armed with a plate of cookies and a glass of milk, Catherine put them on the nightstand then gathered her gown and robe and headed to the shower. Returned from the shower, she sat down on the bed and noticed the sound of paper rustling. She reached into her robe pocket and withdrew a small folded square of paper. Seeing Vincent's distinctive writing, Catherine's heart warmed and she felt surrounded by his love.

Dear Catherine, know that while we are apart my heart is always with you. You will be in my thoughts constantly. I will pray that all goes well for your dear Eleanore. I will miss you more than there are words to say. Be well.

Vincent

Catherine caressed the paper, her fingers tracing his signature. She felt the warmth of Vincent's words and his spirit, and as she held the paper close to her heart, could smell the lingering scent of candle wax and leather. Placing the note beside the table she slid beneath the covers, took a bite of cookie and began to read.

Dr. Johnson moved toward the waiting room. "Miss Chandler?"

"Yes. How is Mrs. Walton? Did the surgery go as expected?"

"Mrs. Walton is in the recovery room and her surgery went amazingly well. I anticipate little, if any, post-op problems. You might as well go have some lunch as you won't be able to see her for at least several hours. If you will stop at the nurse's station upon your return, I'll leave word there that you are to be admitted as Mrs. Walton indicated you were listed as next-of-kin

“Thank you so much for all you’ve done for Eleanore. She has been like a mother to be since I lost my own.”

Catherine asked several more questions then thanked Dr. Johnson once again. After several minutes she was assaulted by memories of another waiting room, remembering her father’s stroke. Fresh pain filled her heart and her arms went around her waist seeking somehow to comfort herself from this still-fresh anguish.

It was nearly seven o’clock when Catherine left the hospital, assured Eleanore was resting comfortably and in no immediate danger. After reassuring Milly of her friend and employer’s condition, Catherine slipped outside while Milly heated her dinner. The sun was setting and she wished Vincent could see its glory.

Chapter 3

“Vincent, may I come in?”

“Of course, Peter, please do.”

Peter was surprised to see Vincent lying across his bed when he entered and noticed the letter which Vincent quickly closed as he started to rise. Peter waved him back to his bed and moved the desk chair beside the bed. “Jacob asked me to check on you, seems he thinks you might have the virus. Have you felt chilled or nauseated? Anything out of the ordinary?”

“No, I don’t have any of the symptoms of the virus. Perhaps I’m just a little tired. I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“Well, then I’ll try to reassure Jacob that you are fine other than being a little tired. My professional advice is for you to get some rest, to relax and to get some extra sleep; just what you were doing before I interrupted you.” Peter rose, returning the chair to its original position and turned to leave. “Oh, Vincent, perhaps some light reading would help.” Withdrawing an envelope from his pocket, Peter handed it to Vincent chuckling as he walked away.

Dearest Vincent,

Eleanore's surgery is over and the doctors say she will make a full and complete recovery. She remains in intensive care as a precautionary measure so my time to visit her is very limited.

When I returned this afternoon I felt the need to walk and as I made my way to the edge of the beautiful woods that surrounds Eleanore's home, I strongly felt your presence. I was certain I could turn and find you walking beside me, enjoying the quiet solitude. There is so much of Eleanore's home I wish to share with you. I can envision you walking through her garden in the spring when all the flowers are blooming. I see your delight when you observe the realistic animal carvings her dear Edward created and placed so lovingly among the flowers. Caught unaware, you feel they are truly alive and you want to move cautiously for fear of disturbing these delightful creatures at play.

At the end of the path there is a small area of wild woodland grasses that Edward collected. It is inside these grasses that hold the best of his carvings and sculptures. Tiny chipmunks, field mice and baby ground squirrels. Edward called this his wildlife nursery.

I miss you so much. The gentle sound of your voice is always a caress to my heart...how I long for the sound. I feel so incomplete without you; and the sudden burst of joy and serenity that surrounds me when I look up to find you there on our balcony. The vision of you standing there - your beauty never ceases to cause my heart to beat wildly.

In a few days – I hope – Peter will come to you or a message will come from him. I ask that you do just as he instructs. I have a gift for you which Peter will deliver. When it arrives you will know you are always in my heart.

All my love,

Catherine

Vincent could hear the sound of Catherine's voice as he reread her letter and his heart beat wildly as her love washed over him. In the many notes and letters he had collected during their relationship, her love for him had never been expressed as strongly, spoken as plainly. The continuing miracle of her love, devotion and

acceptance of him assaulted his senses; crushing the walls he kept trying to erect to protect her. Her love reached across the miles, vanquishing all his defenses and left him weak in the its glow.

He was still lying across his bed as Peter had left him when hours later Father entered his chamber. Catherine's letter lay neatly folded across his chest and his slow, steady breathing indicated how soundly he slept. Moving as silently as possible, Father pulled the quilt over him after removing the letter and placing in on the writing table. He smiled down at his sleeping son and softly left the chamber.

Awakening slowly, Vincent was reluctant to leave the dreams that had filled his sleep. Catherine's incredibly soft, silky skin pressed against his hard body and he drifted suspended in an indescribable world of warmth and pleasure. Her hands caressed him and her eyes told him of her delight in touching him. Her curves blended with his hard contours until he couldn't distinguish where either body began or ended.

Vincent woke abruptly, bathed in sweat; heart pounding as he rapidly drew in gulps of air. His eye darted around the chamber unsure he was alone, so caught was he in the vividness of his dream. His whole body trembled, and he realized he was tightly clutching his pillow against his wildly heaving chest. He turned over, hoping to return to his dream as his body ached for Catherine's soft touches. He felt lost and alone without her. Tears stung his eyes as he tried to recapture his dream.

Chapter 4

Catherine finished wrapping the box; her gift had taken longer to complete than she had anticipated. She drove to the Post Office sending the box overnight air wishing it to reach Vincent as quickly as possible. Her mission complete, she headed toward the hospital to spend the rest of the day with Eleanore now that she had been moved from Intensive Care.

"I shall be so glad to get home again." Eleanore said after greeting Catherine. "Dr. Johnson said he would consider releasing me next week. This has been the longest three weeks and I'm sure," she added, "it has been especially long for you being away from your young man."

“What do you mean?” Catherine asked innocently.

“Oh, come now, Cathy, I have known you all your life. I have seen you wear the blush of love many times, but never has it made you glow more beautifully than since your arrival here. Whoever he is, he must be very special as I have never seen you radiate such joy. I know it must be difficult for you being separated.”

Catherine smiled. “There is someone special in my life whom I miss very much. Since knowing him I’ve found true love for the first time in my life. I understand now how unique was the love my parents shared.”

Vincent rose quickly after unfolding the message Kipper handed him. “I must go, Father. Peter has a message from Catherine.” Gathering his cloak and pressing a light kiss upon Father’s forehead, he dashed from the chamber. His long muscular legs quickly covered the distance to Peter’s home and the entrance beneath it. He tapped the secret code and moments later Peter slide the panel open. “I got your note.”

“So I see!” Peter chuckled. “I’ve only been home about 20 minutes since I passed the note down to Kipper. I don’t have as many visitors through this entrance as I did many years ago. Come on up.”

Vincent looked around the book-lined room with open curiosity. “It looks just as it did all those years ago when Devin and I used to deliver messages and your Winterfest candle. It even has the same smell of old books that I always liked.”

“Come over this way and sit.” Peter pulled an open letter from his pocket and handed it to Vincent. “Go ahead read it, and then I will explain everything else to you.”

Vincent quickly read Catherine’s note to Peter and looked at him, his face full of questions.

“I’ll show you what to do and then I’m going upstairs to bed. Stay as long as you like. Don’t worry about the doors; the alarms are turned on so you would have

plenty of notice if anyone tried to enter. There is no alarm on the tunnel entrance, though, so no need to worry when you leave.”

Peter reviewed his instructions with Vincent once again and then bid him good night. “I mean it, stay as long as you like,” he added just before closing the library door. His head reappeared; quickly from behind the closing door as he added, “And, Vincent, if you should like to return tomorrow night, I have no plans so you won’t be interrupting anything. You would truly be welcome. Have Kipper bring me a note. Good night.”

Minutes after Peter left, Vincent realized he hadn’t even bothered to say good night, so engrossed was he in the box before him. The package was both fascinating and frightening and he smiled at his own foolishness. Picking up Catherine’s letter to him, he slowly read it, savoring each word.

Dearest Vincent,

I apologize for taking much longer to get this gift to you than I had originally planned. It was not as easily accomplished as I thought. Perhaps it will seem a senseless gift, as it does have limited use, and surely isn’t something you can use at home. While my head tells me it is a wild gesture, my heart tells me it is perfect. And since the night you found me, I have learned my heart always knows best.

All my love, as ever

Catherine

Moments later Catherine’s voice filled the darkened room and her face flashed across the TV screen. Vincent sat in enraptured silence as he stared at the miracle that had brought Catherine to him across thousands of miles. The image flickered as he watched in awe as scene after scene of wondrous sites unfolded. Tears streamed spontaneously down his face as he was able to see the garden Catherine had vividly described.

The camera traveled through a hall, up stairs, through another hall, into a room and finally stopped before a window. Catherine’s voice gently filled the room with sound as she described all he was seeing. Tucked securely within the

spreading arms of the largest oak tree Vincent had ever seen was a huge children's tree house. It was painted a hodge-podge of colors; the roof was yellow, the front of the house which faced the window was a delicate periwinkle blue, the side which was visible was a deep plum, and the door was a mixture of greens with large multi-colored polka dots.

Vincent's chuckle filled the room, echoing Catherine's peels of laughter, as she continued her narrative description. The house had been built by Edward but the painting was all done by seven year old David and Sandy, with Cathy helping out with the color selection. As they had grown to a more adult age – 11 - they wanted to repaint the house to something more in keeping with their mature years, but Eleanore had refused to allow it to be changed. The tree house remained as it was originally created and after the children and Edward had died in a boating accident, Eleanore kept it as a monument to their memories.

The screen went blank and Vincent moved toward the VCR. He puzzled briefly then heard the whirring sound as the tape rewound. He pushed another button and again Catherine's voice filled the room. Twice more he rewound the tape and each time his senses and emotions soared with the knowledge that Catherine was there with him.

Placing the video in the cardboard sleeve, Vincent stored it within the box. It was then he discovered a smaller package tucked in the box. He picked up the object, instantly recognizing the cassette player/recorder, and saw another note. He read the note then pushed the small button with the tip of one nail and again Catherine's voice filled the room.

“Vincent, I hope you have enjoyed my first adventure in using a video camera. I wished to show you the boundaries of my current world, to share what my heart tells would give you joy.

“I don't know how much longer I will need to remain here after Eleanore is released. The countryside is filled with beautiful fall foliage. You have said that I have taken you places with my words but, oh, Vincent, I long to actually show you these places.

“At the bottom of this box are two more sets of batteries and an extra blank cassette. If you feel comfortable in talking a letter to me, Peter would, I’m certain, mail these for you.”

Vincent tried to calm his mind and body but despite his efforts, his emotions controlled his attempts for a deep, steady breath. How could he ever thank Catherine for these gifts, for finding a way to allow him to actually see where she was staying? His loneliness for her was still profound, but the tightness that surrounded his heart was not as intense. He sat there lost in thoughts of Catherine and all the sights she had brought to him.

A brief glance toward the blind-shrouded windows confirmed the sky was beginning to lighten. He gathered up the box, refilling it with the videotape but placed the cassette recorder/player in his cloak’s pocket.

Vincent reached the home tunnels without consciously being aware of leaving Peter’s. Entering his chamber he removed his cloak and boots before lying down upon his bed. Visions of all he had seen rushed through his mind and he didn’t know how he would ever sleep.

The steady round of messages on the pipes woke him and a glance at his clock told him he had only slept two hours but he was surprisingly refreshed. Before gathering his clothes he tapped a message for Kipper to come to his chamber and then he set off for the bathing pool.

“You are sure you know how to get to Peter’s office?” Vincent asked.

“Sure, I’m not a baby, ya know,” Kipper replied. “I’ve been there dozens of time for Father,” he added. “Don’t sweat it; I’ll get your note delivered long before lunch.” Kipper flashed a bright smile then ran from the chamber.

Peter smiled as he unlocked his door and went to key in the alarm code to prevent the activation to the alarm center. He then hurried upstairs to shower, knowing that his visitor would be along shortly. Returning downstairs he only had time to put on the teakettle before he heard Vincent’s tapping.

“You’re positive my coming here tonight isn’t a problem?”

“No, it’s not a problem and you’re more than welcome. I was only slightly concerned at the message Kipper brought to my office. I hadn’t realized there was a second package within the box. You look upset; tell me how I may help?”

“I took this,” he thrust the cassette recorder into Peter’s hand. “I believe I was following the instructions, but I obviously was doing something wrong. My voice was faint, then booming, and nothing I wanted to say came out of my mouth!” He ended in a frustrated sigh.

“Well, I can certainly understand your frustration. I’m all-thumbs with these new electronics. Why don’t we take an older, far simpler time honored route to obtain the same results?” He walked over to his desk, opened a book then wrote something on a piece of paper. “This is the Eleanore’s home phone number. Just dial it and you can be talking with Cathy in a few moments.”

“But, I ...”

“No buts about it. I know you wanted to talk a letter to Cathy as you said in your earlier note, but we don’t need to waste time in trying to figure out what we are doing wrong with the recorder. After you have watched the video again, think about calling her. I think your disposition would improve in hearing Cathy’s voice.” Peter grasped Vincent’s shoulder before he strolled from the room. “I’ll set the alarm from the hall.”

After watching the video three more times, Vincent tried to remember all that he had overheard the older children talking about videos and how permanent they might be. He reread all the letters from Catherine since she had been gone and he knew despite his fears what he must do.

The sharp shrill of the phone startled Catherine from her dream. Confused and shaken, her arm shot out as she fumbled to reach the phone.

“Hello?”

“Catherine,” a voice of velvet whispered softly in her ear.

“Vincent, is that really you?”

“Yes, it is I.”

“Where are you? What’s wrong? Is something wrong with Father? Is Peter all right?” Catherine rapidly shot out questions.

“Please, I didn’t mean to frighten you,” he said. “I’m at Peter’s house and he kindly showed me how to dial the phone. I’m sorry to admit that I failed miserably at using the recorder. My voice was strange and the words in my head wouldn’t come out of my mouth.

“Your gift was beyond anything I ever expected,” he continued. “I watched it three times last night. Peter kindly invited me to come back tonight to watch again.

“Catherine, I...,” she heard him swallow and his voiced sounded unsure. Their bond suddenly filled her with a sense of warmth and love. “Catherine, I’ve only felt this empty and lost once before; that was when Devin left the tunnels. The hours pass but there is no sunlight within my heart. I miss you so very much.”

“I want so much to be with you right now,” Catherine responded, “to have your arms around me and holding me tightly.” Her voice broke and she began to softly sob.

“Please, don’t cry. The sound of your tears breaks my heart.”

The unspoken words of love consumed and enveloped them. Never before had Catherine felt so clearly all of Vincent’s emotions as she felt him reaching out to comfort her now.

“I’m trying to be strong, but I’m struggling,” Catherine told him. “I owe Eleanore so much. There is no way I can ever repay my debt to her for all she did after my mother died. Yet I want her to hurry and recover so I can come home to you ... and just having those thoughts makes me feel small, petty and unworthy of her love.”

“No, your feelings are very human and completely understandable,” he reassured her.

“If you will huddle down under your covers, I’ll hold you until you sleep,” Vincent told her. “Relax and allow our bond to open fully and surround you.”

Catherine snuggled down, cradling the phone against her ear. The sound of Vincent’s breathing was calming, soothing the pain she felt.

Drifting in a soft place, Catherine’s eyes suddenly flew open. “Vincent, I feel them! I can actually feel your arms holding me.”

He continued to soothe her, surrounding her as completely as he did on their last night together. She began to drift off to sleep as she held the phone to her ear. She heard his voice in the distance, “Good night, Catherine. Be well, my dear heart, be well.”

Chapter 5

The community was quiet and none of the early risers were yet about as Vincent slipped into Father’s library. A candle burned as was Father’s habit borne of years of having been abruptly awakened by people noisily stumbling down the sturdy steps and loudly cursing the darkness as they sought Father’s help. Slipping quietly into Father’s sleeping alcove, he pulled the quilts higher over Father’s shoulders; reassuring himself that all was well before leaving. He was near the steps when he heard, “Are you well, Vincent? Is there anything wrong?”

Retracing his steps, Vincent stood beside Father’s bed. “No, there is nothing wrong. Go back to sleep. I just returned and I came to check on you, that’s all”. He placed a kiss on Father’s head, straightened, and headed for his own chamber.

Gathering his night things, Vincent headed toward the Falls, suddenly eager for the feel of the forceful water against his flesh. Cleanly he knifed into the still water, diving deeply to surface beneath roaring falls that cascaded over him in a razor sharp torrent. He dove again, swimming beneath the falls and back toward the shore. Several powerful strokes brought him to his soap and towels. He quickly lathered himself then slipped beneath the surface to rinse. Climbing out

he began to dry himself then pulled on his soft sleeping pants and shirt. Donning his slippers and robe he gathered his towels and clothing, hung the towels to dry in the bathroom he shared with Father and took his clothing to his laundry bag.

He settled beneath his quilts and tried to relax into sleep but his thoughts were filled with the many sights Catherine's video had brought to him. He wondered about the man who had carved the woodland creatures with the eye of a true artisan, and about Eleanore, who kept the colorful playhouse as a memorial to her children's happy youth. He once again saw Catherine sitting in the tree house, laughing and making faces at him as she expounded upon the unique colors.

Rising silently, he retrieved the cassette recorder from the folds of his cloak and leaned back into his bed. He drew the quilts up and punched his pillow into his favorite shape. Vincent then pressed the play button and as Catherine's voice spoke softly against his ear; he silently thanked the technical genius who invented this marvelous machine that allowed him to hear her words. Listening now, he heard the full significance of those words: that her love for him was profound, and able to penetrate deeply inside his barriers.

Here alone in his chamber he could not deny the depth of all he felt. Here in the darkness all his walls had been breached and were quickly being tumbled by the forcefulness of his true feelings; he loved Catherine with his heart and soul. He wanted and needed to have her in his life and he wanted her as his wife. No matter how he tried to reject the thought, in his deepest soul, he knew the truth.

He knew all the inner arguments he had used to deny those emotions, the festered wounds to his psyche about what happened with Lisa. He had allowed these feelings to grow to the point that hurting Lisa had somehow become a part of his definition of his ability to feel, to need and to love. "These hands are not meant to give love," he had told Catherine, emphatically, trying to defend his position - that he could not possibly love.

The recording stopped but his thoughts and emotions continued into the silence. Never could he share more than the periphery of Catherine's world ... and she deserved so much more. She could have so much more, if he could just step aside.

"I can't," he breathed into the stillness. The agony of that night when Catherine said she would marry Elliot, to protect his world and his family, and the deep

despair that consumed him as a result, came sharply again into focus. He felt the knife slicing into his heart at her words.

This he knew; *his world would be nothing without his Catherine at the center.*

His senses reeled at this truth, but how could he believe it when everything he knew until now, everything he had been taught, told him that it was wrong, that it was impossible. “Stop!” His voice thundered across the chamber, filling it with sound that echoed, reverberated and shimmered like icy crystals in the cool air.

Several minutes later the hand on his shoulder brought him from his agitated state. “Vincent, what is it? I heard you call out.”

“I’m sorry, Father, I didn’t mean to awaken you.” His eyes were bright, tears brimmed the edges of his lashes. His hand covered his face as soundless, wrenching sobs shook his body.

Father sat on the edge of the bed and waited patiently for the sobs to subside. “Perhaps,” he began hesitantly, “it would help if you were to talk about whatever is troubling you so deeply.”

“I ... I can’t. It would be pointless.”

“Vincent, it is obvious you are in pain, real emotional pain. I have to assume the source of this pain is Catherine. I ...”

His head snapped up sharply. “Why, Father, do you assume Catherine brings only sorrow to me? Why?” His voice thundered in the stillness. “She is everything to me. She makes me whole, not half alive as I was before I found her. You blame her instead of rejoicing in the happiness I have found with her.”

“I apologize if my words offend you. As your father I never wanted anything but happiness for you. Perhaps because of your uniqueness I have been overly protective, seeking to save you from hurt and sorrow.”

Father continued, his voice shaking when he spoke of his past, “At the beginning, my feelings for Catherine were tempered by my instincts to protect you and the community. I felt she could only bring harm to all of us. I made the assumption

based on the fact that she was a society girl and all that title entailed within my own mind. Perhaps my own pain at Margaret's being a society girl, the pain that knowledge inflicted in my life, caused me to judge Catherine too harshly. But I do know how deeply you care for her and if what I see of the two of you is true, she also cares deeply for you. I do know that she has brought you personal happiness beyond anything I ever dreamed possible for you.

"Being a parent is not easy and because of your uniqueness, I am overly protective," he continued. "It is only within these last few years that I realized how much damage I did to both you and Devin in trying not to favor each of you above all the others. There is a sorrow within me that will never heal because of the hurt I unintentionally inflicted on my sons." His voice shook, "Perhaps one day you and Devin will find it within your hearts to forgive me. And if you both can forgive me, perhaps I can forgive myself for all the pain I caused in the name of a father's love."

Vincent lifted his head and looked at Father. "There is no need for sorrow. I knew why you protected me, that you did so out of love."

"Father, again tonight I witnessed Catherine's world. She spends hours at the hospital with Eleanore and yet she made time in her busy schedule to film her world because she wished to share her joy with me. It was beautiful beyond all imagining. A place of quiet solitude, forests that stretched for miles, pictures of the tree house where she played as a child."

"I ache because she gives me so much and I have so little to give her in return. Yet if I am honest, in spite of not being able to give Catherine things, I need ... no, I MUST have her in my life." Reflexively, Vincent's fist came down hard upon the table to emphasize his need; the action startled them both as the sound vibrated within the chamber.

"Vincent, perhaps you have been listening to the wrong person. Maybe you should be listening more closely to the hearts of others in our community. Have you failed to notice that the happiest couples here are those who love most deeply?"

Father placed a hand on Vincent's shoulder, "When I was involved in my troubles Above, Margaret told me repeatedly that she cared not for any of the material

things of her world. All she wanted was for us to be together, to share fully the profound love we had. It was only at the end of her life that we were able to share. Part of our separation was as much my fault as was hers in listening to her parents. I mourn deeply how much of our love was wasted in loneliness and in regret.”

“You have always told me I am unique, something that has never been before. But what am I, Father? Am I truly a man? What I feel for Catherine is what all these books,” his powerful arm swept out, encompassing the stacks that filled the chamber, “describe as love. But what can I do about it?”

Placing his hand on Vincent’s shoulder, Father rocked him gently in an attempt to comfort him, “It is a problem you can only solve with Catherine and that can only be done with open, honest communication. Any embarrassment on either side needs to be forgotten. If you truly love each other, then those embarrassments will only be momentary and quickly forgotten in the greater light of your love.

“It’s late, Vincent, try to sleep. Call if you need me.” Father and son embraced each other, sharing the love that comforted them both.

Chapter 6

“You look as though you have spent the night in the arms of your lover.” Eleanore’s eyes sparkled as she intently studied her young friend. She patted the edge of the bed and Catherine sat down beside her.

“Eleanore!” Catherine blushed a deep red.

“Oh, Cathy, if you could only see your face. It is priceless! I wish I had a camera. I’d certainly win a prize at the local photo contest. I could entitle it “Youth discovers the elderly remember sex!””

“Eleanore!” This time Catherine just smiled broadly.

“Yes. That’s the second time you have said my name, just what do you wish to say? Surely a young lady as modern as you does not still harbor the idea that sex is only for the young?”

“I never,” Catherine stammered, “had given it much thought until just now. Dad didn’t date and I suppose he was celibate but I’m not certain.” Catherine’s face reddened. “I don’t think I ever thought about his needs as a man.”

”Come here, my dear child,” lifting her arms to enfold Catherine. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean my senseless teasing to embarrass you or to cause you pain.”

“I know you would never purposely say or do anything to hurt me.”

“I think we both know what is troubling you. You’re stuck here and your young man is two thousands miles away. Being a normal, healthy girl you miss him and the days and nights you had together. Would it help if you told me about him?” Eleanore patted and stroked Catherine’s hand.

“His name is Vincent.” Not long ago, Catherine had realized that just saying his name made her warm all over and she was afraid that Eleanore would be able to see what was happening.

“A fine, noble name is Vincent,” Eleanore stated.

“Are there problems in your relationship?” she asked. “Edward and I faced problems in our relationship before we married. At times I was beset with serious doubts that I felt would preclude our ever getting married, let alone being happily married.” Eleanore’s eyes misted over as she thought of her beloved Edward.

“If you wish to talk about Vincent, please do. Rest assured whatever you say will remain between us. I have often found it helps to talk, even though the person doing the listening can do little, if anything, to resolve the problem.” She smiled softly, “Edward used to say while talking about the problems, the tennis game of the mind was at least still and the ball was no longer bouncing from left to right in his brain. We found that talking often allowed us to individually view our problems with a clearer vision.”

“I borrowed your video camera, I hope you don’t mind.” Catherine’s sheepish grin caused Eleanore to smile as if she had a guess as to what use Catherine had put the camera.

“Of course not. Whatever is in my home is yours to use as long as you are here. I will never understand what possessed my sister-in-law to send me such a gift. My track record with cameras is the joke of the family. I have no idea of how to even operate it so I’m glad you decided to use it.”

“I made a video to show Vincent where I am. I showed him all the woodland creatures, the tree house and all the garden areas. He is so special, unique. He helped ...”

Catherine’s statement was interrupted when Dr. Johnson strode into the room, smiling broadly at both ladies. “How would you like to go home?”

“I’m more than ready and Cathy is eager to get me settled and be able to return to her home.”

After settling Eleanore into her temporary bedroom, Catherine left her alone with Milly, knowing she was in the best of care. She quickly ran upstairs. Taking out her stationery folder, she quickly wrote a note to Vincent.

Dearest Vincent,

Eleanore is resting comfortably in the den and Milly is there beside her. It was wonderful watching the way they rejoiced at being together again.

When I awoke, I was unsure if I had dreamed your phone call until I found the phone lying beside me on the pillow. I will never look at the phone again without thinking of you, your ability to reach across the miles to comfort me.

I drifted asleep to the gentlest voice I know, feeling your arms about me, holding me close. They were as real and warm as if you were lying beside me.

Soon, soon I will be home and then I will be able to truly have your arms about me.

All my love,

Catherine

Images flickered across the screen, filling the room with dancing brightness. Nightly, Vincent came to Peter's to watch the growing collection of videos beside the recliner. Worlds unknown opened, allowing him to witness what a large majority of the world took for granted.

The structural wonders of a covered bridge fascinated him. Detailed close-ups allowed him to leisurely view the peg fittings, the placement of the braces and the rough hewed beams, all the things Catherine knew he would want to examine if he were there.

A tender smile appeared on Vincent's face when Catherine climbed into the tree house to tell him of her day. To his complete surprise, he found himself talking back to her image and then chuckled at his own foolishness.

He ran into Peter, who was raiding the refrigerator, as he moved back from the kitchen where he had taken his empty teacup to trip the secret panel in the den. "Thank you again for allowing me the use of your den and your equipment. Good night."

"Any time, Vincent, any time. Sleep well."

Throwing back the quilt, Vincent sat on the edge of the bed, his eyes searching the darkness. His dream had been vivid, real to the point he was almost positive he could detect traces of Catherine's scent lingering within his chamber. Impossible! Searching through their bond he felt the thread that connected them. Satisfied that Catherine slept peacefully, he tried to relax.

He ran his long fingers through the tangles of his hair, finding his scalp damp as was his sleep shirt. Uncomfortable and cold, Vincent pulled his shirt over his head using it to towel dry his skin. Shivering, he drew on a dry shirt and slipped beneath the quilts.

The hour was late but Catherine continued to sit before the fire, lost in the magic of the flames. She remembered another evening in this room and the dreadful quiet on the afternoon they returned from the cemetery. Her heart had been numb; the shocking reality of grief had not truly touched her yet. Her father had moved about the room quietly speaking to close friends who had come to comfort Eleanore. Her friends had died so young. Catherine wiped away her tears.

Her thoughts turned to Vincent, as they always did whenever she was sad or melancholy. He understood her feelings and his low mellifluous voice soothed, gentled the pain and helped her find peace.

“Oh, Vincent,” she spoke aloud, “I miss you so much. The days are endless without you. If you would only believe how much I love you and want us to be as one. You are so beautiful, why can’t you see it?” She rose to put the screen around the dying fire and went upstairs.

“Mouse, is there anything wrong? You’ve been unusually quiet throughout the meal. I hope you aren’t coming down with the virus again, you hardly touched your food.” Father resisted the temptation to place his hand on the forehead of the blonde youth.

“Not hungry.” He continued to sit, staring at his plate and neither Pascal nor William was able to break his gloomy silence. They shrugged their shoulders at Father and then gathered up their empty plates, heading off to the kitchen area.

Father put his face closer to Mouse and whispered, “Now that we are alone, Mouse, would you like to tell me what is troubling you?”

He looked around the hall, seeing that most of the community had left. “Maked Vincent mad. Worked on new chambers, lost new drill in hole. Vincent yelled a bunch. It slipped, didn’t mean to lose it.” A single tear slid down his face and his shoulders shook. “Didn’t mean to ... ” Vincent had never said a cross word to him, and to have his hero criticize him hurt more than he could bear.

Just as he finished his short choppy speech, Father saw the subject of the longest speech he had ever heard from Mouse moving quietly up behind the young genius.

The large hand clamped down on Mouse’s shoulder, startling him and causing him to jump. “Father, if you will excuse us, I need a word in private with Mouse.”

Father rose slowly, noting the pleading look on both faces and moved away.

Vincent straddled the chair, his arms resting lightly across the back as he lowered his head to his arms, bringing his eyes level with Mouse. “Mouse, I hurt your feelings today and I humbly ask your forgiveness. I was wrong to react as I did, to blame you for an accident that could have happened to anyone. I allowed my temper to get the better of me and I injured you.”

Mouse was no longer frightened and he brightened immediately. Vincent wasn’t mad at him and he quickly forgot his earlier mood. “You miss Catherine, huh?”

Vincent’s face softened. “Yes, I miss her very much.”

“Missing her makes you grumpy ...”

-“Yes, I suppose I have been grumpy.”

“Miss Catherine, too. Coming home soon?”

“I hope so.”

Chapter 7

“Should we continue another night?” Father’s eyes were bright, seemingly assured of victory, but his sense of fair play would not allow him to take advantage of Vincent’s obvious distracted state of mind.

“I’m playing badly, aren’t I?”

“I don’t wish to take advantage of an eager student,” Father said with a wry chuckle.

Vincent laughed as he covered Father’s hand with his own larger one in a soft caress of unbidden love. “I think I will go for a walk then turn in. Goodnight, Father, sleep well.”

Vincent stood in the shadows of the drainage tunnel; a cold wind caused him to shiver. Pulling his cloak closer he stared up at the stars. His walk had taken him into the trees and around the length of the park. It was not a particularly long or difficult walk but tonight he was strangely tired and thoughts of bed were appealing.

Blowing out the last candle, Vincent slid beneath the quilts and as their warmth spread through his body, he instantly fell into a deep sleep. As he slept he again was immersed within the sweetest dream – Catherine wanted him, welcomed him, sought his touch and found pleasure in his body.

The smile on her face as she reached for him warmed his soul, easing the fears, the torment with which he lived. Her hands ran lightly over his flesh, worshiping his body, her touch telling him again of his physical beauty. Her mouth captured his, causing his blood to roar in his ears and leaving him light headed as her incredible mouth moved exploring his face.

He felt again her warm, incredibly soft lips on his mouth. They pulled away, gone as quickly as they had come, replaced by a cold that touched his soul. “Catherine, come back,” he cried, “don’t leave, please don’t leave me,” his voice filled with throaty passion.

“I’m here,” she said, “and I will never willingly leave you again. I can’t live, survive, without your touch, your love.”

His eyes flew open and as he struggled to retain his dream, he saw Catherine's face before him, awash with tears. He raised his hand gently touching her face. Never had his dreams felt this warm, this real. Surely this must be a dream – he had no sense of her returning!

“Catherine,” his voice filled with longing, “are you real or am I still dreaming?”

“I'm here in your chamber and you aren't dreaming.” She threw her arms around him, covering his face with warm, wet kisses of welcome. Murmuring his name repeatedly she moved to kiss his neck.

Vincent enfolded her in his arms, holding her tightly; afraid she would vanish as all his other dreams had vanished.

Catherine's hands tangled in his hair, grabbing handfuls as she rubbed it across her face. “It's just like I remember, like silk.”

Her words amused and he momentarily relaxed his hold. Catherine was instantly pulling, tugging and moving the quilts away from his chest, shoving them down to rest against his hips. Her actions were lithe, so quick Vincent was caught off guard and he was unable to utter any form of protest.

In one fluid motion Catherine rolled from a sitting position to lie beside him. Moving against him, she snuggled closer until her face was buried against his nightshirt. Her arms encircled his back, pulling him closer as she covered the shirt with kisses. “You smell so good,” she murmured. She lifted her head, her eyes filled with silent, longing, “Please.”

He recalled completely the vivid details of his dream this night and the other dreams that had filled his sleep since Catherine had left. He wanted to know the reality of his dreams. “Catherine ...” Slowly, hesitantly, he lowered his mouth to rest lightly against her up-turned lips.

He felt her heart pounding against his chest as their lips met and he sensed her pleasure as she shifted and sought a deeper embrace. He clung to her, unwilling to end this first kiss and wishing the exquisite joy to continue.

Slowly, they drew apart, and Vincent's eyes filled with wonder and love as he saw the angelic look of peace and serenity on Catherine's face.

Catherine covered his face with soft light kisses. Vincent pulled away as the warm moist feel of her lips drew closer to his own. He hesitated, but was drawn to feel again the warmth of her lips. They fitted perfectly against his and, at their touch, his blood warmed and joy filled his heart. He felt her tongue run lightly over the deep cleft of his upper lip. The sensation startled him and his breath became ragged as he stared into the depths of her eyes.

Catherine's body—the gossamer vision of all his dreams—molded to him in a heady intoxication of movement. He moved to gently hold her away as he tried to control the tumbling feelings that consumed him.

“It's all right, love, what you're feeling is perfectly natural and normal. I didn't know you were so sensitive there.” Her finger lightly touched the cleft, “or I wouldn't have done that just yet, so soon.”

“No one has ever touched me there!” Vincent's reaction surprised them both.

“I didn't mean to frighten or startle you. I have wanted to do that for such a long time. The shape of your mouth is so beautiful and I have wanted to touch and taste this special part of you.”

“There was such an instant boiling within me, something I have never known.” He swallowed, trying to ease the panic that continued to fill him.

“No! What you feel has nothing to do with the rage you feel from the Other! Don't be frightened, please. The two emotions are in no way connected.”

“But if I hurt you I could not...”

“You are incapable of hurting me.” Grasping his jaw firmly, “that which lives within you, the Dark Side, which frightens you, could never harm me. I know that as surely as I know you love me and that I love you. He loves, too, this darkness within you, and his passion is as deep and true as yours. We all have a dark side, one that rises to protect those we love when they are in danger or threatened.

“We are one,” she continued. “One soul living separately within each of us and only complete when we are together. Perhaps this terrible loneliness we’ve felt has been our test. To see if we’re able to move separately through our fears and move freely, joyously, toward the rejoining of our soul.”

Catherine ducked her head trying to stifle a yawn. Vincent’s eyes filled with concern as he noticed the faint tinges of mauve beneath her eyes and the tiny lines that came with physical exhaustion. “You’re exhausted from your journey. I’ll take you home.”

“No, please, I don’t want to be parted from you, not now, not ever again! I have to be in your arms, here beside you, to feel the warmth of your arms, hear the steady beating of your heart. Just a little longer, please, just a little longer,” she pleaded.

“Nothing would give me greater joy than to hold you for the remaining hours of the night. But you need to rest and I will be up early to work with Pascal.”

Catherine uttered a deep sigh, “A storm in the Midwest forced us to land and we were delayed for nearly two hours. I had planned to be here before the evening meal so we would have time together.”

Chapter 8

"I'll wait outside while you dress," she said and slowly rose from the warmth of his arms. He caught her hand, holding it before drawing her again into his arms. He stared at her for a moment then drew closer as his lips found hers.

Their mouths joined in an endless kiss, moving from innocence to promise of passion. Breathlessly they drew apart only to instantly seek the pleasure of their kiss once more. Vincent murmured her name again and again against her lips as he sought to taste the sweet nectar she offered.

Gripping her shoulders, Vincent gently pushed her away, and finding his voice, he huskily said, "I never ... it's beautiful, your mouth on mine."

"I hope it becomes a habit you never stop wanting." Her fingers traced his lips and then she reluctantly rose, walking toward the entrance. "Don't be long," she laughed, "I feel the need for further instructions in this mutually satisfying habit."

Vincent threw back the quilt, rising to his feet only to discover his legs would not support him and sank back to the bed. His whole body trembled, yet he was not afraid, and that knowledge burst upon him. He slowly rose, walking toward the armoire where he kept his clothing and began to dress.

Moments later he took Catherine's hand and they began the journey toward her apartment. The journey passed in silence, but as soon as they were outside the inhabited area, Vincent stopped, drawing her into his arms. Wordlessly, she clung to him, sharing his need to be close. He kissed her wondering as he did so, if he would ever cease being surprised at the joy that filled her heart as his lips touched hers.

The journey, interrupted by many such stops, finally led to the tunnel beneath Catherine's apartment. "Will you come Below after you have rested? I should be free from my work by late afternoon. You could have dinner with us."

"Yes," she responded eagerly.

Their lips met, and the lovers clung to each other until they were breathless. "I don't want to leave you," Catherine cried against his chest.

"And I don't want you to. I want to hold you in my arms and feel again the wonder of your kiss."

"Come Above with me," Catherine urged. "There is still time for you to come safely to the balcony. Oh, please, I can't be separated from you again! I need you so much."

He tried to think rationally, but the longing in Catherine's voice coupled with the driving need inside him, made this all but impossible. He held her trembling body closer, the feel of her arms holding him tightly increased his own shaking.

"Do you have a pen and paper?" he asked "I could write a note to Father and Pascal so they wouldn't worry and if we walk quickly, we could reach one of the sentry posts and return before it gets much lighter."

Catherine quickly dug out the requested items and handing them to him. He took the pen and applied it, folded the note, took her hand and they moved quickly along the way they had just come.

They walked rapidly, but it became apparent to Vincent they would never reach the sentry post in time. "Wait here, Catherine, I will return shortly." Catherine stared at his disappearing cloak as he broke into a full run, his long legs taking him quickly from her sight.

She paced as she waited, afraid he would not return, that his fears would take control and he would disappear, leaving her alone. Then she felt his arms silently slip around her as he pulled her tightly against his chest, nuzzling her neck. "I'm here," he whispered.

Chapter 9

Catherine inserted her key in the lock, impatient to be inside. The door opened and she stepped into his waiting arms. "How?" she managed before his lips silenced her.

"Perhaps the feet of love are faster than modern technology," he said with a smile as he drew away. "I thought I was forever in getting here and then when I saw you weren't here, I realized I had made the journey very quickly."

"You don't mind that I entered without you?" He tilted his head staring intently feeling unsure of himself and his uncharacteristic actions.

"The balcony has never been locked since the first night you came to me after I returned Above. I never had a need to lock you out; I always wanted you to willingly come inside."

Vincent brought her hand to his lips as he felt her acceptance of him washing over him. The fact that her balcony door was never locked bothered him, but until now he had never understood why.

Catherine slipped her hand into his, tugging slightly as she moved across the room. "Come."

He followed, but as they neared the bedroom his steps slowed.

"It's all right, don't be frightened." He was reassured by her loving gaze.

He stood inside the doorway as Catherine moved across the room. "Why don't you put your cloak on the chair there by the balcony." He walked across the room, standing beside the chair for several minutes before he slowly removed the cloak.

Hearing the closet door opening and the sound of things being moved, he was afraid to turn around. Suddenly she was beside him, taking his hand and drawing him toward the bed. He swallowed several times as his eyes focused on the bed which now seemed to overpower the entire room.

"You'll sleep much better if you remove your belt and boots before getting in bed." Catherine's voice was light and easy, and Vincent knew she must have sensed his fears as he stared at the bed.

He slowly removed his belt and sat on the bed to remove his boots. He pulled at the boots which suddenly refused to leave his feet. Vincent looked up at Catherine to find her studiously *not* watching his struggle. She stacked several pillows on top of the bedspread. She withdrew a large blanket and began refolding it.

"Vincent, would you open the balcony doors for me?" He was grateful for the request and his heart lifted as he opened the door, breathing deeply as he filled his lungs with the cool air.

He returned to sit on the edge of the bed, head down, his hands brushing repeatedly against the knees of his well-worn jeans. Thus occupied, he jumped at the sound of her voice. "There, that should work!" she proclaimed.

He turned to see her smoothing the much-folded blanket that she had placed across the bench at the end of the bed. The blanket, folded many times, was now level with the edge of the mattress. "Now your feet won't fall off and you'll be able to sleep comfortably."

He stared at the improvised extension to her bed as he was suddenly aware of how much his comfort meant to Catherine. She turned toward the closet and withdrew another soft light, airy blanket, shaking it and sending it soaring to settle across the bed and over his waiting body.

"I'll only be a moment," she said as she closed the bathroom door. Minutes later she returned, all traces of make-up gone and Vincent could smell her toothpaste.

Catherine moved to the far side of the bed, removing her watch as she walked. She placed it along with her earrings on the night table then removed the thin gold belt that encircled her tiny waist. She tugged her blouse from her slacks and as she did, Vincent's panic began to rise. Lifting the blanket, she slipped beneath it curling against him.

His whole body was rigid. "Please, Vincent, try to relax, nothing is going to happen. Sitting on her knees she leaned forward to place a light kiss against his lips. "Turn over on your stomach, please." Finding that his body suddenly was not his own to command, it took him minutes rather than seconds to comply.

Peering over his shoulder and drawing his hair away from his eyes, he asked, "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing more serious than rubbing your back, something I recall you found enjoyable during the times you were Mary's patient in hospital chamber." Periodically, as her fingers worked their magic, small contentment filled sighs escaped from deep within as Vincent relaxed. Her fingers moved lightly across the tightly knotted muscles of his back, kneading them into submission. When she had finished, almost half an hour later, Vincent felt as though he no longer possessed either muscle or bone. He easily rolled to his side as Catherine requested.

She sank wearily down beside him, snuggled against his chest, sighed and placed a leisurely kiss against his cheek, sighed again and was instantly asleep. Vincent drew her closer settled the blanket around her shoulders and followed her into a deep dreamless sleep. When he awakened, the room was filled with a soft translucent light and he was suddenly filled with joy as he looked down at Catherine sleeping peacefully in his arms. He closed his eyes, allowing himself to drift again into the most blissful sleep he had ever known.

"No!" Catherine cried. She sat up and looked wildly about her room, then sank back into the pillows as tears formed in her eyes.

Her crying stopped abruptly as Vincent's hand swept the hair from her face. "Catherine, I'm here, you aren't alone, I'm here." He soothed her, rocking her gently and she threw her arms about his neck covering his face with kisses.

"I awoke earlier and you looked so tired and were sleeping peacefully, I wanted to let you sleep. I'm sorry I didn't realize you would be distressed to find me gone," he said shyly.

"I thought it was just like my other dreams, that I had only imagined you ... that I had spent the night in your arms."

"I know," he said, understanding the emotions that caused her tears, as they echoed the emotions he shared upon awakening to find himself alone in his chamber. He continued to hold her tenderly, delighting in the feel of her body pressed against his chest.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked as she smiled up at him, her eyes suddenly bright and happy.

"Yes, thanks to you, I did."

They sat staring into each other's eyes then, feeling foolish and silly, they laughed as they both instantly reached to share a warm hug.

"Catherine, may I ask a question?"

"You may ask anything, you know that." Her hands moved through his hair stroking the silky stresses that haunted her dreams as much as his incredible eyes.

"Earlier I wanted to take a shower, but unfortunately, I wasn't familiar with your system of knobs. Would you explain them to me, please?"

Catherine stepped from his lap took his hand and walked toward the bathroom door. "I can wait if you wish to bathe first," he said, suddenly shy.

"Nope!" she grinned happily, "Come on, I'll show you and while you are showering, I'll see what I can find for breakfast. I pretty well cleaned out the refrigerator before I left." She continued to hold his hand as she explained how the shower operated. Then she took several large dark blue bath towels from the linen closet, withdrew a new toothbrush from its package and placed it on the vanity.

She rummaged in one of the drawers then withdrew a wrapped bar of soap. "My father had very sensitive skin; he had a lot of problems with itching until Peter recommended this soap. There were several bars left when I closed up his house and I brought them there, thinking I would bring them to you. I think you might find this more pleasing to your skin than the bar of my perfumed soap that is in the shower.

"The shampoo and cream rinse, if you care to use it, are on the shelf. Take your time; I may have to perform a minor miracle in order find something decent for your breakfast." She leaned up kissing him quickly and then closed the door.

She whirled around the room hugging herself tightly, giggling and then set off for the kitchen.

Chapter 10

"How would you like fresh blueberry muffins, and juice?" Catherine's eyes were bright, traces of laughter lingered in her bubbling voice. "I found the muffins and juice in the freezer," she added casually.

"Would you allow me to cook while you take your shower?"

"OK," Catherine replied happily, aware he was revealing another aspect of his character, allowing her to view a part of him that had been hidden.

To her surprise, a fire burned brightly and several pillows surrounded the floor in front of the fireplace. Never, she thought, had her living room looked as warmly inviting or as appealing as it did now. The sheers were drawn, defusing the bright sunlight, bathing the room in a soft golden hue.

"Catherine?"

She stood staring, her eyes devouring the sight of him.

"Catherine, what is it? Why are you staring?"

"You ... you're beautiful. It's like I'm seeing you for the first time," she stammered. She walked toward him, her gaze traveling the length of his body, as though she could not look at him enough. Her wholehearted open pleasure in his body was clearly visible. Pulling her eyes away, Catherine felt her face flame as he witnessed the naked desire written there.

Her emotions--the burning intensity of them--coursed through their bond as Vincent sought to understand her feelings. Her desire was intense and his body warmed instantly as his own feelings soared with the realization of how pleasurable Catherine found him. It was obvious Catherine found his appearance pleasing.

Shaking her head, Catherine moved toward him, settling in the spot Vincent indicated. Finding herself unable to look at him as she struggled to control her emotions, she busied herself pouring coffee.

They ate in silence for several minutes, each lost within their own thoughts, and then each becoming aware almost at the same instance of the prolonged silence, they strived to work through the awkwardness of the moment. "Since you cooked breakfast, it's only fair that I handle the clean up," Catherine said as Vincent carried the now-empty tray toward the kitchen.

"I can help, Catherine, I'm quite accustomed to kitchen duty. Father and I have had some of our best conversations while we cleaned up after a meal." The warmth of his voice, and the hint of laughter in it, as he shared another aspect of his character, delighted Catherine.

A loud knock interrupted them just as they were finishing. A look of panic flashed across Vincent's face as he quietly moved into the bedroom and closed the door.

Catherine reached the door just as the knock was repeated. "Who is it?" she called.

"Miss Chandler, it's me, Roger. I have a special delivery package which just arrived."

Catherine looked through the in-the-door viewer even though she recognized Roger's voice. Still cautious she slowly removed the chain, both dead bolts and opened the door.

"I thought it might be important so I brought it right up."

"Thank you, Roger, I appreciate this very much," Catherine said as she accepted the package. "Roger, if anyone asks about me, would you please tell them I'm still out of town. I'm exhausted from my travel and I'd prefer not to have visitors for the next couple of days."

"Sure thing, Miss Chandler. I'll tell Thomas when he comes on duty tonight so that you won't be disturbed. What the tenant wants, the tenant gets has always been our

motto here, ya know that. If you need anything else, just let me know." He tipped his hat, smiled broadly then turned and walked away whistling.

Catherine barely glanced at the package as she moved toward the bedroom. Putting the package aside, she immediately walked toward Vincent. She slipped her arms around his back, hugging him tightly, filling the bond with her love.

"I don't know if I will ever be truly comfortable here, Catherine, as much as I want to be," he said explosively. "Things like that," he gestured toward the door, "happen and I realize I have no place in your world! I realize how true Father's words are, how real are his fears, and my own, about what would happen were I found here in the daylight."

"I would have never opened the door, Vincent, had it not been Roger. I share your fears and Father's as to what would happen if you were found. It is a nightmare that lives inside me each waking hour. Father and I are not as far apart in our concerns, our fears, as he would like to believe, not where your safety is concerned." Her arms tightened around his chest as she buried her face against his broad back.

"I know, Catherine, the nightmares, the fears, the secrecy are the price you must pay for my difference." The voice that was normally so soft and whispery suddenly held a hard bitter edge.

Moving to stand in front of him, Catherine stretched up bringing her face beneath the cascade of gold that had completely hidden his face. "It is the price I pay willingly, Vincent, and one I will continue to pay! I love you and nothing is more important than that, nothing! You are my life and being with you, sharing your world, is what I want--what I do willingly. When you sent me away because you thought it was for my own good, we both knew our being apart was impossible. That whatever price we had to pay for being together, we did willingly because it was and is worth any price! That has not change! My feelings will never change. I would never leave you and I would follow you to the grave--I will never be parted from you again, NEVER!" Her eyes blazed a deeper green as she prepared to battle for her right to freely live beside him, to become all he had dreamed of and more.

The war of emotions tore through Vincent's heart as he crushed Catherine in his arms. He buried his face against the fragrant warmth of her neck, trying to swallow the bitter cruelties of his differences and believe completely in her acceptance of them. The dark years of loneliness surrounded him, but beating strongly within was the deep need to believe and accept Catherine's unshakable devotion and love. She held him, murmuring soothing sounds as his tears dampened her neck.

Slipping from his arms, Catherine took his hand and guiding him toward the living room, pausing only long enough to gather up the light, airy throw from the bed. Resting her back against the sofa, Catherine patted the floor. "Come, stretch out and put your head in my lap." He sank in a graceful boneless mass to the floor, then seeing her look of reassurance; he allowed his head to pillow into her lap.

The fire still burned brightly as Catherine settled the throw over his shoulders. She had felt the trembling and sudden coolness of his face as his tears had ceased and she remembered other times--times when he shook with cold after other emotional traumas. She lightly brushed her fingertips across his temples and after a while, she felt him begin to relax under her tender ministrations. She continued to alternate the butterfly-light caresses and stroking his hair until he fell asleep.

Long after Vincent had relaxed into a deep sleep, Catherine continued to indulge herself as she stroked the fiery golden tresses. Her fingers momentarily ceased their flight as Vincent turned, his face pressing lightly against her flat stomach. Her blood instantly warmed as her thoughts stirred, fanning her desires, and she tried unsuccessfully to halt the direction of her thoughts.

Nearly an hour later he nuzzled closer, sighed deeply and was instantly awake. She smiled as she felt his first moments of disappointment as his dream faded and the beginning of his embarrassment as he opened his eyes realizing part of his dream had become reality. "Catherine, I'm sorry," he whispered as he pulled away, "I did not mean to, that is, I didn't ..." his voice trailed into silence.

"It's all right. You needn't apologize or be embarrassed." Her warm smile eased his awkwardness as her fingers continued to brush lightly through his hair.

"Watching you peacefully slumber, feeling you relax in such a deep sleep as you curled against me has been the happiest hour. I would continue to hold you through out the rest of the day if you wish to sleep longer." Catherine brushed her lips across his forehead then slowly claimed his lips.

Vincent rose to his feet and turned, offering his hand then pulled Catherine into his arms, holding her tightly before slowly releasing her.

"Are you hungry? How does some canned fruit and cheese sound to you?" Catherine's smile was warmly welcoming, easing his fears completely.

"Would you see to the fire while I get the food? I like sitting here while we eat." Catherine's voice was warm filled with love as she smiled reassuringly.

Putting the remaining sliced pears on the plate, Catherine carried the tray into the living room.

Chapter 11

Vincent's eyes followed Catherine as she walked toward him carrying the package that had arrived earlier. He felt her excitement and wonder.

She held out the package as she sat in front of him. "It's addressed to you. It's from Eleanore. I recognize her writing.

Vincent accepted the package turning it over and over. Carefully he opened the wrapping and removed the neatly folded note that lay atop a mound of packing bubbles. Unfolding the note, he began to read aloud.

Dear Vincent,

From my window I have watched Cathy as she moved through the garden, camera resting on her shoulder as she endeavored to bring the visual beauty of Edward's woodland creatures to you. Her excitement, the intensity of her need to share all she sees, is a joy to witness.

Cathy has always been like another child to me, as we welcomed her birth as warmly, joyfully as if she were our own. I have never been positive if the tree house colors were truly a collaborative effort or if Cathy led Sandy and David to select them! If our tree house could talk, it would tell many delightful tales of your beloved Cathy--it was always a source of many lively dinner conversations.

When Cathy arrived I immediately knew there was something very different about her. It did not take long to discover that Cathy now wears the mantle of a woman deeply in love. Watching her face as she spoke your name, I am at peace knowing she has found the love that has made her complete. Such was the love I shared with my Edward and it is the same love I wished for my children and for Cathy. The completeness which comes to women, and men, when they are well and truly loved!

As she told me your name, Vincent, her face glowed with such love my own heart ached. Seeing her love, the way she seeks to provide you with the visual delights of Edward's talents, warms me.

Edward charged me with the keeping of his woodland nursery. Now, willingly, I release that charge to you. May the enclosed bring as much joy to your heart as my remembered joy of watching Cathy's face as Edward created this.

Eleanore

Gingerly, his tapered fingers trembling slightly, Vincent parted the packing bubbles, revealing a nest of straw. He took a deep breath as he removed the straw. Nestled within sat an exquisitely detailed life-like baby rabbit. Vincent carefully lifted it closer, savoring each detailed line, the endless strokes which carved life-like hair, the look of wide-eyed curiosity.

His eyes brimmed with joyful tears as he looked at Catherine who sat beside him brushing away her own happy tears. Her mouth forming a silent 'oh' of joy and happiness. "Catherine, it is so life-like, I feel if I sit patiently, quietly enough, his

nose will twitch, his tail will wiggle and he will hop away." Awe filled his voice as his eyes lingered surveying each detail.

Touching his arm Catherine leaned forward, "I know, I have always felt the same way. All of Edward's woodland nursery pieces are just like this--looking as though they would disappear into the grasses. When we would visit, I always took my favorite storybooks with me. After reading one for the fifth time, Edward told me he would just have to make me a rabbit. The next time we visited them, he took me into his studio and he drew dozen of rabbits until he found the right one. When I returned months later we went to the garden. I remember we sat on the cobble stones for hours as I watched, waiting for the rabbit to hop away."

They sat lost within time, fingers tentatively, gingerly stroking the baby rabbit nestled within Vincent's palm. Catherine glowed with happiness over Eleanore's generous gift. And, she could not help but be intrigued by Eleanore's description of her love for Vincent!

Looking up quickly, Vincent touched Catherine's fingers as she caressed the rabbit, "She knew your heart completely--just as I know your heart." Smiling, Catherine realized how completely Vincent had read her thought. He drew her against his chest, a soft contented sigh escaping from his lips as he pressed her close.

Vincent slipped the rabbit back within the protective packing and placed the box on the love seat. Gazing at Catherine, he felt his heart tighten, seeing her loving look as she raised her lips. Warm moist lips clung temptingly until Vincent felt he was lost within the heady intoxicating taste of her mouth. Pulling away briefly, Vincent again sought the honey sweet taste until they were breathless with their fiery need.

"Tell me what you are feeling," she said as she pulled slightly away.

Only his throaty, ragged breathing filled the silence as Vincent struggled to control the erratic pounding of his heart, the heat that covered his body with a light film of sweat. "My thoughts whirl within me like the Chamber of the Winds, filling me with thoughts--longings I can't control, a panic which I can't fight."

"Not your thoughts, but what you are feeling here," she said as she placed her hand over his rapidly beating heart.

"Fear and such joy as I have never known, filling me until I can't begin to separate them." His expressive eyes told Catherine more than his short choppy words, as he struggled to bring his breathing under control.

"Tell me about the fears."

"Catherine, please, I can not, they are like me, dark and ugly!"

"There is nothing about you that I find dark and ugly! Fear of the unknown threatens all of us, but you taught me to face my fears, not to allow them to hold me prisoner." Catherine's hands captured his majestic face, her thumbs tenderly caressing the hollows beneath his prominent cheekbones compelling him to remain within her gaze.

The look in his eyes conveyed a silent plea that she understand and not force him to reveal this part of himself that he had struggled endlessly to control. Catherine stared into his ever-changing azure blue eyes and waited.

"I am not like others, these feelings are wrong, it is not right for you to love me, I can not be ... give you what you need, what you deserve. I am ... I am ugly ... my body would frighten you." He spat the words out, his terrible loneliness echoing in the quiet.

"Have you talked with Father about your fears?"

"Yes, but he can give no answer for the unknown."

"Is it sex you fear?"

"Yes! I cannot risk ... I am not capable ... I can not be what you need. I have no right to love you, I can only bring you pain."

His paralyzing words hung between them, holding them within their grasp. His eyes held intense consuming pain, pain so great Catherine felt her heart would break. "Oh, my love, there is such pain, suffering within you, I ache for you," she murmured. Catherine lifted his hand curling her own inside his larger one as she brought it to her lips, softly kissing his fingers.

"Vincent, what you are--your difference--I accepted long ago. I hold no fears within my heart concerning you, to our truly being together. I am as incomplete without you as you are without me. My time with Eleanore proved that to both of us."

"I want to know your body as intimately as I know my own," she continued. "You say your body is ugly, that I would be frightened by what I see, but I honestly don't believe that. You are beautiful beyond words to me."

"You do have the right to love! Never believe otherwise! Never! Loving and giving is part of you and to want and need those feelings returned is normal. Wanting, needing to share a deeper part of yourself is your birthright." The passion of her voice was as compelling as was her belief in him and his right to love.

"Do you know how proud I am of your love? I want to shout it to the world--tell them the most beautiful, sensitive, and the kindness man in the world loves me! I was hollow, empty until you loved me."

Catherine stroked against his hand and felt it tremble under hers. "Vincent, have you ever seen other men in the tunnels naked?"

"Yes, when I have helped Father in the hospital chamber, but they do not look like me." His hand brushed downward indicating his displeasure with his body and the shame it caused.

"Do you mean they don't have as much body hair as you? Or, do you mean their male organs are not like yours?" Catherine continued to hold her gaze steady, never allowing her expression to change.

Vincent turned, staring into the fire, unable to bring himself to look longer into her eyes or answer her question. "They are not hairy, they ..." he whispered then his voice trailed away.

"Then you are fearful your body hair will be offensive to me?"

"Catherine, please!" His voice exploded, resonating through the room.

"What else?" she demanded, "what else?"

"They are not proportioned as I am," he stammered.

"Oh, my sweet love, your innocence is beautiful," Catherine softly cooed against the hand she nestled against her lips.

"Vincent, I had a friend in college who at the beginning of each fall term sat under a tree watching all the men go by in their shorts and cut-offs because she only wanted to go out with men who turned her on--men with hairy legs. Another friend liked guys who had long hair. And, I knew another girl who found men appealing who didn't button their shirts all the way because she liked to see their chest hair. Body hair is not necessarily a turn-off or something of which you should be ashamed. Do you understand the term 'turn-off'?"

"Yes, it means repulsive, unacceptable, not pleasurable."

"My friend, Jenny Aronson, once went with a guy who didn't want her to shave her legs because he found hair on women's legs attractive. What I am trying to get you to understand and accept is that hair on the body, either the excess or the lack of it, is neither right nor wrong. It just is. We don't know if you are capable of intercourse, but from what we have shared in the last few hours, I feel you are. There are many ways, Vincent, to make love--give and receive pleasures--ways which don't include physical intercourse.

"Now as to the other. Proportions." She paused a moment, as she attempted to gather her thoughts before continuing. "The male penis comes in varying sizes, much like women's breasts."

"Breasts and the size of them cause women more tears than anything else, did you know that? If they are small, like me, then you always wish they were bigger. And, if they are bigger, then you want them smaller."

He was both startled and surprised by her words.

"There is no right or wrong size, proportion. The size or lack of size of a man's penis isn't the measure of a man's sexuality or his ability to give or receive pleasure."

"Just as a man's penis enlarges during arousal, in intercourse, a woman's body is made to accommodate, accept with complete ease his body within hers."

"When you say pain, do you mean you fear you would inflict pain upon me during sex? Or, do you fear the longing, desires your sexual feelings cause when you hold me or kiss me?"

"Catherine, if I ever hurt you I would not live beyond the length of time it would take me to reach the Abyss."

"And I would follow you because I can not live without you!"

"No!" he cried.

"Yes!"

"Don't you realize that even when you are consumed with rage you have never tried to harm me or hurt me? I have never been frightened of you, only frightened for you because I know how gentle you are. If you were going to hurt me, don't you think it would have happened before now? When Paracelsus drugged you, even then you were not capable of harming or hurting me."

"The mixture of emotions which you feel when we are close, the desire to touch and be touched, to love, is separate from the loss of control your rage brings. I

don't know that I am capable of adequately explaining the difference to you. I can only assure you the surrendering of your body in love is a joy beyond description.”

"Tell me about the joy you feel."

His features softened, losing the harsh pain that filled his eyes, as he sought to explain the joy he felt. "Until you, Catherine, I don't think I truly ever knew what joy or hope meant. You allowed me to dream, you brought the world to me in a way no books could, and I have found a fledgling peace within myself when I am with you.”

“When you put your arms around me the first time, I thought my heart would burst with the joy. I did not think I would ever know the joy of a woman’s touch. When you so willingly sought my arms in that instant, I thought I would succumb with happiness. I convinced myself, at first, it was only gratitude on your part, but as time went on and you again reached out to me, I began to hope.”

The open honesty of his response encouraged Catherine to further discussion of his fears of intimacy.

"Was kissing me as frightening as you had thought it would be?"

"No, it was beyond anything I thought!" His voice became a whisper. "Your lips are so soft, warm and welcoming. The taste of your mouth is like sweet honey, it has been a taste I crave. It is like being on a long journey; they are home and welcoming me eagerly."

Catherine smiled easing the tension between them. "I won't try to force you into making love to me, Vincent, but I want you to clearly understand that I willingly accept you, want you as my lover. Within my heart and soul, I have pledged myself as completely as a vow of marriage because within me, I am married to you. Whether it takes months or years to face your fears, my vow will not change, I will wait and I will never leave you."

The growing lump in his throat rendered him as incapable of speech as the emotions that overwhelmed him. He drew Catherine into his arms, holding her

tightly. He tried to sort through the thoughts, but their assault of his senses was rapid-fire, filling him then flashing away quickly replaced by another emotion. As waves pound a rocky shore at high tide, Vincent's emotions ebbed and flowed, spiraling him upward then crushing him against the jagged rocks of his fears.

Catherine felt the rise and fall of his emotions with a clarity that she had never experienced. Her own thoughts whirled in counterpoints to his. She tried to work through the growing anger she felt towards Father. His refusal to discuss even basic biology with Vincent let alone, to have an honest discussion of the fears that consumed him!

Sensing her rising anger, "Catherine, he only did what he thought was right."

"Don't," her eyes blazing a darker green, "don't you dare defend him, he should have explained, helped you to understand your feelings, worked through your fears. His actions are unspeakable! He allowed you to suffer when he could have stopped it with a word. Allowed you to feel ashamed of your body, to deny and doubt your own sexuality because he was unwilling, uncomfortable discussing sex with his own son is unforgivable!"

"Catherine, we can not change the past. What happened is over and we cannot undo what was done. I don't know if it would have helped. My fears consumed me. It was not until you that I ever needed to challenge them. I accepted my difference and believed I would live my life alone."

The gentleness of Vincent's voice as he spoke touched Catherine, an ever-echoing sound of her own heart's fear; fear that she would live her life alone never knowing, never experiencing the rapturous, joyous love of which she had always dreamed. Dreams, which had begun in childhood, dreams that haunted her as they remained unfulfilled until Vincent.

Burying her face against the softness of the velour, Catherine snuggled closer, holding him tighter. Instinctively, Vincent pressed her closer as the warmth of her body spread through his, echoing Catherine's need to be held, enfolded her within his arms, until their hearts were beating as one. Vincent felt Catherine's lips moving, kissing the shirt that covered him, and he wondered what it would be like

to feel her lips upon his flesh. His hand stroked her hair as he pressed her face closer, the heat of her mouth burning through his shirt.

Vincent's hands roamed across her back pressing her breasts against his chest causing the fire within to flame higher. He lifted her face up, trailing kisses along her neck, tasting the soft sensitive flesh beneath her jaw. Catherine's lips mimicked his, licking, tasting, pressing hotly against his neck.

New sensations and feelings assaulted Vincent as Catherine's mouth explored the virgin skin below his ears before moving again to his neck. She lingered against the base of his throat, savoring the tiny patch of exposed skin above the jacket zipper, kissing again and again this expanse of flesh until his skin was wet. Vincent threw his head back, offering yet another small patch of skin to her eager lips. His lips parted as he softly moaned.

Catherine ceased her sweet assault against his neck, molding her lips against his until they parted fully, allowing her complete freedom. Leisurely, she tasted, savored the feel of his soft mouth, until Vincent pulled away unable to stand this exquisite torture.

Burying her face against his neck, Catherine was drawn again to that tantalizing patch of exposed flesh. Vincent inhaled sharply as Catherine inched the zipper lower. Her lips followed the zipper, kissing the warm expanse of chest.

Her eyes found his, silently telling him of her delight as her fingers roamed over the reddish gold hair that spread over his muscular chest before dipping to his waist. "You are more beautiful than I imagined," she whispered. "So beautiful. I can't touch you enough." She smiled into his chest. "I don't want to stop--you feel wonderful beneath my hands."

"Catherine," the velvet voice caressed her name. "everywhere you touch causes a fire, and a fire which delights yet frightens me with its intensity." His hand covered hers stopping the flight of her fingers as he gathered her closer.

Aware of the turmoil her actions had caused, Catherine fought to control her own racing emotions. Emotions filled their bond song with an intensity causing a dizzy

joy and wonder within Vincent as he experienced all of Catherine soaring feelings; her desire swiftly followed by her loving concern for his fears.

Vincent continued his leisurely caresses as Catherine's acceptance of him, his fears and her love filled his thoughts with awe. Her every gesture, word and touch moved to fill the spaces of fear that haunted his waking and sleeping dreams. As her words echoed within his mind, he realized how delicately she had eased him past his own embarrassment to provide him the beginning of a healthy sex education, allowing him an accepting outlet for his questions and complete assurance he could express his deepest fears. Never, he thought, had he expected to experience all Catherine had freely given him.

Vincent sensed the quicksilver swing of her mood and, looking down, saw tears brimming her lashes.

"Have I embarrassed you, Vincent? If I have, then I humbly ask your forgiveness. Our discussion happened so quickly, I didn't plan it, it just happened."

Brushing away the lone tear that slid down her face, Vincent could only stare in wonder. Her constant concern for his feelings, her willingness to always see to his comfort--physically, spiritually, emotionally and mentally--was an ongoing source of joy.

"Catherine, your love eased any momentary embarrassment I may have suffered. I have never discussed sex with Father beyond our biology classes. My differences," his voice trembled slightly as his hand swept past his body, "precluded the necessity."

"After Lisa, I never dared believe I could bring happiness to anyone. Words spoke in love, Catherine, are never spoken to embarrass. Only a heart filled with love would have spoken as you did."

"If I had thought about it, I don't think I could have done it. The words were out of my mo ... mouth be- bef-," she was stammering, something she had done as a young girl and it surfaced at the most inappropriate moments. "Before I knew it."

"Catherine, please, it is all right." His voice whispered as he saw her concern.

"I only wanted to help. I wanted to free you from your fears as you have freed me from mine."

"You opened a door by which they may, with your help and guidance, escape," he softly whispered against her hair.

As she turned, placing her head in his lap, Vincent felt the beginning mirth swell within Catherine before her laughter erupted. Raising a quizzical eyebrow Vincent waited, rejoicing in the delightful sounds that bubbled from deep with Catherine's throat.

"What?" he queried.

"I just had flashes of Father's face if he had been here, heard our discussion. Physician or not, his face would be red!"

"Red does not adequately describe it, Catherine. He would, I fear, stammer, clear his throat excessively, and be far more embarrassed than I." A slight smile flashed across his face before a deep chuckle split the air.

Catherine gave herself over to mental pictures of Father's stern face and between his own peels of laughter, she gasped, "I love hearing you laugh!"

"He would peer about searching for his glasses," Catherine laughed, "then begin to pull at his collar!"

"We have shared much, but I don't believe I ever dreamed that we would be lying on your floor laughing while we discussed sex!" The shy grin that flashed revealed the tips of his canines causing her heart to pull as she again was consumed with laughter.

"I think Father was actually relieved when I became old enough to teach biology class because I overheard him telling Mary once, just a few years ago," Vincent managed between chuckles, "that he was glad there were now others qualified to

teach sex education to the children, because he felt it was something he didn't do well."

Their eyes met briefly then they quickly looked away as their laughter spilled into the air.

Their eyes met again and in the same instant, they reached for each other, only Catherine's quicker movement caused his hand to brush against her breast. He inhaled sharply as he pulled away quickly, laughter dying in his throat. His face was stricken as the fear of intimacy filled him anew, his eyes growing large.

Catherine felt her blood quicken as she watched the feelings that flashed quickly across Vincent's face.

"I did not mean, it wasn't my intent," he struggled, trying to control his breathing, as he fought to find words to explain.

Putting her fingers against his lips, Catherine halted his attempts at speech. "It's all right, Vincent. You don't need to apologize or explain anything." She brought his trembling fingers to her lips, her eyes staring into the bottomless depths of his, as she softly breathed, "Don't be afraid to touch me, to discover the pleasure these hands can bring. The joy they can give to us as we love."

Time was suspended as he felt Catherine's love pouring through their bond, reinforcing her words. Catherine waited patiently as he struggled: acceptance pitted against rejection; desire pitted against need; denial pitted against desire; and fear pitted against love.

Only the flickering flames of the fire broke the silence.

"Catherine, help me, please. Help me to touch you, to know this joy which you offer." His voice was a whisper filled with desire.

She reassured him with her smile then slowly guided his hand to rest against her breast.

His impulse was to pull away from the warmth that filled his palm. His hand fluttered against her as he was torn by conflicting senses.

Catherine lifted her body slightly increasing the pressure against his hand as her desire heightened.

Tentatively, Vincent allowed his hand to fully cup the warmth of her breast. His breathing was rapid as he felt Catherine's desire coursing higher. He threw back his head as pleasure filled him. Slowly, his head lowered, the clouds were suddenly gone from his eyes and a gentle smile played across his face, softening his features into a more youthful countenance. His smile grew as his fingers lightly caressed, then a slight frown appeared.

"Catherine, earlier you said...that is...your breast does not seem small to me! It feels quite wonderful!"

She smiled, thrilled and amused by his words and the loving innocence that caused them. "I always wished they were larger," she said wistfully.

"Your body is perfect to me, perfect in every detail."

"I hope it brings you pleasure," she said as her fingers curled against his chest.

Sun-blocking clouds bathed the room in gentle hues mirroring the glow within their hearts.

Tenderly holding each other, lost within wondrous new feelings, they savored the memories of this new joy. The first teetering steps, a tenuous new beginning, towards a life together, a home together in a newer, kinder land. Halting steps allowed light to fill the dark and ease once hidden fears. Beginning steps towards self-discovery, a shared sexuality, a mating of body, spirit and soul.

The End