

TIMELESS

by Heather Peters

PROLOGUE

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On a beautiful, sunlit afternoon in the southern-most part of Central Park, twelve-year-old Cathy Chandler, dressed in a pale pink pinafore, high button top shoes, and a single honey-brown braid that reached down to her waist, tossed a colorful ball back and forth to her best friend, Jenny.

The young girls giggled as they played, oblivious to the tall figure concealed behind a tall elm barely ten yards away. He was not like the other children, and for that reason kept hidden. The hood that covered his long blond locks also covered his unique, almost leonine countenance. Sky-blue eyes stared unblinkingly at the petite, beautiful, happy child who played with her friend. Although barely 14, Vincent Wells felt his heart pound within his chest every time he was this close to her.

He'd been coming to the park for the past year; drawn by a power he was unable to resist, seeing her. For some unknown reason, he could feel her laughter within his lonely heart, and the emotions evoked by it made him shudder, for he couldn't understand them. He only knew that in some way, this pretty little girl with the long braid and happy green eyes would become part of his life forever.

Day after day, his heart called out to her. He needed to see her as much as he needed air to breathe. He loved Cathy Chandler with all his heart.

But what did it matter? Cathy Chandler didn't know that he existed. They came from different worlds, had separate lives, and were as different as the moon and the sun. What would she think should he reveal himself? Would she turn and run in terror when she saw his face for the first time? Would she suffer from nightmares after she looked upon him?

Vincent shivered in fear as the thought of her rejection mocked him, tore at him.

He was so immersed in his thoughts that he didn't notice the ball the girls had been playing with, until it rolled under the tree and stopped at his feet. His fear increased when he realized he would not be fast enough to conceal himself or run away from the pretty little girl who was running toward him. What to do? He thought as his hooded face turned away from her. It would be rude to just walk away. Vincent thought about kicking the ball back to her, but at that moment, he decided he could do neither. He was unable to move, his mouth dry as cotton, his hands trembling with the realization that in seconds she'd be close enough to touch.

Slowly, he turned his head toward her as she came closer, her braid swaying from side to side, her pink dress bouncing back and forth. He could roll the ball back to her and be gone quickly. He swallowed deeply, his head pounding as he made his decision. He would run before she saw him. It would kill him to frighten her.

Why was it that every time she was in the park, he sensed her presence and followed her? Why did his soul feel joy and his loneliness ease whenever he was close to her? And what would he ultimately do when she turned in terror at the sight of his inhuman face? What did it all mean?

His father had warned him before about some people who might not understand that he just looked different from them. But his beloved brother, Devin, often pointed out the fact that his differences just made him more special than anyone else. He loved his big brother, and wished his words would prove to be true now.

However, it was too late to think, for she was coming, and the closer she got, the more intensely Vincent felt emotions that reached to his soul; they frightened as well as stirred him.

It was now or never. Determined to let fate rule his emotions, he stepped away from the tree, and drew his hood from his unique face.

Vincent was unaware that he'd been holding his breath as she approached and looked up to meet his gaze. And then he heard the musical tone of her voice.

"Excuse me, may I have my ball, please?"

Her voice surrounded him, seeped into his pores, and held him in the sweet grip of youthful rapture. She sounded just as he'd imagined in his dreams: sweet and soft, young and innocent, and at that magical moment, something compelled him to look upon her closely, to drink in her fresh beauty, to try to comprehend the power she held over him.

Catherine took a deep breath as she beheld the most beautiful blue eyes she'd ever seen. A sudden feeling of warmth rushed through her as her fingers lifted to meet the outstretched hand that held her ball.

Their hands touched. Eyes locked. Hearts leaped. She smiled at him.

And he was lost.

CHAPTER ONE

... What lies behind us
and what lies before us
are tiny matters compared to
what lies within us..."

- R. W. Emerson

JANUARY, 1897 - BEAUMONT HILLS ESTATE - LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK

Gaslight illuminated the sitting room of the spacious manor house as dusk descended like a veil over the horizon. Happy sounds of two dear friends reunited after a ten-year separation filled the room. Side-by-side they sat, holding hands, conversing nearly non-stop, attempting to recall each and every moment spent apart.

The dark-haired young woman, Jennifer Aronson, smiled and shook her head disbelievingly. Her dearest childhood friend, Cathy Chandler, had returned home at last after spending nearly a decade abroad with her parents. Now Cathy would be able to attend Jenny's wedding, an event which was a scant seven weeks away. She was betrothed to her childhood sweetheart, Devin Wells, who was now a prominent lawyer and part owner of the large estate. Beaumont Hills was a community unto itself, with dozens of small cottages surrounding two hundred acres of beautiful trees, orchards, an orphanage, and the mansion itself.

The orphanage and estate were established by Dr Peter Alcott, an old friend of Devin's father, Jacob Wells, more than forty years earlier. Before he died, Dr Alcott bequeathed the orphanage, the house, and the land to Jacob, Devin, and Devin's foster brother, Vincent.

It was common knowledge that part of the bequest was to protect Vincent, who was found abandoned on the doorstep of the orphanage twenty-four years before. No one could quite explain Vincent, except to say that he was different, with unique leonine features that frightened some people and intrigued others; but as Devin was always fond of pointing out, Vincent was just 'special'.

Remembering the gentle soul whom she'd played with in the park all those years ago, Catherine expressed to her dear friend how happy she was for her good fortune.

"I always knew you and Devin would marry someday," Catherine stated with confidence. "I'm just so glad I could be here for both of you. I wouldn't miss your wedding for the world."

"Well, we couldn't be married without our dearest friend present to share our day."

Surveying her surroundings, Cathy smiled. "Jen, this house is so beautiful and so ..."

"Overwhelming?" They both laughed as Cathy nodded.

"I can't wait to see the rest of the estate, especially the gazebo and the orchards you mentioned in your letters."

Jenny smiled. "I promise to show you everything in time. It's too dark now to appreciate the beauty of this place. We even have a lovely stone bridge overlooking a clear, blue stream. I know you will love it!"

Cathy nodded enthusiastically. "You and Devin have accomplished much here. I almost dread going back to the city, but I hope you'll let me visit you after you've married."

"I certainly hope you do. I'm going to need your help decorating some of the guest rooms."

Even though they'd been separated for nearly a decade, Jenny recognized a wistful look in Cathy's eyes. Cathy had grown into a stunning, lovely woman, with expressive moss green eyes, a generous mouth, and a musical, almost girlish laugh. Her hair, which she'd worn in a long, thick braid as a little girl, was now worn upswept in a loose chignon. Her forest green velvet gown accentuated her eyes and brought out the pink in her cheeks. Yes, little had changed about Cathy except her age: she was a woman of twenty-two now.

"What is it, Cathy?"

Catherine picked up the teacup at her side and absently took a sip, then frowned and faced her friend. "How is Vincent, Jen, really?"

So that was it. Jenny couldn't help smiling as she nodded. "He's well, Cathy. Protected and well-loved by all of us, teaching the children in the orphanage. He lives in one of the cottages on the outskirts of the estate, near the stream."

"Is he happy?" Cathy asked, her voice full of hope.

Jenny exhaled. "As happy as he can be, I imagine. He's never been the same since you left." Seeing Cathy wince, Jenny tried to comfort her friend.

"Cathy, when we were children, you were friendly and kind to him; you played with him and never made fun of him. I think he's been in love with you since the first time he saw you in the park. Do you remember?"

"How could I forget? Something happened to me that day as well, Jen. It was as if no matter where we were, no matter if I ever saw him again, I sensed that our lives were linked. We were friends for a while ... until I left for Europe. And we did exchange letters."

Jenny nodded and touched Cathy's hand warmly. "Yes, thank goodness for that. Your letters have given him many happy moments. He's grown into a generous, tender-hearted, gentle soul who is resigned with his solitary life. Yet, I've never heard him complain or lament. He loves the children in the orphanage, and they adore him. He's a good man, Cathy, and I know he would like to see you again, but ..."

Cathy's heart lurched. "But, what?"

"He knows about Steven."

Cathy shook her head vehemently. "Jen, I told you that I have no intentions of marrying Steven. I told Vincent as much in my last letter to him. Doesn't he understand?"

"He understands only that Steven is young, rich, and your father's protégé. While Vincent may believe that you do not love Steven, he also realizes that he can never give you the life that Steven can."

Cathy's hands began to tremble. The last thing she wanted to do was to hurt Vincent. But she must make him understand.

"Jen, I want to see him, talk to him. Will you take me to him?"

Jenny shook her head. "He's staying at the orphanage for the next several days. There was extensive damage to the roof after the severe storm we had last week." She managed a smile. "But you will see him for the wedding," she assured Cathy.

There was nothing in the world Cathy wanted more. To see him again, speak with him, share her loneliness with him. Make him understand that since they were children, there had been no one in her life, no one.

Ever since losing her mother six years before, she'd felt lost. Although she loved her father very much, she missed the years that were stolen when her mother died. Now that she was home, she wanted to spend time with her friends again, especially Vincent.

"I can't wait to see him. Jen, I want to explain why my father won't be attending the wedding ..."

"I understand, really I do," Jenny replied softly. "I've always known how your father has felt about Jacob, Devin, and especially Vincent. It's quite all right."

"I love my father very much," Cathy explained. "But he's never understood that my friendship with Vincent was something that I needed very much. He's always seen Vincent as a 'freak', something other than human, and I apologize for his behavior, Jen, truly I do."

"I know he feels the same way as Steven. By the way, has your father finally realized that you have no intentions of marrying him?"

Cathy shook her head vehemently, causing several wisps of her bound hair to come loose and fall in tendrils over her cheeks. "Father hasn't changed his position in the least, Jen. He still sees visions of Steven Bass and I married; Steven, of course, taking over the business, and me taking my rightful place at his side in New York society. Frankly," she looked away, seemingly lost in thought, then faced Jenny once more, "I think I could be very happy right here in your little world."

"Easier said than done," Jenny replied, frowning. "We all grew up with Steven as well, and we know that he'll probably never change. He hates Devin, and we know how he feels about Vincent. Be careful, Cathy."

Cathy nodded. "Steven wants to announce our engagement by spring. I haven't encouraged him at all. I know that the allure of my fortune isn't going to dissuade him that easily. Let's face it Jen," here she chuckled almost mischievously, "I happen to be a wonderful catch."

At this, they allowed themselves to laugh together, letting the problems in their lives drift away for the moment. When the moment ended, Cathy hugged her dear friend tightly. "Oh, Jen, I'm so happy you're here for me now. I do need you." Then she shook her head, and a tear slid down her cheek. "I miss my mother very much."

"I know, but you have me and Devin, and soon, you'll see Vincent again; I want you to meet the people who live in our little community. You'll always have a family here if you need one. Never forget that."

"Thanks, Jen, I'm very grateful."

Jenny stood. "Come, let me show you my gown before you leave for home. By the way, I see Mouse has found his way to you. He'll be a wonderful coach driver."

As Cathy followed her from the room, she nodded. "I'm so glad Devin sent him to me. In the short time I've known him, he's been quite protective of me. He reminds me of a young guardian angel who's lost his way back to his heavenly cloud. You know I have a special place in my heart for those in need."

Jenny took Cathy's arm and led her to the winding staircase. "Yes, I know. Mouse is a truly special young man."

Cathy giggled softly. "He even told me he has a pet racoon named Arthur. Imagine that."

Moments later, standing in one of the upstairs bedrooms, Jenny held up her ivory-hued silk wedding gown for Cathy to see.

"Jen, it's exquisite," Cathy exclaimed excitedly. "You're going to be lovely. Devin Wells is a very lucky man. When will he be arriving? I can't wait to see him."

Jenny turned and hung up her gown, then turned to Cathy. "Soon, I hope. He's trying so hard to build up his law practice in the city." She smiled as she thought of her handsome fiancé. "I'm very proud of him, Cath."

"And how does Dr Wells feel? Is he proud of his son as well? I know they didn't get along when we were children."

Jenny nodded knowingly. "I think he is, finally. After years of enduring Devin's boyish pranks and mischievous behavior, Dr Wells has accustomed himself to Devin's rather playful personality. He has no choice," Jenny shrugged, helplessly.

"Devin is not going to change. I guess that's why I love him so much. I accept him for who he is: a kind man with a beautiful heart."

Cathy took Jenny's hand and squeezed it. "Yes, I know. And he'd better do well by you, or he will answer to me!"

They chatted happily for several moments, until Catherine seemed to drift off into her own reverie. Again, her thoughts went to Devin's mysterious brother, thinking of who he was, what he was. She closed her eyes and recalled the azure blue of his beautiful eyes, like the color of a summer sky; the features of his face, leonine, yet gentle and strong and, yes, beautiful. Even as children, she'd never dwelled on his differences, only the kind of person he was, and the sort of man he would become. And the day they'd met, that first day, when her eyes met his, she sensed something special was happening, that her life would never again be the same.

"Cathy, what is it?" Jenny interrupted her wistful daydream.

Cathy shook her head, as if to clear it and bring her back to the present. "Jen, do you think our lives are fated before we are born?"

Jenny drew back at her friends' strange inquiry. "Do you mean destiny?"

Cathy tilted her head, contemplating her words. "Well, what would you say if I told you that since we were children, I've always wondered -- no, I've always known, that somehow, in some way, Vincent would have a place in my life." At Jenny's confused shake of her head, Cathy continued.

"Jen, since I've been away, not a day has passed that I haven't thought of him," she confessed pointedly. "The day we left for Europe was the saddest of my life, because I felt as though I was leaving a part of myself behind. Oh, I know I was just a child, but the scant few times we played with Vincent in the park I was happy; I felt closer to him than to anyone, even my parents. I can't explain my feelings, but I only know they haven't lessened over the years. Jen, they've grown stronger, and they frighten me."

"I've had young men call on me since I was 16. I was interested in none of them." She paused as Jenny sat next to her, as always, listening to her as a dear friend; never interrupting, just waiting for her to go on

Cathy sighed. "And then Steven came to Europe in order to learn my father's business -- you know how my father has always thought of Steven as the son he never had. Well, he began to court me, and I clearly wasn't interested. I'm still not. Jen, he's very persistent." Cathy laughed sardonically. "He wants me, Jen, he wants my fortune. We all knew even when we were children -- Steven always boasted of how he would make a fortune and become a member of New York's elite." She saw Jenny nod in agreement.

"Status means everything to Steven, I'm afraid. I also think he has my father completely fooled. When he appeared in Europe to learn the shipping business, I never dreamed my father would place him virtually in charge of everything ... including my fortune. You know I care nothing for wealth and position, I just want Father to see what kind of man Steven really is. He's asked for my hand, Jen, but I will not marry him." She raised her chin a notch in defiance. "I don't love him. I still can't forget ..."

The words caught in her throat, and she was afraid that she would cry, but Jenny knew her friend's thoughts, almost as if she had spoken them aloud.

"Cathy," Jen touched her friend's hand, and squeezed it softly. "Can I tell you a little story?" Seeing Cathy nod, Jenny stood and turned toward the window, taking a deep breath.

"Before you see Vincent again, which will probably be at the wedding, I think there are things you should know. To begin with, ever since that day when you two first met, things were never quite the same. I said nothing to you then because we were children, only 12, but now that we're adults, I know that what you and Vincent shared in your brief encounters was more than just a childhood friendship." Watching Cathy's head snap up, Jenny stopped her expected interruption. "No -- let me finish. Devin used to tell me that after Vincent saw you in the park, his whole manner would change. He would smile, even laugh; he seemed to live only for the day when you'd be in the park again. Devin said that Vincent somehow KNEW when you'd be there again. He was unable to explain it, he just could feel it."

"When you left for Europe, he became quiet, and solitary. We all saw it, especially Devin, whose heart broke for his brother. Vincent lived only for the arrival of your letters. He would sit in the gazebo or near the stream and read your letters over and over. Your words made him smile. Yet, he drew into himself as he became older. When a cottage near the bridge became available, Vincent paid for it with money he'd earned from teaching the children. Oh, he loves the

children of the orphanage, has always been kind to them. However, he is almost always alone. It's as if something in his life, as if half of him ... died ... after you left."

Tears slid unheeded down Cathy's cheeks as she listened to Jenny speak of Vincent, of the sadness he'd had to endure all these years. She pulled a lace handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at her eyes, then looked up at her friend, and willed her to continue.

Seeing Cathy's tears, Jenny, too, felt like crying, but knew instead, she must go on. "I don't know what it will do to him to see you. But in my heart I know that he's just waiting for the day when he can see you again. Now I know what you're going to say. Why isn't he here, now?"

Cathy nodded through her tears, and Jenny sighed, then answered her.

"I think you know how sensitive Vincent is. Seeing you again after so many years, and knowing you may become engaged to Steven, do you know what it would do to him?"

Cathy nodded. "Yes, I do," she said in a soft whisper.

Jenny moved from the window, then sat beside her friend. "Now, do you understand why he is not here now?"

She understood. "Thank you for telling me all of this Jen. And I do understand, more than you know. I can't explain this connection we have, but I feel drawn to Vincent, drawn to his life, his world. A power stronger than my own has brought me back home ... to him ... Jen, we're still linked, somehow."

"I hope and pray both of you find your way with each other, if that is what fate has deemed for you. But what will you do about Steven? You know how he feels about us ... about Vincent?"

Cathy's face took on a look of determination and strength, which defied anyone to dictate her life to her.

Jenny knew that look and laughed softly. "I'll do anything I can to help you, you know that?"

"Yes, I do. Thank you, Jen."

"Cathy," Jen turned serious as she searched her friend's deep green eyes. "There will be problems and obstacles if you pursue a relationship with Vincent. I don't want either of you to be hurt. I love you both too much."

"I'd sooner die than hurt him, Jen," she admitted quietly, tears once again welling up in her eyes. "I care for him. I always have."

A short time later, a dark cloaked figure stood safely hidden in the shadows of the mansion, and watched as the carriage carrying his childhood friend disappeared down the main road, back toward the city. He swallowed the lump in his throat and tried unsuccessfully to steady his trembling hands.

"Catherine," he murmured, her name a prayer on his lips.

She was home.

CHAPTER TWO

"Hold fast to dreams

life is a broken-winged bird

for if dreams die,

that cannot fly."

- L. Hughes

The early morning quiet that settled over Beaumont Hills was gently broken by the music of several newly-hatched and hungry bluebirds, waiting quite impatiently for a parent bearing breakfast. That, and the rustling sounds of the lace curtains blowing softly, awakened Catherine from a deep, dreamless slumber.

Slowly opening her eyes to the soft light of the rising sun, Catherine took a deep breath and sat up, surveying her surroundings.

Stretching lazily like a sleek feline, she rose from the softness of the canopied four-poster and slipped on her pale blue silk and lace robe, drawing her waist-length hair out from under the collar.

Striding lazily towards the balcony doors, she drew them open and walked onto the stone terrace, silently admiring the breathtaking view of Beaumont Hills. Inhaling deeply of the early scents of spring, Catherine placed both hands on the wrought-iron railing and gazed upon the incredibly picturesque scene before her.

Beaumont Hills was indeed a community unto itself. They had their own stables and post office, dressmakers, a bakery and general store, which all served to make life liveable and convenient. Dozens of cottages were situated throughout hundreds of acres on hilly, grassy mounds, surrounded by immense elm, maple and dogwood trees.

The new spring grass lay like a green blanket, and Catherine couldn't seem to inhale enough of the sweet fragrance into her lungs. More baby birds could be heard in the distance, and Catherine smiled. Although Vincent had described his home in detail to her through his letters, his words could not compare with the breathtaking beauty of this place. I could be happy here, she thought wistfully.

"What a beautiful day for a wedding," she whispered to herself, then threaded her slender fingers through her hair. Looking off into the distance, she spied one of the little cottages situated on a small grassy hill, surrounded by a white picket fence and tall pines. A quaint stone bridge stood overlooking a thin silver stream, and over to the west of the cottage, she could see a white gazebo, partly obscured by trellises of green stems with hints of tiny buds that in a few short weeks would be blooming with fragrant, wild roses. Secretly, Catherine wished they would bloom into a profusion of Red Velvet and White Crystal, her favorites.

She continued to stare at the little cottage, knowing instinctively it had to belong to Vincent. How like him to choose the cottage furthest from all the rest, so he could enjoy the solitude of his surroundings. But it was the gazebo that drew Catherine's attention.

It looked so magical from where she stood, and her curiosity overwhelmed her.

It was far too early for anyone else to be up, and Catherine was determined to inspect the grounds near that gazebo before the household awoke and the wedding preparations were in full swing. Jenny certainly wouldn't mind. Since she'd returned, she hadn't seen Vincent, and Jenny explained that he'd been staying at the orphanage, helping with repairs.

Before she could change her mind, Catherine turned from her place on the terrace and raced across the chamber, down the narrow back stairs, and out the door. She knew she should have at least pinned her hair up, but, she shrugged as she walked toward the South end of the estate, no one would see her. It was barely Dawn, and surely she was the only person awake at this hour.

She was wrong.

Something pulled him from slumber, something unexplainable. He sat up in his own bed, in his own cottage, having returned late the prior evening. He wanted to be well-rested for the wedding of his beloved brother and Jenny today. Yet it was very early, and very quiet. What had awakened him?

Then his heart lurched, and Vincent clutched at his chest, seeking to calm the steady, loud pounding. Something was happening to him. He leapt out of bed, pulled on black trousers, a white silk shirt, opted not to tie the cravat, then walked to the pitcher and bowl on a nearby stand. Splashing water on his face and haphazardly smoothing back his long, golden mane, he ran down one flight to the main floor, grabbed his cloak from a hook near the door, and draped it over his broad shoulders.

Stepping outside, he inhaled great breaths of the clean, cool morning air, then began walking toward the gazebo, pulled by a force he was unable to explain.

Suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks, his heart tripping hard and fast in his breast as he continued to be drawn to the open structure. He sensed a presence close by and his breath escaped him as he swallowed hard, attempting to comprehend his strange behavior. Could it be?

Vincent knew that Catherine was staying at the house, and for this reason, he began to run toward his objective, his powerful body moving in graceful, panther-like strides, hoping above all hope that a decade of loneliness and waiting were finally to be rewarded.

Approaching the bottom step of the gazebo, his heart soared.

And then, he saw her.

She was here... Catherine.

Her back was to him, and Vincent's first view of her was the incredibly beautiful curtain of honey-brown hair cascading over her slender shoulders and down her back, reaching to her waist. Slowly, she turned, and Vincent felt the breath literally stolen from his body as their eyes met. She was more ethereal, more spirit-like than any imagining could possibly be, and as had happened ten years before, she smiled at him.

And he was lost, swept away, all over again.

Their gazes fixed on each other for a few tentative moments. In the shelter of the gazebo, they seemed isolated from the rest of the outside world. Catherine's heart raced, and her slender hands trembled slightly at the sight of her childhood friend, now a man fully grown. She unashamedly allowed herself to drink in the sight of him: his broad-shouldered, powerful body, his long, strong legs and thighs; she had to turn her gaze up in order to look into his beautiful eyes, still as blue as the summer sky. And his face -- his beautiful, unique leonine features, so strong yet gentle, so intense yet calm, so filled with intelligence and goodness.

And loneliness.

Catherine hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath until she slowly released it. She felt drawn to him, INTO him; there was nothing she could do to stop this powerful pull toward him and moved closer until she was within just inches of him.

"Vincent ..."

The sound of her voice nearly rocked him from his feet. It was a voice filled with everything he'd missed in a lifetime of wanting, the stuff dreams were made of. Catherine was here ... she was home. And as strange as it seemed, she had been drawn to this place as he was.

"Welcome home, Miss ... Catherine," he dared to call her by her Christian name. He wanted to hear her voice again after all the lost years. A lifetime, without the sunshine of her presence, without Catherine, the other half of his soul.

"It is good to be home," she stood still, her arms at her sides, still looking up at him, smiling on him, neither able to look away. Both had so much to say, but didn't know where to start. Fearing to break the contact, Vincent sighed, but dared not blink, afraid she'd disappear and he'd be forever trapped in his aloneness.

Wanting so much to touch, though daring not to Vincent instead allowed his eyes to linger over her. She was as beautiful as a morning in May, a vision of beauty and femininity. She'd acquired a bosom that filled out the lace bodice of her robe, and her slender neck accentuated the fullness of her generous lips and petite nose. It was her eyes, though, that captivated him. As green as the moss that covered the smooth stones beside his stream, he knew he could lose himself in those dark green orbs. His mouth went dry as it finally dawned on him that she was wearing nothing but her nightdress and robe.

"You shouldn't be out here with me ... like this ... it's not proper," he nobly professed. "Someone could see us."

Catherine's smile melted his heart. "Vincent, we are old friends, are we not?" She wanted so much to put him at ease. "There is nothing improper about two friends becoming reacquainted after many years apart, and I assure you, no one is up and about as yet. Tell me, have you been well?"

He nodded. "And yourself?"

Catherine had always loved the sound of his voice, deep and rich. However with the onset of manhood, it had now taken on a more masculine resonance. Even as children, he'd been a creature of few words, for he had spoken mostly with his eyes, with his emotions. Catherine's mind wandered and she imagined fleetingly how it would feel to be held in his strong arms, what his kiss would be like. She shook off her forbidden feelings and faced him again.

"I have been well." She took a deep breath, then looked all around her at the circular enclosure. "This place is enchanting, Vincent. And I think the roses must catch the morning sun beautifully."

What a silly thing to say, she thought. Here she hadn't seen this man in nearly ten years, and one of the first things she mentions is roses. She looked up at him and they both laughed. The tension of the moment was broken, and they visibly relaxed.

Vincent found himself unable to stop smiling at her. Did she have any idea that this was the first time he had a reason to smile or laugh in many years? Without touching her, he led her to the long stone bench, and bade her sit. He knew they should not be here together, alone in the gazebo at this early hour; knew that she was promised to Steven and realized they could never truly be more than good friends. But he would accept anything she wished to give him, even if it was just friendship.

Yet his heart, his soul, cried out for more. He could not think of these feelings now, it was wrong. At the same time, though, he wondered what her hair would feel like under his hands, under his mouth. Would it smell like violets, or roses? Trembling at the thought, he turned to her again, studying her profile as she looked out into the sunlight that was beginning to signal a new day. "Will you ... are you ... home, to stay?" His voice held such a sense of hope, it almost made her weep.

"Oh, yes Vincent ..." she looked up at him, determined and serious. "I'm home to stay. I'll never leave again. I want to spend time with Jenny and Devin and catch up with my life. I've lost many years while I've been in Europe, and I want to know everything that's happened since ... since we were children ... together."

Vincent nodded and allowed himself to exhale. She was home to stay. Smiling shyly, he admitted, "Should we begin discussing all that's happened to us all this time, I fear we would miss the wedding."

Her small laugh stirred in him feelings he'd tucked deep inside his heart over the years. "I fear you're right. We'll just have to put aside special time to spend together in order that we may fill in all the missing places."

Vincent's smile disappeared. "Catherine," he shook his head sadly. "There is nothing I'd like more than to see you again, but you must realize as well as I that it would not be proper to ... meet. You are promised to Steven, and I cannot fathom that he would allow you to share a friendship with me. It is quite impossible. It could never be."

Catherine jumped up and dared to touch his sleeve as he turned from her in sorrow. "How can you say that, Vincent?" She gently turned him to face her, and in his heart, Vincent could actually feel her strength, a determined power that flowed through his veins. "I am over 21, and I will not have Steven Bass, of all people, dictate to me who my friends may be. Vincent," her voice softened, but he would not look at her. "I have waited a long time to see you again. I want to know about your life, I need to hear you speak of your family, and of the children in the orphanage, everything you spoke of in your letters. Vincent, don't you see, there must be a reason for our meeting each other again. I can't explain it yet, but someday you will see the right of it all."

Her voice soothed him. It coursed through him like warm honey. And flowing through his flesh, his blood, emotions other than his own were telling him what she said was true. He felt even more alone then, knowing the feelings they were sharing could not be allowed to bloom and grow. "You should go," he said, his voice barely audible. "We mustn't speak of this again." Just standing this close to her sent an aching pang through his heart.

His sadness pierced her, but she would not let it deter her purpose. "Mr Wells, I haven't returned after all this time so that our friendship could wither." She had his attention now, for he turned to face her, his eyes filled with a tinge of hope.

"Steven and I are not betrothed, and never will be," she argued, holding his attention. "Vincent, will you tell me something, honestly?"

He nodded. "You can ask me anything, Catherine." Catherine took a deep breath. "Do you agree that our friendship was ... is ... special?"

He sensed what she was doing. If he answered yes, he knew he couldn't refuse her anything. And at this very instant, if she asked him to die for her, he'd gladly lay his life down for her.

"Yes," he replied, his voice very low.

Catherine turned from him, crossing her arms over her breasts, looking out over the hill, fearing she had hurt him. Maybe she'd gone too far, and was appearing too forward.

"I'm sorry," she admitted. "I don't want to hurt you. These past years have been empty for me," she cried out in a rush. "Not one day has gone by that I haven't thought of you, wondered what you were doing, if you were well," she turned to gaze at him. "... If you'd forgotten me ..."

Vincent's eyes widened in horror. "Catherine, please don't. My life, as well, has been an empty shell all these years. Only the arrival of your letters brought me the only joy I've ever known. Forgotten you? I'd sooner forget how to breathe. There is nothing I want more than to see you again ..."

Catherine allowed herself a shy smile, happy to know she'd won him over. "Then, you will see me again."

Vincent relented. "Our friendship is very important to me, Catherine. However, what about Steven, and your father? I forbid you to deceive them in order to remain friends with me."

Catherine shrugged. "Let me worry about my father and Steven," she answered. "I'm an adult and I will allow no one to tell me who my friends should be. Besides," she admitted rather slyly. "When Jenny and Devin return from their honeymoon, I've promised to visit Beaumont Hills faithfully, every week."

Vincent smiled at the fact that she'd already made plans to return each week and the thought buoyed him, but he frowned again.

"About Steven ..."

"Yes? What about him?"

"Devin has told me that he is now in charge of your father's business, and we all know how he feels about me. If at any time our friendship causes friction between you and your father and Steven, you must promise to tell me. Please."

Catherine had no intention of making such a promise, so she just smiled and nodded ever so slightly.

"Then it's settled."

Vincent couldn't believe it. He was actually going to meet with her again, actually going to be in her company, hear her voice, her laugh, inhale the enchanting scent of her. He caught his breath as she walked into a shaft of sunlight that had pierced the intricate swirling designs of the gazebo.

"What is it, Vincent? What are you looking at?" Vincent swallowed hard. "Your hair. The sunlight in your hair is so ... beautiful."

She smiled up at him. "I imagine I should return to the house. They'll wonder where I am. Will you meet me here later, after the reception? I have to be home by dusk, but I'd like to talk to you again before I go home

Vincent nodded, knowing it was forbidden, yet realizing he would never refuse her anything again, as long as he lived.

Catherine then walked toward the opening in the gazebo, preparing to go, yet reluctant to ever leave him again. "Until later, then ..."

And then she was gone. Vincent looked after her as she ran back to the house, her slender body making graceful strides across the hill, her waist long hair swaying from side to side as she ran.

"Welcome home, Catherine."

CHAPTER THREE

"The best and most beautiful
things in the world cannot be seen
or even touched. They must be felt with the
heart."

- *H. Keller*

Jenny had made an exquisite bride, and Catherine watched her dear friend as she made her way through the crowd, smiling and sharing words with her guests. She was thrilled for her.

Joviality and a sense of family filled the ballroom of the manor house, as Catherine made her way through the dozens of guests, graciously meeting each and every one. Devin had taken her elbow and patiently introduced her to his immediate family, which included Devin's father, Dr Jacob Wells, a charming fellow, and his lovely wife, Mary. Catherine fully intended to become involved in the lives of each and every one of the friendly people she'd met that day.

As Devin introduced her to Joseph Maxwell, the new Chief of Police, Catherine smiled and exchanged pleasantries, but in the back of her mind, she was unable to stop thinking of Vincent. She'd only seen him briefly during the ceremony before he'd melted into the shadows, and that was hours ago. She wanted to find him, yet wasn't sure where he'd be.

"You haven't heard a word I've said."

The sound of Devin's teasing voice broke into her silent musings, and she looked up at him. "Excuse me. I'm sorry, Devin, what did you say?"

Devin smiled knowingly. "I said, that you can't be having a very good time." Seeing her admonishing expression, he chuckled. "You're either incredibly bored, or simply not impressed with the imported champagne and Russian caviar."

Shaking her head at his playful behavior, Catherine rose on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "Oh, Devin, you haven't changed. I'm so glad."

He nodded knowingly, and they both directed their gazes to Jenny, across the room, speaking to Mary and Jacob. "I hope she can put up with me for the next fifty or sixty years," he said almost absently. "Father must be telling her how impossible I can be," he looked down at Catherine. "But I love her, Cathy, and I'll do anything I can to make her happy." He smiled. "I promise."

"You'd better, or you'll answer to me." Catherine returned his smile, then changed her expression almost instantly. "We must take happiness when it's given to us, Devin, even when it seems impossible, or we may never find it again. Don't ever allow anyone to interfere with yours," her hand squeezed his arm. "Ever."

Devin nodded in agreement as her eyes scanned the room once again. "He's waiting for you at the gazebo," he whispered conspiratorially. "Go on, I'll have Mouse come for you in ten minutes. You said you must be home by dusk." At her smile of thanks, he kissed her forehead. "Cathy, be careful."

"I'm sorry," Vincent touched her hand gently, then his gaze wandered and he turned away from her.

"What are you thinking?" Catherine saw his change of mood as he stood away from her.

He looked out at the approaching dusk, and knew she'd soon be gone, yet he wanted her to know what was in his heart.

"One day," he began, "six years ago, I became restless and decided to journey into the city, to Central Park. So I waited until sundown, and walked into the city, not telling anyone. I was feeling lonely. I had just received a letter from you. You were excited about your sixteenth birthday. I don't think I've ever felt as alone as I did on that night."

He knew Catherine was standing right behind him, but she did not interrupt, so he sighed deeply and continued, determined to tell her the whole of it, knowing that after he did tell her what happened to him on her birthday, they would be unable to break the invisible ties that bound them.

"Of course it takes weeks for letters to arrive from Europe, so the night I took my journey to the park must have been the night of your birthday. I remember finding a cluster of trees and I concealed myself at the base of a weeping willow. I fell asleep. But during the night, I had a nightmare ..."

He grew silent when he felt the touch of her hand on his shoulder, and he shuddered. No one had ever touched him in such a way. A strange tenseness gripped his body as her warmth coursed through him. His head dropped and he had to take deep breaths to keep his control.

"Go on, Vincent, tell me."

He swallowed hard, ever mindful of her hand on him. "The dream I had ..." Here he turned and faced her, his eyes boring into hers. "You were falling, screaming, rolling down an embankment," his voice broke and his breathing was shallow. "I could hear your cries for help, your voice so filled with despair, I could see your blood, your torn clothing ..."

Vincent was unable to continue, and shook his head, attempting to rid himself of the terrible vision he'd suffered all those years ago.

"Oh my God," he heard Catherine murmur. "Are you trying to tell me you felt my accident?"

Vincent shook his head. "I think what happened defies reason, but I do not think it was a coincidence."

Catherine nodded her agreement. "I cannot explain all of this except to say that what I told you before is true." He tilted his head in question.

"That we were meant to explore our friendship ... our feelings. Oh, Vincent, don't you see? We were meant to be together."

"Catherine," he said in a tortured voice, "our lives are different, our worlds, separate and apart. If we pursue a relationship and something should happen to part us now after all these years, the pain would be more than I could bear."

Catherine was not deterred in the least. "Vincent, you have just told me that you actually shared my near-death experience. Something that happened thousands of miles from here, an accident that you saw in a dream. Now you're saying that we should not pursue a relationship?"

"Catherine, I'm frightened," he admitted.

"Of me?" she asked, worriedly.

He managed a small smile. "No, not of you. But I am frightened by this ... connection we seem to share ... this linking of our lives. What will we do?"

"If we do share some sort of connection, don't you agree that we should meet again to speak of it? There is a reason for all of these happenings. Vincent, I knew I had to come back home. I had to return, for you, for myself, to discover what these feelings are. If we were destined to be together, would you be happy?"

His expression told her everything she needed to know. "We mustn't speak like this ...

I ..."

At that moment, Mouse appeared on the top of the hill, waiting patiently for Catherine, so that he might take her home. "It's time for you to go back. You'll be late arriving home."

As far as Catherine was concerned, this wasn't over. "Vincent, will you meet me here when Devin and Jenny return from their honeymoon, so that we may be together and speak again? Please?"

He stared at her a long time, saying nothing. Finally, knowing he would be risking everything to be with her again, he nodded.

"Good," her smile stirred him. "Then I will see you when they return. I'll meet you here. April 12th."

His eyes widened at the mention of the date, and he couldn't help but smile. He nodded as she ran towards Mouse, and, thinking of the night of her accident, he ran his hand through his hair near his left ear, where a thin streak of white was hidden under his thick mane, a result of his nightmare, six years ago, in Central Park.

"April 12th." he whispered hopefully. "Be well, Catherine."

"Miss Catherine ... home."

Turning her attention to the blond young man who stood in the carriage doorway, Catherine smiled and took his offered hand, and stepped down. "Thank you, Mouse

Walking her to the front door of the townhouse, Mouse smiled shyly. "Saw Vincent?" At her nod, he added, "he's my friend."

"Yes, Mouse, I know; he's mine as well."

"Good. Better than good; goodnight, Miss Catherine."

She touched his shoulder gratefully. "Goodnight Mouse."

Handing her cloak to the valet as she entered the house, Catherine heard voices coming from the library, and knew her father and Steven would be having cocktails before dinner. Taking a deep breath, she steeled herself for the confrontation.

"Ah, Catherine, you're home," her father's tone was pleasant enough. "How was the wedding?"

She stopped just inside the threshold of the large, though comfortable room, and frowned when she spied Steven sitting across from her father. My heavens, she thought as her eyes met his, he looks as though he wants to devour me. The thought made her cringe.

"The wedding, was lovely. It's a shame you missed it. Jenny and Devin are very happy."

Steven rose to greet her, gallantly kissing her hand. "Catherine, my dear, you look stunning."

Catherine eased her hand from Steven's grasp, then composed herself.

"What are you doing here?" The words left her lips before she could take them back.

Walking to her father's chair, she kissed his cheek lightly, then stood to his side, hoping that her arrival would signal Steven's departure. All she wanted was to run to the sanctuary of her room, and record the day's wonderful events in her journal, before the visions were gone. But deep in her heart she realized that each moment of her day spent in Beaumont Hills would be etched in her mind forever. The thought gave her the strength to endure even Steven's obnoxious manner.

"Have you forgotten?" Steven looked at her questioningly. "I've been invited to dinner."

Now she remembered. Dinner. Questions about the Wells' family, and an endless evening filled with leering glances from Steven. However, she would not be rude to her father's guest, and as long as her father was present, she could endure an evening in Steven's company.

Later, when they were settled in the main dining room, the first course being served, the subject of the Wells' wedding did, indeed, surface. It was Steven who fired the initial shot.

"So, now that Jenny Aronson has married and moved to Beaumont Hills, perhaps you will have more time to spend in the city with your own family."

Catherine watched him as he spooned his soup, sipping it with relish. "And pray, sir, what is that supposed to mean?"

Charles Chandler lifted his eyes from his plate and rested his gaze on his beautiful daughter, who appeared ready for battle. She had never been a difficult child, always gentle and happy, yet after the death of her mother six years before, Catherine turned inward, and seemed more lonely than most children. He sighed silently as he thought of his wife, missing her deeply, and knew that Catherine shared his loss. He knew his daughter didn't love Steven, but he wanted her to be comfortable, and with Steven, at least she'd never be alone. He also wanted to know she was well taken care of before he passed on. Steven was a good match, and he hoped after all these years, Catherine would give him a chance. However, at the moment, she was poised for battle, preparing to defend her friends. Even though Charles did not share her fondness for the Wells' family, especially that freak of a son, Vincent, he was proud of his daughter for her fierce loyalty to her friends. He smiled.

"I repeat, Steven, what is the purpose for your ungracious remark?"

Steven placed his spoon beside his plate. "You know as well as I that Jacob and Devin Wells aren't of our class, Catherine," he said pointedly. "I realize Jenny is your friend, but really, must you consort with the whole clan of them? They live on the grounds of an orphanage, for heaven's sake. And you know how I've always felt about that freak."

Catherine rose from her chair so abruptly, it crashed against the wall behind her. "That 'freak' as you call him, is my friend. He's an intelligent, gentle man, and I will not have you speak of him that way."

Steven was visibly shocked at her outburst. He always knew that Catherine was no shrinking violet, but this behavior would not do when she became his wife.

"I can understand you defending him," he tried to placate her, "but really, Catherine, it's no wonder they've spirited him away from the rest of the civilized world, that's all."

This was the last straw as far as Catherine was concerned. Stepping away from the table, she threw a contrite look at her parent.

"I'm sorry, Father, I'll say 'goodnight' now. Steven," she cast daggers at the younger man. "If you insist on speaking unkindly about my friends, I really don't think we have anything more to say. Goodnight."

After her departure, Steven picked up his spoon and nonchalantly resumed sipping his soup. Moments later, he directed his remarks to Charles.

"Really, Charles, I think Catherine should have been handled with a firmer hand. She has been too long without a mother. She needs someone to guide her."

"You mean she needs a husband," Charles concurred reluctantly.

Steven nodded. "I hope I haven't injured her feelings, but I will make it up to her. I do care for her and only have her best interests at heart. I'd like to make a formal engagement announcement by early summer at the latest."

Charles suppressed a tremor of concern at Steven's obnoxious behavior, agreeing that despite his small misgivings, Catherine would enjoy a prosperous life with the dashing, successful businessman, whom he himself had groomed to succeed him. He thought of Steven as the son he never had, and surmised that he and Catherine would run the family shipping business successfully long after he was gone.

"Steven, you've hurt her feelings, and I think you should make it up to her as soon as possible," Charles said. "You know that I want nothing more than to see Catherine happy. However, for a person who's known Catherine all her life, I think you sometimes forget that she is not a submissive woman. She has a mind and will of her own. Lord, Steven, we are approaching the twentieth century. I think you should keep that in mind. If you want to endear her to you, you must be gentle, not aggressive."

Shaking his head, Steven answered. "I disagree, Charles. I think Catherine should be dealt with firmly, and the first order of business should be to prevent her from seeing the Wells' family, namely that freak. He could only hurt her reputation, and I won't have it."

"And I'm telling you," Charles answered, more amused than annoyed by his young companion's idealistic manner, "that you will win Catherine's heart with tenderness and understanding, not aggressiveness and negativity. Steven, I trust you with my business, and I'm willing to trust you with my only child, but I think you should reconsider your ideas. Do you really think Catherine would bend to anyone's will? Do you presume to think that she would be a silent, submissive wife? Would you desire such a woman to be your mate for life?"

Steven took a slow sip of his wine, considered an answer, then spoke. "I know she doesn't love me that way, but I think with time, we can move into a comfortable relationship. We are well suited, travel in the right circles, and ..."

"And she's heir to my fortune. Well, Steven, at least you're honest about your feelings. I think of you as a son, Steven, even if you are a bit too ambitious, but I will not force Catherine to marry you if she does not love you. However, I will tell you this: if you can win her over, you have my blessings."

Steven smiled, a smug look gracing his handsome face. "That's all I ask."

A short time later, as Steven sat in his carriage on the way home, his thoughts drifted to the day when the Chandler fortune ... and Catherine would be his alone. By mutual consent ... or by force.

He smiled, having no doubt in his mind about the future.

Seated at her desk, pen in hand, her journal before her, Catherine began writing down her innermost thoughts, wishes, and hopes, all including a unique, leonine-featured young man. Smiling widely, she described the grounds at Beaumont Hills, the wonderful wedding celebration she was so lucky to have been a part of, and the magical gazebo where she would rendezvous with Vincent in just a few short weeks.

Her heart pounded a steady beat in her breast as she recalled his soft, beautiful voice, his strong, powerful body, and his sky blue eyes, filled with so much: intelligence, gentleness, strength, and a loneliness that matched her own.

She knew she was going to have a battle on her hands if she defied her father and Steven, but there was no way she would give up Vincent. She would see him if she had to climb out her window, and yes, she would lie in order to be with him.

How was it that she felt so little about Steven Bass, a man she'd known all her life, yet she felt closer to Vincent than her own self? How was it that she knew part of her would always belong to Vincent, no matter what occurred? What manner of magic was at work here? She felt nothing other than a familial acquaintance with Steven, cringed at the thought of his lips on her hand; yet with one intense gaze, Vincent had stirred her blood and captured her heart.

She knew Mouse would help her to go to him; she could rely on Devin and Jenny to keep her secret. Nothing and no one was going to keep her from Beaumont Hills.

Or from Vincent.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Rose, I breathe you in as if you
were all of life -- and I feel I am
the perfect friend of such a friend."

- R. M. Rilke

He'd see her today.

Vincent stood on the stone bridge overlooking the tiny stream and gazed up into the morning sky. Inhaling deeply of the cool spring air, he once again allowed himself to think of the woman his thoughts had centered solely around these past weeks.

"Catherine." His whispered mention of her name was like a song on his lips. Ever since she'd returned from the other side of the ocean, he could think of little else. From the beautiful, delicate child he'd known a decade ago, to the exquisitely lovely woman she had grown into... Vincent's heart, mind, and soul had never known such a myriad of emotions to course through him. Until now.

Her return, while an answer to all his prayers, was almost sure to raise turmoil, not only within her family, but in his as well. Aside from the fact that she was almost assuredly betrothed to Steven Bass, their families had never been acquaintances. His own father, whom Vincent loved and respected, had just yesterday warned him to take care, that his friendship with Miss Chandler could only bring him heartache. At that point, Devin had walked in on the conversation and defended Vincent's friendship with Catherine, saying that Vincent deserved to be just as happy as any man. Vincent had smiled at his brother, thanking him with his eyes for understanding. Nevertheless, Jacob Wells was fearful for his son. After all, he pointed out, Catherine Chandler was practically engaged to marry Steven Bass, and Vincent should not expect too much from her. He had listened quietly to his father's words, but was unable to answer. His emotions were too fragile, too private to be shared now. All he knew was that whatever happened today, tomorrow, or in the future, Catherine Chandler was somehow part of it.

She had always been part of his past, he believed that now. When he'd seen her scar, he'd sensed in the deepest part of himself, that he'd shared her accident. Her pain had been his pain. There were no explanations for it, he thought, no

right or wrong. There was only Catherine. And no matter what destiny put in their path, he would try to accept his fate, gratefully. Whatever time they had together, be it hours or minutes, would be experienced to the fullest.

Something else had happened to him. Ever since she'd returned home, Vincent's sensitive nature was sharper when it came to Catherine's feelings. He found when he concentrated on her, he could feel her stronger emotions: when she was angry, or sad, her occasional moments of joy, all these feelings became Vincent's as well. It was sometimes difficult for him to concentrate on his own senses when Catherine's emotions came to the fore. But he didn't mind -- rather, he welcomed knowing she was well; it gave him comfort to know she was close by, in thought if not in proximity.

Walking across the bridge in long purposeful strides, he made his way toward the gazebo, his place of solace and sanctuary. This is where they had agreed to meet. He was glad he and Devin had agreed that Mouse would be the perfect person to drive her coach, and also to be something of a guardian angel. He was a trusted friend, and Vincent knew he'd protect Catherine with his life if need be.

As he stepped up into the center of the gazebo, Vincent reached into his heart and sensed her presence. Turning his head to the sound of the distant coach, his hands began to tremble slightly. In a few short moments they'd be together, and he could look upon her, drink in her beauty, her scent, and gaze into the warm green of her eyes. Oh, if only he could melt into those eyes, those expressive orbs that had smiled on him the first moment she glanced at him, all those years ago. Eyes he had never forgotten in all these years. Eyes that had haunted his dreams.

Ten years. Years filled with an aching void only her letters could fill. He'd resigned himself to the fact that the emptiness in his heart would never be filled, unless she came back. Now that she had returned, he was risking everything on the chance that he could finally find some degree of happiness. Dare he wish for a life with Catherine? Should he be content with a platonic relationship, and just be grateful for her friendship? He laughed ruefully. How could he even contemplate more than that? He must never allow himself to dream or wish that he and Catherine Chandler could ever share a life together. He was different. His fingers sported clawed nails, his nose and mouth were more leonine than human, and more than once, he'd felt a rage within himself that had to be kept deeply hidden, never to be brought forth. He had never hurt anyone, for Vincent would never allow his more primal characteristics to present themselves. Never.

Shaking his head sadly, Vincent realized that through all his reasoning, when all was said and done, the moment he allowed his emotions to overtake him, all his noble intentions would be in vain.

As the carriage carrying her drew closer to Beaumont Hills, and to him, Vincent had the feeling that he would gladly give her his heart if she asked. Actually, it had always been hers.

Clutching the book of poetry to her breast, Catherine looked out from the carriage, her heart pounding in anticipation of seeing him again. These had been the longest weeks of her life, and she felt a sudden peace as the carriage approached the boundary of Beaumont Hills. Since her return to America, she'd been restless in the city, only waiting for the time when she could return to this place, to the beautiful picturesque serenity of Beaumont Hills. She'd mentioned to Jenny that she could be happy here, away from the hustle and bustle of city life, away from the night sounds of horses and carriages, the bells of the trolley cars. Her loneliness did not reach this place. Jenny and Devin and their families were here. Vincent was here.

Even his name brought a smile to her lips. Vincent, her childhood friend. Vincent, whose life was somehow linked with her own. She and he would renew acquaintance and, she hoped, grow closer and explore the limits of their relationship.

Reaching for the timepiece that she kept on a thin chain in her reticule, Catherine noted that it had taken them almost two hours to travel from her brownstone on Fifth Avenue to the boundary of Beaumont Hills.

Her father hadn't been very receptive to the idea that she would be traveling to Long Island today, but she'd promised to see Jenny and Devin when they returned from their honeymoon, and her father could rarely refuse Catherine anything. So he kissed her on the cheek, requesting her presence for a dinner party at home that night, and Catherine had graciously accepted her father's request. That would give her only a few short hours with her friends.

She saw Devin and Jenny as they came out from the main house, waving to her as they held hands, their faces glowing with joy. It warmed Catherine's heart to see them so happy.

"Cathy!" Jenny called to her, as Mouse helped her from the carriage. The two childhood friends fell into each other's arms, hugging and giggling like schoolgirls, glad to have a reunion. Devin joined in their embrace, kissing Catherine on

the forehead and welcoming her. Mouse told Catherine he'd meet her at four for the journey home, then proceeded to lead the horse and carriage to the stables.

"You two look wonderful!" Catherine exclaimed, linking her arm with Jenny's. "Marriage agrees with you."

Devin nodded and winked. "It's my incredibly good looks and impeccable charm, Cathy. How can she resist such perfection?"

Jenny joined Catherine in mock laughter. "Let's see how far your looks and charm get you when you start knocking down the wall in the West wing," she teased as Devin scowled at her.

"I see you're already putting him to work, Jen. Good for you. Better to train him early on, so he realizes who is really in charge."

Devin cleared his throat. "Excuse me, Miss Chandler, just wait until you're married, then we'll see who ..."

He noticed his mistake and apologized. "Sorry, Cath, I didn't mean to intimate that you were going to marry Steven; you know me better than that."

Catherine touched his arm gently and forced a tiny smile. "I know, Devin, and you're right. I'm not going to marry Steven. Ever."

Jenny and Devin exchanged glances. It was happening already. Catherine had no intention of endearing herself to anyone but Vincent. It was very obvious that Vincent felt the same, Devin had pointed out to Jenny the day before. He'd also confided to Jenny that from his point of view, Vincent and Catherine had a long, difficult road ahead of them if they insisted on pursuing a relationship. When Steven found out about their friendship, and he would, there would be hell to pay.

Devin and Steven Bass had been natural rivals all their lives. They'd never liked each other from the moment they met as young boys. Maybe it was because Steven had been a vicious child from the beginning, always ridiculing and belittling Vincent. Maybe it was because Steven always bullied Catherine and Jenny, even as children. Oh yes, when Steven discovered that the four of them had resumed their friendship, he would waste no time in trying to hurt both Catherine and Vincent. Devin knew he would have to steel himself for the future confrontation.

He'd never allow Steven to hurt Cathy, Vincent, or Jenny, though he didn't have the slightest idea how he was going to prevent it.

One thing was for sure, however. If Cathy and Vincent grew closer as time went by, he and Jenny would do anything to bring them together. Jenny had agreed with him when they discussed the possibility of Cathy and Vincent's youthful attraction for each other growing into something deeper, something everlasting. Devin had smiled when he thought that he wanted nothing more than to see his beloved brother and Jenny's best friend falling in love, sharing a life, becoming companions and helpmates, lovers and friends. He knew that Vincent had lost his heart to Cathy nearly ten years ago, when they played together in the park. Vincent was the type of man who loved once in his life, and Catherine, even as a child, had become the love of Vincent's life. Instinct told him that Cathy felt the same for Vincent. That was the easy part. The difficulty now would lie in their future ... if they had a future.

Taking a deep breath as he watched his new bride and Cathy speaking to each other, he made a silent vow that he would do everything in his power to cut a clear path for them. He and Jenny would conspire if they had to, to bring them together, and take the burden of suspicion from Steven, until a solution could be found to deal with the impossible son of a bitch.

Watching Cathy as her head lifted to take in her surroundings, and reading her actions as if he were reading a book, Devin nodded knowingly. Jenny followed suit.

"Well," Jenny took Cathy's hand in her own, patting it gently. "We hate to leave you, but Devin's promised to measure those walls in the West wing so that the workmen can get started on the redecoration immediately. Why don't you visit Vincent for a while. He's probably waiting for you."

Catherine shook her head and smiled widely at her friends, "I am thankful every day of my life that I have friends like you."

Devin gave her a mock stern look. "The more you talk, the less time you have with him," he winked. "You know the way. Now off with you."

Catherine gave them both a quick kiss. "See you before I go home. Thank you."

As Devin slid his arm around his wife's waist, giving it a gentle squeeze, their eyes followed Catherine as she ran toward the direction of the gazebo.

"Don't say it, darling. I know what you're thinking."

Jenny kissed him quickly on the mouth. "Know me that well, do you?"

Devin nodded, yet his frown remained. "They have one hell of a time ahead of them, you know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. But I also know Cathy, and I know Vincent. They are two of the bravest, strongest people we know. And if any two people are willing to fight for what they most desire, it is them. We'll help them, won't we, dear?"

He managed a smile and rested his gaze on his wife. "You know we will. I also know Steven and the kind of low-life creature he can be. He'll hurt them if he can, Jen, and I'm just not going to let that happen."

Jenny stood on tiptoe and wrapped her arms around her husband's neck. "Now I know why I married you," she whispered seductively. "You're a good man, Devin Wells, and I love you dearly."

Taking Vincent's arm, Catherine felt the strength of his muscles through his cloak and ruffled linen shirt. His black trousers and knee-high black boots hugged his legs and thighs in a most complimentary way. He had grown into the most attractive man Catherine had ever known. His golden mane shone in the sun and gently blew away from his face as they approached the gazebo. Did he know how magnificent he was? Had he any idea now that they'd found each other again, she had no intention of accepting only friendship from him? How long would it take him to realize that there could never be anyone else for her?

As he led her to a long stone bench that graced one side of the circular enclosure, Catherine reluctantly released his arm and smoothed her dress, pushing the folds away to allow him to sit beside her.

Vincent hesitated, not knowing if it was proper to sit so close to her. He wanted nothing more than to reacquaint himself with her, yet he was obviously reluctant to take the first step. Catherine sensed his doubt, and reached out her lace-gloved hand to him.

"Vincent," she whispered pleadingly, "please."

Vincent closed his eyes and swallowed hard, his mind spinning with a myriad of emotions at the sound of her voice. Her soft request had the subtle essence of a lover's plea. Was this proper? Should they be so completely alone, without the company of a chaperone? What would become of her reputation if they were discovered here, together?"

Yet, as all these questions and doubts whirled around in his mind, his eyes found and met hers and in the space of only a moment, his mind was made up. He could actually feel what she was feeling, and Catherine was aware of it. It seemed from this moment on, their future was carved out for them. He could sense her happiness, which was missing from his heart in the weeks since the wedding. How could anything that involved Catherine be wrong, when in his heart, and hers, everything seemed so right. They were here, now, and he was thankful for whatever part fate played in their togetherness. He would worry about the ramifications of their relationship at another time.

Vincent took a step forward and eased himself down on the bench next to her, drawing a glowing smile from Catherine.

It didn't take her a moment to start a conversation. "I want you to know that I think Beaumont Hills is the most beautiful place I've ever seen, and that includes all of Europe." Catherine took a deep breath and inhaled the scents that surrounded her: the grass, sweet and fresh, the air, clean and cool, and Vincent. Musk and leather permeated her senses, along with a scent she couldn't quite define, but knew it could only belong to him. She looked back at him to see that he was staring at her. She felt a flush of heat rise in her cheeks, and looked down to the book on his lap. Lifting it gently, she turned to a favorite section. "May I?"

Vincent smiled and nodded. "Please."

Catherine cleared her throat. She had brought the book because she needed to put him at ease. What she really wanted to do was ask him dozens of questions about his life in her absence, but she didn't want to appear too forward. Maybe after Rilke.

Turning the pages until she found a particular section she thought he'd enjoy, she began to read, her voice soft and lilting, hypnotizing Vincent with its cadence:

"... Take me by the hand; it's so easy for you, Angel, for you are the road even while being immobile. You see, I'm scared no one here will look for me again; I couldn't make use of whatever was given, So they abandoned me. At first the solitude charmed me like a prelude, but so much music wounded me..."

She stopped to turn a page, and Vincent did not interrupt her; he couldn't if he wanted to. The passages she was reciting told him that she understood, that she had shared his loneliness through all the lost years. He wanted to weep, but instead allowed his silence to speak. She began to read again:

"... Only you are a part of my pure solitude. You transform yourself into all: you are this whisper or this heavenly perfume. Between my arms: such an abyss priming itself with losses. They did not hold you back, and it's thanks to that, surely, that I hold you, forever..."

Vincent opened his eyes to see that she had stopped; tears were streaming down her beautiful face. He knew they weren't tears of sadness. She was telling him that she shared his aloneness; her expression told him that their relationship could destroy them both.

"Please don't cry," Vincent took her hands in his, knowing he shouldn't be touching her, but needing to be close to her. "I understand."

Catherine managed a smile through her tears. She nodded. "Don't you see, Vincent? All these years, I too, have been alone, more alone than I can say. Since we were children, I felt in my heart that no matter what occurred, the day would come when it would be right to be... together." She paused, watching his expression change from one of doubt and reluctance to one of acceptance, and understanding. Slowly he brought his hand to her face, and oh so tenderly, allowed his thumb to wipe away a lone tear. The gesture nearly brought more tears.

"Catherine, do you know what this means?" he asked painfully. "Have you any idea what my... presence in your life could do to your reputation? You do know that when Steven discovers our relationship he will..."

Catherine cut off his words, as her finger gently touched his lips to silence him. "Please, not now. Don't talk about him, not while we're in this magical place. From now on, the gazebo will be the only place that belongs only to us."

He couldn't believe her words. He rose from the bench and turned away from her in order to compose himself. Catherine was actually telling him that she wanted to pursue a relationship with... him. Vincent tried to conceal his joy, for he knew that if they were to be separated again, this time the pain would kill him. Of that he had no doubt.

He turned back to face her. He would give her one more chance to change her mind. "Catherine," his voice was almost inaudible, "are you sure?"

Then she stood and went to him, slowly placing her gloved hand on his cheek. "Vincent, I've never been so sure of anything in my life. I want us to share our loneliness, until it's been banished from our lives. I know it's improper to tell you this, Mr Wells, but we are going to be together, from now on." At his gesture to interrupt, she brushed her palm over his lips, causing him to gasp at her touch. A scent of roses surrounded him, and instinctively he grabbed her hand and held it to his mouth, savoring the touch of her while she continued.

"Please, Vincent, do not fight what is in your heart... or what you know is in my own. I cannot say how much time we have... it may be moments, or seconds. We will learn to measure our lives in those precious moments. And someday..."

She didn't have to finish. He could read her thoughts as though she spoke them aloud. Yes, he wanted to tell her, I feel as you do, Catherine. It will not be an easy path, but yes, his mind and heart screamed, what you speak is the truth.

He nodded slightly and she smiled a smile so warm and bright it would have made the sun envious. He became bold then, and, with heart drumming in his chest, turned her hand so that it was palm up, then slowly unbuttoned the small pearl button of her glove, eased the lace apart until a tiny part of her flesh was exposed, and lowered his lips, pressing a tender, but firm kiss on her warm skin.

It was enough for Catherine as a tiny bud of desire bloomed within her. His touch seared through her. It was as though he had kissed the most intimate part of her, not just her hand, and Catherine knew his action sealed their understanding.

Their eyes met and melted into one another. They just stood together, her hands cradled in his larger ones. Today was the first day of their life together. Neither could predict what was ahead of them; they only knew it would take all their strength to endure the future. And if they were lucky, the fates would be kind to them.

Then she took his hand, led him back to the bench, picked up the book of poetry, and handed it to him.

"Read to me?"

Taking the book from her, their hands touched, and Vincent felt a slight spark of desire touch him.

Inhaling deeply, he smiled at her, then leafed through the book, touching the pages tenderly, until he found a passage that moved him:

"... Rose, I breathe you in as if you were all of life, and I feel I am the perfect friend of such a friend..."

CHAPTER FIVE

"The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;

My heart is at your festival,

My head hath its coronal,

The fullness of your bliss, I feel--

I feel it all."

- *W. Wordsworth*

That evening, dressed resplendently in deep gold taffeta, Catherine acted as the perfect hostess for her father's dinner party, held in their Fifth Avenue brownstone.

Standing beside her father, she gracefully accepted compliments from several of her father's business associates, all of whom arrived with their wives or escorts. As each couple exchanged trivial pieces of conversation, Catherine only appeared to be listening. Her mind was in another place, her thoughts replaying the events of the day at Beaumont Hills.

Her day spent with Vincent was only a fragile beginning, yet Catherine felt more alive than ever. His gentle and caring nature, combined with his strength and hidden passion, caused a gentle ripple to course up her spine. Was it possible she could fall in love with him so quickly, so deeply?

She knew, though, that she'd always loved him, ever since she was a girl, and although they came from different worlds, different backgrounds, it didn't matter to Catherine. Looking around her at the riches and splendor that she would someday inherit, she realized that it all didn't mean a thing. She gazed upon the dining room where she would dine in exquisite splendor. Sterling silver utensils, English bone china place settings for each course, crystal goblets, and the finest champagne were all at her disposal at the wink of an eye. She was heiress to one of the richest shipping businesses on the Eastern seaboard and all her mind could focus upon was a patch of green hilly land on Long Island, and a white wrought iron gazebo surrounded by trellises of climbing rose bushes only just starting to bud.

Wealth to Catherine meant to love and be loved by a unique man, a man who possessed leonine features, a glorious mane of golden hair, and a heart that was good and noble. She knew he cared for her, but she also sensed his reluctance in pursuing a relationship with her because of her exalted place in society, her wealth, her supposed betrothal to Steven Bass ... and his differences.

But Catherine was undaunted by the seemingly endless obstacles that barred their way. She would be the pursuer if she had to, even if it was improper. In this day and age, she knew the consequences of being seen with Vincent would be

devastating, even on Jenny's property.' Her reputation would be tarnished irreparably if rumors escaped. Not that she gave a fig for what people thought. She'd never cared for gossip, but she was concerned for her father, and what his associates might discern, so she silently vowed to be discreet. However, she would not even consider giving up her budding relationship with Vincent... ever.

Seated at the dining table on her father's left side, Steven to his right, Catherine exchanged casual conversation with several female acquaintances, concerning the latest fashions and who would be vacationing in the French Riviera the coming summer, who would be getting married, who had passed away. After several hours, and countless courses, however, Catherine felt quite bored with all the small talk and yearned to escape to the sanctuary of her room to write to her heart's content about Vincent in her journal.

Allowing herself to daydream, if only for a moment, she recalled the lovely dream she had of him the night before. They'd been walking on a deserted beach, hand in hand, the sun casting rays of warmth onto their smiling faces. Then they had stopped walking, and Vincent had turned her to face him. Slowly, he lowered his head and she caught her breath as his lips lightly touched hers. The warmth of his unique lips sent shivers through her body, settling in the core of her womanhood. Ah, Vincent, she thought, my dream lover. When will you come to me again, man of my dreams...

"Catherine?"

She was rudely forced from her sensuous imaginings by Steven, who stood by her chair. "What is it, Steven?"

"Come out to the garden with me. I must speak with you."

The last thing Catherine wanted was to be alone with Steven, especially after reliving her wonderful dream about Vincent's kiss. Nevertheless, she would never think of embarrassing her father, and her refusal might lead to that. Reluctantly, taking the arm he offered, she strolled out into the small garden at the rear of the brownstone.

He turned to face her, lifted her chin with one finger, and spoke softly, but with much purpose to his manner, and Catherine somehow anticipated what he would say, and dreaded his words. When they were spoken, she shuddered.

"Catherine, when will you allow me to announce our engagement? You know everyone expects us to be wed. I was so hoping we would have a summer wedding."

Catherine's stare bore into him. "Steven, I feel it's time we should talk."

He nodded and smiled, ignoring her frown. "That's why we're here. To discuss our marriage plans. When shall I make the announcement?"

It was then that Catherine turned her face away from the cold, emotionless touch of his hand and stepped back. She took a deep steadying breath.

"Steven, you have honored me with your proposal of marriage, however, I feel I am not yet prepared to be married to anyone at the moment."

At Steven's puzzled frown, Catherine continued.

"I realized that since we were children, Father assumed that we would eventually wed; I feel, however, that I must be perfectly honest with you. I'm not in love with you, and I don't see how you could possibly want to marry me if I feel nothing more than... friendship for you. Do you understand?"

Steven's expression changed so suddenly that it frightened Catherine. His handsome features seemed to transform into something... ugly and dangerous. He'd changed since they were children. Catherine was not so naive to assume he loved her. He was in love with her wealth and all the power that went with it. She waited for his answer, and saw the muscles in his jaw twitch nervously as he pondered a reply.

"Dear, dear Catherine," his tone was patronizing and unsteady. "Love will come in time, I promise, and we do suit each other. Soon you'll come to see that I was right. Allow me to court you on a regular basis and we will grow closer. May I have the pleasure of taking you riding in the park this Sunday?"

Just as Catherine was preparing to refuse him, her father blessedly came to her rescue. "Ah, here you are," he exclaimed, casting a questioning glance at his daughter, then approaching her side and slipping an arm around her waist

and pulling her close. "It was becoming quite stuffy in there." He gazed down at the beauty of his only child, and sighed. "Our guests are beginning to take their leave. Will you help me to see them on their way?"

Grateful for the chance to escape Steven, Catherine nodded enthusiastically. "Of course, Father. By the way, did you remember to take your medication this evening?"

Charles nodded and frowned. "Yes, I did. I'm not so old that I'm becoming forgetful, you know. I took three drops in a glass of water not two hours ago. There, are you happy?"

Catherine cast him a charming smile, and nodded. "Yes, I am. Remember what Dr Archer told you. You must take your drops twice a day, faithfully."

"It's just a little heart problem, Catherine. I promise to take my medication. You're not getting rid of me that quickly. I intend to be here for your wedding... someday."

At that moment Catherine stiffened as Charles looked at Steven with a hopeful gaze. "Is that what you two were discussing? Is there an announcement on the horizon, or are you playing at hard to get?"

Catherine met her father's gaze. "I'm sorry, Father. I've just been telling Steven that I need time. I'm just not prepared to announce a betrothal at this time. I hope both of you understand and respect my wishes. Father, we must see to our guests. Steven, I'll say good night. I'm very tired."

With that announcement, she lifted her floor-length dress slightly and walked back into the house, leaving Steven and her father in her wake.

"I take it she refused to agree to an announcement."

Steven turned on his patented boyish charm and smiled confidently. "She's just nervous, Charles. She's young and innocent, and needs time to realize that we belong together. But she'll come around in time. You'll see."

Charles saw no humor in Steven's words, and shook his head. "Make no mistake, Steven. Catherine knows her own mind... and heart. Don't push her. She's just come home from being away for a long time. She's lost her mother. Admittedly she wants to spend time with people her own age, her friends. She doesn't take kindly to being treated like an errant school girl."

Anger etched a fine line in Steven's face as he realized what Charles had said. "You mean she's been to the Wells' place again, don't you? Charles, really, her reputation will be in tatters if you continue to allow Catherine free rein. She is a woman of means and proper breeding. I've just requested her company to go riding on Sunday and she looked at me as if I had the plague, yet she thinks nothing of traveling miles to Long Island without a proper chaperone, I might add, and cavorting with Jenny and Devin Wells. I think a stop should be put to this as soon as possible!"

Charles was not at all surprised at Steven's snobbish outburst. "Oh, Steven, what would you have me do? Lock my daughter up in her room until she promises not to have anything to do with Jenny Wells because her wealth doesn't match Catherine's? Would you have me forbid her to travel to Long Island simply because you deem it improper? Well, I will not deprive her of their company. As for the other brother, I think she knows enough not to have anything to do with him. Let's be reasonable, Steven, he's kept hidden away, I suppose, so I see no danger in giving her permission to see her friends. As for her not being ready for marriage, I cannot speak for her. This is 1897, there are no more arranged marriages. Besides all of that, she's 22 and was never the type of woman who could be told what to do. I rather admire her for it. She's strong and intrepid like her mother. Now, if you'll excuse me, Steven, I must bid my guests goodnight. Join me later in the library for a nightcap. I have some business we must discuss about the Lewis merger."

Watching Charles walk away, Steven made a mental note to discover just when Catherine journeyed to Long Island, with whom she visited, and if, indeed, the freak was kept locked away from her. He would see to the details himself. She would be his wife, like it or not.

The next morning at breakfast, Charles was sipping his coffee when Catherine entered the room, looking lovelier than ever. Her wheat-colored day dress of soft linen brought out the natural beauty of her flawless complexion and brilliant green eyes. Her hair was worn down, reaching her waist, with the sides pulled back and held in place by her mother's sterling silver combs. She was a vision that warmed her father's heart.

Kissing Charles lightly on the cheek she asked, "did you sleep well, Father?"

He nodded and returned her kiss. "Yes, thank you my dear. And before you ask, I took my medication this morning." He saw her nod of approval and went on. "Something came up early this morning and I'll be leaving for Boston until Sunday. Would you care to accompany me?"

Catherine spread a generous helping of raspberry jam on her biscuit, then set the knife down. "If you don't mind, Father, I've been invited to Jenny's for the weekend. I promised her I'd help her with plans to redecorate one of the guest rooms. Would you mind terribly if I go? Mouse will drive me and stay the weekend in the orphanage, then bring me back Sunday. Please, Father, I do enjoy my outings at Jen's."

Charles watched her manner as she spoke of her friends. Each time she mentioned Beaumont Hills, or Jenny, her face lit up with a gladness he'd not seen since before his beloved wife died. He knew he could refuse her nothing.

"You promise to be home by early Sunday, then?"

Catherine's joy shone in her eyes as she rose excitedly from her chair and rushed to hug her father. "Yes, yes, oh thank you, Father."

As she returned to her chair to enjoy her biscuit, Charles lifted one eye suspiciously. "Catherine, is there something you're not telling me?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, is there more to visiting Beaumont Hills than you're letting on?"

Catherine knew she could hide nothing from her father. But what would he say if she told him of her friendship with Vincent? Would he forbid her to go to him? What would she do then? Would she sneak off and meet him in secret? She'd never been dishonest with her father in her entire life, and she would not like to start now. But if it came down to giving up Vincent, or deceiving her father, she knew only one thing: she could never give up seeing Vincent.

"Catherine, answer me, please."

Folding her hands in her lap, she lifted her head to meet his gaze, and looked him straight in the eye. "Father, I have not only reacquainted myself with Jenny and Devin, but I have also met their families, including some of the people who work in the orphanage. I'm even planning to visit the children this weekend. They're lovely people, Father, and I will not stop seeing them because my social status differs from theirs."

"I see," he rubbed his chin thoughtfully, pondering his next question, and dreading the answer because he knew what it would be. "So I assume you have seen the brother?"

She paused only a moment to collect her thoughts and nodded. "Yes, I have seen Vincent, and we have spoken. Is that so wrong?"

Catherine's hands were shaking and she pressed them together as she searched her father's face, trying to divine his reaction.

"Were you two alone when you spoke with him?"

"Father, we were... outside... all the time... when we spoke." She hoped this was enough of an answer for him.

"You're sure?"

She nodded defiantly. "Are you implying that I've behaved in an improper manner, Father?"

Charles almost laughed. How clever she was, and he respected her intelligence and honesty. Catherine was incapable of any impropriety. She probably pitied the poor man and was only being civil and kind. How silly of him to think otherwise. He shook his head, then allowed a smile to show.

"Never. Have a wonderful weekend with your friends. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have much paper work to do this week before I leave for Boston." Rising from his chair and leaning over to kiss the crown of her head, he said softly, "I suggest you avoid revealing your weekend plans to Steven. I feel compelled to inform you he does not approve of your sojourns to Beaumont Hills."

Catherine smiled up at him and touched his arm. "Let's not worry about Steven, Father. He will just have to understand that I will only marry when I fall in love with the right man."

"And I take it that Steven is NOT the right man?"

Catherine nodded. "I'm sorry. I know you had great plans for us, but I feel nothing for him, Father. I want to marry someone who loves me for who I am, not because I'm an heiress. To have a marriage based on mutual love and respect, as you and Mother had, that is what I desire most in the world. You do understand, don't you?"

He did. "Your mother and I were two of the lucky ones. We married because we fell in love, not because our families arranged the match." He patted her arm affectionately. "I won't lie to you and say I'm not disappointed that you've decided that Steven is not the right man for you. Yet on the other hand, all I've ever wanted for you is your happiness."

Catherine smiled and sighed deeply, blessing him for his understanding. "Thank you, Father," was all she said.

He nodded and squeezed her hand, then walked away, leaving her with a myriad of thoughts swimming in her mind. An entire weekend to visit... him; and with Father's permission! It was almost too good to be true! She pushed back her chair, grabbed two handfuls of dress, and ran upstairs to her room to draft a letter to Vincent and Jenny, telling them of her good news. In just a few short days she'd be with him, and with the time she had, she'd convince him of the rightness of their relationship. He'd see that the dreams she held in her heart were meant for both of them.

"Oh Vincent, everything will turn out fine for us... you'll see,"

It was early Saturday morning when she and Mouse arrived at the outskirts of Beaumont Hills. Catherine breathed in the spring air, fresh and clean, her beautiful green eyes drinking in every square inch of land before her. She felt such a kinship with this place, and in her heart she knew the reason. The other half of her heart was here. She felt whole only when she was near him. She didn't attempt to explain it, she just knew that it was so.

It was Vincent she saw first. He had apparently seen the carriage arriving, and hurried to help her with her bags. How handsome he looked, Catherine thought, as her eyes rested upon him. Tall and golden, strong and masculine, his black trousers hugged his legs as though molded to him, his black boots reaching his knees, his snowy white ruffled shirt, knotted neatly at the throat, and his ever present black cloak hugging his broad shoulders. All in all, he was a formidable creature who unknowingly attracted attention.

Before Mouse could help her from the carriage, Vincent was there, offering his hand to her. She took it without hesitation, and stepped lightly to the ground. He lowered his head to greet her.

"Welcome. Your journey was pleasurable?"

As always, her smile melted his heart. "Yes, it was. I'm happy to be here, and... to see you. Are you well?"

He returned her smile and nodded. "I'll get your bags and bring them to the house."

As she followed Vincent and Mouse into the house, she saw Jenny and Devin coming in through the back door, holding hands and laughing. They exchanged hugs, kisses and greetings, then told Catherine and Vincent of their plans for the day.

"Mouse, will you take the bags up, then go to the orphanage? Pascal and Kanin need your help with the new book shelves."

Mouse smiled proudly. "They need my help... can't start shelves without Mouse..." he said, then made his way towards the guest room with the bags.

Devin clapped his hands together and announced his intentions. "I have a wonderful day planned for us. We're going on a picnic, the four of us, so, Cathy, why don't you change from your traveling clothes into something light and comfortable. Sarah has prepared a delicious lunch for us and then, later, I was hoping that Vincent would take you to the orphanage, and you can meet the children. Would you like that?"

All heads turned to Catherine, who was beaming with happiness at the idea of spending the whole day with her friends... and especially with Vincent.

"Oh yes, Devin, I would." She turned to Vincent. "Will you show me where you live as well?"

Vincent was slightly taken aback by her request, but smiled and nodded. "I'd be happy to, Catherine."

Devin and Jenny looked at each other then, and a knowing smile passed between them. It was obvious that Catherine and Vincent wanted time together and today was the perfect time. Devin realized that his brother needed the chance to

see his fears were unfounded as far as Catherine was concerned. They belonged together and, sooner or later, Vincent would realize that.

Less than an hour later, the four young people made their way toward the outskirts of the property, closer to Vincent's land, and Catherine held her breath as they came upon a cluster of large elms, maples, and dogwoods, their new leaves fluttering gently in the soft spring breeze, while young robins and bluebirds called back and forth in song from their branches. Catherine felt as if she'd just entered a heavenly garden.

"Do you like it?" His voice was a whispered murmur that stirred her as he came up beside her.

She stopped and turned, breathing deeply of the scents and sounds that enveloped her. "Like it? Vincent, it's... magical. If I lived here, I should never wish to leave."

Her words churned something in him that he'd never experienced. His eyes drank in her beauty like a man dying of thirst. She was a vision of loveliness in her pale green dress of dotted Swiss, her arms bare from the elbows down. She wore no hat or gloves, and her honey brown hair shone gloriously in the sun. Vincent wished his emotions at this very second could be frozen in time so that he could reclaim them at any time in his memory. Her gown outlined the womanly curves she possessed, and he couldn't tear his eyes from her smiling face, slender fair neck, and the way her breasts filled the bodice of her dress. He shouldn't think of her in such a manner, mustn't look at her this way. But if Catherine had seen his eyes at this instant, she'd know what he was thinking.

He wanted her.

Just then Devin called, informing them he'd set a place on an enormous blanket under a nearby spreading oak tree, and Catherine and Vincent exchanged warm smiles and joined their friends.

Vincent's hands were shaking as he helped with the wine and dishes as they sat in a circle and prepared to dine. Catherine's closeness, combined with the heavenly scent of her, unnerved him to the point where he was becoming almost uncomfortable. It seemed as if his mind had no control over his body, and it was only through great self-control that he was able to steady himself. If Catherine's presence was unsettling in the company of others, imagine what would happen when they were alone...

He tried not to think about it as they began to eat. That, together with the easy camaraderie of his brother's wit, Jenny's sweet manner and Catherine's presence at his side, made the afternoon a lovely experience that would not be easily forgotten.

When the last of the wine and fruit was consumed, Devin and Jenny decided to take off on their own, suggesting to Vincent that he take Catherine around the property and show her the land, the orphanage, and to just have fun.

Helping Catherine to her feet, he tucked her arm into his own, and they started out on their afternoon excursion... alone.

"Where shall we go?" she asked, laughter edging her voice.

He dared to look upon her, hoping she couldn't see the hunger in his eyes. "Everywhere. I want to show you everything."

Catherine smiled. "I want to see your bridge that overlooks the stream, and of course, the orphanage. Will you take me to your cottage?"

"Whatever you wish," he told her, then took her hand, and they walked leisurely toward his home. Catherine could feel the tension leave him and she smiled. He was relaxing in her company and that filled Catherine with joy. The feel of his hand entwined with hers sent tendrils of passion through her. She recalled Steven's touch, which was cold and unfeeling. Once, when Steven had stolen a kiss, she recoiled at the feel of his cold, dry lips. She wondered what it would be like to kiss Vincent, and knew in her heart that his uniquely shaped mouth would be like heaven to touch. His tongue would be warm and sweet and...

Shaking herself from her forbidden reverie, Catherine and Vincent approached his cottage and, reluctantly, he led her toward the front door.

"Are you sure you want to see it? It's very small, not much..."

"Vincent, please. I'm sure I'll love it... because it's yours."

He nodded his agreement and opened the door, letting her pass before him and watching her reaction all the time.

Leading her deeper into the two storied cottage, Vincent began to show her around, and was surprised to find that she was actually impressed with his modest home.

"Vincent, this is the most beautiful house I've ever seen," she exclaimed with obvious wonder. It wasn't a small cottage, Catherine noticed. It was perfect for him, and when she thought about it, it would be perfect for two or three people as well. The kitchen was roomy and filled with sunlight and sported many utensils and a potbellied stove, there was a lovely dining room that was large enough for at least eight people, a small parlor that housed two small sofas, a large book shelf overflowing with tomes of every conceivable topic, plus a huge stone fireplace that added warmth to the room.

The upstairs consisted of two very big bedrooms. One was presently empty except for a large antique chair, and more book shelves. A chessboard sat on a small table near the window. The other was Vincent's master bedroom, and Catherine thought it was as if the room was made for him. A huge four poster bed graced the center of the room, covered with a coverlet of deep hues of earth colors: forest green, bold rust, deep gold and chocolate brown. In one corner was a huge desk, on which Catherine noticed a large leather bound journal, several pens, and an inkwell. Two additional chairs sat before another fireplace. Catherine noticed that instead of gaslight, Vincent's cottage was filled with candles of every size and shape. The idea made her smile.

She found herself staring at his bed, sighing deeply, and silently dreaming, imagining...

Vincent felt a spark of desire emanate from her heart and his eyes followed hers. He swallowed hard and found himself coming up behind her, almost touching her, but daring not to.

Her scent gripped him, and he felt his body tense, feeling her closeness as she gazed unblinkingly at his bed. Catherine was completely aware of his presence just behind her. Touch me, she willed him silently, please Vincent... just once...

Then his mouth whispered into her ear, stirring her, yet breaking the spell of the moment.

"Catherine...," he murmured.

She nodded ever so slightly, then turned so suddenly she found herself in his arms. "Vincent..."

He allowed his eyes to look at her face, her eyes, her nose, her chin... her lips. She possessed a perfect mouth, Vincent thought. Her bottom lip was full and generous and...

What was he doing? This wasn't proper. They were alone, in his bedroom! "We... should go. Are you ready?"

Catherine wanted to put him at ease and smiled. "Yes," she steadied her own racing heart. "I'm ready."

As they left the house, and Vincent once again took her hand, he knew that from this day forward, whenever he lay in his bed, he'd always think of her... and wish for a life that could never be.

Or could it... ?

CHAPTER SIX

"How bold one gets when one is sure of
being loved!"

- S. Freud

Before long they found themselves on a stone bridge that overlooked a narrow, clear running stream. They walked slowly onto the center and stood in silent companionship, listening to the gentle rippling of the water as it glided up and over the smooth stones. Lovebirds could be heard calling to each other in the distance, and the rhythmic chirping of crickets added to the serenity of this absolutely perfect day. Catherine smiled and wished it could last forever.

Vincent could almost read her thoughts as he quietly stood at her side. Sighing deeply, he was keenly aware of her as a woman, inhaling her scent of soft roses, allowing it to bombard his senses, awakening his body to her nearness. He was fighting inwardly to keep tight control over his secret yearnings when she whispered to him, speaking quietly so as not to disturb the magic of the moment.

"Vincent, this is a truly enchanting spot. I imagine it gives you a great sense of calm."

He nodded slowly, as she raised her head to listen to his reply. "I call it my whispering pool, because there are times the gentle rush of the stream lulls me; even when I am alone, I feel at peace in that aloneness."

"Yes...", she murmured in agreement. "You've been truly blessed to have such a place to call your own, Vincent."

He ventured to lower his eyes to hers, and in that moment, a rush of desire and wanting washed over him, so overwhelming he had to remember to breathe.

Catherine could sense his emotions, but instead of acting on her feelings, she chose to repress them, for now. She took his hand, squeezing it reassuringly. "Take me to meet the children. I've been looking forward to it all day."

Minutes later, they approached the door of the orphanage. Entering the front parlor of the century-old building, Vincent placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her to the main dining room, where he knew the children took their midday meal.

Catherine noted her surroundings, taking in the sturdy, clean structure, and admiring its cleanliness and roominess. She also noticed that the sun shone in from huge windows, bathing the rooms with life-giving light.

The draperies and carpeting were of earthy tones, with rich cream-colored walls. For a place that housed parentless children, it was anything but a dreary, depressing institution. On the contrary, the children had a good home here, lots of love, and friends. Just looking at Vincent told her that. The children who dwelled here were, indeed fortunate.

"Vincent!"

Seconds after they entered the dining hall, a chorus of young voices called in greeting to their favorite citizen of Beaumont Hills. Vincent and Catherine found themselves surrounded by beautiful little faces of all shapes, sizes and nationalities, in ages ranging from four to fourteen.

"Have you come to read us a story?" one bright little freckled face inquired hopefully.

"Will you play hide and seek with us?" A curly-headed pixie approached Vincent, tugging on his cloak to gain his attention.

Catherine watched as dozens of children seemed to be drawn by his smile and calm friendliness. He loves each and every one of them as if they were his own, she thought as she watched him. And they love him equally as a friend, brother and teacher. What a wonderful father he would be, she mused wistfully. Each second she watched him with the little ones, she fell more in love with him.

Vincent's head shot up to meet her gaze over the heads of the children. He knows, she thought, smiling back at him. He knows what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling, and I'm glad. I shall tell him how I feel. A look of longing passed between them, filled with unspoken words that needed to be voiced. Later.

Vincent was still smiling when he presented Catherine to the crowd of babbling youths. "Where are your manners?" he admonished gently. "We have a guest."

The crowd of smiling faces, some with missing front teeth, turned in unison to inspect the stranger in their midst. "She's pretty, Vincent; what's her name?"

Vincent looked at the handsome boy who was standing beside him. "Yes, Geoffrey, she is pretty. Children, this is Miss Catherine Chandler, my dear friend." He turned to look at her. "We were children together many years ago with Mr Devin and Miss Jenny. She's just returned from Europe, where she lived for many years."

The children seemed mesmerized with his statement. "Europe? You mean you lived across the Atlantic Ocean?"

"Yes, Eric," Vincent answered. "You remember we learned about Europe? A country that is very far away."

"Did you see London Bridge?"

"Yes, and Buckingham Palace?"

"Did you go to Paris? Did you climb the Eiffel Tower?"

Catherine's amused laugh filled the room, but it was Vincent who kept control of the crowd. "I see our lesson about Europe has finally caught your interest," he commented with mock sternness. "Let's not confuse Miss Catherine by speaking all at once."

"No, Vincent, it's quite all right," Catherine touched his arm. "Yes, children, I did see all those places," she answered, "and I hope I shall be allowed to return to tell you more about Europe. Would that be all right?"

Her inquiry was directed to Vincent, whose expression of gratitude was his answer. "You need only ask, Miss. You are always welcome here, you know that."

Catherine smiled joyously at his answer.

Soon, introductions were made all around, and Catherine found herself at the center of everyone's attention. She shook hands with each child, etching each and every face and name into her memory, hoping she'd see them all again soon. Eventually she also met with the custodians of the orphanage, Pascal and Kanin, and Jamie and Michael, who greeted Catherine warmly, in the spirit of friendship.

But, time again grew short, and Vincent was soon announcing their departure. "Children, we must be leaving now." To the groans that were met with their impending departure, Vincent added, "I've promised to show Miss Catherine all of Beaumont Hills, and as you all well know, it is a very large place. But I know she will keep her promise and return soon."

Vincent's words were all they needed to hear. "Goodbye, Miss Catherine," they called out warmly. "Goodbye, Vincent. See you on Monday."

"Be well, children." they answered, then took their leave.

Once outside the dwelling, Catherine fell into step beside Vincent as they headed in the direction of the gazebo. "They're very special children, Vincent, with personalities and qualities all their own. I like them."

Vincent concurred. "Yes, I care deeply for each and every one of them, all so innocent and happy, despite their hardships."

"It wasn't so very long ago that we... were their age. Do you remember?"

Her soft moss green eyes held his as he nodded. "You were my special friend."

"I still am."

Vincent sighed. "With your pink pinafore, and your long braid tied with a big pink bow-I can still remember your cheerful laugh as you and Jenny tossed that big colorful ball back and forth. You were an unforgettable sight."

They stopped walking and faced each other. Vincent absorbed all that she was: her beauty, her goodness, her womanliness. She was no longer a child.

"You still are," he whispered hoarsely.

Catherine reached for his hand and squeezed it. Their easy camaraderie continued, and they approached the gazebo, but not before Vincent plucked a perfect white bud from the trellis. As she walked ahead of him, making her way to the stone bench in the corner, he removed the thorns, grimaced as one pricked his finger, then presented it to her.

Catherine reached up and took his offering, their hands touching as she silently thanked him. "It's perfect, Vincent. A beautiful symbol of purity."

Their eyes locked. "And eternity," he finished, sitting beside her.

Catherine dropped her eyes, her cheeks flushed pink at the sound of his words. Suddenly, she saw the blood on his hand and gasped. "Vincent, you've hurt yourself. Your finger, it's bleeding."

She placed the rose in her lap and tenderly took his hand in hers. A sliver of tension rose up his arm as he saw, and then felt, her head dip to his injured finger, placing a light, exquisite kiss over the cut.

He swallowed hard. He couldn't move, couldn't speak. The touch of her flesh on his was an indescribable sensation. As he sat, hypnotized by her gesture, she drew a white lace handkerchief from her dress sleeve, and with the tenderest of touches, wrapped the small linen square around his finger.

"There, that should do it," she was proud of her ingenuity.

Vincent finally found his voice. "Catherine, you shouldn't. You'll ruin your beautiful handkerchief."

Catherine patted his hand, then met his gaze. "It doesn't matter, Vincent." And then she lifted his wounded finger to her lips and kissed it once more. "It really doesn't."

They were so close that Vincent wished to absorb her into himself. What should he say to her? Did he have the right to express his feelings to her so soon after her return? She must know by now what she means to me, he thought, as she lifted the small white blossom and held it to her nose. I want to kiss her; will she allow it? Is it proper? And then reality sank in. They were utterly and truly alone out here. The only life that he could see was a nest of robins in a nearby oak, groups of butterflies fluttering over the gazebo, and the faraway chirping of crickets. He was alone with the woman who was the missing half of his soul, the woman who was at the core of his every waking moment, who was the vision of his dreams each night. And, watching her now, he knew he would fly to the moon with her if she asked. He was frightened. He was nervous. He was in love.

It was Catherine who eventually broke the awkwardness of the moment by speaking. "Vincent, did you bring poetry?"

Bless her heart, he thought, as he gratefully nodded and reached into the hidden pocket of his cloak. Showing her the title of the volume, she smiled widely, then laughed that musical laugh that had changed little since they were children. "Then read to me of roses."

Vincent opened to a special passage that Rilke had written about roses, and began:

"... A single rose is every rose and this one: irreplaceable, perfect, a supple vocable by the text of things enclosed. Without her, how can we ever talk about what our hopes were, about the tender intervals in this perpetual departure..."

He looked over and saw that Catherine's eyes were closed, her body relaxed. But Vincent's eyes were directed to the rose she was unconsciously sliding across her cheek in an easy motion. Swallowing hard, he watched unblinking as she guided the tiny white bud across her lips in a gesture that made Vincent grow hard with desire. Was she aware of what she was doing? It didn't matter, for Vincent could have stared at her all day while she did those marvelous things with that rose.

Shaking himself from his voyeuristic observation of her, he turned the page and dared to read a more suggestive verse: *"... Rose, certainly earthy and our equal, flower of all our flowers, inside yourself, petal over petal, do you feel our own palpable pleasure? These tender touches filling you, O rose, does their measure comprise all that we've dared, all that we venture, and this hesitant happiness?..."*

Vincent lowered the book onto his lap. His hands were shaking from her nearness, and he was afraid he'd gone too far. The poem had long been one of his favorites, but to read it to Catherine in this idyllic, yet tempting setting was to put flame to smoldering embers. He felt her lean into him, and his heart hammered with anticipation.

"Vincent..."

His name was a tender prayer coming from her lips, and as his eyes met hers, he knew he must tell her all that was in his heart.

"There are no words to describe what this day has meant to me," he confessed in an almost inaudible tone. "You've given me a glimpse of a dream I thought never to be possible." He took both her hands in his.

"Catherine, I do not know what will happen now; I cannot dare to wish for something my heart yearns for more than my life. To be separated from you now, after you've come back into my life... would be more that I can bear, more than I could endure..."

Catherine moved closer into his open arms, her mouth almost touching his. "Vincent, don't you know, you could never lose me again, we could never lose each other, I won't allow it. You know, we've never really been apart. You've always been with me, here."

And then she did something that made him gasp. She took his hand and placed it -over her heart, on her breast. His body tensed with untold desire.

"Can you hear my heart beat?"

He nodded slightly, but dared not move his hand. It was the sweetest gesture he'd ever experienced.

Vincent could feel the restless beating of her heart and her emotions. He could feel her love, for it burned through him like warm sunshine.

Then he took his hand from her breast and placed it on her flushed cheek. "I... I want to kiss you," he whispered so soft it made her shiver.

"Kiss me," she tenderly consented.

His head dipped slowly to meet her mouth, and the touch sent prickles of passion racing through them. It started as a chaste kiss, mouths gently pressing, experimenting, tasting, but in one startling moment, their mouths opened to taste one another, and they couldn't get close enough. Catherine's arms stole around his neck, drawing him, coaxing him to take everything she had to give. Vincent answered her plea by entwining his tongue with her own, tasting her sweetness, again and again. Her moan of passion brought his arms tighter around her waist, and he could feel his manhood swell with his arousal. The firm rise of her breasts were pressed into his chest, and Vincent thought he'd explode from the touch of such exquisite softness.

The kiss deepened, their tongues circled and coaxed, teased and tasted, and both knew that if they didn't stop now, in moments it would be too late.

Catherine wanted him, needed him. She had never known a man intimately, but she was mature enough to sense that Vincent was enflamed with desire, and that they must stop now, or suffer the consequences.

Reluctantly they broke their fiery kiss, but were both breathing heavily, Catherine's cheeks flushing pink from their passionate embrace, Vincent taking in deep breaths to steady the almost deafening pounding of his heart. He was unable, however, to release their embrace.

"Oh Catherine... Catherine..."

She dared to look at him then, his blue eyes dark with unfulfilled passion, his body tense and eager to continue, and she smiled.

"I knew it would be like this between us," she whispered breathlessly. "I knew."

Her words served as a balm to his excited state. "Maybe you should go back to the house," he suggested half-heartedly.

"Can't we just wait for the sunset?" she asked, as she pulled back from him in order to look deeper into his eyes.

"Please?"

Vincent knew that they both needed time to compose themselves, and he nodded agreeably. "If you asked me for the moon, somehow I'd get it for you." He dared to smile as she leaned more comfortably into his arms.

"I think it's time to return to the house. Devin and Jenny will wonder what's become of us."

Catherine didn't want to move, didn't want to think or talk. The splendor of the setting sun, together with Vincent's arms around her, were all she could ever want for the rest of her life.

Just a moment, Vincent," she murmured. "Please."

He rubbed his lips at her temple, kissing her tenderly. "If we wait any longer, I don't know if I'll be able to ever let you go." His shy confession brought tears to her eyes.

She shook her head and stood up, facing him and wiping an errant tear from her cheek. "Then don't let me go, Vincent," she implored, then knelt at his feet, placing her palms on his thighs. "Keep me here with you forever. I want... I want to be with you."

Vincent shook his head fiercely, denying her what he wanted most. "Catherine, please, you shouldn't suggest such a thing." He took her hands and lifted her from the ground.

She grabbed his arms. "Vincent, I can wait until everyone's asleep. We'll meet by the bridge and just watch the moon and the stars. I want to be with you. I know you want the same thing."

He began to turn away from her, frightened to let her see in his eyes that she spoke the truth. But it was no use, because she knew what was in his heart.

"You know I'm right. We must take whatever time we are given, Vincent. I have to be home early tomorrow and I don't know when I'll be able to see you again. Vincent, please, talk to me."

Vincent hesitated for so long, Catherine hoped she had swayed him.

He stood with his back to her, so she walked up behind him and slowly slid both arms over his shoulders down to his chest and, hearing his sharp intake of breath, she pressed her body to his back. Her whispered suggestion crashed through his body like a crack of thunder.

"Shall I come to you then... tonight?"

He turned and took her into his arms, wishing he could just carry her off to his cottage, to his bed. He wished they were married so that he could undress her slowly and tenderly, then bury himself deep within her. He leaned down and looked deep into her eyes.

"Come to me... ."

Then he kissed her hands, deeply, fiercely, knowing a rush of happiness he'd never experienced. "Go now," he nuzzled her ear. "Go... before..."

Catherine stood on tiptoe and covered his mouth with her own. Vincent groaned deeply as he drank his fill of her, their mouths opening and offering tastes of one another. He couldn't get enough of her, would never get enough of her.

He broke the kiss and she embraced him one last time before grabbing her white rose with one hand and a fistful of dress in the other.

"Until tonight..." she said, then ran all the way to the house, smiling and crying all at the same time.

Vincent looked after her, breathing heavily, and suddenly realizing she hadn't waited for him to walk her back. But he could see her as she took flight, and knew she'd be safe. He could feel all the love that was in her heart.

The more time they spent together, the deeper their desire would grow. His need of her was growing by the day, and he knew his life was centered around her. His love was so all consuming it frightened him. But life was filled with risks, and Catherine was worth...

everything. The truth was that he wanted her with every fiber of his being, wanted to love her, and to make love to her, yearned to give her children, longed to make her happy above all else. To share all that he was with her, to make her part of him for all time... this was a dream he'd harbored in his soul all of his life.

"... Until tonight..."

Unbeknownst to either of them, Steven had observed their tearful farewell, and he was angered beyond belief. However, instead of chasing after Catherine as she made her way to the main house, he chose to go straight to the heart of the problem: Vincent.

Vincent, meanwhile, was in the process of freshening up. After removing his cloak and hanging it on the hook near the front door of his cottage, he poured fresh water from a pitcher into a bowl, then reverently removed Catherine's dainty handkerchief from his cut finger.

Spying a tiny blood stain that had marred the small square of lace, Vincent dipped it into the bowl of water to cleanse the stain away, then squeezed away the excess water, and placed the handkerchief over a nearby chair to dry. Later, he would place it into his journal as a joyous remembrance of their idyllic day together.

After washing his hands and face, he was just about to change into a clean shirt when he heard the insistent rapping on his heavy oak door. Thinking it was Mouse coming to inform him of the hour Catherine would be leaving for home tomorrow, he walked swiftly and threw open the door. The sight of an obviously perturbed Steven Bass rocked Vincent back on his heels.

"Steven, what are you doing here?"

"Is that any way to greet an old friend, Wells?" His condescending tone began to irk Vincent, but he stood his ground.

"I never realized we were friends, Steven. And if you have anything to say to me after all these years, say it now, and then get off my property."

Vincent had an idea why Steven had come. He'd obviously been spying on he and Catherine, and was now up to his old tricks. It seemed Steven had never changed. He had been a vicious, conniving child, and it seemed he'd grown into a self-serving, cruel adult. His presence here now could only mean trouble for himself and Catherine.

"Well, no matter, what I have to say won't take long." With a purposeful gesture, he drew one well-manicured hand through his shock of thick chestnut brown hair, then cleared his throat, and met Vincent's gaze without blinking.

"I know you've been seeing Catherine since she returned from Europe... and I want it to stop now."

Seeing Vincent's imminent interruption, he raised a hand to stop him.

"I want to be a gentleman about this, Wells, so I'll just say this: If you refuse to give her up, I can make life very difficult, for both of you. How, you might ask? Well, I'll tell you. First of all, Catherine and I are, for all intents and purposes, very nearly engaged. She just needs a little gentle persuasion. Her reputation could be damaged beyond repair should I reveal to certain parties, what I saw here today. Or maybe I should inform the chief of police that I saw you attacking Catherine and you'll most assuredly be put away for a very long time. I do have influential friends in high places, including, Catherine's father. Am I getting through to you, Wells?"

Vincent's body was quaking with anger, and his heart was pounding so loud he could hardly hear himself think.

"That's your idea of being a gentleman? You haven't changed, Steven. Even as a child, all you could think of were ways to hurt people who were supposed to be your friends. What can you hope to gain from your cruelty?"

Steven laughed. "Gain? Why Wells, I thought you knew. I want Catherine for my wife."

"You want her fortune," Vincent stated plainly.

"That is none of your business. Besides, I intend to inform her father what's been going on under his nose. Look at you, Vincent; you know you don't deserve her. I can give her jewels, clothes; travel anywhere in the world she chooses. We'll have beautiful children," he smiled cruelly at Vincent, who at the moment was taking in the truth of Steven's words, knowing that Catherine did indeed deserve everything he could never give her.

Was it so wrong to love her? What would happen in several years when she yearned for the world she'd left behind? Would she regret loving him? Much as he hated to agree with Steven, he wanted only what was best for her. She deserved no less.

Steven was watching Vincent, and instinct told him he'd hit a nerve. Of course the freak would give her up. He'd always been so selfless, so kind and noble. He and that brother of his always thought they were better than everyone else.

"She's too good for you, Wells. What could you ever hope to give her?"

Vincent lifted his head, looking straight into Steven's eyes. "My heart."

Steven laughed. "Keep your heart. Oh come now, Wells, I do truly care for her. You know she's better off with... her own kind... You understand. So I suggest, very strongly, that you do as I say and there will be no trouble. However, if you insist..."

"Don't threaten me, Steven." Vincent took a step forward, clenching his fists.

Steven's eyes glistened with vindictive anger. "Oh, this is no threat. This is a promise. I swear after I get through with both of you, she won't be able to step into her father's house again. But I'll be there to pick up the pieces, and she'll naturally turn to me. Get out of her life, Wells. Do I make myself clear?"

Vincent felt as if the air had been knocked from his chest. His hands were tied. "I'll speak to her."

"See that you do," Steven smiled, satisfied with his little scheme. "Then I have your word, as a gentleman?"

"You have nothing, Bass. I will speak to her, but Catherine has a mind and will of her own, and will not be blackmailed."

"That, unfortunately, is your problem."

Vincent nearly growled with pent up anger. "Leave now, Steven, before I throw you off my land. And don't come back."

"I'm going, Wells. Remember what I said. Give her up, or no one will be able to help you. Not even that brother of yours." He turned and walked away with long, swift strides.

Vincent almost went after him. He wanted to hurt Steven for speaking against the people he loved, and had to repress the urge to kill.

Stepping back into the cottage, Vincent slammed the door behind him and sunk to the floor, dropping his head into his hands.

What was he to do? Steven's words swirled around his head like a swarm of angry bees. His heart was aching with sadness at the cruel and vicious words Steven had flung at him, like a thousand daggers aimed straight at his chest.

Catherine deserved everything he was unable to give her: money, status, jewels, fine clothes... a normal life with a normal man.

Vincent remained in the same position, still as a stone, never moving, his thoughts haunting him, Steven's words tormenting and taunting him, causing him to weep. His perfect day had been marred, and he allowed the tears to come, as they had so many times in the past ten years.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I love thee with the breath, smiles,
tears, of all my life!"

- *E.B. Browning*

"Did you and Vincent enjoy your day, Cathy?" Jenny smiled as Catherine flitted into the parlor, cheeks flushed, hair escaping from her braid, a delicate white rose clutched in her hand. Jenny couldn't help but chuckle softly. Cathy reminded her of that same light-hearted, twelve-year-old girl who'd played with her in the park all those years ago.

"Oh yes, Jen. I love Beaumont Hills. I wish I could stay her forever." Giggling happily, she brought the rose to her nose to inhale it's sweetness, then began to gaily twirl around, and landed right in Devin's arms.

"Oh Devin, I'm sorry!" Catherine exclaimed with not the least bit of remorse, her eyes twinkling with happiness.

"No you're not," he laughed, then shook his head. "Jen," he looked at his wife. "I have a feeling that this young lady had a pleasant day." He leaned down to Catherine and jokingly whispered, "shall we have the wedding invitations drawn up?"

Catherine and Jenny were amused by Devin's remark, and the three friends walked arm in arm to the matching sofas in the parlor.

As Devin brought each lady a glass of wine, he stood across from them, and leaned one arm on the mantel above the fireplace. Taking a sip from the glass, he cleared his throat, then grew serious.

"Cathy," he drew her attention by the tone of his voice. "I had a feeling this would happen, but not this soon." He looked at his wife for support, and found it in her warm smile. "I always knew you two were meant to be together, and I'm happy for you, Cathy, really."

"Am I so obvious, then?" Catherine couldn't hold back her joy.

"Obvious? Cathy, if you placed an ad in the TIMES it wouldn't be as telling!" Jenny exclaimed teasingly. "It's written all over your face. And I know the look, because," she looked at her husband, "I'm in love as well."

Devin put his glass on a nearby table. "What about Steven?"

Catherine shook her head and frowned. "I don't love him, Devin. I never have. Besides, my life is my own to do with as I see fit. I love Vincent. Without him... there is nothing."

Jenny and Devin gave each other a knowing look, then approached Cathy and hugged her tightly. "You know you have all our love and support, don't you?"

Tears welled in Cathy's eyes as she nodded. "Thank you. I love you both."

She cleared her throat and managed a bright smile. "Now, you must excuse me. I promised to meet Vincent after dinner, and I must change my clothes."

"Well, dinner is in an hour," Devin announced.

Cathy smiled. "Oh, no thank you, I'm not hungry." As she turned to run up the stairs, she called back, "I don't want to be late."

Jenny and Devin looked at her as she hurried up the stairs. "It's wonderful to see her so happy, darling."

Devin kissed his wife warmly on the cheek. "I spoke to Vincent this morning. He's hopelessly in love with her as well, but..."

"What is it, Devin?"

He shrugged. "I don't trust Bass, I never did. I swear Jen, if he attempts to hurt them in any way... I'll kill the son of a bitch."

As they made their way to the dining room, a chill ran up Jenny's spine. Devin's words disturbed her, and no matter what she did to shake off the feelings of doom, the feelings remained. Lately, her dreams were becoming more and more strange, and she was unable to decipher their meaning. She only knew they involved Catherine and Vincent... and their happiness.

Catherine was dressed appropriately for the mild, clear spring evening.

She hurried to the gazebo, clutching her deep burgundy dress with two gloved hands, impatient to see him.

He wasn't there.

Puzzled by his absence, Catherine shrugged and sat on the stone bench. He probably stopped at the orphanage to see the children, or perhaps he'd fallen asleep after their long day. Oh well, she thought, I'll wait for him a little while. He'll be here soon.

When he didn't appear twenty minutes later. Catherine began to worry. She left the gazebo and made her way toward his cottage. She'd hate to wake him if he were indeed sleeping, but their time together was so precious that she wished to spend every possible moment with him.

Her mind made up, she walked towards the little stone bridge. Maybe he was there.

He wasn't.

Catherine's heart began to beat restlessly as she approached his cottage and knocked at the door. No answer.

Again she knocked and, receiving no response, she turned the knob. To her surprise, the door opened easily.

"Vincent," she called, entering the main hall. Turning to the parlor, she cautiously stepped into the room, dark except for a single candle that cast a dim shadow on the slumped form that was sitting on the floor, legs drawn up, head slumped into his arms. Catherine thought he was sleeping.

As she approached him, she gasped as his head lifted to meet her eyes. Catherine's heart broke as her eyes took him in. It was clearly evident that he'd been crying, and his body was tense. The expression on his face was so filled with torment, Catherine began to cry.

"Vincent," she knelt at his side. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

She couldn't possibly fathom what had occurred in the short time she'd left him that could warrant such an expression of heartache. Was he having second thoughts about their future? Was he sorry he kissed her?

Wrapping her arms around him like a warm blanket, she felt him break the hold and pull away from her as he rose to his feet, pulling her up with him.

"Catherine... you shouldn't be here... I'm sorry... if I worried you..."

His words trailed off, causing Catherine to move to him again. She took hold of both his hands, which were ice cold, and swallowed hard.

"Tell me."

Vincent looked at her lovingly. How beautiful she is, how strong. How can I give her up? She is my life. He tried to shake off his depressing thoughts, but couldn't.

"Maybe we're fooling ourselves."

She drew back from him, her brows furrowed, her eyes registering shock and disbelief. "What on earth are you talking about? Vincent, you're frightening me. I don't understand."

He released his hands from hers and turned from her to pace across the room. "It's not going to work, Catherine. I can give you nothing. This dream we share... perhaps it can never be."

His words chilled her to the bone. "Vincent!" Then she knew, just by the troubled way he paced the room, tense and angry, sad and confused. This had something to do with Steven. It had to. But what had changed him in such a short time to...

"Vincent, was Steven here?"

He stopped dead from his restless pacing to look at her. His tiny nod told her everything.

"He was here."

Catherine again approached him, but didn't touch him. Vincent had to be given the chance to see that he was wrong in what he was saying to her. "Talk to me, Vincent. I want to know everything he said to you."

He could feel her strength in his own soul, so powerful was the force of it.

"He saw us... together, Catherine. He knows we are... close. We argued and he threatened to destroy us, unless I refuse to see you again. He wants you, Catherine, and he will go to any extreme to have you."

Catherine's resolve was strong as she met his gaze.

"Well, I don't want him. It's you I love. All I ever want or need in my life is you, you must, must believe that.

Tears fell unheeded down her cheeks as he attempted to form a strong argument. "He can give you more, Catherine."

She shook her head vehemently. "All I want is you."

His fists clenched as he kept his distance from her. "There is so much I wish to give you... and so much I know I can never give you."

Her chin lifted, as did her voice. "You've given me more love and joy in these past few weeks than I have ever known. I shall only be happy when we can share a life... together. Vincent, I was dead for ten years. I came home, and you made me live again. I know you feel the same. Please, don't deny it. When you touch me, I feel..."

"Look at me," he answered hoarsely, holding up his hands to her. "Do you want these hands touching you?" He shook his head, and swallowed hard. "Were these hands really meant to give love?"

His question tore at her heart. "Vincent, you must stop saying these things. You're breaking my heart." She needed to touch him, to reassure him of her love, but was almost afraid to put her hands on him, afraid she'd break his heart as well. "I won't allow you to sacrifice your happiness for me. Don't you know that your pain is my pain. Sometimes I think that we are one person, two halves of the same heart."

Vincent knew if he didn't hold himself back, in another second, he'd touch her and be lost. "You deserve to be happy, happier than I can ever make you."

She refused to be swayed, and stood her ground. "Listen to me; no matter what you say, I will not leave you." She couldn't stay away from him any longer. She grabbed his shoulders as if to shake him, then slid her hands down to hold his own. "These hands are beautiful. These are my hands." She gently kissed each of his unique, strong fingers, as he gasped for air. "Vincent, do you love me?"

The damn broke with her touch. He pulled her into his arms and buried his face in her neck. "Love you? Catherine... I ache with love for you. You are in my dreams each night, in every waking moment you are with me." He lifted his head to drink in her beauty, gently wiping her tears away. "You've shown me a life I never thought to behold. Forgive me," he tightened his hold on her, and he heard her sigh as she pushed closer to him. "I don't want you to leave me. But, please understand, I only want for you to have everything."

"But I do have everything... I have you." And then she smiled at him, and the sun shone through their tears, and the birds sang.

"Catherine," he took her hands in his, kissing her palms, catching the scent of roses on her skin. "Make no mistake about Steven. If we defy him, he will find a way to destroy us."

She nodded in agreement. "The first thing I will do when I return home tomorrow is speak with my father and tell him the truth about us. I'll make him understand, and I hope he'll agree to talk to you. We shall survive Steven's viciousness, Vincent, I promise."

He managed to smile through his tears. "I believe you."

"Vincent..."

And then his lips were on hers, and he moaned as her tongue touched his in a teasing caress. She began to suck on his full, warm lower lip, drawing another low groan from him.

"Catherine," he breathed. "Do you know what you are doing to me?"

She kissed his chin, and cheeks, his unique nose, then his eyes. "Loving you, if you give me the chance."

He knew what she was suggesting, and he wanted nothing more than to become part of her. All he had to do was take her into his arms and carry her up one flight to his bed, where he would make her belong to him in the most intimate fashion. But he wouldn't... not yet.

"Catherine, please."

Catherine pulled back from him to look into the deep blue of his eyes, so warm and soft with love. She knew he would never dishonor her in that way.

"I understand, Vincent."

"Know that there is nothing I want more than to share my love with you, but..."

"Yes?"

"Catherine, Steven asked me what I could possibly have to give you and I told him the only thing I had... was my heart. You have my heart, Catherine. Will you give me yours? Will you be my wife?"

He had to hold her to keep her from falling. Her legs grew weak and she threw her arms around him, so tightly that Vincent was surprised at her strength.

She began kissing him again, and her answer was in her kiss.

Vincent lifted her and twirled her around the room, and together they basked in their joy, both of them forgetting Steven Bass for the moment.

They could survive any storm, as long as they were together.

"Vincent?"

"Mmmm?"

"When will we be married?"

They were sitting on the moss-covered bank of the small silver stream that ran through his property, Catherine contentedly cradled in his strong arms, all thoughts of Steven obliterated for now. Vincent was staring at the moon, while Catherine gazed at him. The night sky was sprinkled with countless stars and the moon, a silver crescent against the black velvet canvas above them.

Vincent lowered his head to meet her question. How beautiful she was, and how marvelous she felt in his arms. As they had been growing closer these past weeks, he began to sense her stronger emotions. If he concentrated, he could feel her love emanating through him. It was a feeling that comforted him, for now. But they still had obstacles to overcome, boundaries to cross. Namely, Steven Bass.

"Catherine, this is all so overwhelming, I feel I must tell you that there can be no marriage unless... unless your father gives us his blessing. I will not dishonor you by defying him."

Catherine's brows furrowed as she entwined her hand with his. "You mean that you would elope with me if my father DID approve?"

He smiled. She was teasing again, and he thoroughly enjoyed it. He nodded. "If we had his blessing, I would go anywhere with you, surely you know that."

"Yes, I know. It seems lately everything that is in my heart, I find is in yours. These feelings I have for you are so strong, that I..."

He didn't have to see her face to know she was blushing. She was telling him that she wanted him, as a woman wants a man, intimately, completely. The depth of his love for her was such that, even now he fought to suppress the desire to take her here in this secret place. The warm scent of her skin, the heat of her closeness, hardened him to the point of discomfort. Nevertheless, he suppressed his arousal, and strove to enjoy their time together.

"I, too, am overwhelmed by my love for you," he whispered, his mouth close to hers. Her admission of desire made him soar, and hearing her deep sigh, he knew he'd done the right thing by being truthful with her. "It's given me strength and hope that we shall soon see our way through our problems." He kissed her softly, then poured out all that was in his heart.

"I'll never stop loving you, Catherine, never. And I promise to make you happy."

"We'll make each other happy."

And then she was in his arms, pressing herself closer to his fire, welcoming his lips as they nearly crushed her own, sealing their vow of commitment with a kiss that was timeless.

A faint rustle close by caused them to abruptly break their heart-stopping kiss. Catherine folded into Vincent's protective embrace, fearing that Steven had returned. When she felt Vincent's hold on her relax, she knew she had nothing to fear.

"Vincent," her voice was barely a whisper. "What is it?"

"Shhh," he instructed gently. "Look..."

Her eyes followed the direction of his own, and her mouth opened with the discovery. "They're beautiful," she exclaimed in wonder.

Vincent nodded, and brought both arms around her. They watched in silence, as a graceful doe and her small fawn stood on the opposite bank of the stone bridge, sipping water from the stream, undisturbed by the presence of the lovers sitting only a short distance away. Catherine placed her hand on Vincent's chest, absently gliding her fingers over his breast, the gesture making Vincent's heart race and his blood boil. She did it not to seduce him, however, she just needed to share the beauty of the moment with him.

They spent endless moments just gazing upon the graceful gentle creatures, the fawn sporting white spots on her slender body. In those moments, Catherine and Vincent felt a lifetime of loneliness melt away. When mother and child finally turned and disappeared back into the forest, Vincent turned to Catherine. "Whatever happens, whatever comes, know that I love you."

And then, as naturally as taking a breath, he bent his head, and kissed her so tenderly, she nearly wept.

His scent of musk and moonlight flooded her as she sustained the kiss, combing her fingers through his great mane of golden hair, and he moaned, wanting to taste her again and again.

Above them, a shooting star shot across the night sky, painting an arc of sparkling diamonds over their secluded piece of paradise.

Early the next morning Catherine dressed and packed, not wanting to leave Beaumont Hills, but needing to arrive home to speak to her father before Steven did. She had to convince him of the rightness of the love she and Vincent shared and her commitment to him.

She was pleasantly surprised to find Vincent waiting for her in the dining room, holding out her chair. Early the next morning Catherine dressed and packed, not wanting to leave Beaumont Hills, but needing to arrive home to speak to her father before Steven did. She had to convince him of the rightness of the love she and Vincent shared and her commitment to him.

She was pleasantly surprised to find Vincent waiting for her in the dining room, holding out her chair, while Jenny and Devin joined them. They shared a loving gaze that was deeper than words, then sat to enjoy the morning meal.

Catherine and Vincent were mostly silent, exchanging meaningful glances, knowing their time together was growing to a close. Vincent's eyes seemed to be telling her to be strong. She nodded and her smile was his sunlight.

Mouse placed her bags in the carriage, then ran back to the orphanage to retrieve a forgotten item. Devin chuckled lightly, admiring the young man for his discreet manner, knowing he wished to give Vincent and Catherine a few moments alone to say their goodbyes.

Jenny and Devin were having the same idea as they said their farewells, then returned to the house, leaving Catherine and Vincent alone to share those few moments together. Grey skies threatened rain as they faced each other.

Vincent took her hands in his, lifting them to his mouth, and kissed each knuckle tenderly, then turned them over, and pressed his lips to her palms. They stared at each other, not speaking for several seconds, just drinking in the sight of the other, burning the memory of their time together within their hearts.

A single tear slid down her cheek as a light drizzling rain began to fall. "Vincent..."

He swallowed at the painful sound in her voice. "When will I see you?"

"I don't know. I'll send word as soon as I can." A clap of thunder seemed to emphasize the turmoil in her heart. "Goodbye..."

He squeezed her hands and nodded slightly, feeling as if his heart were being ripped from his body. He watched her when she turned, clutching a handful of gown, then helped her into the carriage. Seeing her settled in, he gave her one last look of longing, knowing if he said anything more, he'd never let her go.

Catherine saw his cloak flutter behind him as he began to walk from her. But as she watched, he stopped. The rain continued to fall and as she looked on, he slowly turned and came back to her. She smiled through her tears, and held out her arms to him, welcoming him as he jumped into the carriage in one powerful step.

"I'll miss you," he pulled her into his arms, wanting to feel her warmth, her touch, her kiss, one more time.

Between soft kisses and words of love, Catherine nodded. "Remember, what I told you. Nothing will keep us apart. Believe that, Vincent."

"Wherever you go, wherever I am, my heart is with you."

Catherine let out a sob as she leaned into him, smelling the rain on his cloak, wishing she could crawl inside and never emerge.

"Our separation will make our reunion so much sweeter," her tone was encouraging.

As Mouse could be seen in the distance, Vincent knew they had only seconds remaining. "You must go."

She swallowed and managed a smile. "Tell me how much you love me, just once more."

Whispering in her ear, his eyes squeezed shut against his oncoming flood of tears, and he murmured, "I love you so much, that I'd rather die with you beside me, than live a thousand lifetimes without you."

She nodded, then accepted his lips in a kiss that was sweet and sad, yet filled with hope and courage. As Mouse approached, Vincent squeezed her hands once more, whispered, "be well," and turned to Mouse.

"Take great care on the journey back," he clutched Mouse's shoulder in a brotherly fashion, but settled his eyes on Catherine. "You carry a precious treasure."

Mouse smiled, proud that he should be entrusted with such a special passenger. "Don't worry, Vincent... Mouse will take West route... get Miss Catherine home safe... can trust Mouse."

"Yes," he answered, then slowly closed the carriage door, his eyes never leaving her beautiful face until they pulled away, and were gone from his sight.

He returned to the cottage, then lit several candles, and decided to read. He lifted a book of Sonnets by Shakespeare. Settling himself on the stone floor near the parlor window, Vincent found comfort in the words of the great poet, missing Catherine so deeply already it left an aching void in his heart. She'd send word soon, her father would give them his blessing, and they would be wed. All would be well.

Clutching that hopeful thought to his heart as a child would a favorite toy, Vincent fell asleep, his last thoughts of Catherine, her beautiful eyes the color of spring moss, and a laugh that rivaled the sweetest of songbirds.

CHAPTER EIGHT

One must learn to love, and go through
a good deal of suffering to get to it."

- *D. H. Lawrence*

True to his word, Mouse did indeed arrive safely at the brownstone less than three hours later, his precious cargo, safe, tired, yet determined to speak to her father, and to convince him that the love she and Vincent shared was right.

She heard Steven's voice announce, "she's home" before she crossed the threshold of the library, where Charles and Steven had, obviously, been keeping vigil for her. She thanked Mouse with a smile and hug, then watched the young man as he carried her bags up to her room.

Taking a deep, cleansing breath, she prepared herself for the confrontation she knew would be the most important of her life. Lifting off her hat and placing it on a nearby chair, she began to peel off her gloves as she entered the library and walked straight to her father, who was sitting in the big leather chair behind his desk.

"Hello, Father, are you well?"

Charles looked pale, she thought, as she placed an affectionate kiss on his cheek. What had Steven told him? She could only surmise.

She acknowledged Bass with a slight nod, then straightened and prepared for battle. Taking a chair her father held out for her, she sat and waited.

"Well, Charles, say something." Steven's tone was carefully persuasive.

Charles allowed his eyes to rest on his only child. She was the mirror image of her mother -- lovely and petite, yet bearing an inner strength and intelligence few women possessed. Beautiful and feminine, he tried but was unable to imagine all the things Steven had told him about seeing her with Vincent Wells.

Was something going on between him and Catherine? Impossible, he mused. What Steven saw was probably Catherine's compassion towards him. His daughter had a great capacity for kindness, and would sooner hurt herself before she'd hurt another human being. That was it. Catherine was just being kind, that was all.

So he had decided, long before she arrived home, that he would hear her side of the story before he drew any conclusions. He and Catherine had always been honest with each other, and he had no reason to doubt her now. He would listen to her side of the story. Yet before he did, he saw his beloved daughter gearing up for the face-off with

Steven. So Charles sat back, a bemused expression gracing his gently aging features, and watched as the fireworks began. He suppressed a smile by placing two fingers over his mouth, as Catherine armed herself with words, as a warrior would with a sword.

"Steven, I think the time has come to put things straight, right now, once and for all."

"Catherine, I think we can cease the melodramatics. I've already explained everything to your father, although I can't for the life of me comprehend why he hasn't called in the authorities to arrest that freak for pawing you the way he did."

This should be thoroughly entertaining, Charles thought. Let the games begin! Watching Catherine rise from the chair, Charles entwined his fingers together and relaxed.

"How dare you!" Catherine exclaimed angrily, her cheeks blushing with rage. "My relationship with Vincent is none of your business, and by the way, what were you doing in Beaumont Hills - spying on me?" She placed her hands on her hips and continued her tirade, almost oblivious to the presence of Charles, who at the moment was enjoying himself enormously, despite the tightness in his left shoulder.

"Who gave you the right to go to Vincent's home and confront him with the threat of ruining not only my reputation, but his as well? Vincent is the most gentle, caring, noble man I've ever met, the most 'human' being I know. He may be different, but he's more a man than you'll ever be! And as far as you calling the police," here she turned and remembered her father's presence. "Father, Vincent did nothing improper, and if I could simply speak to you... alone, all would be explained in a matter of moments. Please."

Her flushed, angered expression and protective stance reminded Charles at the moment of a lioness, defending her child.

Or her mate.

His smile faded as he realized with gravity the nature of Catherine's relationship with Wells. Slowly it dawned on him that her 'friendship' with Vincent Wells went far beyond platonic; he could see the passion in her eyes, the protective manner in which she defended him. My God, he thought with dismay, she's in love with him. Steven was right!

Coming to his feet, Charles' whole demeanor changed. What had begun as an amusing morning had now resulted in a serious situation, which deserved a more serious discussion.

"Steven, leave us please," he centered his gaze on Catherine.

"I think I should stay. After all, Catherine and I are practically engaged..."

Catherine's impatience showed in her facial expression. "Steven, please stop deluding yourself. We are not engaged, nor will we ever be engaged. I do not wish to discuss this with you any longer. I wish to speak to my father now." Her voice dripped with finality.

Incensed that he was being thoroughly dismissed, Steven fought to keep from showing his ever increasing anger. Clenching his fists at his sides, he strode from the room, but did not leave the house. Instead, he stood outside of the huge library doors, and listened to the conversation between father and daughter, vowing that by the end of the day, a plan would be formed to be rid of Wells once and for all.

Meanwhile, Catherine faced her father with chin raised, her eyes meeting his, prepared to tell him everything.

"Catherine..." Charles rose from the chair and walked around to lean against the front of his desk. "I think it's only proper that you tell me what has been going on between you and Wells."

Catherine took a deep breath, then spoke in a steady, determined voice. "Please understand, Father, my intent was never to deceive you in any way, no matter what Steven has told you."

"You've never lied to me," he answered simply.

Catherine gave him a loving smile. "And I've no intention of starting now. What has Steven told you about... Vincent and me?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "He said he saw you and Wells in an affectionate embrace... that he was, kissing you. Catherine, is this true?"

At her nod, Charles braced himself. "My God, what were you thinking? He is not like us. Did you become carried away in your kindness to him? The man isn't even human!"

His words bit into her, causing her to tremble with sadness. Oh, how could she make him understand?

"Father, Vincent is the most 'human' person I know. He's kind and gentle, compassionate and loving. His differences do not matter to me. To me, he is only what he is... a man."

And then she added softly, "the man I love."

Suddenly, Charles realized this was not the 12 year old girl with the pink pinafore who climbed trees in the park; she was not the same 16 year melancholy youth who'd lost her mother too soon. Here was his daughter: an adult woman, fully prepared to take on the consequences of loving a man who was not like any other. A man who, for all intents and purposes, was only part human. Who but a unique, extraordinary woman like his daughter could love a unique, mysterious, extraordinary being like Vincent Wells

"Father, say something, please."

What was there to say, except to listen to her. But first, he must make a last attempt to dissuade her from a life of uncertainty. He owed it to her, and to himself, to try to make her see what consequences befell both of them if they pursued this most unusual relationship.

"Catherine, what is to become of you? Surely you realize you will someday become the richest woman in New York. You have responsibilities that a woman of your social status must be aware of. Where does Wells fit in to your life?"

"He is my life," she said softly.

"He is a poor man," he argued.

"It doesn't matter," she countered.

"What about your reputation?"

Catherine saw by the soft look in his eyes and the calmness of his voice that he was yielding. She began to relax.

"Father, Vincent has been a perfect gentleman. Besides, we are nearly at the turn of the century. I do not need a chaperone. You must learn to trust me."

As his gaze locked onto hers, he saw a single tear make its way down her flushed cheek. "You're in love with him, aren't you?"

She did not hesitate for a second as she nodded. "Terribly, Father."

"I thought as much. Talk to me Catherine. Help me to understand how you've fallen in love with a man that you've only seen several times since we returned from Europe. How can I ever bless a union between the two of you when you don't even know if he is human? Did you plan to run away together? Has he persuaded you to live in sin? Please, Catherine."

Catherine went to him, and wrapped her arms gently around his shoulders. "Oh, Father, I would never deceive you, never, and neither would Vincent. You must believe me. I want to tell you all about our relationship, if you'll allow me to."

She released her arms from him, but held his hand between hers. He nodded. "Have the two of you... has he...?"

"No," she shook her head, "we haven't," she stated truthfully. "Vincent would never dishonor me in that way. He is honorable and considerate. Father, we have been in love since we were children. Jenny and I would play in the park and he would hide behind a cluster of trees, and wait for me."

At this point, Charles noticed a faraway look in her eyes, as if she were reliving her childhood in her mind. It was a bittersweet expression, as if she were trying to recapture the past in her mind's eye; it was the look of a full grown woman in love.

How could he refuse her the chance to speak of him? No matter what she'd done in the past few weeks that violated what society saw as proper, she was still his daughter and he would listen to what she had to say, then pass judgement on her relationship with Wells.

"Father, I want to tell you all about him," she became enthusiastic and her eyes brightened at the prospect of revealing all of Vincent's special qualities. "I want you to know that if you forbade me to see him ...," she became enthusiastic and her eyes brightened at the prospect of revealing all of Vincent's special qualities. "... I would still find a way to be with him. You know that I am past the age of consent and if I wished, I could elope with him. Devin is a lawyer, and could easily arrange for us to be wed by a judge, but that is not what we want, Father. Vincent has told me, in no uncertain terms, that he will not marry me without your blessing... he couldn't. He would rather die than risk my honor. He loves me, Father, as I love him. He is my life... without him, there is nothing."

She had spoken without pause or hesitation, without doubt or fear. Here was a woman who truly was a lioness, a woman any man would be proud to call wife.

Catherine's hands were shaking, tears were falling unheeded down her cheeks; her head was pounding, her heart racing, but she never faltered. Looking at her father, waiting for his response, she inhaled deeply, and pulled a small lace handkerchief from her sleeve, dabbing at her eyes and nose. A long silence ensued then, finally, her father walked behind his desk and settled himself in his chair.

He blinked twice, then to Catherine's astonishment, he smiled. "I'm listening."

Catherine exhaled with relief. Her answering smile warmed his heart. "He lives in a small cottage on the grounds of Beaumont Hills, and teaches the children of the orphanage..."

While Catherine shared all her innermost dreams and wishes with her father, Steven listened, in near shock, from outside the library door. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Catherine, in love with the freak! Impossible! And Charles, the old fool, was actually listening to her romantic dribble with some sort of abject interest. A nauseating wave of panic washed over Steven, pushing him to the edge of reason. This was certainly the last straw. Imagine the audacity of the woman, breaking their engagement because she imagined herself in love with Wells!

Finally, he'd heard enough. Silently walking to the front door, he opened it, and quietly stepped through. He had failed to see Mouse, however, who was coming down the stairs after delivering Catherine's bags to her room. The young man frowned. Mr. Bass was eavesdropping on Miss Catherine's conversation with her father, and that was not proper. He'd tell Vincent about it when next he saw him.

"... That is when Vincent told me that he would not marry me without your blessing." Catherine sat on the library sofa as her father listened without interruption to the events of the past several weeks.

Charles ran a slender hand through his thinning white hair, then turned from the window and faced his only child. "I suppose I should be grateful to him, then, for not spiriting you away?" Catherine knew he was only half serious.

"Father, my fondest wish is for you to be present at my wedding, to walk with me down the aisle, so I may be joined to the man I love with your blessings. Will you meet with him, Father, talk with him?"

Charles paced on one side of the library, the tiny twitch in his left shoulder returning as a reminder of his mortality. The doctor said his heart was not strong enough to survive undue stress and worry. He grew sad then, only because he wished to live long enough to see his grandchildren born. And he was certain there would be grandchildren. A worried frown creased his brow. What would they be like? Would they resemble Wells? He knew that if they did, Catherine would certainly be shunned forever from society, but as she so happily put it, Wells' cottage was enough for her, and she would live with him in Beaumont Hills and be happy. She had not a care for the fact that she was an heiress, and someday would be wealthy beyond dreams.

There was much to think about if she shunned her wealth and all that went with it. Then there was his will, that would have to be altered, and the shipping business, and Steven. Yes, he would have to deal with Steven...

"Father?"

Catherine's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Sorry, dear. It seems we have much to discuss."

"Yes?"

"I will meet with him, Catherine. You may send word with Mouse. I'll see him Sunday."

Her joy was overwhelming. "Oh, Father, thank you," she cried as she ran into his arms, hugging him tightly. "I love you."

"I know," he answered as he hugged her back. "Now, I wish to go over my will again, and I need your help. But first, I think you should rest after your long trip home."

Catherine's smile vanished. "Your will? Father, what is it? Is there something you're not telling me? Why do we have to..."

"It's nothing," he assured her, guiding her from the room, his hand softly holding her elbow. "However, since there will be no marriage to Steven, I must make certain adjustments to assure that Steven will have no control over your inheritance after I'm gone."

He didn't need to say anymore, and Catherine nodded her understanding. "I'll just change into fresh clothes, and we can talk over lunch."

Charles nodded. "Go and write that note to Wells."

"Right away."

As she walked briskly from the room, Catherine suddenly felt rejuvenated, and filled with endless energy. Oh, Vincent, I told you he'd understand, she thought happily. "Everything will be well now," she whispered as she ran up the stairs and entered her bedroom.

All that had to be dealt with now, was the question of Steven.

Hours later, while Catherine and Charles conspired to draw up a new will in the presence of their lawyer, Steven Bass was sitting in a uptown tavern, sipping his fifth scotch, and devising a plan to insure his admittance into the Chandler fortune.

Vincent, meanwhile, stood in the gazebo, watching the rain, his thoughts centering around Catherine, missing her deeply, silently praying that all was going well with her. Had her father understood? Had he forbidden her to see him again? When would she send word with Mouse? Tomorrow?

"Oh, Catherine...", he whispered, wanting simply to hear her name on his lips. It had the feel of velvet rose petals and thinking of her now comforted him. He closed his eyes against his aloneness and felt her within his heart. A rush of warmth surged through his body, and he smiled. She was with him. She would always be with him.

A sense of hopeful optimism filled Catherine as she entered her bedroom. Walking to her desk, she brought out some stationery from a side drawer then proceeded to compose a letter to Vincent. She smiled inwardly and thought, this will be my first love letter to him. She must make it special. Taking pen in hand, she dipped the point gracefully into the ink well, then began:

A sense of hopeful optimism filled Catherine as she entered her bedroom. Walking to her desk, she brought out some stationery from a side drawer then proceeded to compose a letter to Vincent. She smiled inwardly and thought, this will be my first love letter to him. She must make it special. Taking pen in hand, she dipped the point gracefully into the ink well, then began:

... Dearest Vincent, I have such wonderful news. After a long discussion with Father, he has agreed to meet with you on Sunday evening. This means I can still spend a glorious day in your arms. I cannot express in words how happy I am, so on Sunday, I will just have to show you.

You must know that you have been in my thoughts and dreams every moment since we've been apart. I'll miss you each day until we can be together. I'll meet you at our special place. I told you that everything would be well.

Until we meet again, I am yours, always,

Catherine..."

Catherine re-read the note, smiled happily, then folded the cream colored vellum in half and sealed it in an envelope.

Finding Mouse moments later in the stables, she handed him the note and smiled. "Mouse, would you take this letter to Vincent when you return to Beaumont Hills?"

"Tomorrow morning... I'll deliver it to Vincent... you can depend on Mouse..."

"Thank you, Mouse. It's a very important note, and I would like him to receive it very soon. You're a good friend," and with that, she placed a sisterly kiss on his cheek, making him blush. He hurried away, reverently placing the letter to Vincent in a secret pocket in his coat.

After sharing the mid-day meal with her father, Catherine and Charles retired to the library, where they discussed the changes he had made in his will.

"What will we tell Steven?"

"Don't worry about Steven, Catherine," her father reassured her. "I'll take care of him. After all, you are my only heir, and once the lawyer draws up the new will, everything will be legal and binding."

Catherine nodded, although a prickle of fear crept up her spine. "He won't take this well, I'm afraid."

"He has no choice," Charles stated pointedly. "You are, and always have been my first priority, Catherine. I am only interested in your wellbeing, and your future. Unfortunately, where Steven was concerned, I must apologize for showing bad Judgement. I should know as well as anyone, that you cannot force a person to love another. Forgive me?"

Catherine hugged him tightly. "There is nothing to forgive. You did what you did out of love, and I'm grateful. But I must live my own life, and I want that life to be shared with Vincent. Please keep an open mind when you meet with him, Father. I know in time you'll come to see how much I love him."

He sighed. "I'll try, Catherine, I'll try."

"That's all I ask."

Watching his only child as she made her way up the winding stairs, Charles inhaled. He was very tired, and only hoped he lived long enough to secure her happiness. Once that was done, he would rest.

CHAPTER NINE

"Come live with me and be my love,
and we will all the pleasures prove."

- J. Donne

Luck was on Catherine's side the rest of the week, in part because Steven was called away on business. One part of her thought most assuredly that her father had had something to do with his absence. Bless his heart. One person she did not want to have to deal with right now was Steven. There would be time enough to match wits with him soon enough.

Four days. It had been four days since she'd seen Vincent, and her eyes ached for the sight of him.

Walking to her desk, she lifted the letter he'd sent with Mouse to her earlier that day. She sat on the edge of her bed preparing to read it for the eighth time.

It was late, and she had dressed for bed. The beige lace nightgown caressed her womanly curves, and her waist-length honey-brown hair was unbound and flowing over her shoulders, down her back.

Her father had been invited out to the opera, but Catherine was not up to it. She was blessedly alone in the house, and the quietness lulled her as she unfolded the single page of thin paper. She smiled as her eyes perused his handwriting, a neat, flowing script that drew her to his words. Clearing her throat, she began to again read his words, savoring each treasured syllable.

... *Dearest Catherine,*

My heart rejoices with the news that your father has graciously agreed to meet with me. I only hope that when he sees me, he will not regret his decision.

It has been just four days since you left me and already I feel empty, as though a part of me has been taken. I miss you deeply and only live for Sunday, when I might be with you, speak with you, and hold you in my arms once more.

I long for you to see the roses that are coming into full bloom around the gazebo. Their beauty is breathtaking, and their fragrance is so intoxicating that I feel drawn to them, as I am drawn to your own sweet essence. The crimson buds are like your lips, soft and warm, filled with passion... filled with fire...

The white roses are delicate and pure, with a scent so sweet, they take my breath away. As you do.

Until Sunday, be well my love,

Always, Vincent t..."

"Catherine..."

Suddenly, Catherine whirled around and gazed in stunned surprise at the appearance of her heart's dream. He was tall and golden... and beautiful as he stood in the entrance to her bedroom, with Mouse standing behind him.

"Vincent!" She was breathless as she ran to his outstretched arms, grabbing him around the neck like a lifeline, wanting to assure herself that he was real, that he was here, with her.

"I've missed you so," he cradled her tenderly in his arms, while he buried his face in her neck, inhaling a rose scent on her soft, warm flesh. "I had to see you, if only for a moment."

"Your letter," she looked up into his eyes, so filled with warmth and love. "I've been reading it all day." She smiled. "It was enough to sustain me - until now. Oh God, Vincent," she breathed. "Four days..."

"An eternity," he murmured.

And then his lips were on hers, tasting her as she tilted her head back to meet his searching mouth, wishing to devour her if he were able. He responded to her soft body as it pressed to his, her fingers entwining in his hair, and her touch, as always, spread to his core like wildfire. His mouth opened and their tongues touched and pressed, curling around each other as their bodies drew closer, both of them clearly oblivious to Mouse, who crept quietly down the hall to give them privacy.

Vincent trembled from their kiss, and he steadied himself while allowing his eyes to take in the wonder of all of her. He loved looking at her, it was like feeling the warmth of the sun each time their eyes met.

"I can't stay," he breathed, as his hands slid up her arms, touching soft lace. His hands shook as he allowed spread fingers to caress her beautiful long hair. He let out a sigh that shook both of them.

"I came because I wanted to know that you were well." At Catherine's questioning look he explained.

"It seems Steven was eavesdropping on your conversation with your father. Mouse discovered him standing nearby." Catherine's eyes widened, and Vincent took both of her hands in his, comforting her.

"I want you to take great care. Mouse will watch over you until we can speak to your father together." He ran the pad of his thumb over her lower lip in a loving gesture. "I must go."

Catherine nodded. "I'll be careful, I promise."

They merely stared at each other for a moment. Then Mouse's voice, reminding them that it was time, brought them together for a last kiss. Catherine's hands slid over his chest, memorizing his strength, his warmth. Her fingers rested over his heart, and she found comfort there, while Vincent slanted his mouth over hers, possessing her lips, wanting more, though not taking it. His body grew hard with desire, but he held himself in check and finally broke the kiss.

"Until Sunday," his voice was barely a murmur. "I love you..."

Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "And I love you."

She watched him as he moved aside his cloak and brought out two blossoms from a deep pocket, one scarlet, one white. "For you."

As she heard his departure down the back stairs, she held the thorn less, perfect roses to her nose, inhaling deeply of their beauty. Two perfect roses, the symbols of eternity and passion, delicate, yet strong enough to survive the long carriage journey in Vincent's cloak.

Yes, they had bloomed beautifully. Just as Vincent said.

"You look like an angel, standing there," Vincent told her as she turned to greet him, her welcoming smile warming every fiber of his being.

She'd been standing on the hill leading to the gazebo, watching a family of chubby brown rabbits as they scampered to their burrow. When Vincent saw her, she reminded him of a figure out of a Monet painting: her lemon yellow day dress fitted perfectly to her slender, yet shapely curves; her white ruffled parasol raised daintily above her head to block the rays of the sun. Her lovely spring hat completed her ensemble, but it was her hair Vincent noticed most. Today it was worn in a single thick braid that reached to her waist, and he smiled, his mind drifting back ten years to the beautiful little girl with the musical laugh and pink pinafore.

Yet when she turned to face him, all thoughts of that little girl fled; she had grown into the loveliest woman he'd ever seen. No dream or imagined visions could ever create a portrait as breathtaking as Catherine.

She lowered her parasol as his arms enclosed her. Oh, to touch her again! The warmth her body exuded, her scent, so naturally seductive it could have driven him over the edge if he allowed it. But a kiss would suffice. For now.

"Oh, I'm so happy to see you!" She exclaimed before his mouth descended on hers, taking her lips in a possessive kiss that stole her breath. What a wonderful feeling: to love and be loved! She wished for him to never release her; to be able to remain in his warm embrace for all time.

Reluctantly breaking their kiss, Vincent took a moment to stare into her eyes, savoring the brightness and love he saw in her deep green orbs. "Have you any idea how much I've missed you?"

Catherine smiled. "I would imagine as much as I missed you."

Vincent reached for her hand. "Come then. Walk with me."

She nodded happily, raised her parasol, and took his hand.

If he lived a thousand lifetimes, it would not be long enough to tell her all that was in his heart. It was a perfect Sunday morning; he had Catherine by his side. When he met with her father this evening, he'd ask for her hand, and soon, if the fates were kind, they'd be wed and he would be the happiest man on the face of the earth.

Approaching the gazebo, they stopped a moment to admire dozens of new roses, inhaling the seductive fragrance that surrounded them. Trellises supporting the new buds stood straight and tall. Soon the red and white flowers would grow to intertwine through the lattice patterns of the gazebo. Catherine could hardly believe the beauty of this magical place.

Vincent led her to the bench, where she folded in her parasol, then removed her hat, wanting to feel the spring breeze in her hair, all around her. She looked up at Vincent, who was staring at her intensely.

"What is it?" she chuckled lightly.

He had gone over in his mind all morning what he planned to say to her. The sight of her took away all reason, left him speechless, made his legs weak. Was it possible to love a woman so deeply? Shaking his head in wonder, he took several deep breaths to steady himself.

"I have something for you."

Catherine's heart lurched with his words. She didn't answer, rather waited for him to make the first move. His nervousness seemed endearing to Catherine as she watched him take a deep breath.

She watched happily as Vincent reached inside his cloak, and presented her with a blue silk pouch. "Open it," he instructed softly.

Catherine's fingers trembled as she opened the pouch, and gasped as her eyes beheld the most beautiful oval-shaped locket she'd ever seen. It was gold filigree, with two entwined roses engraved in the center, and Catherine reverently passed a finger over it, admiring the fine workmanship of the piece.

"It is so lovely." She looked up at him. "May I open it?" she asked. Vincent nodded slightly and continued to watch her.

Slipping a fingernail through a slit in the gold piece, Catherine gasped when the inside of the locket was revealed to her gaze.

On one side, Vincent had had their initials engraved, with the date they had first met as children, April 12th, 1887. On the other half, were engraved the words, "... *Catherine, my heart is bound to yours, always. Vincent.*"

"Oh, Vincent," she swallowed the lump in her throat as he knelt at her feet. Taking the precious gold piece from her fingers, he tenderly looped the fragile gold chain around her neck, then simply watched as it nestled between her breasts, rising and falling with her every breath.

Lifting her hand to his cheek, she caressed it softly, stirring him with her touch. "I will treasure it always."

As they sat gazing at each other, Catherine reached into her sleeve and pulled out an exquisite lace handkerchief, which held a white lace cloth.

"I want you to have this."

Opening it, Vincent blinked back tears as his eyes beheld the loveliest pocket watch and thick gold chain he'd ever seen. "Catherine..."

"Now open yours," she smiled expectantly.

The casing was a heavy, masculine gold, boldly bearing his initials on the cover. Opening it, he admired the exquisite workmanship of the gold piece. He was taken aback by the appearance of a neat, thin, long braid of Catherine's hair, rolled into a flat spiral, where it fit snugly into the watch fob.

It was a common custom for an engaged woman to place a lock of her hair into her betrothed's gift. Catherine's braid was nearly two feet long, and delicately tied on both ends with tiny ribbons. Vincent was clearly overwhelmed by her gesture. Lifting the timepiece to his nose, he inhaled the sweet strands of silk then smiled through his tears of joy, recognizing her scent: essence of roses.

He closed the watch, reverently placed it in his cloak, then took her hands in his. "Catherine, how can I tell you what your love has meant to me? Since you've come back to me, I am whole again. My heart swells with joy with each thought of you and the sweetness your love has given me. I promise with all my heart, that I will make every day of our lives happy. My love for you is so deep, so fathomless, I ache whenever I am not touching you. I love you, Catherine. I always have; I always will."

Catherine grabbed his shoulders, urging him to sit beside her. "What can I say to you? When I left to live in Europe, I had resigned myself to a new life. But my loneliness for you only deepened. Then, when my mother died, I was overwhelmed with sadness." She smiled through the tears that slid down her flushed cheeks. "Then I came home, and you made me smile again. And I know that, in the deepest part of who I am, no matter what happens, Vincent, we will endure, and we will smile, I promise you that with all my heart." She touched her locket tenderly. "You are my best friend, my fiancé... my dream. I love you very much."

They came together then for a kiss that sealed their commitment. She allowed her lips to part as he came to her, and the moment their tongues touched, a jolt of desire shot through her, from her head to the tips of her toes. She heard him moan with pleasure as her hands cupped his head and pressed him closer. His lips then slid from hers as he trailed his mouth down her chin to the exposed flesh of her throat.

At the touch of his warm, moist tongue on the bare flesh of her neck, Catherine moaned in ecstasy, for she had never been touched in such a tender, gentle manner. His mouth was doing marvelous things to her and she felt a hot moistness form in the center of her being. Her breathing deepened as Vincent's tongue slid up her throat, over the sensitized skin just over the scar beside her left ear. The heat of his mouth was torture; it was pain.

It was heaven.

Her breasts ached for his touch, and she found herself boldly taking his hand and slowly placing it over her heart. Vincent felt himself grow so heavy with his arousal that his trembling hand slid over one breast, experiencing sensations that were exquisite. Only the sound of her pleas urging him on brought Vincent unsteadily back to reason.

He groaned and buried his face in her neck, then brought shaking hands around her waist. His body was on fire, burning with longing for her. Just touching her through her layers of clothes nearly brought him to the point of release. They

must be careful from now on for he realized that each time they found themselves alone, the closer they came to the completion they both wanted.

"Catherine..." He finally found his voice.

"Vincent, I love you...", she breathed, holding him tighter. "I wish..."

"Be careful what you wish for, Catherine," he whispered raggedly in her ear. "For I fear I could refuse you nothing at this moment." His eyes met hers and he could see she understood. "Please don't ask it of me."

She placed her palms on his face. "Would it be proper then if I asked for a walk to the bridge, where we could sit by the stream and perhaps, talk?"

His answer was in his smile. As their breathing slowed and returned to normal, he took her hand, and kissed it gently. They walked from the gazebo, arm in arm, and made their way down the hill, to the serenity of their other secret place.

Steven arrived at the Chandler brownstone, having just returned from business in Boston. Summoned by Charles, he was eager to catch up on Catherine's comings and goings. Now that he'd settled affairs with Wells, he'd expect Catherine to start preparation for their wedding. He saw her brief attraction to Wells merely a temporary show of pity, and he had forgiven her bad judgement. He had every intention of confronting her today and informing her how foolishly she had acted. Didn't she realize what was at stake here? A huge shipping dynasty, which, once they wed, would belong to him. Everything would go according to plan, he thought confidently, a smile gracing his lips.

Given the unusual warmth of the late spring day, he carried no gloves and wore no coat. Walking past the butler, he went straight to the library, where he found Charles holding a sheaf of papers.

"Oh Steven, good, you're here," Charles looked up when he heard Steven enter the room. "Please sit. I have many things to discuss with you, and today is as good a day as any."

Pouring himself a scotch before he sat, Steven asked, "Where is Catherine? I wish to speak with her."

"You're not here to speak with Catherine, and I don't see that it's any of your concern any longer."

"Pardon?"

Charles sighed heavily, then stood. "Steven, you've been like a son to me for many years, and I do care for you, yet I think we'd better clear the air about Catherine before we go any further."

Steven tensed as he fixed his gaze on the older man. What the hell was going on?

"Charles, where is Catherine," he frowned, guessing the answer. "Don't tell me that you've allowed Catherine to return to Beaumont Hills? This is unthinkable!"

Charles leered at Steven. "That, too, Steven is none of your business anymore. Catherine has made it quite clear to me that her feelings for you do not go beyond friendship. I respect her wishes. I wish you would too. Do I make myself totally clear?"

Steven sat in wide-eyed shock as Charles was literally wiping out all his dreams for the future. This would never do.

"Charles, you're not thinking clearly." He saw the tall, grey-haired man begin to rub at his left shoulder. "Perhaps you need a drink. I'll pour you a brandy."

"I do NOT need a brandy!" Charles practically roared. He felt his heart begin to race and braced himself to relax. He'd forgotten to take his medication this morning. Catherine would be angry with him. "I need my drops, Steven. Over there, on the mantel, get the bottle for me, would you please?"

Steven ignored his request, for he was bent on only one thing: straightening out this whole sorted mess, and proceeding with plans for the wedding. That took priority over all else.

But before he had time to speak, Charles raised a hand to stop his words. "Steven, let me explain. Now, this is most difficult for me, but you will have to understand. After listening to Catherine's explanations of her feelings for Wells, I have relented and agreed to meet with him."

"You what?"

"Steven, please. Secondly, I hope you realize by now that Catherine has her own mind, and I must respect her wishes. She is my only child, my whole world, and I do think it would be best if you come to terms with that. I have." The ache in his shoulder tightened, but before he could rise to retrieve the medication himself, Steven began ranting once more.

"Charles, I cannot believe what I am hearing. Have you lost your mind? Wells is not good enough for her. Good God, Charles, he's not even human!"

Charles became more irritated with every word Steven spoke. He also was feeling ill, and retrieved his drops from the mantel. Walking back to his desk, he realized there was one more thing he would have to tell Steven, and it was time to tell him now. Placing the drops on the desk, he looked at Steven, and took a deep breath.

"Steven, in light of the way you feel about Catherine and Wells, and given my choice to meet with him to try to understand the depth of their relationship, I think it best if you resign from the firm. I'll give you excellent recommendations and..."

"Recommendations!" Steven jumped up, his entire body rocked with rage, his eyes bright with anger. "I've invested every penny I have in the business. I could operate Chandler Shipping with my eyes closed. How dare you attempt to dismiss me as if I were one of your lowly employees."

"I'm sorry Steven. But that is my final decision. All monies you have invested will be returned to you. I'll make out a bank draft in your name and have it sent to you tomorrow, if you wish."

Steven was shaking with anger, could feel the blood pounding in his ears. Charles could not do this to him. All his plans, all his hopes and dreams were about to go up in smoke. Charles wouldn't get away with this.

As he watched Charles open the glass bottle of his medication with trembling hands. Steven swiftly intercepted the small vial of medicine and clutched it within his hands, away from Charles, who was now clutching his chest in pain.

"Steven... what are you doing? I need my medication... please?"

Steven's smile was deadly as he ignored Charles' plea. "You won't get away with this, Charles. I'll have Chandler Shipping... and Catherine. But you won't be here to see it, will you?"

As Steven's words sunk into Charles Chandler's brain, he was aware that Steven, was, indeed, mad. He watched in wide-eyed terror as Steven crushed the small glass vial between his fingers, allowing the precious medicine to drip to the carpet. Charles, whose breathing was now shallow and labored, sunk back in his leather desk chair, clutching his chest.

Steven watched and waited, ignoring the blood dripping from his hand, and patiently gazed at his former mentor, as his breathing grew more and more shallow, then stopped. Hurriedly placing a handkerchief around his wounded palm, he dropped the tiny glass fragments to the floor, and fled from the house, his mind confused, twisted...

Catherine plucked a 'sprig of Queen Anne's-Lace from the ground nearby, playfully tickled Vincent's cheek with it, causing him to sigh and then smile. They were comfortably seated on Vincent's cloak near the bank of the narrow, silver stream that ran under the bridge. She slid the delicate, flat white blossom across his forehead, teasing and touching, until he turned his face level with her own, and gazed dreamily at her.

He'd never felt so fulfilled, so at peace with himself, with his world. Since his youth, he'd tried to resign himself to a life of solitude, but always, he harbored the hope in his heart that she'd come back to him, that someday she'd return to ease the ache of aloneness, and now it was true; she was here, with him, and soon, they'd be wed. It was almost beyond his wildest dreams.

She giggled playfully as she coaxed him with the flower, then moved the fragile blossom across his unique upper lip, across his full lower one. She dared to look into his eyes, eyes that were as bright and warm as the sky above them. He gently took the flower from her, lightly brushing her lips with it, then slowly replaced the blossom with his mouth. So soft and warm was the touch of his skin, Catherine felt as if she'd been touched by the wings of a butterfly.

But quickly the kiss deepened, Vincent pressing closer and possessively wrapping one arm around her waist, the other behind her head. He lowered her to her back, then lay on the ground beside her.

He wished to freeze the moment in time and remain with her until they both died. No, he thought, love as powerful as the one they shared could never die. Their love was timeless, endless. He could feel her tongue swirl around his teeth and the roof of his mouth and groaned with the flaming sensations she stirred in him. Hard with desire, he moved closer to her, yet was still careful to control his arousal. He yearned to touch her, to taste her sweetness, to bury himself in her softness.

He drew his tongue across her upper lip, her flesh soft and warm, and hearing her moan his name softly, he pressed his mouth to hers once more.

Catherine's hand was drawn to the center of his body, and she knew she must touch him, or die. With a trembling hand, she slowly slid her palm over the source of his heat, and found it hard and straining against his trousers. The sound of her name breaking from his lips only drove her to touch him again.

"Catherine... please, I can bear... no more..."

She took her hand from him and drew it through his thick, sun-kissed mane. Her voice was a love-drunk murmur. "Do you imagine what it will be like when we are married?"

He took a deep steadying breath, then brushed his thumb across her lower lip. "I fear lately I have thought of little else. It is difficult to wait, yet you know that we must, don't you?"

Catherine managed a tiny smile through her passion. "If that is what you wish."

"What I wish," he feigned a look of admonishment, "is for you to cease your endless torture of me. I am only human, you know."

His expression turned instantly into a pained look that wasn't lost on Catherine. "Vincent," she placed her hand under his chin, and turned his face to hers. "I know what you're thinking. You mustn't allow Steven's cruel gibes to hurt you. You are a man... the man I love, the man I'm going to spend my life with, and you are the best part of what it means to be human. Never, ever forget that, Vincent."

How could he ever doubt anything she said? Her courage, strength, and her endless devotion had rescued him from a life adrift in a sea of loneliness.

"I do."

Satisfied that the matter was settled, Catherine became thoughtful. "Vincent, I want to tell you what it was like... when I went away. I was so sad I thought surely I would die from the loss of my friends, and you... you most of all. As the ship left the dock that day, so long ago, moved out to sea, and I lost sight of land, my home, my heart cried from the pain. I knew it would break and never heal," here she lightly brushed the pads of her fingers across his mouth, "unless I found you again."

"And you did," he happily finished the thought. "We found each other," she smiled warmly.

Vincent sighed, then took her hand and kissed her palm. "They told me you were gone, but I really didn't believe it to be true until I went to the park one afternoon and you did not appear. Jenny was there, and so was Devin and two other little girls; however, I felt your absence so deeply, I wanted to die right there. You see," he paused to collect his thoughts, "you were my sunlight in a world of shadows. You were the first to touch my hand without being repulsed. Catherine, your letters saved me. After that day, I never returned to the park, except for the night of your accident when I dreamed of your injury, your pain."

Absently, Catherine lightly touched a finger to the scar near her ear. She watched as Vincent lifted a long lock of his mane to reveal a bold, white shock of white hair, above his left ear. Catherine gasped.

"Vincent, did this happen...?"

He nodded. "The next morning, I awoke and was bathing when I saw it."

"Were you frightened?"

He chuckled lightly. "I thought I had aged eighty years in a single night," he noted cynically. "Till the day I saw your scar, I had no idea that your accident and this," he pointed to his lock of white, "had any connection. Now I realize that we are,

and always will be, linked by a power neither of us can explain. Yet I accept this, Catherine. We share a destiny, stronger than anything we could ever hope to know."

"It is true, Vincent. Do you know that I truly believe that we have existed before in a different time and place, and I know, in my heart, that we will live again, in another life?"

He brought his arms around her again, and brought his mouth to within inches of hers.

"Yes..."

He was just about to kiss her when they heard Jenny and Devin calling out their names.

"We're here," Catherine took Vincent's hand, and rose to her feet, waiting for the appearance of her friends. Jenny's frown and Devin's grim expression sent a chill down Catherine's spine. Vincent sensed her unease and held her close. "What is it?" He looked from Jenny to Devin.

"Mouse just arrived from the city," Devin took Catherine's hand. "You must leave for home quickly, Cathy. It's your father."

"Oh no, Father, he's ill," Catherine cried and turned into Vincent's comforting embrace.

"We'll leave immediately. We'll all go with Cathy," Jenny said hurriedly. Mouse is waiting to take us with the carriage."

Holding her close, they all walked quickly to the carriage, where a grim looking Mouse held open the door for them. Catherine ran to him.

"Mouse, tell me..."

"Mr Charles, he's sick. I called Dr Archer. He's with Mr Charles. Said to come for you quick. We need to leave, Miss Catherine, right now!"

As they gathered into the carriage, Catherine cried softly as Vincent murmured comforting words in her ear, keeping her close. "I'm here... I'm here. Everything will be well, I promise you."

Catherine looked up at him, and believed it to be true. Vincent would be with her when she went home. Yes, all would be well.

CHAPTER TEN

"Love is all we have, the only way that each can help the other."

- Euripides

The carriage had barely stopped before Catherine jumped out and headed up the stairs of the brownstone she shared with her father. Her heart was pounding with fear, sensing the worst.

One of the servants was waiting at the door for her, and immediately greeted her mistress solemnly. "Thank the saints above you're home, Miss Catherine. Mr Charles, he's very ill. Doctor Archer is upstairs with him now."

As Catherine rushed up the stairs to her father's bedroom, Vincent, Devin and Jenny rushed into the house and were thoroughly surprised to see the appearance of Captain Joseph Maxwell coming out of the library.

"Joseph, what are you doing here? What's happened to Mr Chandler?" Devin shook hands with his friend.

After greeting Jenny and Vincent, Captain Maxwell, held out a handkerchief containing tiny broken bits of glass, a faint scent emanating from the cloth.

"It seems there was some kind of confrontation here between Mr Chandler and Steven Bass." Seeing Devin's questioning glance, Captain Maxwell answered with a faint smile. "Miss Chandler's coachman, what do you call him, Mouse? He saw Bass leave, apparently very angry. The boy heard arguing and the next thing he knew, Bass stormed out of here, and he found Mr Chandler, apparently in the nick of time. The family physician, Dr Daniel Archer, is upstairs with him now. Says Mr Chandler can't be moved."

"He is very ill, then?" Vincent asked softly.

"I'm afraid so."

"I must go to Catherine," Vincent said. "I must be with her."

"I'll take you," Jenny volunteered.

"I want to talk to Joseph," Devin told his wife and brother. "Stay with Cathy."

After Vincent and Jenny climbed the stairs to Charles' room, Devin turned to Captain Maxwell. "All right, Joseph, tell me everything. Did that son of a bitch attempt to murder Mr Chandler? Talk to me Joseph."

Captain Maxwell and Devin returned to the library, where the medicinal scent was stronger. "I found this broken glass here," he pointed to the wet patch on the oriental rug. "There are blood stains on the glass and a drop or two on the floor."

Devin looked at Joseph, then at the glass. "What do you make of all this, Joseph?"

"Oh, you're finally asking my professional opinion? I'm flattered, Devin," Captain Maxwell attempted a smile. "I want to get this glass to the police laboratory to have it analyzed. In the meantime, while we wait for my men, this is what I have deduced to have happened, given what the young Mouse told me."

"It seems Mr Chandler and Bass were arguing about Miss Chandler and... your brother. Apparently, Mr Chandler was going to ask Bass to resign. I saw papers on his desk that contained legal statements about his shipping business and the termination of Steven Bass's employment. I think Bass was very angry to discover he'd not only lost his job, but probably Miss Catherine's hand in marriage as well."

"Cathy told us that her father had agreed to meet with Vincent tonight. They were so happy today, Joseph, you should have seen them. Laughing and holding hands." Devin looked skeptically at Captain Maxwell. "I know my brother may have a frightening appearance to some, but I love him fiercely, and so does Cathy. So if you have reservations about being around him, I suggest you leave now."

Joseph put a brotherly hand on Devin's shoulder. "It's obvious that he's a good man, Devin. I realize he is different, but I'm not repulsed. He's your brother, and Miss Chandler's fiancé. That's all that matters."

Grateful for his friend's understanding attitude, Devin went back to the matter at hand. "Maybe Mr Chandler couldn't get to his medicine in time, and the bottle broke in his hand?" Devin suggested.

"Either that, or... "

"What, Joseph? What are you trying to say? That Bass withheld that bottle from Mr Chandler? Why, that's attempted murder! I'll kill that bastard. Finally, I have good reason to find him and make him pay for what he's done to all of us."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Joseph grabbed Devin's arm firmly. "This is a matter for the police. Don't make me have to arrest you, Devin. What would that do to your family? Think straight, man. Leave this to me and my men. If Bass had anything to do with Mr Chandler's heart attack, believe me, I'll be the first one to lock him away for good. Trust me, Devin, and do nothing."

Devin took a deep breath, and looked around the room, then back at his friend. "All right, Joseph, you win. But promise you'll let me know the minute you find out anything?"

"Without a doubt. Now, leave this investigation to me. Ah, here come my men, now. Go to your family, and if Miss Chandler is up to it, I'd like to talk with her later."

"Joseph, thank you for everything. Stay as long as you have to. We'll stay with Cathy, probably for a while. Jenny won't leave her until we know what her father's condition is."

"I hope Miss Chandler doesn't mind if we search the room for fingerprints and such."

"Do whatever you must, Joseph, for however long it takes. If Steven is responsible for Cathy's grief, he will pay, I swear it."

He turned and left the room before Captain Maxwell could respond to him. Then his men approached the room and Maxwell set out to work to solve the puzzle of Mr Chandler's near fatal heart attack.

Moments later, Catherine, Vincent and Jenny stood at Charles's bedside, surrounding the longtime Chandler family physician, Dr Daniel Archer as he examined the grey-haired man who was lying so very still in the center of the huge bed. Catherine knelt at his side, holding her father's cold hand, tears slowly sliding down her flushed cheeks.

Dr Archer, who was an old family friend, listened intently to Charles Chandler's heartbeat, which was weak and faint. The injection he'd given him had not helped as much as he had hoped, and now he feared his old friend wouldn't last the night. Taking a deep breath, he removed the stethoscope from his ears, placed it in his leather bag, and looked over at Catherine.

"He's resting easy, now. Shall we go downstairs where we can talk?" He asked her in a soft, comforting tone.

Catherine nodded, and Vincent came to her side and helped her to her feet, gathering her in his arms and rocking her softly as she cried for her father. One of Dr Archer's nurses took a chair and sat beside Mr Chandler. She'd been given instructions to check Charles' vital signs every fifteen minutes, and report anything unusual to Dr Archer immediately. They all left the room.

"In all the confusion, Daniel, I've forgotten to introduce my friends," Catherine told him as they all gathered in the parlor moments later. This is Jenny and Devin Wells, and this," she wrapped two hands around Vincent's arm, "is my fiancé, Vincent Wells."

Bless his heart, Catherine thought, as Dr Archer shook hands with each of them, and said or did nothing unusual when he saw Vincent's unique face. She smiled weakly in gratitude as Vincent led her to a nearby chair, then stood behind it, silently lending his strength to her in her time of need.

"What is going to happen to my father, Daniel?"

The doctor looked at all of them, then turned sympathetic eyes toward Catherine. What a lovely woman she'd grown into, he thought. She was the image of her mother: intelligent, strong, affectionate. He was happy that her friends were here for her now. As for Vincent Wells, he must be a very special person for Catherine to fall in love with him. It was abundantly clear that they were very much in love. Fleeting, he wondered what Charles thought of their relationship. Oh well, there were more important matters to think of at the moment.

"Catherine, I won't lie to you, nor will I sugarcoat the situation. Your father is very ill. You knew his heart was not as strong as it used to be." Catherine nodded as Vincent's hand came around the chair to rest on her shoulder, where she grabbed and held it tightly.

"Well, several weeks ago, I told him that his heart would grow weaker if he did not receive sufficient rest, and avoid stress. Didn't he tell you I was here?"

Catherine's brows furrowed. "No, he didn't. He probably didn't want to worry me."

"Well, I told him right in front of one of his partners. You know him: Steven Bass. I guess he didn't tell you I was here either?"

Devin cursed under his breath, and Vincent's hand tightened around Catherine's fingers.

"No," Catherine replied angrily. "Steven said nothing to me."

Dr Archer approached Catherine, then touched her shoulder gently. "All we can do now is make him as comfortable as we can. After you rest, maybe you can read something soothing to him. They say that the sound of the voice of a loved one sometimes helps. You know how much he loves *"The Velveteen Rabbit."* He managed to make Catherine smile, which made him happy.

"I will stay the night in one of the guest rooms, so I can check on Charles through the night. Now, Catherine, I want you to rest."

"Dr Archer's right, Cathy," Jenny replied soothingly. "We're all staying as well, Dr Archer, and we're all grateful to you."

Daniel looked at the four young people and their obvious devotion to each other. A spark of recognition touched his memory. "You're Jacob's sons, aren't you? Vincent and Devin nodded and Daniel went on. "Didn't all of you used to play in the park, years ago, as children, before Catherine left for Europe?"

"You know our father?" Devin asked, amazed.

He nodded. "Went to medical school with him."

"You remember, Daniel?" Catherine stood and wiped tears from her face as Vincent came to her side and took her hand in his own.

He smiled. "I remember seeing you one day as you played ball with this young lady, and I recall saying to myself, 'Look at the four of them, with not a care in the world', and you, Catherine, with your pretty dress and long braid. Something told me that if any group of young people would be friends for life, it would be the four of you. Seems I was correct in my assumption."

"Yes, you were, Daniel," Catherine answered softly, wearily. "And as soon as Father is well, Vincent and I will be married, and..."

She began to tremble again, and Vincent held her in his arms and spoke softly to her in words only she could hear. Meanwhile, Dr Archer left the room to check on Charles, and Captain Maxwell entered the parlor from the library.

His men left the house quietly, but Maxwell stayed behind to speak with Catherine and Devin.

"Joseph, what did you find?"

Captain Maxwell looked at Devin, then approached Catherine, and spoke in comforting tones. "Miss Chandler, I'm truly sorry about your father and I promise to solve this mystery of his unfortunate illness."

Catherine turned from the safe haven of Vincent's arms to face Maxwell. "Why are you here, Captain Maxwell? I just thought Father had a heart attack. What does this have to do with the police?" She then looked at Devin's frowning expression. "Devin, tell me."

Vincent was more than curious as well. "Yes, Devin, Captain Maxwell, what is going on?"

"Please sit down, all of you," Maxwell requested.

After everyone was seated, Maxwell began to explain his suspicions. "From the evidence I found, and from what your coachman told me, I have sufficient reason to believe that Steven Bass caused your father's heart attack."

Catherine swayed in disbelief and began to cry into Vincent's arms. Jenny gasped in horror, Vincent closed his eyes as his heart broke for Catherine, and Devin's eyes darkened with anger and hatred.

"What do you intend to do about this, Joseph?" Maxwell turned to Devin. "I think I have enough to question Bass," he replied. "Like to come along, Devin?" Before Devin could reply, Maxwell added sternly. "Only if you promise to behave yourself and leave this to me."

Devin nodded. "Wouldn't miss it for the world, Joseph."

He turned to his family. "I'm going with Joseph to find Steven," he began. "And if he is the one who did this, I'll..."

"Devin," Vincent's voice was calm yet strong. "Please do nothing. Captain Maxwell will take care of this," he squeezed his brother's shoulder affectionately. "We must think of Catherine and her father now, you do understand?"

Devin smiled and touched his brother's hand. Yes, he understood. No matter what Steven did or didn't do, now was not the time to think of revenge, or of childhood pain from the past. Vincent had suffered enough. Let it be over and done. "all right," was all he said and then kissed his wife goodbye, nodded to Catherine, and departed with Captain Maxwell.

After changing into her nightclothes, Catherine sat at her father's bedside and held his hand, noting the paleness and age lines of his once handsome face. He was still a very attractive man, she saw. He hadn't regained consciousness, and she found herself drifting off, her head slowly dropping forward. She floated into a light slumber, still holding on to his hand.

This is how Jenny and Vincent found her moments later, and at the sight of her, realized she was exhausted beyond reason. "I'll sit with Mr Chandler, Vincent. Why don't you carry Cathy to bed. It's down the hall, last door on the right."

Vincent nodded at Jenny, then ever so gently he lifted Catherine into his arms as if she were no more than a feather, and almost immediately he felt her arms encircle his neck. He sighed deeply and softly kissed her cheek, then took her to her room.

Her bedroom was dark except for the light of the full moon that shone through the open window. Obviously one of the servants had prepared her room, for her bed covers had been drawn back and that made it easy for Vincent to ease her down into the softness of her bed.

"Vincent... ?" Her soft, drowsy whisper drew him to her warmth as he knelt at her side.

"I'm here, Catherine. You must sleep. Jenny will stay with your father, and then I will sit with him when she becomes tired. I'm with you, love," he murmured, as her eyes opened and fixed on him.

She was in her bed, and Vincent was with her.

"Don't go... I need you close..."

Her words rocked him. Seeing her in her nightclothes, in her bed, with her hair unbound, stirred Vincent in ways he knew were inappropriate, given the situation they were in.

Yet, even as he knew it was improper to see her like this, he was unable to leave her if his life depended on it. He just wished to drink in her beauty all night if need be, to protect her with his life. He would let nothing bad happen to her, ever. This he silently vowed.

"Will you stay with me until I fall asleep? Will you promise to wake me if my father... if he... ?" And then the dam collapsed, and she began to cry, in deep gulping sobs that tore Vincent's heart in two. Without a thought to the impropriety of his actions, he moved onto the bed next to her, where she naturally came into his welcoming arms.

Gently, he kissed her head, and cradled her against the safety of his embrace.

"Just cry..." he quietly encouraged.

And she did. For long, sad moments, he lovingly whispered to her that all would be well, that he would never leave her.

"Sleep now; in the morning things will be better, you'll see."

She didn't answer, yet allowed herself to be lulled to sleep by the sound of his voice. As she drifted off into blessed oblivion, Vincent heard her murmur, "I love you," and he kissed her again, softly, on her warm lips, then sat holding her for a very long time.

The sound of her even breathing told him she had finally found the solace of slumber. He swallowed nervously, admonishing himself for having sensual thoughts of her. What kind of man was he, desiring her as she lay in his arms asleep, sick with worry and sadness over her father? Even now, he could think of nothing but the warmth of her body, laying beside him, the scent of her, so seductive, yet subtle, driving him mad. Her unbound hair was now draped over his arm, and Vincent couldn't help but press his face over it, inhaling the rose scent of her long strands, as if a blanket of silk was touching his skin. She was tantalizing, and lovely. If she drove him mad with desire while deep in sleep, what delights would they share on their wedding night when both of them were wide awake?

Vincent attempted to shake off his forbidden images of her, naked and writhing beneath him, caught in the throes of passion. He closed his eyes and tried to catch precious moments of slumber. Finally, he did fall asleep, but the erotic images of Catherine only returned in his dreams, and these visions were as vivid and heated as before.

"I've taken him in for : questioning, Miss Chandler."

Captain Maxwell's announcement took all of them by surprise, except for Devin, of course.

"You've arrested Steven?" Catherine exclaimed, sitting on the sofa with Vincent at her side, opposite Maxwell, who smiled and nodded.

"I haven't charged him, yet," Maxwell replied. "We found him at his club late last night," he began to explain, as Jenny handed him a cup of coffee. "He was quite drunk. Apparently, he'd been rambling about his 'discussion' with your father earlier in the day. We have several witnesses that will testify that he told them that Chandler Shipping wouldn't have him to kick around anymore. Oh, and there was one more thing."

Catherine leaned forward. "Which was?"

Devin looked from Maxwell back to her. "His hand was wrapped in a makeshift bandage. Apparently, it was badly bruised when he crushed the medicine vial in his hand."

Catherine, Vincent, and Jenny couldn't believe it had all come to this. But something in Catherine told her that it was over now, and she sighed a breath of relief. Steven had inadvertently caused her father's heart attack, and she wanted him out of her life, for good.

"Will Mouse testify that he saw and heard Steven withhold Father's medicine?"

Maxwell nodded. "He's ready to tell the truth, Miss Chandler."

"Good. Then can we get this over with, Captain Maxwell?"

Maxwell nodded again. She was quite a woman, he thought, silently admiring Miss Chandler's courage and strength, her quiet dignity and outward beauty. No wonder Wells was so in love with her.

"If you will be so kind as to send for young Mouse, I'll take him down to the station and obtain his statement. Devin," he looked at his friend. "You are acting as Mouse's attorney, are you not?"

Devin put down his coffee cup and nodded. "We'll come down to the station with you, Joseph."

Catherine stood up then and approached Maxwell, holding out her hand in friendship. Her smile sent shivers up his spine. "I'd like to thank you for all you've done, Captain Maxwell. You are always welcome here. I hope we will always be friends."

"It would be a privilege for me to call you friend, Miss Chandler."

As Devin was preparing to depart with Mouse and Maxwell moments later, Devin turned and faced Catherine. "I feel it only fair to tell you, Cathy, that that son of a... that Steven has sworn revenge - on all of us," he stated bluntly. He looked at Vincent with an apologetic gleam in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Vincent, but when he had the audacity to mention Cathy's name in an unkind way, shall I say, well, I..."

"What did you do, Devin?" Vincent already knew the answer, and cringed.

"The truth of the matter is, Mr Wells, that I almost arrested your brother as well."

"What?" Catherine and Jenny cried in unison.

"Sorry, Cath... I... broke his jaw." Then, seeing the disapproving looks from all in the room, Devin shrugged and grunted rather sheepishly, "Well, the bastard had it coming."

Vincent stood silent, Jenny suppressed a tiny smile, Maxwell shook his head, and Catherine, who up to this point was thinking only about her father, walked up to Devin and kissed his cheek.

"Catherine, may I speak with you for a moment?"

She was sitting at her father's side, reading *'The Velveteen Rabbit'* when Vincent approached her and knelt at her side. Lovingly, he kissed her slightly parted lips, the warmth of her mouth making him sigh with happiness. She wrapped her hands around his shoulders and around the back of his neck, pulling him closer, deepening the kiss, and teasing his tongue with her own.

Reluctantly breaking the kiss a second later, Vincent took her hand into his, then looked at her father. "There is no change?"

She shook her head sadly. "The doctor just left. He said that all we can do is make him comfortable. Vincent, I wish there was something we could do. I feel so helpless."

Vincent squeezed her hand. "Maybe there is." She looked a question at him.

"Catherine, I have a suggestion and I hope you will hear me out before you make any decisions." At her nod of agreement, he went on.

"What would you say if I asked you to allow my father to come here, to examine your father?"

Catherine looked at him for a time, and was embarrassed that she hadn't thought of it herself. "Do you think he would come, Vincent? You do realize they haven't spoken in years?"

Vincent nodded knowingly. "He will come. Mouse and I can leave right away and fetch him back by late afternoon."

Catherine looked lovingly upon the man she loved. How had she ever lived without him for ten years? How could she ever survive if she lost him? She placed a hand on his cheek and softly caressed the light golden stubble on his beautifully unique face.

"Go on," she whispered, her mouth very close to his. "And come back to me, Quickly."

He kissed her, deeply and lovingly. "I'll return as soon as I can. Be well."

After he left, Catherine took hold of her father's hand in both of her own and began to talk to him, silently praying he could hear her.

"Father," she began speaking in low, even tones, "I can't wait until you are able to meet Vincent. He is the most special person I have ever known, present company excepted, of course. He has banished my loneliness, only to fill it with love and hope, happiness and respect. Father, Vincent may be different, but he is good and kind. You must get well so that I may show you my locket; it is my engagement gift- from him. I want you to know much I love him, and how much I love you. I long to share a happy life in marriage as you and Mother did."

Then she lifted the book she'd been reading from her lap, and resumed reading her father's favorite story. "... *What is real? asked the rabbit one day as they sat side by side in the nursery...*"

Just before dusk, the Chandler carriage bearing Vincent and Dr Jacob Wells arrived at the Fifth Avenue brownstone, with Mouse at the reins.

Vincent and Mouse took the bags and led his father into the main hall, where they were greeted by Jenny and Devin.

After exchanging amenities, Jacob and Vincent approached the doorway to Charles' bed chamber, where they were met by Catherine, who brightened with hope at the appearance of Dr Wells.

"Miss Catherine, I regret we must meet under these circumstances," Jacob took both of her hands in his own and bowed politely. "I am so sorry to hear about Charles. May I examine him?"

"Of course, and thank you very much for coming." Tears filled her - yes as she watched Dr Wells administer to Charles, then accepted Vincent's comforting embrace as she came into his beautiful, strong arms.

Jacob Wells took his time examining Charles, looking into his eyes and ears, listening to his lungs, then his heart, for many long moments. Then he folded his stethoscope and placed it in his black leather case.

"Father?"

Jacob turned to Catherine and Vincent, and his expression was unreadable. Catherine's brow furrowed with confusion. Was Dr Wells smiling? No, it was not possible.

"Miss Catherine, I admit your father is ill, but in my opinion, I don't think he's ready to leave this earth. Not for a time, anyway."

Catherine swallowed as her heart leaped with hopeful optimism. "What are you saying, Dr Wells?"

"I'm saying that with the permission of your family doctor, I'd like to try a combination of vitamins and herbs, combined with his medication. Together, with constant verbal stimulation, I think it will make a difference. Are you willing to try?"

"Vincent, would you be kind enough to send Mouse to fetch Dr Archer right away?" At his smile and nod, Catherine kissed him lightly on the mouth. "Thank you."

When Dr Archer arrived less than an hour later, Catherine was pleasantly surprised to find that Jacob Wells and Daniel Archer had been medical colleagues many years before. Both had been acquainted with Peter Alcott, who had been a close friend of Jacob's. They discussed Charles' while Daniel examined him. Archer agreed with Jacob's prognosis. Dr Archer had always respected Jacob Wells, and could never understand why Charles and Jacob had a falling out years ago.

But that was irrelevant. All that mattered now was Charles.

After Jacob and Daniel retired to the library to discuss medication and talk over old times, Catherine turned to Vincent, her heart already feeling lighter. "How can I thank you for all you've done for me?"

He smiled. "You can marry me."

"I wish it could be tonight," she whispered.

"As soon as your father recovers," he replied.

Catherine pressed closer to him, needing his warmth. She slid her palms up the length of his broad chest, feeling the silk of his shirt under her hands. "I need you so much."

Vincent swallowed hard at the touch of her hands on him, warm and willing, so close and tempting. How would her hands feel on his bare flesh? How would it be when they came together, skin on skin, sharing their bodies, consummating their love in the most intimate way?

"And I need you. It won't be long, Catherine, I promise."

Savoring the depth of his words, Catherine whispered softly. "Hold me, Vincent. Just hold me for a little while."

He granted her request willingly. "For as long as you need me, Catherine."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Love conquers all things."

- *Virgil*

Three days went by, and although Charles had not regained consciousness, Dr Archer agreed with Jacob Wells that his heart rate was steadier and his pulse was stronger. It wouldn't be long, they told Catherine. She should continue to read to him, to talk to him. They sounded optimistic.

Catherine was encouraged. She was also happy to have the house filled with people. Vincent and Devin had gone back to Beaumont Hills only to bring additional clothes for Jenny and Dr Archer was continuously in and out, not only to give Charles medical attention, but to speak with Jacob and share medical tidbits. They would all take turns reading to Charles, and Catherine had insisted Dr Archer share dinner with them almost every evening.

Jenny had been so wonderful, helping plan the meals while Catherine spent time with her father. Devin had gone to his law office each morning, and had closely followed Steven's trial, which had only lasted two days. Thanks to Mouse's testimony, he was convicted, but Devin was deeply disturbed to discover that he'd only been sentenced to eighteen months in jail. When she heard, Catherine gave his sentencing only a fleeting thought, as she was on her way up to her father's room to read to him.

As she climbed the stairs, her mind traveled to Vincent and the pillar of strength he'd been these past several days. Having him actually sleeping across the hall in one of the guest rooms, though, was a temptation Catherine had never imagined. Each night, after sitting with her father for a time, one of the servants would relieve her so that she could rest, and Catherine would walk wearily to her own bedroom, change into her nightdress and robe, and loosen the combs in her hair, letting it flow loose and free.

While lying in bed, her body would cry out to him, wishing he'd come into her room, lay at her side, and take her into his body, make love to her all night, make her cry out in ecstasy. She wanted to go to him so badly she ached inside.

Catherine entered her father's room, and went to her usual place at his side. Suddenly, as she picked up a book of Shakespeare's plays, she thought she saw a movement in her father's eyes. Was her imagination playing tricks on her?

No - his eyes - they were opening! He was trying to do something! She rose and leaned over him, tears falling freely from her eyes as she spoke softly to him.

"Father, it's me. You're home, and you're going to be all right..."

Charles Chandler opened his eyes, blinked once when he heard his daughter's beautiful voice, and a tear slipped from a corner of his eye. He was alive... he was alive...

The household froze, then panicked when they heard Catherine's cries from the upper bedroom. Vincent was the first to reach her, taking the stairs two at a time. He entered the room, breathless, not knowing what he would find and trembling from head to toe. He was taken totally off guard by Catherine's throaty laughter as she literally threw herself at him, nearly knocking him over.

"Vincent, oh, Vincent, Father is awake. He spoke to me, he said my name! We must call Dr Jacob and Daniel, quickly. Oh, Vincent, isn't it wonderful?"

He held tighter to her, sharing her happiness, and silently thanked God for returning her father to her.

It was, indeed, a happy day. Jacob and Daniel both agreed that Charles had improved, and although Charles looked confused at the presence of Jacob Wells, he couldn't keep his eyes from the strange creature who stood in the shadows in one corner of the room.

Vincent. The other brother.

As the days passed, Charles' condition improved, and the Chandler house became a happy place to be once more. He was still bedridden, but his strength slowly seeped back into his body. Once he discovered that it was Jacob Wells who had worked in conjunction with Daniel Archer to treat him, the old problem of the past melted away, along with their estrangement, and the two men began a fragile, yet promising, friendship.

Dr Daniel Archer, who'd known both men since college, was happy to see Charles and Jacob at least attempting to be civil to each other. One evening he walked into Charles' bedroom to find Jacob and Charles sitting with a chessboard between them. It made him smile.

Devin and Jenny Wells pined for their Long Island home, and had returned to Beaumont Hills. Vincent remained for one more day, dreading the thought of leaving Catherine, but wishing to speak to Charles. There was still the matter of their betrothal to be discussed, and Vincent wanted nothing more than to set the record straight, and to become acquainted with Catherine's father.

He'd seen Charles' expression the day he awoke from his near coma, and he'd hoped to alleviate any impression of fear the older man might harbor. In the days since the start of his slow but steady recovery, Vincent had stayed, waiting until Charles was strong enough to summon him for a talk.

Finally, one evening, Charles sent word that he would like to meet and speak with Vincent. Vincent became understandably nervous, and kept glancing at his pocket watch to make sure he wouldn't be late. Staring at the beautiful timepiece that was his engagement gift from Catherine, Vincent opened the gold piece, and lightly slid the pad of his finger over the lock of hair she had placed in it. What would her father say at their meeting tonight? After all that happened, would he forbid their union? Would he ask them to wait a very long time before they could wed?

It was time. Slowly mounting the stairs, then knocking on the bedroom door, he took a deep breath and steadied himself as he heard Charles say, "Come in."

Entering the room, Vincent noticed that Mr Chandler was propped up on several pillows, looking quite comfortable. There was color in his cheeks, and he'd just eaten dinner, as evidenced by the empty bowl of soup, and a half-eaten piece of bread. A half-full wine glass was standing on the tray, and Vincent smiled, happy that Catherine's father was regaining his health.

"Mr Chandler, you're looking well, sir."

"Vincent, come in, sit down." As Vincent complied, Charles presented his hand in greeting, and Vincent hardily shook it.

"It seems I have you to thank, in part, for my being here right now," he sat back against his pillows and folded his hands together.

Vincent shook his head. "I am very happy to see that you and my father have made amends," he pointed out, as Charles smiled. "He and Dr Archer are wonderful physicians, and it seems they have done their job well. You are looking much better than the first time I saw you."

"I thought Steven was going to kill me," Charles said softly. "I've never seen him so angry, especially when I told him that I altered the will for Catherine's sake."

At the expression of love Charles saw in Vincent's eyes at the mention of his daughter's name, he allowed himself a smile. I've made the young man nervous enough; might as well get down to business, he thought silently.

"Steven cannot hurt anyone anymore. He is in prison and will serve his time for what he has done." Vincent didn't feel the need to say any more, and Charles nodded in agreement.

"Thank God for that," Charles added. "I shudder to think what would have happened had Catherine been here."

"But you are both safe now... and well," Vincent said, wishing to change the subject. "Mr Chandler, can we speak of Catherine, and of our... engagement?"

Charles smiled. "Ah, yes, let's speak of Catherine, my favorite subject. You love her deeply, don't you Vincent?"

Vincent was taken aback, but admired Charles' straightforward attitude. "With all that I am. I know I am not good enough for her, but I promise to provide for her, and to keep her safe." He took a deep breath. "I vow to love her all the days of my life. Mr Chandler," his voice broke with emotion, "I'd like to have Catherine for my wife; I'm asking for her hand. Will you give us your blessing?"

Charles allowed himself a moment of dramatic pause to look at this young man, really look at him. Well he wasn't so very different from other men. True, he possessed a leonine countenance and long, golden hair that flowed over his shoulders, but he was intelligent and strong, and he seemed honest and brave. But the one thing about him that Charles respected the most was the love this man possessed for Catherine.

"Of course, you do know that Catherine is an heiress and will come into a great fortune when I leave this earth," Charles was almost cheerful at this point, as he noticed Vincent's apprehension.

"I am not interested in Catherine's fortune... I care nothing for her money... only in her happiness," Vincent replied dryly.

Charles wanted to end Vincent's torment... so he did. "So when were you two planning to wed?"

Vincent held his breath. "Are you giving us your blessing then, sir?"

"That is why you came to me, is it not?" he chuckled lightly.

At Vincent's slight nod, Charles said, "then you have it. And Vincent... ?"

"Yes?" He could hardly contain his excitement.

"Open the door."

"Sir?"

"Open the door, and let Catherine in," he instructed softly.

Doing what he was told, Vincent opened the door, and Catherine nearly fell into his arms. Looking up at Vincent, she nearly knocked him over and then began kissing him, until she realized her father was watching both of them intently. Vincent quickly released his hold on her, cleared his throat and, taking her hand, faced her father once more.

"Oh, Father, thank you, thank you!" She released Vincent's hand and ran to the bed to give her father a tight hug. "As soon as you're back on your feet, we'll be married." She rose to stand beside Vincent, and looked up into azure eyes that were bright with happiness ...

"Nonsense, you'll be married as soon as it can be arranged."

"Father, we can wait." Catherine said it, but didn't mean it. She wished they could be married today -- tonight -- now.

"No you can't," Charles answered, as if he'd read her mind. "Now, I know what it's like to be in love, and I also know that it may be months before I am actually back on my feet. So let us compromise."

"But, Father..."

"No buts. Now, don't you want to make an old man happy?" Seeing them nod in unison, Charles smiled. "As soon as the proper arrangements are made, the house is placed in order, and my doctors say I can leave this god-forsaken bed, there will be a wedding in this house. Have I made myself clear?"

His stern voice and intimidating manner did not fool Catherine. She smiled happily and hugged her father again, whispering in his ear, "I wouldn't think of disobeying you, Father. Your wishes will be carried out to the letter. Don't you agree, Vincent?"

She turned to stand by Vincent's side. He looked down at her, love shining brightly in his summer blue eyes. "Yes, my love. I do."

Later, when Devin and Jenny came to visit, along with Jacob and Daniel and Mouse, champagne was poured and toasts were made all around to the joyous couple and their impending nuptials.

Catherine stood in the warm shelter of Vincent's arms, content and joyous beyond belief. Tears of joy fell, as Vincent lowered his head to hers, and kissed her deep and long, sealing their commitment for all time.

She wept with pity and delight,
She blushed with love, and virgin-shame;
And like the murmur of a dream,
I heard her breathe my name.

Her bosom heaved - she stepped aside,
As conscious of my look she stepped -
Then suddenly, with timorous eyes
She fled to me and wept.

She half enclosed me with her arms
She pressed as with a meek embrace;
And bending back her head looked up
And gazed upon my face.

'Twas partly love, and partly fear,
And partly 'twas a bashful art,
That I might rather feel, than see,
The swelling of her heart.

I calmed her fears, and she was calm
And I told her love with virgin pride;
And so I won her -- then I won her --
My bright and beauteous bride.

- Samuel Coleridge

The large dining chamber of the Chandler brownstone was a bustle of activity. Servants hurried in and out, carrying trays of delicate crystal glasses filled with the finest champagne New York had to offer. Others set up hors d'oeuvres on long tables, complete with crisp white eyelet tablecloths; still others brought platters of meats and desserts.

The crystal chandelier that hung from the ceiling shone like diamonds, and dozens of brocade covered chairs were set up toward the front of the chamber to face a flower-bedecked podium that bore the family Bible.

The air was filled with the seductive scent of white and crimson roses, fully bloomed, that lined the room in exquisite tall crystal vases. They had all been picked from the area around the gazebo. Vincent had personally selected and cut only the loveliest and sweetest smelling... for Catherine... for this special occasion.

Their wedding day.

After much discussion, Vincent and Catherine decided to wait until Charles had recovered enough to walk her down the aisle, but had decided against a church wedding. Traveling would be too taxing on Charles' still fragile health, but more important, Catherine didn't want curious eyes intruding in church for the purpose of staring and whispering about Vincent. She could never do that to him. A small gathering of fifty very close friends and family, including the children from the orphanage were in attendance.

So, in the end, they both agreed to wait eight weeks. Summer was at its end, but today their life would begin... at last.

Standing in the center of her bedroom, her reflection looking back at her from a gold-framed full-length mirror, Catherine chatted quietly with Jenny as the last of her preparations were being completed.

Resplendently dressed in her mother's exquisite antique lace ivory wedding gown, complete with a pearl encrusted train which trailed behind her, Catherine tenderly touched the fragile white porcelain rose pin at her throat. It had also belonged to her mother, and Catherine had looked forward to the day when she could wear the beautiful brooch.

Her hair was arranged in a stunning upswept chignon, loose tendrils escaping her white pearl combs and framing her lovely face. Baby's breath was painstakingly arranged around the combs, and a very long veil was fastened to the crown of her head, and cascaded gracefully down her back, a delicate cloud of tulle and ivory silk.

Catherine had never felt so beautiful in all her life. Sliding one hand down the bodice of the dress, she smiled and once again looked at her reflection. Her face beamed with untold joy; it was the face of a woman deeply and profoundly in love. Her eyes brimmed with unshed tears.

"Don't do that now, Cathy; save it for after the ceremony," Jenny chuckled softly as she straightened the back of Catherine's train. "Let's be certain all is in order. Now, do you have... something old?"

Catherine smiled. "Mother's dress."

"Something new?"

Catherine blushed. "My petticoat."

Jenny shared her blush. "Something borrowed?"

Catherine dug two fingers into her left sleeve and brought out a square of lace. "Your handkerchief," she smiled.

"And something blue?"

Catherine bowed her head, then lifted it again to look at her dear friend. "The ribbons on my chemisette," she said softly.

"Well, then, I think we're all done. Are you ready, Cath?"

Catherine nodded slightly, and took the flowers that Jenny handed to her. Her bridal bouquet had been made by Vincent; twenty-two roses, one for each year of her life, eleven scarlet velvet, eleven snow white, surrounded by tiny bunches of baby's breath, and secured with a wide, ivory lace ribbon.

She inhaled the heady fragrance of the perfect blooms, and thought lovingly of Vincent, downstairs waiting for her. She turned at the sound in the open doorway. It was her father, beaming with pride, dressed in a handsomely fitted morning coat.

"Catherine..." he entered the room, smiled at Jenny, then took his daughter's hand and kissed it tenderly. "You are a vision to make the angels envious," he told her, tears brimming in his eyes. "Your mother would have been very proud."

"Thank you, Father, for giving me this day." She took a step and hugged him tightly. "And thank you, for accepting Vincent."

"Excuse me, you two, I hear violins. Cathy, I think they're ready to begin."

Catherine hugged her matron of honor. "I'm ready, Jen. Thank you; you've been a wonderful friend."

Jenny nodded, took her own bouquet of daisies and carnations, and left the room before father and daughter. "It's time, Father."

Charles allowed himself to look at her as they walked from the room and made their way toward the stairway.

As she looped one hand around his arm, she clutched a fistful of gown and her flowers with the other.

Charles noticed that she was calm and serene, not nervous and giddy like other brides he'd seen in the past. Her face was flushed pink with excitement and joy, and she held herself like a queen. He didn't need to ask her if she was sure about being wed. He'd never known anyone to be so certain of anything as Catherine was at this moment.

"You love him very much, don't you?" He didn't know why he asked the question now, as they were descending the stairs, soft violin music drifting towards them.

Catherine looked back at him, but didn't halt her descent. Her voice was low, soft, filled with emotion. "More than you can possibly imagine, Father."

He patted her hand where it rested on his arm. Then he smiled.

Vincent looked around as the violin music began. The soft, lilting sounds drifted dreamily to him as he stood to the right of the podium with Devin at his side.

The group of guests included friends from Beaumont Hills, the children from the orphanage who were accompanied by Pascal, Kanin and Jamie, Captain Joseph Maxwell, who'd been so kind to them during the arrest and conviction of Steven Bass, and several friends and family members of Catherine's - who Vincent had met only days before, yet found to be caring and friendly people.

He allowed his gaze to look upon the exquisitely decorated dining chamber: long tables filled with trays of food and champagne, bowls of flowers centered on each one; another table contained desserts and pastries of every possible flavor and filling; still another was brimming with platters of candied fruit and other assorted sweets.

However, it was the arrangement of the roses that touched his heart. It seemed that his efforts of picking and pruning hundreds of his beloved gazebo blossoms had paid off. Dozens of vases lined the room in neat arrangements, and the seductive scent they gave off caused Vincent to smile inwardly and think of...

A light touch on his arm from Devin caught his attention, and he looked toward the stairway where the woman of his dreams was descending on the arm of her father. He forgot how to breathe.

As every guest in the room stood in anticipation of the bride, and the violins prepared to play the wedding march, Vincent centered his own being and saw only her. As she came toward him, his body trembled in anticipation, taking in every inch of her: the way she carried herself, straight and proud; the baby's breath entwined in the ivory combs in her hair; the tiny details of her dress; the fullness of the bouquet she carried.

Her veil was long and delicate and flowing like a cloud; thin wisps of hair framed her beautiful face, now pink with excitement and anticipation.

Catherine. He had only imagined this day in a young boy's dream; a teenager's fantasy had bloomed into the fervent hopes and visions of one day joining with her in marriage. Now the day had come. His heart surged with love such as he had never known, and if he lived to be a hundred, he knew it would not be time enough to show her how deeply he cared for her. Her courage in the face of seemingly impossible odds had rallied him, and had brought them to this place in their lives. Today, a new life begins, he thought, with her, my wife, my love. Catherine.

Catherine had never seen him look so handsome.

Black trousers hugged his powerful legs and thighs, while shiny thigh-high boots of the same color accented his limbs. A crisp, white ruffled silk shirt was tied neatly at the throat, and today he wore a long, black vest that fit perfectly, outlining his wide shoulders. His hair was golden and loose falling over his shoulders, long and neatly brushed. He was magnificent.

They joined hands and gazed at each other throughout the entire ceremony, exchanged their vows with quivering voices, then placed gold bands on each other's fingers, never letting their eyes wander. It was their day, with time to bask in their love and share lifelong vows with their family and friends. They were not ashamed of the love they held in their hearts.

Finally the judge was pronouncing them husband and wife, and Catherine felt herself being pulled gently into his arms. Her arms came naturally around his neck, and they whispered, 'forever' to each other as their mouths came together for a deep and emotional kiss that sealed their destiny. They were one.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Be mingled in my soul with scent and song."

- C. Baudelaire

Elaborate celebrating was not one of Vincent's favorite past-times for he felt uncomfortable with crowds, being a solitary creature by nature, even though he was acquainted with everyone here. What he really longed for was to be gone with Catherine, to return to his -- no, their -- cottage in Beaumont Hills, and be alone with her -- completely, irrevocably alone, where they could talk and touch in private. As Joseph Maxwell and Daniel Archer shared a glass of wine with him, he smiled at them. He'd made new and lasting friendships through his brother and Catherine, and he was grateful. Charles and Jacob had formed a fragile yet growing acquaintance, and that had made Catherine so very happy. It was everything Vincent intended for her; to make her happy every day of their lives. However, at the moment, the only thing that would make him as happy would be to find her in this crowd of laughing, boisterous people, and tell her it was time to go.

The violin music started again, and Vincent felt her presence just behind him. He sighed and smiled.

"I've been looking for you."

He turned, and met her eyes, eyes filled with a thousand soaring emotions, and they were all for him. He nodded. "And you found me," he lowered his head to whisper.

"I always do, Mr. Wells," she whispered back, and there was such joy in her small voice that Vincent longed to lift her into his arms, and whisk her away from this place.

"Did I tell you how very beautiful you look today, Mrs Wells?"

She loved hearing her new name spoken from his lips. "Yes, and I do admit we make a fine couple." Drawing a smile from him, she turned toward the violins. They were playing a waltz, and she wondered about something she'd never asked him...

"Vincent, do you dance?"

His eyes widened with mild surprise. He replied by taking her elbow and leading her out into the center of the floor. They glided into the steps of the waltz, naturally, easily. They moved as if one, as if they'd danced together dozens of times before. Catherine was exhilarated by the touch of his hand on her back, the other entwined with hers. They were surrounded by guests, each so taken with their movements, their silent command of the music, that they had all taken a step back and given them the floor. Vincent felt only slightly self-conscious at being the center of attention, yet sensed such happiness in Catherine's heart, he'd dance with her all night if she wished.

Catherine could have danced in his arms forever but she, too, was growing impatient for their departure... and their wedding night. Yet, being held in his arms like this, gliding across the floor in easy flowing movements, felt like heaven. Oh, yes, Vincent could dance.

After bidding their families and friends farewell, and after their bags were put into the carriage, Vincent helped Catherine, stepped up behind her, and closed the door behind them. Mouse shook the reins and the horses began the journey to Beaumont Hills.

Catherine settled herself comfortably within her husband's arms, smiling up at him, her eyes filled with promises of things to come, and Vincent allowed himself a good, long look at her.

"Ah, at last," he said softly, emphasizing his words with a deep kiss filled with desire, and yearning for all that was to come.

They arrived at Beaumont Hills just after dusk, and after helping Mouse with the bags, they hugged the young man goodbye and watched as he made his way to the stables.

After taking the bags into the cottage, Vincent lit some candles, while Catherine poured each of them a glass of wine. She handed one to him, and they sat on the rug in the parlor. Vincent shed his coat and untied his shirt, but Catherine had chosen to remain in her wedding dress, cuddling her back to his chest, both of them simply enjoying their closeness, relaxing in the quietness of their home.

Her head resting on his chest, they slowly sipped and finished their wine, placing the glasses beside them on the floor. Seeing her wedding bouquet nearby, Vincent lifted it, untied the lace ribbon that bound it and brought a deep red bloom to Catherine's cheek, softly tickling her with the petals, and drawing a long sigh from her throat.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he whispered hoarsely, his mouth warm against her ear.

The velvet softness of the rose on her face began to stir her, the wine soothed her, and his voice did marvelous things to the rest of her. "I'm thinking that no one in the entire world could be as happy as I am right at this moment."

"My only wish is for you to remain so for all our lives." His mouth then moved to her own and she dipped her head back so he would have access to her.

He began touching her lips and face with his tongue, silently hinting that he wanted more.

She turned in his arms, facing him, seeing his eyes darken with the onset of passion. "Vincent?"

"Yes, love," he breathed.

She touched his cheek in a gentle, yet possessive gesture. "Are you... frightened?"

His smile melted away whatever fears she might have harbored. "No... not any longer. We are together and you make me feel ... beautiful. Catherine, you're not afraid, are you?"

"Never," she said assuredly. "You are my husband, and my only wish is to belong to you in every way." She blushed pink, as a tear slid down her cheek. "Tonight, we shall learn together."

Their mouths came together in a kiss that promised passion and desire. The taste of wine on her mouth drove Vincent to delve deeper, as his tongue met hers and they drank of each other, moaning with pleasure, holding each other tighter. He longed to absorb her into himself, to become one with her, to share his body and flesh with hers. She was his past and future, but it was the present, the now, he was concerned about. His body hardened with his need of her, and he could feel her tremble exquisitely in his arms.

Catherine felt the change in him, and reveled in the fact that she was able to arouse him in such a way. Suddenly, she wanted to be naked in his arms, needed to lie under his body, feel his warmth surround her, possess her... to be inside her. They were perfectly attuned to each other's yearnings.

"Catherine..." He barely breathed as they reluctantly broke their kiss.

Catherine met his eyes and saw in them his unmasked eagerness. Shivers rippled down her arms, and she realized she was shy and eager all at once.

Within seconds she was in his arms, being carried up the stairs to the master bedroom.

After releasing her so that he could light a lone candle near the bed, he turned and held his breath. The sight of her by candlelight, in his bedroom, in her wedding dress, caused the throbbing in his loins to intensify into aching torture. As she stood away from him, he watched her with burning intensity as slowly, seductively, she raised her arms and began

to lift the veil from her head, then pulled the combs from her hair. Vincent stared, mesmerized, swallowing hard and clenching his fists as she unknowingly drove him wild with passion.

Her hair fell to her waist in thick, honey brown waves, and he held his breath as she came closer to him, lifting it so that it rested over one breast. She turned so that her back was to him. "Will you help me?" she asked shyly.

Vincent was surprised to find that there were very few buttons on her dress. It had been mainly secured by wide, ivory satin ribbons, six in all, and with a sharp intake of breath he slowly untied each ribbon, his arousal for her growing with each passing second. But he held back, wanting to savor every moment of this night, longing to pleasure her, to fulfill her in every way possible. He would not rush this time with her; he'd waited too long for this day.

The last ribbon undone, his hands shook as her scent of warm closeness intoxicated him. He closed his eyes for a moment, then nuzzled her neck, while his hands gently pulled the gown off her shoulders. Burying his face in her hair while his lips touched the warmth of her back and shoulders, he heard her sigh, a small sound, yet a sound that drove him onward.

As she turned again to face him, his arms slid around her waist, and only fleetingly he realized she wore no corset, only a thin, silky chemisette with ribbon-thin blue straps, and a petticoat. "So beautiful," he murmured, as his hands slid down her back, bringing her body closer to his heat. He wanted her. He ached with wanting her.

With shaking hands, he tenderly slid the ribbons of her chemisette down her arms while she looked straight into his eyes, warm with encouragement and longing. Stepping away from her, he slid the remainder of the lacy, enticing garment from her breasts, and marveled at the perfection of her.

Drawing in a sharp breath, he slid the delicate silk from her, then tugged at the waistband of her petticoat and looked at her. She placed her hand over his, encouraging him to remove it as well. In mere seconds she was standing before him, her only covering the glorious curtain of hair draping over her shoulders and covering her breasts. To Vincent, she appeared to be a wood sprite, so small and petite, so magical and ethereal. She was all things to him, friend and confidante, wife, and now... lover.

Without warning, he carried her to their marriage bed, kissing her all the while. How could anything feel so soft, so fragile and beautiful? He was stunned by the emotions she stirred in him, and all he wanted was to touch and memorize every inch of her.

When they reached the foot of the bed, he lowered her down against the length of his body, his heart pounding as she kissed him full on the mouth, her hair and flesh wreaking havoc with his arousal.

She watched him with hooded eyes as he removed his clothes, her body trembling with shy anticipation as she saw him naked for the first time. Her knowledge of the act of love was limited but she knew that together they would be wonderful. Her eyes skimmed the length of him and she blushed as they lingered on Vincent's arousal, heavy and thick with passion, ready to love and be loved.

Vincent felt a tinge of apprehension in her heart. Gently, he took her hands in his. "Don't be afraid; please don't be afraid. It is my first time as well. I could never hurt you, Catherine."

His soft-spoken admission calmed her, and she managed a smile. "I'm not scared... we're together."

"Yes, together."

Their breathing grew heavy, labored, and they stood just inches apart. Catherine placed her palms on the hard-corded muscles of his chest, and looked into his eyes. "You're so strong," she murmured, breathless, "so hard."

"And you are..." His fingers grazed her nipples, as they hardened instantly at his touch. "So soft, so lovely..."

Slowly, he lowered her to the bed and settled himself at her side. As her arms wrapped around his waist, his head lowered to her lips, then slid down her neck and throat, settling on one breast, his lips surrounding a pebble-hard crest, sucking gently, making her shudder instantly.

Sliding his hand between their bodies, he began to stroke her thighs. With shaking hands, he probed and teased, and heard her groan with pleasure when her legs parted for him, bidding him to touch her closer, deeper.

Catherine basked in the feelings he evoked from her, and caressed him from shoulder to back, her breathing shallow and quick. The feel of his fingers inside her turned her flesh to pure sensation. Arching her neck, she silently begged him to give her' all he had to give. The more he offered, the more she craved.

Vincent sensed her need, felt her love and all emotions through their bond. Her response to his touches was flooding him with heat and sensation.

And then he was surrounding her, all around her, over her, his body lowering onto her own, and Catherine could feel the hardness of his arousal pressing against her. His whispered words of love were barely audible, so caught up were they in their passion. His mouth found the hollow of her throat and Catherine arched her neck, giving him easy access to her flesh.

Their bodies instinctively followed a natural path of loving. Their fingers entwined tightly as Catherine's body opened for him, surrendering, inviting. Then their eyes met and they lost themselves in the wonder of the moment. His face was above hers, his eyes dark and half-closed in passion and unbridled desire for her, and Catherine thought she'd die from the force of the power his gaze held.

Finally, his hardness pressed softly into her as her breath caught, and she instinctively opened to him to allow his rigid length to tenderly lance her virgin barrier. She was so tight; the more he tried to be gentle, the more he ached. Vincent's forehead was covered in beads of moistness from withholding. The sweet torment was killing him.

As her body slowly encased his length, Catherine gasped softly, when a brief wave of discomfort assailed her.

"Catherine, am I hurting you?" Vincent cried achingly . "I don't want to hurt you," he breathed, as the splendor of her warm flesh consumed him. The exquisite feeling of being inside her body rocked him to the depths of his soul.

A single tear slid down her cheek and she held him fast to her as he withdrew. "No, Vincent, don't leave me, please," she pleaded thickly. "I'm well... please, please love me, Vincent."

Her words were driving him over the edge and he kissed her hard and full. Her hips rose to cradle his flanks, her arms kept him close. He gently pierced her again and again, their cries of passion lancing the stillness of the night.

Catherine watched his face, the deep blue of his eyes burrowing deep into the warm green depths of her own. Catherine moaned and cried out his name over and over as his flesh buried itself in hers, farther and farther, deeper and deeper, until she was certain he had touched her soul.

He surged again as her fingers threaded through his hair, her words of love and seduction driving him fast to release.

And then he filled her, making her a part of him for all time, his mouth hot on hers as his warm seed filled her. Their cries of fulfillment played like a song of passion, an ode to the moon and stars of their love.

Happiness poured over them like sunlight in a meadow on a bright summer day.

Still encased wonderfully inside her, Vincent rolled to his side, taking her with him, and kissed her damp forehead. He possessed just enough strength to reach for a quilt to cover their nakedness.

He smiled as she nuzzled her warm, moist body close to his own, and brought her hand up to caress his chest. She whispered his name over and over, while he held her in his warm embrace.

"Mrs Wells?" he whispered, his lips caressing her cheek.

"Mmmm?" she answered sleepily.

He chuckled softly. "I just wanted to say your name."

"It sounds... wonderful..." she replied, and Vincent could sense that she was falling asleep. "This is how it will always be, Catherine," he whispered, as he held her safe within the protective circle of his arms. "I promise."

As he followed her to sweet slumber moments later, a sense of complete and utter peace engulfed him, like a warm woolen blanket, and he kissed his bride once more, loving her more deeply than he ever thought himself capable.

Roses.

He was surrounded by roses, a scent so sweet he wished to lose himself in it. And then he opened his eyes and he was covered by a heady bouquet of the fragrant blossoms. Was he still dreaming?

No, he was awake, and the scent emanated from the glorious blanket of her waist length hair, draped across his chest and arms and under his chin, where her head rested over his heart. Vincent inhaled deeply of her fragrance, her warmth and knew what it meant to be alive, to be happy. And in love. Ah, so deeply in love.

The touch of her bare flesh so close to his own sent tremors of arousal shooting through him, and already he could feel the swell of his oncoming erection. How he wanted her, and prayed he would feel this way for all time. She stirred in his arms, but didn't waken, and Vincent sighed as her leg insinuated itself between his thighs. He softly placed one hand on her back, the other sliding lazily up and down her hip. I could stay here with her like this forever, he thought, turning his head to look out the window and seeing another beautiful sunny morning. He smiled, happy to know he had awakened this particular morning, a newly wedded man... Catherine's husband.

The combined scent of her and their lovemaking caused him to grow heavy with desire and he swallowed, silently wishing she were awake so that he could love her again.

They'd made love nearly all night, sharing their bodies in the most intimate way two people in love could. They learned the secrets of each other's bodies, touched and caressed, brought pleasure to each other. And they exchanged secret dreams and hidden desires in the privacy of their marriage bed. He would kiss her and tell her that yes, she was right, they were fated from the dawn of time to belong to each other.

She'd become playful and teasing one moment, serious and seductive the next. Vincent found her to be captivating and sensual, with a body that drove him wild with desire, and a mouth that pushed him over the edge.

"Good morning."

He turned to the sound of her sleepy voice and smiled at her. His heart overflowed with joy.

"Yes, it is.

Catherine allowed herself a few silent moments just to drink in the mysterious beauty of him. Her body still ached wonderfully from his lovemaking, and all at once she wanted him to touch her again... now. Her breasts ached for his hands, for his mouth, and, seeing the look of yearning in his eyes that said he, too, wanted her, felt herself grow weak with anticipation.

She'd never in her life awakened nude before today, yet knew she'd never be able to sleep in any other fashion after last night. She snuggled close to his warmth, slowly rubbed her leg against his length, and moaned softly when she realized how hard and ready he was for her.

"Vincent..."

He gazed at her, his eyes dark with passion and promise.

"Yes..."

That was all Vincent needed to hear. His hands skimmed down her arms to her waist and suddenly he was over her, his mouth lowering to her slightly parted lips. He took all of her into himself, her lips, her tongue, sipping and sampling, gently sucking, teasing each inch of her mouth. He groaned as his mind went back to the night before, when she had lowered herself over him, kissing every pore, every fiber of his body until she reached the center of him. He recalled her hair, draped over his chest and arms, and her tongue, taking him into her mouth, and sending him to heaven and back.

He ached with longing at the remembered vision of her in his mind, and feeling her slender legs part willingly for him, Vincent slowly sank into her velvet heat, and sensed he'd died and was now at the threshold of paradise, with Catherine as his own heavenly guide.

"Vincent... Vincent... you feel so... beautiful," Catherine murmured brokenly as he pushed himself into her tightness.

Her words enchanted him and he looked deep into the inviting green of her eyes. He inhaled sharply as she opened wider for him, and like a warm sheath, her inviting flesh enclosed him, caressingly, softly.

Suddenly he turned them, and she found herself above him, his hands cupping her buttocks and pushing her closer, deeper into his heat. She lifted her head slightly, and Vincent drew his hands through the glorious curtain of hair that surrounded their faces.

"Catherine..." her name was a plea and she understood what he wanted. He wanted her.

"I love you," she whispered, then began to move in a rhythmic, sensual way and Vincent followed, gripping her hips and pushing her closer to him in a dance as old and primal as time itself.

Their movements grew deeper and deeper, faster and faster until Vincent felt tiny contractions within her heat, and knew his own completion was at hand.

The sound of his name on her lips over and over plummeted Vincent over the edge of an abyss, where the only thing that mattered was Catherine. His last, hard thrust brought a roar of triumph tearing from his throat, and he throbbed as the warm essence of his seed filled her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Open thine heart wide, and fold within the wet
wings of thy dove."

- *E. B. Browning.*

They didn't eat breakfast that day, and instead made love through the afternoon, then slept until dusk. When they awoke, they felt happy and sated. Since Vincent employed no servants, they would either have to prepare their own meals or starve. It didn't matter to them one way or the other if they ever consumed a meal again. They wanted only to consume each other. Each time they loved, Catherine had to reassure Vincent that she was well, not tired or sore, though she was; yet it was the most wonderful feeling she'd ever experienced. Her tiny aches only reminded her of how tenderly Vincent had treated her. Catherine had no knowledge of intimacy before her wedding night, yet was knowledgeable enough to realize how strong and powerful he was, how he'd held back their first time, so he would not hurt her. How she loved him for his tenderness.

"What are you thinking?" he asked later, as she sat on their bed before him, wearing a white silk robe, sighing with pleasure at his touch that stirred every nerve ending in her body. He was brushing her hair with long, gentle strokes, carefully dislodging the tangles and knots that had occurred during their lovemaking.

"Oh, Vincent, that feels wonderful, but sooner or later, we have to eat something. I do cook, you know. Or are you frightened of being poisoned?"

He smiled as he brushed. Her hair intrigued him, felt like strands of silk in his hands, and he brought handfuls to his face to inhale the scent of roses and woman. Catherine.

"I suppose we should eat," he mused, then moved to whisper in her ear. "We do have to keep up our strength, Mrs Wells."

She turned to face him, and took the brush from his hand. "Do you have any idea how deeply I love you, Mr Wells?"

He turned serious, caressing her face with his thumb. "Yes, I do. And each day of my life I shall be grateful that we found each other again. Oh, Catherine," he sighed and opened his arms for her. "I want you to be happy."

What a strange thing to say, she thought. "You know that I'm happy. Is something troubling you? You must tell me."

Vincent looked around their modest bedroom. "I know that you were accustomed to living in a huge home with many servants to attend you, who prepared meals, and cleaned the house, and helped you with your clothes..."

Catherine lifted his chin with her finger. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"Only that if the cottage is not large enough for you, we could add on to it, I suppose, and we could hire one servant to help with the meals and..."

"Stop," she said softly, placing a hand gently over his mouth. "Vincent, don't you know that this is where I wish to be for all my life? I love this cottage, and Beaumont Hills and... you," she said pointedly. "This is my home now. I am your wife and my place is by your side, wherever you are, wherever you wish to be. Don't you see?"

He nodded slightly. "Catherine, I just wanted you to know that I'll do whatever I have to, to make you happy. I would even move back to the city to live, if... if you wished it."

Kissing him deeply, Catherine then shook her head. "I want to live here, although, I would go anywhere with you, you should know that." She grabbed his hands and entwined them with her own, resting them over her heart. "In a tree or mountain," she lightened her voice with humor to soothe him. "In a shack or a castle. I'd live with you in a hidden cavern under the ground if you asked it of me." She saw a tear slide down his cheek and kissed it away, tasting it on her lips. "As long as we're together, Vincent. Don't you know that to be with you is a dream come true for me?"

He managed a smile and nodded his agreement. "For both of us."

Catherine nodded. "It's what I wished for... more than anything."

And from that day forward, Vincent never doubted her love or devotion to him. She was happy, and that's all that mattered.

Later, they bathed and dressed and ate fresh baked muffins and fruit, drank wine, laughed and talked. At midnight, they walked arm in arm to the gazebo and sat on the stone bench, talking and kissing, sharing touches and caresses, setting each other on fire. After sharing the sight of a spectacular sunrise, they walked back to their lovely little cottage, made love until they were sated, and then slept away the rest of the day.

Their days were filled with happiness, companionship, and contentment. Nights usually found them in the gazebo, talking quietly, holding hands, or watching the moon. Their lovemaking was intense and emotional, bringing them a joyous fulfillment few would ever know. Theirs was truly a happy life.

Summer faded into Autumn, and it was on a particular October morning that Catherine found herself at the orphanage with Geoffrey and Mouse trailing behind her, carrying pumpkins from the orchard, now ripe and ready to be carved into jack-o-lanterns in preparation for Halloween.

Each child grew excited and took a place at the large, long dining table with a pumpkin before them, and it made Catherine happy to see the look on each of their little faces. She felt a maternal protectiveness toward each one of them. As she helped one of the little ones cut the top off a pumpkin, she wished she would conceive a child soon. She longed for Vincent's child.

She laughed along with the children as the large orange globes were cut and carved into lopsided jack-o-lanterns. When their task was completed and all the pumpkins were ready to be put on display, Catherine prepared to leave; she had promised to meet Vincent for lunch at the gazebo. She'd packed a basket for them to share, and before the weather drew too cold to picnic, they tried to meet at the gazebo or the small stream under the bridge. After lunch they would usually return to the cottage for a time, making love and enjoying each other's company.

They'd been married only a few weeks, and Catherine was happier than she dreamed possible. Adjusting to life in Beaumont Hills had not been difficult; she adored the calm, unhurried serenity of the land, loved preparing meals and keeping houses for herself and Vincent. It gave her a freedom she enjoyed greatly, and the fact that they did not employ servants went almost unnoticed by her.

The cottage became a place of warmth and love for her, and Vincent had urged her to change or enhance anything she wished. Catherine thought her new home was perfect, but she did find time to sew new lace curtains for the parlor windows, and began working on a handmade coverlet for their bed. She was grateful that her mother had taught her to cook, sew, and run a household, and Catherine performed her duties with relish.

Catherine found that the only thing she missed about her life before marriage was her father. He was recovering nicely but he still needed to take medication for his heart. The shipping business was being run by several trustworthy associates, and in a gesture that had taken everyone by surprise, Charles had hired Devin as the company attorney. It seemed Steven's conviction had changed everyone's life for the better. Catherine and Vincent gave a dinner party at the cottage for Chandler Shipping's new corporate lawyer, and it was a great success. The party, that included Devin and

Jenny, Charles and Daniel Archer, Jacob and Mary, and Joseph Maxwell, who'd become a friend to all in the community. An atmosphere of friendship and love filled the cottage, with Vincent assisting Catherine with the preparation. He was a most thoughtful, wonderful husband, possessing a gentle, loving soul.

During the day, Vincent taught the children in the classroom of the orphanage, while Catherine would tend the orchard or the rose gardens. Some days she'd go to the orphanage and help with the meals, or tend to a sick child.

When Vincent found her one particular day after she'd failed to meet him by the stream for the mid-day meal, he grew worried and went to find her. She had been sitting at Eric's side, sponging down his fever, tending him until Dr Wells arrived; she'd lost all track of time and couldn't bear to leave. Another time, Geoffrey had fallen and cut his knee and would allow only Catherine to dress the wound.

Vincent smiled; the children loved her fiercely, as he did. "How can anyone not love her?" he once commented to Devin as she tended Geoffrey's injury.

That night, as they lay in bed, touching and kissing, and exchanging intimate words of desire, Vincent noticed a slight change in her body, somehow. Her breasts seemed heavier, fuller. Could it be? He had memorized every inch of her soft, enticing body.

"Catherine..." he lowered his head to her ear. "Mmmm... more," he heard her whisper.

He loved touching the warmth of her flesh, so responsive and sensitive to his searching eager hands and mouth.

Catherine's breathing quickened in her passion. He was devouring her and she was consumed in the flames of his arousal. His tongue was doing wonderful things to her breasts; sucking and nuzzling, kissing her pebble-hard nubs, while his hands gently fondled and teased her full warm, round globes.

He forgot for a moment to question her about his suspicions, as her body, warm and inviting, slowly parted in seductive invitation, bidding him to enter her most secret place. Vincent answered her without hesitation, his loins aching and swollen. Her moan of pleasure drove him onward as he buried himself deep within her flesh, becoming part of her. She arched her back and closed her eyes as he fell deeper into her, groaning her name as her hands cupped his buttocks and pushed him closer to her heat.

"Look at me," she heard him plead as he moved quicker and deeper into her.

Catherine watched heavy-lidded as his eyes darkened with passion. Their eyes locked as their oncoming completion took hold and the wonder of it all struck them. It will always be like this, she thought dreamily, always.

"I love you," she cried, then repeated his name over and over, while Vincent growled with his powerful release, muttering words of forever and love to her.

As they lay in each other's arms later, Vincent kissed her hair. "Catherine... ?"

She looked a question at him.

"Is there anything you wish... to tell me?"

Catherine chuckled softly as she kissed him on the chest. "I don't know yet... it's too soon to tell." She lay across his chest. "Will you be pleased?"

Vincent swallowed the lump in his throat.

"Pleased? Catherine, just the idea is overwhelming." He paused to take it all in. "There are no words to describe how I'm feeling."

She agreed. "I will go to see Father in several days when I am certain. Can you wait that long?" she teased, as he smiled.

"Catherine, I've waited all my life for the kind of joy you've given me. I suppose I could survive several more days."

As he pressed closer to her enticing warmth, Catherine moaned. "In the meantime, I'd like to make you happy," and she moved over him and bent her head to nuzzle his ear. "Do you love me?"

"Mmmm," was his answer, sliding his hands under the curtain of her lustrous hair, pulling her closer for a kiss.

"Good... show me," she urged in a whisper, covering his body with her own, moving over him, inflaming him to the point of no return.

In the hours that followed, he set out to do just that.

The children had convinced Vincent and Catherine to celebrate Halloween with them by dressing as Romeo and Juliet, and Catherine herself hand-made their costumes. For Vincent, she created an appropriate costume consisting of new black velvet trousers, matching tunic, and a new white silk shirt. Ankle high boots completed his ensemble.

For herself, she compiled a clinging brocade floor length gown of white, shot through with gold thread, her hair worn in a single, waist-length braid with a gold-braided skull cap and white kid slippers to make her look the part of the tragic heroine.

It was a wonderful celebration that was held in the orphanage, with dozens of glowing jack-o-lanterns, paper cut-outs of witches and black cats covering the windows, candies and homemade cookies, and games that included bobbing for apples and pin the tail on the donkey.

At the end of the evening, everyone sat in a shadowy circle of candlelight, while Vincent read "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and each child sat with mouth open, eager to be terrorized by the headless horseman. Of course, at the appropriate part where Ichabod Crane encountered that villain on the bridge, the younger children all grabbed onto Catherine, wanting her protective embrace, and she eagerly lent them the safe haven of her arms.

Halloween was a tremendous success, yet as they walked back to the cottage hand in hand later on, Vincent sensed a weariness within his beautiful wife.

"You're tired."

"Yes, it is quite late."

"Catherine," he stopped to look at her. "Are you well?"

She kissed him quickly on the mouth. "I did feel a little nauseous this morning, and I seem to grow tired earlier than usual." She smiled, hooked her arm through his, and resumed walking.

"When will you see Father?"

She leaned in closer to him. "Shall I go tomorrow?"

He nodded. "I'll come with you," he volunteered.

"No, you can't. Don't you remember? You promised to take the children to collect autumn leaves by the orchard."

"I can postpone the excursion for another time."

Catherine smiled. "Vincent, you know you could never disappoint the children. And I would never ask you to. As soon as I return from Father, I'll go home and wait for you. But I already know that I carry your child." She moved her hand to slide it over her still flat stomach.

Vincent agreed. "Yes, I feel life in you," he placed his hand over hers. Catherine took his hand and kissed it, then held it in her own. "A life we have created... together."

As luck would have it, Daniel Archer was visiting Jacob Wells the morning Catherine arrived at his house. They were exchanging pleasantries and recent happenings in their lives when Catherine announced the reason for her visit wasn't purely a personal one.

"Is something wrong, dear? Are you ill?" Both Jacob and Daniel seemed concerned.

Catherine smiled and shook her head. "No, quite the contrary."

Both men saw the pink blush on her cheeks, combined with her beaming green eyes, and guessed instantly. "Ah, that is wonderful news. But we must make sure, don't you think?"

"Please," Catherine agreed.

So while Daniel took her pulse and listened to her heart and lungs, Jacob asked questions concerning her monthly flow and certain symptoms that she may have experienced. In the end, it was agreed that by late May, she and Vincent would be parents for the first time. Catherine could hardly contain her joy.

"Thank you both," she hugged each man in turn, then prepared to go to the cottage to wait for Vincent to tell him the joyous news. She was preparing a special candlelit dinner for him when she heard him come hurriedly through the door.

The wonderful smell of a fresh apple pie permeated his senses as he entered the dining room, knowing he'd find her there. Breathless with anticipation, he softly called her name and she stopped, looked up to meet his eyes, and smiled at him.

"Catherine?"

She nodded slowly, blushed slightly, then let out a cry of surprise when she felt herself being lifted into his arms and swung around the room.

Catherine hugged him tightly, sharing his laughter and tears of joy. Then he kissed her with a kiss that revealed so many emotions, she yearned to touch him, to give him anything he wanted... everything he needed. She began seducing him with her words, her lips, her hands, her tongue.

Needless to say, dinner was served later that evening... much later.

It had been agreed that the children would celebrate Thanksgiving with Devin, Jenny, Catherine, Vincent and the rest of the community. The house was certainly large enough, and it would be a wonderful time to get together with friends and family from the entire community.

The plan was that Vincent would bring all the children to Jenny's in the morning. Instead of teaching regular classes, Vincent thought helping Jenny with decorating the house together, as a family, would be a lesson in itself. Helping and contributing to the preparations for the feast of Thanks would teach the children that they were all a part of one family, all pledged to help each other.

As he dressed, he looked over at the huge bed where Catherine lay, still deep in sleep. She'd been growing tired more easily since the start of her pregnancy, and Vincent had urged her to sleep as much as she needed. He'd tried to convince her not to walk all the way to the orphanage each day, but Jacob had said she needed daily exercise, and as long as she was feeling well and didn't overdo, everything would be all right.

She stirred as he leaned over to kiss her goodbye. "Vincent? Where are you going?" she asked sleepily.

"I'm taking the children to the house." He sat next to her on the bed, smoothing back her hair, which was fanned out beautifully on the pillow. "I'll be there most of the day with them." He looked out the window at the ominous black clouds and frowned. "I'd feel better if you'd stay at home today. I'll send Mouse or Jamie back to keep you company."

"I'll be fine, Vincent." She sat up and yawned lazily, while he smiled lovingly at her.

"Why don't you go back to sleep, and I'll be home for lunch. I could be back by noon and prepare a spinach salad."

Catherine grimaced. "Vincent, if I eat one more vegetable, I fear our child will be born green." She placed her hands on her slightly rounded stomach. "I'd rather have roast duck and buttered baby peas with baked potatoes smothered in sour cream, and apple pie with fresh cream."

Vincent gasped in mock horror at the idea of her menu. "Catherine, if you insist on eating all that, I will have to build a larger door to the cottage." They both laughed at Vincent's dry sense of humor, and Catherine nodded. "I promise I'll do nothing to jeopardize my health. But, I still dream of eating everything in sight." She shrugged helplessly.

Vincent kissed her gently. "Let me worry about lunch. Now, go back to sleep, and I'll see you later. You're sure you don't want me to send Mouse back to keep you company?"

"I'm sure. In any case," she said, looking out the window, "it looks like a storm is on the way. Mouse will be drenched by the time he walks here."

"Until later, then," and he kissed her again, then looked into her eyes. "I love you, Mrs Wells."

"Take care, I love you, too," she whispered.

Hearing him close the front door behind him, she lay back down, covered herself with the new quilt she'd sewn, and instantly fell back to sleep.

She was drawn from sleep by the sound of thunder. Rising from the bed and drawing on her heavy brocade robe, she walked to the window and saw the winds picking up in intensity, the rain slanting down in heavy sheets, the clouds dark grey and menacing, and lightning streaking across the sky. Catherine shivered.

"A cup of tea, that's what I need," she said to herself as she made her way down the stairs. Reaching the kitchen, she saw a small piece of bread on a plate on the counter, and popped it in her mouth, knowing the presence of something in her stomach would ease her morning sickness.

After brewing her tea, she looked at the clock on the mantle in the parlor and noticed it was eleven o'clock. She felt well rested, and soon Vincent would be home, yet with the rains so heavy, she hoped he'd stay at Jenny's until the storm passed. She decided to dress and begin cutting out paper turkeys for the window decorations at the orphanage. That would keep her busy until Vincent returned.

Minutes later, she was hard at work in the dining room, dressed casually in a comfortable rust-colored gown that had been let out a bit for her growing abdomen. She had a cup of tea beside her and began to cut pieces of colored paper for the turkeys' feathers with pine cones for their bodies. She was quite satisfied with her artistic attempts.

The sound that came from outside seconds later was not thunder, as Catherine originally thought. Someone was pounding at the door. Maybe it was Mouse.

As she rose to answer the door, she knocked over the cup of tea and it spilled onto the paper feathers. Catherine couldn't explain the chill that ran up her spine, but as she unlocked and opened the door, revealing the man dressed all in black, the reason for her dread was brought to light.

Steven Bass.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Pains of love be sweeter far than
all other pleasures are."

- J. Dryden

"Captain Maxwell is here. In this weather?"

Something must be wrong," Devin commented to the servant as Joseph Maxwell hurried into the house, unmindful that he was dripping wet from the storm.

"Devin, I'm sorry for the imposition," Maxwell said, "however, something's happened that you should know."

"What is it, Joseph?" Devin inquired, a tinge of foreboding crawling up his spine. "Come into the library. You look as though you could use a brandy."

Maxwell grabbed Devin's arm. "Bass has escaped," he said succinctly.

"Oh my God," Devin exclaimed. "But how?"

Maxwell exhales sharply. "Somehow, he grabbed a guard's gun; killed the man and escaped through one of the kitchen windows. He must be captured soon, or who knows what will happen."

"Do you think he'll go after Charles?"

Maxwell nodded. "That was my first thought, so I've sent a half dozen men to stay with Mr Chandler until we can catch him. Devin, he couldn't have gone far, what with this weather, but I have a feeling. ..."

Just then, Vincent entered the room and sensed that all was not right as he looked in surprise at Joseph Maxwell. "Good morning, Captain, what are you doing here?"

Devin faced his brother and took a deep breath. "Bass has escaped from jail, Vincent. Joseph thinks he might be --"

Vincent's eyes widened in horror. "Catherine!" he cried. "She's alone at the cottage!"

Without another word, all three men grabbed their cloaks and approached the front door, opened it, and were almost thrown back from the force of the wind and the cold, biting rain.

They stepped out into the storm, the power of the wind combined with the freezing torrents of rain hampering their flight to the cottage.

A rage of terror combined with a red-hot anger filled Vincent, and he silently swore that if Steven was at the cottage and so much as touched Catherine, he'd kill him with his bare hands.

As Jenny ran to the front door to call to them and confirm that their intuition was correct, she felt a sting of fear pierce her heart. She began to cry, then bundled herself in a heavy cloak and boots. She must go to Cathy. She had a terrible feeling that her dear friend was in danger.

"St - teven? What are you doing here?"

Catherine's heart pounded like a drum inside her chest as the sight of Steven Bass threw her into a whirlpool of panic. He must have escaped from prison! She thought, horrified. She thought of running from him, but stopped herself. She must attempt to remain calm, and not do anything to rile Steven, for the life of her child was at stake. He walked past her into the house, slamming the door shut behind him. Silently she prayed for Vincent to come home ... soon.

Steven turned to face her, the threatening look in his eyes frightening Catherine. "I should have known I'd find you here," his voice was angry, desperate. "What did the freak do to force you to come here?" he added.

Catherine was shocked by his irrational statements. Had he gone mad? She took a deep breath and chose her words carefully. "Steven, uh, why don't we sit down, and you can tell me what you're doing here," she tried to sound calm.

"I don't want to sit down... I want you to come with me. We're getting out of here." Before Catherine could respond to his ravings, he said, "I have it all planned, Catherine. First, we'll go to Virginia, and we'll be married. Then we'll..."

Catherine shook her head and frowned. "Steven, I can't go with you. The police will be..."

Again he interrupted. "Don't you understand, Catherine? If we leave right now, the police will never find us. And if the freak gets in our way, I'll just take care of him the same way I took care of the guard at the prison."

Catherine clasped her hands together to prevent Steven from seeing how they were shaking. He was totally removed from reality at the moment, and she had to find a way to stop him. But how? Oh Vincent, where are you? I need you!

Suddenly, Steven approached her, and pulled her to him. "Get your cloak, we're leaving this place, now!" he raged, dragging Catherine by the arm in the direction of the front door. "Now, Catherine!" he repeated.

"No, I won't go with you!" Catherine shouted, as a crash of thunder bellowed overhead. "This is my home, and I will NOT leave." She was crying now, pulling her arm out of Steven's grip and backing up, away from him. Her anger gripped her, and she wanted to tell Steven everything.

"Who do you think you are, to come into MY home, to disrupt my life, and Vincent's life?" Seeing she took Steven completely off guard, she kept talking, hoping to stall him long enough, until Vincent came home. "Since we were children, all you did was bully all of us. You seemed to take pleasure in belittling Vincent, and making him feel that he was less than human."

"Well, let me tell you something, Steven. Vincent is more human, more of a man than you will ever be," she shouted at him as he came closer to her, a murderous rage burning in his eyes.

"He is a freak!" Steven grabbed her again.

"No! He is my life... he is my husband, and nothing you can do will ever change that."

"I'll kill him!"

"I carry his child," Catherine admitted, as Steven gripped her hair and screamed his rage.

And then Catherine felt the force of his hand as it struck her across the face and jaw. As she fell over the footstool onto her back, a shooting pain seized her and she cried weakly. She was only fleetingly aware of the front door being thrown open and a cold wind passing over her, then she heard voices raised in heated argument. She muttered Vincent's name, then thankfully swirled into a vortex of nothingness.

Vincent sat by her side all night, hoping she'd regain consciousness. The nightmare of the past several hours rolled around in his head, repeating over and over.

After, he, Devin, and Maxwell had stormed into the cottage, they'd found Catherine on the floor unconscious. Steven had run out the door, and Devin had grabbed him, punching him repeatedly. Yet Steven was clever, and had pulled a gun out of his coat. Devin didn't see the gun, but thank goodness, Captain Maxwell had, and hadn't hesitated to use his own. Steven was dead; Devin and Maxwell, unharmed.

Vincent focused on his wife... so pale... so still. He gently caressed her hand between his own and kissed her fingers gently. "Oh, Catherine... Catherine," he whispered softly. "Can you ever forgive me?"

His child was gone, and he was to blame. After vowing to protect Catherine with his life, he had failed her when she needed him most. If he had come several moments sooner, Catherine would be all right, and his child would be safe.

When he had lifted Catherine into his arms to carry her up to their bed, Vincent had noticed blood on her dress and on the hardwood floor, and had screamed in agony. Jacob had come as quickly as he could, and tended to Catherine. Physically, she would recover. She had a small bump on the head and a bruise along her jaw, but when she fell she'd begun to bleed, and the baby was lost.

Jenny had arrived shortly thereafter, and helped clean and dress her in a nightgown then had gone down to the kitchen to prepare dinner for them all. Daniel was notified, and came immediately, as did Charles. They all held vigil downstairs with Devin while Vincent insisted on staying with Catherine. He would not eat, rest or leave her side.

And he never cried.

It seemed Vincent had escaped somewhere deep within himself. The only thing that mattered was Catherine, and her recovery, but she had to be told about the baby. Because of him, because he did not arrive in time to protect her, their child was lost. The pain in his heart was like an open wound, and he realized nothing would ever be the same again.

"Catherine... come back to me... I love you."

Still, he did not cry.

It was close to noon the next day when the sun finally showed its face in the autumn sky. Catherine slowly opened her eyes and saw Vincent dozing in the chair beside the huge bed. Her mouth was dry, her jaw and back hurt, and her head pounded with pain. What had happened? She attempted to delve into her memory to remember the events from the time Steven had pushed his way into the cottage. Squeezing her eyes tightly shut, tears began as she recalled falling from the force of Steven's hand. Instinctively, her hand slid down to her now flat stomach, and she let out a cry of torment so agonizing that Vincent almost jumped from the chair beside her.

"Vincent, my baby... oh God, no, not my baby!" she sobbed as Vincent rose to sit on the bed beside her, holding her to him, giving her support and comfort.

"My baby," she repeated over and over, as Vincent rocked her gently, feeling her grief deep in his own soul.

"Shh, Catherine, I know. I'm sorry, so sorry," he told her, his voice hoarse and broken with sadness. "If I had only come in time..."

Catherine gripped his shirt, clinging for his support, needing his strength, giving him her own. She just seemed to want to cry out her grief in his arms. She cried for many long moments, even when Jenny and Charles and Daniel came up to comfort her.

Still, Vincent did not cry. All he could think of was her blood, the blood of his unborn child, seeping from her body, and he had not arrived in time to prevent it.

Within a week of the tragedy, Catherine was allowed to get out of bed for short intervals. She was still very sore, but the bruise on her jaw was nearly healed, and the pain in her back was gone. She grieved openly for her lost child, and cried whenever she thought of the tiny being she'd nurtured in her womb, and whom she would never give life to.

Daniel and Jacob had come every day, to give her comfort, and to tell her that crying was part of the healing process. Grieving was one way to cope with her sadness. It was a normal part of life. Death was a normal part of life, they told her.

So, when both doctors agreed that in time, she would be able to conceive again, Catherine smiled through her tears. But then, her smile disappeared into a worried frown. There was one person who had not smiled, barely talked, and never cried through all of this. And Catherine knew he had hidden himself away from his grief, blaming himself for the loss of their child: Vincent.

Although he had not neglected her these last days, on the contrary, he'd been most attentive to all her needs, Vincent turned inward, brooding, unreachable, distant. He had taken complete charge of her care, tending to all that needed to be done for her. He cooked all meals, serving her in bed, helped her to get dressed, and brushed her hair each night before they turned in.

Yet, Catherine sensed, as well as saw, his guilt, his inner sadness. No matter how much she tried to assure him that what had happened was not his fault, he would shake his head, sadly.

Several times she had attempted to reach him with poetry, but he seemed to be far away, sequestered in a place where she could not reach him; she'd find him brooding in front of the fire, silent, night after night. He was thoughtful, polite, and always attentive, yet Catherine knew part of him was gone, and that he needed time to find his strength again.

When Christmas and the New Year came and went, she grew increasingly distressed. Dr Jacob had given her the good news that it was again safe to resume physical relations, but Vincent claimed that she needed more rest, and he needed more time.

One night, late in January, Catherine had convinced him to sit in front of the fire and share a glass of wine. A blazing fire crackled in the grate, and a gentle snow fell outside. Catherine wanted him, missed him terribly; his touch, his warmth, the feel of his hands on her body, the sensation of his flesh buried deep inside her own. She needed to be one with him again, to share all of herself, with all of him. She moved closer to him.

"Vincent... I miss you," she whispered, kissing his neck, trailing her hand down his hard-muscled thigh. She felt him flinch.

"Catherine, it's late."

He was throwing up walls, withdrawing again. "Vincent, please don't turn me away," she softly cried.

The torment in her voice pierced his heart like a knife. He wanted to touch her as well, but he was frightened. "Forgive me, but I need to be alone," and he rose from his position before the fire. "I'll return soon. Please, don't worry yourself about me," he gently pleaded, before grabbing his cloak. Giving her a long, last painful glance, he walked to the front door, and was gone.

Catherine sat stunned and realized that since the loss of their child, he still hadn't cried... not once.

An hour passed, and still he hadn't returned to the cottage, and Catherine decided to go after him. Wrapping herself in her heavy woolen coat, scarf and boots, she stepped outside of the cottage and took in the quiet beauty of all that surrounded her. Snowflakes floated to the ground in graceful silence; the only sound to be heard was the soft crunch of her boots. She knew with a certainty where he would be, and made her way to the beloved gazebo, telling herself that she wasn't going home without him. All these weeks she had allowed him to suffer in peace, thinking that time would be its own healer, but that had not happened. It was time to confront his fears, time to talk about their loss... together. She would not allow him to destroy himself over something that was beyond his control. She knew her love was strong enough, and deep enough to bring them both back to life. She had to try.

As the gazebo appeared in her sight, she held back her tears. She must be brave, and to show Vincent the way back to her heart. He'd been so strong for her during her recovery, now she must be strong for him. He was frightened, she knew this as well. The prospect of bearing another child frightened her as well, but she yearned for a baby... and for his love.

Yet how could she convince him that everything would be well, when she wasn't sure herself?

He heard the crunching sounds of her boots in the snow but didn't turn to face her.

"Vincent, talk to me."

He shook his head and continued to look out at the night sky.

Catherine took a deep cleansing breath, then exhaled a vapor of white clouds. "Then, please listen while I have my say. I know you blame yourself for the baby, but it was NOT your fault. Steven's madness killed our child." She saw him flinch. "You must stop torturing yourself with guilt. I miss our baby too, but Father says we can have more children. Vincent, you're breaking my heart with your sadness. We haven't made love... in... so long..."

Vincent lowered his head, but still did not answer her. His heart was aching for her love, but... he could still see her lying on the floor... and her blood... so much blood.

"I know you miss me as well," her whisper was as soft as the snow. "I see you looking at me when we prepare for bed, and I know you want to touch me. You see, we are part of each other, we always have been, and we always will be. You can no more deny that than we can challenge the change of seasons. I know what you're feeling, what you're thinking. Vincent," she took a cautious step toward him, "you cared for me after our loss, now, let me take care of you. I know you haven't slept well in weeks. I can hear you pacing the floors in the middle of the night. And I know you haven't eaten in God knows how long. You've lost weight and..."

She took a deep breath to stop her oncoming tears, but it was no use. Her voice betrayed her. "Vincent, you are my husband, and I love you. I need you to come back home with me, where we can talk and... be close again. Please," her voice broke with emotion, "I couldn't bear to lose you, too," she whispered hoarsely.

Tentatively, she took another step toward him, then gently touched his shoulder.

Her touch burned through him as a sob rose in his throat. A shuddering cry of grief tore from his throat, piercing the silence of the snow-filled night.

Then all at once, he turned and fell to his knees, grabbing onto her legs and pressing his face into her coat, clutching her hips and sobbing her name over and over, begging her to forgive him, while she drew her fingers through his hair, softly comforting him with her words of love.

"It's all right... I love you... just cry..."

"Catherine, oh, Catherine..." He shuddered from the force of his sobs.

She knelt on the floor with him, crying into his arms, rubbing his back in comfort, showering soft kisses over his face. "I'm here, love... always."

"Hold me..." he cried, savoring her touch, her kisses, her warmth. "Please... hold me..."

Much later, in the warmth of their bedroom, soft sounds of their tender, tear-filled lovemaking filled the quietness of the night. Catherine held his warm body close to her heart, knowing their destiny was right here, in their room, in their hearts.

Their bodies sated, their legs entwined, they lay side by side, savoring the intimacy of what they had just shared. They remained silent for a time, just gazing at one another, allowing the remnants of their loving to create memories in their hearts. They had touched each other's soul in a way that could not be described, or explained. Love had brought them back to each other. And for the first time in many weeks, Vincent smiled.

"What are you thinking?" Catherine whispered, trailing her fingers through the golden silk of his hair.

"You," he answered just as softly. "You're all I think of."

"Tell me more," she prompted, snuggling closer to his warmth.

He placed one finger under her chin, and looked into the warm green of her eyes. "I always thought that I would be your protector, your strength, your courage in difficult times, but..."

"But you are," she told him, taking his hand and placing a warm kiss on his palm. "You always will be."

He nodded slightly. "Yet tonight, I realised that we share that courage, that strength. You have become my protector as well. You saved me, Catherine, and for that, there are no words to thank you."."

"You never have to thank me for something that I willingly share with you, Vincent. All you have to do is love me. That is all I will ever need."

He kissed her gently on her love-swollen lips. "I do love you, surely you know that."

Seeing how relaxed he was, Catherine became a bit playful. "How much do you love me?" she moaned seductively.

She was teasing him, and he was enjoying it thoroughly. He smiled, but when he cradled her face in his hands, he became completely serious. "You, my love, are a ray of golden sunshine in my life of shadows; you are a bright, silver star in an empty, black sky; you, are my cool oasis in a dry barren desert. You consume my thoughts, you fill my dreams. We share the same soul, Catherine."

A single tear slid down her cheek, and Vincent caught it with his kiss, tasting her love for him, while her closeness filled him with flames of desire.

"I am your wife," she said contentedly.

"Yes," he answered, his lips meeting hers in a kiss that ignited a spark within him. "And I am your husband, always."

As his desire bloomed for her once more, the tears he now shed were tears of joy. He was in her arms, where he belonged... sharing what few ever hoped to share.

He was home

EPILOGUE

TWO YEARS LATER...

"Give all to love; follow thy heart."

- *R. W. Emerson*

How quickly time passed, Catherine thought as she stood in her beloved gazebo, inhaling the sweet scent of roses that surrounded her. In her hand she held two perfect buds, one red, one white.

The sky was clear and blue on this last weekend of summer; a warm day, though not unpleasant. She had decided to come here to enjoy the last vestiges of the day, and wait until Vincent came for her.

She was dressed all in white, from the white pearl combs that held back her hair, to the white lace gloves and pearl earrings she wore.

Her dress was a cool white cotton with short, billowy puffed sleeves, worn empire style. The white satin sash fashioned under her breasts seemed to emphasize her full-term pregnancy.

As she watched the slow setting of the breathtaking late summer sun, she grimaced slightly as another contraction caused her to place one hand on her back and absently rub the pain away. She took a deep breath, trying to control the cramp, and in seconds the pain subsided.

Her labor had begun hours before, but she had longed to come here once more, wanted to enjoy the splendor in their special place once more, before her child was born. A soft breeze blew through the trees, and bluebirds sang to each other in chatty conversation. Wispy tendrils of her hair softly encircled her cheeks and chin. The next contraction was stronger, and

Catherine concentrated on her roses, breathing deeply, refusing to surrender to her pain. Again her hand went to her back, and she rubbed the affected area until the discomfort abated...

He stood watching her intently from only a short distance away, mesmerized by her beauty, humbled by the courage and strength he felt in her heart. Dressed all in white, she looked like an angel, standing there in the gazebo, surrounded by climbing roses, serene and calm.

Vincent hated to disturb her, yet sensed her discomfort. Silently he approached her, and heard her sigh deeply as his arms encircled the beautiful, rounded place where their child rested. When he felt a strong kick against his hand, his heart leapt with joy.

"I'm here," he whispered close to her ear. "Are you all right?"

She nodded and leaned her head back to look at him. "The pain is stronger now," she breathed, then gasped as a particularly hard pain shot through her. "Oh, Vincent."

"Let me carry you home," he said, attempting to sound calm.

"Not yet... I just want to watch the sunset with you... a moment more... please." Her breaths were shallow with the onset of another contraction. "Then we can go home

He kissed her softly then, and felt her hand squeeze his tightly as her pain ebbed... and passed.

Twenty minutes later, he lifted her into his very strong arms and whispered words of love and comfort as her pains grew more intense, and close in proximity. She was still quiet and peaceful, moaning only each time a contraction hit.

He carried Catherine into the cottage and upstairs to their bedroom, and prepared to help her undress. As he unfastened the buttons on the back of her dress, however, she suddenly arched her back, and softly cried out his name.

"Vincent?"

"Yes, love?" he answered as he tenderly removed her clothes.

"Are you frightened?"

"Not anymore. We are together. Nothing can hurt us now."

"Nothing," she whispered, then felt a trickle of warmth trail down her legs. The pain intensified, and Catherine's legs buckled under her.

Vincent lifted her into his arms, then gently settled her in bed. He washed her with a warm cloth, then dressed her in a clean nightgown. He heard Jacob calling him from downstairs, and beckoned his father to come up. Jenny and Mary trailed behind the older man, ready and willing to assist in any way they could.

Vincent moved to sit behind Catherine on the bed, preparing to hold her through the birth. He drew her back to his strong chest, while her hands grabbed his and held on, squeezing his fingers tightly.

"You are doing beautifully," he whispered in her ear, while his father encouraged her to push again. "Soon our child will be here."

"It hurts , Vincent, it hurts."

Vincent grimaced. "I know. I wish I could bear your pain, but I am not as strong as you, Catherine."

"Don't let go of me, Vincent... don't let go "

"You can do it, Catherine. Just squeeze my hands, as hard as you can."

Jacob was encouraging her as well, instructing her when to push, when to take deep breaths, when to relax. It wouldn't be long now.

Catherine felt as though she was being turned inside out, but Vincent's soothing voice carried her through each painful contraction. She took his courage and made it her own. Her fear was gone. Vincent was with her. She could do this.

Minutes later, Isabella Chandler Wells was presented to the world, crying lustily, surrounded by her happy parents and loving family.

Catherine and Vincent were crying and laughing simultaneously while they marveled at their tiny miracle. She was pink and small, but she was perfect, from the light dusting of light hair on her head to her ten tiny toes. And when she opened her eyes, they gasped in wonder. Blue eyes the color of a summer sky looked back at them, and Vincent was overwhelmed by his own emotions. His heart constricted with joy as he gazed upon this child who had been created in love.

A short time later, Catherine and Vincent found themselves alone with their daughter. Vincent's eyes brimmed with unshed tears as Catherine unfastened the buttons on her nightgown, and placed the baby to her breast.

Their eyes met as the infant hungrily nursed, and Vincent was hit with emotions so overpowering and intense, he had to close his eyes for a moment to grasp all he was feeling.

He held Catherine while the infant nursed, and then, steadying himself, searched for the appropriate words to tell his wife all that was in his heart. "Catherine, you were so brave today, and I am humbled by your strength. I cannot begin to tell you what you mean to me."

Catherine touched his cheek. "Then don't... I know what you're feeling," she answered softly. She lowered her gaze to her daughter, then back up to meet the beautiful loving eyes of her husband. "Thank you for giving me Isabella. I love you Vincent. I always have... I always will."

"Yes... I know."

Moments later, after Isabella had fallen asleep in Catherine's arms, Vincent lifted his tiny daughter, and placed her in the cradle beside the bed. Catherine watched him as he gently kissed the baby's cheek, his eyes filled with tears.

He looked at Catherine. "I have something for Isabella."

Catherine nodded at him as he turned from the cradle and walked across the room where a large cedar chest stood. She watched as Vincent rummaged through it, then smiled widely as she immediately recognized the toy he held in his hand. She began to cry as he approached the bed, memories of that beloved toy roiling in her mind.

"Vincent," her voice broke with her whisper, "my ball!"

He sat on the bed next to her, presenting her with the toy that had virtually been their destiny. Catherine took it from him, then kissed him softly on the mouth.

"You kept it all these years?"

He nodded as he encircled her in his arms. "Jenny gave it to me after you left for Europe," he explained. "Sometimes, after I'd receive one of your letters, I'd take it out of the cedar chest, thinking of you, and holding on to the memories of our time in the park." Holding her close, he whispered. "We shall give it to Isabella, and someday, when she's old enough to understand, we'll tell her how this simple toy brought her parents together."

Catherine nodded in agreement. "Thank you, Vincent."

"You are tired ... you should rest."

"Mmmmm," she answered, nuzzling closer to him. "Just for a few moments," she murmured.

Vincent held her close to his heart as she slept. Looking from his wife to the cradle where his infant daughter slumbered peacefully, Vincent took a deep breath, grateful that all was well, happier than he ever dreamed possible. He was suddenly reminded of all that Catherine had told him all these months, They were each other's destiny, in this life and the next, and that they would always be together. Yes, Vincent thought, Catherine was right all along. A love like theirs was too strong and magical to exist in only one lifetime, but would last for all eternity.

Their dream, as well as their love, knew no beginning, no end.

It was timeless.

THE END