

Embrace the Night

by Debbie Ristick

"You must share it with me," Catherine insisted gently. "Whatever happens, whatever comes."

An overwhelming rush of love brought Vincent's arm around her shoulder, and pulling her close, his lips tenderly brushed her hair.

"Whatever happens, whatever comes," he took a deep breath than whispered. "Know that I love you."

The words, though long in coming, were something Catherine already knew and cherished. Nothing had ever sounded so sweet as those words spoken in his beloved voice. With their expression, she felt alive again, her weariness from the past three days fading like morning mist. She felt infused with the strength of possibilities unleashed. The verbal acknowledgement of his love for her was intoxicating. It was, at long last, admitted, concrete, tangible. It was worth fighting his battles for, worthy dying for. Whatever it was that had disrupted his life so bitterly could now be challenged openly. She was armed with the most powerful weapon of all - his love, and fully intended to slap a gauntlet across the face of his fears.

"Nothing in my life means more to me than you, Vincent." Catherine glanced up into his eyes. "Always know this. Let the truth guide you through this turmoil. Know that I will be here for you, forever."

"I will," he answered in a tired voice. "I must."

Concern washed over her and she raised a trembling hand to his cheek. "Are you certain you are strong enough to go down?"

A tortured sigh left his lips, and pressing a claw-tipped hand t the glass on the French doors, he looked to her again.

"Catherine, I have placed you in enough danger already. If the struggle isn't over, then I cannot allow it to continue here. I must return Below."

Nodding slowly, she held his gaze. "At least rest awhile longer. It won't be safe for you to go for awhile yet. In the meantime, go back to bed - try to sleep for a few more hours. When it's fully dark, and the city has quieted, I'll wake you and we'll go down together."

Holding her close for another moment, Vincent finally surrendered. He could feel her love and concern for him filtering through the mangled web of their bond like sunlight determined to do battle with darkness.

"I'll do as you wish, Catherine."

She walked with him back to the bed, her slim arm wrapped protectively around his waist, as if she alone could support his weight. After settling the quilted comforter over him, Catherine brushed the hair from Vincent's cheek. His eyes closed in weariness, and after a moment, she knew he was fast asleep. Hoping that all would be well soon, she left the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Over. The nightmare was finally over. Vincent could feel his body relaxing as he surrendered to a strange sense of weightlessness. It mattered not that he had ultimately been victorious over Gabriel; all that mattered now was that his son was safe. The child - Catherine's child - would be raised in the love and safety of the tunnels. The boy would grow, learning of the supreme sacrifice his mother had been forced to make in the name of love. He would know of Diana's courage, of her uncanny sense of perception. He would know the love of all who surrounded him - but he would always feel the emptiness inside his father.

Darkness engulfed him and Vincent sighed with resignation. The past several weeks had seemed almost endless, mindless in the loss, terror and frustration that had accompanied them. It had been insanity. And it had been needless.

Catherine lived inside his heart now, inside his mind, his very soul. From this place she would never be taken, could never be removed. Inside him, she was forever safe, forever protected. But inside him, too, was an abyss of despair. It was torture to live without her touch, her voice, the thrill of her emotions running through him to gladden his heart. How could life have shown him the perfect love, allowed him in a fever of bedlam to taste of it, only to snatch it away so cruelly?

Vincent rolled over in the bed, groaning out loud with the crushing sense of loss he felt. As his mind came fully conscious, it was the strangeness of the bedclothes that startled him first. Sitting up quickly, he looked around in confusion.

He was not in his chamber. The walls were not rough, carved stone, the window he looked through was not the golden hues of stained glass, the covers on the bed were not a patchwork of fabric made of the cast off materials from the world Above.

Trembling and disoriented, Vincent threw back the blankets and put his feet on the thickly-carpeted floor. With another shake of his maned head, he jumped up in terror as the identity of his surroundings finally reached him.

'Catherine's bedroom!' These were her things, her bed. This was their view of the city through those paned doors, their place of sanctuary. How did he get here? Another memory assaulted him of another waking with no recollection of how he had come to be there. Head spinning, he sank back on the bed. That morning in the park, with the relentless brightness of broad daylight shining upon features meant to know only shadow, he had panicked. That had marked the true beginning of this madness, the horrors wrought by Paracelsus's hand being only a precursor to the unbalancing of his psyche.

Putting his hands to his head, Vincent forced himself to think. His clouded mind gave him no peace, no freedom from the confusion rising in his thoughts, and a low groan of agony escaped his lips as he slid to the floor in defeat.

The louvered doors suddenly slid open and, before he could react, a soft, cool hand placed itself upon his brow.

"What is it? Are you all right?" The concern in the softly spoken words penetrated his mind and looking up, he recognized the face that was barely inches from his.

"Catherine?" His voice choked out her name. "Is it really you?" He was almost afraid to touch her lest she disappear.

Kneeling beside his shivering body, Catherine tenderly smoothed the dream-tossed mane from his face.

"Yes, my love, it's really me." She stroked his beard-stubbed jaw, explaining. "You were having a nightmare, but it's over now."

Pulling himself to the side of the bed, Vincent looked around the room again, taking in every detail. There was no doubt in his mind where he was, this at least was not a dream. But the events of the past weeks, the loss and anguish he had experienced.... were they then the dream? With Catherine kneeling before him, it almost felt like this was the dream.

"How long....?" he asked hesitantly.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"I.... I told you that I loved you.... Oh, Catherine...." he choked, suddenly reaching for her, pulling her to him convulsively. "But I never told you how deeply I loved you."

Catherine's arms went around him and for a moment she buried her face against his chest, tears springing to her eyes. *'My love,'* she thought. *'My poor, tortured love.'*

Swallowing back her tears, she forced herself to regain control of her emotions before looking up at him.

"Would it help to talk about it?"

For a split second he questioned the reality of any of this. The dream - was it only a dream, after all? Images flashed across his mind; the loss of their bond.... a cold windswept rooftop.... Catherine falling into his arms whispering *'there is a child'*.... a truce between rivals, a betrayal, softened by an ultimate sacrifice.... an ally in the form of a red-haired woman.... a time of bitter cold and triumph over snow.... the ultimate evil of a man named Gabriel.... a child.... his son, Catherine's son.... And overlying everything, coloring every emotion, every action, every word----was grief. A searing agony of loss that had proven insurmountable.

His arms tightened around her, almost painful in their grip. He whispered hoarsely, without thought. "I am dead and glad of it, if it means holding you in my arms again."

Catherine knew the extent of his suffering then, knew the magnitude of his nightmares, his fears. Her heart stumbled, the knowledge of how deep his misery ran slicing into her with swordlike swiftness. She forced her voice to remain calm and rational.

"No, Vincent, you're not dead. You've been in my apartment for the last five days. You've been ill, fighting some kind of delirium neither of us understands. You were getting better and wanted to leave. I asked you to rest again before it was dark enough but the fever came back. You've been mostly unconscious for the past forty-eight hours. Having terrible nightmares, I think."

She added the last gently, remembering his anguished calling of her name. Once, he had nearly screamed the name *'Gabriel!'* and she had been terrified that one of the neighbors would hear, or worse yet, investigate.

Comprehension swirled through the murky darkness lingering in his mind. He must return to the tunnels. He must not allow any part of that dream to become reality. The fear that perhaps the dream had been a foretelling of things to come left an acrid taste of terror on his tongue.

Scrambling to his feet, he looked at her as though in great pain. "Catherine, I must go back." Circumventing her protest, he continued. "And I must go alone. It is not safe for you.... not until I can be sure."

"Sure of what, Vincent?" Catherine's voice trembled as she struggled to contain her fear.

"That the dream was not an omen. I must be certain that it was not a warning of things to come. For if it was, then it was a dream of impending destruction to us, for all of the people we hold close to our hearts. I could not bear to lose you, and in the dream, Catherine.... you were murdered. You died in my arms."

A shudder passed through his body, even to speak of it in the context of a dream caused a fresh

spasm of agony to wrack his heart.

Startled, Catherine stood and walked to his side to stand before the French doors. Laying a comforting hand on his back, she looked up at him.

"A couple of days ago you said that whatever happens, whatever comes, you love me. I believe in that. I also believe that, no matter what you may have dreamed, you will always protect me."

"No!" Vincent's hands clenched with helplessness. "I could not protect you! Our connection was lost to me and I could not find you. You were killed after giving birth to a child, our child.... a child conceived in a dark chamber below the Catacombs. We loved, Catherine, a love that I could not remember sharing with you, a love that is impossible for me to desire."

For a moment Catherine was silent, unable to find the words that would ease the pain in his eyes. She only knew that she did not want him to leave, did not want him beyond her touch.

"Then perhaps you should stay here a while longer," she suggested. "Stay with me until morning. I'll lay beside you, read to you, anything that will help you put the nightmare behind you." She almost added. *'If only you would let me heal you.... let me love you.'* but reason conquered impulse and she did not.

Indecision edged the leonine planes of his face as he studied hers for a long moment. *'Stay with me,'* she'd said. *'I'll lie beside you.'* For a brief span of a heartbeat, he was tempted, a different sort of fever rising in his blood. But then out of the corner of his eye he saw the shattered mirror on her wall, mute evidence of the destruction he'd wrought here. He took a step back, closing his eyes tightly with the resolve he had erected.

"No." He almost groaned with the weight of denying her. "No, where I am going, you must not follow. I need some time, Catherine, to be certain.... to be certain the madness is over."

Reaching out to him, she pleaded. "Don't give this dream credence, Vincent. However real it seemed to you, it was only a nightmare. You must remember that. Nothing is written in stone, we have the freedom to choose our own destiny."

He only shook his head, desperate to protect her.... but who would protect her from him?

Catherine watched helplessly as he opened the French doors, throwing his cloak carelessly around broad shoulders bent now with exhaustion. After turning back to look at her with blue eyes as deep as a storm-tossed sea, he was gone.

The tunnel seemed quieter than usual as Vincent made his way towards the hub. Sweat poured from his face, blurring this vision unmercifully, as he walked. But fear drove him on, pushed him past the limits of endurance, forcing him to hold onto the slim remnants of sanity he still possessed. From the echo of the nightmare he could still hear the voice, the insane, coldly mocking voice of Gabriel.

'I kept her alive for months when a word would have ended it.' The evil bearing of the man had been so real, the pain of loss and grief so tangible and now - it had all been a product of this illness? A shudder passed through him. If not for Diana - no - *'it had all been a nightmare'*, he reminded himself again, a dream caused by delirium. Catherine was safe, she was safe Above, in her own home. She had not followed him down, had not been taken from him. Her friend Joe had not been in an explosion. She was still there for him. She loved him.

'Stay with me.... stay with me.' He heard Catherine's words over and over in his mind. They echoed off the cavern walls, building in intensity as he reached the stairs to the Abyss. It was madness, lunacy and he teetered at the edge of a step, unsure of his ability to stop a fall, skeptical as to whether he should even try. He had failed her again, denied her. She, who meant more to him than

life, she, whose smile gave him the will to go on. Her love was a gift, a miracle. She offered so much to him.... she offered herself.

'Whatever happens.... whatever comes.' The promise of her words crushed him with their meaning and Vincent's knees buckled under the weight of his denial. He landed ungracefully on the rough steps even as his mind cried out for her. *'Know that I love you.'* His words, spoken earlier with such sincerity, came back to haunt him, mocking him with their loving innocence, their spiritual reverence.

His feelings were truth, for the love he felt for Catherine had grown from a tiny spark the night he had found her battered, nearly lifeless body in the park. The spark had ignited into a brilliant fire and that flame threatened sometimes to engulf him, to consume him with its passion - and its reality. For what he desired was no dream; what he desired was the reality of this woman in his arms - and that must never be.

His dark side had appeared before him many times in the blackness of night as his love and desire had grown, badgering him, harassing him with the reminder of his existence. He mocked him, triumphantly proud of the dreadful gloom he had thrown over his *'brother.'*

'You cannot have her,' the dark version of himself crowed. *'She does not want you - or if she does it is because she does not know you as you really are. She would not want a monster, and you are that - I have made sure of it!'*

"*'NO!'*" Vincent roared into the howling winds. "We love! I am a man! You are nothing but the image of myself as drawn by Paracelsus. You do not belong here! I will not give credence to your existence, you shall have no more power over me!"

Shaking his tawny head, Vincent's leonine face surveyed the empty cavern of the Abyss. There were no hated rivels here, no monsters challenging him to battle. The fever had overwhelmed him, memory and hallucinations mixing together like some witch's brew, until he didn't know what had been real and what was illusion.

With determination made of steel, he stood, balancing himself carefully on the steps, and continued the journey down. Safety lay beyond the next turn; his chamber, his bed, the wisdom and support of his family and friends - and Father - he needed Father most of all. He needed the familiar voice, at once stern and comforting, to guide him through this hell.

Staggering with the effort, Vincent reached the bottom of the stairs and, with a final look behind him, he shut out the enemy as he shut out the winds of the ever-beckoning Abyss. The hated rival would exercise no further power over him, no further madness. He saw before him the golden lights of home, the sanity offered by familiar things; his books, his journal, all the things he cherished. He moved towards the light, leaving the devil behind on those stairs; but the enigma of a long denied and increasingly overwhelming desire for her remained with him. That desire would not leave him in peace, would not allow itself to be prohibited.

As he turned away from the howling cries of the wind, Vincent felt the mighty heart in his chest convulse as though in agony. He would shut out that need, forbid himself to feel it again. "It will pass," he tried to reassure himself, but on the inside, his mind called him *'coward.'*

Catherine paced restlessly across the limited confines of her living room in subliminal imitation of Vincent, her mind in turmoil. The furniture presented no obstacle as she made her way uninterrupted across the carpeted floor and back. Realizing with a start what she was doing, she stopped abruptly, muttering out loud.

"I can't let him be alone. I cant!"

Although he had only been gone less than an hour, she was filled with a sense of loss. Even though he had been alternately unconscious than weak with the fatigue of his struggle, having him near twenty-four hours a day had been an experience she would treasure always. Lying next to him in her bed, holding the hard length of his body close to hers.... somehow, deep within herself, Catherine knew that no harm could come to him while he was in her care. But now he was gone, ruled once more by his fears, his fate out of her loving hands.

Unthinking, she resumed pacing. Hands.... the blood on his hands.... her hands.... But it was more than that, more than the evil scheming of Paracelsus that had brought on this terrible affliction of his soul. It was a lifetime of repression, of denying the most natural and elemental desires of mankind. Vincent, perhaps even more so than other men, needed a mate, needed what he had never known. The gentle hand of a woman had been denied him from birth. He needed that now, desperately needed the love and unconditional acceptance fo a woman, a mate who would accept him and all that he is; he needed her.

Her own guilt in this madness ran far deeper than just making choices that exposed herself to physical danger. There had been times, she knew now, that she had unknowingly teased him, tempted him with something he felt he could never have. He saw himself as her protector, and he had always been that. But she saw him as a lover, and he was that as wel, in all ways but one.

"Though they go mad, they shall be sane," she whispered the words, recalling with crystal clarity when they had left his lips. Suddenly, the jumbled myriad of thoughts blowing across her mind like a sheaf of papers loose in a windstorm settled into one neat, ordely stack. "A lover in every way but one," she whispered aloud, comprehension filling her entire being. "Though they sink through the sea, they shall rise again!"

In that second, Catherine knew the answer. It was time; time for dreams to banish nightmares, for love to conquer fears. It was time for yearning hearts to be completed. In less than a heartbeat, she threw on her coat and was heading for the door.

Her mind was a torrent of thought as Catherine reached the sub-basement. A smile played on the corners of her lips as she crossed through the radiance of light splashing down from the world Above. But the smile turned to a frown when she realized he was not there.

"Vincent?" she questioned softly, her voice echoing against the empty tunnel. She could barely recall a time when he had not anticipated her arrival, had not been here before she had given herself a chance to safely maneuver the hidden stairs. He had said the bond was imperiled, did he mean in the dream - or did he mean now?

Reaching inside herself for determination, Catherine continued on, past the Spiral staircase, beyond the steam vents, into the core of the world Below, into the friendliness, the love and happiness she knew existed here. She walked quickly through the tunnels she knew so well, straightaway to the chamber where she thought he would be.

The golden hue of the stained glass above his bed was breathtaking. No matter how many times she saw this chamber, it always struck her fresh with how indelibly imprinted with his character it was. For a moment, Catherine allowed herself the fantasy of waking next to him in this bed, feeling the hardened muscle of his legs intertwined with hers. She imagined how he would look then, sleep rumped, beautiful and how it would feel to lie beside him.

"Catherine?" A familiar voice called to her from the entrance, breaking her reverie.

Turning, she looked up into the eyes of the tunnel patriarch, and with a tired smile, crossed the chamber to his side.

"Father, where is he?"

"It's all right, Catherine. Whatever you did, whatever you said, has done more for him than I ever could. He told me of his dreams, of the nightmare. He's tired now, exhausted. I've sent him to the Bathing pools."

"Father," Catherine started slowly, somehow compelled to tell him of her discovery. "He needs me, I know it now. He needs more than rest, more than the Bathing pools. He needs what we have always wanted, always dreamed of sharing."

Raising grey flecked brows, Father questioned. "What exactly are you saying?"

Whirling, she took deep breaths as she began to pace again in an attempt to assemble her reeling thoughts into rational sentences. The need to be with Vincent was a living thing inside her, growing stronger and stronger with each passing minute.

"Father, you were only half right when you said part of him is a man. Vincent is not like other men, to deny him that would be to deny his uniqueness. But, he is a man, with a man's needs and longings. To deny him that is to deny his very existence." Her voice grew soft as she continued, holding his grey eyes captive with the conviction in hers. "He loves me. And I love him more than life. I want him. I need to be with him, to love him the way he has never dared to dream. It will heal him, Father."

She stopped, and walked to where the older man still stood. "He is my life. He is all that matters. Without him, there is nothing for me."

Jacob Wells saw the resolve in Catherine's heart, and the fear that he had never kept well hidden was suddenly vanquished as though she, in just this simple declaration of her love, had made it pass. She stood before him, trembling, the stark pleading for his understanding in her eyes causing his own legs to weaken.

"Catherine," he started helplessly, running a hand through his hair. "I know you love him, and I've always known how deeply he loves you. I have seen the miracle of the bond between you. If you are asking for my blessing, you have it, even though you've never needed it. It may not have appeared so to you, but I have always desired Vincent's happiness above all else. My reservations about your relationship with him in the beginning were only my own doubts that you would be willing to make the sacrifices that you gladly have."

He paused, reaching out to take her hand. "I love you too, Cathy. You've given him a dream and if you believe the fulfillment of that dream is the answer, you will find no argument from me. Go to him.... now."

Hope sprang from green eyes sparkling with promise, and Catherine nodded eagerly, hugging him fiercely as she started for the doorway, disappearing without a backward glance.

Father stood in his son's empty chamber for a moment longer, then finally lowered himself into Vincent's large, velvet upholstered chair. "Know only joy, my children," he whispered solemnly.

The Bathing pools were not far from the main chambers, and Catherine knew the way blindfolded, from her short stay Below after her father's death. Seclusion would present no problem, especially this time of night. Her heart beat madly as she made her way through the torch in corridors, and she scolded herself at the intense confidence she felt rising in her breast. So bold....

'I will force him, if need be', she told herself. He must be made to acknowledge the truth of her feelings, the reality of the answer she now saw so clearly. Her own decision had been made so long ago - he was the only one for her. Now, she was determined to make him admit it that, in more ways than one, she was the only one for him.

Vincent pulled the sweat-soaked thermal undershirt from his broad shoulders and tossed it onto the growing pile of clothing. He laid his soft suede boots near the clean clothes in which he would re-dress after his bath. The engraved lines of worry and care upon his brow softened as he stepped towards the pool. His fever seemed to have ebbed again, and the healing warmth of the water promised relaxation. He tested the temperature with his foot, and satisfied, bent to continue undressing.

Mild images of Catherine in the tunnels circled around him, but he couldn't trust them, couldn't put confidence in the reflections. The delirium of the past few days had taught him to be skeptical, suspicious of his own perceptions.

His fingers tangled in the workings of his belt as the vision suddenly grew stronger. Catherine walking, coming closer to him, tenacious in the faith she had in herself and her quest - and in him. There was love in her strides, passion, answers to all the questions he had ever agonized over. In her eyes he was a man, in her eyes he was beautiful. But she didn't believe him, he had to right to ask....

She was drawing nearer by the second, and a tremor of impending doom surged through him as he stifled a roar.

"I am alone," he whispered to the empty chamber. "She is not here. She is not." He shook his head, conflict clashing within his breast like two warring armies. *'I need her, I need her so desperately... but no! No! It cannot be. I cannot be!'*

Catherine paused outside the contained alcove that led to the Bathing pool. A small battered engineer's lantern stood guard next to the stone portal, unmistakable evidence that the pool was in use and privacy was requested. She took a deep breath and held it for a moment, attempting to still the twin butterflies of apprehension and anticipation flitting in her stomach. However, love made her intrepid, and she boldly held the thick patchwork blanket aside as she slipped into the small chamber.

It was fairly well lit here, with torches ensconced upon the rock walls, reflecting off the waters in the duo of naturally formed stone pools. The first pool was quite large, about four feet deep and big enough in diameter to seat three or four people comfortably along its hewn rock ledge that served as a bench.

She remembered from her own sojourns Below how warm and soothing the water was, coming from a natural hot spring that originated just above the dominant pool to feed a continuous fresh supply of water from its mouth. The smaller second pool was situated just below the major one, and at about a step lower, serving as a run-off basin from the larger one. From there, the water drained off in a natural rivulet, traveling to who-knew-where. It was customary to use the larger pool for soaking and relaxing, then move to the smaller one to get soaped up and rinsed off in. That way, the major pool always stayed fresh for the next person.

Catherine's breath caught in her throat as the flickering torches alternately illuminated and shadowed the man standing with his head bent, his face hidden in a curtain of tawny mane. He was stripped down to his breeches, a thick white towel tucked under one muscular arm as he seemed to struggle with the fastening on his belt. For a moment, it surprised her that he seemed unawares of her presence, but then, there was no doubt his recent illness had resulted in the impairment of their bond.

'That, too,' she thought, 'we will heal.'

He was so beautiful, standing there like some medieval knight at the baths of Camelot, all golden and muscled, his every movement unconsciously sensual.

It was the whispered words, "I am alone," that caused her to take action, and she spoke as she closed the distance between them, walking slowly towards him, her concentration utterly focused on him.

"Do you need any help?" Her question alarmed him visibly as the towel nearly fell into the swirling waters.

"No!" His startled blue eyes swept over her then dropped to the towel he now held clutched in both hands. "No," he repeated, calmer now.

"I think you do." She took another step towards him, speaking in a low, seductive voice. "Let me heal you, Vincent." One hand reached for him as if drawn by a magnet, stopping only when it had touched the springy blond curls covering his chest.

He jumped as if branded with a red hot iron, but then stood as strong and still as granite, unmoving except for the labored rise and fall of his chest. His thoughts were swirling in a blood red mist as he grappled to maintain his tenuous hold.

'I want her. How can she be here? Oh, how I want her.' The unspoken need raced through his veins, keeping time with the accelerated beat of his heart. But even though his body and soul ached for her, he spoke the words denying himself the very thing that would save him.

"I have no right..."

"You have every right, Vincent," Catherine interrupted. "You always have. You are the only one who does have the right. I gave it to you. I belong to you, with you. Don't you understand yet?"

"I don't know," he began, confusion evident in his blue eyes.

"I do," she answered calmly. "I know what you need." She was so close now she could feel the heat of his body. Leaning forward slightly, she tipped her head back to look at him as her hands came up to rest on the bulge of each of his biceps, her silk clad breasts barely touching his chest. The rhythm of her breathing matched his, deep and quickened.

"Catherine," he groaned, his husky, graveled voice betraying the struggle within. She was so beautiful, she was so close.

But she heard more than conflict coloring his voice; she heard the undertone of undiscovered surrender and the rough edge that sexual excitement lent to his tone. Her pulse leaped with the responses of her body to him, the instinct of desire causing her femininity to melt in a wave of heat.

The muscles in his arms tightened and knotted, swelling beneath her hands into twin mounds as hard as rock. Moving her hands on his arms, she stroked upwards to his shoulders, stopping only when he suddenly backed away from her.

"Forgive me, Catherine," he breathed tensely, suddenly at a loss to go on.

"Forgive you? For what, my love?" The green of her eyes turned golden in the flickering light of the torches as she took a step forward.

"For loving you," he confessed. "For wanting what can never be."

"But it can be, Vincent. It will be," she insisted.

"How can you be so certain?" He took another step back. "How can you stand here, offering yourself to me with no doubt in your heart?"

"If you only knew how many times I've already made love to you in my dreams, how many times I've longed to feel a child of yours growing inside me, you would know."

The towel dropped unnoticed as he made a sweeping gesture over himself with both hands. "And is *'this'* what you saw in your dreams, Catherine? Is this the father you envisioned for your

children?" His eyes were intensely blue, as they bored into hers, with no mercy to spare for either of them.

Stepping towards him once more, she answered. "Oh, Vincent. You are beautiful beyond my dream. You are my heart, my soul. And yes, you will be the father of my children."

Her words left no room for doubt, and the moment her fingers touched him again, furrowing through the hair on his chest to leave a trail of fire, he was lost. Battle weary and fever rising, Vincent closed his eyes, swaying against her hand as his arms crushed her to him like a drowning man clutching a life preserver.

His head bent to hers and their lips met in perfect union, seeking, blending, harmonizing in a beautiful symphony of love and desire. Vincent felt the heat steaming through his veins as her mouth opened beneath his. His fangs presented no obstacle as her tongue came boldly into his mouth. The taste of her was intoxicating, sending his senses reeling. He could smell the femaleness of her, the willingness of her.

There was a noise.... was that himself growling deep in his throat? Were those his hands urgently and carelessly removing her clothing? There was a terrible fever boiling in his blood, a darkness circling around him like a bird of prey. He was losing himself and knew it, but was as helpless to stop as a leaf being swept away in a raging torrent.

Catherine could feel that dark side begin its ascent in him, could feel the sheer, unrestrained power of it. But it didn't matter, nothing mattered but his mouth moving over hers, his hands warm and strong on her body. She loved him too, that dark side who protected her, and she wanted him with an acceptance that was soul deep.

"Vincent," she groaned his name, and from her lips made it sound almost sacred. Hands tangling in his mane, she yielded eagerly to her body bending over her, easing her down to the ground in spite of her fervor. She felt the power of him, the struggle of that darker brother to stay in control, to take her; and the gentle Vincent who wanted desperately to love her.

"All of you," she murmured. "I want all of you."

She returned his kisses, meeting his passion equally, glorying in the warmth his touch spread throughout her body. His tongue traced circles around her breasts, igniting her senses, taking her somewhere she had never been.

"Vincent, please," she groaned, caught in the web of love's delights. It had been too long, this struggle they had waged again at such a passion as theirs. She ached for him, would surely perish in a chasm of need if he did not give himself now. "Please," she pleaded again, praying that he would understand what she begged for.

And he did, for through the reddened haze of desire, the lover in him took over. With gentleness, he slid between her thighs, holding himself tightly in check at the lingering fear of doing her harm. Slowly, deliberately, he became one with her, easing himself into her warmth with a control he thought not to possess. His body trembled with strain, but the feel of her....

"Oh, Catherine.... Catherine," he groaned. Nothing he had ever experienced in his life could have prepared him for this.... this rebirth. In her arms, the gaping wound in his soul was filled, he was reborn in her body, the whole world was created anew, and he was healed. He almost cried aloud at the ecstasy of it, the overwhelming thrill of each progressive inch as she accepted him deeper and deeper into herself. He became one with her.... he wanted to roar and weep at the same time.... for so long, so long he had been alone, forever chained to the rock of his own denial of himself. But no more.... never again.... he was whole, he was complete, he was loved.

At the first touch of him, Catherine moaned, clutching his arms with an eager abandon. Her hips lifted to meet his, impatient, greedy for his strength. Only when he lay fully sheathed within her did

she relax, knowing they had won.

Through the mists of pleasure swirling around him, Vincent felt the magic of Catherine's touch, the beauty she had promised was his. Whimpers left her lips, but he knew immediately they were not the protests of pain. Instead, they were music to his ears, the truth of the feelings he gave her, and his heart soared as her body began to slowly move beneath him, asking him for more.

Slowly, he began to thrust; gently, awkwardly at first, like an eagle too long caged, gasping at the absolute delight that began to tease its way through his veins. How could he have known? And once tasted, could he ever live without this again? The bond between them exploded into life, filling them both with such passion, such pure, healing love that he could once again feel her in his heart. She loved him, loved what he was doing to her, with her; she needed him.

The slow, delicious movements could not be maintained, for the mutual needs of both heightened. His blood boiled with the intense fury of his desire, and he returned Catherine's kisses, matching her enthusiasm with every stroke. Their rhythm became frantic, almost hysterical as they searched for that final step, for that ultimate release.

Shaking his head, blue eyes darkened by desire weakly struggled to regain their vision. The sensations surrounding him should have been fearful, but it was too wonderful. He couldn't stop, didn't want to stop, and through it all realized that Catherine needed him to continue. Some place deep inside himself, he felt the resurgence of some potent emotion, some overwhelming and undeniable need slowly building, forcing its way to the surface of his mind. There was no choice to make, he would lose himself once more, but this is different, this was beyond thought, beyond any dream he had ever dared to have.

Assaulted by the raptures she had so long imagined, Catherine felt the growl of orgasm start building within herself. Her hands clutched frantically to Vincent's face, pulling his mouth to hers to stifle her coming cry.

When it happened, it was both simultaneous and overpowering. Vincent saw the sun flash before his eyes, spewing waves of gold and silver into the obscurity of his life. Catherine gasped for breath as she floated back to earth, secure in the knowledge that somehow this was right, this was what had been needed all along. Her senses reeled from the sheer beauty of it, and the chamber, though filled with the splashing and gurgling of the pools, was filled also with the scent of roses.

Sanity returned to Vincent, and as his head cleared, all he saw was Catherine before him, her skin rosy and passion bruised by his kisses, her face flushed with the evidence of pleasure. His first reaction was to pull away, but in the span of a heartbeat he changed his mind. Pulling her closer instead, he whispered soft words of love and devotion into her ear, kissing her lips softly with a satisfaction he never thought to possess in his entire life.

An exquisite lethargy overtook her, and Catherine laid her head on the silken curls of Vincent's damp chest. For a moment, she listened to the slowing of his heartbeat, the tranquility of his breathing, and knew that all would soon be well. He would forgive her for this.

Raising her head from his chest, Catherine looked into his eyes. They were calm now, blue and contented, all traces of the battle he was waged erased. He looked almost drowsy, rather like some great cat basking in the warmth of the sunshine. She smiled.

"I did the right thing," she whispered softly.

One tawny brow lifted slightly in question.

"I wasn't sure before, but I can see now that I made the right choice by forcing the issue." Her voice was soft, washed with relief.

"You hardly forced me, Catherine."

The warm throaty purr of his voice sent a delightful shiver through her, her belly contracting with remembered pleasure.

"No, but I was prepared to. This time, Vincent, I was determined to save you from yourself."

"And you have," he murmured softly, tightening his arm around her. "So many nights, Catherine.... so many wasted opportunities. I have longed for your touch, dreamed of the time when we might finally be together.... but what we shared...." His voice trailed off as words escaped him.

"I know, my love, I know." She smiled, her green eyes as deep as a forest pool. "It was time and past for this. There are things we must discuss, plans we have to make."

"Yes," he whispered, the blue of his eyes darkening again. "But now is not the time, and this is not the place."

"No," she agreed, her voice almost as low as his. "I love you so much, Vincent."

Fears gone, strong arms lifted her easily, the tawny mane of his hair sweeping over her bare shoulders as he lowered her to the warmth of the pool. Submerged, they floated in careless abandon as the healing process was begun again.

If anyone remarked that the Bathing pools were used by one person for an overly long time on this day, Father refused to listen. One look at his son told him that if anyone suffered, the price was a small one to pay.

Father poured himself a cup of tea from the slightly battered but still beautiful silver teapot. Settling himself comfortably in his big leather chair, he opened the latest issue of the *'New England Journal of Medicine,'* provided thoughtfully by Peter Alcott. Running a half-gloved finger down the table of contents, he stopped at an article about unusual complications during pregnancy. *'Perhaps I should be researching this,'* he thought sardonically.

Ever since Vincent's crisis, and subsequent recovery, Catherine had become a regular visitor Below. Father had absolutely forbidden trips Above until he was certain his son was completely well. Over the past month, Vincent had slowly regained the weight he had lost, and although he still ran a low grade fever sporadically, he seemed to be back in his normal state of robust good health.

Father had been mildly surprised that Vincent had complied with those orders so meekly. *'Too meekly,'* he thought with a snort. That would not have been the case had Catherine not been able to spend so much time with him Below. She and Vincent had taken to going for long walks, during which they seemed to disappear for hours at a time, with no one reporting seeing them. Father vacillated between amusement at his son's drowsy, half-stunned look after these *'walks,'* and terror that Catherine (*having that same lazy, well-fed look*) would so lose herself that she would forget to take precautions. Logically, he knew that should be the last thing he should worry about; but who knew.... really?

Sighing, Father flipped a page, deciding as usual to just read the journal cover to cover. *'What will be, will be,'* he thought, taking a sip of tea. *'After all, those two have already proven that anything is possible.'*

The warm summer rain fell in tiny droplets barely more than mist, but enough to bead up on Catherine's light raincoat. The dampness made her hair curl softly against her cheeks and neck in a way she hoped he would find attractive. Dusk had just begun to wrap the day in a blanket of charcoal velvet and although there was still enough light to see by, Catherine had decided to chance the park entrance since she was nearby.

Her day had been long and tiresome, but productive as she had finally cleared her desk of the

backlog of paperwork present since Vincent's illness. Just one more phone call to make to a reluctant witness tonight and her evening would be free. She only had a short amount of time before she had to make that call, but being so close to this entrance was a temptation she had been unable to forego. This was especially so in light of the fact that she had been unable to slip Below for three entire days due to her workload. The only thing that had kept her sane was the knowledge that, come Friday night, she would have an entire, glorious weekend free of loose ends. Her small overnight bag was already packed and waiting.

Assured that she was unwatched, Catherine slipped into the drainage viaduct, making her way toward the partition between her world and his. It was hard to believe that over a month had passed since his fever had culminated in her decision to heal him, whatever the cost. And what a month it had been; full of love and laughter and dreams coming true. She had never been so happy or so physically satisfied in her entire life.

That Vincent was an incomparable lover did not surprise her in the least. That he was innately sensual was evident in his every move; his smallest gesture, the graveled silk tone of his voice, even the fullness of his lower lip hinted at it. He was strong and hard, with an intensely masculine body built to please a woman like herself with an old fashioned concept of what a man should be. Well-muscled and lean with a heavy pattern of hair on his chest and other manly places, powerful yet gentle, he was beyond any fantasy she'd ever had.

Passing through the panel, she turned to hit the hidden lever that would close it soundlessly behind her, shutting out the rest of the world. A warm glow filled her heart, like the gentle flicker of a candle in the dark, and she knew he felt her presence Below. Soon, he would appear at the other end of the tunnel, walking towards her with his black cloak swinging gracefully around his muscular legs with every stride.

Her heart quickened along with her step as he came into sight, looking impossibly handsome with tight breeches tucked into thigh-high leather boots and a faded blue shirt that made his eyes look like blue jewels set against the golden beauty of his face. Three days was too long!

Stepping into his open arms, she was gratified at the possessive way he leaned into her, gathering her close against the hard planes of his body. Lifting her face for his kiss, her lips parted eagerly, anticipating the taste of him, the feel of his unique lips moving against her own.

Vincent felt that sweetly familiar jolt go through him as he bent his head to her mouth. She was so warm and willing, pressing her soft curves against him in a way that took his breath away. His heart began to thud heavily in his chest, as her tongue slipped into his mouth, boldly caressing his fangs. Tightening his arms around her in response to her suddenly weakened knees, he took control of the kiss, giving her his tongue as she teased it into her mouth.

Finally, they came apart, both breathing heavily, as they looked at each other with passion-darkened eyes.

"Vincent," she whispered, clinging to his cloak until her legs regained their strength. "I can't stay.... I have to talk to a phone.... I mean, I have to phone a witness." She stumbled, inwardly laughing at herself for behaving like a lovesick schoolgirl. But he made her feel that way!

"Catherine," he breathed, his own muscles trembling from the intensity of their kiss. Was it like this for other lovers? Did they experience this glorious soaring of the heart, this transcendent flame of excitement leaping to life at the mere sight of the beloved?

She took his hand and they began to walk. "I was in the area and I couldn't resist seeing you, even if only for a little while. My car's in the shop, so I decided to slip in the park entrance and circle through the tunnels to the basement of my building." she explained, admiring the breadth of his shoulders as he walked alongside her. "I thought we could walk together that way," she added.

"I'm glad you came, Catherine." He moved his thumb sensually against her hand, the small gesture sending a shower of sparks cascading through her veins.

Hand-in-hand, they continued down the rock corridor, their feet taking them without conscious thought the way leading to the Lower Waterfalls, a favorite trysting place. There happened to be a very private alcove off the falls, well hidden from view and completely secluded. A thick patchwork quilt, along with several pillows had somehow taken up permanent residence there.

Realizing they had missed the turn leading to the main chambers, Catherine stopped suddenly, dropping Vincent's hand as where they were heading became clear to her.

"We're going the wrong way!" she exclaimed.

"So we are," Vincent started, looking a little embarrassed, as he swiftly took her hand again and did an about face, starting back to the central area. His eyes darted to her face. "Catherine, I didn't mean to imply..."

Her delighted laughter forestalled his stammered explanation at the direction he had been leading her. "It's all right, Vincent. If I had the time, there's no place I'd rather go with you." She glanced up at him through her lashes, adding. "Especially after that kiss."

He didn't answer, but his eyes held a thousand promises.

"I have to make that call at seven pm, but I can come back down after that," she offered.

He stopped walking, and turned to her, his eyes caressing her face. "No, I'll come to you, tonight."

"Are you sure you're well enough? It's raining."

He stroked the back of his furred fingers along her cheek, causing her to lean into them like a grateful kitten.

"I'm sure, Catherine." Gentle amusement danced in his blue eyes as he added. "Your.... ah.... cure, quite healed me."

She dropped her eyes, a faint rose-colored blush rising to her cheeks. "I guess it did, at that."

With one long, claw-tipped finger, he raised her chin to look at him. "I am grateful, Catherine. There are no words to tell you how much."

The timbre of his voice sent a flush of warmth through her belly. "Then," she said in a low voice as she took his hand, kissing it. "Come to me tonight."

By the time Catherine completed her seven pm phone call then finished with the ubiquitous notes and documentation, it was fully dark outside. She took a quick shower and dressed in a comfortable, but becoming sweater, and light wool slacks.

Suddenly ravenous, she headed for the kitchen to see what she could rummage up. Popping a soda cracker in her mouth as she foraged through the cupboards, Catherine encountered a can of salmon, complete with a puce-colored label and scaly-looking fish jumping across the can. Her stomach churned violently at the sight of it, and she turned from the shelves, slamming the door shut.

The only thing that seemed to appeal to her after all her searching was the opened box of soda crackers on the counter. She grabbed up a handful, munching away as she paced around the small kitchen. In contrast to her usual state of fatigue over the past few days, there seemed to be too much energy flowing through her veins to allow her to stand still. Her thoughts returned to her love, recalling the sight of him as she had left him in her sub-basement. There was not a part of her that didn't desperately need to be with him, talk to him, kiss him, love him.

'Soon,' her heart sang, *'he'll be here soon.'*

Aimlessly, she wandered out of the kitchen, wondering with mild curiosity at the queasiness she had been experiencing lately. Earlier in the week, she had almost decided that her morning vitamins must be the culprit, even though she'd never experienced nausea from taking them before. It had been over the lunch table at work that Rita had watched her with concern as she pushed away a half-eaten bowl of broccoli cheddar soup, and raced down the hall to the ladies' room. When she returned, her features were pinched with distress and her face had lost all trace of color.

"Are you sure you don't have the flu?" Rita had asked. "It's all over the office."

Annoyed, Catherine had replied. "Absolutely not! I don't have time to be sick."

Their conversation had turned to the vitamins, and Rita had informed her that she used to take them in the morning until she discovered they had been causing her daily nausea. Laughing then, Rita confided that she had even been terrified for a while that she might have become pregnant, and it had been a good month before she'd figured it out. Catherine had sympathized, thinking to herself that this was one thing she didn't have to worry about with Peter's proclamation of Vincent's *'different blood chemistry'* still ringing in her ears.

But *'worry'* was the wrong word, she thought sadly. A child was something she and Vincent could never have - and that meant a child was something she could never have. He would call it a sacrifice, but she valued his love above all other considerations, and counted herself already blessed beyond reason. There was no sacrifice.

So, the vitamins had been changed to a night-time regime, but the general feeling of illness persisted.

A small, unformed thought began to flit at the back of her mind, like a bee dancing before a blossom. Doubling back to the kitchen, Catherine consulted the small desk calendar that resided on her counter top. Flipping through the pages she frowned at the conspicuous absence of the little red *'p'* she usually scribbled on the day she started her period. *'Must have forgotten,'* she thought, thumbing the pages ahead again.

Before she could correlate any significance to it, a light tapping came from the direction of her bedroom. Practically skipping through the apartment, Catherine flung open the French doors, greeting him with a hard hug.

"It's only been four hours, and I've missed you terribly," she said, her voice muffled by his shirt as she buried her face in his chest. He always smelled so good.... of candlewax and tea, of night and wind.

Smiling, he kissed the top of her head, inhaling the sweet, feminine fragrance of her hair. Had it only been four hours? It seemed like four days.

Lifting her face, she took his arm. "Come inside." As he stepped through the doors, she noticed he carried a sort of duffel bag under his cloak, tied with rope and secured over one broad shoulder.

Once inside, he shrugged off his cloak with the grace of a matador, folding it neatly over the back of a chair before turning to her smiling eyes. "Catherine."

When he said her name like that it never failed to send a shiver down her spine, a fact she sometimes wondered if he was aware of; he did it so well.

With one long finger, he brushed away a crumb at the corner of her mouth. "You've been eating crackers," he observed, gentle amusement in his blue eyes.

She caught his hand, kissing the thumb that had touched his mouth. "I admit it," she laughed, delighted that she had made him smile. He had such a beautiful smile, with his lovely feline lip

turning up so gently and his white teeth gleaming.

Tearing her avaricious gaze from his mouth, Catherine gestured to the cloth sack he still held, frankly curious. "What's that?"

"A present," he replied, setting it down carefully as he knelt to untie the knotted string. "To replace something I broke."

Dropping to her knees beside him, she peered past the curtain of golden mane into his face. "That isn't necessary, Vincent. All that I have is yours, you don't need to replace anything."

"Nevertheless, I want you to have this." He finished untying the knot and loosened the top of the bag, pausing for a brief moment as he met her eyes. "You make this possible, Catherine. Your love is life itself to me."

"As yours is to me," she answered softly, leaning forward to kiss him lightly on the lips.

Vincent smiled at her reaction when he lifted the antique mirror from its knapsack.

"Oh," she breathed, unable to resist touching it. "It's beautiful!" Her eyes took in every detail, immediately recognizing and appreciating the marvelous craftsmanship that had gone into the making of this mirror. The heavy old glass was deeply beveled, cradled in a frame of burnished oak that had been painstakingly carved with tumbling roses at the top and bottom. "This is exquisite, Vincent. Where did it come from?"

Leaning back on his haunches, he gazed into the mirror for a long moment, his eyes unfocused. "It used to hang in Father's study," he finally began. "Until one day he happened to notice how I always avoided the chair opposite it, or ducked my head when walking by it." He paused again, lost in the awakening of a long buried childhood memory.

Catherine felt her heart turn as she imagined the gentle, sensitive little boy he must have been, bewildered by the unfairness of fate. A surge of protectiveness rose in her breast and she touched his arm in comfort.

Feeling her sympathy for that lonely child he once was, Vincent added gently, "But Catherine, it holds no terror for me now."

'My dearest love,' she thought, 'you've borne so much, and yet what I see before me is the most beautiful person I've ever known.' Looking into his face with conviction, she smiled. "Nor should it, Vincent, for if you ever want to see your true reflection, you need only to look in my eyes."

Blue eyes merged with green, and in that moment they were as completely joined as if they were making love. Every hurt he had ever known, every moment of anguish, was hers also. She had taken his pain, gladly, into herself, surrounding his soul with her love so that every splintered shard of rejection and disappointment became a pearl in her hands.

Looking forward simultaneously, their lips met, celebrating the sweet consummation of their souls. Finally, they broke apart, a similar look of promise shining in each other's eyes.

Vincent shook his head a little, smiling at her. "Shall I hang it for you?"

Nodding, she stood, her knees a bit shaky both from kneeling for so long and his kiss. She followed him as he carried the mirror to her dining room wall where a picture hanger was still embedded, mute testimony of the destruction he had caused. But that was behind them now.

Lifting the mirror, Vincent hung it carefully, reaching one furred hand behind it to adjust the twisted wire hanger.

"Is it straight?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder at her.

"Perfect." Catherine walked up behind him, putting a small hand on his shoulder as she stood by

his side. Reaching up on tiptoe, she kissed his cheek. "It's a lovely present, Vincent. I will treasure it always."

His arm came around her then, holding her close against his side, watching her in the mirror as her hand went to his throat.

Starting at the top button on his shirt, Catherine loosened it slowly then moved down to undo each progressive button. Her lips were parted and cheeks flushed by the time she reached the last button over his hard belly, before the shirt disappeared into the waistband of his pants.

Even though he wore a thermal undershirt beneath the chambray one, her fingers lit tiny spots of flame everywhere they touched. He stood immobile except for the lowering of his head and increased breathing. A fine tremor started in his muscles as she slowly pulled the fabric from his pants, bringing her other hand around to undo his belt buckle.

Vincent continued to look into the mirror as if captivated. Desire for him was evident in her every aspect, something he still marvelled at. *'She is so small,'* he thought, noticing how she came only to his shoulder. Beside his own rough masculinity, she seemed even more delicate, more feminine. His maleness rose strong and hard in response to her hands on him, and he could stand it no more as she moved in front of the mirror, kneeling to unlace his boots.

Bending, he gently took her hands, raising her up, then brought them to his lips. "Let me do that."

She nodded in understanding, stepping back as she pulled her sweater off. She stepped to the doorway and flipped the light switch so that the only light was a diffuse glow from the kitchen. Unzipping her pants, she slid them off her hips and gracefully stepped out of them.

Catherine raised smokey green eyes, intercepting a look from him across the shadowed room that was purely sexual. With the grace of a dancer, he shed the rest of his clothes, then moved to stand before her, magnificent in his height, his potency. Their eyes met and caressed before closing in deference to the rapture of their kiss.

Through the newly-heightened sensitivity of their bond, Vincent could feel that her need of him was as intense as his for her. She needed his strength as much as he needed her softness. He could feel it in her; the rise of her passion, the quickened heartbeat, the readying of her body to receive him. She wanted him, wanted his weight on her, in her.

Catherine almost cried out with pleasure as he took her in her corded arms, his hands sliding up her arms to her shoulders in a sensuous journey. Bringing down her bra straps with his hands, she watched with lowered head and heightened senses as he undid the front fastener. She smiled, remembering how only a few short weeks ago such feminine attire would have baffled him.

Now strong and sure, his hands moved down her waist to her hips as he knelt before her, kissing the satin softness of her thighs as he removed her panties.

The dizzying sensation of his mouth on the most sensitive parts of her body weakened her knees, and she had to brace herself with both hands on his shoulders. Swallowing hard, she stifled the plea that rose to her throat. *'Please, Vincent, take me.... take me now.'*

As if he heard the unspoken words, he stood slowly, kissing his way upwards, his mouth paying homage to the breathtaking beauty before him. With his powerful, calloused hands on her waist, he lifted her above him with one easy movement.

Catherine's arms tightened around his neck, her head falling back as he kissed her throat, deliberately grazing her lightly with his fangs, knowing how she loved it when he did that. To know that he could give her such pleasure defined his own being, banishing the doubts and fears of a lifetime.

She did cry out when he lowered her slowly against him, the rough hairs on his chest sparking a

thousand flames as her breasts slid across them. When his manhood entered her, she wrapped her slim, shapely legs around him, striving to give him as much depth as possible.

Kissing his face and neck as he carried her to the bed, she whispered against his skin. "I love you, I love you."

"My heart is yours.... my soul is yours," he murmured, in a velvet covered voice as he lowered her to the mattress.

Passion ascending, they clung together, giving and taking, glorying in the completeness the other offered. Outside, the weather had cleared and the midnight sky was filled with a vast array of diamonds, each twinkling brightly as the heavens seemed to smile.

Even the soft, musical rings of Catherine's telephone sounded harsh and foreboding in the complete silence of night before dawn. Vincent woke immediately, senses alert and adrenaline flowing with the ever-present knowledge that he was a trespasser in this world.

"It's okay," Catherine whispered, stroking his arm as she reached over him to fumble for the phone. Squinting at the bedside clock she mumbled. "Three am!" Her heart gave a jump - calls at such an hour were inevitably bad news.

"Hello?" Her voice was more of a question than a greeting.

"Catherine Chandler?" A woman's voice questioned.

Catherine's voice was tense as she answered. "Yes. Who is this?"

"My name is Marie Remy, I'm a nurse here in the emergency room at St. Clare's Hospital. I'm calling for Joe Maxwell. He.... I'm sorry, but I'm afraid there's been an accident--"

"My God! Joe's hurt?" She sat bolt upright in bed, gripping the phone so hard her fingers turned white.

Vincent sat up, his heart starting to thud in his chest with clairvoyant fear. Like the first pebble before an avalanche, panic began to tumble about him, smothering him with a prescient horror.

"Yes, he was brought in a short while ago. He had a card in his pocket with your name on it. I thought you'd want to know."

Struggling with fear, Catherine tried to sound coherent. "How.... how badly is he hurt? What happened?"

"He's being prepared for surgery now," the nurse replied, her voice gentle. "We'll know more after that, but I can tell you that it is serious. He was involved in some sort of explosion and suffered multiple injuries, as well as some rather severe burns."

"I'll be right there." Catherine paused, her mind whirling with unanswered questions. "Does he need blood?"

"I think he will, but he's a rare type----"

"I'm type O," Catherine interrupted. "I can give to anybody. Be ready for me, I'll be there in twenty minutes."

She hung up the telephone, throwing back the covers as she scrambled from the bed, pausing only to switch on the bedstand light.

"Tell me." Vincent was up too, already gathering his clothes, dreading her answer even as he asked for it.

"Joe's been in an accident, an explosion or something. He needs blood." She was scurrying

around, opening drawers and grabbing clothes as she rushed for the bathroom.

"Oh damn!" she swore, just remembering her car was in the shop. Stuffing her clothes under one arm, she dialed the cab company with shaking fingers, curtly giving an order for a taxi in five minutes before rushing to the bathroom.

As soon as the words '*Joe's been in an accident, an explosion*' left her mouth, Vincent felt his heart fall from the heavens to crash upon the cold, hard earth like a meteor plunging to its death. He had to forcibly bite back the words that rose in his throat, '*don't go.*' Of course she would go, must go. But even as that knowledge was irrefutable, so was the fear that burned in his heart. The nightmare - had it indeed been a foretelling of things to come? During the bliss of the past month, he had all but forgotten it, dismissing it as only a dream after all, as Father and Catherine both assured him it was.

Fully-dressed, Catherine emerged from the bathroom, grabbing up her purse and keys.

"I'll go with you," he began, wincing at her incredulous look.

"Vincent, you can't." She regretted the sharpness in her voice almost before the words were out. Reaching for his hand, she defended. "Joe needs me right now, and I'll be no good for him if I'm worried sick about you." Her eyes pleaded with him for understanding.

"I understand, Catherine." He felt the sting of guilt's lash for burdening her this way when her mind was so filled with fear for her friend. But he was so filled with fear for her! Forcing himself under control, he took her arm as he walked with her to the door, helping her to unbolt the locks. She needed his reassurances now, not his nameless anxieties.

She turned to him before opening the door, flooding him with the light of her love, her courage. "I'll come Below tomorrow as soon as I can."

"Take care, Catherine," he managed, holding back all the terrible demons of the nightmare that were pounding at his soul.

"I love you." She flashed him a quick smile, but her eyes were worried and her mind already at the hospital.

He stepped back as she opened the door, blending with the shadows of the unlit room. "I love you, Catherine...."

The door shut quietly behind her, and he turned the deadbolt until it clicked into place. He stood still for a moment, suddenly feeling like an intruder; he didn't belong here. "Be safe, my love," he whispered into the empty room as he turned to leave. "Please, be safe."

But even as the words left his lips, the hair on the back of his neck stiffened, and he could almost hear the mocking voice of Gabriel behind him taunting, '*.... it has begun....*'

Catherine sat up slowly, bracing her hands on the white-papered exam table. A nurse handed her a small paper cup of orange juice, which was dutifully downed. It had been two hours since her arrival at the hospital, a good hour of it spent in wading through an ocean of red tape. Joe had already been in surgery when she arrived, and she was told, just now being wheeled into recovery. Thankfully, he had suffered no more internal injuries than a ruptured spleen, which had been expeditiously removed by an excellent trauma surgeon.

"When can I see him?" Catherine asked, gingerly rolling down her sleeve over the taped wad of cotton atop the bend of her elbow.

"The new anesthetics they use now have a very rapid dissolution time," the nurse explained politely, "so he may be awake even now." As Catherine disappeared down the hall, the nurse

added, "He'll be groggy, though."

Expecting the worst, Catherine was both relieved and shocked after seeing Joe. She had been lucky enough to intercept the surgeon who assured her Joe should have a full recovery, even though he would be out of commission for some time. Although he wasn't horribly injured, it was still hard to see the brash, vibrant man she knew lying helpless in a hospital bed, looking even paler than the crisp white sheets.

Bruised and battered though he was, he was still coherent enough to insist she retrieve some sort of book from his coat pocket. He couldn't seem to tell her why it was of such importance, so she simply took it on faith that it was, immediately finding it and slipping it into her purse.

Now, he was sleeping the deep submerged sleep of the heavily sedated. Catherine gently placed a kiss on his heedless brow before exiting the room. An unnatural stillness seemed to occupy the hospital corridors as she made her way to the nearest elevator. Not really paying attention to where she was going, she made a wrong turn and wound up passing by the nursery.

"Damn," she swore under her breath, realizing her mistake, thinking that hospitals hallways should have some distinguishing colors or something, like a parking lot did.

Turning on her heel to double back, she almost bumped into a man standing at the nursery window, seeming to appear out of nowhere. "Pardon me," she excused herself, stopping at the rapt expression on the man's face. Following his gaze, she saw a newborn infant, complete with a tiny blue cap and little knitted blue booties and gloves. "What a handsome boy," she remarked. "Is he your son?"

"Yes," the man answered softly. "Isn't he a miracle?"

Catherine smiled indulgently. "All babies are miraculous."

"I suppose so," the new father admitted. "But this one is special, at least to me," he added with conviction. Seeing her smile, he felt a trifle foolish, feeling compelled to explain. "You see, my wife and I thought we could never have children. We've been trying for ten years, had all the tests, suffered all the dehumanizing machinations the fertility experts tout, and nothing ever happened. Finally, a couple of years ago we decided that we were blessed with each other, we should trust in God for the rest. If it never happened, well, we would always have each other."

"And now, you've been blessed again, right out of the blue," Catherine smiled, her eyes warm with empathy.

"Yes," he said simply, shrugging his shoulders. A silly grin appeared on his face as he added. "I guess anything is possible."

"Well, congratulations. He is a beautiful baby."

Looking at her sheepishly, the man sighed. "Thank you. I'm sorry I ran on like that, it's just that...."

Catherine held up a hand. "No need to apologize. I understand."

"Well, thank you. Say, I hope everything is all right for you - this is a strange hour to be at a hospital."

"A friend of mine was in an accident earlier, but he's going to be okay," she answered, turning to leave. "Goodnight."

"I think it's morning now," the man smiled, his attention drawn back to the window as his son waved a tiny fist.

Catherine continued down the stark hallway to stand patiently in front of an elevator door. *The*

confounded things seemed to take forever,' she thought wearily. the events of the past hours beginning to catch up with her. *'What was it that man said?'* Her fatigued brain seemed to be a jumble of disjointed thoughts. *'Anything is possible,*' he had said. Anything is possible?

As she stepped into the elevator and pushed the lobby button, those three words continued to haunt her. *'Anything is possible.... anything....'* She knew that was true, she had lived it!

Hand snaking out, she abruptly hit the second floor button, where the lab was situated. Striding purposefully down the hall, she turned into the lab's reception area, sliding back the glass window herself.

"Excuse me," she called to a passing technician.

Clipboard in hand, the woman smiled as she walked to the window. "Can I help you with something?"

"Yes, my name is Catherine Chandler and I just gave blood here about an hour ago. Could I get a test run on that?"

"Depends," the white-coated woman answered. "What kind of test?"

Gathering her nerve, Catherine's chin lifted. "Pregnancy."

"It's possible," the technician replied. "But we'll need a doctor's order to do it. Will your doctor order the test?"

Nodding, Catherine caught the technician's eyes. "Yes. His name is Dr. Peter Alcott. I have his number right here," she mumbled, rummaging through her purse. "I know it's early yet, but he'll be at his office at eight. Could you call him then?"

"Sure," the woman answered, deftly writing down Peter's number. "I'll still be on my shift then, so I'll take care of it myself. You can call his office for the results this afternoon."

"Thank you." Catherine lifted green eyes suddenly filled with knowledge and smiled.

The range of Catherine's emotions had assaulted Vincent unmercifully as he sat in stony silence in his chamber. His journal lay untouched, his books unopened, his duties on the current work detail for the day left undone. All he could see before him was her pale face as he had laid her on her bed. Her eyes, once so filled with love and life, were closed forever. Her lips, always so inviting to him, were cold.

He heard his own words echo from the dream, *'while I love, you live - with me, in me - always,'* and he knew a moment of paramount fear. *'Was there a Gabriel out there in her world waiting for her, waiting for him?'*

Without rational thought he stood, grabbing his cloak. His feet led him unconsciously to the sub-basement of Catherine's building. Standing quietly beneath the dim light, he pressed his body against the rough stone wall as if the solidness of the rock would somehow be imparted to him. His face remained expressionless as he tried to forbid the alien thoughts clamoring for entry into his mind. He would remain here as long as was necessary - he would wait for Catherine to come to him. He would wait for her forever.

But still the images filled his mind, the terrors, the words, the events. His eyes closed tightly as he tried to dismiss the collage of grief and rage assaulting his memory. But he could not forget the trauma of blood and betrayal at the carousel, the horror of the hunter, the explosion on the Compass Rose, the death of Elliot Burch. These elements were all very real to him - as solid as the love he would always feel for Catherine, and it was Catherine whose life depended on the decisions he was now being forced to make.

Taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes. She had left the hospital now and he could feel her relief at the discovery that Joe would be all right. But there was another emotion beseeing him, stronger in every way. It was like nothing he had ever felt from her, as though her emotions had invented it. It was a separate part of her, a shocked jubilation - an unbelievable incredulity. She would come to him soon, she would tell him and he would be set free from this term of worry. He would hold her close, whisper of his love for her, look into her eyes as she heard the words.

It didn't take as long as he had thought, for a mere hour after his arrival, his heart filled with the sense of her. The elation and apprehension she was feeling seemed at odds with each other, and he knew her unrest. He could feel her joy, her total and utter excitement and yet he sensed her dread in sharing it with him, almost as if she feared him in some impossible way.

The secret door opened and barely an instant later she appeared. The smile on her face broadened at the sight of him and her eyes filled with the passion he knew dwelt inside of her. Her lips parted suddenly in preparation for the kiss she knew would come. Then she was in his arms; warm, vibrant and alive, holding him tightly against herself, the bond between them pulsating with the intensity of their emotions.

"Catherine," he heard his own voice whisper as if from far away, feeling her hands clutch at the folds of his cloak. "You're safe."

Fathomless green eyes caught azure blue and they began to walk towards the lower falls by mutual, unspoken agreement. Inside, Catherine wanted to shout out the news, to hurl the words from the rooftops of Manhattan, but a strange sense of uncertainty held her back. *'What if he wasn't pleased that they had created a child - possibly a child in his image?'*

Even as these thoughts eddied around her, she became aware of the warmth of his fingers entwined with hers, and desire began to rise in her breast. The knowledge that she carried his child was almost aphrodisiac in its potency. The anticipation she suddenly felt for his touch was enormous, and clouded with the unspoken anxiety it became almost painful not to be with him, not to feel him beside her, inside her. *'The need to be together, to be one with him became all that mattered. He felt it too,'* she thought, as his grip on her hand tightened and his breath quickened.

As soon as they were isolated from the rest of the tunnels, she turned expectantly to him, holding open her arms in invitation. They came together almost savagely, with a hunger only the other could satisfy.

It was much later, after night had fallen over the world Above, that they relaxed under the handmade quilts. Their bodies remained close as they studied each other calmly now, both quiet and still drowsy from their love. Vincent pulled her closer and Catherine snuggled happily into the crook of his arm, her heart still beating quickly at the sensation of his bared skin against hers. Finally, she looked up at him to find his blue eyes upon her, his heart living in their depths.

"I have to talk to you," she began softly. "I'm not sure how to do this or what to say."

Though his mind had begun to race with unnamed horrors, he managed a smile and kissed the tip of his nose.

"You know you can tell me anything, Catherine. You have nothing to fear from me."

Turning from the intensity of his gaze, Catherine closed her eyes as she began. "I never imagined that I would be having this conversation with you, Vincent. I sometimes doubted that one day we could be as close as this. But now we are and all of the dreams I ever had are beginning to come true. Being with you is magic, every moment like a cherished lifetime. Something wonderful has happened to us. It's not only important to the lives we share but to our future together."

Looking into receptive blue eyes, she felt a blush unaccountably rising on her cheeks. "What I'm trying to say, Vincent, is that I'm carrying your child."

A jolt charged through him, but his expression never changed. He closed his eyes for a moment, forcing back the quick stab of apprehension that struck his heart like a double edged sword. A child! The darkness of the nightmare surged against him. With it came the swift cut of reality, bringing the onus of responsibility for having perpetuated his own inexplicable genetics.

He smiled at her, saying only, "Then, it is time for rejoicing."

The love he felt from Catherine was absolute, the joy she realized in this news completing her happiness. He wanted desperately to find the right words, to express the right emotions to reassure her, but fear held him in its dark grip. He was a mass of nerves, each like an uncontrolled lightning rod that had been severed, whipping loose, splitting its energy at the blackened sky.

Momentarily shaken by his reserve and evident lack of the overwhelming joy that was so much a part of her own emotions, Catherine sat up abruptly, not even trying to cover her breasts with the quilt.

"I thought that you might be troubled, upset even, but I never thought that you would seem indifferent. Don't you understand what has happened to us?" She choked back the whimper trying to escape her throat, giving him a chance to explain.

With the realization of his effect on her, Vincent sat up and pulled her into his arms. "Forgive me, Catherine," he started, struggling to force the memory of the nightmare away from them. "There are things beginning to happen, things you don't know about. I'm worried about the dream.... the nightmare. It is beginning again, the fears, the foreboding. There are events in that dream that are starting to happen to us, around us. Joe's accident was only the first. Now this."

Confusion showed on Catherine's face. "The dream? Vincent, are you saying that some of the events in your nightmare are coming true?"

Weakly, he nodded. "Yes, though in the dream, you never told me about the pregnancy. You never got the chance."

Cold realization swept over her and she forgot her hurt. Instead, she pulled his golden head towards her, kissing her tenderly. "I'm sorry, Vincent. I'm sorry this had happened. I only want us to be happy, to know a complete life with one another. I never thought I would be able to conceive your child." She gently brushed the hair from his cheek, her eyes soft. "But I have and I would change nothing. You must believe that. I am not afraid."

"I do," he replied softly. "And I am not indifferent, Catherine. The emotions building in me are incredible, rising above the fears I've lived with all my life. I always thought it would be heartless to burden another life with the limitations of mine, but now, those limits seem to be crumbling."

He cradled her closer against himself, kissing her temple. "You have given me everything, shown me everything. You healed me and made me strong again. You showed me life, love, the giving and taking of pleasure.... everything. Now you tell me that you carry my child. I am more than humbled, Catherine. I am blessed."

Catherine rubbed her cheek against the downy fur of his chest, then looked up into the sweeping blue eyes so filled with love for her.

"Love me," she whispered softly, her voice husky with a resurgence of desire. "Love me now."

Immediate understanding flared within him, coupled with a strong wave of desire that mirrored hers. They needed to be together, to dissolve fears and foreboding into mere raindrops sizzling into nothingness upon the white hot surface of their love. Tightening his arms around her, Vincent lowered his lips to her throat as they sank back into the quilts.

The candles beside the lovers melted lazily until there was no further wax to burn. They sputtered softly, fading away into the murkiness of the chamber, leaving no trace of intrusive light to mark the

passage of time.

When he awoke, Vincent reached towards the space Catherine had occupied for the past many hours. It was empty and his eyes widened as they swept the chamber in search of her. It was still too new, this ecstasy of falling asleep with her wrapped in his arms, and when he woke without her there, he never failed to feel a chill, as if the sun had gone behind a cloud.

She sat quietly near the mouth of the chamber, bent over something before her, oblivious to the anxiety her disappearance had caused him. Her hair was long now, longer than it had been in quite a while, and she gave up trying to push it out of her eyesight, blowing at it in frustration instead.

She was not aware of how each little movement, every little habit affected him. The slightest of smiles that captured her mouth, the smallest flicker of her eyelashes, the tilt of her head, these were only a part of the captivating charm of the woman he loved. All that she was, he adored. *'And she carries my child,'* he thought, with an unfamiliar flicker of pride.

"Catherine," he murmured softly, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth as she turned to him. "I thought you had left me."

"I woke up a while ago," she started, walking back to his side. "I didn't feel well and wanted to look at some of the things I brought home from the office, especially this." She started to hand Vincent the small, black book she had taken from Joe's coat pocket, but almost dropped it at his nearly hysterical reflex.

"*'No!'*" He gasped in horror, recoiling as if she had offered him some particularly loathsome reptile. "Catherine, how did you come by this?" His voice sounded harsh and demanding even to his own ears and he took a deep breath in an effort to calm his racing heart.

Staring at him nervously, Catherine was amazed by the look of sheer terror that flashed across the features usually so calm, so logical.

"From Joe, at the hospital. His old friend died in the car that exploded, but he had given Joe this book right before it happened. Joe was practically incoherent and couldn't tell me much, except that it was important that I safeguard it." She shook her head perplexedly as she fanned through the pages. "I can't make much sense of it, but from the looks of it, it's probably some sort of code. Vincent, the mob usually uses codes like these. I think Joe's friend was involved in some kind of organized crime."

"Yes," the gravel-silk voice whispered, suddenly feeling his body tremble with a fear greater than he had ever known. "It is much more than that," his blue eyes caught her suddenly. "It is the death warrant of many, Catherine; the key in a long series of useless, mindless evil. In my dream ..." his voice caught and he closed his eyes as the pain spread out before him like a banquet of poison. "In my dream," he began again. "You were its first victim." He touched her hand. "You must not keep it ... you must not try to unravel its mysteries."

The attorney in her bristled at the idea of eschewing possible evidence such as this. The desire to do only good for all the people of her world surged to the forefront and she opened her mouth to argue. But the look in his eyes, the obvious fear reflected within those blue, blue depths made her relent and she lowered her head.

"What should I do?"

Sitting up straight, Vincent pulled her into her arms. "Catherine, I must tell you everything. There are things that will dishearten you. I'm afraid that someone you have always trusted and believed in is not as he appears."

The need to know encompassed her and she met his gaze as she settled herself more comfortably

at his side.

"Tell me, Vincent," she insisted with a gentleness born of their great love. "Tell me everything."

The truth could be held at bay no longer and Vincent sighed, his body trembling at the memory of the fever, for foretelling. The warning....

"John Moreno is not only involved, Catherine, but he is in alliance with the man who would kill you. In my dream, he betrayed you, authorizing your imprisonment, allowing you to be filled with drugs in the attempt to make you reveal to them where you had hidden this book and what you had learned from it. No thought was spared for you. When Gabriel leaned you were pregnant, it did not deter him. Finally, you saw the pipes in your prison and tried to summon me. But the bond was lost and - I failed you." He dropped his head, forgetting in his distress that she did not know who *'Gabriel'* was.

His pain at what might have been engulfed her and she reached out a hand to stroke his cheek, resting her palm against the golden stubble. She had been witness to far too many of his extraordinary powers to dismiss this as just a dream now. It was obviously very upsetting to him still, thus unsettling to her.

Now, he needed to talk about it and she needed to hear it all. "But you came for me?" she asked gently, knowing that nothing in the realm of heaven or hell could have kept him from her, even in the context of a dream.

"Yes, I came." Vincent stiffened as the memory assaulted him. "Somehow, Gabriel saw me. I answered your signal, found the warehouse where you were being held and my.... darker side tried to set you free. There were cameras everywhere; because of my condition, I didn't see them. Catherine, he taped it all, the entire ordeal. After that, though you were kept closely confined, you were not longer subjected to the drugs. Your care improved, but only from a clinical point of view. You were kept secluded, imprisoned in a stark white room where your only company was the blinking red light of a surveillance camera,"

Turning to her, his grip upon her tightened. "Catherine, Gabriel found he wanted something even more than the information in that book. He wanted our child." Shuddering within, Vincent finished. "After my display at the warehouse, he knew that I was the father. And he wanted the child."

A chill spread throughout her entire body, and Catherine sniffed, wiping her eyes with the heels of her palms. "I respect your foresight, Vincent. You know I'll trust you in this."

"Catherine," his voice had softened, losing that almost strident edge of fear that had been present. "When Moreno asks for the book, no matter how badly you wish to keep it, do not."

Despite her words of reassurance, a war fought itself inside her, and Catherine trembled from the conflict between respecting his wishes and obeying her own investigative instincts. The trepidation in Vincent's eyes convinced her. He had said *'when'* Moreno asks for the book, not *'if.'* *Was he so certain then?* She nodded a bit sadly. "I'll give him the book."

A relieved sigh left his lips and the golden head turned away. "I am sorry. I know how important the contents must be, but I am frightened for you, for us." Gently, he placed one large hand on the infestimal swell of her belly. "You are more important to me than anything. And you carry a child.... I must protect you, Catherine; I must protect you both. You must allow me to do it the only way I know how. Perhaps my senses are not always correct, but they are all that I have."

"I trust you," she said evenly, covering his furred hand with her own. "I trust you with my life, Vincent. I never meant for you to feel anything but that trust. It's just that, sometimes, some of the things you see are difficult for me to comprehend. I have trusted John Moreno, too. He's been an excellent District Attorney ever since he's been in office. It's hard for me to believe he may be corrupt."

"I know," was all Vincent could manage. Looking away, his eyes drifted beyond the infamous black book to another box that lay amid Catherine's papers on the floor.

Following his gaze, she smiled. "I bought a gift for you. I wanted you to have a new journal. I thought you might wish to record your feelings about the changes coming to our lives, about the baby." She half rose and reached across the floor to grasp the box, then handed it to him. Wrapping a quilt around her shoulders, Catherine sat back to watch him open it.

With trembling hands that could barely control the wrapping paper, he lifted the lid from the box. When he saw the lovely leather bound journal, she thought he would smile, but he didn't. Instead, his eyes closed tightly as if in pain, as he lifted the cover to expose the first page.

"With Love, all things are possible. Forever, Catherine." The words left his lips in ragged whispers but his eyes had never opened to look at them. When he did open them, he saw Catherine before him, her face devoid of all color, looking at him with an expression of complete understanding.

"This too?" she questioned, already knowing the answer.

At his almost imperceptible nod, she sighed heavily, knowing now that whatever he told her she would believe, no matter what her logical mind insisted.

"It was the day after you gave this journal to me, Catherine." His blue gaze caught and held her eyes. "They took you the next day."

Defiance blazed from those green eyes, making them spark like emerald fire. Something he had said a long time ago echoed in her mind, and she moved into his arms, clinging tightly to him with her head pressed against his chest. *Why does it sometimes seem the world conspires to keep lovers apart?* Nothing, she vowed, nothing would ever take her from him.

"I'm not afraid, Vincent," she said, still hugging him fiercely. "Remember what I told you during your illness, that nothing is written in stone. We control our own destiny. We must believe that."

Releasing her grip, she moved just far enough back to look into his face. "You've done the only thing you can, you passed on your foreknowledge. I will do what I must now. Together perhaps we can alter the course of your dream."

Vincent drew her back into the safety of his arms once more. "Please," he whispered desperately. "Please make the right choices. I could not live without you now."

Alone in her apartment Catherine didn't bother to turn on the lights. She found herself standing before the beveled mirror that Vincent had brought her, staring abstractedly into the heavy glass as if in search of the answers to her problem. If Moreno was corrupt, she would have to try and expose him without compromising her own safety. She would worry about this '*Gabriel*' later.

Everything came down to the book, and she cursed out loud for its unwanted interference in her life. She couldn't keep it, she had promised that much to Vincent, and she had too much respect for his preternatural gifts to not heed his warnings. But on the other hand, she felt duty bound to see that justice was served.

An idea gnawed its way into her mind, and with a gasp, she turned quickly to the desk in her living room, pulling haphazardly at the unused notebook she kept there. Sitting cross-legged on the couch, she began to write diligently, painstakingly copying every symbol, every word and every number that she found in that black book until the last page. Her stomach fluttered in concern at what she'd done, but at the same time she felt that a burden had been lifted.

The copy was placed discreetly into an old scrapbook, then hidden in a box shoved under her bed. Catherine irreverently threw the original in her briefcase, clicking the little lock shut with a vengeance. Telling Vincent about the copy was out of the question, but at least she would be able

to keep her promise to him and hand the book over to Moreno. For her, that was all that mattered. In the future, there would still be a promising chance for the justice she wanted as well.

The offices of the District Attorney of Manhattan were alive with its usual hustle and bustle, but Catherine had buried herself in the depositions pertaining to her current case load. The book Joe had entrusted her with lay in the large desk drawer before her, easily accessible, and the decision not to leave the office with it was still firmly planted within her mind.

The words of the testimony she was reading blurred as she became lost in the interpretation Vincent had given her of his nightmare. Within the realm of his dream, his suffering, as well as that of so many others, was untenable. The needless, mindless pain that was still so real to him touched her with its coldness.

Rubbing her eyes, she looked up to see John Moreno standing in front of her desk. He stood before her smiling and she felt compelled to return the smile, politely inquiring, "What's up, John?" "Just saw Joe," he answered, grimacing. "God, he's lucky, Cathy. The police said that if he'd been any closer to that car, he wouldn't have made it."

"Yeah," she replied. "It's pretty scary. I saw him myself the night he was brought in. A nurse found one of my cards on him and phoned me. I gave blood, though I'm not sure if they used it or not." She paused for a heartbeat, then making a sudden decision, added. "As a result of that, I made a rather happy discovery."

Moreno fidgeted with the papers on the 'In' shelf of the box residing on Catherine's desk. "Oh yeah? Anything you want to share?"

In spite of herself, she blushed. "I'm pregnant," she said, catching his eyes. *'Would that knowledge have changed anything?'* she wondered. *'Could he still condemn her to the drugs and imprisonment that Vincent saw?'*

"Really?" He managed a smile. "Well, congratulations. I hope that doesn't mean you'll be taking an extended leave of absence?" He asked with the merest hint of false concern.

"No longer than a few weeks, I would think. The baby's father is of.... independent means, so he will be caring for our child during the day."

"Well, I know money isn't a problem for you either, Chandler," he joked, hiding the sudden surge of envy in his blood with practiced ease. "Can you come into my office when you get a few minutes? Joe told me who he had dinner with that night and what the guy gave him. He said he asked you to get it. I'd like to take a look at it."

"Of course, John," she agreed, the queasiness in her stomach turning into a raging pit of java. "I think I'll be finished going over this in about forty minutes - is that all right for you?"

"Sure, Cathy, sure. Just come on in whenever you're ready."

Watching him retreat into the plushness of his office, Catherine felt a steady ache develop in her head. The future loomed before her, ugly, fearful, desolate. Her every move, every choice could determine that future, and the pressure that accompanied that knowledge weighed heavily upon her.

Turning back to the deposition, she rubbed her lower abdomen in a protective gesture. Her child would not be born in some colorless, lifeless penthouse. Her child would be born in the warmth and sanctuary of the tunnel world. Of this she *'would'* make certain.

"I'm not sure what it is exactly or what it all means, but it seemed terribly important to Joe. What do

you make of it?" Catherine asked as she gave Moreno the book.

Moreno tensed slightly as he watched the book leave Catherine's hand, recovering himself a fraction of a second later, but not before her sharp eyes caught the flicker of fear in his.

'*He's dirty,*' she realized silently. Even prepared as she was, Catherine tasted the bitter dregs of disappointment laced with betrayal.

Holding the book tightly, he quickly scoured the first few pages before looking up to meet her interested gaze. "I've seen stuff like this before," he began slowly, seemingly at a loss for words. Mob stuff.... coded deals, shipments, payments. We'll need experts to shift through this. Even then we may never know the significance of what's in here."

Nodding, she smiled. "I had a hunch, but I wasn't sure."

Moreno closed the book almost gently, laying it on the polished oaken finish of his desk. Slowly, he pushed it towards her. Taking a deep breath, he asked. "So, what do you think we should do about this? Do you know somebody, or should I take care of it?" His muddy brown eyes zeroed in on her.

Abruptly, Catherine's hand closed on the volume, loyalty to Joe and the position she held first and foremost in her mind. But then she was filled with the stark, pleading look that had been on Vincent's face. His words replayed in her mind, all of his warnings and fears. Suddenly, the events surrounding the return of Stephen Bass flashed through her mind and if nothing else had served to convince her, that memory did. Vincent had been right then, too, and she had almost met with death because she had disregarded his warnings. There was no reason not to trust him on this.

"Look, John," she started, her hands trembling ever so slightly as she remembered the copy hidden in her apartment. "I promised Joe I would keep this, but hey, my case load is ridiculous. If you know anyone that may be able to shed some light on this, please take it. After all, you are the boss. But you will explain it to Joe, won't you? I don't need him to be this sick and mad at me as well, you know?"

Moreno smiled and pulled the book back across his desk. "Don't worry about it, Cathy. I'll take care of Joe. You just concentrate on your cases. You're the best investigator I've got and I need you doing just that."

A heavy sigh left her and Catherine returned his smile, however reluctantly. "Yeah, back to the salt mine." Her insides churned at the possessive way he cradled the book. "If there's nothing else, I've got to get back to my desk. I have a big weekend planned and don't want anything hanging over until Monday."

She stepped quickly into the hall outside his office, leaning against the wall to catch her breath. It wasn't done purposely, but the sound of a phone being punched and then Moreno's voice a few seconds later carried out of the cracked door. Her heart lurched heavily in her chest at the words he spoke.

"Yeah, you can call it off. She gave it to me without a fuss. She doesn't know anything. I'll meet you in the parking garage in an hour."

The parking structure was quiet and Catherine felt entirely uncomfortable as she silently waited in her car. From her vantage point she could easily see the elevator entrance used by most of the DA's staff, and John Moreno's car occupied the primary spot directly next to that entrance.

It had been just over forty-five minutes after leaving his office that she had made her way to her car intending to leave quickly - to go home, get her already packed overnight bag and escape to the safety of the tunnels. But when she stepped out of the elevator, something struck her consciousness and she realized in that moment she had to know beyond a doubt if it was true.

Sliding into her car, she slumped down, partially hiding behind the steering wheel. In the darkness of the corner where she'd parked, she would be safe from prying eyes, yet be able to easily see anyone who came out of those doors.

Exactly one hour after she'd heard him make that call, John Moreno stepped from the elevator and walked confidently to his car. He toyed with the trunk for a moment as if searching for something inside it, trying to look inconspicuous.

As he climbed into the vehicle and started the motor, Catherine sighed, a part of her only too eager to believe that Vincent's fears were groundless, no matter what she thought she'd overheard. But the sound of another car approaching caused her to tense, sucking in air with a hiss as she slid further down the car seat until she could just barely see between the spokes of the steering wheel.

It was a limousine, moving slowly but steadily towards Moreno's car, almost giving the appearance of slithering, its windows tinted snake-black. The car eased to a halt and John quickly got out of his own car.

A soft whirring sound caught Catherine's attention and she lifted her head to see the window slide down and a thin, pale hand reached out. Moreno pulled the book from his overcoat pocket, offering it to that bloodless hand. He watched in silence as the hand disappeared inside, the window slowly moving up to close with noiseless finality. The big dark car moved unhurriedly towards the exit.

Catherine felt her heart beating madly as she sat there, knowing now that all Vincent said was true and that somehow, her decisions and actions today had just altered their future. She waited in shocked silence until Moreno returned to his car and pulled it out of its parking spot before she began to breathe normally again. Her heart didn't slow until she watched him drive off, heading for the busy Manhattan traffic.

Hot tears of anger made their way down her cheeks; tears of betrayal for herself and Joe, for Edie and Rita, and all the others who had put their trust into the man they thought John Moreno was. And, Catherine knew, she was alone in these feelings, for without proof, John would continue to misuse his office, would continue to betray them all every time he took that leather bound chair behind the DA's desk.

With determination edged with courage, Catherine started her car, easing it slowly out of the parking structure. Moreno had the book and had returned it to the man whose ruin it would have meant, the man Vincent called '*Gabriel*.' She was safe for now and Vincent would know a return to the calmness that, although sometimes incongruous, seemed an integral part of his nature. For now the crisis was past. Even as she breathed a sigh of relief, she couldn't rid herself of the nagging feeling that she had not seen the last of any of it.

Her nerves had not improved by the time Catherine fought the rush hour traffic and made her way back to her apartment. At times, she wanted only to scream out her frustration; at other times she felt tremors of irrational fear that someone might be watching her, waiting for her, as they had once before. The sudden memory of '*The Watcher*', and his attempt to murder her caused her to stop abruptly before her door. Trembling, she slid her key into the lock and entered her home quietly, muscles tensed and ready for anything.

The sudden tranquility that greeted her guaranteed immediate relaxation, for there was indeed someone waiting for her, someone watching her. Someone wonderful....

He stood in the middle of her living room, eyes bright with love and features content with the knowledge that she was clearly safe. He gave her just a moment in which to shut out the rest of the world and throw the bolt across the door before he pulled her into his arms, wrapping her in a fierce embrace.

Catherine almost cried out, so great was her relief and joy in finding him here.

"Vincent, you were right. They would have stopped at nothing if I hadn't given Moreno that book." Her voice was husky and muffled against the soft, ribbed fabric of his shirt, but she couldn't seem to stop hugging him.

"I was afraid too, Catherine," he murmured against her hair, inhaling the sweet, feminine fragrance of her. "I felt your fear and," he added proudly, "your strength." Raising one hand to stroke her back, he reassured her. "I was nearby. I would not have allowed them to take you."

Catherine tilted her head back to look into his eyes, a shiver running down her spine from the combination of steely gravel in his voice and the firm, warm feel of his hand on her back. Eyes meeting, the realization of what could have happened, of what almost did happen flooded them both simultaneously with a sense of relief laced with urgency.

The need to be together surpassed all remaining terrors. Once she had been lifted gently into his strong arms, Catherine wept with relief. "I love you so much. I need you.... I need you."

"Shhhh, don't cry," he whispered, as he carried her to the bedroom. "Everything will be all right now." Setting her feet on the carpeted floor, he bent to kiss her tears away, his lips soon finding hers as she reached for him.

"Yes," she moaned, desire for him flaming into existence under the sweet caress of his mouth. Toeing off her shoes, she reached for the leather thongs on his shirt.

Finally, they lay together under the silken comforter adorning the bed, and although the sensation of skin on skin was intoxicating, neither made any move to initiate lovemaking. Instead they lay together, savoring the closeness of the other, listening as their hearts beat in cadence.

Lifting her head, Catherine gazed into his eyes, her own growing soft and misty at the look of unquenchable love in his. As she watched him, she could almost see the last of his fears fading like smoke before the winds of change.

"It's over," she whispered, pushing a long strand of golden hair from her beloved's face, feeling that it was her turn now to deliver comfort. "You've always kept me safe. Always."

The grasp of his hands on her still-slim body tightened perceptibly and she was suddenly face to face with blue eyes simmering with hunger. "No one, Catherine," he promised softly, his voice deep and passionate and resolute. "No one will ever take you from me."

"Catherine, are you certain you have your dates right?" Peter looked up from the ultrasound monitor, his eyes questioning.

"I don't know, really. I guess I could have conceived any time during that month following Vincent's illness." She lowered her lashes as a sudden warmth crept up her cheeks.

"No," Peter shook his head, tactfully ignoring the rosy blush kissing her cheeks. "I meant, could conception have occurred earlier than the first date you gave me? Your baby is too well-developed for twelve weeks." He glanced at the monitor again, adding. "Looks more like eighteen to twenty weeks."

"That wouldn't be possible, Peter," she stated with certainty.

"I suppose nothing about this pregnancy should surprise me. It seems a miracle to me that it could have even occurred." Peter held out a hand, helping her to sit up. "Taking into consideration the differences in Vincent's blood."

"Miraculous is a word I use a lot when thinking of Vincent," she smiled, gathering together the edges of the embarrassingly thin hospital gown. Laying a hand over the gentle protrusion of her

once-flat abdomen, she added, "I am awfully large for only being three months along, aren't I?"

Peter picked up on the edge of worry in her voice, hastening to reassure her. "You are, but Cathy, everything seems fine. The baby looks healthy and the only unusual characteristic that I can determine is the accelerated rate of development." Laying a warm hand on her shoulder, he continued. "And you look well, except for those circles under your pretty eyes. Are you getting enough sleep? Are you still having a lot of morning sickness?"

"I haven't been sick for the last couple of weeks, so I think that phase has passed."

Peter smiled as she added. "Thank God!"

"But I am still tired all the time. Although, I've been putting in a lot of hours at work. I have a lot of loose ends to tie up." Of course, she couldn't tell him she was working late into the night deciphering the cryptic codes copied from one small, black book. Also, although she made light of it, the rapid rate of the baby's growth did concern her. There were too many unknowns and she desperately wanted this child to be healthy.

"Well, you're just going to have to slow down a bit." Peter fixed her with a stern look. "I want you to get eight hours of sleep a night and if you don't comply, I'll be telling Vincent," he admonished, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Oh, please!" Catherine laughed, rolling her eyes in supplication. "Eight hours, I promise."

'It was time,' she thought, as Peter left her to dress, time to turn over all that she knew to Joe and bow out. There were enough names and dates now to nail Moreno and enough solid leads to rid the city of at least a few rats, even if the kingpin did escape. Yes, it was time to disappear for a good, long while.

"Peter said everything is fine," Catherine offered quickly, realizing at once that he could feel the tiny tremor of anxiety coiling within her that refused to be quelled. Since she had left work early for the ultrasound, she'd seen no reason to delay being with Vincent. She'd been certain he would be waiting. And he had been, waiting patiently - or at least giving that appearance - as he moved forward to ease her way down the iron rungs from her sub-basement's access.

With his large hands still warm upon her waist, she turned in his arms, giving him the verbal reassurance before reaching up on tiptoe to greet his lips. As they drew apart, Catherine could see the unspoken questions lingering in those blue eyes like seabirds circling above a cerulean sea. Taking his hand, she squeezed it as they began to walk, her mind searching for the words that would inform without causing alarm.

After several strides made in silence, Vincent stopped, turning to face her. "Must I ask the question then?" His voice was gentle but determined.

"I'm sorry, Vincent. I was just thinking. Truly, Peter says I'm fine and the baby's fine."

Still he waited, unmoving, his eyes never leaving hers.

"There is one thing out of the ordinary though." She took a deep breath, her eyes sliding from his to glance down at the gentle mound of her abdomen that was evident even under the over-sized shirt she wore. "The baby is developing at a faster rate than is----." She stumbled, about to say *'normal'* before her tongue adroitly exchanged that word with another. "----usual. He thought perhaps I had been mistaken on the date of conception." A smile tweaked the corners of her mouth. "But we both know that's not possible."

"Catherine," he sighed, beginning to walk beside her once more. "How could any child of my flesh be normal?" He ruthlessly used the word she had skipped around, sparing himself nothing.

Strangely, Catherine felt the small spot of concern that had been present since Peter's announcement, melt away like the last patch of ice before the morning sun. *'What did it matter if the child was developing at a faster rate? Of course this baby wouldn't be like any other.'* This baby would be extraordinary, just like his father, and she felt honored and blessed beyond reason that she would be the mother of such a child.

It was her turn to halt, and she reached for his cloaked shoulder, touching him lightly. "Perhaps our child won't be exactly like other children, but our child will be loved and cherished to the depths of our beings. Vincent, this will be an extraordinary child."

'... An extraordinary child....' Vincent heard the words echo coldly against the walls of his memory and, as if viewing himself through a dense fog, saw his reflection turn suddenly on her as he asked with razor sharpness. "But what kind of a child?" And Catherine had answered through her fear with the same words she had just uttered. "An extraordinary child."

Closing his eyes briefly, he silently willed away this final, lingering vestige of the nightmare while she waited, ever patient, for him to explain. He realized with dawning relief that this was not a vision; this was merely an echo of his own deepest insecurity about who and what he was. Compared to the horror of what might have been, that fear seemed a small price to pay.

Ever since the day she had given the book to Moreno, the driving omens of his nightmare had ceased to hammer him. The past few weeks had been a welcome respite from the dark foreboding that had so haunted him and he knew with all certainty that the impending tragedy had been averted. It was like the last storm cloud passing from the sun, leaving nothing but clear, untroubled skies the color of his own eyes.

Earlier he had felt Catherine's apprehension and had correctly connected it with the child she carried. She had been reluctant to tell him about the ultrasound, he knew, and perhaps his own uncertainties about fathering a child had magnified that feeling of concern. But now he felt only love and a calm, certain patience flowing through their bond.

He reached out to stroke her arm in reassurance, wetting his lips before speaking, an action that she found all the more sensuous because he was so totally unaware that he did it.

"In my dream.... the nightmare.... you were afraid to tell me about the child, afraid of what my reaction might be." He dropped his golden head, almost as if ashamed. "I don't want you ever to be afraid to tell me anything."

"Vincent," she said softly, raising his head with one finger under his chin. "I've never been afraid of you."

At his gently raised brows, she added. "At least, not after I knew your heart."

"Your courage has always been a part of you, Catherine."

As soon as he mentioned courage, they were both transported by a memory to that time after the cave-in. They were so attuned to each other that both knew they were remembering the same thing.

Catherine smiled, knowing there was no need to preface her words with an explanation. "It's always been love, Vincent. Always."

He could feel the warmth of her words and the truth of her joy in this child. "Catherine, please forgive me. I cannot help but fear the possibility that I have inflicted my burden on an innocent child. But at the same time I am filled with such joy at the prospect of our child. You must know how deeply I already love this baby."

"I know, Vincent. I know." Her hand moved in his, slim fingers entwining intimately with his strong, furred ones as once more they began the journey to the main chambers. Glancing up at the noble

planes of his profile, she felt a lightening of her heart, a feeling that all would be well. *'She would meet with Joe tomorrow and hand in her resignation, along with the evidence that would put Moreno away, evidence that he didn't now she'd kept. And tomorrow night she would become a full-fledged member of Vincent's world.'*

Responding to that thought, she almost skipped beside him, causing him to look down at her with brows raised.

"I've something else to tell you, Vincent," she teased.

He immediately felt her spirits lift and his won inexplicably rising with hers.... she was so incredibly beautiful, walking at this side as though she hadn't a care in the world. He found himself smiling at her. "And what might that be?"

"The ultrasound showed what sex the baby is," she stated somewhat smugly, as if she were the lone guardian of some intriguing secret. *'I'll just torture him a little while before I tell him,'* she thought, wanting to laugh at the slightly condescending look on his face.

"Oh, I've known for weeks that the child you carry is a boy, Catherine," he answered a little too innocently. It was all he could do to keep a straight face at the outraged expression on hers.

"What! Why didn't you tell me?" she exclaimed, her voice demanding but her heart smiling at the pleased expression in his eyes.

"I didn't want to spoil the surprise for you. And," he reminded her, teasing now, "you didn't ask."

"I guess I can't hide anything from you," she grumbled good-naturedly. *'But just wait,'* she thought, *'until you find me on your doorstep tomorrow night, suitcase in hand.'*

Although they had discussed her inevitable move Below and had even transferred some of her things, no concrete plans had been made. As always, Catherine's work demanded so much of her time and attention that more important things seemed to get shelved like some fragile heirloom too precious for everyday use. Vincent never said anything, always quietly waiting, supportive and patient, but she knew how he yearned to have her live with him. A life together; it was the gold at the end of the rainbow.

For a time they walked on in companionable silence, each lost in thoughts of this new life swelling within her, all fears and foreboding banished for the moment. Then, speaking as if with one voice, they both murmured with an identical degree of wonder.

"A son...."

Opening the door to the regimented chaos of the DA's office, Catherine paused for a moment, her eyes absorbing all the activity within. Some people were bent laboriously over stacks of paperwork, some writing copious notes while hunching one shoulder to hold a phone glued to one ear, others grimaced at the bitter brew that passed for coffee while pecking away at a computer terminal.

In a way, she supposed she would miss the hustle and the satisfaction of a hard job well done. But she had more important things to do. Perhaps she would come back to this someday, if it were possible to integrate it so that her life Below would not be threatened. For now, however, she would soon have a baby to raise in addition to an extraordinary man to love.

"Hey, Radcliffe!" Joe's voice carried across the hum of the large room as he waved to her from his office door.

She returned his greeting as he strode towards her with only a hint of the stiffness in his gait that had plagued him after the explosion. They met in the middle of the room, Joe's boyish good looks breaking into a grin.

"You gonna waste the taxpayer's money just standing there all day?"

"I'm a taxpayer too, Joe. Remember?" She smiled at him, surprising him by taking his arm. "Come in, let's go to your office. I've got a newsflash for you and you're not going to believe it."

"Cathy, I don't know what to say," Joe began, running a hand through his thick brown hair. "This just blows me away." He gestured toward the notebook she'd given him half an hour ago. "If you're right, this could put Moreno in jail for a long, long time, not to mention some other pretty powerful people."

"It's all true, Joe. You just follow up on the leads I've outlined in that book and it will all fall into place. I had a hard time believing Moreno was dirty myself," she said, empathizing with the betrayal surfacing in his warm, brown eyes. "I'm sorry, Joe."

"Why didn't you come to me before this?" he asked, absent-mindedly toying with a rubber band as if the nervous energy so characteristic of him could be expelled that way.

"It was too dangerous. I had a... warning. Besides, I wanted to unravel a few of these codes before I turned it over to you. You weren't feeling too well for a time either." Catherine leaned across the desk, touching his hand. "Joe, the repercussions from this could be lethal. Promise me you'll be careful?"

"Hey, I'm always careful, especially when the mob's involved. Don't forget, I've got an Uncle Luigi myself," he added wryly. "But now, we have to worry about you," he frowned. "If this gets out, the people involved with this will know you have knowledge of major contacts----"

Settling back in her chair, Catherine held up a hand. "No, Joe. You don't have to worry about me. I'm going to disappear for a while."

"Disappear? Cathy, what----" He stopped, comprehension dawning in his eyes. "This will be more than an extended maternity leave, won't it?" His voice was gentle. No one had been more surprised than he when she'd told him about her pregnancy. He'd never figured her for the single mother type and had even had a wild, impulsive thought or two about offering to make an honest woman out of her. Fortunately, he'd recovered his wits before making too big a fool out of himself. Though she was very close-mouthed about her boyfriend, it was obvious, even to his sometimes unobservant eyes, that she was in love with whoever it was - deeply in love.

"Yes. I'll be gone a long time." She didn't say it aloud, but he heard the unspoken words that followed. *'Maybe forever.'*

"Where are you going?" he started, then laughed self-deprecatingly. "Never mind; I know better than to ask a question like that." He rose and came around the desk and for the first time took her hand, enclosing it warmly in his.

Catherine stood, suddenly feeling a rush of tears. "I'll miss you," she said, stepping into a pair of welcoming arms that hugged her tightly.

"I'll miss you too, Cathy." He blinked back the suspicious moisture rising in his eyes and bent to kiss her forehead. "You take care."

Determined green eyes met saddened brown, but Catherine fought back her tears and simply whispered. "And you, Joe."

The leonine head bent dutifully over the leather-bound journal Catherine had given him as he wrote, smiling almost whimsically over the deep feeling of peace that had entered his life. He had reported in intricate detail what seemed to be his every thought; the concern and joy, the misgiving

and ecstasy. There was comfort in putting these feelings down on paper, as if by doing so would forever preserve the wonders and put back into perspective the fears. At times in his life, the journal served as a vent for emotions that could have otherwise eaten him alive with their intensity.

Recapping the antique fountain pen, he gazed with mild surprise at the profuse amount of left-handed script filling the page. *'Had he really written all that?'* As he closed the journal, his eyes lifted and he found himself glancing around the familiar rough walls of his chamber.

There was so much of her here now; so many of her personal things adorned the shelves, delicate glass eggs and porcelain vases sitting comfortably beside his own more tarnished treasures. Several items of her clothing hung side by side with his in the old mahogany armoire, the lingering fragrance of lavender blending sensuously with the masculine scent of leather, wintergreen candles and night. Upon his bed lay a silk covered, lace edged pillow, nestled with seductive ease against his own leather-patched bolster.

It was as though he was surrounded by her and this filled him with joy, even as he sometimes pondered how everything would eventually fit. *'The chamber seemed to be expectant as well, waiting for the day she would truly make it her home.'* That thought made him smile, for the day drew ever closer when he would be spiritually completed, would see her smiling face before he slept, lie close to her yielding warmth, know the promise of a love so long denied, and happily look into the calm depths of those haunting green eyes when he awoke.

The love that existed in him was more than gratifying, for even now, blooming with his child as she was, the small chamber behind the falls seldom went unoccupied for more than a day or two; Catherine was just as eager for him as he remained for her.

A footstep beyond his chamber entrance brought his attention to heel and he was surprised to look up into Catherine's face as she slowly entered the room. She stood before him in sweet silence, love and a sparkle of mischievousness shining in her eyes. She took one more hesitant step before he noticed the suitcase she carried.

Hurriedly rising from the well worn velvet of his chair, he took it from her grasp before wrapping her in his arms. A quick hug later, he stepped back, clearly puzzled that he hadn't felt her nearness earlier.

"Catherine, I didn't sense your arrival."

"I wanted to surprise you, Vincent," she began innocently. "I didn't want you to meet me and try to talk me out of my intentions."

"Which are?" he asked, his heart beginning to soar even before hearing the words.

"I want to be with you, now and for always. I'm here for good, my love," she whispered, then stood on tiptoe to gently brush his lips with her own. "That is," she added, tilting her head to look into his eyes. "If you'll allow me to stay."

"Allow you?" Vincent was incredulous as his arms opened to her again and he took a step towards her. "Catherine.... what you ask is the answer to my most passionate wish."

Gratefully, she leaned into his welcoming embrace, feeling the gentle strength of his arms circle her protectively. The bond hummed to life, enclosing itself around them completely until the rest of the world ceased to exist for either of them.

"With love, all things are possible, Catherine." Vincent whispered in her ear. "You are all I need and all I want. As long as you are happy, I would be honored to have you stay. But there is something I've been contemplating, something that I would like to ask of you."

Raising her eyes, to his, she waited, attentive and curious.

Dropping his arms, Vincent turned and walked back to the writing table. "I have loved you,

Catherine, since the first moment I touched you.... that night I found you in the park. There was a moment when the way was still new and I was afraid to hope." He paused, suddenly overcome by a feeling of *deja vu*. *'Where had he heard those words before?'* A shadow passed over his heart in the form of a memory of that nightmare so many months ago, and for a moment, his gaze became unfocused.

"I was afraid to hope too, Vincent," she soothed, as she closed the distance between them, reaching a hand up to touch one shadowed cheek. "But hope was born that night. Hope and love."

"Yes," he replied, pulled back into the light by the force of her love. "Once I thought it was only a dream that you could return my love. Now, you do and I feel such power in that knowledge." He reached for her hands again, grasping them tightly. "But now not only do you return my love, but you bear my child and I am humbled by this gift."

Kneeling before her, Vincent lifted her hands to his lips, kissing each one softly. "I will speak to Father tonight.... Catherine, will you join with me? Will you become my wife?"

"A wedding, Vincent?" Leaning forward, she kissed his lips tenderly. "We can have a wedding?"

A smile brightened his eyes, turning the sapphire depths into turquoise. "In a way. We call it a joining - two people come together and stand before the Council, declaring to all present their intention to live as one. Their hands are affixed together by a ribbon and Father, who is always quite happy at these occasions, says a few words."

"A joining...." Catherine repeated, an ever-widening smile on her face. "And is there a honeymoon?"

"Always," he conceded, dropping his head bashfully.

"Vincent, I would be honored to become one with you.... to be your wife and call you my husband, and live with you for the rest of my days."

Standing gracefully, Vincent pulled her into his arms, intending to seal his proposal with a kiss.

"Oh!" Catherine exclaimed, looking down at the swell of her belly touching the hard flatness of his. "But look at me, Vincent. I'm already huge."

Very real concern flared in her eyes, as she pictured herself, enormously pregnant waddling through the crowded chamber to stand before Father's reproachful eyes.

"I'm afraid I won't make a very chaste appearing bride," she added ruefully.

Vincent closed his eyes, his mouth twitching, as he felt the surge of her consternation nudging against the happiness she felt. Although he did not wish to minimize her concerns, he could not escape the humor of the situation.

Catherine felt the tremors begin in his chest and she peered into his face asking, "What?"

"Catherine," he began, mastering the urge to chuckle. "I don't know if I should laugh or weep.... that you should worry about being a fit bride for me. Look at me."

She saw the gentle amusement in his eyes, mingled with incredulity and a humbleness that was soul deep. Reaching up, she smoothed back the shaggy bangs in a tender gesture. "I do look at you, Vincent, every chance I get. I used to sneak looks at you, because I was afraid you'd think I was staring. You are so beautiful that sometimes I still think I must have dreamed you up."

Her eyes grew soft and misty, the color of Irish moss at dawn. "I love you so very much and there is nothing in the world I would rather do than marry you - especially if it means that I can stay with you forever."

Love, pure and deep, ran through him at the look in her eyes and he could feel her soul touching

his through the open current of their bond. 'Yes, to stay forever....'

"You can," he whispered before his mouth covered hers. "You must."

Becoming lost in the heady desire of his touch, Catherine allowed herself to be swept away, to feel fully the rich and potent promise that had always existed between them. As Vincent reached behind him to snuff the candle, she found herself secure in an everlasting and ever growing sense of joy. The request they would make to Father.... could wait until tomorrow.

Father's study was brightly lit, the candle flames dancing in celebration of this joyous event. As Father looked around the room filled to capacity with friends and Helpers, he wondered if it wouldn't have been wiser to open the Great Hall after all. He glanced over at William, receiving a nod from the ruddy-faced cook indicating that the refreshments would be ample and ready.

Vincent paced restlessly, his nerves already pushed far past their usual endurance by his anticipation and expectations. His eyes kept finding the archway leading to the main tunnels, searching for her, needing her to come through that doorway and into his life forever, for always, never to leave him to his loneliness again.

"Vincent," Father tried to compose his son. "She's coming; you heard the signal on the pipes. You're wearing a hole in my carpet!"

Subdued laughter from the outer tunnel brought the leonine head sharply around and the entire room held its collective breath, as Catherine stepped into the chamber flanked by Jamie and Brooke. Her radiance made the candles obsolete, her beauty made him forget anyone else was present at all.

In two long strides he was by her side, looking down into emerald eyes sparkling with happiness, with desire and with resolution.

"Shall we?" he questioned softly, indicating Father at the head of the chamber.

"Yes, my love," she answered, grasping his hand tightly in her own.

Hand-in-hand, they walked to Father, the crowd parting for them as they went until they stood side-by-side before the trustees of the tunnel world.

Father stood straight and proud, assuming his role as head of the Council.

"Vincent," he began, his voice formal. "You asked for this meeting today. What business do you bring before us?"

Taking a deep breath, the golden head turned briefly to Catherine, touching her with love in his eyes, before he turned his gaze to sweep the room. "I have asked you to come together this day to hear the words of joining. It is my intention to live the rest of my days with Catherine as my wife, if she will have me."

All eyes turned to Catherine Chandler, former socialite, mugging victim, corporate lawyer, investigator, now healer and lover of their beloved Vincent and friend to all in the audience. She glanced around her, feeling the love and delight emanating from everyone in the room. She felt the confidence of a love finally realized flow through her freely and, with a smile, stepped toward the patriarch. "It is my intention to live the rest of my days with Vincent as my husband. It is also my intention to make this place my home, if I am welcome."

Brooke moved forward slowly, grateful for Father's smile of encouragement. Her hands trembled slightly as she pulled a long plaited ribbon from the pocket of her dress and began tying the braid around the couple's clasped hands.

Vincent glanced down at the binding, watching the red and white braid seal tightly the dream he

had never thought to realize. A rainbow of emotions cascaded through him as he witnessed his own thick wrist bound to the slim, fine-boned one of the woman he loved. He felt Catherine's eyes on him, sensed the profound joy in her heart, and knew she too saw those shimmering colors of a dream come true.

Jamie made her way through the crowd to hand Catherine a small bouquet of roses, also red and white. Shyly, she kissed the bride quickly on the cheek before turning to the assembled Council.

"I welcome Catherine to be one with us."

Brooke smiled, "As do I."

The Council members broke into enthusiastic grins as Father turned once more to the newly joined couple. "Your declarations have been heard and accepted. For now and forever, you are one to us and to each other. May you be blessed with happiness."

Father's gray eyes held a mixture of sadness and joy, for he had truly given the care of his beloved son into another's hands. Still, he knew of no greater love than would be found in those same small hands.

Impulsively, he gathered Catherine to him in a hug, speaking for her ears only. "He is yours now... my daughter."

Catherine touched the grizzled beard lightly with her free hand, whispering a promise. "I'll hold his heart carefully, Father."

He gave her a grateful kiss, then, releasing her, spoke loudly enough for the entire room to hear. "Catherine, I welcome you as our new resident and as my son's wife."

The room came alive with applause and shouts from well-wishers. Even the multitude of candles seemed to burn brighter, their flames rising higher in jubilation of a destiny fulfilled. As Vincent's free arm enveloped her tightly, Catherine felt the weight of all the old pain and denial lift from her. It was almost like a fairy tale - the trials had been triumphed over, the magic words had been spoken, and now the reward was in her hands. No more would she consider the tunnels a hidden, secret place, for as she was carried from Father's chamber by her impatient husband, Catherine knew that from now on this was home.

Vincent paused at the chamber portal, one broad shoulder touching the side of the rough hewn rock. Catherine was seated at the small writing table, her head bent over a sheaf of what appeared to be legal documents. She wore an oversized knitted sweater, the deep green color of a forest at twilight, over black stretch pants. He gazed at her, his eyes caressing the sweet, strong curve of her jaw, emphasized by the cowl-neck of the sweater. Dropping his eyes along her profile, he smiled at the obvious roundness of her belly, so pronounced against the green wool. As he watched, her hands came up to rest on the child inside her, fingers absently caressing the cherished life within.

He felt an inexplicable rush of pride that this beautiful woman was his wife, his lover, her body blooming with the mute evidence of his virility. All his old fears seemed so trivial now. *'What had made him wait so long to claim what she had always offered? Why was it that he had been blind to this destiny between them? And why must the world Above seem to conspire to haunt him when everything he ever dreamed of was his?'*

"Catherine," he called softly, not wanting to startle her.

A smile greeted him as he entered the chamber, his tread slow and graceful, redolent of leashed power. Sitting beside her at the writing table, where she had been working, he folded his hands together as he leaned forward to brace his forearms on the solidness of oak.

"I didn't expect you back so early. Is everything all right at the work site?" Catherine picked up her pen, making a note in the margin of her paper as she also leaned forward, hampered by the mound of her belly.

"It's progressing nicely," he answered truthfully. "Mouse has arrived at the perfect solution, but of course it means he will have to go Above in search of the needed materials."

"I could send Peter a note," she offered. "I'm sure he'd be willing to bring down whatever you need."

"Perhaps, but Catherine, that is not why I'm here."

At the sudden edge in his voice, she stopped writing and focused her complete attention on him. There was something in his eyes that she hadn't seen since she'd promised to hand over that black book to John Moreno.

"What is it?"

"Peter has sent us some disturbing news." His voice dropped in volume until he could hardly be heard over the rattle of a subway train above them.

"Tell me, Vincent."

Glancing up from his folded hands, he met her gaze. "There is an investigation being implemented in the city. The District Attorney of Manhattan has been found to be corrupt and has been indicted. The evidence was indisputable; coded payments and shipments.... a code broken by someone who gave the information to Joe Maxwell."

Catherine had to consciously stifle a sudden urge to squirm in her chair. Although there was not so much as a hint of accusation in that beautiful voice, his eyes were shadowed and the knowledge in them was plain. Expelling her breath, Catherine searched her mind for the right words to explain that omission to him. They had promised never to withhold the truth from each other and now she had been caught doing just that.

"Vincent," she began, peering into eyes of implacable blue. "I copied the book. I wanted to tell you, but you'd been so ill. I didn't want to worry you, and I knew you would brood over it if you knew what I'd done."

Vincent remained silent, dropping his head so that his face was shielded by a curtain of golden mane. He could feel the love and concern she was feeling, along with genuine remorse and a ripple of guilt. It was such a little wound, really, this omission of hers, but no one knew better than he how fiercely little wounds could bleed, if left unstaunched by apology or explanation.

Catherine misinterpreted his silence as disapproval, and she pushed back her chair in sudden agitation. She felt like she was ten years old again, seated before her father's great mahogany desk, explaining why she'd failed to deliver a teacher's note.

"I was careful," she rushed to explain. "I gave my notes and research to Joe the day before I moved Below. I wasn't in any danger." She rose and moved to stand by his side, placing a tentative hand on his shoulder. "Please, Vincent, try to understand. It was you who taught me to face fear, to have the courage to do good in spite of evil. How could I just walk away, knowing that I held the key to stop him?"

Vincent lifted his face, one arm going around her expanded waistline as he pulled her a step closer.

"It was not my intention to reproach you, Catherine. I should be ashamed that I ever asked you to compromise your professional integrity." He shook his head. "But you are so precious to me...." His voice trailed off as he leaned into her warmth, chagrined that he'd made her feel dishonest when everything she'd done had been to protect him.

Reaching out a hand, Catherine pulled his golden head to her breast, kissing the top of his hair. "I

love you," she murmured. At that moment, the child inside her kicked and she took his free hand, holding it across her abdomen so that he might feel the life he'd put inside her. "I've done my best for the world Above. My life is with you now, Vincent, here in this safe place."

"Yes," he agreed, closing his eyes as he felt his son move beneath his hand.

Turning a page, Catherine glanced over at her husband, noting that he was still engrossed in the book he held effortlessly balanced in one large hand. Comfortably pillowed and blanketed, he sat beside her in their bed with knees drawn up and head bent forward intently. He looked very young without his usual layers of rather intimidating clothing, wearing only a well worn, slightly frayed, white thermal undershirt.

Catherine found her thoughts wandering from her book.... *'He actually looked, well, cuddly...'*

Unable to maintain the same degree of absorption in her own book, she closed her eyes for a moment, wishing he would blow out the candle and take her in his arms. Wiggling into a more comfortable position against the mound of pillows supporting her back, she gave up on the book altogether, practically losing it in a lap that had all but disappeared under the mound of her stomach.

"Vincent?"

"Hmmm?" he responded, not taking his eyes from the page.

"I've been thinking of names," she began, placing both hands over her protuberant abdomen.

"Have you?" he answered distractedly.

"Yes," she replied a bit shortly, irritated at his apparent lack of attention to a subject she very much wanted to discuss.

"That's nice," he murmured nonchalantly, hiding a smile. He knew it annoyed her when he didn't give her his full attention when she was in a talkative mood, but it was worth it just to see the green of her eyes darken into emerald fire when he took her in his arms.

Catherine expelled her breath. "Are you even listening to me, Vincent?"

"Mmmmm," he murmured, stealing a glance at her from under lowered lashes the color of Serengeti gold.

With one quick movement, she snaked out a hand with the intention of capturing his book, but he was too quick for her, snatching it out of harm's way, all the while holding his place in it. It was a combination of the amused chuckle and the indulgent laughter in his blue eyes that made her realize he had only been teasing her.

"You're toying with me again!" she exclaimed, wavering between getting mad at him and melting against that wide expanse of incredibly inviting chest.

"Yes," he admitted, "I am."

Laying his book to one side, he put an arm around her shoulders, hugging her close to his side. Although he was tempted to tease her about the hormonally induced mood swings she'd been experiencing, he thought better of it. It was only yesterday that an innocently phrased query about the size of her girth had sent her storming from the chamber in tears. It had taken him a good hour to reassure her and work his way back into her good graces.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, kissing her forehead. "It's just that you are so beautiful when you're vexed with me. Did you know your eyes turn the most fascinating shade of green?"

"Oh, stop it," she grumbled, ignoring the all too innocent expression of his face. "I'm serious. I think

I've found the perfect name."

"You have my complete attention," he vowed, turning the full intensity of his sapphire gaze on her. Catherine sniffed, suddenly feeling the urge to sneeze. She squeezed her eyes shut and wrinkled her nose in an effort to stop it. With the weight of the baby compressing her bladder, a sneeze was apt to almost make her wet her pants, something she was determined not to do.

"Ahh.... ah....," she sniffed again, opening her eyes, the sneeze successfully stifled for now. "Well, I thought.... J.... J.... Ju....," she stammered as the urge to sneeze returned full force. "Ah-chooo!"

'*Julian!*' Vincent's mind reeled from the shock of hearing that name, or at least what he thought was the beginning of that name. His hand unconsciously tightened on her shoulder, fingers trembling.

"Jacob," she finished, wondering why he was suddenly as tense as a marble statue. Staring up at him with amazement at such a strongly negative reaction, Catherine hurried to pacify him. "It's just a suggestion, Vincent. I thought you'd be pleased, but if you really don't like it, I'll forget it. We'll think of something else."

Shaking his head, Vincent blinked in relief. '*Jacob, she'd said Jacob.*' His grip on her shoulder relaxed and he rubbed her arm as if in apology. "No, Catherine, Jacob is a wonderful name. I am pleased and I know Father will be too. For a moment, I thought you were going to say another name."

Catherine studied him for a brief moment, appraising the fast fleeting streak of fear in his eyes before he lowered them, guarding her from the terrible nightmare that seemed destined to haunt him in bits and pieces for the rest of his life. Raising a hand to his chin, she turned his face towards her to lightly stroke the prominence of one nobly sculpted cheekbone.

"It's all right," she whispered. "You don't need to explain. I understand."

He caught her hand in his, bringing it to rest against his heart. "I know you do," he answered in a low voice. Unable to resist, he reached under the covers to lay his other hand over the swell of her abdomen, needing to feel the gentle movements of their son.

Catherine settled more comfortably against him, savoring the warmth of his hand on her belly. Never did she feel so loved and cherished, as in these precious moments when the three of them were this close.

Closing her eyes in contentment, she murmured softly. "Blow out the candle, Vincent."

Raising her knees in a fruitless effort to ease the dull ache in her back, Catherine shifted restlessly in bed. There didn't seem to be a position that she could get comfortable in, and to make matters worse, she had to use the bathroom again. Wistfully remembering the days when she used to sleep through an entire night, she yielding to the pressure of her baby and rose with an odd sort of cumbersome grace.

With her feet warmly encased in a pair of sheepskin-lined leather slippers, she scuffed her way down the short passageway leading to the facilities. Instead of diminishing the pain in her back, walking seemed to aggravate it and she groaned inwardly, wondering if all pregnant women had to endure such nocturnal indignities.

Vincent opened one sleepy blue eye, then closed it as he realized Catherine was only making her nightly trip. Yawning, he stretched before snuggling deeper into his pillow, sleep reclaiming him immediately. It was only a few scant minutes later, however, before he sat bolt upright, his eyes flying open. For a moment, he was still, sorting out the sudden rush of input flooding the bond.... but it wasn't Catherine whose emotions called to him with such intensity.

Suddenly, a sharp pain shot through her belly, so severe and unexpected that it would have brought her to her knees had Vincent not appeared beside her at that moment to steady her with his large, gentle hands.

"Oh, Vincent," she gasped, still doubled over from the contraction. "I think it's time."

"Yes," he agreed, helping her to stand upright.

"How did you know?" she asked, wondering how he gotten to her even as the contraction had begun.

"It was the child," he answered, his voice colored with wonder. "I felt the pain you were experiencing, but before that, I felt the heartbeat of our child."

Catherine gratefully leaned into the arm he offered as they walked slowly back to their chamber.

"Like in our bond?"

"Like that, yes, but not exactly the same. Not as strong or as well-defined, yet there is a definite presence.... here," he added, touching his heart.

The next pain assailed her, stronger than the first, and she almost cried aloud at the intensity of it.

"Well," she groaned when it had passed, still possessing a sense of humor. "I hope you felt that one."

He smiled at her little joke, proud of her spirit and strength. "I've no doubt that I'll be aware of everything you experience, Catherine. Shall I get Father?"

"Yes," she grimaced, sitting down gingerly on the edge of the bed. "And send for Peter, too. I think I'm about to make you a daddy."

"I can see the baby's head, Cathy, it's almost here." Peter looked up from where he stood, shoulder to shoulder with Father. "Push, honey, push harder," he encouraged.

"That's good, very good," Father added, intent upon the miracle about to be delivered into his waiting hands. "Again.... push again."

Catherine's breath came hard and fast, as if she could not draw enough air into her lungs to fulfill the tremendous demand of her body. Dimly, she heard someone telling her to push, but all she was really conscious of was Vincent behind her, supporting her, giving her strength. She wanted to scream, but there didn't seem to be enough air for it. It was hard.... oh, it was so hard....

A fresh wave of pain washed over her, gripping her body with viselike pressure, twisting and tearing at her exhausted muscles. The pain tore at her, the scream rising in her throat stopped only by the grinding of her clenched teeth as she struggled to keep it back. She was lost.... lost in a desert filled with mile after mile of insurmountable dunes, burning with a heat so fierce it was blinding.

A soft, cool hand smoothed back the sweat soaked strands of hair from her brow and Catherine almost cried out for her mother before she realized it was Mary standing beside her.

"It's all right to scream. Let it out, it's easier not to fight it. There's no one here you need ot be this brave for." The advice she had given so many young women in the throes of childbirth now fell upon Catherine's ears. Mary smiled encouragingly at Vincent, touching his shoulder.

"Soon," she promised, her eyes kind and understanding.

Vincent's head fell back, his mouth slightly open as he, too, breathed deeply. Although he had witnessed other births and had marveled at the strength and courage of women, they had not been his wife, it had not been his child.... and now he found himself chafing at his own helplessness. He should be able to help her, to take the pain from her somehow. It suddenly seemed so unfair that

the wages of such incredible pleasure were destined to be spent in such agony for her.

With a final, herculean effort, Catherine strained with all her might, and laying down her weapons of courage and stubbornness, surrendered to the demands of pain. As the scream tore from her lips, Vincent, too, closed his eyes, a full, deep throated roar coming unbidden from deep within. Their voices joined together in a cry of pain and triumph, blending even as their bodies had blended to create this child. Then, for a brief moment the chamber fell silent except for the lingering groan and labored breathing of Catherine. A small, wavering cry broke the spell, as a new life came into the world.

Vincent opened his eyes just in time to intercept a cryptic glance exchanged between Father and Peter. Uncomprehending, he moved closer.

Holding the squirming infant already protectively wrapped in a soft white blanket. Father smiled at Vincent. "You have a son, a fine, healthy boy."

Vincent's eyes widened at the sight of his son, his mouth actually falling open in shock at the small, perfect features so like his own. In spite of his early fears, he had not truly expected the child to be like him. In the dream, the baby had been featured like her.... *'He's beautiful, she'd said....'*

"Oh, Catherine," he murmured, unaware that he'd spoken at all.

"Vincent?"

Catherine's voice penetrated his astonishment, bringing him back to the present. Carefully, he took the baby from Father, nodding at him as their eyes met briefly, a thousand unspoken words passing between them. Going to Catherine and kneeling beside her, he placed the baby in her arms, his eyes full of love and apology. He had no words.

A single tear fell from her eyes, as she cradled the baby in her arms, one finger touching the tiny claws. "Vincent," she breathed, her voice breaking both with weariness and wonder. "He's beautiful."

Vincent stood beside the cradle, gazing down at the sleeping infant whose tiny features were illuminated only by the soft saffron light coming from the stained glass window across the chamber. It was almost two am, but he was unaware of the time, having been drawn here by a force stronger than mere minutes and hours. His son was a week old today and this would be his Naming day.

Several different emotions washed over him, coloring his thoughts with many shades and dimensions, the strongest of which was love. This child.... his son, her son.... had become part of him in a way he'd never dreamed possible. Although closed now, when those bright blue eyes were looking into his own, Vincent felt the earth move with the force of his feelings. His emotions ran so strong at these times that his eyes would fill with tears and his heart would beat with a fierce sense of protectiveness, of deep and utter love.

Catherine's eyes fluttered open as she turned over to snuggle into a large, warm form that wasn't there. Stifling a yawn, she raised up on one elbow, peering into the shadows. A smile touched her lips, as she saw Vincent standing watch over their son. She was filled with a sense of pride that she had given birth to such an extraordinary child, that she had been able to give him this gift beyond measure. But sometimes it worried her that he was still burdened with uncertainties. She knew how he felt about passing on his differences, but now that the child was a reality, she hoped he would put those fears behind him.

Reaching out one hand, Vincent carefully brought the edge of the soft, patchwork quilt up to tuck it more securely around the angelic face of his son. And what a face it was. *'Would this child, who would know the full love and care of his parents, be more accepting of his differences than he*

himself had been? Or would he someday come to resent those differences and the one who had been responsible for perpetrating them?'

Vincent was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't hear Catherine come up behind him.

"Vincent?" Gently, she placed her palm against his back, speaking his name in a soft question.

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

"No." He turned to face her, one arm going around her shoulders to pull her against his side. "No, nothing's wrong. I was just.... watching him.... and thinking."

"Tell me," she invited with a smile, snuggling gratefully into the warmth of his arm. "Tell me your thoughts."

"He's so.... so...." Vincent's blue eyes closed, as he shook his head in an attempt to compose himself. "Catherine, what have I done?"

Feeling his body tremble with a sudden, crippling uncertainty, Catherine reached for his chin with her free hand, gently urging him to face her.

"You've become a father, my love. You have a son! The uncertainty and doubts you feel are not uncommon or unusual - all new fathers feel them. You're also faced with the realization of what a responsibility this child will be, no matter how old he is. Don't fight what you're feeling, Vincent. Understand it and know you are not alone in this. He'll have us both to turn to, to confide in, and when he's grown he'll find his own love. He'll know happiness beyond measure, with no doubts as to his worthiness to feel it, and no holding back because of uncertainty or fear. He'll know the truth, Vincent - he will."

After meeting her gaze and losing himself in the depths of the certainty he saw there, Vincent turned back to his son. The baby had awakened and was peering through still fuzzy eyes at the faces of his parents. The bond that had been forged during his delivery had strengthened and was filled with wondrous feelings of peace and security, comfort and love.

Placing a claw-tipped finger to the side of the child's mouth, Vincent gently rubbed the tiny lips, smiling helplessly as the boy made slight sucking motions, expecting to be fed.

"Give him to me," Catherine whispered, already fumbling with the front of her nightgown as she returned to their bed.

After handing her the baby, Vincent watched in silence as she put him to her breast. The baby grabbed at the exposed nipple with enthusiasm and began nursing in earnest, much to Catherine's amazement.

"Slow down, little one," she admonished softly. "There's plenty of time."

Unable to restrain himself, Vincent moved closer and reached forward to gently brush away a strand of fine golden hair from his son's face. The baby waved his tiny hands, never missing a second of his nursing, but turned his eyes to his father.

Catherine glanced up then, noting the look upon her husband's face as their son studied him, and smiled. "He's a greedy one," she almost laughed.

"Yes," Vincent answered without taking his eyes from the baby. "He's a blessing I never dared to imagine. He's so like me, but he's so like you. I can only hope he doesn't become burdened with the more frightening depths of my nature. I couldn't bear it if he came to hate me for passing that on to him."

"No, Vincent," Catherine touched his shoulder. "A child of ours could not hate you - ever! Your wisdom, your experience and understanding will guide him throughout his life. And, if he did inherit that part of you, he'll be able to cope with it because of what you've taught him, because of what

we've taught him, he won't be isolated. He won't be unloved or unwanted. He has the both of us and we'll love and guide him together. He'll understand."

Raising emotion filled eyes to her, Vincent nodded in appreciation, running a finger along their son's hand, examining the tiny claws. The bond between them came alive at this contact and Vincent watched the little face for a moment, suddenly knowing without a doubt that this child did know who and what he was, and was content with it. He knew he was loved.

"It will be all right, Catherine," he whispered. "I know it will be all right."

Love surrounded them as the proud parents entered Father's chamber with their son. After exchanging greetings with a few Helpers that hadn't been Below in a while, Vincent looked up, surprised to actually see Narcissa walk through the door with a huge smile crossing her kindly face.

"I had to see de little one," she explained, her accent heavy with the lilt of her homeland. "Only de special love can see all de possibilities in him."

Jacob Wells stood behind his desk clad in outdated finery, his best clothes having been taken out of the cedar-lined armoire to wear on this special day. He, too, was astonished to see the old Haitian enter his chamber, not having seen her since releasing her from the Hospital chamber that Winterfest when Paracelsus nearly burned her to death.

"Narcissa!" Father limped towards her, hands outstretched in greeting. "It's good to see you again."

Focusing nearly sightless eyes on the patriarch, she cackled happily. "Even dis crazy old woman must be present at de Naming celebration of Vincent's first child!"

Catherine glanced up at that remark, her eyes meeting Vincent. "First child?" she whispered. "Do you think she knows something we don't?"

Vincent shrugged his shoulders, brows uplifted as he looked down at her. "Perhaps, Catherine," he answered simply, the faintest of smiles teasing his mouth. "I suppose we must wait and see."

Catherine was about to answer when her attention was brought back to Father, as he cleared his throat and the chamber quieted obediently.

"In all my years as a physician, I've never lost that very deep sense of awe and reverence when new life comes into the world. To me, every child is a miracle, a promise fulfilled." He paused a moment, turning his gazer to the baby now dozing in his father's arms.

"But this child.... this child's very existence is a testament to what love can do, what love can dare. We are here today to honor the result of that love and to welcome the child with a name."

Catherine and Vincent walked the few, short steps together, joining Father in the center of his chamber. They were met with his warm, caring smile, and in that moment, a bonding seemed to pass between them that was almost palpable; truly, they were family.

Addressing the community again, Father began to recite the words each dweller of this world knew so well.

"It has been said that the child is the meaning of this life. The truth of that has never been more apparent to me than it is today, when we celebrate this new life that's come into our world. We welcome the child with love, so that he will be able to love. We welcome the child with gifts, so that he will learn generosity. And finally," he turned expectant eyes to Vincent and Catherine. *"We welcome the child.... with a name."*

After exchanging a loving glance, Catherine accepted the child from her husband, her eyes encompassing all the familiar, well-loved faces before her. "We've named our son Jacob. Jacob Chandler Wells."

The chamber immediately echoed with the happy, approving chatter of all present. It was obvious that their choice of a name met with unanimous approval.

Father closed his eyes tightly, fighting back the tears that threatened to engulf him. After all the hardships and heartache, after all he'd said to keep them apart, they named their son Jacob. The pride he felt well up in his breast was surpassed only by the sudden rush of humbleness and gratitude.

"Well now," he began, blinking suspiciously. "In honor of young Jacob Chandler, William has prepared a feast fit for a king. Why don't we make our way to the Great Hall and see it for ourselves?"

As the crowd began to disperse, Vincent stepped to Catherine's side, his arm encircling her shoulders possessively.

"I love you," she whispered. "Thank you for our son."

"Catherine," he replied, his tone sending sparks down her spine as his large hand covered hers where it lay cradling their baby. "It is I who should thank you. Your courage has shown me the way to happiness. Your love has vanquished the darkness. Now, you've given me this child and together, we are a family."

After cradling the baby in his left arm, he smiled as Catherine slid her hands around his right, and together the family made their way to the feast being celebrated in their honor.

Though tired after the day's events, Catherine assured her reluctantly-convinced husband that she would be all right going home with Jacob, while he escorted Narcissa back to her chambers beyond the Chamber of the Winds. The day had been long for her as well, and both Vincent and Father worried that she'd have difficulty traveling home alone.

Father paused outside the chamber portal, clearing his throat before calling. "Cathy? May I come in?" Since she'd disappeared from the lingering crowd with a hungry baby, he thought it best he announced his presence before walking in on her.

"Yes, come in, Father," she answered, discreetly rearranging Jacob's blanket so that her breast was covered. Even though this man had delivered her baby and since performed the necessarily intimate gynecological exams that followed, she still felt inexplicably shy with him at times.

Father entered the chamber, smiling as he watched his namesake rooting enthusiastically under the blanket. "It looks like my grandson has quite an appetite," he remarked, moving closer. His limp was a little more pronounced than usual, evidence that the long day had tired him.

"Sit down, Father," Catherine invited, nodding at the chair opposite hers.

He shook his head. "No, I won't stay, thank you. I'm off to bed early tonight. One of the Helpers brought today's newspaper down and I saw an article that I thought would be of interest to you."

He handed her a section of newspaper folded in thirds to display a title that read; *'Maxwell Wins DA Position.'*

Catherine glanced at the paper, a smile flowing across her face. "Thank you, Father." She looked up in gratitude.

"Well, I'll leave you to read it in peace," he turned to leave, thinking to himself how beautiful and serene she looked, rocking gently in the chair, Vincent's baby held so lovingly to her breast.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Father," she called after him, wincing a little as the baby pulled a bit too

enthusiastically. Lowering the blanket, she switched sides with him, chiding gently, "Don't be so greedy, little one." Settling into a comfortable position once more, she held up the paper and began to read.

'Winning by an easy margin, acting District Attorney Joe Maxwell secured his appointment to that post in yesterday's election. Earlier in the year, Maxwell had temporarily taken over the DA's job when evidence surfaced connecting John Moreno to a host of illegal activities. With the aid of an investigator from the Special Crimes Division of the New York City Police Department, Moreno was sentenced to twenty years in a federal prison.'

There was more, but Catherine lowered the paper as she pictured Joe fiddling with a rubberband... throwing darts at the back of his office door.... snacking on chocolate cheese curls. With a twinge, she realized she missed him, missed his warmth and friendship.

'Someday,' she mused, 'someday when it's safe, I'll see him again.'

A tiny fist came up to pummel her breast, as if little Jacob knew he'd lost her complete attention. Shifting him in her arms, the newspaper slid off her lap to fall in a tented heap at her feet. A smile started in her heart, as she looked into the already intense, slightly tilted blue eyes of her son. For now, there were more important things to claim her attention....

Catherine stood just outside the park entrance, motionless except for the fine, silken strands of honey kissed hair blowing gently around her face. She inhaled deeply, drawing the night air into her lungs. Even the Manhattan air smelled sweet and cold here, as if it had been purified by the greenery in the park. Lifting her face to the heavens above, she lost herself in the star-studded sky and the sensation of a cool, gentle breeze caressing her skin.

She pulled the hand-loomed woolen shawl higher over her shoulders, covering the soft lavender cotton of her dress. Though faded and patched, it was one of her favorite, because it had been sewn and given to her by Mary after the birth of Jacob. Catherine had been disappointed that her figure hadn't returned shortly after the birth, and it was then that Mary had given her this dress. It had been sewn with love, beautifully pieced together with cloth the color of crocuses; soft white, pale lavender and yellow the shade of melted butter.

The dress bespoke softness and femininity, possessing a tucked waist but with the bodice generous enough to accommodate a nursing mother. When Mary gave it to her, she told Catherine to hang it in her armoire and not to put it on until the first spring flowers showed their heads above. Today, Geoffrey had brought her a bouquet of crocuses still damp from the morning dew, and handed them to her clenched in one, precious, grubby hand.

Later, when she'd seen Father in the Hospital chamber, he had examined her and pronounced her healed. He had smiled in response to her shyly posed question and nodded his head affirmatively, grey eyes twinkling. It had been ten weeks since Jacob's birth and she and Vincent had not been together for weeks before that in deference to her size and the difficulty of the pregnancy.

She had not said anything to Vincent about Father's sanction, wanting to surprise him tonight - reward him for his patience. But there was an anticipation vibrating within her that she knew would be impossible to hide from him. More than once during the course of the day, she had intercepted a speculative gaze from his blue eyes, making her quiver inside like a flower opening before the sun.

Earlier this evening, she had put Jacob to bed after having fed him under the watchful gaze of his father. Vincent had long ago confessed that nothing filled him with such warmth as watching her with their son at her breast. Tonight there had been a different glint in his eye, and a warmth of a different nature.

Now as Catherine watched the stars twinkling like snowflakes in the moon-dark sky, her mind and heart were filled with images of him. She waited, knowing he would come for her.

Vincent arrived silently, coming up behind her with all the grace and leashed power of a panther in the dark. He stood for a moment, content to just watch her, letting the gentle thrum of her emotions fill their bond. There was contentment and happiness, quiet joy and deep peace, but there was also a muted expectancy - a waiting. She was well again, her body healed from the birth of their son. Tonight, he would take her in his arms and carry her to their bed. Tonight, he would make love to her, slowly....

Sweet anticipation filled him, causing him to breathe deeply of the same night air she was savoring. Love for her filled him so completely, that he closed his eyes for a moment, lifting his face in silent gratitude to the heavens. *'She had brought a richness to his life that he never knew existed; had made dreams come true and possibilities reality. In her eyes, he knew what it was to be beautiful. She was his wife, his lover, the mother of his son. And she was safe - oh, thank God, she was safe.'*

Stepping to her side, he wrapped one arm around her shoulders, enclosing her within the warmth of his cloak. "You look as though you are embracing the night," he observed quietly, his voice no more than a deep whisper brushed against her ear.

Her arm went inside his cloak, and around his waist as she moved closer to his side, absorbing the solid strength of him.

"I am," she answered, looking up at the golden features she held so dear.

He dropped his head until his lips were a scant inch from hers. "And are you searching for the stars?" he murmured, lightly kissing the corner of her mouth before moving slightly away, as if in question.

Catherine turned to face him fully, her other arm going around his waist also, milk-laden breasts pushed softly against his chest.

"No," she whispered, her voice calm and certain. "I've already found them in your eyes."

Her breath was warm against his neck and he could feel the desire rising in them both, meeting like lyrics and melody to form a perfect song. He kissed her once again, his lips soft and lingering, patiently waiting for her to signal him.

The velvet of his mouth against hers made her pulse leap, and she savored it for only a moment before desire demanded more. Parting her lips, she touched him intimately while moving closer against him, her invitation clear.

When the kiss ended, their eyes met in understanding, the promise between them kindling brilliant sparks of blue and green that put the stars to shame.

"It's time for bed," he suggested, his voice deep and husky as he took her hand to lead her back through the tunnel. She followed him willingly, without a backward glance at the magnificence of the night they were leaving behind. Soon, they would embrace the night again.... together.

END

