

# A MATTER OF TIME

by Heather Peters

## FRIDAY - 8 P.M.

Soaked to the skin, droplets of rainwater dripping from her hair, Catherine entered the candlelit chamber, yearning for warmth. Slipping off her sopping raincoat and waterlogged heels, she shivered as a chill rushed through her.

But that chill was quickly put to rest when she felt the blessed warmth of a big, fluffy bath towel being wrapped around her from behind. She sighed and turned in the arms of her mate.

"Mmm, bless your heart," she purred, taking the towel from him to blot her wet hair. Raising on her tiptoes, she eagerly sought his lips, and was met with a deep, loving kiss from Vincent.

"Catherine, you're freezing." He assisted her as she towel dried her hair and noticed that her slacks were plastered to her slender legs and derriere. His body then tightened with awareness as she moved closer to him, seeking more warmth than the towel could provide.

"The newspapers are saying that it's the worst storm the East Coast has suffered in over eighty years," she told him, as his fingers went to the front of her blouse, undoing the pearl buttons while she spoke to him about the storm that had raged Above for over two days now.

She closed her eyes, loving the feel of his hands on her. "I've never seen rain like this, Vincent, never."

He stopped his ministrations and looked at her. "The children, are they ...?"

Catherine placed her hand over his. "They're fine, don't worry. I got them safely to Jenny's place." She smiled. "They were so excited about spending the weekend with her little boy, they almost forgot I was there. They're going to have a wonderful time. Nancy and Rebecca will be there with their children. Jenny told me that if the weather gets worse, the twins can stay with them until Sunday. I brought enough clothes to last them. Okay?"

Vincent smiled, then sighed, lightly kissing her forehead. "I know Jenny will take great care of them, but Catherine, two whole days without them?" His tone was teasing, almost playful. "What will we do with our time?"

Catherine chuckled as she finished unbuttoning her blouse. "Oh, we'll think of something. I know we're going to miss them very much."

"I already miss them." He watched as she walked from him to shed the rest of her wet clothes. She was still so beautiful, he mused, as he openly gazed upon her nakedness, growing hard with desire. Turning from her for only a moment, he walked to the chamber door, making sure it was secured and locked for the night. Ever since he and Cullen designed and carved the heavy oak door for their chamber, privacy had become a wonderful luxury for them.

He was untying his suede vest as he walked back to Catherine, who had wrapped the towel around her, the end tucked neatly between her breasts. She now watched him as he undressed, and was still amazed that after all these years together, the sight of his naked body was still able to make her burn for him. They'd certainly come a long way since she came to be with him over six years ago. The birth of their four-year old twins, Arielle and Peter, had only deepened their love and commitment, and Catherine felt fortunate that she had been given such precious gifts as Vincent and her children. They had discussed having another baby soon, and she hoped this weekend would give them a little much-needed time together.

"Did you kiss the children for me?" He came up behind her so quietly, she almost gasped.

She nodded, then leaned into him as he pushed her long hair aside and nuzzled her neck with hot little kisses. His nakedness burned into her as his hand came around to gently pull the end of the towel from her. She turned in his arms, her body revealed to him, and he drew a deep breath, allowing himself to drink in her warmth and womanly scent.

"Come," he bade her, breathless with want as her hands found the source of his arousal. He ached from her touch, then led her to their bed. "I'll warm you."

Their bodies touched as he perched himself above her, their mutual desire flooding the bond. Catherine sighed softly as Vincent slowly bent his head and kissed her. His lips were soft and warm, brushing gently back and forth across hers until she strained to him, longing for him to give her more.

Hypnotized by his kiss and his warmth, Catherine arched her back, pressing her body to his, her breaths becoming quicker and deeper. Breathless, she tore her lips from his. "Warmer ..." she murmured in his ear. "Make me warmer."

In answer, Vincent's arms went around her back, pushing her closer. Her breasts pressed into his, and Catherine loved the intimate contact they shared. Rubbing herself erotically against his hips, she welcomed his mouth as it met hers once more. The kiss deepened as their bodies struggled to merge. Vincent stroked her back as she molded to his heat.

His erection was steel encased in velvet, aching with untold need. Oh, how he wanted her. Through their bond, Catherine sensed his craving need and looked deep into his eyes, telling him she needed him just as much.

When he parted her legs and touched her, he found her ready for him. When he entered her, they gazed at each other, and Vincent was filled with a primitive need to possess her totally, completely. Catherine looked up at the man who was buried deep within her, and wished to keep him inside her forever. They held a beautiful power over each other, it was a power that was stronger than anything either had ever experienced. It was more than physical or emotional or spiritual. It was indescribable.

Vincent was entirely sheathed by her flesh, and hearing her moan with pleasure, began to move inside her, their bodies rising higher and higher, their skin glistening with beads of sweat, their mouths aching to kiss. So he kissed her, again and again, lips touching, tongues meeting, while their bodies tensed with anticipation. Catherine was calling his name, begging him to fall with her, to go over the edge, together, and he wanted only to give her anything she wanted.

They gave to each other, until their mutual completion shattered them with ecstasy and filled them with wonder, even after all their years together. They clung to each other, neither willing to let go.

Falling asleep in his wonderful, loving arms, Catherine murmured, "I love you," before Vincent followed her into peaceful slumber. They lay side by side, naked as the day they were born, their bodies still joined intimately.

#### **FRIDAY - 11:30 P.M.**

With Catherine asleep in his arms, her bare skin touching his so intimately, Vincent savored her closeness as he lay awake, silently reflecting on the life they'd shared for the past six years.

They'd been blessed with a happy life, a life filled with love and laughter, sharing and family.

And his babies, Arielle and Peter. How strong was a father's love, he thought wistfully. He never realized the intensity with which he loved the twins. They shared his blood and Catherine's blood. They shared in his life,

his legacy. They were part of him, and of Catherine. His children were the best part of what it meant to be human.

He missed them.

Silently, he laughed and shook his head, knowing he felt as Catherine did. Even though they'd be gone for only a short time, he couldn't wait to see them.

Watching Catherine as she slept peacefully beside him, he was suddenly reminded of the fragility of the only world he would ever know. Every day he was thankful that Catherine had chosen to share that world with him. What would he do if the tunnels were suddenly threatened with a natural disaster, like the storm that was raging Above? Of course, the tunnels had faced danger before. There was the Burch tower that almost destroyed their world, the outsiders that had killed before they were stopped, and the constant threat of Paracelsus that hung over their heads.

Always, though, their world had survived, and Vincent was grateful. But what if this time was different? He was well aware of the dangers of a storm of this magnitude. Underground cables could rot from water, therefore causing a fire. Even though they were deep under the ground, the possibility of water seeping into the park entrance and to the secret door, were very real.

Just recently, he and Pascal had been investigating some of the weaker rock walls on the first level, and both men had agreed, that if the tunnels were hit by very strong rains, not only would the park entrance flood, but the excess water may very well begin to destroy the walls that led to the second level.

The main hub.

Vincent already knew for a fact that the walls in the maze were directly connected to the sewer drainage system in the north section of Central Park. Should the combination of wind and rain hit that locale, he knew the tunnels would have to be prepared for major flooding.

If the walls in the maze collapsed, and the possibility was always there, there was no doubt about it, the main hub would be affected. But how much? And how much longer would the hurricane continue? If it didn't let up soon, Vincent knew he'd have to call the community together, have a council meeting, and attempt to prevent the residents from panicking.

No matter what, a hurricane was something that could not be controlled, and as much as he tried to push it from his mind, Vincent couldn't stop thinking about their situation.

He decided to read the evening paper Catherine had brought home and rose from the bed without disturbing her, trying to push away the nagging thoughts that entered his mind.

### **11:45 P.M.**

The rain continued to fall -- relentless, pouring, teeming down upon New York City. The sewers in Central Park overflowed, traffic was jammed for miles, and still it rained ...

For three days, the city was being held in the grip of something that was uncontrollable, with no end in sight. Power lines were down, tempers were short, and still it rained.

Autumn leaves were torn from the trees in the park, homes on the shore were destroyed, and the New York City subway system was literally crippled. People in Staten Island had to be evacuated because of the threat to their homes.

And still it rained.

### **MIDNIGHT**

Catherine turned and touched the empty space next to her in the large bed. Opening her eyes, she saw Vincent sitting at the table in the center of the chamber, reading the newspaper, a frown creasing his brow.

She became concerned and left the bed to go to him. "Vincent, what is it? What's the matter?"

He shook his head, pointing to the newspaper headline about the storm.

She moved closer to him, sharing his warmth and concern. "You're thinking about the storm," she said lightly.

He nodded. "Yes, and about the children."

"Ah, you miss them as much as I do." She managed to draw a tiny smile from him.

Vincent didn't answer her, just stared at the newspaper in front of him. "Something's wrong." He heard Catherine's voice enter his thoughts.

"Yes, I feel a strange sense of ..."

"Danger?" Catherine asked. "Trouble?"

He looked up to meet her eyes. "I - I don't know."

Catherine knew that once Vincent centered his thoughts on a subject, he could brood over it forever, so she decided to take a different route to detour his emotions, to channel them into something more ... pleasurable.

"All this talk of the hurricane," she took his hands in hers and slowly led him back to the bed, "has you nervous." Vincent knew exactly what she was up to, and allowed her free rein to do anything she wanted.

"Why don't you let me help you to forget all about the weather and move on to more ... um .... pleasant things."

In the space of an instant, their places were reversed and she found herself beneath the power of his body. Laying under him, she conveyed to him through their bond how much she wanted him, needed him. Vincent touched his lips to hers in a kiss that told her he'd quickly forgotten his depressing thoughts. Feeling the need to be naked and warm, in each other's arms, they undressed quickly, and Vincent caught his breath as she opened to him in sweet abandon.

"You have quite a way of making me forget what it was I was worried about," he whispered against her ear, sending shivers up her spine.

"I intend to make you think of nothing but me for the rest of the night," she answered in kind, running her palms over the tightness of his buttocks, making him groan with pleasure.

His voice was low and seductive and he moaned when her hand found and caressed his sleek, hard erection.

"You're all I ever think about, Catherine."

She smiled lovingly when she felt him press into her. "Oh, Vincent," she murmured, their bodies burning for each other, yearning to be one.

"Love me, Catherine ... don't stop ... loving me ..." And then he touched her soul, and she cried out her joy.

"Never," she cried as they became one. "Never."

#### **SATURDAY - 5:00 A.M.**

A furred hand slid lazily over Catherine's back, hip, and thigh, causing her to stretch like a contented cat.

"Mmm, that feels so good," she purred while her mate smiled, obviously enjoying this repast with her. For the first time in months, they had the early morning to themselves. They had shamelessly, slowly made love all

night, taking several short naps in between. They were resting now, it being close to dawn, but they felt very content and very sated. Vincent smiled as the recipient of his erotic touch sighed with pleasure.

"It's almost morning," he whispered, playfully kissing her very tantalizing neck. "Strangely enough, though, I don't feel tired."

Catherine allowed herself a girlish giggle. "Neither am I ... I-feel ... oh what's the word I'm looking for?"

He smiled as she gave him a mock innocent grin. "Lazy?" He saw her shake her head. He tried again. "Self-indulgent?" Again, she shook her head.

"Shameless?" He offered, his voice tinged with humor as she moved closer to him.

Catherine slid a finger across his chest, causing a low growl to escape from his throat. "Oh, no. I feel ..." she raised her eyebrows up and down, making Vincent chuckle, "uninhibited."

"Do you?"

She nodded. "Yes," she whispered seductively.

"Why is that, Catherine? Are you about to do something ... uninhibited?"

Again, she feigned innocence. "Who, me?"

As Vincent watched her throw the quilts and pillows to the floor, Catherine moved over him with her mouth, starting with his lips and throat. Then with a singleness of mind and body, she loved him with her mouth, bringing a raspy groan of arousal from him. Ever lower she moved as Vincent closed his eyes, on fire from the touch of her lips on every inch of him. Within seconds, Catherine proved how very ... uninhibited she could be.

## **6:00 A.M.**

The knock on their chamber door brought them back to reality. Their morning of play had come to a delicious and fulfilling end. Vincent and Catherine couldn't remember when they'd shared such a precious time before. They really hadn't slept all night, but they didn't care. They were happy.

Catherine tied her robe, pushed errant strands of hair behind her ears and walked toward the door to unlock it. Vincent grabbed her from behind and pressed a good morning kiss on her still swollen mouth. She smiled up at him, her eyes telling him of her love. It would be enough for him. For now.

Finding Zach on the other side of their chamber door worried Vincent.

"What is it, Zach? Is it the storm?"

Zach entered the chamber and approached Vincent, who was tying his quilted vest. "Caleb and Daniel just came from up top. Said some slabs of wall are starting to collapse in the maze. There are also a line of cable wires on fire near the park entrance. The rains are getting worse. What should we do, Vincent?"

Vincent looked at Catherine, then at Zach. "We must call a council meeting, but first, would you ask Pascal, Kanin and Mouse to meet me up at the park? We need to survey the damage."

Catherine saw his worried frown and moved to his side. "And most important," she chimed in, "we must keep the children away from the first level."

Vincent nodded in agreement and turned to Zach. "I will take care of informing everyone that the entire community is to remain Below until this problem is solved."

Retrieving his cloak from a nearby chair, Vincent turned to Catherine. "I must speak with Father. He'll be worried by now."

Catherine nodded as he allowed his eyes to take in her beautiful, disheveled look. Knowing how she got that way, Vincent smiled, took her hand, and kissed it.

"I'll return as soon as I can."

"Vincent," she touched his face tenderly, and saw a hint of apprehension in his clear blue eyes. "Everything will be alright. Please try not to worry."

He sighed, touched her cheek, then turned and left the chamber.

### **9:00 A.M.**

The damage was as serious as Vincent had suspected. Not only was there extensive flooding already starting in the maze, due to crumbling walls and weak rock shelves, but the water beyond the secret door to the park entrance was already ankle-deep. He tried to remember if there was a release valve in this section of tunnel. If there was such a valve, was it in working condition? Would it release and drain the water if the flood grew worse? Vincent shook his head, then took a mental note of all he surveyed, trying to remain optimistic about the possibility of danger to the community. The storm that held the entire Eastern Seaboard in its grasp was beginning to take its toll on his world as well. With no sign of letting up, and with the water rising, a solution had to be found quickly and efficiently. A council meeting had been set for noon. In the meantime, he began to discuss their options with Pascal, who'd just arrived, and who in Vincent's opinion, knew as much about the architecture and structure of the tunnels as he did.

### **10:00 A.M.**

After speaking with Pascal, Vincent grew more worried. Pascal said that they'd have to find a viable drainage system, and fast, or it appeared that the water would just continue to come, and eventually begin to seep downward toward the main chambers. He made his way back to his own chamber. He needed to see and talk to Catherine.

### **10:15 A.M.**

Catherine was sitting at the table sipping tea and reading yesterday's newspaper -- again. She instantly saw his furrowed brow as he entered their chamber, but she managed to smile as he leaned down to place a loving kiss on her upturned mouth.

"What's happening? Talk to me," she said, concern etching her eyes as she handed him a cup of tea.

He sighed, and took the cup she offered. "The storm is wreaking havoc at the park entrance and the water is rising." He paused to take a sip of the steaming brew. "There's a council meeting at noon, and I've already spoken to Pascal, who is very concerned about the absence of proper drainage in that section of tunnel."

"You're concerned that we're not going to be able to drain that section if the storm doesn't stop soon." It wasn't a question.

He nodded, then formed the next statement in his mind before he approached her with his own ideas about their safety.

"I think we should discuss the possibility of you going Above to be with the children, at least until the crisis is past."

His words took her by surprise and she looked at him. "The children are safe, Vincent. You know that. So how could you even entertain the notion that I would leave you, leave my home -- for any reason?" she said, disbelievingly.

"Catherine," his voice was barely audible, "I was only --"

She shook her head vehemently. "No, Vincent, there's nothing to discuss. I'm not leaving, and that's that, okay?"

He watched her rise from her chair and approach him. Kneeling between his legs, she placed her hands on his thighs and took a deep breath as she looked up at him with a loving gaze.

"I wish you'd stop this."

He was taken aback. "Stop what?"

"Stop being noble all the time. I love you for worrying so much about me. But you know damn well that I would never leave you, for any reason. The children are fine, and my place is with you. So why are you wasting your breath?"

Her smile broke the tense moment between them, and he lifted her to sit on his lap. He shrugged. "Force of habit, I'd imagine."

His attempt at humor stirred her emotions. How she adored him. "Now you listen to me," she feigned sternness as she pressed closer to him, and began to undo his vest and shirt, "I'm not leaving you - ever -- so you may as well get used to it. Unless, of course, you're trying to get rid of me." She could feel his heart beating faster under her hand and knew she'd made her point. "And if you are, I'm afraid I'm going to have to convince you in another way."

He drew a sharp breath when she ran her hand down his throat to his chest, allowing her fingers to brush against his nipples.

As he pulled her sweater over her head, his voice was thick with passion. "You do seem to have a way of persuading me to see things your way. I can be bribed, you know."

Catherine gave him a seductive glance and as she proceeded to show him the advantages of letting her stay, the intensity of their passion became as fierce as the storm that raged relentlessly in the world above them.

## **SATURDAY - NOON**

Vincent stood at Father's desk, speaking to the council. Catherine, who had been elected to the council when she was pregnant with the twins, sat looking up at him, silently supporting him through their bond.

"Pascal, in your estimation, if the storm continues through the day, how long do we have before the main chambers are in danger of flooding?"

"Well," Pascal took a deep breath and stood to face the sea of worried face, "it's noon now. Considering the downpour and with no letup for the past two days, if it doesn't stop soon, I'd say, no more than seven hours ... maybe eight."

Several gasps were heard throughout the chamber.

Father removed his glasses and wearily rubbed his eyes. "Seven or eight hours?" he repeated disbelievingly.

Vincent approached his father and placed a comforting arm around his shoulder. "Try not to worry, Father. We will find a solution. All of us, working together. It may stop raining soon, and then we'll have a better chance of draining the water."

Vincent knew his words were of little comfort. "What if it doesn't stop raining?" Father asked the chamber at large.

Mouse came forward. "We can try to re-route water ... have new machine ... makes water go the other way."

Vincent looked at Mouse with brotherly admiration. "Thank you, Mouse, but we don't have time to test your new machine. I hope you understand." Mouse nodded, disappointed that he wouldn't be able to try out his water machine.

"Well, we can go Above and start bailing water, or at least try, can't we?" Mary asked hopefully.

Vincent shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Because of the vicinity of the flooding, it's extremely dangerous to attempt any manual drainage. I will have to forbid everyone except Kanin, Pascal, Mouse and myself from going to that area. If any more of those walls collapse, I don't want anyone hurt unnecessarily."

At this point Catherine stood and went to him, placing a supporting hand on his arm. "Tell us what we can do when and if water begins to seep into the home chambers," she asked.

Vincent touched his hand to hers, silently thanking her for her comfort, and for her presence in his life.

"We must take shifts and begin to keep watch for leakage in all of the living chambers, especially the children's dorms, the kitchen, the chandlery, and especially the food storage bins. Catherine, will you arrange groups to make hourly surveys to certain chambers?"

She nodded.

"If anyone sees flooding, they're to signal for help at once. Use the pipes. In that way, word will travel quickly."

Father rose wearily. "If everyone knows what he must do, I'll call this meeting to an end, so that Catherine may start organizing groups for surveillance."

As the council members rose to speak to Vincent, Catherine allowed herself a chance to watch him. As they sought his advice, he took the time to reassure each and every one with a word or a touch on the shoulder, lending his wisdom and strength to all who needed comfort.

She reached for his hand and grasped it tightly, silently telling him how deeply she loved him. Through their bond, she felt his love in return, and she turned to meet his eyes for a fleeting moment. With a nod of encouragement, she smiled widely, then joined the others and began formulating plans with Mary and Jamie to divide into groups to keep watch for flooding.

As she began discussing her ideas with the other women, Catherine felt a sense of purpose wash over her. Determination hit her strongly when she found herself involved in a purpose, especially in times of crisis, and she realized she'd never felt this passionate about her work Above, even when she worked with the District Attorney's office. Being here was her heart's desire, and she was prepared to give her life for this world, for these people. For Vincent.

### **1:30 P.M.**

Sometime later, after making an inspection of the kitchen and children's dorms and finding them still untouched by leakage, Catherine made her way into Father's chamber and felt a strange sensation bombard her. Something was wrong. It was unusually damp and chilly. Looking toward the upper gallery of the library, she held her breath when she thought she heard - something.

Almost immediately her brain registered the noise as water dripping onto books and Catherine unconsciously cried out as she saw droplets of water seeping through the rock ceiling ... Father's books ...

"Oh no," she muttered brokenly, running up the spiral staircase to survey the damage. Reaching the top, she slid her hands over one exposed wall of books which were, at first glance, ruined beyond repair.



With tears stinging her eyes, Catherine pulled down dozens of soaked volumes, unsure what to do with them. Knowing she must salvage as many books as she could, she ran back down the stairs to call for help, while mentally blocking her grief from Vincent. She didn't want to upset him while he had so much on his mind.

Running desperately from the chamber, carrying half a dozen sopping books, she was in luck to find Samantha, Jamie, and Kipper heading her way. They immediately saw the look of desperation in her eyes.

"Catherine, what's wrong?" Jamie asked, seeing the damaged books in her arms.

"Hurry, I need help." Catherine tried to control her emotions. "The library, Father's books ... the gallery."

While Jamie and Samantha followed Catherine, Kipper ran for the other children. He also met Rebecca and Brooke on the way, and they, too, came to Catherine's aid.

### **1:40 P.M.**

Within minutes, Catherine found herself surrounded by everyone who was available to help. When word of the leak in the library got out, people, especially the children, banded together, as was always the case in their world. Father, thankfully, was with Vincent near the park entrance surveying the flood, and would not be returning for some time. Catherine didn't want him to see what was happening. Not until she had a chance to clean up the library. It never failed to amaze Catherine that no matter the crisis, everyone helped everyone. She smiled in spite of the impending damage that the storm had caused.

She knew that the only reason Vincent wasn't there was because he was Above, assessing the progress of the hurricane. The less he and Father knew about this, the better. Maybe by the time they returned, the problem would be solved. However, she doubted it.

They worked hand over hand, passing book after book from the gallery down to Catherine, who began piling volumes in dry cartons the children had gathered from the storage chambers. Some of the books were first editions, some were fairly new. Many were hard-covered prose, others soft-covered volumes of poetry. Each one was a rare treasure, irreplaceable. Catherine tried to hold back her tears as several of the books fell apart in her hands. Some were so waterlogged that they were beyond salvation.

The water was steadily dripping onto the empty bookshelves, and some of the children placed rags and buckets to catch the water. That was all they could do until Vincent and Pascal found a way to drain the water that was leaking in from Above. Catherine looked at the steady drip, drip as it fell into the buckets and rags, and silently prayed that a solution would be found soon.

As she turned back to her work, Catherine's chest began to ache. Oh, God, what would Father do when he saw his beloved library in such disarray? The grim thought caused her to work faster, and harder to clear the sodden shelves, and save whatever she could.

She sighed. Vincent. What would his reaction be when he surveyed the damage? Looking around the chamber, she knew they'd done the best they could. They'd emptied all the shelves, leaving the wall virtually bare.

### **2:45 P.M.**

Catherine looked around the chamber. She was proud of the work they'd all done. After thanking everyone for their invaluable assistance, she gave herself a minute to rest. Staring at the empty wall before her, then at all the cartons of books they'd managed to save, she silently promised that when this was all over, she'd try with all her heart to replace what she could, for Father, and Vincent ... and all of them.

### **3:00 P.M.**

Vincent, Father, Kanin, Pascal and Mouse stood and wearily surveyed the progress of the flood. The water level near the park entrance was fast approaching dangerous levels, and even with all their efforts to manually drain the water, it refused to abate.

Vincent turned to Pascal. "Were you able to locate the blueprints for this area yet, Pascal?"

Pascal frowned. "Not yet. I've searched everywhere, and there's only one more place they could be."

Mouse approached them and shook his head. "Sewer release below ... below the water ... doesn't work ... I know ... nowhere for water to go but through walls ... not good." He looked helplessly to Vincent. "The water, Vincent, how does it stop? Make it stop, Vincent."

Vincent was rocked by Mouse's words. "Don't worry, Mouse, once we find the plans, we will decide what must be done to save our home. Pascal, where shall we look for the blueprints?"

Pascal frowned yet didn't hesitate with his answer. "There's only one other place they can be. In the library."

### **3:30 P.M.**

"Please be careful with those," Father tearfully pleaded as he viewed, with much despair, dozens of his beloved books, now waterlogged and virtually irreparable.

"We're sorry, Father," Catherine sympathetically answered, approaching him, then wrapping her arms around him. "But we have to move the damaged books and salvage the dry ones. You do understand?"

He nodded sadly. "I know you're doing your best, really I do, all of you," he told several of the children who had stayed to help Catherine clean up. He patted Catherine's hand affectionately. "Oh Catherine, we're losing." He shook his head. "Will it ever stop raining?"

He suddenly felt very old, and Mary guided him to a nearby chair, urging him to rest while they did the work. Then they went back to work, with Catherine leading the way, emptying another sodden shelf of books, journals and educational and instructional manuals filled with papers and blueprints, some so damaged by water, the print was smeared and virtually beyond recognition.

### **3:35 P.M.**

"At this rate, I estimate we have maybe two hours left before the water begins to seep into the main chambers, if they haven't already," Kanin stated as they hurried to Father's chambers, wading through ankle-high water that was rising steadily.

Vincent was silently grateful that he had sent Father back to the main hub with Mouse sometime before. But now, Vincent sensed that all was not well in the main hub. The pipes had been unusually quiet in the past two hours or so. He knew everyone was busy with the surveillance groups, however ...

"I fear you're right, Kanin," Vincent said, his steps quickening as they turned the first corner.

Fatigue was creeping into his body, but he shook it off. Now was not the time to grow weary. There was much to be done. A spark of fear made its way into his mind, but that too, was not allowed to fester.

None of their methods up to this point had helped to drain the flood waters. Time was indeed against them and soon drastic measures would have to be taken. The word evacuation had not yet been used, but Vincent thought there was a possibility of that happening. He refused to think about it. For now. He had urged all families with children to go Above to stay with Helpers til the danger passed. However, everyone had opted

to stay Below to help. Secretly, he knew that his tunnel family would not leave him, because he himself could never go Above. And he loved them for that.

He heard his name being called by Pascal and turned to answer his friend. "Yes, Pascal?"

"I said, I hope those blueprints are in the library."

Vincent nodded. "They're probably in the gallery with-the maps and the blueprints of the lower chambers."

"I hope so. That water is rising faster than I thought it would."

They began to walk faster and suddenly, Vincent felt a strong, almost overpowering urge to be with Catherine. To see her, touch her, and to be touched by her. He sensed her presence in Father's chamber, and made his way there, quickening his steps along the way.

#### **4:15 P.M.**

"Father, are you alright?"

"Oh, Catherine," he answered, looking at his beloved gallery, shaking his head as he gazed upon the empty shelves. "Look at my beautiful library. We lost so many books ..."

Catherine knelt at his feet and placed her hands upon his own. "But look at how many we saved." She smiled at him, trying to remain optimistic, holding back her tears, but not her emotions from Vincent. She could feel him coming to them, and she knew it would only be a matter of time before he found out about the library. It was a great loss; but not so great that many of the volumes could not be replaced. She would do what she could to help in that regard.

Father looked back at her, his voice far away, detached. "I hope we can save the rest of our precious possessions before --"

-- It's not going to happen," Catherine interrupted with a determined tone. "Don't think like that." She gently grabbed his shoulders, hoping to lend him some of her strength. "We're going to come through this, I know it. Our world has been through worse and we've always come through. We've always found a way to survive."

He nodded weakly. "But this time, we may not be able to defeat an act of nature."

Both he and Catherine turned as Vincent and Pascal entered the chamber, numbly surveying the scene before them. Disbelief clouded Vincent's eyes as he gazed at the piles of damaged books, then at the cartons of books that were virtually untouched. He swallowed hard, then turned to Catherine and Father.

Catherine held out her arms to him as he came to her. "It's all right, Vincent," she murmured in his ear. "It's not as bad as it looks, really." She tried to sound convincing as Vincent hugged her. "We saved most of them. We lost mostly soft-covered poetry, some classics and new editions."

"The most damage, I'm afraid, was to the maps, instructional volumes and some blueprints."

Vincent lifted his head and turned to Pascal, who shook his head, then proceeded to sift through the rubble of waterlogged paper to look for the blueprints. It seemed hopeless.

Vincent turned back to Father and managed a tiny smile. "Now you'll have to have Kanin and Mouse build you those shelves they've been after you about," he said, with an attempt at humor.

Father nodded in agreement and smiled sadly. "Yes, Vincent, you may be right about that."

"We'll get through this, Father," Vincent watched as Catherine's strength wasted over them. How he loved her determination and spirit in the face of adversity.

"Oh Catherine, I sometimes think I spend too much time feeling sorry for myself. And it seems there's nothing more for me to do here. Vincent, did you and Pascal have any luck finding those blueprints for the park entrance?"

From across the room Pascal replied. "Not yet, but I think I've found the carton they could be in. Why don't you go rest, and when I find them, I'll bring them to your chamber, Vincent."

"A good idea," Father agreed. "You've been working hard all day. Now go and have lunch with Catherine, and we'll meet back here in an hour. In the meantime, the next shift should be checking the kitchen and lower chambers. If anything is wrong, we'll hear it over the pipes soon enough."

Vincent was too tired to argue with them. Besides, he needed to be alone with Catherine. "I only need one hour to rest, Pascal, then please come to get me."

As Pascal searched for the blueprints and Father turned to the numerous cartons of books to see which ones had been saved, Vincent faced Catherine, just giving himself several precious moments to look at her.

"What is it?" she asked him, touching his face gently. "If you're worried about the books, don't worry. I'll do whatever I can to replace them, you know that."

Vincent stared at her, nodding absently, then reached for her hand. "I need to be with you." His voice was sad, almost weary.

Catherine understood completely and closed her hand around his. Their touch sent a myriad of feelings through them. They both knew it.

Without words, he led her from the library to their own chamber. He closed and locked the heavy oak door behind them, then stood looking at her for a frozen moment. He caught the quickening of her breathing and knew he had to have her. Now.

Catherine couldn't slow her breathing even if she wanted to. She just returned his look, hungry and starving for her. She wanted him just as much, and noticed that he was ready for her. His powerful male flesh rose beneath the fabric of his jeans.

Neither spoke a word. Neither needed to. There was so little time ....

They moved to face each other. Catherine anxiously raised her hand to his chest, and Vincent drew her to him. Eyes locked while hearts pounded. Vincent's face lowered, Catherine's tipped up, and mouths met in a searing kiss of surrender.

And then it was as if a wildfire spread through them. One kiss and they burst into flames. There was no time to think. The fire, once fanned, grew so hot it could only be extinguished by burning out of control.

That's exactly what happened.

Their desire for each other was so intense, they never made it to the bed. There was no time.

Catherine was just as eager, just as excited as Vincent. Her face was flushed and gooseflesh rose on her arms as he pulled her down onto him to the chamber floor.

Quickly, he pulled her sweater over her head and left it on the carpet, kissing her hard and deep. Her bra followed, then, unwilling to break the kiss, the pair began shedding the rest of their unwanted garments. Vincent's hand spanned her fragile ribcage, pressing her body close. His pebble-hard nipples rose from the crisp golden hair of his broad chest, while his erection pulsed against her belly.

Wanting her so badly he hurt, he continued to kiss her aggressively, almost as if he would die if he couldn't be inside her. Finally tearing his mouth from hers, he pushed her tousled hair back, leaned down, and buried his mouth in the curve of her neck.

He kissed her shoulders, throat, and breasts as Catherine thought she'd die from pleasure. She felt the animal hardness of him pressing against her, and through their bond, she told him of her aching need.

He already knew.

In the next few explosive seconds he urged her legs apart, while Catherine simply clung to him, holding him tightly, afraid he might take that throbbing power from her.

Driven beyond endurance by the touch of her sweet nakedness, Vincent quickly positioned her hips so that she was slightly above him. Then he gripped himself and thrust into her as she drove down onto him, her readiness making it possible for him to slide easily into her softness.

Their eyes locked, her fingers curled into his hair, and she moved up and down, tilting her hips more fully to accommodate him, enveloping him in her sweet flesh. Together, they made sounds of pleasure and clung to each other.

Vincent then lifted her and shifted her beneath him, driving into her as she cried out her ecstasy. She drew her knees up and welcomed him with slender legs that wound around his back, pressing him ever closer, savoring the exquisite joy of his driving thrusts.

In seconds it was over.

Together, they exploded into a million stars ... so intense was their lovemaking that both of them nearly lost consciousness. They'd never loved so desperately before, as if they'd expire if they couldn't be part of each other.

As if they had run out of time...

#### **5:00 P.M.**

"May I come in?"

Vincent and Catherine smiled as they saw Pascal on the threshold of their chamber. "Of course," Catherine replied as Vincent approached his friend.

Seeing several rolled-up sheets of paper in Pascal's hand, Vincent's eyes widened. "You found the blueprints?"

"Yes," he answered, as Catherine invited both men to sit and have a cup of tea, "but they were damaged by the water."

"How badly?" Vincent inquired.

In answer, Pascal walked to the table and began to roll out the large square parchment before them. "The water has virtually erased the plans for that part of tunnel. However," he added hopefully, "because they were drawn with indelible ink, we can probably make out the general area, and then figure out where the release valve would be. One thing's for sure though." He saw Vincent's and Catherine's eyes centered on him as he answered. "The valve is way below the surface of the flooding. It's under a craggy rock ledge in the maze. I don't even know if it still works."

Catherine frowned. "You mean, this release valve is UNDER water?"

Pascal nodded, then looked over at Vincent. "Probably eight to ten feet by now."

His statement rocked them all. Catherine swallowed hard, trying to take in all that Pascal just said.

"Then, whoever volunteers for this task must actually go underwater to release this valve, if it still works, and if it's still there, is that right?"

She felt Vincent's hand cover hers and instantly she knew who the volunteer would be. She tried to compose herself, but at the same time, knew that when Vincent made up his mind to do something, there was no changing it.

Pascal tried to comfort her as well. "Catherine, I won't say it isn't dangerous, but we really have no choice, do we?" At her slight nod, he continued.

"Can I tell you a little story?" he asked Catherine. Vincent noticed how Pascal's voice had such a calming effect on his friends. He also knew which story Pascal was going to tell. He managed a small smile and squeezed Catherine's hand in assurance, while Pascal began his tale.

"I'm sure Vincent's told you that when we were kids, we'd all go swimming in the Chamber of the Falls." He saw Catherine nod, so he went on. "Well, we were so young and fearless, we'd dive off one of the rock ledges. I'd say it was about ten or fifteen feet high," he said, looking to Vincent for confirmation. "Well, one day, we were fooling around and Winslow pushed me off that ledge, and I wasn't ready for it. I didn't have time to hold my breath, and I sunk like a rock into the pool.

"I must have hit my head when I fell in, and I was only semi-conscious. I knew I was drowning, so I panicked." His gaze then went to rest on Vincent. "Vincent dived in for me. The other kids told me later that Vincent just kept diving in the water until he found me. He wouldn't give up." He smiled at Vincent, then looked at Catherine. "He's strong, Catherine. He wouldn't let me drown. He can do it. I know he can. I think you know it, too."

Catherine leaned over to Vincent and touched his face tenderly. "I know you can do it. But knowing that is not going to keep me from worrying about you," she declared.

"I know," he smiled lovingly at her, "but it must be done, you understand?"

She nodded, then kissed him deeply. "I'm sure you two have things to discuss, and I have to get to the kitchen and the children's dorms to check on the progress of the flood. I'll leave you to your work."

After bidding both men goodbye, she closed the chamber door behind her to afford them privacy to discuss the next plan of action.

As they stood side by side, trying to decipher the smeared blueprints, Pascal chuckled softly.

"Something funny?" Vincent inquired with a quizzical look.

Pascal shook his head. "You."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Why is it every time one of us focusses on your finer attributes, you look at us as though we've lost our minds? Don't you know that women love a hero?"

"Pascal ..." Vincent appeared uncomfortable. "I'd like to think that Catherine loves me for myself, not because of my so-called heroic deeds."

"Well, it got you a kiss, didn't it?" Pascal was laughing in earnest now.

Vincent took a second to think, then turned to Pascal and smiled. "Indeed it did, Pascal. Thank you for pointing out my 'finer attributes'. They do seem to have their advantages."

## **6:00 P.M.**

Vincent paced nervously as Catherine gathered a clean shirt and pair of jeans. "I really don't think I'll need clean clothes," he told her absently as he continued to pace. Back and forth. Back and forth. "I'll only be going into dirty water."

Catherine turned and watched him as he paced. Back and forth. She could tell he was wound tighter than a spring. On the edge. As usual, the fate of their world rested entirely on his shoulders. She was able to shield her feelings from him for the moment, only because he was so involved in his own thoughts about the impending disaster.

Catherine handed him the dry clothes, but he continued to pace. Back and forth.

Thinking back on the blueprints he and Pascal had discussed, they had both come to several conclusions, the main one being the location of the steel cylinder that would release the flood water out of the tunnel passages and into a drainage system out and away from them. The other face they had discovered was that in order to find that cylinder, Vincent would have to literally lower himself into over nine feet of dirty water, and find that valve. Then, as if things weren't complicated enough, he'd have to pray that when he found the valve, that it was in working order, and that he would be able to hold his breath long enough to turn it.

And then there was the question of evacuation if their plan did not work. If he was unable to dive past that wall and release the flood water into the proper drainage facility, he knew their only other alternative would be for everyone to salvage whatever personal belongings they could, and make their way down to the fifth level. There would be no way to communicate that far down, but many of them would be safe for the time being, until the storm abated. Past that thought, Vincent wouldn't allow himself to think about the consequences of losing all that they had. Now it was up to him.

As always, the pressure was on him as his role as protector, friend, teacher and now ... savior. It all seemed so overwhelming. Catherine wondered how he was able to handle all that was placed upon his shoulders.

Catherine continued to watch him as he paced. He was exhausted, that much she knew. Countless hours had passed since this all began and now he was expected to dive into dirty, bacteria-filled water, perhaps a dozen times or more, to find an elusive water valve that might be broken, disintegrating, or simply not there anymore. Catherine also realized that he stood to lose the most if this world did not survive, however she would not allow herself to think that far as yet. Whatever happened, she'd protect him -- some way, somehow. If the unthinkable happened, she wanted to be with him.

"What is it? What are you thinking?"

She was surprised to see him standing in front of her, his finger tenderly rubbing her cheek.

She managed a smile, then turned her head to kiss his hand. "I'm thinking of our world, our babies, and how much I love you."

He looked a question at her. "And ... ?"

Catherine sighed deeply. "And how tired you are. Vincent, you don't have to do this alone, you know." Seeing the determined answer in his eyes, she continued. "I know you feel that YOU must do this because you are the only one who cannot survive without this world, but Vincent, you're risking yourself, when any of a dozen of us can help you. We can take turns diving, like a relay. Vincent, please --"

"- Catherine," he interrupted. "Please try to understand." He took hold of her shoulders. "We've discussed this before. This is my home, the only home I will ever have. And I will not risk anyone else here - I must do it myself. Me. Only me. The fate of the tunnels now rests on my shoulders and I --"

She shook her head vehemently. "And when will the weight of this place finally bear down so heavily that you are unable to get up?" She saw his frown, but continued. "Vincent, you owe us nothing, do you hear me?" She caught his arm as he tried to turn from her.

"The only thing you owe us is the same thing we owe you." Her voice softened to a sweet murmur as he turned to face her once again. "Your friendship and ... your love. That's all."

He sighed deeply. "Catherine, I do this for us all."

She blinked back tears and cleared her throat. "You do this because you assume that everyone expects you to always bail us out of every crisis that arises down here. It's just not true. You always take it upon yourself to protect us all the time.

Sparing us from danger and despair, being all things to all of us. And it's true, you are all those things. Especially to me and the children. I don't think I've ever truly known what it means to commit yourself totally to a relationship and to a family until I met you."

She had his undivided attention now. She could see it in his eyes, feel it through their bond. She moved closer to him and looked up into his eyes, sending him her love, and feeling his in return.

"I want you to know that we all love you because of who you are, not because of the things you do for us." She could hold back her tears no longer. His arms opened and she leaned in to him, grateful for his embrace that spoke of the strength and love he felt for her.

"Oh, Catherine ..."

Catherine's arms circled his waist, and she pulled him closer to her. She couldn't get close enough. All she knew was that she needed him now, needed him to understand what he meant to her and to all who lived here. She also knew that he was going to do whatever needed to be done to save his world, and he was going to do it alone, whatever it took.

Even to the point of risking his life.

Pressing her mouth to his throat, she inhaled deeply, memorizing his scent, savoring the unique muskiness that could only belong to him. "Just be careful down there," she whispered against his chest, "and come back to me." She raised her head to meet his eyes.

Vincent nodded as he embraced her again. "I promise."

"I'll help you -- through our bond." His nod told her he understood what she was saying.

"Thank you, for understanding," he told her softly as they stood in the middle of the chamber, in each other's arms.

Catherine shook her head. "Don't talk. Just hold me. Hold me for just a little while."

He did.

### **7:30 P.M.**

"Are you ready?"

Father's words sounded like a cry for help. Vincent nodded. "Yes, Father."

The whole of their world gathered before him and Pascal in a circle of support in Father's chamber, all of them opting to stay even though most of them had the option of going Above to stay with the Helpers until the danger was past. This was home, they informed Vincent and Father. They would live and die here, where they belonged.

Catherine felt the chill and dampness permeating the chamber. It would soon grow colder as the night wore on. A shiver rushed through her and she rubbed her arms unconsciously, trying not to think about what would happen if the flooding couldn't be stopped.

She gazed at Vincent as he waited for Pascal to return with rope. The plan would be for Vincent to tie the heavy cord around his waist so that he would be guided by the others through water which would almost certainly be murky and muddy. The smudged blueprints showed that the cylinder was in a corner behind a particularly unstable wall. Pascal would time Vincent at sixty-second intervals, then tug on the cord, to give



him an additional twenty seconds, give or take a few, to surface. Beyond eighty seconds, it would be extremely dangerous for Vincent. Despite the fact that he possessed strong and powerful lungs, Catherine knew that he was exhausted from the day's events. He hadn't slept in many hours. She blocked her fear from him but not her love and support. Walking to him, she needed to be with him before he went Above.

As she approached him, she was reminded of a poem Vincent had once read to her when she was sick in bed with the flu. Even though she couldn't recall who'd written the poignant lines, she had memorized the piece, line for line ...

... Just one look, just one light touch,  
makes me love you oh so much,  
your eyes thrill me,  
your lips fill me,  
my heart is yours, now and forever  
I belong to you  
Until the twelfth of Never.

We are one now  
you and I,  
one soul we share  
with love so rare  
two heart that beat  
in perfect time.  
Two bodies joined in endless rhyme,  
My love is yours, you are mine  
together, forever,  
'til the end of Time..."

"Can we talk alone, for a moment?" Catherine took him by the hand to a tiny alcove just around the corner from the library. The group gathered in Father's chamber spoke among themselves and allowed Catherine and Vincent a few moments of much needed privacy.

The small opening they entered was only large enough for two, so they faced each other and clasped hands. Their eyes fixed and locked on each other.

"Catherine," his voice cracked. "If our plan does not work, and the worst happens --"

"No," she shook her head. "Don't say it, don't even think it."

But Vincent was insistent. "Catherine, please listen to me. If the worst should happen, if our plan does not work, you'll have twenty minutes, many thirty, until the main hub begins to flood. If that happens, you and the others must follow the route I've mapped out for all of you."

She shook her head, but he gently grabbed her chin. "Mouse and Jamie know the path. It will lead you down to the fifth level, where you will all be safe until the storm passes. Then you can take an alternate route that will take you Above. Be warned, it is a dangerous and unstable path, but you will make it."

"I won't leave you," her eyes brimmed with tears.

His hands were on her shoulders. "You must. Do it for our children. Catherine, you're strong you'll survive." He pressed her closer to his chest, drinking in her scent, memorizing the softness of her body, kissing her head with a tenderness that made her sigh.

"Catherine," his eyes met hers again. "As long as you live, then part of me lives, on as well. Promise me," he took her face in his palms. The tears slid down her cheeks.

"I promise, only if you'll promise to come home." He nodded slightly, as a lone tear made its way down his cheek.

Tenderly, she wiped his tear away with her thumb. "Remember, I'll be with you down there. I'll help you through our bond. Concentrate on me, on our connection, on our strength. I'll breathe with you, I'll help you, Vincent. Don't give up."

Strength and determination tinged her voice, so much so that it rocked Vincent. He knew he'd never give up, not while he had this beautiful woman to guide him. "I won't."

"Alright," she whispered, then brought her lips to his. "Then go, and I'll be waiting for you to come back." She kissed him again, then raised her eyes to his. "And tomorrow," she sighed, "I'll pick up the twins, and we'll take them on a picnic to the Chamber of the Falls."

He managed a tiny smile. "It's a date." Then he grew serious again. "Catherine, I want to tell you . . ."

"Yes, I know," she whispered, as he drew her against him for a last, searing kiss. "I know."

A moment later, he pulled away from her tight embrace, allowed himself one last loving look at her, and he was gone.

#### **7:45 P.M.**

"How much time, Pascal?"

Pascal shook his head as he tied the rope tighter around Vincent's waist. "I think we're all out of time, Vincent. I estimate it will be only a matter of time before the library and gallery will be virtually a river. The kitchen, dining chambers, and the children's dorms won't have much time after that."

Listening to Pascal's words of impending doom, Vincent began taking deep cleansing breaths. He would need every ounce of oxygen to begin his dive.

"Mouse and Jamie know what to do in case our plan fails," he told Pascal. "As soon as the flooding invades the main chambers, they're to start evacuating, taking only the bare essentials. There's fresh bottled water that could be carried in the wagons from the kitchen." He saw Pascal's look of concern etched upon his face.

"It's not going to happen, Vincent," he tried to sound reassuring. "It's only a precaution and we must be prepared, you know that. We're going to lick this, so let's get going, okay?" At Vincent's nod, he smiled. "Soon this will all be over, and you can get back to Catherine and the twins."

Vincent smiled, then turned serious. "Pascal, if I fail, you must leave this area as soon as possible."

"You're not going to fail," Pascal patted Vincent on the back with a brotherly touch. "You don't think I told Catherine that story about us for nothing, did you?"

Vincent smiled and hugged his friend in silent appreciation. "I think I'm ready now, Pascal."

And then Mouse and Father each hugged him in turn. "God bless," Father whispered, touching his son's hair. "Take great care."

As Vincent sat on the high ledge, tying the rope around his waist as he prepared to descend to the floor of the cavern, Pascal gave him last minute instructions. "Now remember, when you touch bottom, turn west and go five yards. I estimate the curved wall to be another three to five yards over and the release valve should be shoulder height under the lip of the wall. Turn it counter-clockwise. It won't be easy, and I'm going to be timing you. In sixty seconds, I'll tug on the rope; you must come up, whether or not you've released the valve. Okay?"

Vincent nodded in agreement, then took deep breaths. "Then, good luck," Pascal said. "Whenever you're ready."

Vincent pulled off his boots and heavy socks, then his sweaters and shirts. He left only his worn, thin pair of jeans. He immediately felt the dampness on his upper torso, but gave himself no time to think. Taking three deep breaths and focusing on his objective, then on Catherine through their bond, he lowered himself into nearly eight feet of murky water, then silently prayed for the strength to accomplish this difficult task, so that his family would be free from danger.

#### **7.50 P.M.**

Catherine's mind and heart were so centered on him that she could feel the exact moment he entered the water. Sitting in a corner of the library with the others, the distant drops of water making a plop, plopping sound onto the library floor, her thoughts lay solely with him. She began to breathe steadily, giving him silent encouragement and strength. "I'm here, Vincent .... I'm with you ..."

#### **7:50 P.M.**

The water was so cloudy, he was unable to find the wall, therefore, there was no chance of finding the valve. Feeling a tug on the rope, Vincent knew it was time to surface. He followed the rope's path back, broke the surface, looked up at Pascal, and shook his head. His first attempt had failed ....

#### **7:52 P.M.**

Catherine opened her eyes and felt his despair. "It's all right, Vincent," she thought silently. "You'll do it next time. I know you will ..."

#### **7:57 P.M.**

"Pascal, the water is so cloudy, it's extremely difficult to find my way."

Pascal placed a comforting hand on Vincent's shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, yes. I must try again."

"Rest a moment. And don't talk," Pascal instructed gently.

Minutes later, Vincent submerged once more. This time he found the wall, but not the valve. Surfacing once more, he took more deep breaths. Again, he sent his love to Catherine and felt hers in return. Her strength gave him the impetus to submerge again ....

**8:01 P.M.**

Water began trickling along the inner perimeters to the main hub. Any moment, it would begin to seep into Father's sleeping quarters, then Mary's. It had already reached the entrance of Vincent and Catherine's chambers ....

**8:02 P.M.**

Vincent was growing tired, so tired, as he took a deep breath and went under again. He didn't know how much longer he could go on before exhaustion took him ... but he had to try ... Catherine.

He broke the surface, taking in great gulps of air.

Catherine felt his weariness, yet didn't dare allow herself to feel fear. She blocked her apprehension from him, and instead began to breathe, centering all the strength she possessed on him ...

**8:10 P.M.**

Vincent could hardly hold his breath and knew it was now or never. Making his way around the curve, he frantically searched for the valve, but again, as in the other attempts, found nothing. Feeling along the wall, he forced his eyes to focus in the dark water, and then he thought he felt, and saw, something.

Yes, he thought, it was definitely round and Vincent grasped it with both hands. It had to be the release valve. It had to be. Using every ounce of strength he could muster, he began to turn the cold, steel cylinder counter-clockwise, just as Pascal instructed. At first it didn't budge, but then Vincent thought he felt it give a little. Please, he silently prayed, please give me the strength to do this. All of a sudden he felt a bolt of courage so strong, so powerful, he knew it was Catherine. And he knew it was all he needed to help him.

Through his exhaustion, he turned the valve with every fiber of his being and felt it slowly give.

His lungs were bursting, though he felt no tug on his rope. It didn't matter. He kept turning the valve, and already heard a gurgling sound, telling him the valve was open, and that water was already receding ...

... Catherine felt a pang of relief, but suddenly, she felt short of breath ... something was wrong ...

... Reaching to his waist, Vincent's heart lurched. The rope was taut at his side. When he trailed his hand along the length of it, he realized with horror that it was caught on something. He couldn't move, couldn't breathe. He pulled on the rope, but it was no use ... he was devoid of strength ... his chest was burnin ...

... Catherine couldn't breathe, couldn't concentrate. She took deep breaths of air. What was happening? Vincent!

**8:15 P.M.**

Vincent followed his instincts and pulled with all his might, using his strength to free himself. In the interim, he grew dangerously close to losing consciousness. Again he pulled and tugged and still, it didn't budge. Stars exploded behind his eyes ... his chest seared ... his lungs were on fire ... He wouldn't be able to make his way back ... He was swirling toward darkness ... Catherine ... our babies ... I'm sorry ...

... Catherine screamed, and then, head pounding, lungs searing, she swirled into darkness and fainted ...

**8:25 P.M.**

"Catherine, dear. Are you all right?"

Mary's voice intruded on her place of darkness and Catherine moaned. Opening her eyes, she saw Mary and Jamie surrounding her, a wet cloth cooling her forehead, and Samantha tenderly holding her hand.

"What happened, dear?"

Catherine tried to sit up. "What? Vincent? Where's Vincent?" Her heart was racing, her chest burning. She was so upset she couldn't focus on their bond, and began to panic.

"We've had no word," Mary answered sadly, with tears in her eyes.

Catherine looked around the empty chamber. "Where is everyone?" she asked.

"Trying to salvage what's left of the kitchen and dining chambers," she answered sadly.

But where was Vincent? Catherine needed to go to him.

Just as she struggled to her feet, she heard noises in the outer chamber. There was a commotion, so she turned to the chamber entrance, her heart pounding in her ears. And suddenly, he was there. He was filthy, his hair was matted to his head, and she could smell the dirty water on him, even from a distance.

Catherine let out a ragged breath of relief, thinking he was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen. In seconds she was in his arms, both of them in tears.

"Oh Vincent, thank God you're safe."

He couldn't get close enough to her softness. "Catherine, oh Catherine," he murmured, kissing her deeply.

"You did it, didn't you?"

He nodded weakly. "Yes, the water has already receded several feet." He directed his next statement to all who were beginning to gather in the room. "The danger is past; it has stopped raining," and then, with conviction, "we've won."

Aloud resounding cheer went up in the chamber as Father approached them. "We're grateful to you, but now, I want you to go with Catherine, get ah, cleaned up, and rest. You've earned it," he stated forcefully, daring Vincent to defy him.

Vincent nodded and smiled. "Father, I couldn't agree with you more," he replied, holding Catherine close to his side. "But the clean-up detail --"

Father held up a hand. "The clean-up detail will be organized by Kanin, Mouse and Jamie. You go on now. Catherine, take care of him, will you?"

Catherine was only too happy to comply. "Absolutely," she answered, and led a very tired Vincent to their chamber.

It was over.

### **9:00 P. M.**

As she closed the door to the chamber, she felt Vincent's arms around her. She turned in his arms and held him close.

"I felt your strength, your encouragement every time I went into the water," he murmured into her ear.

"Thank you."

"Oh Vincent, you're safe, that's all that matters now."

"We're all safe, Catherine." He looked down at her and smiled.

She hugged him again. "Are you all right?" She began touching him: his face, and hands, then saw a spot of blood near his ear. "You're hurt," she stated, leading him to the chair, wanting to attend to him.

"It's nothing," he assured her.

Catherine allowed herself to really look at him. "You're so tired. You need to rest."

He managed a tiny chuckle. "I need a bath."

She nodded, then left him to gather a towel, clean clothes, and a bar of soap. "Go, then, and when you come back, you really need to rest. Okay?"

Vincent smiled and nodded in agreement. He took the bundle from her, turned to leave the chamber, then turned back to her. "Catherine, I - I was ..."

Catherine faced him, and touched his face tenderly. "Frightened?" He nodded. "I know. I was too."

Again, they embraced for a long moment. "It's over now. I love you," she whispered.

After he returned from the bathing chamber, Catherine had extinguished all but one candle, the quilts on the bed were turned down, and the fire in the corner brazier burned bright and warm. To Vincent, so exhausted from his ordeal, it felt as though he'd just entered Paradise, and in Catherine, who stood before him in a white lace nightgown, he'd found an angel.

She grasped his hand, led him to the bed, took his robe from him and covered him with the soft, fluffy quilt.

"Rest now," she softly commanded, rising from the bed.

She felt him grab her wrist. "Stay with me?"

With a smile that melted his heart, she settled in beside him, then took him into the warmth of her arms. Within seconds, he was fast asleep.

## **MIDNIGHT**

... He was sinking deeper and deeper, going further down into the murky depths ... the rope was around his neck now, choking the life from him ... he couldn't breathe ... no air ... he was dying ... Catherine, save me ... Catherine!

"Catherine ..."

His cry of utter despair woke her instantly. "What is it? Vincent, wake up. You're dreaming!" She shook him gently, noticing his brow was beaded with sweat.

Vincent was jarred from the depths of slumber by the soothing tone of her voice. He opened his eyes and saw her comforting him. He sighed deeply and clung to her warmth, seeking her touch.

She drew her fingers through his hair and sat close to him, waiting for the pounding of his heart to calm. "Tell me."

Vincent slowly regained his composure and drew a deep breath. "A terrible dream. I was drowning, couldn't get air. I couldn't find you."

"Ssh, it's over, it's over. It was only a nightmare. It can't hurt us."

He looked up at her and through their special empathic link, he sensed her comfort and love. He nodded. "Only a dream."

"Better?" she asked after a few silent moments, letting her fingers caress his face and shoulders.

He was suddenly aware of her scent and her warmth, along with the wonderful feel of her womanly curves. Through their bond, he could feel a spark of desire begin within her. His own heat began to grow, his body reacting to her femaleness.

He nodded. "Yes, better."

"Good." Her voice lowered to a seductive murmur as her hand moved to his throat and chest. She needed to be closer to his golden warmth. "I'm glad," she looked into his eyes and knew he wanted her too. "Then," she lightly kissed him on the lips, "drown in me," she gently whispered. "And I promise, there'll be no more bad dreams." She slid her hand ever lower and felt him grow hard with need. His gasp told her what she wanted to know. "I promise," she vowed as Vincent's arms came around her.

"After all, we have time," she told him as he slowly pressed her beneath him into the softness of their bed. "All the time in the world."

And then, he dived in her softness, in the beauty of her warm depths, deeper and deeper until their souls rejoiced in a tidal wave of love and light. Hours later, they would be aware of a new life they had created through the oneness of their loving.

Out of the storm and clouds, had come the sunlight.

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## **THE GROTTTO ~ by Heather Peters**

"How much further?"

"Just around the next curve. We'll be there soon."

Catherine sighed, feeling as if she'd been walking for hours. Maybe that was because they had been, she mused wearily as she held tight to Vincent's hand, following his lead. They'd left the hub of the community hours before, and at Vincent's rare show of impulsiveness, they were now on their way to a place he'd never before shared with anyone.

Not even her.

What had begun as a quiet birthday celebration for Vincent in his chamber, now appeared to be culminating in a journey to the center of the earth. Or so it seemed.

And now, with her hand cradled lovingly in his own, each dressed for a long journey, backpacks slung over their backs, Catherine began to feel a quiver of excitement slice down her spine. She realized that wherever they were going, it would indeed be special. Catherine expected nothing less from Vincent. He'd made her life special since the day their paths crossed.

Sensing the change in climate as they steadily journeyed ever downward, Catherine smiled inwardly, thinking herself extremely fortunate to be a part of this magical world. Was there no end to the splendor and beauty of the world Below? No matter how long she lived, she would never fully comprehend the wonder of being part of Vincent's life, his home.

His love.

Most of their journey had been traveled in silence and Catherine noted that it was at these times that she cherished what was between them. Their unique relationship was such that they had never felt the need for inane conversation. Vincent was a naturally quiet being, and Catherine was so attuned to his emotions she sometimes felt as if they could almost make love just by looking at each other. She felt so safe now, miles

away from anything, anywhere. She was with him; it didn't matter where they were going. They were together.

But she sure wished they'd get there soon. Her feet were killing her.

Vincent's lips formed a tiny smile. He knew she was growing just a trifle impatient. But they would soon be at the grotto. Then they could relax, and take a well-deserved break from the pressure of the past grueling weeks.

He realized that he'd never done anything so impulsive in his life, but after watching Catherine literally doze off while sitting up in his chamber last evening, he knew it was time for them to get away from the chaos of her job - and his work detail.

She'd been on a particularly difficult murder case that had unexpectedly drenched her of her usual bright vitality, and dark circles had begun to form beneath her beautiful green eyes. Vincent also worried that she had visibly lost weight. Yet, she'd come Below almost every night to have dinner and spend precious time with him, no matter what the hour. He had not been able to go Above to her for weeks on end, because his work had drained him of strength as well.

A pipe extension project which would normally have taken several days had gone wrong, and in the interim, dragged out to over a month. A month of fourteen hour work days - cutting the pipe, removing the rusted, leaking old pipes had been, at the least, a hapless, dirty job. Then in the middle of the project Mouse, Jamie, and Kanin had all come down with the flu, which left Vincent virtually alone to handle the remainder of the work.

He was still tired and weary, and knew he needed time away from his family. Even though he loved each and every one of them fiercely, he needed to be alone with Catherine, needed time to touch her, to laugh with her, and simply just to share himself with her. At this moment it was sheer heaven just to hold her tiny hand in his own. He could feel her love through their bond, and it made him smile, just knowing they were together, alone and deeply in love.

And he could think of nowhere that was as secluded, safe, and warm as the grotto. At the thought of the misty cavern he'd discovered several years ago when he had taken himself off alone, Vincent could almost feel his tight, exhausted muscles relax. In his mind's eye, he began to picture himself and Catherine slowly undressing each other, then stepping across the velvet moss of the cavern shore to sink into the hot, soothing, steaming ....

"Oh Vincent, what I'd give for a hot bath right now," she sighed.

At her seemingly innocent remark, Vincent couldn't help but chuckle softly. As their eyes met, he released her hand from his own to softly touch her cheek.

"Soon you'll have your bath," he murmured lovingly.

Catherine's brows furrowed as she shook her head. "Vincent, what are you talking about? We're in the middle of nowhere." She kissed his hand as it caressed her face. "How on earth would you ever find a bath all the way down here?"

The direction of his gaze gave her the answer. Vincent was looking past her shoulder to a steep incline just below them. But there was something different happening here.

"Just down the hill, Catherine." He took her hand once more.

Catherine felt the change as they took careful steps to reach the bottom of a high mound, and silently noted the atmosphere growing warmer, almost humid. The air felt wonderful, and Catherine's heart began to pound in anticipation.



Vincent felt her excitement and could hardly mask his own as he, too, felt the air grow heavy with a humid, warm mist.

Moments later Vincent announced, "We're here."

"We are?" Catherine asked excitedly, realizing all she was able to see at first glance was a wall of ivy, which was strange enough in this part of the tunnels. But as she drew closer, she took a deep breath.

For beyond that curtain of greenery, lay something more. She thought she heard something bubbling. Her curiosity drove her to leave Vincent's side. She lifted her arm to push the heavy drape of vines aside, then gasped as she peeked inside.

Vincent attempted to light a candle as Catherine moved forward into the dark, misty cavern. However, the mist was so thick that the wick of the candle was unable to hold a flame.

Finally he was able to light the candle, and follow Catherine into the cloudy cave of the grotto. If anything, it was more beautiful than he had remembered.

He drew closer to Catherine's side, intently witnessing her initial reaction to the ethereal sight of the cavern that had been hewn from solid rock.

Catherine drew in her breath, not believing her eyes. The cloud of steam rising off the surface of a small pool was obviously fed from underground. The pool itself couldn't have been wider than fifteen feet, and it shone like clear glass, making it possible to see the bottom. Fine white sand lined the pool, and at the very center a small eruption of water bubbled up from the bottom. It was a breathtaking sight.

Overhead, Catherine noticed the glistening moistness of the carved rock that surrounded them. The ceiling was dome-shaped, which was obviously how the heat was trapped. Lustrous green moss closely blanketed the tiny piece of land around the pool.

Vincent stood watching her in silence, already sensing the change in her. For the first time in months, Catherine looked as if the weight of the world was indeed, lifting from her fragile shoulders.

He, too, felt the tightness of his overworked muscles ease and he allowed himself a tiny smile. Yes, he thought, this was the perfect place to spend treasured time with each other.

When he approached Catherine to help her with her backpack, he sensed her happiness. She planted a quick, but loving kiss to his beautiful mouth.

"Vincent, this place is so .... so beautiful, so magical."

His brows rose in amusement. "I thought you didn't believe in--"

"Don't say it," she good-naturedly admonished him. Drawing closer to him, she slipped her arms around his waist. "Thank you," she whispered, "for always knowing what I need."

He shrugged lightly. "You questioned the existence of a hot bath," he stated matter-of-factly. "I am only granting your small wish."

Catherine sighed deeply, then lifted her eyes to his. "You always give me what I want," she crooned. "I'm terribly spoiled you know." She deliberately pushed closer to him as the candle he'd been holding sputtered at last and expired.

Her tiny laugh stirred him, and all at once he wanted her. Wanted to kiss her, and caress her smooth flesh, wanted to move inside her. He felt her mutual desire as it welled up within her. The last six weeks were worth everything, as long as they were together.

Reluctantly breaking apart, they managed to light several candles, placing them in the sand. The allure of the hot spring sent shivers of anticipation rushing through them. They faced each other, at first not touching, just drinking in the sight of each other, and of their surroundings. Catherine could smell what she thought was

honeysuckle, and found it a very erotic scent. As she gazed longingly at Vincent, she could feel his strength, his power, his sensuality emanating from him. She burned for him.

"Vincent ...."

He touched her and went up in flames.

"I'm here," his voice was a gruff whisper.

Slowly, his fingers worked the buttons of her sweater free, yet his eyes never left hers. He slid the garment from her and heard her sigh from his touch. Vincent always made the act of disrobing her an erotic, sensual ritual, one from which she never tired.

He paused just a moment to lower his eyes to her bare breasts, and felt Catherine's arousal heighten steadily. His mouth went dry and his fingers trembled, noting silently that the sight and touch of Catherine never failed to drive him wild with passion.

The warmth of his hands on her bare flesh caused Catherine's senses to soar. She didn't move, didn't speak. She was only capable of having him feel her love and incredible longing for him.

His hands next traveled to the single braid that hung down her back. Ever since growing her hair long, she found that Vincent loved threading his fingers through her thick tresses. As he uncoiled it, the strands separated, then fell loosely over Catherine's shoulders and breasts and down to her waist.

The humid mist seemed to surround them as they stood on the mossy bank, and they both felt as if they'd been transported to a place that belonged only to them.

Vincent allowed himself to take a step back to gaze upon her nakedness, her only covering her long hair. She reminded him of a sea sprite he'd read about when he was younger. His loins grew hard at the sight of her, and how the white mist from the pool crept up her body, circling her calves and almost reaching up to the secret triangle between her legs. His breath came faster and harder as Catherine reached out and touched him. He was burning to take her, to feel himself move inside her softness, to hear her moan his name over and over.

Catherine slipped her hands around his neck, kissing him gently, almost innocently. But her thoughts and actions were anything but chaste. It didn't take long to undress him, and she gazed intently at his nakedness, knowingly that in moments he would claim her, would love her with all the passion that was inside him.

She heard his soothing voice in her ear. "Whenever you are ready, my lady," he whispered in invitation, "your bath awaits."

Catherine smiled lazily, then clasped his hand, and followed him into the clear, steaming water. It was warm ... so warm. The fine sand beneath her feet was soft as cotton, and as she took another step, and another, the water reached her calves, the incredible sensations floating all around her.

Finally they stood in the center of the pool, and Vincent turned to face her. His look was pure heat and desire, and despite the moistness of the cavern, Catherine's throat went dry. The water lazily lapped around their bodies, and she felt herself being drawn into his power when his hands circled her hips, then slowly slid upward to caress her breasts.

His manhood throbbed and ached as he felt her nipples harden under his touch. Vincent drew her forward to meet the incredible heat of his body, then smothered her gasps as his lips moved slowly, possessively over hers, his tongue meeting hers in a bold dance of flesh.

Catherine cried out as his body pushed against hers, signaling his need of her. His hands cupped her buttocks, pushing them against his pulsing shaft, and that, combined with the moist heat of the cavern and the warmth of the water, made her legs weak. She kissed him again, running her hands over his back, down the hard muscles of his buttocks, crushing her thighs against his, telling him with her body how much she needed him.

"Catherine ... Catherine ..." His voice was thick with insatiable passion, answering her body's signals with his own. Suddenly, without breaking the heat of their kiss, he placed trembling hands beneath her hips to raise her, then carried her to a tiny spot on the bank of the pool, laying her gently where the water was a warm, thin sheet over the soft, white sand, and the sweet green moss created a soft pillow for her head. He lay beside her, raking his hand through the long silky strands of her hair. He could feel her trembling, as he was at the sight of her beauty.

Then, as their eyes met and fixed in ecstatic anticipation, he rose above her and she welcomed him into her body ... into her soul. Catherine heard his hoarse groan of pleasure as she opened herself in primitive abandon, telling him to possess her, crying out in glorious uninhibited rapture. Instinctively, with movements as old as time, she lifted her legs, wrapping them around his waist as he surged into the very depths of her soul.

Vincent gasped when her velvety womanhood enveloped him in a heat so blinding, so incredible, he was unable to move. He swelled within her, bidding her to match his desire, and when he began to move within her, Catherine followed him with equal fervor, whispering love words in his ear.

He slid shaking hands beneath her hips to bring her closer to his fire, feeling the tide of pleasure begin to take hold. Catherine's legs tightened around his hips, spurring Vincent to take them higher and higher, and they soared through peak after peak of rapture, hotter and hotter. She began to shiver uncontrollably with the onset of their little death, as Vincent's roar of triumph echoed through the mist, his heart pounding from his climax.

Clinging to each other even as Vincent rolled to his side, taking her with him, they looked into each other's eyes. The kiss they shared was filled with endless promise and, almost instantly, they became aroused once more. Vincent's eyes widened as he again became aware of moist pulsations of their flesh, as Catherine began to push against him. He grew hard in seconds.

Catherine moved over him this time, smiling seductively as she felt the throbbing at his center. Feeling his hands pushing her body onto the proof of his need, she was shameless in her desire for him. Vincent's hands drew up into her hair, then felt her flesh drive down into his with a hunger he eagerly matched. Their cries echoed for endless moments through the foggy white mist of their secret grotto.

Hours later, Catherine awoke in his arms, feeling his eyes adoring her.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

He smiled lazily, gently tracing one clawed finger down her cheek. "Did you enjoy your bath?"

She chuckled lightly. "If everyone took a bath like we just did, there would be no one left on land," she joked, as she touched his hand.

"Catherine, if everyone shared a bath in that manner," he whispered in her ear, bringing shivers of delight to her body, "the world would surely find itself in the midst of a population explosion."

His statement held a special meaning for them both. She brought his hand down to her slightly rounded belly, both of them smiling with joy at the evidence of the new life growing within her.

The stress and strain of the past weeks seemed to melt away as they held each other close, grateful for their new secret place, and for the miracle that was now being nurtured in Catherine's womb, powerful proof of a love that was stronger than time.

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## WITH PEN IN HAND

by Heather Peters

Vincent sat, still as stone, on the bank of the Mirror Pool, his mind centered entirely on the one person he loved above all else. On the one person who could ease his loneliness. On the one person whose smile made his life worth living.

That one person, who had been away on business for the past ten days, was the reason for his self-involvement now.

Catherine.

Sighing deeply as his heart ached with endless thoughts of her, Vincent had thought he would be able to handle their separation better than this. He was wrong. Her absence had not only made him miserable, it had caused anyone who had to deal with him to become just as miserable.

Her only contact with him 'til now were phone calls delivered to Jenny, who in turn had come Below twice since her departure to relay small messages to him. He was grateful to Catherine's dear friend for her help, but Vincent missed hearing her voice, missed touching her and laughing with her. And second-hand phone calls just didn't satisfy his need for her. He needed more.

Through their bond he knew she was well, if somewhat tired. What was to be a short three-day assignment on the West Coast had turned into a huge confusing legal entanglement. He had taken to sleeping on her side of their bed, hoping to feel closer to her when he lay on her pillow, taking in the wonderful scent that could only belong to her. He'd slept little since her departure. He'd picked the most grueling, difficult work details he could find during the day, so at night he'd be so exhausted, he'd have only enough energy to bathe, eat a light dinner, and go to bed.

His silent reverie was interrupted by Geoffrey, who approached him slowly, not wanting to disturb him. Vincent saw the boy over his left shoulder and managed a smile.

"Geoffrey, is something wrong?"

The boy shook his head. "No, nothing's wrong. I have something for you."

Vincent's heart began to pound as the youth drew a pink envelope from his vest pocket.

"A letter?" Vincent asked hopefully.

Now Geoffrey smiled widely, knowing he brought good news to his dear friend. "It's from Catherine. Jenny asked me to find you right away. Said she knew you'd been waiting to hear from her."

Taking the envelope from Geoffrey, he ruffled the boy's hair and smiled in gratitude. "I think Jenny knew how much I needed this," he replied, realizing his hands were trembling. "Thank you Geoffrey."

"Hope it says she's coming home soon. I miss her," the boy stated with sweet sincerity.

As Geoffrey turned and ran from the chamber, Vincent nodded his head. "I miss her too, Geoffrey. I miss her, too."

He wanted to be in their chamber as he read her letter, so he made his way back to the main hub. Practically jogging through the tunnel, he finally approached the entrance, then entered his all too empty room. Lighting several candles, he removed his boots and heavy vest, then climbed in his bed, and proceeded to open the envelope.

Unfolding the several pages, he noticed the embossed, raised pink rose on the left hand side of the page. Rubbing his thumb over the flower, with its petals opened in invitation, Vincent smiled. It reminded him of .... Oh how he missed her.

Focusing his gaze on her angular, feminine script, Vincent's heart raced in anticipation as he sighed deeply. Slowly, so as to drink in every word, he began to read:

*Dearest Vincent,*

*Today is Friday, it's been nearly ten days since we've touched, and I miss you so much. The job we were sent to do has hit so many snags and complications, only the thought of returning home to you has lessened my loneliness.*

*I'm in no danger (as you well know) but even with Joe and John here with me, I feel so alone. My hotel room is grey and barren, cold and lonely. Each night as I go to sleep (which I've done little of) my thoughts and my love are with you. When I close my eyes, the memories of us together lessen the ache of our separation. I hope Mary and Father are taking good care of you, and I hope you're not working too hard. Sometimes, if I have a free moment, I reach deep inside my heart and I can feel you thinking about me. I can almost sense you reaching for me. It's comforting to know there is someone I love waiting for me.*

*Every night you're in my dreams, in my soul. I miss the way the warmth of your body shelters me, protects me, loves me. Even now I can feel you keeping me safe. It's a wonderful feeling. It's what keeps me going on these lonely, lonely nights.*

*Can you close your eyes now, Vincent and recall the special night we went to our secret place under the park? Remember how they played our favorite romantic music that night, "Barber's Adagio?" You touched me, and I forgot everything except the look in your eyes, the heat of your body as you enfolded me? Remember the way we whispered to one another of our needs, our longing?*

*Close your eyes, Vincent, and visualize us on our thick, quilted blanket, you touching me. Your fingers are so gentle, your movements stirring me to awakening arousal, caressing my secret place, bringing me such joy and fulfillment. Can you feel it, Vincent? Do you remember our whispered words of love that night? I needed your fire that night, as I do always. And our love burned bright as the music moved us with its power and magic.*

*I'm thinking of you now, Vincent, as you read my letter. I can feel your heart beating beneath my hand, so fast, so strong, it takes my breath away. I can feel the exact moment we reached the height of our joy. We cried out as we made each other happy. Together, we draw happiness from the other.*

*I'll be home soon, and then I promise you, I'll never leave you again. Ever. Be well.*

*Always, Catherine.*

Vincent's hands were trembling as he re-read the letter four times. Overcome with weariness, he drew his sweater over his head, shed his trousers, and moved to lay on her side of the bed.

But he did not sleep. Covering his eyes with his arm, he took a deep cleansing breath and allowed himself to recall each and every minute detail of the night Catherine spoke of in her letter. It was a magical night ...

.... It was a perfect, romantic evening as they enjoyed the concert. *Barber's Adagio* happened to be one of their favorite pieces of music, and their lovemaking that night was quiet yet fierce.

They were lying on a thick, soft quilt facing each other, their eyes dark with desire thanks to the sensual erotic strains of the music they'd just enjoyed.

Then the music ended and there was only silence, only the sound of restless hearts beating in synch, hearts longing for the physical fulfillment of their love. With the moonlight shining through the grating from Above, Catherine reveled in the dark passion-laden eyes of her lover as he stared intently at her. She shivered at his look, so filled with his want, his longing for her.

Vincent moved closer to her, so close now, she could feel his breath on her mouth. For what seemed a lifetime, they gazed at one another, their breathing growing deeper and more frantic. Vincent put his thumb to her cheek, kissed one corner of her mouth, then slowly moved across to place warm kisses over her trembling lips.

Catherine closed her eyes and relished his tenderness as he slid his hand down her throat. She didn't move, couldn't move. She just wanted to revel in the feel of his hand as it slid ever lower to rest on her breast. His thumb circled the hardened bead slowly, then moved to her waist.

Catherine knew these tortuous teasing touches were only prelude to what they would soon share, but she wanted him so badly, her mouth grew dry and the secret place between her legs ached for his touch.

"Vincent." Her whispered plea was barely audible. "Please..."

She opened her eyes, and they knew and felt an indescribable heat between them, a heat that could only be assuaged by their joining. Their mouths came together in a searing kiss, as Vincent pulled her into his arms. His soft caresses were gone and in their wake, his kiss was a powerful passionate embrace that ignited Catherine's longing. She opened her mouth to him and gloried in his demanding tongue as it plundered her own. His hands glided up her back, holding her close.

Kiss after hungry kiss brought their bodies ever closer, touching and caressing. Wave after wave of warmth spread over Catherine and enveloped Vincent, causing their touches to grow more heated and intimate.

Finally drawing his mouth from hers, Catherine moaned from the separation. Then she silently smiled when he began to undress her. Her lips were tender and swollen from his kisses and all Catherine wanted was more and more. More of his kisses, more of his touch, the heat of his body moving inside her own. She was bare and trembling as Vincent's mouth found its way to her breasts, nibbling at the turgid peaks while she opened to his searching fingers when they slipped between her legs.

Slowly, Vincent began to caress her while his smoldering blue eyes impaled her face. Catherine groaned in rapture as his fingers explored, circled, and coaxed and all she wanted and needed was to lie in this man's arms for the rest of her life. Nothing else mattered, nothing but the two of them, loving together, living together.

As Catherine arched her back and softly cried out his name, Vincent knew she was his and his alone. She was so soft and warm and willing, and Vincent knew he loved her more than one man had the right to love. She was begging to give her all he had to give and Vincent, now moaning with his own longing, wanted to give her everything. Anything she wanted, anything she needed.

Catherine's eyes opened slowly, and shamelessly she watched Vincent as he rose to undress. Standing naked and proud in the light of the midnight moon, Catherine's heart pounded endlessly as he heatedly returned her gaze with a look of total possession. Then he was beside her again, kissing her eyes, her cheeks, her throat.

Pushing a long silky strand of hair away from her face, his legs moved over hers and his eyes again met her own.

Pulling her underneath him, she heard his voice, hoarse with emotion, whisper 'love you' as he buried himself deep within her, his body sleek and hard and on fire. His breath was ragged and hot against the moistness of her throat, and he could taste the saltiness of her soft skin.

Catherine clung to him, then cried his name over and over as Vincent grasped her hips and lifted her to him while he dived into her warmth with growing urgency.

They moved in perfect unison, with a rhythm that echoed a primal dance as old as time itself. When ecstasy came upon them, it took them with a stunning swiftness. Sobs of joy burst from them, and they lay entwined afterward, knowing the love between them would be served ... now and always ...

Suddenly, Vincent shot up from the bed, his body soaked in sweat, his heart racing. A certain part of him ached so much he hurt, and Vincent took deep breaths, covering his eyes in an attempt to calm his very tense body.

He felt something, but what? Was it his overactive imagination, or was it ... her? Was it wishful thinking, or was Catherine near?

Unable to wish his trembling body back to normal, Vincent just sat in the center of the bed, his manhood aching with need, his heart pounding in anticipation, his mind silently praying that it was indeed Catherine and not his erotic daydreams confusing his mind and soul.

Yes, he could sense her closeness now. But he was unable to move, and then she was at the entrance of their chamber, looking breathless and beautiful and flushed and ....

"Vincent ...."

He couldn't move, couldn't talk. Just the sound of her voice paralyzed him. The sweet, sultry voice that he missed so deeply the past ten days. She was home. Home.

Catherine took two steps into the chamber and quickly took note of her letter, scattered to his side, but more than that, she noticed his bare chest, lightly glistening with sweat, rising and falling quickly with every breath he took. Her eyes lowered past his chest, down his stomach to the bulge in his tight thermal leggings. She smiled slightly, knowing he'd been dreaming of her.

She approached the bed, slipped off her boots and coat, then climbed on the bed next to him. Their eyes met and locked.

"Did you enjoy reading the letter?" she whispered seductively, as his hand found its way to the button on her blouse.

Pulling her down on the bed beside him, he then proceeded, without words, to show her how much enjoyment her words had brought to him.

The END