

And Then There Was Joy

by Inez Paskal

(from Castles in the Air)

Joe Maxwell had been watching Catherine for almost two months. She wasn't aware of it, of course, but then she didn't seem to be aware of much of anything lately. She would sit at her desk and do her work. She would not laugh, or talk, or cry. She didn't show any particular emotion, and yet to look in her eyes was to look into haunted caverns.

She had disappeared for weeks, and it was almost as though he'd expected it, because she'd been acting strangely for quite some time. When she returned, he had made her understand that he was her friend. She couldn't answer any questions, she'd said. "So what else is new?" he had replied. "I'll *just* wait until you need to talk."

As he looked out at her now, she had the look of someone devouring herself. Her skin had a pallor and her eyes were dark-rimmed. He was sure she wasn't sleeping and he hadn't seen her eat anything in all this time. He couldn't *just* stand by anymore.

"Chandler, I'd like to see you ... please," he shouted from his door.

She looked up, startled, then jumped to her feet. She stood, gripping the edge of her desk to steady herself. The room seemed to sliding around, but only for an instant, then cautiously, she walked into his office.

"Yes, Joe?" she said, closing the door behind her.

"Cathy, I can't stand this any longer. It is obvious that you are not well. I *just* want to help. I promise, you can tell me anything." He noticed her reluctance and added, "Would it make you feel better if we didn't talk here? I can come over to your place ..."

"No, Joe, I can't," her voice was tight. "I know you are my friend, but I can't." Her throat seemed to close up, making it difficult to breath, and tears swelled in her eyes.

"Then please promise me that you will see a doctor. Go see Peter."

"Peter... yes, I have to see Peter," she gasped.

Joe had the feeling he was watching a sleepwalker as Catherine, almost in slow motion, slumped to the floor.

He pulled a pillow from the couch, placed it under her feet, then covered her with his jacket. Joe ran to the door, flagging down Rita for a cup of water, before moving back to Catherine. He rubbed her hands and wrists, then placed a damp handkerchief on her forehead. Catherine moved and fluttered her eyelids, but Joe was still concerned; he'd never seen anyone look so pale. Catherine opened her eyes and Joe bathed her face again, then helped her sit up so she could have a sip of water. He laid her back gently against the couch, then promptly called a doctor.

"Peter? Joe Maxwell. Cathy Chandler just fainted in my office. She's come out of it, but I'm going to take her home. Can you meet us there in an hour? Good! See you then."

Peter was waiting at Catherine's apartment when she and Joe arrived. Catherine unlocked the door and let them in, then excusing herself, she went into her bedroom, closed the door behind her, and went to bed.

"I don't know what's going on here, Peter, but there definitely is something wrong with that girl."

"You're right, Joe. The most important person in her life has been lost to her. Someone she loved ... beyond human understanding. She sacrificed herself for him, and still she lost him. Joe, believe me when I say they were truly one. How does she go on being only a half? She needs time to become whole again."

"Poor kid. I could see it happening - her intensity. She can take as much time as she needs, but please, keep me informed."

After Joe left, Peter went in to check on Catherine.

"Cathy-girl, what are you doing to yourself?"

Her smile was fragile and her eyes burned like emeralds in her pale face. "I'm trying to exist, Peter. But even that seems pointless."

"Jacob has been asking about you. He's worried," Peter said as he sat down on the edge of her bed. "He would like to see you, but I know it's difficult, impossible, for you to go Below now."

Catherine hesitated, then whispered, "How are things down there?"

"Actually, they are just trying to exist also, not much has changed."

"Oh," was all she could manage.

"I want to see you in my office tomorrow," Peter said after a moment. "I'll see you any time you can get there. Now, I'll give you a sedative. I want you to get a good night's sleep."

"No nightmares?"

"No, sweetheart," Peter smiled, patting her hand gently. "No nightmares, just sleep."

Catherine felt almost good the next morning and managed to get herself to Peter's office by ten. She had scared herself the day before, realizing that she hadn't been paying attention to herself since returning Above. The examination was routine, but Peter was very thorough, performing all tests. He told her that her blood pressure was a little low and that she'd lost weight, otherwise she was healthy enough. Peter said he'd call when the test results came back.

A few days later, the call came. Peter wanted to see her immediately. "Come in, Cathy," Peter said, ushering her into his private office. "Sit down." He waited until she was seated, then continued, choosing his words carefully.

"Cathy, you've been in denial for some time now. But the time has come to face reality." He watched as she squirmed in her chair. "What happened when you went into the cave with Vincent? You were together for days."

She was crying before he finished the sentence. "Cathy, this is important. Listen to me," he said sharply. "You can't go on like this and I'm the only person you can talk to."

"I love him," she said between racking sobs. "I love him."

"I know that, Cathy." Peter positioned himself squarely in front of her and took a deep breath. "Did he rape you?"

Catherine gasped. "NO!" she said emphatically, then in a quieter tone, "No, it wasn't rape. I welcomed it. I had long dreamed of spending time with him, but it was as though we both were being driven mad. Partly by proximity, partly by his rages, partly by my fear and partly by our own frustration. The consummation was our one quiet, blissful moment. Oh, Peter, it was beautiful, but it made what followed even more unbearable!"

She began to cry uncontrollably and Peter held her until her sobs subsided.

"Can you go on now? ,You need to talk about it."

"Vincent was so gentle, even in his rage, there was only love and I gave myself so willingly. He seemed very lucid and all our dreams were realized in those moments. He kissed me. Peter, he actually kissed me and held me, and there was *no* hesitation ... the restraints of his mind were gone. He was just a man in love." The tenderness and love in her voice were heartbreaking.

"We clung to each other. I would have stayed forever and we fell asleep in each other's arms. I woke up to that awful roaring. He was pacing frantically. Somewhere in our sleep, he was overcome with guilt. He couldn't remember the beauty we shared. I couldn't make him believe it *wasn't* rape, and he couldn't live with that." Her sobbing was pitiful.

"Oh, God," she whispered. "He tore at himself. It was as though that was the final barrier and he had crossed it. He could only see himself ...," she hesitated as though she couldn't bare to say the words -"an animal. Nothing I could say made any difference. My very presence made him more repulsive to himself. There was just no way to comfort him. Peter, I saw him *give* up the fight before my eyes. There were no words, just growls; no love in his eyes, just rage; no gentleness in his touch, just claws."

Her breaths were very short now and her wet cheeks flushed red. Peter rocked her until her crying gave way to occasional sobs.

"It's okay, Cathy. Let it all out." After a time, Catherine sat up and looked at Peter. Her expression was confused when she asked, "How did you know?"

"You're pregnant, Catherine," he said simply. "Starting your third month, I'd say." She stared at him speechless. "You had no idea?"

"No. Time has meant nothing to me since I returned... I don't even know what day it is."

"Well, it's September 10th and, near as I can figure, somewhere around April 15th you should be a mother - provided you start taking care of yourself, and don't put yourself or the baby in jeopardy."

"April 13th would be perfect," she whispered with the faintest smile. Her mind was racing, her life was starting again. Once again, she and Vincent were one, and she was whole.

"You seem to be surprisingly healthy, considering."

Catherine didn't want to speculate or analyze the situation, she accepted the fact and clung to it as a lifeline. "I'm grateful, Peter."

"Cathy, do you want this child?" Peter asked quietly.

Her expression was horrified. "Don't even finish that thought! What do I do now?"

Peter gave her a list of do's and don'ts, complete with diet and exercise instructions, and a set of appointments. If this baby was important to her, and she *wanted* it, he intended to take very good care

of her. But there were decisions to make, did she want to risk taking all the tests that were now normal procedure?

"Cathy, they could give us some answers, but they could also present more questions. "

Catherine was reluctant. "I don't think so. The answers would not make any difference, would they? I'll take the tests only if it would be better for my child."

"Okay, we'll do this the old fashioned way. Have you given any thought to where you want the baby born?"

"I would like it born Below, but I don't know if that will be possible."

"Well, that would solve certain problems should they arise," Peter agreed. "I'll talk to Jacob about it and get back to you as soon as I can."

If you don't mind, Peter," Catherine said quietly, "I'd like to break the news to him first. Would you arrange a meeting?"

That night, Father came to visit.

"Hello, Catherine," he said when the door swung open. I received a message that you wanted to see me."

"Yes," she said, giving him a genuine smile and quick hug. "Come in, Father. How are you? How are things Below?"

Father hobbled into the living room and settled himself on the sofa. "I am fairly well," he said. "And things are about the same." He glanced around the well decorated room. "This is quite lovely, Catherine, as I would expect."

"Thank you. I'll hate to give it up."

He looked startled. "Give it up? Why would you do that?"

"Well, eventually, it may not be big enough for two."

There was a long, uneasy pause. "I see. You have found someone to love and ... uh ... perhaps marry?"

"Father... how could I ever do that?"

"Then I do not understand your meaning," he said with a slight frown.

"Father, I'm going to have Vincent's child," Catherine said, as she sat beside him and took his hand in hers.

"How did that happen?"

"Do I need to explain?" her smile was soft and he seemed flustered. "I don't question what has happened, I've accepted it gratefully."

"You *accept*?" Father sputtered. "You saw, you saw, you experienced all the pain and suffering, and still you accept? Do you know what may be in store for you?"

"I have also loved all the love and I have already faced the fact that I may have to come Below to have this child, and perhaps, stay there. It won't be easy, but I will do what is necessary."

Father saw fierce determination in her green eyes and knew it would be as she said. He reached out and patted her hand, saying, "Then I'll do whatever I can to help."

A week later, Catherine bounced into Joe's office. "Hi, Joe!"

He looked up in total amazement, she looked healthy and vibrant. "Well, look at you. A few days made all the difference in the world."

"A few days and some news," she corrected him. "I have to tell you because you've been so concerned and such a good friend." She sat down and took a deep breath, trying to decide how to phrase the words.

"Just come out with it. You're leaving ..."

"No, I don't want to do that!"

"Well, come on - what?"

"Joe," her voice softened, "I'm going to have a baby."

He was speechless, then he remembered his conversation with Peter. "You're going to do this alone?"

Catherine's radiance dimmed somewhat and Joe stood up, walked around his desk and hugged her.

"Well, you're not alone, Radcliffe. You have me and you have Peter."

"Thank you, Joe," she said.

Time seemed to go quickly. A month passed and before Catherine knew it, it was Halloween - Samain. She set candles out on the balcony and had her supper there. Catherine took one of Brigit's books and bundled herself on the chaise to have a wonderful evening of memories. Suddenly, she sat up. She couldn't be sure ... yes, there it was again and Catherine burst into tears of joy. The child within her moved, and it was as though Vincent were there with her on their balcony. But there was always such pain mixed with her happiness and, somehow, this child knew what she needed.

Several days later, Peter went Below. "Jacob, she would really like to give birth down here."

"I know," Father sighed, rubbing his forehead. "She seems to have it all worked out, but I just don't know." He seemed truly torn and Peter wondered what was going on. As if reading his mind, Father met his friend's puzzled gaze and said, "I think you'd better come with me."

Father led the way down to a level just above the catacombs where Narcissa ruled. The old woman looked up from her work table, a deep smile creased her face.

"Father, welcome! All is quiet."

"Thank you, Narcissa," he replied, moving past her to a narrow passage which ended in a large opening. It was a well lit, pleasant room with iron bars for a door. Sitting quietly in his chair amid his books was Vincent.

"Hello, Vincent," Father said, his voice full of love.

Vincent looked up and smiled.

Peter was amazed. "Jacob, he knows you!"

"Yes," Father nodded. "We're making some progress."

Vincent rose and came to the bars. "Father," he said in a low voice, then pointed at Peter. "Who?"

"Vincent, this is Peter, an old friend."

"Peter? Peter," Vincent repeatedly softly.

"He's trying to put it into his memory, just like a three year old," Father explained. After a moment, Vincent gave up and said, "Father, stay ...read." Father read *The Emperor's Clothes* to Vincent. It was a favorite of his and made him laugh, but it made Peter sad to see his old friend in such a state.

Back in Father's chamber, Peter was very somber. "Jacob, I know what happened during that time Catherine and Vincent were together. I finally made Catherine tell me, she had to tell someone." He continued, telling Father the horrible story of Vincent's total breakdown and attempted self-destruction.

Vincent had tried several times in the days that followed Catherine's return to the world Above to harm himself. Father had witnessed the attempts and knew how devastating they were.

"Those poor children, victims of who knows what," Father said. "That Catherine did not go mad herself is a miracle."

"She almost did," Peter replied gravely. "Her child saved her sanity. Jacob, is there any glimmer of memory?"

"No. There seems to be total amnesia, but the intelligence is there, and he learns so very quickly. I'm sure once he learns to read, and he can learn at his own speed, there will be rapid progress."

"He seems quite calm."

"Yes, he's almost ready to come back and join us, I think."

"That will be good," Peter said with a hopeful smile. "I better warn Cathy not to come down. We don't want a repeat of what happened the last time he saw her. The next time he might succeed in killing himself."

"That is my worst fear," Father said, his expression turning grim. "I don't know that I *want* him to remember anything. We can't be sure what he will remember. If he will remember what actually happened, or his distorted images of that time. With all my heart, I wish he would come out of this and remember only our care and concern. Of course, I want him to remember Catherine's love for him. But who knows what he sees as his reality?"

"Jacob, does he realize he is not like everyone else?"

"Yes, and he has to work on accepting *that* all over again, too."

"It isn't right," Peter said, shaking his head. "Have we lost our friend and confidant; that beautiful, brave, noble spirit?"

"I keep thinking how ecstatic he would be to see his child, but how can I even tell him? He does not remember Catherine and then, if he does remember her, the very existence of the baby means he crossed the barrier he erected between them. He would have to accept that fact also."

Father sighed as if the weight of the world were upon him. "It's no use speculating about something that may never come to pass. He may keep all of the past suppressed forever as a means of self-preservation."

The two old friends sat together a long time that evening trying to console each other.

Vincent began pacing again. "Peter, Peter, Peter."

He stopped and grabbed his head. He didn't know what he was seeing, thinking. "Father and Peter, Father and Peter sit down at table." A fleeting glimpse of memory, a twinkling, and it was gone. He let out a roar.

Narcissa appeared at the door. "Child, what do you feel? Pain?" She opened her heart and mind to him and perceived him through his aura.

"Oh! *No...frustration.* There are things going on in your head and you do not know what they are. But now you do understand when we speak to you. That will be a big help. Vincent, I see that you will go through much very quickly now, and I see the struggle beginning. Oh, Vincent! Your eyes are like pools of innocence as they stare at me, wondering at an old woman's words." She reached up and stroked his face. "We all love you."

"Narcissa ... I love," Vincent whispered, his expression struggling with the images torturing his mind.

"Yes, Vincent, you love with all of your great heart."

She had soothed him and could tell he was thinking about what she'd said. She wanted to tell him the story of his life. She knew he was wondering, but she'd been told that it would be better to deal with each incident as he remembered, *if he remembered.*

"*Narcissa, home?*"

"*You know this is not home,*" she gently chided him.

"This is not home."

He mimicked her lilting voice as he repeated the words, but he knew what they meant. Indeed, he was progressing quickly, and Father might have to face his problem sooner than he thought.

Mouse, Father, and Jamie, along with a stream of children, moved Vincent back to his chamber. Then they stood back in anticipation, waiting for his reactions. Vincent looked around the room without any sign of recognition, but he seemed uneasy, so they left him alone with his thoughts.

Vincent made his way around the chamber, occasionally touching an unfamiliar object. He looked at the bed and the stained glass window above it, but there was no pull on his memory. He stopped at the table and fingered the chess pieces.

"Father and Peter at table."

That memory was clear. Vincent moved away from the chess game and stretched out on his bed. He fell asleep quickly, but his dreams were invaded by images that he couldn't understand. When he woke up, he reached for one of the books that had been brought back from his 'cell' They hadn't interested him there, but he sensed they had been an important part of his life. He turned the pages. Father saw stories there. He only saw little marks.

It was time for Winterfest. The excitement and preparation for this most celebrated event was the same as it had been in other years, and Vincent observed everything with the interest and delight of a child. He was fascinated by the candle-making process and loved the stories of years past. He asked

questions of one and all, and they answered him with patience and affection, for everyone was grateful to have him back.

Soon it was time to deliver candles and invitations to the Helpers Above, and one of the younger children, Marcie, remembered Catherine's welcome into the community the previous year. Realizing that no one had invited her this year, and since she had one candle left, Marcie took it upon herself to deliver the candle to Catherine, along with her personal invitation to attend Winteriest.

Catherine was surprised and pleased, giving Marcie a grateful hug. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed her friends Below. The community was her haven, her sanity in contrast to the insanity of the violence and insensitivity of the world Above. Sadness stole into Catherine's heart and she fought against tears. She would not think of all the things that had kept her away for so long, or the reasons why. She looked at the candle and held it close to her heart. This invitation meant that somehow it was safe and she could return to the people she loved.

On the night of Winteriest, Catherine dressed carefully. The dress she chose was blue, like Vincent's eyes, and flowed in soft pleats from a pearl-encrusted yoke. She placed the crystal he had given her around her neck, then checked the mirror. She wanted the picture to be perfect. This would be the first time these special friends would see her full with Vincent's child.

Catherine carefully made her way through the park. She wanted to walk in the crisp, late December air, this was something to savor - she was going home. She knew she would be early, but she wanted to just sit in Father's study for a while. She wasn't sure where Vincent would be, but if she could spend some time in his chamber, maybe she could feel him again, remember the warmth of his embrace.

There was great excitement and chattering as Catherine approached Father's study. She hurried along, her excitement contagious as her child began moving vigorously within her.

"You're home, little one, and I think you know it," she whispered, thrilled.

She burst into the chamber, candle in hand, throwing her arms around Mary. "I'm so very, very happy to be here. Thank you, all of you, for the invitation."

All eyes turned toward her as silence fell like a heavy curtain. She stood there, puzzled, but then everyone's joy at seeing her superseded their fear of the outcome. For a time, they crowded around her, all speaking at once, marveling at how radiant she looked. As she was turning around so all could get a good look at her, Vincent walked into the chamber, and they came face to face.

His smile was pleasant, yet shy when he said hello, then he walked past her - no trace of recognition in those beautiful blue eyes. She turned to look after him, her longing gaze lingered on his proud shoulders and noble back. Then the spirit drained out of her as she realized what had just happened. The memories of that horrible scene - the last time she saw Vincent - came over her, crushing her with their force. Catherine knew she couldn't stay and have him look at her with empty eyes; she quietly picked up her coat, draped it over her arm, then walked out.

Walking through the tunnels toward her apartment, Catherine re-lived the times she and Vincent had walked through the same passageways, hand in hand. Hot tears swam in her eyes and made everything a blur, then she heard someone call her name.

"Catherine ... all right?"

It was dear, sweet Mouse and she turned to stroke his cheek. "No, Mouse. Peter told me that Vincent might be rejoining the community, and I thought, when I received the invitation, that it would be safe for me to come down. He doesn't remember, does he?" She gave Mouse no chance to answer as she quickly added, "Maybe it's better that way."

Mouse walked with her until she disappeared into the sub-basement. He shook his head and a tear escaped his eyes. How could he enjoy Winterfest when his dearest friends had suffered so much during the past year and were still in such pain?

All the pain Catherine had suppressed since discovering she was pregnant, rushed through her as she entered her bedroom. She couldn't accept Vincent's unknowing stare, no one could ask that of her. She couldn't have the baby Below and have it mean nothing to him.

She threw herself on the bed, punching the pillow as she screamed into it. Curling up on her side, she felt the agitated movements of her child. Early in her pregnancy, Catherine had decided that this child would be a boy and had referred to it as "him" from that moment on. Now she concentrated on him, the soothing words she whispered relaxed them both. Catherine was mesmerized by his existence, and gradually, the pain began to fade as she channeled all the love in her heart into the one who needed her as much as she needed him.

April came, and still Catherine and Peter couldn't agree on where she would have the baby. She carried very well and it appeared her delivery would be normal, but Peter did not want to leave anything to chance.

"Catherine, you've gone through all your classes at the hospital and you are familiar with the facility, why won't you make up your mind to have the baby there? What is it? What are you feeling?"

"I don't want to be alone. I so wanted Mary as my mid-wife, and Father fussing about, and Vincent holding my hand. Peter, they are my family."

Peter thought for a while, then said, "That may be possible. If everything goes along normally, *if* you go to the hospital for a complete exam, and *if* we have hospital hook-up monitoring, I'll agree to let you have the baby at home. I'll bring Jacob and Mary up, we can all be here for you."

Catherine looked up, green eyes filled with gratitude. "I'll do whatever you say, if that can be arranged. Thank you, Peter." Her child would be born, surrounded by love, into the arms of the people who would accept him - no matter what.

The five months since Winterfest were filled with learning for Vincent. He was becoming quite articulate and those "little marks" on a page now meant something to him. He would have brief flashes of memory, but nothing he could hang on to or identify. He seemed quite calm most of the time. He was surrounded by love and complete acceptance, so there was no threat to him. He thought of himself as loved and loving. The "beast" had been forgotten, along with everything else.

As April 15th approached, Narcissa thought Vincent's progress needed a gentle nudge forward. One day, when he was working in the tunnels, she slipped into his chamber and left a brown leather pouch with a long cord on his table. She had kept it safe from the time she'd found it in the tunnels, hidden beneath his clothing. It was time ... the stirrings in the atmosphere were converging to start the miracle

of life .and April 13 was the day - this day.

Vincent finished his work and searched for Father. He wanted to read to him something he had read the night before - the story about the elephant's trunk. The story evoked memories of a strange place ... high above his world with a brick wall and glass doors. He wanted to recall this place, so Father might explain. But Father wasn't in his chamber, and when Vincent inquired about his whereabouts, people simply shrugged and shook their heads.

Vincent went to his chamber, changed his clothes, then sat down at the table to practice his writing. His eyes were drawn immediately to the brown pouch and slowly, he reached for it, his long fingers pulling the drawstring apart. He held out his right hand and emptied the contents into his palm. A white porcelain rose glinted in the candlelight and Vincent stared at it, losing himself in the keepsake instantly. He saw the beautiful woman in blue that he'd seen at the Winterfest celebration, and suddenly, he felt excruciating pain. He didn't know why or where it came from, but when he set the rose aside, the pain disappeared. He picked the rose up again, and the vision returned ... and so did the pain.

At the same time, on the eighteenth floor of an apartment building near Central Park, Catherine was in labor. When it first started, all she could think of was the date - how perfect. This was the night Vincent had saved her life and now their new life was about to emerge.

Peter sent a message before he left for Catherine's apartment, and an hour after he arrived, Father and Mary were at the door. Catherine was still in the first stages of labor, so there was a lot of talk and laughing as they played backgammon. Somewhere toward the end of the third game, they noticed that Catherine had gotten quiet, and there was a bit of strain in her voice when she spoke.

Peter checked her and said she was coming along nicely, then Mary took over. She walked Catherine around the apartment, then out on the balcony. It was a lovely evening, so they stayed out for a while, but Catherine would stop ever so often, digging into Mary's arm with her fingers as the contractions intensified. Suddenly, Catherine's head snapped up, her expression changed, and Mary thought she was recovering from an especially sharp pain. But Catherine was feeling Vincent through their bond as she hadn't felt him in months. It was very brief, but when it happened a second time, she was sure of it.

What does this mean? she wondered. As quickly as it had come, it was gone, but for an instant he was there with her.

When the next contraction came, it was deep in her back and Catherine's knees buckled as she pushed into it, groaning with the force of it. Mary walked Catherine back into the bedroom and helped her lie down on the bed. Peter hooked up the hospital monitor to follow her progress. They could see her heartbeat and the baby's, both were normal, everything looked fine.

An hour later Catherine delivered her first-born. Peter held her hand while Mary guided the baby's head and shoulders, then placed the screaming child into Father's anxious hands.

"Catherine, it's a girl!" Father exclaimed in wonder, his expression beaming.

Catherine couldn't believe her ears, she'd been talking to her "son" for months, but suddenly nothing mattered, except the child's condition. Was she healthy? Peter was peering over Father's shoulder, both men were grinning, then laughing crazily.

"I don't know exactly what we have here," Peter said in a teasing voice, "but the world had better

watch out."

That remark alarmed Catherine and she wanted to see her baby without further delay. Father dried the baby off, then weighed and measured her. Finally, he turned toward Catherine and put the baby in her arms.

"Here she is, all 9 pounds, 2 ounces, and 22 inches of her. This is one big baby for a woman your size. Well done, Catherine! I am proud of you ... and very grateful ..."

Father's voice trailed off as he struggled to control his emotions, but Catherine scarcely noticed. She pulled the blanket away from the baby's face and peered anxiously at her little one.

The first thing she noticed were the beautiful, large blue eyes, then a round face with full cheeks and a tiny nose that seemed to blend in. As Catherine continued to pull the blanket away, she squealed in delight at the sight of her child's mass of blond hair. It was still wet and seemed to stand up in spikes all over her little girl's head. Catherine's happy laughter seemed to bring a scowl to the baby's face and she appeared quite ferocious.

She certainly looks like a force to be reckoned with, Catherine thought. Although the child had many of her father's characteristics, her appearance was totally human and Catherine made sure of it. She inspected her baby from head to toe. She was perfect, and Catherine lost herself in those blue eyes. That first bonding brought both pleasure and pain, as Catherine saw so much of Vincent in that little face.

Mary stayed with Catherine the next day, and when she returned Below, she sent Jamie up for a while. Jamie was shy at first, being around so many pretty things, but soon she grew more comfortable. Jamie even looked forward to meeting Catherine's friends; Joe, Jenny and Nancy having been called by Catherine soon after the birth. Catherine wanted her friends to share her happiness, and reluctantly, Catherine admitted she wanted to boast about her child, for even now her exotic beauty was evident.

Joe was the first to arrive. He walked back and forth, smirking proudly, as if he'd been responsible, and Catherine couldn't resist a smile when he panicked as she held the baby out to him.

"No thanks, Radcliffe!" he stammered, backing away. "She's really something, you know? Look at those eyes and that hair. What in the world did her father look like? Pretty handsome guy, huh?"

"No one in the world like him," Catherine said with a sad smile.

"Does she make up for your loss?"

"Nothing could ever fill that void, but she is a special gift."

When Jenny and Nancy came, it was like three schoolgirls at a reunion. They had been worried about Catherine, but she was radiant, and it didn't take long for them to start chattering and gossiping. Then Jamie brought the baby over to the couch.

"She is absolutely fascinating," Jenny remarked as she held the child. "I mean from an artistic point of view. Most babies don't have eyes that blue so young, do they? And look at her beautifully long, tapered fingers. If that hair ever settles down, she could be a model"

"I don't think I want that for her," Catherine said.

Then it was Nancy's turn to hold the baby. She cradled her and smiled. "You know, you have to laugh when you look at her. She is so unique, she fills one with joy."

That word described Catherine's feeling so well that she decided her baby's name would be Joy.

Later, after her friends had left and she'd rested, Catherine summoned the courage to ask Jamie about Vincent. Her very soul was full of him these past days. She wanted desperately to show him their child, but the baby would mean nothing to him and how would she ever explain?

"Oh, he's almost like his old self," Jamie replied. "I don't think he remembers anything, but he has learned to be a part of us again." *A part of us.* That started Catherine thinking. *Joy and I are certainly a part of him. Maybe he can learn to be a part of us, too.*

But there was always the fear that his memory would return, with all the terrible consequences. What would they do if his wild rantings should start again? Could she take that chance because of her need to be a part of him? Would those Below be willing to let her take that chance with their lives and Vincent's?

The memory of Winterfest was fresh in her mind. Would she be able to start over with Vincent, him believing her a stranger? She had no answers, but she was determined Joy should know her father. Surely, no one Below would deny Joy that right, even if it meant that Catherine would have to stay in the background. Fear and anticipation filled Catherine as she decided she would try to become a part of Vincent's life again.

When Joy was six weeks old, Catherine took her Below. She entered Father's study unannounced, and the reaction was immediate as Joy was held in loving arms. Everyone wanted to hold her, and Joy laughed with delight, but Father frowned at Catherine as she approached him.

"This is her family," Catherine explained firmly. "She belongs here for at least part of the time. She will truly be of both worlds, but she needs this society. I can love her and provide for her, but she needs ..."

Catherine's words were cut short as Vincent entered the study to see what was causing the commotion. As it happened, his were the next pair of arms in the circle as he came in the door. He was startled at first, but then he looked at the baby, and smiling, held her close. When Vincent raised his eyes again, he looked directly into Catherine's.

"There you are. You came back," he said amiably. "It's been a long time since Winteriest." His gaze darted from Catherine to Joy, then back again. "Is she yours? She is beautiful. Look at all that hair. What is her name?"

"I named her Joy because of the joy she gives everyone, especially me, from the moment of conception," Catherine said through tears.

Vincent thought that was an odd thing to say, and a past memory flashed before his mind's eye, along with the odd sensation he felt every time he held the rose. He stared deep into Catherine's eyes, a look that made her shiver, then he carefully handed Joy to her mother and left. For reasons he couldn't understand, he always felt uneasy around this beautiful woman.

Soon after their reunion, Catherine returned to work. Jamie would take Joy Below each morning to spend the day, and Catherine picked the child up in the evening. She decided not to push her relationship with Vincent and he seemed to stay in the background when she was there. Vincent wasn't aware of it, but someone was always watching him for some indication of the violence

Catherine's presence once provoked. But Vincent's peaceful demeanor never wavered, he simply watched Catherine with calm, blue eyes.

Lately, Vincent was thinking more about Catherine. He was certainly drawn to her and she filled his dreams. He would dream of being with her: high above the city, standing on a brick ledge with long doors behind them, or sitting beneath a concert stage listening to music, or walking hand in hand through the tunnels. Then the dreams would turn into nightmares, and Catherine would appear in the darkness, repeating over and over again, " ... *the joy she gave me from the moment of conception ...* " He would wake with a start. Something deep inside him rejected his feelings, and made him deny the dreams. Why must they recur and torment him? They were only dreams, weren't they?

He knew he had no right to love her, being what he was, but somehow, inexplicably, he did. He would try to hold back, but his desire moved him toward her. Sometimes he found himself so close he could smell her hair, and at those times he could feel her as well. He felt her so intimately they seemed to be connected. She didn't seem the least bit repulsed by him, in fact, she was almost loving.

Vincent began to look forward to Joy's daily visits and soon took over her care completely. Father watched the bond between them grow as quickly as the child herself. By Joy's first birthday, she'd already been walking and saying a few words for the last three months. Vincent never seemed happier. He was with Joy all day long and with Catherine every evening.

Sometimes, after dinner, Father and Catherine would watch Vincent and Joy playing together. They would touch foreheads and stare at each other, blue eyes to blue eyes, blond hair to blond hair. Joy would giggle as she nuzzled her daddy's fuzzy nose, and it was difficult to tell where one ended and the other began. Father and daughter were a magnificent pair.

Catherine, along with Joy's underground family, planned a big party for the little girl's birthday, and Vincent looked forward to it. He was searching for something special to give Joy, when he came across the rose that he'd put away months ago. He couldn't explain it, but the rose always gave him a headache as it begged for memories he couldn't provide. This time, however, when he held it and closed his eyes, he saw his dreams and he was filled with such love for Catherine that he slipped the pouch around his neck. It felt right there and he was certain this was where it belonged. Then he decided to give Joy the carousel he had in his trunk, supposing it had been a favorite childhood toy.

When Catherine arrived with the ice cream, Mary brought out the birthday cake and everyone gathered around to sing "Happy Birthday." But all Catherine could see was the rose around Vincent's neck. She fingered her crystal, remembering the night three years ago when they exchanged those gifts. Here he was so close, as if the bond...

She looked up and found him staring at her. Once again, the bond was there, uniting them in every emotion. She felt it and knew that he felt it, too.

As Joy was busy diving into her cake, Catherine decided to take the chance. She walked up to Vincent and put her arms around his waist. He withdrew slightly from her touch so she leaned forward and whispered, "don't you know how much I love you?"

He was filled with disbelief, but as he "felt" her meaning through this new found bond, he knew it was true. For a long moment, they simply stood staring deep into each other's eyes, filling their starving souls with the other's presence. Reality intruded on their dream when a pair of small arms attacked their legs. Vincent reached down with one arm and scooped up his little one.

"Patty cake, patty cake," she pleaded.

Vincent sat down and started the rhyme for Joy.

*"Patty cake, patty cake, baker's man
Bake me a cake as fast as you can
Pat it and roll it and mark it with 'B'
And put it in the oven for Daddy and me. "*

She squealed with delight as he tickled her, then reached up with two little hands and brought her tiny face close.

She kissed him and repeated, "For Da-dee, Da-dee, Da-dee."

Vincent drew Joy tightly to him, then held her out away from him and looked at her - truly looked at her - as tears streamed from his eyes. Time seemed to stand still in the tunnels as everyone watched Vincent and his daughter, their own eyes wet with tears. Catherine knelt down beside Vincent, placing her hand on his knee, she had stopped breathing when Joy called Vincent, "Daddy."

No one was prepared for what happened next. Vincent started to pant heavily, he closed eyes, and moved his head from side to side. Mary grabbed Joy, but Catherine remained by his side. She knew that Vincent was having flashes of memory. The moment of the dilemma was upon them. Vincent tossed his head and roared deep within himself as all his memories rushed in on him at once. The nightmares were no longer confined to sleep. The rage and self-recriminations were fighting to the surface and he opened his eyes to see Catherine kneeling beside him. Her voice was calm as she spoke.

"Remember Joy. The joy she gave me from the moment of conception. The joy she gave *us*. I loved you. I *wanted* you! I *still* love you."

He looked deep into her eyes and felt her serenity--no fear. And then he looked at his child, straining against Mary, arms outstretched as she tried to get back to the father she loved. He remembered love and respect and passion. And he understood.

EPILOGUE

Joy fell asleep in Vincent's arms, so I decided to leave her Below for the night. Vincent and I had much to talk about, but years of memories were colliding in his mind, and watching everyone try to regain their place in his life was almost painful. We had just discovered each other again; it was our anniversary and we needed to be together. But Vincent seemed weary, and Father suggested that another time would be more satisfying for us. After all, we have waited this long, another day and a good night's sleep wouldn't hurt.

Vincent seemed almost relieved when I told him I was leaving. He was reluctant to live through the details of that fateful night. He was embarrassed and uneasy. Time was needed to remember and feel and put things in perspective.

As we left the study, I felt a great burden on my emotions. I couldn't explain it. He walked with me, but he was almost shy to take my hand and I realized he was very puzzled by our entire relationship. He needed to fit the past into this last year. The further we walked in silence, the more burdened I felt.

I was tired. It had been a long day. It should have been one of the happiest days of my life, but instead, I was dejected and I was struggling for the emotion -the label - guilt ridden. That was it. I had to come to terms with my own part in all this. Could I have done anything to stop that moment in time which had caused Vincent so much pain? Was It my passion that was unleashed? Did I take advantage of his torment to fulfill my desire?

I sat in front of my mirror, incriminating myself. I had to be honest. I had to see it as it really was if I was ever to help Vincent through this.

"So, Miss Chandler, now that you have sworn to tell the truth, relate the story from the beginning." The voice from the mirror was speaking legalese and it demanded my objectivity. I went back to that night...

Father begged me not to go into the cave, but I had to help Vincent. He wouldn't feel abandoned as long as I lived, for there was no life for me without him. My mind took in all the possibilities as I walked forward. It was as though I was being pulled by an invisible thread toward that horrible, growling scream.

He could have lost all control by this time. Would he even know me? He could lash out at me without realizing it. The incessant roaring echoed, reverberating from one wall to the other. My heart was pounding and my mouth went dry, but I put one foot in front of the other, forcing myself on.

My foot fell on something soft, I stopped and looked down. There on the floor of the tunnel were Vincent's clothes. This presented a problem I hadn't thought of before. No... that wasn't true. To say I had not thought of his naked body before is wrong. I would imagine his body next to mine as I lay in my bed at night. I imaginea his masculine firmness, I lost myself in the expanse ot his shoulders and trembled at the thought of his touch on my naked body. Perhaps my own desire was part of my determination to reach him.

I couldn't see anything when I entered the cavern. It was dark and I knew Vincent had the advantage of superior eyesight. I moved in a little farther, trying to pinpoint the sound of his voice, but the echo made it impossible. I felt the wall behind me and I inched my way to the left, my right hand on the wall, my left hand out to my side, probing the unseen. My eyes began to get used to the darkness. I realized that a shaft of light - dim as it was - came in through the opening from the outside tunnel where Mouse and Father were keeping vigil. As I turned toward the light, Vincent quickly moved into my line of vision.

All I could do was cry out his name in alarm, for standing before me was my beloved with his hair matted with blood. It trickled down his face and as I called out he collapsed. I was terrified that he was dead. I ran to him and he lifted himself on his elbows, growling at the unseen enemy. I tried to soothe him and the sound of my voice did seem to quiet him.

Father called into the cave. He wanted to know what I needed. The sound of his voice agitated Vincent again. It was as though the sounds were amplified in his ears. I replied as quietly as I could that I needed a lantern, water, bandages, food, and Vincent's cloak. I cradled him in my arms while I waited. I hummed a lullaby and Vincent nestled closer to me.

I was very much aware that I was caressing his bare shoulders. I felt along the clavicle to his neck - it was smooth and hairless - then I reached down and rubbed my cheek along the ridge of his shoulder. I allowed my lips to follow with several small kisses anf nestled my chin on his chest as I nibbled his neck. I could hear what sounded like a rumbling purr, coming from deep within him.

My right hand began exploring his chest while my left hand held him. My fingers combed through soft,

warm down. It felt luxurious and I knew the color had to be that wonderful golden blond. I wanted to lay my bare breasts on his chest and I started to tremble with desire. Did I dare continue this erotic exploring? I tried to stop myself, but I couldn't. My gentle massaging and fondling relaxed him. I could feel his breathing become less labored. However, I was to the point where I could hardly breathe.

Moving my hand in an undulating manner, I continued to probe along his side, down to his waist, his hip, his thigh. There was a very fine covering of short, silky hair that gave way to bare skin at the hip. I kept rubbing the side of his thigh, teasing myself, before I allowed my touch to move forward. I pressed my hand into his skin, hesitating only a moment before I allowed my hand to slide to the center of his body.

"Catherine! I leave 'stuff outside." Mouse's voice startled me back to sensibility. I swallowed hard and breathed deeply to clear my head. Reluctantly, I left Vincent to get the supplies, and Mouse told me he would bring fresh supplies daily until we could bring Vincent home. I thanked him, then returned to Vincent.

The lantern filled the cavern with a soft light and Vincent turned his head. For a moment, I simply stood there, taking in that magnificent body, then I recovered my senses and set to work washing face and head to discover the extent of his wounds. He had a deep gash across his forehead as though he'd struck his head on the stone walls several times. After he was cleaned and bandaged, I tried to get him to eat, but he refused. I was unable to tell if he was conscious of his surroundings, or if he knew who I was. I spread his cloak on the floor and he crawled onto it. I slipped in next to him and covered us both.

I have no idea how long we slept, for there was no day or night, as each day slipped into the next. Most of the time Vincent would pace, then stop and growl. He seemed to look right through me. His torment was terrible and I have to admit I had great fear. I didn't fear him as much as the unknown. He would come at me, but stop just short of doing harm. For very brief moments, he would be lucid, and even called my name. Once, as we lay in darkness, he reached for me, held and caressed me, and I could feel him becoming aroused, as I molded myself into his body. But the old restraints took over and the frustration added to his torment and mine.

After ten days of rage, tears, and anguish, he finally seemed exhausted. He lay on his cloak, his mane matted, his eyes dark circled and lacklustered, his mouth moving as though forming silent words. I don't know what frightened me more, the loud ranting or this silent staring. I watched as he fell asleep and then I realized I was at the end of my endurance, also. I sensed the end of the struggle was coming soon.

I lay there next to him, looking into the face I loved, watching his chest rise and fall. It was the most peaceful he had been throughout our ordeal. I took off my sweater, loosened my blouse, turned down the lantern, then moved in very close under the cloak. I looked forward to a peaceful rest. Sometime later, I became aware of Vincent's voice, soft and husky as it had always been.

"Catherine, know that I love you. No matter what... I love you."

I felt as though I was going to melt. All of the fear, frustration, and passion that I had experienced those past ten days flooded my being and I was too weary to resist. So was Vincent. Our bodies were so close, I could feel the down on his chest through my blouse. My breasts were throbbing and I threw off my clothing to feel the sensation of him. A quiver went through Vincent as he realized my nakedness, but I was determined not to allow him to stop. Imagine my joy when I realized he had no intentions of pulling back. He kissed me once, then twice, and I was turned inside out. We had waited two years for this moment.

I moved away long enough to remove the rest of my clothing. When I returned to him it was evident he was ready to consummate our love and I was more than ready to receive him.

He hesitated for a moment and said, "I don't know what will happen."

"We will find out together," I whispered as I reached up and pulled him down to me. I kissed him deeply, over and over, as our sensuous movements made us one. I remember digging my nails into his back and nipping his lip. As gentle as he was, I was savage. My pent-up passion ran wild. We were well-matched and satisfied each other as I always knew we would. Later, we fell asleep, totally exhausted and at peace.

I woke up suddenly to awful, pitiful sounds, which were somehow different than before. I sat up to find Vincent kneeling beside me. He was sobbing and holding his head.

"What is it?" I asked, alarmed. Vincent's head snapped up. "You should never have come," he hissed. "How can you look at me? Catherine, I forced you."

"No, Vincent. No!" I cried, panic gripping my heart.

"Do not lie to me, Catherine. I know what happened. I've lost all humanity. am nothing."

He was infuriated with himself and I could not convince him otherwise.

"I am an animal - an animal!"

He was so repulsed that he became incoherent and before my eyes he slashed his wrists and gouged his chest with razor sharp claws. He growled and paced and raged. He didn't know me.

I ran to get Father. By the time we got back, Vincent had almost bled to death and was unconscious. Father tended him and we carried him out of that cavern up to Narcissa's chambers. It was the closest place to make him comfortable. We took turns by his bedside. Father assumed this was the natural result of Vincent's torment and I let him think it. How could such beautiful passion cause such devastation? I began to believe it was all a dream. I had had so many dreams before, this could have been one more.

Vincent regained consciousness and just stared. He didn't speak or show any sign of recognizing anyone. I wasn't there when he opened his eyes, but Father came to get me, hoping I could jog his memory. When I walked into the chamber, Vincent became violent once again. Even in his weakened condition, it took both Father and Mouse to restrain him. He tore at his bandages and tried to re-open his wounds. He was determined to do away with himself, and his reaction surprised all of us.

Sadly, Father said, "Catherine, for some reason you seem to trigger a suicidal reaction in Vincent. I dislike suggesting this, but maybe you had better leave. I don't think it will be safe for either one of you, if you stay."

I asked how long I should stay away, but he couldn't give me an answer. He only said it could take a very long time. I will never forget the feeling of total despair. How does one go on living after all your hopes and dreams come true and then, are denied you?

I said all of this out loud. I needed to hear my voice saying the words. Vincent took on the blame and self-recrimination, the shame and self-reproach, for crossing the barrier he'd set up between us, but it was I who seduced him from the very first day. I can say that now. I can be honest and perhaps make him realize my part in his loss of innocence. But he must also understand that when there is love as deep as ours, this is the natural, "human" course of events or we shall both go mad.