

Shadows of the Heart

by Gloria Handley

PART ONE

For over an hour, it had been snowing those big, plump flakes that fall softly, individually, from the sky to settle delicately upon eyelids and lips of those hardy individuals who ventured out into the night. It was one of those rare picture postcard snowfalls that briefly covers the dingy city in glistening respectability.

Carrying a cup of hot tea, Diana limped from the kitchen area and stopped mid-way across the loft room to gaze upward through her skylight window. As she watched the slowly falling snow, the wind currents around her rooftop suddenly collided and gathered into a small whirlwind that created a miniature, white, blizzard just beyond the window panes.

A dark shape suddenly materialized out of the white storm to stop and peer down at her. The apparition appeared massive, a threatening and powerful entity. The wind caught at and pulled its hooded garment aside, revealing an animal's fanged muzzle and fearsome leonine features that were partially obscured by a long, rough, straw-colored mane blown even wilder by the wind. One huge, fur-covered hand raised, revealing sharp-clawed fingers that tapped purposefully against the fragile glass pane.

The primordial form moved a fraction closer to the window and was reflected more clearly in the golden light from the single lamp on her desk. The wind snatched at the hooded cloak and the fabric beat against her window like a bird's black wings.

Diana stared up into the face of that disquieting being and into a pair of the gentlest, most intensely blue eyes imaginable.

"Vincent!" Her heart leaped joyously and she smiled up at him.

Balancing on one bare foot, she held the other out to indicate its bandaged condition and motioned for him to join her. She would be unable to go to him on the roof this time. He would need to come to her. He hesitated but a moment, then disappeared into the blackness.

Diana hobbled down the short hallway to meet him and reached the stairwell just as he emerged from the shadows. She had not heard the roof door open nor felt the expected icy invasion of the winter storm. He stood before her, a most welcome sight.

His visits were too infrequent and he had never, since that first time when she had brought him unconscious into her loft, voluntarily entered her living space. She was pleased that he had elected to do so this evening. She peered up into his uniquely-sculpted features, momentarily speechless, as she always seemed to be during those first few moments when they would initially meet; always fearing that he might disappear back into the protective night shadows where he found a degree of comfort and friendliness.

Drops of melted snow glistened against the black fabric of his cloak and clung to his wind-whipped, golden mane. He smelled of the cold night air, leather and damp woolen fabric, and his own scent, which never failed to excite her senses. The hallway suddenly seemed filled with him; the narrow space barely able to contain his broad-shouldered form.

She found being this close to him particularly disturbing. She moved to step back, intending to precede him into the living room, but in the excitement of having him so close once again, she

had forgotten her injured foot. It refused to bear her slight weight, sending instead a sharp, excruciating pain up her leg. She cried out and grabbed for the nearest thing for support which, in this case, happened to be Vincent. Instantly, Vincent reached for her, his arms went around her and under her legs. Effortlessly lifting her, he strode quickly into the rooms beyond the small hallway and settled her comfortably on the white sofa. Noting the blood-tinged bandage, he held her foot tenderly, cradling it within the palm of his huge, fur-covered hand.

"What happened?" he whispered.

The pain in her foot had subsided to a dull ache, but the intensely electric feel of his touch made her breathless. She spoke in short, disjointed, phrases summarizing quickly the reason for her bandaged foot.

"I dropped a glass a couple of nights ago - didn't find all the pieces - stepped on a couple of them the next morning." Her story continued through gritted teeth. "Removed one - must be another still hiding in there."

Vincent had removed his cloak, tossing it on a nearby chair, all the while listening attentively to her story. Before she realized what was happening, he had knelt beside the couch, deftly unwrapped the bandage and was examining the wound, running the pads of his clawed fingers lightly over the bottom of her damaged foot.

"I believe there is an errant piece of glass still there," he advised quietly. "You should have it removed."

She knew he was right. She had been thinking the same thing all day, but she could find a whole array of reasons, other than the logical one, for not having it done. She was deep in the midst of a disturbingly stubborn case, and she always tried to avoid any distraction that would interrupt her concentration toward the final resolution of said case. She had no new information that she needed to chase down and, with the advent of her injured foot, it had seemed an opportune time to sift through the pile of clues for any new information that might have been missed. An injured foot was a good excuse to avoid traveling all over town. Then the storm had come up and she had no desire to attempt maneuvering the distance between her comfortable rooms and the street. And, hunting for a cab to take her to an emergency room where she would wait for hours would test her already frayed nerves. And, the mere thought of someone poking and prodding for a piece of glass in her exquisitely tender foot gave her a cold chill.

"It will work its way out," she stated unconvincingly, knowing it wouldn't.

Vincent noted the tight white line around her lips and the pain she tried to hide in her eyes. "It won't, you know."

She hated his softly spoken logic. "I know. I'll do it tomorrow."

"You won't, you know." He looked her straight in the eyes. She quickly looked away. He knew her too well. Perversely, Diana also noticed that Vincent's usual elegant language seemed to have slipped dramatically.

He placed her foot carefully back on the sofa and rose to stand towering over her. Without further words, he disappeared into the darkness at the rear of her apartment. She heard him moving about before he returned moments later, hands filled with the necessary first aid supplies which he placed on one end of the kitchen counter. Then he was beside her again. She gave a small gasp of surprise, her arms going reflexively around his neck as he lifted her easily from the soft cushions, carrying her to the kitchen and settling her with obvious determined purpose on the kitchen counter next to the sink.

"What are you doing?" She asked somewhat fearfully. She trusted him, but she didn't wish to participate in that which he seemed determined to carry out.

"I should ask your permission," he spoke quietly to her, "but I know you would probably refuse. So... if you trust me, may we begin?" His blue eyes locked with hers, daring her to refuse his help. "There is glass in there, I can feel it, as you obviously can," he pointed out. His already upswept eyebrows arching ever so slightly higher to emphasize his point. "It needs to come out. I will be as gentle as possible."

"I never thought being a bully was part of your makeup, Vincent."

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Only when the occasion warrants." He turned the full intensity of his blue eyes upon her. "Well?"

She stared at him unbelieving. His 'well'? really giving her no choice. Her intuition told her that regardless of her answer, he would find some way to repair her damaged foot. She swallowed hard and could only nod her head in answer. It wasn't only the pain involved with removing the glass that she was afraid of, but the closeness of him, his touch that caused her skin to tingle and her senses to leap crazily.

Diana was certain Vincent's heart was most assuredly still tied to Catherine. But Diana had lost hers to him through the long nights after she had brought him to her loft, put him in her bed, and nursed him, coaxing his reluctant spirit back to life. She had survived that initial horrifying night when, fighting the terrors of his delirium and nightmares, he had nearly destroyed her bedroom. She had been terrified of him during those first few hours.

Then, he had awakened and spoken to her in a voice velvet-soft, weak and tinged with pain. He had spoken Catherine's name, and Diana had wished it was her own name he had been calling out.

"Catherine?" The ragged wisp of hope had been borne on that one word.

"No," she had answered quietly, "my name is Diana."

All his dreams and possibilities died with her simple answer and he gave himself over once more to the blessed painlessness of oblivion.

In her wildest dreams, her imagination could never have created the uniquely different, incredibly beautiful being he was. She was occasionally embarrassed to remember how she had been unable to keep her hands off him; how she needed to touch him, to look at him, to reassure herself that he was real; how she tried to reconcile what was before her eyes with the scattered facts of her investigations into Catherine Chandler's death.

After he had healed and then disappeared so unexpectedly from her loft, she could not forget him. He haunted her dreams and her waking hours until she had gone to search for him in those dark and unfamiliar tunnels that marked his world. He had saved her life then. She had witnessed the explosive, primitive fury that compelled him to protect those he cared for.

Afterward, he had not defended his actions for killing the men who, without a shred of remorse, would have callously snuffed out her own life. He had merely laid himself open before her, revealing to her still another nature of his being. She had been witness to that other dark, inhuman side, and she had accepted him fully. She tried to become a part of his life then, to help him find the demon who had been responsible for Catherine's death and who held his son captive.

But afraid for her safety, and still unable to accept help from anyone, Vincent did not want her near himself and so he urged her to forget him. When she spoke from her heart that she could not, he told her "then remember me as in a dream".

How prophetic his statement was, for those unbidden dreams had visited her with increasing frequency and rising sensuality. The most recent, occurring just last night, had found her in that languorous state before full awakening; imagining the feel of him curled against her back, the hardness of his strong body and the warmth of his touch still clinging to her senses. The

sensation had been so vividly real, she expected to turn over and see him in bed with her. It had taken her hours to shake that intensely disturbing illusion. It didn't help now with him so close for that dream to come flooding back into her consciousness, arousing her body.

She made a face and tried to get her mind onto something other than those persistent dreams, and what he was doing to her foot, and her emotions.

"Did Father teach you how to do that?" she asked with more of a sharp edge to her voice than she intended.

"Father taught me many things," he answered cryptically. "Medical care was but one."

"What else did he teach you?" She was trying, desperately, to focus her attention elsewhere. She jumped as his finger lightly traced the bottom of her foot. "How to deal with recalcitrant redheads?"

Vincent glanced sideways at her, humor lighting his blue eyes and a slight grin curving his mouth pleasantly at the corners.

"Recalcitrant? I wouldn't classify you as recalcitrant - more along the line of - tenaciously stubborn."

"Stubborn? Me?"

The hand over her heart, coupled with her feigned, wide-eyed innocence, caused him to smile a bit more. She wished he would smile like that more often, it was beautiful. Her second wish was that he would finish with her foot. He had found a particularly tender spot and she didn't want to make a fool of herself by crying out. She also felt ridiculous perched on the counter like some oversized child. She hadn't been placed on a kitchen counter to have her hurts tended since she was a very small youngster. Besides, her nerve endings were vibrating like crazy with her foot secured in the warmth of his massive hand. It was amazing how such an impersonal contact could suddenly take on erotic overtones.

Squeezing her eyes shut for a moment, she calmed her inner self down, then opened her eyes and concentrated on the procedure at hand. Vincent held her foot gently immobile while he examined, then cleansed, the surface.

She watched him now as he deftly ministered to her needs. His movements were tender and unhurried, ever mindful of the sensitive condition of her lacerated foot. He touched one spot a little longer than she felt he needed to and she gave a small whimper.

"Here," he turned toward her holding his hand out. Automatically, she reached toward him. There was a tiny drop of her blood on the sharp tip of one of his claws. He placed an almost invisible sliver of glass within her palm. "That should take care of one of your problems."

"If all problems could be handled so easily," she remarked, amazed that such a small thing could cause so much misery. "Thank you."

He merely nodded. He finished wrapping a clean bandage around her foot and, before she could protest, he gathered her in his powerful arms, strode back to the couch once again, and lowered her with care onto the white cushions. For a brief instant, his face was close to hers and she fought the desire to reach out and touch him, to press her lips to his whiskered jaw line. Then he straightened and returned to the kitchen. During the few moments it took him to replace the first aid supplies, she desperately struggled to quiet her rampaging emotions.

When Vincent returned to the semi-darkened room, he did not sit down but paced restively around her small office area, studying the photographs tacked to her working bulletin board. Was he remembering those other photographs? The ones of Catherine and her friends, and the question-marked features of once-mysterious strangers, who Diana came to know and now protected as fiercely as Vincent did? For those strangers had become very important part of her

life and she would not betray them or their sanctuary any more than she would reveal Vincent's presence to her callous world.

Diana studied Vincent for several moments. Now that her needs had been tended to and he had nothing to focus his attention upon, he seemed restive and distracted.

These past months, the periods between his visits to her had seemed to stretch out interminably. He had come to her unexpectedly that first time to thank her for all she had done for him - for rescuing him and his son. He came to tell her the truth about himself and where he lived, to share that place with her and to invite her to his son's naming ceremony.

The world he had introduced to her took her breath away. It was filled with sights and marvels she could never have imagined possible. So strangely different from her own world, it was as beautiful and unique as the imposing man who proudly escorted her through its many wonders.

For whatever reason he came, she was ecstatic when he did make one of his infrequent visits to her rooftop. Perhaps, she convinced herself, he had defined her rooftop, so unlike Catherine's terrace, as one of his small sanctuaries. Diana imagined that there must be few places he could safely go where he could experience even a minute amount of liberation from what must surely become the sometimes confining boundaries of his own world. He once explained to her that when walking the empty shadow streets of the city, he would often seek clarification regarding some niggling problem and the only answer lay in the world Above; when only Above could provide him the answer.

At first, his refusal to enter her loft bothered her. Eventually, she came to understand his unvoiced reason for always meeting her on the roof, never coming inside. The answer came to her late one night when she saw the expression on his face and the slow, relaxing of his body as he looked skyward. He could view the sky here, feel the night air upon his face, and taste some degree of freedom from the rocky walls within his world, experience the rarity of unconfined space. Following that insight, knowing how he treasured those moments above, she never pressed him to enter her loft, even when she became chilled.

Tonight, as Diana watched Vincent slowly pace around the small confines of her loft, she intuitively felt that he had come to some point in his existence where he had bumped up against a wall, found himself tangled in a great strangling knot. He had come to her perhaps to untie that knot, but he apparently could not face it as yet. And that dilemma was drawing the knot tighter.

"What brings you out on a night like this?"

The question was companionable in itself, but underneath lay a deeper probing. There was undeniable trust between them; however, Diana still was uncertain as to how far she could invade his privacy; how far within those boundaries she could travel before he would close himself off to her and simply leave. And, now, knowing him as well as she did, his leaving always created an unbearable emptiness in her life.

"I'm not sure," came the quiet reply. His gaze traveled around the open-spaced rooms searching for an answer. He found none. "I should go."

He turned and, scooping up his cloak, he swung its weight around his broad shoulders. He would have gone, but Diana sprang from the couch to race ahead of him, gritting her teeth with each painful step, halting him just at the bottom step of the stairway.

"No!" She planted herself on the bottom step, blocking his exit. Her eyes level with his. "No. Something is wrong." Tonight, to help him, she would take that necessary step too far into his private world.

He was quiet, the war still raged within him, the knot drawing tighter around him, choking him. It was so palpable, Diana could feel it.

"What is it, Vincent? Let me help."

Vincent advanced toward her, obviously intending to go around her and up the stairs. With his superior strength and power, it would be easy to set her aside and escape. Diana moved backward and up one more step, crying out as her weight applied unwanted pressure on her wounded foot. Her action halted Vincent's forward momentum. She bit her lip against the pain in her foot - but she would not budge.

His blue eyes studied her face, saw the determination there and the genuine concern she felt for him. He took a deep breath, slowed his restless movements, then stood still, head slightly bowed. He noted her bloody footprint. "You are bleeding!"

"So are you." Diana spoke the words clearly, pointedly. She had probed with her keen inner sight and found the glass sliver that was imbedded in his heart - the heart that was making his life painful and himself unreachable. She had plumbed his very soul and beheld the gaping wound. She wondered why it was that he always gave love and help so freely to others, but found it so very difficult to accept for himself.

Vincent studied the open face of the woman before him. He had every reason to trust Diana. She had more than proven to be a courageous and valued friend. He had started out his evening walk thinking the tone of his sanctuaries might give him an answer. None had. Then he found himself on Diana's rooftop. There had been no intent to disturb her privacy. He still sought his own counsel. He had no conscious sense of the passage of time nor how long he had stood silently staring out into the night from her rooftop. The snow fell softly around him until his hooded cloak was dusted white with it. The night had been calm, but as he turned to leave, the wind around the rooftop gusted, swirling the quietly floating snowflakes into a blizzard-like whirlwind.

Catherine's presence seemed unusually strong and when he turned to leave, he found himself instead moving toward the warmth of light streaming from Diana's casement. He told himself that he only intended to look in on Diana from the window, but when he peered down into her loft rooms, he found her standing, staring up into the night. Suddenly, the room below filled him with a peace and tranquility that he had not felt in a long time. Not since Catherine.

Vincent, himself, was uncertain why he had come to this place - to this woman - to Diana; some need he did not fully understand had subconsciously directed his footsteps to her. Perhaps, he argued silently within himself, her keenly intuitive mind could help him search out and uncover the cause of the restlessness, help him find the answers which seemed just beyond his grasp, find the source of what it was that had driven him these past weeks.

Now, Diana stood implacable and unyielding before him, as determined to help him as he had been in treating her injured foot earlier, and just as determined that he was not to leave. As Vincent studied the classic features of the woman confronting him, he made no move to get past her.

For long moments, there was a still silence from the man standing before her. Diana returned his steady scrutiny without flinching. The sheer mass of Vincent's form, combined with being under that intensely penetrating blue-eyed gaze, could have been intimidating to anyone of lesser courage. Though Diana found standing eye-to-eye with Vincent more than a bit disconcerting, she remained solidly immobile.

"Tell me about Catherine, Vincent."

He flinched for an instant, and the pain flashed through his eyes and across his face so swiftly, had it been anyone but Diana, it would have passed unnoticed.

He was gone in a swirl of black cloak and whispering leather - not around her and up the stairs, but back into the living room. Diana breathed a sigh of relief. At least he had not fled to the rooftop and out into the night. Following him at a much slower pace, she heel-walked back down the hallway. Entering the central loft room, she found him pacing back and forth near the kitchen area. His cloak made great wide sweeping movements each time he turned to repeat a gradually

slowing circle. She watched in patient silence until he finally came to a halt with his head bowed, shoulders bent and his huge hands clasped into tight fists at his side. His anguish was so palpable, she could feel it across the dimly lit room. His massive image blurred in her vision and she blinked the tears away.

Finally, he turned to face her, not missing the moisture on her cheeks and knowing it had not come from the pain of her injured foot.

"Thank you," he spoke softly, sincerely. "They are all so kind, so careful, Below. No one speaks her name... until I do."

"They, too, are hurting at her loss."

Catherine, Diana knew, had become an integral part of the tunnel world, returning their love and kindness and trust with her own. Kind, courageous people are a rarity and, when found, are a true treasure. There is sorrow and grief in losing them.

"They do not wish to bring you pain, Vincent."

"They bring it by their silence."

His deep voice broke with barely checked tears. He closed his eyes tightly and drew in a ragged breath. Diana watched as his fingers dug into the soft back of her couch. He seemed to be clutching at something, trying to grasp a solid substance to anchor himself in place. Finally, his hands quieted and he looked up and studied her for a long moment. He was obviously troubled and seeking an answer to some puzzle. Solving it seemed an easier direction to go instead of the more painful memory of Catherine.

"I found myself on your roof tonight, Diana. Why? I have no remembrance of directing myself here."

"Catherine?"

"Catherine?" Perplexed, he tilted his gold-maned head sideways, studying her more closely. "I don't understand."

"Moments ago, you removed a very painful piece of glass from the foot of a very reluctant friend." She paused watching Vincent's face closely. "Catherine is a shard of glass piercing your heart, Vincent. To have it there is painful. To pull it out and look at it is equally painful. But, it is a bittersweet memory that must be looked at, touched again, and savored. Not for the sadness of her death, but for all the joy in the memories, remembering what you were to one another, what you had together. Most people only dream of that kind of love. You and Catherine lived it."

She was silent for a moment, her brow furrowed in thought.

"What do you know about plants, Vincent?" Her seemingly off-the-wall question brought a puzzled frown to his face.

Perplexed for an instant, Vincent wondered what did this have to do with Catherine? Diana seemed to have digressed within her own train of thought. His heart sank, thinking she was following the course of those Below who changed the subject when there was a possibility Catherine might be mentioned. Before he could form an answer to her question, she continued.

"I have a room off here," she pointed to a door just at the end of the hallway, immediately off the living area. "It's small so I use it for storage and as a plant room - to start new plants, heal sick ones, give us a break from one another. There is even a dark closet at one end, perfect for resting bulbs or dormant plants. There is a window in the room that lets in just enough sunlight to keep the plants happy. I put Catherine's rosebush in that room the day after I found you... I didn't know what painful memories it might awaken had you seen it."

At Vincent's surprised expression, she quickly explained how she found the rosebush on Catherine's terrace and had sensed the life still in it, even after all the months it had been

neglected. How she brought it to her loft, tended it, nursed it back to life; how it bloomed shortly before she found him, and then its eventual return to dormancy.

What she didn't tell him, and perhaps hadn't realized clearly herself until that very moment, was that she had sensed a thin, tenuous strand coming from the rosebush, connecting herself, Catherine and the elusive Vincent, and all these events had occurred to assure the survival of the rosebush, keeping it alive against all odds.

There progressed one of those interwoven chains of coincidences that mark people's lives, those strange happenings that the average person shuttles off to the sidelines because they are too unexplainable. But, Diana was used to such occurrences and she was certain Vincent lived comfortably with them as well.

"I know the clinical, sterile, investigative facts about Catherine's life and death. I have pieced her life together like a jigsaw puzzle." Diana spoke slowly, quietly, trying to explain. "But, until I found you, I couldn't truly understand the woman she was."

It was time to stop trying to explain something that couldn't be explained. She motioned for him to follow her. Limping toward the hallway, she opened the door to the storage room, stepped over the threshold, snapped on the bare bulb overhead light, then turned and looked back at Vincent.

"You asked why you came to my rooftop tonight. I didn't know the answer. Now, I think I do... and this, this needs telling."

She stepped back to allow Vincent to enter. His massive frame brushed past her as he entered the room, the heat of his body warming her in the cool room. She looked up into blue eyes that were dull with pain and unasked questions. For answer, one slender hand pointed to the center of the room. Vincent's eyes followed her movements and, turning, he looked unbelieving at the reason she had brought him into the room. There in the center of the room, and overflowing its confines, sat a familiar white garden pot that he had last seen so long ago on the terrace of his beloved.

Catherine's rosebush was in full bloom!

Diana's heart went out to Vincent as he knelt, unbelieving, before the tub of profusely blooming white and red roses. One great hand shook slightly as he reached to tenderly caress the delicate, velvet-petaled blossoms. She heard a painful, strangled sound gather in his throat as tears spread silently across his cheeks.

Diana backed out of the room, quietly closing the door behind her.

PART TWO

Time ticked quietly, unimportantly by. Outside the clerestory windows, the storm had calmed and the snow floated down in lazy white flakes, cushioning the sounds of the city. The quiet within her loft was absolute.

Leaning against the island stove, Diana glanced idly around the room. Her eyes moved slowly over comfortable objects, their familiar shapes changed by the play of light and shadow. It was a moment before she realized she had been staring at Vincent's black-cloaked form. Almost indistinguishable from the deeper blackness of the hallway, he stood tall and silent, and so very still. It was the stillness surrounding him that pained her. He had pulled his own shadows more tightly about himself, shrouding his golden head within the folds of his hood.

She heard the soft whisper of his cloak as he moved out of the darkness and into the soft light of the living room. Leaning with his back and head against the wall, he closed his eyes. Exhaling a deep breath, he struggled to gather himself before he glanced in her direction. His eyes had turned a deep, smoky blue, revealing the grief and pain he still visibly carried.

"Catherine never saw them bloom, Diana." The sadness within his voice reached across the room to wash over her.

God, Bennett, what have you done to this poor man? She chided herself for possibly making a wrong decision, for unintentionally bringing him more sorrow than he needed to bear. Yet, her intuition assured her that showing Vincent the roses was something that needed to be done. They were a lifeline for him to grasp, to help bring to the surface, and gently purge, a still unlooked at anguish buried within his grief.

"There was so much beauty and kindness that she gave to all of us, Diana, so many lives she touched and nourished with her light and her love. There is a sadness in knowing she was never given the opportunity to see the final results of her work. Yet, there is a certain kind of joy in recognizing all that she did accomplish because she was willing to sacrifice so great a part of her life for others."

Uncertain what to say to him, Diana ached to ease his pain but knew he had to find what solace he could in his own time, in his own way. The thread of events that had woven themselves into the fabric of this evening was something she needed to understand. The flowering bush in the next room seemed to be a part of it all. Hesitantly, she began telling Vincent about the roses.

"I am truly sorry, Vincent, if I have brought you deeper sorrow this evening, but I thought you should see what was in that room." She hesitated before continuing, finally choosing from many different possibilities in an attempt to explain, to him as well as herself, all that had been happening.

"Had you not shown up on my rooftop tonight, I would have imagined that it was, indeed, a very unusual bush and just happened to be crazy enough to bloom in the midst of winter. Then you appeared." She paused in her story-telling, frowning at how irrational what she was saying must sound.

"A few days ago, that bush was dormant. This morning..."

The words seemed so inadequate, and inane. What she was trying to impart, what she sensed was the unexplainable reason for the blooms appearing on that bush at this time, why Vincent showed up on her rooftop tonight of all nights...she rushed forward.

"I think Catherine has seen them, Vincent. I think... I think she is the reason they are blooming when they shouldn't be. I think she is the reason you found yourself on my rooftop tonight."

Vincent remained silent. His probing gaze caught, then held and assessed her own, never wavering from her face. He gave no outward indication that he heard or comprehended what she was trying to explain to him. She had to admit, it was stretching reality. But there seemed no other explanation than that. Somehow, Catherine's undeniable presence, the roses blooming at this time of year, and Vincent being drawn to her rooftop on this particular night were all intricately connected. There were certain events that had occurred within Diana's life that she never attempted to analyze, or never questioned to find the deeper answer. She just accepted these things for what they turned out to be... coincidences with a deeper underlying, unexplainable purpose.

She felt as if she and Vincent had stepped into an area of their lives where both were encountering, head on, a new beginning - and she hadn't the foggiest idea where they were being led. She did know that the man across the room was the heart and soul of it all; a very large, essential integral part of the final outcome. How it would end depended, in great part, on his responses to it all.

"I can't ease the sorrow and aloneness you are suffering, Vincent. Only you can start that healing." Ignoring the painful smarting of her foot, she walked slowly over to stand before Vincent's tall hooded form. "Perhaps, I am overstepping the bounds of our friendship. If I am, say so, and I won't go this path again."

She moved fearlessly forward into territory that, perhaps, should remain untrod. But Diana had never backed away from what needed to be done, especially when it concerned someone for whom she carried deep affection.

"Talk to me, Vincent. Tell me about Catherine."

He stood before her, head bowed, silent and immobile. She felt as if he had pulled a protective bell-jar over himself - closing himself in and shutting the rest of the world outside. Frustration edged her voice, impatience, along with the deeper concern of one friend wanting to help another when that help was being pushed away, goaded her forward.

"If you won't - or can't - talk to me," her voice rasped from her throat, becoming hard-edged and impatient in her frustration, "go into that room and talk to the bush. But talk, Vincent, talk!"

He raised his head a fraction to peer at her from under his brows. Though his face remained blank of expression, his eyes had turned a lighter hue within their blue depths, and she thought she caught the tiniest glint of amusement. His deep voice echoed her words of earlier that evening back to her.

"I never knew being a bully was part of your makeup, Diana."

She swallowed hard, fighting back unexpected tears, amazed that he had the ability to see beyond the deepest misery of his own life to find a spark of lightness within it. Emotions she had held tightly in check, were now expelled in a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. Shrugging her slender shoulders, she gazed unblinking and straight-faced up at him.

"Something I learned from a very good friend."

He moved restively before her, his features momentarily hidden within the shadows of his hood. He had withdrawn once again, although, Diana sensed, not as deeply into himself as he had been a moment before.

"You are a good and kind, and truly valued friend, Diana, and I appreciate and understand what you are trying to do. It isn't that I can't - or won't - talk to you...."

His words came with obvious wrenching difficulty. The clouded blue eyes he raised to her this time were shot through with such raw suffering that it jolted her when they met her own. He raised his large hands in frustration and anguish, and one fist, clenched tightly, pushed at the center of his chest trying to ease the agony that clutched his heart.

"The pain - it crushes me, Diana. It is as raw as that last moment I held her in my arms - the instant I felt her leave." The words rasped, a barely audible sound choked from his throat. His massive chest heaved in a desperate struggle for breath.

Diana was silent, judging the state of the desolate man standing before her. She reached out and carefully eased back his hood, bringing him gently out from that bit of self-imposed, protective darkness. Her fingertips brushed the rough texture of his mane in passing. She longed to linger and smooth his brown, to brush the tears from his whiskered cheeks, but this was not the time for even that tenderly caring contact. Instead, she let her hand lightly brush across his shoulder and chest in passing, coming to rest over his heart. The healing had to begin somewhere. Perhaps a place slightly less painful, but still close to where it needed to take place.

Speaking quietly, she urged him, "then... tell me about the roses, Vincent."

He looked beyond her, staring off into space, seeing a terrace on a warm night and Catherine struggling with great determination to transplant the bush, that very special rose bush. His words came softly, slowly at first. As if he were speaking from a great distance off, pulling in memories and scenes of another time, another life.

He spoke about the first time he saw the bush, of Catherine pricking her finger on a thorn and how he had unthinking, instinctively, taken her hand, put it to his mouth, intending only to ease her pain. But, his tender ministrations - his tongue sliding along her finger and meant only to

gently suck away the blood, had become instead a kissing motion. His innocent act had suddenly taken on a more erotic undertone as a flaring hunger coursed through their bond unhindered, free and fully exposed. Carefully controlled barriers had suddenly crashed down allowing the escape of equally carefully controlled emotions to flare to the surface.

Startled by its intensity, he questioned whether the heated surge of passion he had felt had originated from Catherine or himself. Then she grasped his chin and forced him to look at her and into her eyes, where her desire was unashamedly revealed to him, and she silently begged for him to see and acknowledge its presence.

They had been swept away on an emotional ride that nearly overcame them both. But, the moment passed and he could only wonder what the outcome might have been had not the world, in the form of unexpected visitors at her door, impinged upon that potentially explosive moment.

Diana realized that Vincent had gifted her with a very private interlude. She felt humbled by this most intimate and tender look at his and Catherine's lives and emotions.

Vincent levered himself away from the wall to ease around her. Diana watched as he walked to the kitchen windows. Those same windows he had stared through when telling her about Catherine and their love, revealing the tragic events that had occurred to drive him in his desperate search for Catherine and their child.

"I can't imagine loving someone like that, or being loved like that."

Diana had been in awe of the power of their love. Now, she fully understood it. For the focus of her own love stood sorrowfully gazing out of the windows at a world as cold and silent as the memories he was trying so painfully to resurrect.

"I can only remember."

The words had bled from his heart with such sadness and longing, Diana had silently wept within for them both.

The snow had ceased falling and the night pressed against the glass panes. Vincent stood before the windows, his golden head starkly outlined against the velvet blackness just beyond. He stared unseeing through glass that reflected his ghostly twin image. One large, fur-cloaked hand moved absently across the window sill, the long, slender claw-tipped fingers drawing invisible designs on the rough brick surface. Finally, he turned to face Diana.

"Always, she was willing to cross boundaries that I approached with great hesitation and could not cross. She accepted situations within our lives, and acknowledged the desire growing between us with a courage that I did not possess."

The words came hesitantly at first, then, as he lost himself in the poignant memories, they flowed unhindered and sweetly from his heart.

"When I went to her terrace that first time, she threw herself into my arms and embraced me." It seemed to come as a fresh new revelation to him, "She made all the first contacts. Our only kiss - she came to me and kissed me, Diana. She kissed me." The soft tone of his voice made it appear that, somehow, despite all evidence to the contrary, it still seemed incredulous to him that Catherine would have wished such intimate contact.

Slowly, the words began to pour freely and Vincent became lost in and breathed life back into his memories of Catherine. His voice filled with awe at remembering how Catherine had been the first to speak aloud the word 'love' as being what had motivated her - not courage - when she had saved his life and Father's. The bravery of the act of going into the arms of the drug-maddened beast to hug tightly to her breast, and bring him back through the final stage of the ravages of Paracelsus' drug and back to himself. And the greater courage it had taken to enter that black cavern to face the unknown and raging beast that was himself and bring them both safely back into the world to savor the miracle that was life.

Diana listened patiently, hopefully, knowing there was still one excruciatingly painful memory he had not approached as yet. The one that, once voiced, would give him the freedom to live his life fully once again.

"Catherine's courage was immeasurable, Diana. She gave my life back to me in a way I could never have dreamed possible." He was silent for a long time. His voice carried the weight of his grief in his next words.

"I look at my son, Diana, and I am filled with such sorrow that he and Catherine will never know one another." Vincent had finally begun exposing the deepest, rawest of the wounds. He spoke aloud the memories, sweet and fearful. "She came into that dark place after me - and gave my life back to me. Is that where our child was conceived? I don't remember. Why can't I remember those caresses, Diana?"

Diana held her breath, heart pounding, waiting for him to continue. Please, Vincent, she prayed silently, say the words - free yourself to live again!

There was a dark, shadowed look in his haunted eyes as they searched hers, seeking an answer. "...Or were there no tender caresses? Did that inhuman side of me take her in that cold, dark place? Is that how our child was conceived, in the throes of madness - of rape? When did it happen? When I was battling that darkness... that Beast...which had risen up inside me, nearly destroying me?"

Diana wanted to shout for joy, throw her arms around him and crush him to her breast. At last, he had approached and given voice to his most dreaded fear of all. But, how could she answer him? What could she say that would help release him from his most dreaded nightmare? She thought back to the first time he had stood before these windows, when the sunlight had streamed in upon his golden head and broad shoulders. What was it he had told her?

"On that cold, windy rooftop, Vincent, when Catherine told you about the child, what did she tell you just before she died?"

Vincent visibly recoiled at the memory, still so painful. His stronger inner spirit struggled to re-enter deep into that painful memory, to hold Catherine one last time in his arms and, through his present agony, to hear her words, "We loved, there is a child!"

"Vincent, Catherine told you what happened in that cave. It was not the Beast who came to Catherine, Vincent, but you. She said, 'We loved!' It would not have been so with the Beast."

The Beast. She hated to use that word, for she never thought of him in that regard. But he had used that term to describe what he considered to be his 'darker side', therefore, she would use it back to him. For the use of a word can take some of the overpowering charge away from it. Besides, she had forced him to go back into that time of such painful memories. She would use the terms he used to free him.

Diana looked up into the drawn face and haunted eyes of the man she loved, and struggled with her own sorrow at knowing she would never be loved by him as he loved Catherine. For herself, as well as for him, she had to give his life back by returning Catherine to him free of any nightmarish possibility that he might have harmed the woman he loved. For in giving Catherine back to him, Diana selfishly admitted that she could have just a little bit more of him for herself.

"You have wrapped yourself in sorrow as you wrap your cloak about you for protection: to hide from the truth, to hide from yourself and the world. Vincent, go back to your world and find your memories there. Let those memories, no matter how sweet or how painful, wash over you."

She reached out and placed her hand lightly against his chest. "Catherine lives, Vincent. She lives here in your heart, in all your tender memories, in all the things you shared together. Tell them to your son. He will come to know her gentle, courageous spirit through you."

Diana was finding it difficult to speak without tears strangling her voice to silence. She was unaware one glistening tear had spilled softly down her cheek. Damn you, Catherine Chandler, for being the cause of this man's grief! She bowed her head for a moment to stifle the words and control her voice. Help me, Catherine. Help me help him!

"Catherine gave you a dream, Vincent. You lived it, however briefly. She would want you to have other dreams. Let them in."

Vincent remained silent and immobile. He heard the truth behind Diana's words, felt her compassion, felt both of them surrounded by Catherine's benign and loving presence. He reached out and gently stroked his clawed fingers along Diana's smooth cheek. His thumb tenderly wiped away the solitary tear she had shed. This priceless friend, this gentle woman, revealed more to him in that one tear and touched him more deeply than all the words of condolence spoken by others.

"Diana of the Roses. Once again, tonight, I thank you."

PART THREE

The world had been covered a pristine white but a few short hours before was already taking on the gray dullness of the city. Vincent, blending easily with the darkness still hovering in the alleyway corners, stood silent and motionless awaiting an opportunity to utilize the nearby entrance that would allow him access to the world Below. His ability to become invisible within his surroundings, and his absolute stillness as he waited, was so complete that a human scavenger, hunting through one of the dumpsters lining the alley, passed within arm's length totally oblivious to Vincent's shrouded presence.

His large, dark-cloaked figure gliding silently within the fading shadows, Vincent cautiously passed through the well-disguised access to the tunnel entrance just as a steel gray dawn edged the sky. As he went deeper into the bowels of the city, the sounds above him gradually faded to silence. The early morning hour found this particular section of the Tunnels unoccupied. The slight scrunching noise made by his boots as he strode along the sandy passageways was the solitary sound disturbing the morning quiet. His pace was unhurried as he traversed, with easy familiarity, the intricate turns and meanderings of the narrow rock corridors of his home territory.

In a similar unhurried manner, Diana's quiet yet persistent prodding tonight had led him through the maze of his memories. On the pretext of going in one direction, she led him in another, guiding him in a manner which enabled him to confront his worst fears and nightmares about Catherine and himself, to judge the truth of what really happened during that terrifying and traumatic period of his life.

He had given voice to the agonizing terror that, during the throes of the blackness which had controlled him, he had raped Catherine. And with Diana's compassionate help, he was able to face the reality of that fear. Yet, why was there still a small part of him that could not fully accept Catherine's words "We loved"? Perhaps, because he knew her tender heart would never reveal any wrong-doing to herself by him. She would want to leave him with the sweeter memory that their son had been conceived in love.

Tonight he had fully faced this greatest fear and had given voice to it, made it tangible. Then why was there still a bitter taste remaining to sour such a sweet victory? Did he need to return once more to that dark cavern to try and remember what had occurred within those cragged walls? Why could he not accept the truth of Catherine's words? What significant aspect of himself was still entombed there?

He had returned there just once, the day of Catherine's funeral. He had knelt on the cold stone floor of the cavern and searched through the grains of sand, sifting them through his fingers,

crying out for an essence of what had happened there. Amid the sweeter memories of their time together, he found only the heartache of her absence. The stone walls were silent and unyielding, and he could recapture nothing of what had transpired there. It was as if his memory had ceased to function once he had entered that black tomb roaring out his rage and agony. For that was how he had come to think of that dark place far below the earth - a tomb - where a significant part of his memory, his life, and of himself still remained buried.

Vincent halted his steps and turned to lean back against the hard rock walls of the passage. He felt, suddenly, physically and emotionally exhausted. His heart cried out for solace from his grief and aloneness.

Catherine.

Saying her name aloud, breathing it across his lips like a kiss, gave her an instant of life and brought to him a fleeting comfort and some small amount of peace. Before she had become his heart, he had patiently complied with the limits of his life - certain there would be no one for him. He had accepted those limits until Catherine brought her warmth and radiant light into his world. Then, he dared to dream and, for two brief years, they had shared a love - and a dream.

The actuality of Catherine's death reached him in small and sometimes unsuspecting ways, as all deaths do. A melody heard, the children struggling during their lessons reciting a quotation from a book or poem he and Catherine had once shared and, each month, the full moon... that lover's moon. How many times had he felt he only need turn his head to see her beside him?

Head bowed, he reached out to touch a heart bursting with happiness at his coming; but there was only the icy cold nothingness of that which had once given warmth back to him. He missed the closeness, the intimacy of their bond, feeling her near, knowing where to find her. When she would come to him in the tunnels, he could feel her joy radiating before her, reaching out to him, filling him with joy. But, the bond was no longer there and he found only an endless, unresponsive coldness that emphasized his aloneness. He would reach out for a sense of her, trying to feel her heartbeat, but found only her absence. He wanted to embrace her, hold her close to his heart and inhale the sweet scent of her that always stirred his senses. He ached to feel her softness pressed against him. They had never shared his bed. Yet, he became conscious every time he woke from sleep of the emptiness of the bed beside him. For he had allowed himself the fragile dream of the joyous possibility of that kind of intimacy.

When she died - the emptiness! The cold emptiness.

He felt, in one sense, that he had died in that black cavern deep within the earth. For a significant part of himself had been lost there. He had emerged from that cavern weak and spent; yet, for the most part, whole again. Yet, Vincent did not feel whole. Some would have told him he had come out victorious. But had he come out the victor? There was the chilling sense that his other side should claim the battle prize. For the battle had taken his memory, a part of his life, and stolen from him his singular moment of intimacy with Catherine.

Vincent sensed he needed to go back one final time and try to seek out those stolen memories, find that part of himself that seemed irrevocably lost among the black rock walls in the catacombs. He also knew that the desire to know the truth, and the finding of it, might bring him more pain than he could bear. It was a journey he was not certain he was able to make just yet.

Where is the truth, Catherine? Where?

He found he no longer had tears left to wash away and dull the sword-edged agony of her death. With great effort, he pushed away from the stony wall and continued his journey homeward.

PART FOUR

Friendship was important to young Eric, and his friendship with Vincent overshadowed all other relationships. The nine-year old had lost his entire family and, since the death of his sister, Ellie, Eric became Vincent's second shadow. His slight form following behind the taller and more massive Vincent brought smiles to everyone who saw them pass. Of all the boy's tunnel family, he chose Vincent to be the recipient of his adoration, and Vincent returned the boy's affection unconditionally.

Pascal had noticed that, of late, Eric seemed downcast and quite pensive. Several times, he watched Eric approach his usually responsive friend, seemingly about to speak, and then the youngster would turn and scurry off in the opposite direction.

Eric worried about Vincent, and he carried his concern about his friend for as long as he could. Vincent, for the first time since they had met, was unresponsive to his overtures of friendship. Unable to solve the problem, Eric stopped on his journey through the tunnel passageways to sit down against the craggy wall and try to think things out. He wondered, had he said or done something that made Vincent mad at him? Had he broken a promise to Vincent? Why didn't Vincent come around and talk to him like he used to do? What was the problem? This was how Pascal had found Eric - hunkered down on the floor, frowning in deep concentration, pondering his problem.

"You seem troubled about something, Eric. Can I help?" Pascal had noticed Eric's preoccupied state over the last few days and decided the time had come to find out what was bothering the young boy.

"What's wrong with Vincent?" Direct and to the point, as always.

Pascal paused for a moment, then lowered his slight frame down against the rock wall to sit cross-legged beside the youngster. He noted the small nine-year-old had grown taller in the past year - stretching an already slender frame to thinner extremes. Vincent's seeming preoccupation and unresponsiveness to his approach lately had obviously caused the boy some hurt feelings and more than a little bit of concern. Pascal carefully laid his ever-present pipe tapping rods nearby his feet on the floor. Resting his arms across his knees, he spoke gently to Eric, hoping to help him understand.

"Do you remember when Ellie died, how much it hurt, and how much you missed her afterward?"

"Yes," came the quiet answer.

"Well, Vincent is remembering Catherine. He misses her the way you miss Ellie."

Eric studied Pascal's face intently for a long moment, judging his words, remembering his own hurt with Ellie's passing. "What can I do to help him?"

Pascal swallowed hard and said quietly, "What helped you the most?"

Eric thought on it for a long time and then, armed with this new understanding, he made the decision to approach Vincent. But when he reached his friend's chamber, he found him gone.

So it was that an exhausted Vincent, upon reaching his dimly lit chamber, found Eric curled up on his bed. The youngster's vigil had been overlong and he had fallen asleep while waiting. Vincent smiled warmly down at the sleeping boy. Eric's thick-lensed glasses rested slightly askew across his thin nose and a piece of yellow paper was clutched in one hand. He awoke as Vincent knelt beside the bed.

"Vincent," his young voice was thick and yawny. "I'm sorry. I must have fallen asleep." Eric scurried to straighten his glasses and wriggled himself toward the edge of the quilt covered bed.

"It's all right, Eric," Vincent assured him in quiet tones. "It must have been important for you to wait so long for me. I'm sorry I wasn't here when you came. What is it you wanted to see me about?"

Eric frowned at the slightly rumpled piece of paper he held. He thrust it out toward Vincent.

"Here," he said, "this is for you."

Thinking Eric had come to deliver a note to him, Vincent accepted the paper and turned it over in search of the expected message. When he found the page was blank on both sides, he cast a questioning glance at the still drowsy young boy.

"It's for you," Eric repeated, blinking the sleep from his eyes.

Vincent tilted his head a bit to the side and glanced inquiringly at the young boy now standing before him. "Yes?"

"To write a letter," Eric added helpfully. "I thought it might help."

Vincent glanced down at the paper in his hand, trying to understand the meaning behind Eric's words and actions. He rubbed clawed fingers across his forehead, wishing he could connect something with what Eric was attempting to tell him.

"You've been kind of moping around lately." Eric shrugged his thin shoulders and hurried to explain a bit further. "I thought it might help if you wrote a letter."

"To whom, Eric?" Vincent patiently prodded, hoping for a more explicit answer.

"To Catherine," Eric said simply, as if it were the most obvious of answers.

Suddenly, Vincent realized what Eric had been about these past weeks. The boy's questioning glances and somewhat uncharacteristic, almost aloof, behavior had been an indication of Eric having noted his, Vincent's, preoccupied state, and the boy had become worried his friend did not want him around for some reason - that was not the case at all.

The letter Eric spoke of was a reference to something that had been done for him when his sister, Ellie, died. Father suggested that Eric write to Ellie, to apologize for saying he hated her because she wouldn't let him follow her to the hospital chamber when she was taken ill, and to tell her that he really did love her. A small fire had been built near the mirror pool and everyone wrote Ellie a letter saying their goodbyes to her. The ashes were borne skyward through a narrow vent in the rocks above them, carrying their messages of love to her. It had proven to be a healing for them all.

Eric stood eye-to-eye with Vincent, all the love he felt for his most special friend shining within his eyes. Vincent's own eyes were moist, and he was amazed to hear the words he had used to comfort Eric echoed back to him, exactly as he had said them that sad night he told the young boy his sister had died.

"When Ellie died, you told me that sometimes bad things happen in life, and that all we can do is cry for those we've lost and remember them in our hearts." Eric paused for a moment, tears glistened in his eyes. "Please, try not to be sad because you don't have Catherine anymore."

Eric pressed the small yellow piece of paper into Vincent's large hand, "Write the letter, Vincent, please. You'll feel less sad and lonely if you do."

Eric was quiet for a moment while he reached into the layered folds of his mismatched and often-patched clothing and pulled a stub of pencil from a pocket. He pressed this into Vincent's palm.

"When I wrote my letter to Ellie, it helped me feel a little better." The boy's eyes looked large and shiny behind the thick glass lenses. "It might help you smile more often." He studied Vincent's face intently as if expecting to see him do so. "You haven't done that much lately."

Eric turned to leave and then stopped in the arched entryway. Turning, he faced Vincent once more. "If you'd like, I'll build the fire - that is, if you need any help."

Vincent rose to his full height and looked across the room at the earnest young boy. "Thank you, Eric." His voice was quiet and suffused with the warmth he felt over the small boy's concern for him.

Hesitating for a moment, Eric walked back into the room and returned to stand staring up at Vincent. Once again, Vincent knelt down on one knee, level with Eric, giving him his undivided attention.

"What is it, Eric?"

The intense expression on the young boy's face tugged at Vincent's heart. Eric moved into him, placing his slender arms around Vincent's powerful neck, hugged him tightly and whispered into his ear.

"I love you, Vincent. We all love you. Try and be happy."

After Eric left the chamber, Vincent rose slowly to his feet, tears moistening his eyes. He was deeply moved by Eric's expression of love and concern. The boy was wiser than his years.

He remembered how Catherine had brought he and Eric together. She had rescued Eric from a county run foster home that sold the children into thievery, and she brought him to the tunnels for safety. Wrapped in a plaid blanket, an exhausted Eric had fallen asleep on the floor just outside the steel door-gate that led to the tunnel entrance. The very frightened young boy had awakened from his sleep and had looked upon, and touched Vincent's strange features with curiosity and then complete acceptance. Studying the scrap of paper in his hand, Vincent thought that, somehow, it seemed appropriate that he and Eric send their letters together. Perhaps, when he was ready, he would have Eric help him build that fire.

Vincent carefully placed the rumpled sheet of yellow writing paper and the stubby pencil in his cupboard. He would save it until later.

PART FIVE

The dreams have begun again. It has been so long - I thought, perhaps, they had finally come to an end. But, his presence is too powerful for me to forget. He is a miracle my mind still finds difficult to hold. Since that first night when I found him at Catherine's grave, I cannot shut him out of my thoughts.

By day, I have my work to lose myself in, to focus on. But, the nights... my mind flies free to roam and it seeks him out. He enters into my dreams as a disturbing influence... and the dreams are becoming increasingly sensual... and erotic. The emotions flowing through them overwhelm me and I must awaken to escape their potency. For, what I might feel toward him, I sense Catherine's presence and know that he carries her within his heart and mind. I feel that if I let the dreams continue, to the only conclusion I know they will reach, that I will be betraying her. Why should I feel that way? I don't know....

Diana stared at the screen, reading what she had just written. The little green cursor pulsed back from its tiny field on the screen... like an impatiently tapping finger awaiting her next response. Diana had begun keeping a journal of her dreams since that first night Vincent came into her life. This journal was a release valve for the emotions she felt about him.

This wasn't the first diary she had kept in her computer; with her work files, she would follow the same format of putting her words before her on the screen, digesting her thoughts, seeking impressions, and then coming to conclusions. During the day, she would sort these conclusions

through her mind, re-read them at night and come to new conclusion, with the ultimate result of finding that which she was searching for - answers to questions she didn't even know existed.

But since Vincent, this ritual of recording her thoughts had taken on a whole new meaning. Each entry protectively saved to a disk and stored away from the possibility of prying eyes. There was no one she could talk to about him, so she used her computer screen as a sounding board to sift through and analyze her feelings about this unimaginable man, this enigma that had come into her life.

She thought that by putting her dreams about him down in print, she might be able to dispel some of their power. It was a foolish idea, for it only seemed to bring him closer, magnify her emotions and make her more potently aware of the impossibility of their relationship. Obsession, infatuation - not words she would have used to describe her feelings, but they came close. She knew with certainty that she loved him. And, she didn't know what to do about it or how to proceed without scaring him off. She wondered if Catherine had puzzled over that same problem; now, she was positive Catherine had. She would borrow a page from Catherine's own book: she would be there, but at a comfortable distance until he was ready to receive her love. That it might never be returned to her was a factor she hoped she was prepared to handle.

Diana called up one of the first entries after Vincent had suddenly left her apartment to return to his world. He had been gone about a week and, though he had been in her dreams, it had been merely as a 'passerby', someone she had met, someone who had made such a strong impression on her mind that his image recurred repeatedly during her dreams. But, one particular night, it had been an unusual dream. One she had felt compelled to record.

October 18, 1989. A week has passed and nothing. Still no sign. I dreamt of him again last night. A strange dream. I held his face close to mine, but he couldn't see me. I spoke to him, but he didn't hear me. I was with him, but he was alone.

IMPRESSION; Am I finally losing my mind? Probably. But his sadness has carried over into me - these last few days especially.

She had gone into the tunnels to try and find him. She had been attacked and he had materialized out of the blackness of the tunnels to save her life. Was that how he had come to Catherine's rescue? How many times had he done so? Vincent had killed to protect Catherine and she, Diana, had killed to protect Vincent from Gabriel.

We are not so different, he and I, she reflected. Each has killed to protect a loved one.

Wearily, Diana leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and rubbed away the sting of tiredness. She shut down the computer, turned off her desk lamp and, grabbing a bulky knit sweater, she swung its woolen weight around her shoulders and slowly climbed the stairs to her rooftop. The cold night air felt soothing against her forehead and quieted a threatening headache. It was after midnight, but the low, rumbling sounds of the city continued unabated. The city still pulsed with life, and the hum of it reached across the surrounding rooftops to thrum softly around her. She wondered if there was a place in the city where its throbbing pulse didn't reach, where all you felt was your own heartbeat?

Yes. Below. In Vincent's world. A world that brought its own calmness just by being there. Diana thought of the dark, winding tunnel passages, the soothing rush of the imaginably beautiful waterfalls singing their song of peace as they cascaded over the cliff walls. She thought of him quietly walking along those candlelit passageways, moving through his domain of flame and shadow, giving his strength and tranquility to a fragile world whose existence was often perilously tenuous; making that world safer for those he loved.

Those he loved.

She wondered if she would ever be among that small select group. She knew he was grateful for all she had done to help him. But, love? Somehow she didn't think she quite fit into that category as yet; certainly, not the same kind of love she felt for him.

Thinking back to a few nights ago when she had encouraged him - *no, Bennett, more like bullied him* - into talking about Catherine, bringing up pain buried so deeply as to make it almost untouchable. She wondered how he had been since that night. She wondered, too, when - or if - she would see him again.

The dreams she had been experiencing lately were her only contact with him, and their sensual, sexual nature made it difficult to concentrate when she awakened. *Unfulfilled desires, Bennett?* She had questioned herself. Vincent was the only disturbing influence in a life that Diana felt was comfortably under her control.

Turning her back on the city, she leaned against the stone wall marking her rooftop. One booted toe made an idle arc on the floor. Deep in thought, it was a moment before she became aware she was not alone. Instantly alert, she peered through the darkness at the shadowy corners and angles that made up her roof and those nearby.

"Diana," his deep, richly-textured voice reached out of the darkness to touch her with its quiet warmth. "I'm sorry. Did I frighten you?"

"No," she assured him, her racing pulse and accelerated heartbeat were not caused by fear, "you did not frighten me."

She moved away from the wall and took several steps toward him. She watched as he moved out of the blackness. A tall, darkly shrouded figure, carrying the night with him in the midnight-colored fabric of his hooded cloak. He walked toward her, his movements slow, full of grace and virility, and it was all she could do not to run to him and throw herself into his arms.

He stopped before her and gazed quietly down, studying her, not speaking. He had sensed something within her he couldn't quite touch, strong emotions being wrestled with, a disturbance just under the surface, ruffling her usually studied quiet inspection of her surroundings, that had nothing to do with his sudden appearance out of the shadows.

"Are you well?"

She stared up into his face, going over the planes and angles of each beloved contour. The dim light from her clerestory windows heightening, dramatizing his unique features. She nodded silently, unable to speak - afraid to speak. Tongue-tied would be a more appropriate description of her condition. Dreams and reality were colliding and she needed to orient herself as to which she was experiencing. For, one of the dreams had started with meeting him on her rooftop on a night as black as this. He had taken her into his arms and kissed her tenderly, hungrily. In the timeless span of dreams, the kiss had seemed at once endless and, yet, too quickly over. Nothing else had happened. But, with Vincent standing so close, that dream came back with startling clarity and she was once again awash in the sensations that had aroused her body and clung tenaciously to her throughout the day. In remembering, a shiver of pleasure passed over her.

"Are you cold?" he asked solicitously.

"No."

Monosyllables seemed to constitute her entire vocabulary tonight. She had been concerned for him and searched his face for some outward sign of his state of being. He had passed through some extremely painful times and memories and fears during his previous visit. They had talked throughout the night. He, staying until it was almost too close to dawn for him to safely leave. When he finally departed, the knot that had constricted him when he first arrived seemed to have loosened, and he had promised to return to her when he was able. She had helped to excise the terrors of at least one festering wound. Her concern now was the welfare of the patient.

"Have you been well?" She inquired softly. At his silent nod, she went on, "I wasn't sure you would return."

He dropped his head in characteristic fashion and Diana thought she caught the glimpse of a small, fleeting smile. It was definitely there in his eyes when they contacted hers.

"I have survived the first phase of the doctor's surgery," he confirmed.

The memories of their last, painful conversation were rushing over her. During his previous visit, Diana had urged him to return once again to the cave to search out more of the truth. He became momentarily agitated, pacing back and forth, and bluntly refused.

"I can not go back there again, Diana!"

"Why?" she spat out at him, irritated with his seeming reluctance to help himself. "Afraid you will find the truth and then have no excuse to feel sorry for yourself?" She bit her tongue, but it was too late.

His eyes blazed flame-blue for an instant and he turned to glare at her. Before he could speak, she added fuel to the fire.

"Perhaps, you relish the role of the tragic, star-crossed lover. Is that it, Vincent? You wallow in it, rather than face what happened. That way, you can avoid having to live again. Some legacy **that** is to Catherine's memory!"

What the outcome of that conversation would have been, she had no way of knowing, for they both became aware of the approaching dawn and his need to leave and reach the tunnels safely. He had given no indication of when, or if, he would return. That he had returned, especially at this after-midnight hour, intrigued her. Questions crowded her mind but she waited patiently for him to state his reason for being there.

He studied her silently for several long moments. His eyes shone a startling blue in the faint light from her windows. A moment later, he turned and faced outward to look over the city. When he spoke, his voice drifted softly across the narrow space of darkness separating them. It wrapped around her, warmed her with its slightly gravel quality, and pulled her toward him with an invisible cord. Although she wanted to surrender to its power, she resisted the pull. Instead of a forward motion, she moved sideways and leaned against the low wall that defined the outer edge of her rooftop.

"There is someone below whose counsel I have valued since I was a boy. She is a blind woman who sees with a clear-sightedness others do not, for she sees with the wisdom of her ancestors. She is a solitary person whose chambers are far removed from everyone. She prefers it that way and she rarely comes to us."

He spoke with something of wonder in his voice. "But, last night, she came to my chamber. She knew of you, of my struggle." Vincent turned to face Diana. "She spoke of you, saying that '*the woman with hair of fire has a spirit to match. She must go with you, Vincent. If you are to find your peace with Catherine, the red-haired woman must be your companion*'. I told her it would not be safe for you to go. She said it would not be safe if you did not go."

His eyes met hers fully. Diana had been blunt in her remarks of the previous night. As much as they had stung, Vincent knew there had been the sharp barb of truth behind them, and he was grateful she had the courage to speak the words to him.

"As you so boldly and succinctly pointed out to me, I need to lay my doubts and fears to rest." There was the slightest shade of hesitancy in his voice when the question came.

"I need your help. Will you go with me?" They were words she had never expected to hear him speak. "Perhaps, with your help, I can discover those lost memories, find that part of me still there."

Diana rejoiced at his words and, if uncertainty had unexpectedly reared its vicious head, it was only because she was suddenly afraid of what might be found in that shadowy place. Vincent's memories of what transpired between him and Catherine could return; Diana was not afraid of that. Although he might have some fear about what had occurred, she felt the truth in Catherine's final words to him. What she was afraid of, and hadn't considered before this instant, was that those memories might reawaken that dark side of him, endow it with a rebirth. And, perhaps, this time it would not withdraw so easily.

"Do not let my brow-beating, or the words of an old woman, push you into something regrettable. Perhaps, even more dangerous for you than anyone else."

"I sense your fear, your hesitation, and your concern, Diana." His words shook her out of her reverie, "I will understand if you do not wish to accompany me."

"Vincent, are you truly certain this is what you want?" How could she make him understand her fear for him. "Will it be safe for you to go there, Vincent?"

He understood, now, that her reluctance was not fear for herself, but for him, and he recognized the face of the uncertainty that had suddenly arisen within her.

He solemnly nodded his assent, "Yes, Diana, I am certain that I want to go there."

He became silent once again, studying his hand as it moved idly across the top of the low, concrete-topped parapet surrounding her rooftop. Diana noted it was a characteristic move he unconsciously performed whenever he was deep in thought.

"I found myself there the day of Catherine's funeral... I had gone there..." He paused and she knew he was back in that subterranean chamber struggling, once again, to recapture those lost memories. "I went there to get a sense of her, Diana. To remember. To feel."

"And what did you find?" she asked gently.

"My aloneness. My emptiness. My memories." He turned to her. "I apologize, Diana. I sound filled with that self-pity you spoke of." He was still grasping for something, for an understanding of his reason for going there. "In returning there, I was searching... I was...."

"...Trying to say goodbye," Diana quietly finished for him.

He looked at her weighing her words, and, nodding his golden head, he quietly acquiesced the intent behind those words.

"Yes." So quiet his answer, so filled with the finality of what must be.

PART SIX

Vincent held the lantern high as he and Diana made their way slowly through the tunnels that led downward to the deepest part of his world. Their shape-changing shadows chased after them as the darkness reluctantly gave way to the circle of golden light which marked their passage.

Vincent halted at the ragged stone archway marking the end of the tunnel passageway. Diana stopped near his side. In the blue-blackness just beyond, she could barely discern the uneven stones of an ancient stairway descending downward into a cavernous room. One of the perpetual subterranean air currents guttered the lantern, causing their shadows to dip and sway against the stone walls.

"This part of my world you know, Diana." Vincent raised his large hand indicating their present surroundings and the direction they had just traversed. "Beyond this point we go deeper still within the earth." He lowered the lantern and turned to her. His golden mane hung about his shoulders and head in brilliant contrast against the surrounding darkness. "You know only the tragedies of

my life, Diana. That is all you have ever seen. I would have you know that my life has been abundantly filled with boundless love and gentleness by compassionate people."

Diana softly prodded, "I have pieced together scraps of Catherine's life and connected them to yours. You have told me about Catherine and your son, but you never revealed to me what happened to drive you down here."

Placing the lantern between them on the earthen floor, he stared down at the circle of yellow light it described around their feet, his head bowed in thought. After a moment, he stepped out of the lighted ring to stand at the edge of darkness, peering into it and down the stairway.

"It is down there that I fought a battle which cost a part of me I may never regain. Taking its place is the black fear of how that contest may have hurt the one person who was truly my life."

He turned to face her, his eyes darkened, and the words he spoke struggled from his throat, echoing the pain in his voice. He told her of the blackness that had invaded his soul. How it had occurred in his youth, nearly destroying him then. But its strength, this time, was insidious, unimaginable. He had no warning of its coming. Its power was overwhelming. Under its control, he recognized no one, was unaware of where he was or of what he was doing.

"Catherine - I called out to her. Somehow I knew my existence was in her hands. One time before, she had saved me from the madness of Paracelsus' evil poisonous drug. Without hesitation, she came again, this time into that dark cave and saved me from death. But at what cost to herself? In the end, she sacrificed her life for mine."

Diana stood silently attentive, listening as Vincent explained the animalistic state of being that had driven him into the cave; that had forced him to hide himself away from those he loved, to keep them safe and separate, away from the darkly savage and inhuman creature he had become. But Catherine's courage had taken her into the face of the terror and she had brought them both out alive. Diana hoped to touch to that courage.

"I am not certain this journey should continue, Diana. I returned once before and found memories of what Catherine and I had shared together. Perhaps, that is enough; perhaps, that is our legacy to one another - our love."

It hurt to see the uncertainty on Vincent's face, he who always seemed to carry the aura of quiet confidence, strength and undeniable courage. They could not go back. Not now.

"No. There is more." Diana knew there was something waiting to be done, needing to be done. And when that was accomplished, the healing could truly begin.

Scattered lines of a poem filtered into her thoughts. She was uncertain why this particular poem and these words should come into her mind now. Yet, during a time when the world had nearly destroyed her, the words had given her comfort and the courage to continue with her own life. Diana spoke softly across the semi-darkness.

"I must go back... for I must meet and marry in myself the truth of what has ended, what is new; then I shall be able to refind myself, and also you."

She looked up into Vincent's face telling him only that, "I think it is time we continue our journey." Then moving into that black doorway, she took the first tentative step to finding his truth.

They stood in the narrow passageway leading into the cavern. Vincent was obviously still uncomfortable about her entering the cave alone. Had Narcissa not told him it should be so, Diana knew neither of them would be here. She didn't fully understand why she should enter first - that, too, had been Narcissa's counsel.

Perhaps Narcissa understood that Diana needed to enter without Vincent. For his emotions and memories, what he would think and feel about what he remembered, would interfere with Diana's own empathic impressions. Diana looked up at his towering figure and tried to imagine what he

must be thinking. His face was unreadable. He stood tall and quiet, staring into that black space before them. What memories were stirring within him? What memories would she touch to within those darkened walls? Would she sense anything? The times she had talked to an absent Catherine, she had merely been 'talking to herself' as she often did when puzzling something out. That she frequently received answers was something she never questioned. She spoke silently now to Catherine.

Oh, Cathy, what will I find within? I don't know what lies before me. I enter this place because an old woman has told Vincent it must be done if he is to have his peace with himself. He seems to hold great store by her wisdom. I hope she is right this time. Diana took a small step forward as if expecting to see Catherine emerge from the cave and greet her. *For him, Cathy. Help me.*

Vincent's voice broke through her reverie. He held their single source of light out toward her. "Take the lantern with you, Diana," he urged.

"Did Catherine have light when she entered the cave?"

"No."

"Then I want none."

She wanted to get the same impressions Catherine would have had going into that unknown darkness. Perhaps touch the same walls and see and hear what Catherine had seen and heard and felt. There was a difference this time. The cave was now silent and unoccupied. There would be no threatening presence within.

"It will not be the same, Diana." The agony of remembering what he had been when Catherine ventured beyond the mouth of that stygian cave before them was carried in merciless lines on his face.

"The only danger of that time, the only remnants of fear, of what occurred there," she said to him, trying to soothe his unease, "are what remain in the rock walls - and that cannot harm me." She took another step toward the mouth of the cavern, halted and turned to him. "I appreciate your concern for me, Vincent. As Narcissa told you, I need to go in alone. I need to feel what Catherine felt, see what she saw; to become intimate with those moments."

She saw the struggle within him not to stop her. His massive body was almost vibrating with the effort it took for him not to restrain her, to hold himself back from joining her entering that cave.

"You will be here, if I need help," she reminded him. "And, if it will ease your mind," a tiny smile was aimed up at him, "I will have Catherine to talk with in there."

He tilted his head and questioned her with his eyes. She continued explaining.

"Catherine and I have talked to each other in the past, before I found you. When I was trying to figure out who 'Vincent' was, I would imagine she was in the room with me and I would ask her questions about you. I talked to her. Through her, I tried to understand you, to understand her, to build the lives of strangers and make sense out of the cold facts given me. It's one of the ways I work." She looked up into his darkly shadowed leonine features and said, "That is what I plan to do in there."

She pointed into the blackness before them. "Go in. Listen. Talk to myself, or in this instance, Catherine." She reached out and touched his strong arm trying to soothe his unease. "Please, Vincent, do not worry. I will be fine."

She knew the only reasons that stayed Vincent from following her had been Narcissa's counsel that it should be thus; and his ironbound code of honor that made it impossible for him to break a promise once made. Diana removed her hand from the reassuring hardness of his muscular arm, turned from him and, bending over slightly, entered the yawning black mouth of the cave.

Advancing slowly through the darkness, she felt her way along the jagged rock walls. Diana had entered, alone, many unknown and dangerous places in her career; nevertheless, it was

comforting to know that in this instance, Vincent's power and strength were within shouting distance. It made the dark unknown within this place considerably less threatening.

The passageway twisted and made a slight turn, shutting out the lantern light behind her. She paused and waited for her eyes to adjust more fully to the surrounding blue darkness. The subterranean chamber was damp and the air cold. An uneasy silence seemed to pervade the very walls. It was the silence rather than the coldness of the air that made her shiver. She had no idea how far she had advanced into the cave when she heard it. A sound. Movement. Somewhere ahead.

"Hello," she said, as she slowly moved forward. Foolish. As if she were expecting someone to answer her. Only she and Vincent were in this place and she knew Vincent was guarding the opening behind her. The sound came again. Or was it her imagination? No. More sounds. Low. Feral. Elemental. Rolling out of the darkness to surround her. Felt as much as heard. She stopped, listened, strained her eyes to peer through the semi-darkness of the cave. There was no one. Now she knew with certainty it was only phantoms coming from the past. She turned and advanced a few more steps when she met with another surprise.

In stark contrast to the blackness she and Vincent had been traveling through most of their journey, Diana was amazed, once she had reached this point in the cave, to find there was a diffuse, blue-gray light that permitted the outlines and craggy shapes of the cavern's interior to be partly visible.

Again. The sound. A low, warning growl captured within the rocks themselves, hanging suspended there, waiting. It grew louder, reverberating around the cavern, a blood-chilling bellow of savagery and animal rage, deafening in its intensity, pushing against her. Diana covered her ears and pressed against the wall for support. Then the inhuman noise ceased, retreating into whatever phantom space it occupied, and the cave became intensely silent once again.

She spoke softly aloud to the semi-darkness, "Is that what you heard, Catherine? Is that the unholy sound that met you when you came in after him?" The center of Diana's body still trembled slightly, reacting to the natural terror of hearing the unknown, of hearing and feeling a cry that was no longer in existence. Not since that night.

"To hear that, and still come after him. God! the courage, the love that brought you into what must have been hell. What did you see, Catherine? What was waiting for you within this Faustian blackness?"

"Vincent!"

Diana spun around at the voice crying out. Peering through the darkness trying to locate its source. There was no one. She was alone.

"Vincent!"

This time the scream tore in achingly painful sound from her throat. No. Not her throat. Catherine's. She was hearing Catherine cry out to him. Suddenly, the images were there in her mind. Their story began to unfold and she became a part of it.

Catherine felt her way along the low, narrow passageway. Through the surrounding shades of gray, she could barely distinguish the faint outline that marked the cave's opening. Someone of lesser courage would have turned and ran from the unknown presence filling the darkness ahead with sounds straight from hell. The anguished, feral growling vibrated in agonizing waves around the surrounding stone walls.

But Vincent was in there and whatever demon he was battling in that dark place, she could not leave him to battle it alone. She couldn't imagine her life without him. She would freely give hers to keep him safe.

He had already begun to shed the outer garments of his humanity to battle the beast within. The leather and wool fabric of his cloak lay in a nondescript pile on the cavern floor, the fringe fluttering listlessly in the weak air currents within the darkened passageway. There was no need for his cloak in that dark place. Its hood shrouded his features from those Above who lived in the sunlight. This enigma of darkness was the arena of the Beast. A place of battle.

Stepping over Vincent's cloak, Catherine approached the yawning black maw of the cave. The terrifying, low, elemental growls of savage fury increased with frightening intensity, rolling about the jagged stone walls as if alive, searching out its own prey.

Far back in the glue-black shadowed cavern room, a darkness-shrouded figure crouched low. Menacing, strangled noises came deep and guttural from its throat. A growling that reverberated off the walls, rolling one on top of another in an endless cacophony of sound that spoke of rage and anguish, unending terror and a pleading for release from some predatory hell. Suddenly, the bestial figure moved, bent over low in killing position, it barreled through the darkness toward her. As it reached the entryway and the shadowy intruder there, it raised up slightly, the powerful upper torso twisting, right arm lifted high, clawed hand poised in killing position, ready to strike and eviscerate.

Catherine watched as the fearsome being charged toward her, crouched low with deadly intent. The fanged mouth was open, the promise of death roaring from deep within the powerful chest and corded throat. The eyes were no longer Vincent's, gentle, blue and filled with love, but icy black pools that showed no recognition of her. Even its outward shape had altered. She could identify no part of the form rushing toward her as Vincent. It was sound and fury, feral and primeval, intent only on destroying that which intruded upon its lair.

"Vincent!"

His name tore from her throat as she cried out, terrified at the sight of the predatory killer that was charging toward her. It had always been her terror that had brought the Beast out of Vincent when she was in danger and needed him, perhaps feeling and hearing her danger now might bring the reverse transformation and draw Vincent out of the Beast. It took but seconds for her to make the decision.

Catherine screamed his name again, and this time the sound came full-bodied and piercing from her throat.

"Vincent!"

He halted only paces from her, striking arm still raised, but the eyes were now blank and confused. There was no recognition of her within the black depths. The figure hesitated, and wobbled uncertainly for a brief moment. The eyes glazed over and Vincent crumpled to the earthen floor, dragging Catherine down with him.

Pulling herself out from under the heavy, lifeless weight of his body, Catherine raised herself up and peered down at Vincent's unconscious form. His stillness frightened her more than the charging beast of a moment ago. He seemed more than unconscious. There was a deathly quiet about him that terrified her. She called out softly to him. Placing her ear against his chest, she heard no heartbeat, felt no pulse at his throat.

"No, Vincent, no!" Her own heart refused to believe that he was dead. She would not accept that fact. "You can't, not without me."

Placing her lips over his, she began kissing him, opening his lips with hers, breathing her life into him, willing him back with her love. As Catherine's warm lips moved against Vincent's, her kiss became more than life-giving. All the desire she had wished to show him with her kisses, she now

expressed against his cold lips. Pouring all her love for him through this longed for contact, her lips moved warmly over his. A subtle change was taking place and soon, what they had never shared before became their first passionate kiss.

Vincent's flesh had turned cold. His body still as death. All his vital signs stopped. It was as Father had said happened to him when he was an adolescent. But as Catherine kissed him, he stirred. His first breath came from her mouth, from her lungs. One arm struggled to rise tentatively above the cavern floor. His hand weakly reached out for her, then fell back to the dirt floor. Catherine was not certain she had felt him respond. She continued to kiss him, breathing life into his mouth, willing him back to her. Then, his lips moved under hers. Grasping his jaw with her fingers, she held him steady under her mouth. Her lips shaping his to her own. The kiss subtly changed from that of wild desperation to gentle persuasion. Her hand released his jaw to move across his broad, massive chest. She could feel him breathing now. Through the layers of his clothing, she could feel the faintness of his heartbeat, but it was beating! He was alive!

Releasing his mouth, she anxiously studied his face. His lips were slightly open and she could feel his warm breath on her face as he took in the life giving air.

"Vincent...Vincent, talk to me!" Reaching across his body, she grasped one shoulder and gave it a resounding shake. "Look at me, Vincent. Look at me!" Her voice was softly insistent. There was no urgency, only a demand that he hear her and recognize her, that he give some sign of recognition.

He collapsed once more back into a semi-comatose state. His breathing so shallow, she feared that once again, he had left her.

"No, Vincent. No!" She was up on her knees now, bending over his prostrate form. "Don't you dare leave without me." Shaking him savagely, she struggled to rouse him, tears streaming down her face. Holding his head between her hands, she pressed her tear dampened cheeks to his. "Please, Vincent, please. Stay with me!"

His hand slowly reached up to weakly grasp the one touching his cheek. She turned her hand and clung to his fur covered one. It was cold, but she could feel the tiniest pressure in answer to her squeezing of his fingers. He had come back to her.

"Catherine." His voice, the lowest of whispers, fell sweetly on her ears.

Diana collapsed to the earthen floor. She had been so much a part of Catherine's memories for the past moments that the emotional intensity of it all had drained the strength from her. Like Catherine, she cried in relief at Vincent's survival. Then, she heard his deep voice beside her.

"I heard you cry out." Vincent was kneeling close beside her, the weight of his large hand heavy on her shoulder. What he thought to be sounds of her distress had reached him at the cave entrance and, thinking she was in danger, he had hurried into the cave to find her kneeling on the floor and sobbing silently. He gathered her gently in his arms, pulled her close against his powerful chest and comforted her.

Before she could assure him she was all right, he, too, caught the images that had coursed through Diana and he cried out. Now, the dam of his memories burst and he trembled all over. Now, he owned them, and their intensity burned within him, stirring vividly to life.

All had been darkness. Catherine's heart and mind had called out to him. Catherine's lips, warm and insistent on his, had brought him back. She had cradled his weakened body close to hers, warming him from the coldness that enveloped him. Holding his now shivering body close to her own, she spoke of their love, of all they had been through, of all they had endured. It was her

voice, the heat and closeness of her soft body that gently brought him back from the cold pit he had sunk into.

With Vincent's head resting just beneath her cheek, the comforting warmth of his breath against her neck assured Catherine that he was still alive. Sheltering him close against her, Catherine gently stroked Vincent's hair, his face, encourage his body into a stronger circulation of his blood by rubbing his back and powerful shoulders. Her lips brushed lightly against his forehead.

Then, almost imperceptibly, she felt Vincent's body change. He no longer lay limp and weak against her. Catherine sensed rather than felt the tremor releasing the darkness that was hidden deep within Vincent. The Beast turned his face into her, nuzzling obscenely against her neck, kissing her in a way Vincent would never have done. Though she stiffened against him, she knew that to release her hold on Vincent would surrender him to the Beast. This she would not do. Stifling her revulsion of the creature clinging to her, fondling her, she continued stroking Vincent's back and shoulders, reaffirming, strengthening her words of love.

"Catherine, sweet Catherine. Now, there is only you and me. He is gone, but then, perhaps..." It was the rasping voice of the Beast who addressed her now. Taunted her, letting her know HE was in control, that the Vincent she loved was buried somewhere deep within that other cold blackness. It was letting her know she could not save her Vincent, for HE would not relinquish control. It savored its freedom lusciously. "... perhaps, I am the part of him he really wants you to know."

Reliving that memory, Vincent cried out from the depths of agony and misery - the blackness had surfaced and had touched Catherine! It only gave horrifying credence to his belief that he had become the Beast and had attacked Catherine. His brain reeled with the realization of the heinous act that he believed had been committed by himself upon Catherine. Kneeling, folded over on himself, Vincent sat back on his heels and, throwing his head backward, roared out his rage and anguish.

Diana wanted to reach out and touch him, to comfort him, but it was the quiet voice that enclosed him and touched his heart and his tormented soul. Catherine had spanned the abyss of timelessness to call out to him.

"I'm here, Vincent. I'm always here." Catherine's softly spoken words reached out to surround Vincent. "Your love lives within me. Mine lives within you. Believe the words I spoke were true."

The voice was filled with such infinite love that Diana wanted to weep, for she knew where the words had come from and to whom they were directed. As Diana watched, she saw Vincent's shuddering body relax and his powerful frame, racked with sobs a moment before, become stilled. Then, Diana felt it, too. Something moved out of the darkness like a caress and their love swirled over her and around her, filling the cave with its essence.

Vincent remembered. Fighting past the imagined horror, he had, at last, yielded his mind to memory and the cave was filled with the intensity of that remembering. He remembered, as one awakening from a dream relives the terrors or euphoria that have clung like fading memories to the waking mind.

He cried out his love to her, "Catherine!"

He felt the sweet flood of joy, of comfort and love shouldering aside the darkness and rage. The sadness dissipated in the power of their love. The accumulated terrors and tensions of the past weeks, and of that night, swelled and broke in a fierce explosion of love. He felt the light and happiness pouring into his heart and mind from Catherine. The sharing of themselves in the most intimate way there is. The mixture of strangeness, of tenderness. And, because of the oneness of the bond they shared, their bodies already seemed to know the feel of the other. Their coming

together was an ecstasy that would survive beyond death. At last, Vincent finally knew and could accept the truth of Catherine's words, "We loved!"

Diana wept silently, joyfully for them both. She drew her eyes away from Vincent. She felt like an intruder. She knew she could leave him in this place now. He would heal. He had found the truth he had searched for so desperately. Looking up, she saw the shadowy outline of a woman standing in the cave doorway. Somehow she knew that it was Narcissa. Rising from the floor, Diana walked slowly over to this very special woman who was so instrumental in giving Vincent's heart and life back to him.

Narcissa turned her white eyes to peer sightlessly through the darkness toward Vincent. "Veen-cent will be well now. He has found himself again." Her voice was deep and quiet, her words marked by a pleasant, lilting accent.

"Come," the woman peered into Diana's face, a secret smile softening her prominent dark features, "I will guide you out."

PART SEVEN

In the past, her dream of him never went beyond that of pure emotion and sensation - the promise of erotic contact hovering expectantly in the air around her. She would let her mind reach out to him and be free to experience what it might be like to receive his love, to be made love to by him.

In her dream, she always created a place devoid of identifying signposts where they could come together safely, separate and apart from all that intruded upon their lives. Tonight, she welcomed that other reality. She pulled herself out of the wearying substance of everyday life and surrendered willingly to the balm of sleep.

She was kneeling on the floor, legs folded under her. Her nakedness seemed natural. She hugged her arms around her body and, closing her eyes, reached out to touch the surrounding environment, to sense where she was. To sense him. She knew when her eyes opened that she would be deep within his domain, protectively enclosed within the cragged rock walls. All was imbued with a profound silence.

An air of hushed expectancy permeated the rock walls. It was a feather-like impression breathing softly across her naked body, stirring the nerve ends to electrical excitement. She held her breath, as if breathing would disturb the very fabric of the air which, in turn, would bring about the cessation of the dream. All her senses came into play and, now, she heard water cascading soft and musical in the distance. Beneath her legs, she felt the coolness of sand. The texture gritty and yielding against her skin. A waft of air brushed across her skin, as soft as the gentle exploration of a lover's hands - Vincent's hands - caressing her in all the places the breeze had so intimately touched. She silently whispered his name, wanting him near.

Vincent.

The rock chamber became infused with an overpowering sensual presence radiating a sexual energy that surrounded and engulfed her, stimulating her already intensely acute awareness of him soaring to new heights. From behind her, she heard the barely audible sound of bare feet crossing the sand.

Vincent.

She held herself in waiting. She felt the nakedness of his powerful body lightly brush against her as he lowered himself to kneel close behind her. The heady musky scent of his body reached out to surround her, and she quivered in ecstasy as he moved closer against her.

Strong, furred thighs eased forward locking possessively along her own. She felt his strength and virility through that singularly erotic, burning contact. She was conscious with every fiber of her being of the muscular hardness of his body at each heated point along her back and hips. The fur of his chest and abdomen brushed like silk against her, creating its own sensual stimulation to her senses. He moved closer and she could feel the deep, even cadence of his breathing as his powerful chest nudged against her naked skin.

His large, clawed hands skimmed carefully across her skin as he gathered the long length of her auburn hair, lifting it gently aside. He leaned forward and his clefted mouth traced the sensitive curve of her neck, igniting a trail of fire and flame on her shoulder and across her back wherever he touched her. His lips explored the curved smoothness of her neck and delicately brushed against her earlobe. She felt the tip of his tongue, disturbingly warm and moist and sensual upon her skin. Tremors ran through her whole being and, to steady herself, she threw her head back. The move backward was halted by his massive shoulder.

The dream had never progressed this far. She had always awakened trying to shake the overpowering surge of emotions and sensations that clung fever-like to her mind and body. But, this time, the dream had taken on a reality never present before. This was not the vaporous, changeable quality of which dreams are made. The thin line separating the two worlds had disappeared, melding them into an indistinguishable oneness. The dream had suddenly become intensely real, and she was submerged in a tide of passion so deep, she felt lost in it. She searched futilely for a more solid reality, all the while drowning in the scorching intimacy of his touch - of his imagined touch. For she tried desperately to convince herself that Vincent could not be real, but only a desire manifesting within her dream, as were the physical sensations surging through her body. Had their worlds faded and blended until one had trapped the other? Was it possible to take another human being into your dreams and hold that person captive there? Was she caught in his dream world, or he in hers?

"I am real, Diana," the rumbling softness of his voice whispered hoarsely against her ear.

The warmth of him so close caused her heart to accelerate and pound uncontrollably. The virility and sinewy strength of his body surrounded her as he pressed closer. His arms encircled her within the tenderest embrace, and he encompassed her with his quietness until the passion that had flared, calmed and became still.

"Diana," his mouth pressed softly near her ear, "for us, this is all there can be," and then he eased away from her.

She cried out silently at his leaving. Bereft of the warmth of his body, she felt cold and terribly alone. Turning, she looked up into his smokey-blue eyes and found compassion there, and something not quite readable. Was he telling her, in this dream, that for them there was to be nothing closer than what they already shared? Even in the depth of her sleep, Diana felt the sadness of that possibility. She felt her throat tighten and the tears press closely behind her eyes.

"Come." Vincent held out one furred hand to her.

A short distance away, the black waters of a small pond shimmered in the soft light of the cavern. Diana placed her hand in his and rose to her feet. Claspng her hand within the gentle warmth of his rough palm, he led her to the pond's edge and, stepping into the water first, he turned to her.

"Will you follow me on this journey?"

His eyes held a question beyond that which he asked - one she understood but could not have given voice to it. The answer to what lay ahead for them could be found only within that inward-looking journey where questions were asked and answers given - all without words. It would be in the act of simply knowing that their future together or apart would be revealed to them. Diana was unsure if she wanted to know the answer. But, if Vincent were with her, she would take the journey with him to find the answer.

He had released his slight grasp of her hand, turning his own so that her smaller one rested loose and free within his opened palm, his clawed fingers touching lightly the underside of her wrist. She was like the unicorn within the hunter's fenced corral, captured but still able to leap the fence and escape if she chose. The choice was hers. Escaping from him was not her choice and she stepped freely and willingly into the waters to stand close before him. In the changeable and capricious manner of dreams, one instant they stood side by side, the water lapping coolly about their ankles, the next instant they were swimming easily, synchronously, across the seemingly endless width of the pond. The water was an erotic stimulation flowing across Diana's naked body, arousing her more intensely with each stroke she swam. She was being touched everywhere at once. Her breasts, her stomach, her thighs, her groin were being aroused to a point of excitement beyond which she found it impossible to continue swimming beside him. The water and Vincent had become one. As it caressed her body, so did he.

She dove under the water to change the flow of it and found herself able to see clearer than when above. Within the tranquility of the water depths, she found the clarity of her thoughts startling. She was able to define clearly what it was she wanted of herself and of Vincent. The direction they would be headed and what the journey would hold for them. He had joined her within the bluish-tinted water and swam effortlessly toward her with the fluid grace of a golden-fleshed merman. He stopped to hover before her in the water, his mane spreading out around his head like a wavering, gold, luminous cloud, his naked body shimmered in the underwater light. With an indiscernible movement of his body, Vincent rose slowly to the surface. Her own movements as seemingly effortless, Diana floated slowly to the surface, following Vincent's upward journey.

She surfaced, emerging out of the water inches from Vincent. As her upper torso cleared the water, his huge hands caught her around the waist, holding her free and clear of the now black waters. She grasped his powerful shoulders for support and looked down into his calm blue eyes.

Instead of releasing her, he lowered her slowly along the slippery length of his naked body and she felt the potent virility and sinewy strength encompassed within him. Her equilibrium wavered and she reached out to steady herself. Her hands contacted the muscular hardness of his shoulders. With trembling fingers, she traced the muscles under the light covering of fur. When he moved, she could feel the power coiled there, laying taut just beneath the surface as his arms encircled her, his embrace tightly enfolding her. Her arms went around his neck as he lowered her a fraction more along his body. She could feel every magnificent inch of his body against hers, from breast to thighs. She felt his manhood pressing against her and marveled at its touch.

One arm released her and he raised clawed fingers to gently stroke across her smooth, damp cheek before lifting the wet, auburn hair away. He had spoken to words to her since stepping into the water. His face was but a breath away and she wanted desperately to place her mouth on his, to savor the taste of him. The infinitesimal space between their lips began to close and she felt the sweet hunger of his kiss, but there had been no contact. Their hips moved closer and she felt the throbbing pressure of his tumescent flesh as he entered her, enshrouding himself deeply and completely inside her. Her body burned with the heat of his lovemaking, yet he had not touched her.

His hand cradled her cheek and he pulled her head to his massive chest. Resting his whiskered jaw lightly against her forehead, he held her with infinite tenderness for a very long time. Why had he not physically made love to her? The sensations had been powerful enough that she felt as if he had, but he had merely encompassed her tenderly within his arms and let her own dreams and wishes create that which he could not give to her.

"I feel and understand your need, Diana. Your desire is strong and, in this place only will hunger be fulfilled." His lips pressed tenderly against her forehead, "But know, for now, that it will not truly be me. Not yet."

And that was her heartrending answer, she could dream of him making love to her, but he was unable to return her love, even in the dream state. Diana lifted her head from the comforting hardness of his powerful chest and gazed into the gentleness of his eyes.

"I desire no dream image, Vincent." She passed her fingers lightly across his lips. "It is the reality of your touch that I crave and, until I can have you, I will wait."

"Know that what we have shared here in this place... this is all we can have. Certain events must evolve before we are allowed to experience outside of this reality. And until such time as I am able, Diana, this is all I can give you. Carry the memory close within you. Hold it for the future."

He lowered his golden head and his lips touched hers without pressure, the contact as light as his breath and she was overwhelmed by the physical sensations surging through her body; more wonderful, more powerful than what had occurred before. Though not joined physically, they were no longer two separate bodies. They had become one entity, melded into a single overpowering erotic oneness. Their bodies surging together in the timeless rhythm of lovemaking. She gasped for air, her breathing sharp and labored, and she cried out silently within her dream for release from the tension growing deep within her. It came with his phantom touch and the remembrance of his deep-timbered voice whispering her name.

"Diana!"

PART EIGHT

She heard Vincent's voice warm against her ear, calling softly to her, "Diana!" Then it became more urgent and she felt him touch her.

Swimming up from the depths of her sleep, she awoke slowly, the powerfully erotic sensations from the dream tenaciously clinging to her body and mind. Her flesh, damp and hot, still tingled from the remembered contact.

She awoke to his urgent whisper, "Diana, wake up!" Unbelievably, he was inside her loft, kneeling beside her davenport, reaching out toward her.

Embarrassed, and still disoriented from the power of the dream, Diana sat up, drawing away from Vincent, pushing backward, trying to sink into the soft, plump cushions away from his touch. The dream had been so potently real that she was fearful it would be visible to his eyes.

"What's wrong, Diana?" Vincent's concern colored his voice.

"Please, do not come any closer, Vincent." Her voice sounded thick and unfamiliar to her own ears.

"Are you ill?" The hand he reached out to touch her with was halted, just before contacting her moist forehead, by her urgent request.

"No," she assured him, "I'm okay." She didn't want him to think she abhorred his touch, that hadn't been the reason she had backed away from him. Had he made contact with her skin, even as innocent as it would have been, that would have added fuel to the fire. He would have felt it through his empathic abilities.

"I had a dream, that's all." *Boy, is that an understatement, Bennett!* Diana took a deep, head-clearing breath and opened her eyes. "Some dreams are a bit hard to shake clear of." She smiled weakly at him, hoping he would be convinced she was all right. But the steady intensity of his concerned blue-eyed gaze was too much for her.

She closed her eyes to shut out his image. It was difficult to silence his words from the dream and shake off the sensations that still scorched her flesh. So strong were they that her skin felt hot and damp from the dream-state lovemaking. Lovemaking which had not taken place, she briskly

reminded herself. But her traitorous body failed to acknowledge that fact. The vaporous wall between the two worlds was still dangerously thin. Her voice trembled and, had her eyes not been tightly shut, she would have seen the frown that creased Vincent's brow, unconvinced that all was as it should be with her.

"Tell me."

"I can't!" How could she tell him about its powerful eroticism? "Some dreams are best not shared," was all she could manage to say. She was shutting him again, and she didn't want that. He deserved more of an explanation. She tried to explain it in another way.

"As long as you don't touch me, those dreams are mine - private. Nothing personal, Vincent, I just prefer them that way."

He bowed his golden head, deep in his own thoughts for a long silent moment. When he raised it, his cerulean blue eyes met and locked onto her, holding her gaze so steadfastly that she couldn't turn away from him. His rough-timbered voice spoke softly and the greatest of tenderness touching his words.

"I know about the dream, Diana. When I touched you awake, it was still there." His voice revealed his essential gentle nature, and the kindness that was so integral a part of him came through. Diana was unwrapped in an embarrassing situation and he was doing his best to ease her discomfort.

"I have had such dreams myself... about Catherine."

Diana shifted uncomfortably amongst the cushions. "You were lovers," she stated simply.

"Only in my dreams, Diana." The pain and regret of unrealized fulfillment filled his voice.

Diana hurt for him, for she, too, had felt the pain and ecstasy of those kinds of dreams. She had just awakened from one. He had been the center of it and it still soared through her with a fire that refused to dampen down. Since going with Vincent into the cavern and experiencing the emotions felt by him and Catherine in that dark place, she had found it more and more difficult to shed those impassioned memories when coming back into her own world. She tried to explain how she carried them with her.

"Occasionally, when I am working, the thoughts and feelings of others come into and become a part of me, Vincent. It takes me a while to separate from them." She felt her skin flush with an unsettling realization. "I was having such a dream just now... and when you touched me... I was afraid you might find it disturbing."

Vincent lowered his head, his features veiled behind the fall of golden mane. "Some were still there," he revealed carefully. He was silent for several moments, searching for the right words to say to ease her discomfort. Raising his head, compassionate blue eyes sought and held hers. He had been flooded with the fading wash of erotic emotions from her dream. Though they had begun to wane, they were still potently evident to his acute empathic sensitivities. What he had felt there, the power of the dream, and the still vivid image that revealed his part in it, had startled him, but had not disturbed him.

"But, what you experienced, Diana... those were your own images, not those of Catherine, and I. Admit to them, accept them. Do not be embarrassed by them. I am not."

He had meant to ease any embarrassment she might be feeling, but it was not entirely successful. Still, she was grateful for his attempt. Rising from the davenport, she walked into the kitchen area. She paused a moment before the center island and then turned to face him. In one easy fluid movement, Vincent rose to his feet, the wool and leather fabric of his cloak whispering around him. It always surprised Diana that no matter how long between the times that she saw him, she would forget how imposing a figure he made, how he seemed to fill the room, how comforting his presence could be.

He was watching her, his attention focused solely upon her.

"I have become so bound - so intertwined, with you and your world, Vincent, I do not know where my dreams begin and where they end. Just now, when I awoke..." The wall between dreaming and the finite world continued to waver within Diana's mind, and she tried desperately to solidify it, "I was still a bit disoriented."

She began to pace restlessly, following the same path Vincent had traced the night she bullied him into talking about Catherine. Now, it appeared, it was her turn to bare her soul.

"Since going with you to that cavern, experiencing your emotions and Catherine's, I do not know which are mine, or which belong to you and Catherine - what is dream and what is reality." She swung her arms wide, indicating her loft room. "Perhaps this is all a dream. Just a different scene - another part - of that dream from which I haven't fully awakened."

She was quiet for a moment, caught in the middle of a whirlwind of emotion she was finding difficult to get under control. Unusual for her, as self-control - keeping a rein on her emotions - had become an integral and essential part of her makeup. It kept her world sane and in balance when facing the horrors of her professional life. She desperately needed that stability now.

"The dreams have been increasingly persistent. They are but a small part of what I have felt since finding you. Perhaps, it wasn't necessary to tell you - you may have known about them before tonight. But since I now know you are aware of them and, since touching me awake, you must have sensed my feelings about you...."

Diana walked over to where Vincent stood silent and motionless near the couch. She stopped and looked up at his tall, quiet form, studying his face. Unafraid of most situations that faced her, she had never found one that quite unnerved her the way this one did. Dream or reality, whatever the outcome, her life would be irrevocably changed within the next few moments. Had his eyes not been such a calm blue, she would never have had the courage to speak. She could blame it on the fiery memories of the dream, or the need to work off the intense physical hunger for him still clinging to her mind and body. Whatever was driving her forward, her uncharacteristic verbosity was the only way, at the moment, that seemed open to her.

"Sometimes I make wrong choices. I hope this is not one of them. If this is a dream..." Her words faded off into nothingness. She hesitated a moment before continuing to steady her racing pulse. Diana's knees were suddenly weak and she wanted to sit down, but she stood her ground, pushing herself into her future, however uncertain it was to become.

"I love you, Vincent. It is a love stronger than friend for friend." She paused, choosing her words carefully. "I know Catherine will always own the largest part of your heart. I don't want to take her place, I simply want to find my own with you - be a part of your life. If you can only accept me as a friend, then I will be your friend. If knowing I love you makes you uncomfortable, if you stay away because you know that about me... then, I will accept your decision." She raised her hands in helpless gesture.

She suddenly found herself blushing at her forthrightness and, uncharacteristically, she lowered her head to hide her face, then turned and walked around him to stand by her desk. This time she was the one who was deep in thought, idly tracing her fingers across some immobile surface.

Vincent stood silent and unmoving where she had left him. She had forgotten how quiet and still he could be. She had presented him with a bomb he may not have been ready to handle as yet. Perhaps, it was still too soon, too close to his newly reawakened memories of Catherine. Diana silently cursed herself. Her usual good sense seemed to have deserted her. She spoke across the narrow space separating them.

"I apologize, Vincent, if I have embarrassed or offended you in any way by my outburst. However, I do not apologize for what I said, because it is the truth. And, although I admit to using the dream as an excuse to bring it out in the open, know that the words came fully from my heart."

"I am honored by your feelings toward me, Diana - and by your honesty." He moved slowly over to stand beside her. He reached out to touch her but stayed his hand. "I have been aware of your dreams. In that way, we seem to have become linked. Catherine and I had our bond. I could feel her emotions and find her in the world above me. Through her, the closeness of our bond gave me a freedom I had never known before. When that bond ended, I felt an unbearable aloneness."

He reached out and touched her, turning her gently toward him. His massively strong hands lightly clasping her arms.

"Diana, know that I will treasure your feelings toward me. Embarrassed by them? No. Offended by them? How could I be? To be loved by someone is to receive the greatest gift one person can give to another. As for our friendship, I would find my world empty without it."

His hands slid down her arms to grasp her hands. He held them enfolded within his, his thumbs rubbing gently across her tender skin. Looking down between them at their hands, he whispered softly, "there are still things I must do before I can truly be at peace with myself and with Catherine. You have made that more a possibility. You helped me find myself and have given me back my memories of Catherine. And for that, I will be eternally grateful."

He released one of her hands, and placing his fingers under her chin, gently raised her face. Her moist brown eyes met his.

"For now, we must go slowly to discover what happens between us. But I think each of our worlds would be quite barren without the other in it."

"Yes," Diana replied softly. She saw the warm possibilities of someday within the soft, tender gaze of his blue eyes. At least he would be part of that someday and, with that knowledge, Diana's heart overflowed with happiness. For now, it was time to awaken from the dream and touch once more to reality. She brushed the wetness from her face and smiled up at him with another affirming, "Yes."

PART NINE

Eric concentrated all of his attention on building the fire. It was proving to be a bit more difficult than he thought it would be, but he worked diligently to get the small flame started, tending it with great care.

Watching his young friend's efforts for a few moments, Vincent returned to the entrance that led into the chamber housing the Mirror pool and removed the single torch there from its iron sconce. Walking back into the chamber room, he lit a second torch a short distance past where Eric was engrossed in his fire-building endeavors.

Held securely against him, Vincent's son slept contentedly within his arms. Jacob's well-padded bottom rested upon his father's strong arm, his head tucked under Vincent's whiskered jawline. The tiny arms stretched wide to encircle the powerful neck of the giant man who held him so tenderly. Vincent strode slowly back to stand near Eric who was now blowing gently across the tiny flame, teasing it into fuller growth. At last, the fire caught and Eric looked triumphantly up at his tall friend.

"There, it's ready, Vincent," he said, proud of his accomplishment. He rose from the earthen floor to stand beside Vincent, his smaller shadow joining Vincent's against the wall behind them. "Did you remember to bring Jacob's letter?"

"Yes," Vincent nodded.

Somehow, during the past day or two, Eric had managed to fit his ever-present stubby pencil into the child's hand and, lightly holding Jacob's chubby fish within his own hand, had let the infant make some scratches on a scrap of paper - which Eric had also provided. When Vincent

suggested that perhaps Jacob should wait until he could write his own words, Eric assured him that he could do that later. But, for now, the 'picture' Jacob had drawn would be just fine to send to Catherine. He was certain she would be happy with it. Vincent agreed, she would be. Now, the two stood silently waiting for the fire to build enough to carry their messages to Catherine, for Eric had written one as well.

There was a noise at the entrance which caused Eric to shift uneasily beside Vincent. Vincent looked toward the entryway to find Pascal, Jamie and Brooke standing in the doorway. Eric very definitely looked uncomfortable now.

"I hope you don't mind, Vincent," his small voice spoke somewhat hesitantly, "I told a few people what we were going to do. Said you might not mind if they sent a letter to Catherine, too. Okay?" His eyes looked huge and uncertain behind the thick eyeglass lenses.

Vincent looked down at the youngster standing uncertainly at his side. This boy's heart was ten times his diminutive size. Eric had sensed the need in others within their community to say goodbye to Catherine as well. Over a year ago, they had all attended Catherine's funeral. Above. But that had been a formal ceremony, designed for mourning and not for the easing of grief. This more personal ceremony healed in the deeper hurting places, the lonely places, and it helped to bring, first, Ellie and, now, Catherine closer for a needed few moments more.

Vincent smiled down at the young boy, placing his massive hand gently on the boy's thin shoulder, reassuring him. "That was a fine idea, Eric. We will wait until everyone is here."

Slowly, one by one, they filed into the cavernous room. Father, who had been so uncertain about this young woman who had come into his son's life. Certain she would only bring him pain and unhappiness. She did. But it came with her death and not with the love and the dreams she had given him while she lived. Pascal, quiet and steadfast who loved her because of her love for Vincent. Brooke and Jamie who had known her such a short time, and who now made themselves the surrogate mothers for Catherine's son. The gentle-hearted Mary, gruff William with tears silently dampening his round cheeks, the quieter Mouse who had given her a gift from a treasure ship simply because she was Vincent's friend. Laura and Rebecca, and all the others whose lives Catherine had touched so briefly but whose legacy to them had been her love and trust, her courage and devotion. Each stood quietly remembering, thinking private thoughts, each carrying with them a small piece of paper with farewells and very special memories written upon them, for Catherine was someone who had left a very empty space in their lives.

Jacob stirred sleepily in his father's arms, fussing for a moment before waking. Vincent's clawed fingers gently rubbed the child's back, soothing him awake, his lips lightly brushing his son's soft, pink forehead. The small head raised from its resting place on Vincent's shoulder to look upward into his father's smokey-blue eyes. Looking down, Vincent was lost in sea-green eyes so much like Catherine's that a pain shot through him. Jacob's tiny hand brushed across his father's softly whiskered chin for a moment, reassuring himself that all was well within his small world, then he put his head back down on his father's broad shoulder and once more succumbed to sleep.

"I think Jacob should send his first, don't you, Vincent?" Eric looked up at Vincent waiting for his answer.

Vincent nodded and, reaching behind his wide belt where he had placed it securely, he pulled out that tiny scrap of paper Eric had designated as belonging to Jacob. He handed it to Eric.

"Would you place Jacob's in the fire for him? I think he would appreciate your help."

Beaming with pride for the honor he felt had been bestowed upon him, Eric slowly approached the fire and, kneeling down, he thought for a moment and then spoke aloud.

"This is from Jacob, Catherine. He is asleep right now so I'm sending it for him. When he gets older, he can write a real letter to you. He did this drawing. It's his first. I think you'll like it."

With special care, Eric placed the tiny offering in the very center of the fire and watched it burn for a moment. He turned a questioning look upward at Vincent, who smiled gently and nodded his head.

Eric knelt before the small fire and looked upward as he spoke, "Thank you, Catherine, for bringing me here. I love you. I miss you. So does Vincent."

He then put his own letter in the fire and rose to his feet. Going over to stand near Vincent, he placed his small hand in Vincent's, gripping it tightly for just a moment.

"Now you."

Vincent nodded and knelt before the fire. He sat silent for a moment, his head bowed. He looked upon the folded paper in his hand. Everything he had wanted to say to Catherine, but never had, all the unfulfilled dreams they had both wished for, all the memories of their time together, were encompassed within the few words he had written upon it. Then, before slowly releasing it to the flames, he pressed it to his lips. His heart went with the ashes as they rose upward.

Brooke and Jamie had taken the sleeping Jacob with them. Everyone had gone when Vincent noticed Eric standing deep in thought by the dying fire. Walking over to the boy, Vincent knelt down near him, concerned about his silence.

"What is it, Eric?"

"I was just thinking, wouldn't it be nice if Catherine and Ellie were together? I think they would like that, don't you?"

Vincent spoke quietly, "Yes, Eric, I do. I think they would like that very much."

Eric moved closer to Vincent, touching him, leaning a bit against Vincent's body, feeling comfort in his nearness. Eric was quiet for some moments longer as he stared into the waning fire.

"Can we stay a bit longer, Vincent?"

Vincent understood the boy's need for solitude at this time, he felt a similar need. Without speaking, he pulled the boy into the circle of his powerful arms. The torches guttered and made small fire storms in their sconces. The water in the Mirror pool whispered against its banks. Neither man nor boy spoke for a long time.

"Vincent, when I die will you write a letter to me?"

"If I can, Eric."

There was another long silence within the rocky chamber.

"I'll write one to you, too, Vincent."

"Thank you, Eric."

Eric sat on the sandy floor next to Vincent. A few minutes passed and he leaned, touching shoulder to shoulder with Vincent. Vincent, too, found a special comfort in the closeness of his young companion. The two friends stayed near the Mirror pool long after the flames had died down and until the embers were almost cold.

"Vincent, when does the hurt and loneliness go away?"

"I don't know, Eric."

PART TEN

My life is defined by all those whose lives touch mine. Tonight, with the innocent, compassionate heart of childhood, one of those lives reached out to push back the shadows of grief that had encroached upon my soul. He had felt the need in all of us, especially myself, for one final, healing farewell to Catherine. The need to say on paper all the things that had never been spoken. To let her go with our heart's words, to finally let go.

Eric and I had stayed long after everyone had left. The hour was late and, as we watched the fire die to glowing embers, Eric fell asleep leaning against my shoulder. I carried him back to the children's chamber thinking how blessed we all were to have him in our world. In a way, he is a gift from Catherine, for had she not rescued Eric and his sister from the cruelties of the foster home, our Tunnel world would have one less beautiful gift from the world Above. Eric is not the only gift to come from the city above us. There is another who helped make tonight a less painful possibility for me.

I went above tonight and, once again, I found myself on Diana's rooftop. Her windows were dark. She slept somewhere within. Who is this remarkable woman? Who is this person who has proven to be a dearer friend than I could have ever imagined? Her compassion warms me. Her courage astounds me - for it took courage to make that descent into darkness with me. I had wrapped myself in sorrow and wore it like a secondary cloak about me. Because of her insistent prodding, she helped strip those sorrows away and revealed that my fears were unfounded. She helped shed light into the dark corners of my life where I had refused it admittance, preferring instead the solitary darkness of my own self-pity.

It took courage for her to help open up wounds that I had refused to look at because I feared they would be too painful. She prodded, not gently, and forced me to recognize and acknowledge truths I had refused to admit were possibilities. Because we returned to that subterranean chamber searching for truth, my memories of Catherine will now hold less pain.

I am aware of the dreams Diana has had - and my part in them. I sense in her, strong feelings for me - feelings which I cannot return. For that place in my heart is not yet ready to open to another.

I look at the future and no longer see emptiness but only the wealth of possibilities. I see the truth of what has ended, of what is new, and know the joy in refinding myself.

THE END