

LEAD ME THROUGH THE DARK

DEAD OF WINTER EPILOGUE

by Debbie Ristick

Standing together in companionable silence, Vincent and Catherine were finally alone. The Great Hall was deserted; all who'd attended the Winterfest celebration had gone, melting back into the corridors and tunnels from which they'd all come several hours before.

Catherine gazed around the hall dreamily, able to set aside the moments of horror and apprehension of the past many hours. Instead, she recalled the wonderful feelings she'd experienced this day - this day of acceptance and love. She smiled, turning to the large man at her side.

The wind moaned from behind the enormous doors at the front of the ample room and her mind flitted with wonder at the sensations just being here caused in her.

Taking a deep breath, she spoke, "Can you hear it, Vincent?"

Mystified by both the look on her face and the messages he was receiving from the bond, he gazed into her eyes.

"What?" he asked with uncertainty. "The quiet? And the wind outside crying to get in?"

Her heart skipped a beat as she looked at him; she knew she could make him understand. With a determined expression, she said, "Listen," begging him with her eyes to realize what she meant. "You can hear it if you try ... the music."

He tilted his head in comprehension as a smile crossed his lips. "Yes," he started, acceptance filling him with happiness. "I hear it."

The day had been both difficult and wonderful. The joys shared by the tunnel community blending with the terror caused by Paracelsus. Thinking back on all of it, he remembered something else ... a question Catherine had asked and he'd never had the opportunity to answer.

"Catherine." He spoke her name softly and his voice never faltered though his hand shook with nervousness. "That question that you asked me earlier..."

"I remember..." she replied huskily, unable to control the anticipation she felt rising in her like a tide.

There was no further need for words; taking her hand gently in his, Vincent guided her across the empty floor fluidly in the age-old steps of the waltz. They didn't need any music, for their souls recalled every note played earlier. Now they needed only each other, needed to recognize the turths that had surrounded them for so long, and to admit them to themselves.

When the dancing stopped, Catherine opened her eyes and watched his face. The breath caught in her throat as she took in his expression; he met her eyes boldly, his filled with hope, revelation and eagerness.

"Vincent..." Her voice shook with passion at her discovery. How much of what she was feeling toward him could he feel in her? How much could he see by simply looking into her eyes?

"Catherine..." His beautiful voice was the rough softness of sand upon silk as it caressed her name. The bond had exploded with sensation; he found it hard to concentrate as he was filled with her

powerful emotions. The love he knew she possessed for him was overwhelming and commanding his attention; he was dizzy in the aftermath of his own, often times denied, desires.

And yet Catherine was lost for words. She felt almost bashful before him, but tried to smile. "Dancing with you," she began, never taking her eyes from his, "surpassed all my expectations."

His heart fluttered with pleasure as he listened to her, and her impeccable beauty hypnotized him into silence. Her words echoed all he was feeling, for just holding her in his arms had caused his pulse to quicken. The dreams he'd always kept under tight control had surfaced with a startling and fierce clarity, leaving him intoxicated with their enthusiasm. How could he help but love her?

After a moment of awkward silence, Vincent found his voice, though the words he spoke were uttered reluctantly. "Shall I walk you home?"

The question hung heavily between them, for neither of them was ready to allow this evening to end. Though the hour was late, the magic wasn't over; the spell surrounding them had not yet run its course.

"Of course," she answered with a smile. "But, Vincent, can we walk slowly?"

With an almost imperceptible nod, Vincent smiled back. "Yes," he replied as he started for the doorway. "We will walk slowly, but we must finish here before we can go anywhere...."

Trying to still the mad racing of her heart, Catherine nodded and set about the room to extinguish the candles, as they'd promised Father they would. The significance of this day was forever assured her, for she'd officially been accepted as a member of the hidden society living below Manhattan's streets. She knew, in Vincent's mind at least, that this acceptance was long overdue, for they had trusted her with their laws and lives, their existence and their secrets for a long time. And in them she'd found a family, she'd found a reason for belonging.

But most of all, she thought smugly, she'd found that mysterious, once-in-a-lifetime love the poets had always written about. She understood the words they wrote, now, and agreed with them, especially when face to face with the truth unmistakably etched in Vincent's eyes as he looked at her.

After half an hour of work, Catherine watched as Vincent lifted the huge bar that served to barricade the Great Hall, the wind whipping through her hair. An enormous sense of pride filled her and she didn't know why.

When he finished, he held out a gloved hand to her. "Shall we go now?"

"Yes, Vincent," she answered. "Lead me through the dark...."

He offered her a shy smile as he remembered that only hours before he'd asked her if he could lead her through the dark. Her reply would forever be etched upon his heart. *'There is no darkness, Vincent, when you're with me.'*

The tunnels were quiet as the couple slowly made their way toward the sub-basement of Catherine's building. Once over the steam pipes and up the spiral staircase, the familiar junction was before them. Her pace, always attuned to his, had begun to slow, causing his to slow as she tried to prolong their time together.

Finally, goodbyes could be put off no longer.

Fathomless green eyes met azure blue, and Catherine shook as a stubborn tear forced its way from her eyes.

"Tonight was wonderful." Vincent tried voicing his thoughts and found his entire body trembling with a need he didn't understand.

"Yes," Catherine agreed gently. "I've never felt so much a part of your world. It's a night I swear I'll never forget...."

"And I will never forget how it felt to hold you in my arms, Catherine," Vincent answered, not really intending to voice these thoughts to her but unable to stop himself. "I've always considered you to be a part of my world since the very beginning. You've given my life hope and meaning. You've given me the miracle of sunlight ... of love ... things I never thought I'd have. I know now that I will never be alone ... I no longer have to be..."

The hint of a blush stained Catherine's cheeks, and she lifted quivering hands to his broad shoulders. "My heart is always with you," she admitted, "no matter where I am or what I'm doing. Please, hold me?"

His arms went around her eagerly and Vincent sighed as Catherine's body molded closely to his. The feelings this simple act stirred in him were wondrous, more than frightening to him. Pulling back slightly, he saw her eyes glistening with large, unshed tears.

"You must know, Vincent," she began breathlessly. "You must be able to feel that, for me, there will be only you..."

He almost staggered as he allowed the last wall to fall around his heart, exposing him to the truth of everything she felt. Her yearning was so wonderful and beautiful, so pure and immense. Her desires were strong, and her willingness absolute. She wanted him near her, needed him to touch her.

"Yes," he scarcely breathed. "I know..."

"I love you," she whispered, closing her eyes in anticipation.

Taking a deep breath, Vincent lowered his face to Catherine's. His mouth touched hers softly, almost experimentally, unsure of himself. Discovering the sensations between them only grew in vigor at this touch, he allowed the kiss to deepen, to linger as long as it would.

Catherine relaxed happily, wrapping her arms around him tightly. The miracle of love was alive in her. Nothing in her life had given her as much pleasure as she felt now. This was truth. This was real. This was what she'd always needed and had never found before.

Nearly breathless from the passion of the kiss, they parted, and Vincent took a step back from her as Catherine met his gaze.

"I must go," he whispered softly, suddenly unable to say more. Turning quickly, he disappeared into the darkness of the tunnels.

Standing in the entrance to her sub-basement, Catherine sighed. She knew that Vincent must be shocked by what had happened; he probably had difficulty accepting it, although in his heart he had to have sensed her happiness.

"It will only be better," Catherine whispered to herself in the empty cavern. "I love you, Vincent. The pain you feel is undeserved ..."

After brushing the hair from her face, she sighed, then turned toward the lights separating their worlds. She took one last look, then disappeared into their protectiveness.

Watching her from the shadows of the brick walls, Vincent slid to the tunnel floor, heaving a sigh of amazement. She was right, for he was filled with an agonizing pain he'd never felt before. He didn't want to leave her, didn't want her to return Above. And yet, what had just occurred left him gasping for breath.

She'd said she loved him! Oh, he'd already known it, but to hear the words! And, if that was not enough, she'd responded eagerly to his kiss, not even noticing how violently he trembled.

Overwhelmed by the freedom and promise he allowed himself to feel, he turned, staring through the opening in the wall at the mysterious lights spilling down from the world Above. Opening his heart to Catherine, he gasped, feeling the strength of her love as it poured over him. The excitement she felt was staggering, as was her hope that he'd appear on her balcony that night.

Lying with his head against the wall behind him, Vincent smiled, knowing in his heart that he could no longer deny her anything.... he could no longer deny himself.

Wild horses couldn't keep him away.

END