

Deeper Than All Roses

by Joy Faulkner

"The voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses"
- E E Cummings: Somewhere I have never travelled

Catherine began to think that Jenny would never leave. Much as she loved her friend and she did, dearly, her nerves were stretched almost to breaking point as Jenny fussed around her, talking, watching, making sure she was all right. And she sighed heavily, a little for Jenny, it was true, knowing how worried her friend must have been. And with good reason too. But mostly, if she was honest, Catherine sighed for herself. She was desperate, dying for Jenny to go, but she couldn't push her out of the door, much as she was tempted to. Not without offering some sort of explanation, some comment as to why, and that was something Catherine just wasn't able to do.

"You needn't stay, Jen," she began tentatively, hoping against hope that Jenny would take the hint without too much trouble.

But she was wrong, as she'd guessed all along she probably would be. Jenny's protests were immediate and effusive, insisting she could stay all night if need be. But that was the very last thing Catherine wanted to hear and she had to grit her teeth hard to stop herself from screaming. Jenny meant well, she knew, but if she didn't leave soon, Catherine felt she would surely go mad. Vincent was waiting, out on the cold balcony and she was frantic for him to hold her, to comfort her. No one else would do. No one. No matter how much they cared.

"But I'm not going to be alone, Jen," finally throwing caution to the winds, she blurted out the truth - or part of it, at least. Uttering the only words she was sure would have any effect.

And this time she was right. They had certainly shut Jenny up and Catherine hung her head, carefully avoiding her friend's eyes. Or, to be more precise, avoiding the array of stunned questions suddenly evident there. But she was determined she wasn't going to satisfy Jenny's curiosity just yet. She would have to wait and, by the time the conversation came round again, Catherine would have had time to think something up. But until then, she kept her head low, doing her best to look bashful and she ushered her friend gently but firmly towards the door. And to her relief, Jenny went fairly easily. They exchanged a few more pleasantries, muttered a few last goodbyes and then, finally, Catherine was alone. Alone, in the breathless silence, in the sudden night-time quiet of her apartment.

She snapped off the light at once, not pausing, not thinking, too desperate to see Vincent, to touch him, to stop for a second. And he was there, poised at the french windows, waiting for her.

With an inarticulate cry, one she scarcely recognised as being her own, Catherine hurled herself across the apartment floor towards him, faster than she'd ever moved before, all reserve vanquished in her need to hold him close. She reached him in an instant and with an agony that matched her own, he gathered her to him; holding her, enfolding her, calling her name.

"I felt you go, I felt you go," he groaned, crushing her closer.

But even that wasn't enough for Catherine. "Hold me tighter, tighter," she implored, clinging onto him for dear life. But nothing he did was enough. "I'm cold, cold," she cried, past consoling and, bowing silently to the inevitable, Vincent stepped through into the apartment and closed the door quietly behind them.

She was truly shivering, dithering uncontrollably with cold and delayed shock, her body shaking and sick. She had never before been so close to death. At least, not knowing it quite so much. The bullet from Mitch Denton's gun had been fired into her back and, cowardly as it was, it had also been quick. And merciful. She had dropped at once, aware of nothing more until she'd awakened, hours later, in a hospital bed. But tonight had been different. She'd come to, cruelly regained consciousness as the trunk of the car had been filling with its deadly load of icy water. And she'd been awake, awake and fighting, as it crept higher, covering her, choking her. Until it had finally blotted her out.

But it had been denied its final triumph, Vincent had seen to that. His desperation had proved too much for it. If anything, his pain had been deeper, his fear sharper, than hers. For he would have been the one left behind; the one alone and he didn't think he could have survived that. Of all things, not that. The thought of her warm, breathing form growing cold, lifeless, lost to him, was enough to tear him apart. And he wrapped his arms about her, his tears moistening her silky hair, frantic to convince himself she was really there, alive, still with him; all but inconsolable himself.

Somehow they found themselves in the bed, wrapped up in the covers. It was the only way Vincent could think of to get her warm. And she wormed her way closer, wriggling beneath his quilted jerkin to bury her face in his chest.

"Catherine." He whispered her name like an invocation, his breathing quickening in spite of himself.

The terrors of the night were telling on him too and he could feel his control slipping fast. He knew in an instant that Catherine felt it as well. Her arms clung more tightly about his neck and she began to kiss his neck, his ear, with a very different kind of desperation. Immediately, his blood started to sing, his heart to hammer, in a response he couldn't deny. So he started to rise, to disentangle himself.

"You're going, you're leaving me!" she accused wildly, guessing his purpose at once. "You don't love me. You can't," she sobbed, "when you can go and leave me now, when I need you so much! You might as well have left me back in the car!"

Catherine knew she was pushing him beyond endurance, hurting him unbearably, but she couldn't help herself. She'd glimpsed a promise of something new, something wonderful and it had been snatched away before she could grasp it - and she was bitterly hurt and rejected.

"Catherine," he tried to soothe her, his fingertips brushing the tears from her face, his voice mirroring her pain. "I might hurt you, I might hurt you," he breathed, beside himself with fear.

But she would have none of that. "No," she said dully, "I don't believe it. You could never hurt me. It's just an excuse. Go, if you must, but don't lie to me anymore. You obviously don't want me. You never did."

She rolled over onto her face as he rose, gripped by a hurt greater than she'd ever known before as she felt him leave. And she cried into her pillow with the abandonment of a child, a lost, lonely, unwanted child, sure that her heart was shattered.

But suddenly, unbelievably, Vincent was beside her again, holding her close. He hadn't gone. Not for the world could he have left her. Not like that. And very gently, very carefully, as if she was pure Dresden china, precious and breakable, he gathered her back into the warmth, the safety, of his arms.

Catherine scarcely dared breathe, she almost thought she was dreaming, but her arms went round him just the same, clutching him to her and the sense of unreality bloomed, heightened, as she realised his boots were gone, finally discarded onto the bedroom floor, and his thick outer clothing, too. Only his shirt remained a barrier between them and that was made of thin stuff indeed. So thin she could feel his heart pounding beneath it. So thin he was shivering himself.

"Cold?" she queried, her voice sounding odd, unreal, in the darkness.

Her eyes scrutinized his face, brimming with an agonized hope, watching his every move. But he merely shook his tawny head.

"Not really," he said, sighing and that faint sound said it all.

With a start of surprise, she suddenly understood. It wasn't the cold making him shudder: it was her.

How it had happened, she never knew. Just that it had. And she wasn't going to take the chance of it slipping through her fingers again. Not now. So she took his face between her hands, before he could move, before he could change his mind and she kissed him, slowly, sweetly, touching the cleft upper lip, the smooth lower one, with her own; revelling in the strange yet somehow familiar feeling of his mouth beneath hers. And softly, tenderly, in one brief, heart-stopping moment, Vincent began to kiss her back.

It always amazed her afterwards, that one who had experienced so little, should know so much. But at the time it didn't occur to her. She was far too busy feeling it, cherishing it, to ever think about questioning it. She'd undone his shirt with impatient hands, tugging at the buttons in her haste; her fingers suddenly all thumbs. She wanted so much to see him, hesitation or modesty even, weren't options open to her any longer. And he hesitated only a fraction himself, catching her hands tightly in his. But she brushed them aside with a shake of her head, a breathless 'no'; determined that nothing would stop her now. If she never had him again, if they were never again to be this close, that night, at least, he would be hers. And that night, too, when he had come within a space of a moment, the merest breath, of losing her for good, Vincent could deny her nothing. Not even himself. So he released her, his breath expressed in one short sigh, resigned to his fate and he gently allowed her her freedom.

Her hands slid beneath the flimsy material, pulling it back to expose his chest, her fingers finding at last the thick, golden fur growing in abundance there. And she shouted aloud her delight, glorying in its softness, the silky feel of it beneath her touch.

"Beautiful, beautiful," she murmured, exploring it with her lips, her tongue; feeling it part into small, wet curls under her demanding little mouth. And she buried her nose in it, snuffling into its warmth, breathing in its scent. She couldn't get enough of him and Vincent knew it. He knew.

"Catherine, Catherine," he whispered, but he was smiling as he spoke. The horror, the repugnance, he'd always feared so much, just wasn't there. All he could feel from her - and so strongly that it made his head reel - was love; and a need for him, a sexual attraction so strong that he could scarcely believe it. He knew, of course; had known for some time, that she thought she wanted him. But he had never been able to hope, even secretly, in his dreams, in the privacy and quiet of his own night-time chamber, that the attraction would survive the reality of his hairiness, his size, in her bed.

But he couldn't have been more wrong. He had come back to her prepared for rejection, in a fearful haze of apprehension, steeling himself to face the pain of her horror, her disgust; but sure in his aching heart that anything, anything at all, had to be better than leaving her to believe he just didn't care. *Let her see*, he'd thought, *and she'll understand*. But he'd prayed, fervently, desperately hard, that her love would survive the shock. Only distantly, in the faraway reaches of his mind, had he hoped, just a little, that she might want him still.

"Vincent," she breathed, and he lifted her face between his two palms, seeing her parted lips, her widened eyes, marvelling that this wealth of feeling, this need, was for him.

Catherine smiled at his astonishment and she put her arms about his neck to draw his head down towards her.

"Oh, my love," she said and, infinitely slowly, savouring every tiny moment she drew back his mane of hair and blew a torrent of breathy kisses into his ear.

The shock of his reaction stunned him rigid. His huge frame tensed and it seemed every hair on his body stood on end at once - and for Vincent, that was an awful lot of hair. But he found he enjoyed it vastly and he was far from losing control. So he decided to do the same to her, reasoning, fairly logically, that if he liked it so much, there was a good chance that she would like it too. So he held her down, firmly, so that she couldn't wriggle away and tried a few experimental kisses himself. And when that seemed to work, delightfully well, he tried a few more. But this time he explored a bit further, kissed that bit

harder. Moving on to her neck, the unbelievably silky curve of her shoulder and finally, scarcely daring to believe that he actually might, to each rosy nipple in turn.

From then on, Vincent had it all his own way and he knew it. He was in no rush, he was enjoying himself too hugely for that, exploring Catherine's body minutely, committing every pale, tender inch of it to his mind. He was amazed by her smallness, the daintiness of her build and the creamy smoothness of her skin beneath his hands, his lips. And the more he explored, the more she trembled and the bolder he became. He had never imagined, not in his wildest dreams, that it would be like this. If he'd ever allowed himself to think, even for a moment, that making love to Catherine was even the vaguest of vague possibilities he'd somehow been sure that she would be the leader, the one who knew how. Yet' here they were, in her bed, quite definitely making love and he was the one dominating the pace. But he'd patted himself on the back just a little too soon and Catherine suddenly pushed him back against the pillows; insistent now to have her turn.

"Now me, now me," she demanded. But by then, when her fingers were finally poised impatiently at the fastening of his jeans, pulling them open; he was far more relaxed about it than she. He lay back, shifting his weight a little here and there to help her, allowing her to finally strip him down to the skin.

Then it was Catherine's turn to marvel. He was fair, surprisingly fair, with the same thick golden growth on his chest and arms. But the rest of his body was smooth to the touch, like carved ivory and as powerfully muscled as an athlete's. She touched him, lightly at first, then with growing courage, following every line of his muscular frame with her questing fingertips, until his blood was pounding like fire in his veins and he thought he was going to explode.

"Now?" she breathed and he nodded, all patience lost in the growing tide of his passion.

"Now," he agreed, his voice barely a whisper in the darkness of the room.

And now that the moment, the act of possession, was finally upon him, he didn't hesitate. There was no fear; his control was not slipping, his humanity wasn't debased. Not at all. Indeed, he had never felt stronger and he exulted in his own maleness, in Catherine's tender, receptive femininity, in ways he had never dreamed possible.

"Now," she urged again, arching upwards to meet him, her body tense, eyes hazy, their pupils dilated and one last blaze of sheer wonder flooded his heart, that it was him, him she was aching for.

But then the wondering ceased and the reality truly began. She helped him to find her, trembling like a reed in the encompassing circle of his arms, shaking in her impatience and then at last, at long last, Vincent settled himself carefully over her slender form and finally claimed his Catherine for his own.

It wasn't all plain sailing at first. Vincent was a heavy man and he had to take care his weight didn't cause her too many problems. The last thing he wanted was to literally drive the breath from her body. And Catherine, she had been celibate for so long that anyone, let alone someone the size of Vincent, would have caused her some initial discomfort. But the difficulty was fleeting and soon overcome. An experimental shift of weight, a sharp intake of breath and it was past and already forgotten. They were both so engrossed, so absorbed in exploring this brand-new world, this universe of sharing their most intimate selves, most intimate thoughts and feelings, that everything else became lost in the glory of it.

Again, Vincent was stunned by the sheer power, the overwhelming force of his feelings. He had expected it to be good, more than good, but the incandescent maelstrom of pure sensation he actually felt almost buried him in its intensity. It took over, a sweet fire burning white hot in his loins, setting him aflame. But he carried Catherine with him, he made certain of that, allowing her no pause, no respite, in the delicious building of her own passions.

Not that she wanted any. Catherine would have been as amazed as he, had she had time to feel anything but the growing agony of love taking her body inexorably in its grip. She held Vincent close, helping him, loving him, letting him know that this feeling, this love, was his and his alone. And he responded, with equal love, driving them both onwards and upwards, towards peaks she hadn't even

known existed. That it was Vincent, truly Vincent, the one person she loved more than life itself, the man she had waited so achingly long to hold, who now held her body in such thrall, was no small factor in the intensity of her pleasure. No one else could have produced such a power of love in her, such an abandonment of sheer delight.

And she wanted to be sure he knew that. So she kissed him, hard, wherever she could reach and caressed every available part of him. Until, together, in a fiery explosion that took every vestige of breath from their bodies, they crashed through the final barrier and out into the realms of pure gold beyond.

The tranquility that followed, the slow descent back to the everyday world, was almost as delightful as the power of their love had been mighty. The contentment was deep, the mutual satisfaction sublime and they needed no words to express it. Vincent rolled onto his back, but he was careful to keep her close. He wrapped his arms about her, making sure she was settled the length of him, their bodies still touching, each taking in the warmth of the other. And her head lay on his shoulder, resting as trusting as a child's against the strong column of his neck. Then, and only then, when he was quite, quite sure she was safe, did he allow himself to fully relax.

But Catherine was already relaxed, draped over him in total abandonment, eyes closed and breathing slow. She was misted in perspiration, as he was himself and her hair was streaked and damp to his touch. He smoothed it back from her face, smiling to himself at the heavy, silken feel of it between his fingers and she sighed and stretched involuntarily against him. He watched her sleep, watched her breathe, absorbing the feel of her, her very essence, into the fibre of his being.

But making love to Catherine had been more than a physical act, no matter how sensational it had been. It had brought with it subtle changes to their relationship. Subtle but irredeemable. He had known the sublime joy of possession the power of dominating her body completely with his and there could be no going back on that. She was no longer a goddess, an unreachable dream to be cherished and cared for. Though elements of those remained still remained. Now there was more; much, much more. She had become, in that one act, a reality in his life; a woman, who had squirmed and moaned beneath him, his woman, someone there to be touched, held close, loved whenever he chose. An undeniable part of him. She would expect different things of him now and give different messages back. The vistas were unending, the possibilities enormous. He was responsible now, in every possible way; her chosen partner; her rock more than ever before. And he was desperate to be truly worthy of her.

"Vincent," she was just starting to wake and her voice was still muffled with sleep, the name almost lost against his neck.

"Mmmm." He shifted her slightly, moving her head just a fraction so that he could hear her better.

"Are you really here?" she asked softly.

"I think so," he smiled, genuinely amused. "See," he added, holding out an arm, "No dream. Definitely flesh and blood."

She sighed, but didn't touch him straight away. She felt the changes too, and was suddenly overcome, overwhelmed by a ridiculous sense of shyness.

Don't be silly, this is Vincent, she reasoned with herself. But somehow, it wasn't Vincent at all. At least, not the Vincent she knew so well. This was a man with a distinctly self-satisfied smile on his face, and that was a whole new experience for Catherine. She threw him a sidelong glance, from beneath lowered lashes and his smile deepened as their eyes met.

"Hello, my love," he said softly and she wondered with a faint sense of surprise what on earth she'd unleashed. He was self-satisfied and manifestly pleased with himself.

"Hello," she responded, still somewhat shy of him, but she was waking up properly now and more than a little intrigued by what she was finding.

Lifting a hand, she ran a fingertip along his upper lip, feeling the strangeness, the difference, of it. After all, if he was claiming rights over her and it seemed like he was, then she had some rights over him, too.

"Of course," he agreed gravely, obviously picking up her thoughts. So emboldened, she continued.

She had never before touched him in such a way and she was determined to make the most of it. Her fingers traced the cheekbones, the arched brows, the velvety growth of hair that covered his chin. Or fur? She smiled to herself.

"Probably fur," he answered for her. "It certainly doesn't shave off. I know, because I've tried."

"Vincent!" she exclaimed, unaccountably pained. She didn't want to think of him an atom different from how he was now.

"All boys try," he protested mildly. "I was no different."

"We'd have to clip you, like a horse," she grinned, thinking of the stallion her father had tried to keep once. It had been a truly magnificent animal, arrogantly male and full of itself, always prancing and throwing its head about, permanently showing off and proving far too much for either of them to handle. And Vincent laughed aloud at the comparison.

"You flatter me," he began.

"No I don't," she contradicted. "Not in the least. Haven't I always said you were special? And now you must know it too, my own love."

She used those last three words deliberately, cherishing the sound of them, the truth of them. And the feeling of joy that they gave her.

"Maybe you're right," he nodded, a wicked gleam in his eyes, agreeing with her so completely that Catherine took a quick, deep breath. She certainly had started something.

"Be careful," she said severely, eyebrows raised in an attempt to put him firmly in his place. "Or you could have the makings of a real male chauvinist. Did you know that?"

"Chauvinist?" he queried, obviously nonplussed and she laughed aloud at the bewilderment on his face.

"In my world," she said sweetly, "It's a term for an arrogant male, too sure of himself for his own good."

She wasn't certain if that was quite the right explanation, but it would serve her purpose very nicely, just the same.

"If I am arrogant, my Catherine, then it is you who have made me so," he murmured and her name rolled off his tongue like wine, heady and dark and she shivered in spite of herself. Never before had one word sounded quite so sensual, like a caress in itself. And its whispered resonance sent shudders up and down her spine. "Does it surprise you?" he asked, his tone silken in the extreme.

"A little," she admitted. "I thought you might be more shy, more ... er, restrained, the first time. And a little less knowing," she added, avoiding his eyes, only too well aware that they were brimming over with unconcealed amusement.

"But you made it so easy for me," he laughed. "I could see for myself what pleased you, even without our bond, our connection. But that told me what pleased you most. Did you think I wouldn't know? Didn't you know what pleased me?"

"Mmmm," she smiled, secretly, into the broad expanse of his shoulder, reliving the experience. Of course she had, almost instinctively. As if they had been meant for this moment. Always.

"So we have," he breathed and she laughed up at him.

"Took you long enough to find out," she teased, "But now that you have, you needn't think you'll escape again so easily."

She rolled over onto her front and began to stake her claim on him again. He was hers and she felt very possessive of him. Hadn't she touched him, in places no one else had even seen since he'd grown? Hadn't she heard him growl, deep in his throat, in the heights of his passion? Sounds only she had ever heard him make.

"True," he whispered, "Not even I had heard that before."

He began to bite the pink cushion of her earlobe and explore again the depths of her ear with the tip of his tongue. And Vincent's tongue was rough, just like a cat's, increasing the sensation a hundredfold. He really did remember the things that she liked, very well indeed. And once learnt, he needed no reminding. It was Catherine who needed reminding, and often, that she was his first and only love.

But Catherine wasn't to be deflected from her purpose. He was hers now, every part of him, and she wanted to touch him, to feel him, to know him. So she followed the line of his ribcage with an inquisitive finger, counting each rib, holding them all in her memory.

"You are so beautiful," she smiled, tracing the gleaming muscles of his chest, each rippling bicep in turn, glorying in their strength, their power. And he was relaxed, allowing the contact, enjoying it.

"Do you think our children will be furry?" she murmured, Lips pressed to the golden growth above his wrist, her eyes dazed with love for him.

"Children!" he sat bolt upright, rigid with shock, his face almost comical in its surprise. And Catherine threw him a provocative look.

"It usually happens," she said softly, "When two people indulge in this sort of thing. Surely you knew?"

She was teasing, flirting with him, and he knew it. He lifted her until she was kneeling between his long legs, facing him, and he solemnly shook his head.

"No?" he exclaimed, as if thoroughly scandalized by her words. "Does it really? We'll have to stop..."

He didn't get any further. She flung herself at him, arms about his neck, fists pounding his back in protest.

"You dare," she threatened, "To say such a thing again and I'll ..."

"You'll what?"

Even Catherine, who knew him so well, who could ask and expect anything of him, knew better than to answer that one. This was the new Vincent speaking, and his tone wasn't one to be trifled with. It positively oozed challenge, and she stilled, eyes wide, watching him carefully, truly not knowing what to expect next.

"You'll what?" he asked again, his voice like velvet. And she heard herself instinctively placating him.

"Nothing, nothing, I meant nothing," the speed of her climb down surprised even her, and the raised brows, the glint in his eye, told her it hadn't gone unnoticed by him either. But she was suddenly wary, and not of any so-called beast-like side of him at that. It was the man in him she was taking no chances with.

"Good," he purred, literally, and he folded her back into his arms, head cradled back against his shoulder; well satisfied with her compliance. But she wasn't prepared to let the matter rest there.

"Vincent," she persisted, wriggling round until she was facing him again, and looking deep into his eyes.

"Mmmm?" He put up a hand to stroke her hair, so tenderly that she almost forgot what she was going to say.

"What would you have done, just then?" she asked, but with something of an effort. His hands, his smile, were so gentle that she could scarcely believe this was the same man she'd just seen force her into some sort of submission, no matter how trivial.

"I've no idea," he said candidly. "I wanted to see what you would do, I think."

"Oh," her voice was small, and she subsided against him again, digesting this piece of information.

"And now I know," he couldn't resist adding, smugly.

Catherine couldn't let that pass unchallenged. But she knew any attempt to quell him in a physical tussle had to be doomed to failure. She was no match for his strength, she would have to resort to more underhand methods to reduce him to begging for mercy from her. So she began to stroke the fur on his arm, equally gently, lulling him into a false sense of security. Then, when he was utterly relaxed, she moved innocently towards his chest, smoothing the thatch of fine hair growing there.

"That's nice," he murmured and she began to falter in her resolve. Their positions had been reversed and he was settled against her, tawny head on her breast, eyes closed as he enjoyed the touch of her fingertips on his body, stroking the silky hair. He seemed so vulnerable in that moment, for all his great size, and she realised how new this had to be for him. He had no mother and no earlier loves who might have wanted to stroke him. She was the first to have ever touched him in love, held him, told him how beautiful he was, in the whole of his life, and her throat ached with unshed tears at the sadness of it.

"Catherine," he felt her pain at once, and his eyes searched hers. "Did I really frighten you?" he asked fearfully.

"No, of course not," she laughed, if somewhat shakily. "I was just thinking how wonderful you are, and how lucky I am that you've chosen me to love."

It was true, all true and she didn't care how arrogant, how demanding, it made him. She wanted him to believe it. Passionately.

"I believe it," he stated simply, feeling how important the words were to her. He started to rise, to try to comfort her, but for once she prevented him. "No," she insisted, "Let me hold you, let me love you. I want to, Vincent. Please."

"My pleasure," he smiled. It was still something of a marvel to him, that he could make her happy, merely by loving her as he'd always secretly wanted to. But, mysteriously, wonderfully, it was so.

He settled himself back against her, head in her lap, and she resumed her caresses. But there was no ulterior motive now. He trusted her, with his body which he had so recently believed too repulsive for love, with his heart, that she would never break it, and nothing on earth would have made her betray that faith. It was too new, too fragile to play with yet. There was time enough, a whole lifetime before them, for that. One day, she knew, she would be able to tease him, to torment him until he begged for mercy. But not just yet.

"Don't count on it," he whispered serenely, picking up her thoughts and lazily pooh-poohing the very idea. He didn't even bother to open his eyes.

"Wretch!" She threw back her head and laughed, revelling in his impudence. And she bent her head, kissing his mouth, spontaneously, without thinking twice and it was a magical moment.

He pulled her down, back into the depths of his body again; his arms tight about her.

"Four," he murmured into her ear, "Or may be six."

"What?" she queried, totally mystified.

"Children," he said equably, nodding at her astonished face.

"Why so few?" she asked, her tone dry. "Why not ten or twelve?"

"No," he smiled, "I think we might have started too late for that. Four will have to do."

"If you're sure ..." She was teasing him now, she couldn't help it, and it was his turn to laugh aloud.

"I'm sure," he said.

"Then we haven't any time to waste," she breathed, kissing him again. But this time with more fervour, more obvious desire. And he responded at once.

Their second love-making was longer, slower, and infinitely more sure, took time to explore more fully, glorying in each new sensation, each deeper satisfaction. And the end, when it came, was sweeter than ever, and even more cataclysmic.

"Good grief, Vincent," Catherine finally gasped, lying limp and totally sated in the protective circle of his arm. "If you're this good now, what are you going to be like in a few weeks time?"

"When I've had more practice?" he queried, smiling at her.

"I don't think you need too much practice," she corrected, fervently.

"What a pity," his tone was grave, "And I was so looking forward to it."

"Oh, Vincent," she was giggling now, helplessly, and so infectiously that he was forced into laughing too.

"Well, I was," he said, defending himself.

"Good," she said, "Because if you don't come here, I swear I'll search you out Below and tear the clothes off your back by force, if necessary."

"Father might be rather surprised at that, not to mention William or Mary."

"Never mind them," she insisted. "You are mine now, and they've just got to get used to it. They've had you to themselves long enough. I can share you with them, just," she continued magnanimously, "as long as you always remember that I come first."

"You've come first for a long time now, they already know that."

"Even Father?" she was genuinely curious to know.

"Even Father," he smiled. "Though," he added gently, "he may not be expecting this."

"I don't know why not, it's a natural enough progression." she protested.

"Natural?" he queried.

"Natural," she insisted firmly.

"Then who am I to argue," he spread his hands, solemnly conceding defeat, "So, Father will have to get used to it, won't he?"

"Do you think he will?" she was still a little dubious, and suddenly fearful that Vincent might be swayed again, away from her.

"It isn't possible," he answered the unvoiced anxiety, soothing her fears away. "It never has been," he stated flatly, "not even in the beginning. So how could it possibly be now?"

"Perhaps, when he gets his grandchildren..." Her voice tailed off, unsure.

And he laughed. "Perhaps," he said.

She had never, not in the whole of her life, felt so safe, so unutterably content with her lot, as she did at that moment. And Vincent sighed, absorbing her happiness, her peace, into his own. They had set their feet on a new path now, and no one could pretend the future was going to be easy. But it was going to be worth it, of that he was sure. How could it not be? There were so many new things to learn now, new thoughts, new feelings, hopes and desires, but no matter what anyone else had to say on the subject, they were going to take their lifetimes to do it. The promised delights were enormous and together, they were going to enjoy their discovery.

"You'll always be here?" she whispered, putting up a hand to touch his face. Her face, too, now.

He gathered her to him, feeling the softness of her body draped against the strength of his own, her love shining into his heart.

"Always," he promised. And Catherine believed him. And slept.

* * *

If keeping Vincent a secret was hard before, it was well-nigh impossible now. More than once Catherine caught people watching her, half-wondering, especially Joe, and his smile always deepened into a grin as their eyes met.

"What's up, Radcliffe?" he would ask and she always smiled and shook her head. It was the same routine every time and it went on for weeks.

"Nothing," she'd lie. But her luminous eye would always give her away.

"Don't give me that," he once said. "I know."

"Know what?" she shrugged, doing her best to sound casual, unconcerned.

"Something has happened," he grinned. "You've met someone, haven't you?"

"I meet lots of people," she countered, her look innocent, but Joe only threw back his head and laughed aloud.

"You know what I mean," he insisted. "Someone special. He has to be, to get you mooning about all the time. Even," he put in, with all the air of a coup de gras "In Court, listening to Moreno droning on for hours about that dead boring case of Hughes'. I saw you."

"Oh Joe, I do not. You're imagining things," she shook her head again, dismissing his suggestion as absurd.

"Well," he speculated, "Perhaps it's an old friend. What about the one Edie told me about, the one who kept you from going after Moreno's job in Rhode Island, on the Domestic Violence Programme there?"

"Edie's imagination was as wild as yours at times," Catherine scoffed. "I just didn't want to leave New York. There was no mystery in that." But nevertheless, her heart gave a tiny jolt. She'd almost forgotten that Edie had seen Vincent's name, in a book he'd given her. She'd been reading it once when Edie called and Edie, dear Edie, ever the romantic, had latched onto it at once.

"Well, we can't all be imagining things, kiddo." Joe persisted, breaking into her thoughts again. "What about Jenny, then? Was she hearing things as well, when you told her to go home that night, the night you almost drowned? And after I'd particularly asked her to stay," he added, aggrieved.

The conversation was getting just a bit too close for comfort, so Catherine decided to put a stop to it, once and for all.

"Oh Joe," she smiled, very sweetly, "Much as I love listening to you, and I find your theories fascinating, really I do, I have far too much work to get through today."

She turned and, picking up her briefcase, made for the door, leaving Joe leaning against the desk watching her.

"Vincent, wasn't it?" he called after her. "Isn't that what Edie called him?"

The pause in Catherine's stride was imperceptible. A halt the mere space of a heartbeat. Her breath caught, held, and started again. And when she turned back to face Joe, her smile was wider than before.

"Really, Joe," she exclaimed. "Poor Vincent, to be the cause of all this" and she waved a hand, encompassing Joe and the entire office. "If you ever met him," she continued, in total truth, "you'd be amazed at the very idea. Vincent," she laughed, shaking her head as if she could scarcely contain her delight, and she swung off again. Still giggling.

But once out of sight, Catherine's smile faded and died. She had to be more careful. Much more careful. The trouble was, and she sighed softly to herself, she didn't want to be careful. She wanted to shout Vincent's name from the rooftops, and at the top of her voice at that. And boast about him, unendingly,

about his kindness, his gentleness, his over-whelming beauty, to anyone who cared to listen. And to a few who didn't care to as well. She wasn't fussy.

She saw Vincent most days now. But it was still never enough. Not anymore. If it was fine they walked in the park, very close, touching and holding hands silently under the midnight stars. They had no need for words, their thoughts, their feelings, said all they needed to say. But at other times they went Below, to visit Father, sharing their precious time with him, or may be to sit together in their special place under the orchestra stand, if there was a concert they particularly wanted to hear. But the very best times of all, their times, were in her apartment. Then they would curl up in bed, listening to music, laughing, talking, for hours on end; wrapped up in each other as never before. And Vincent would read to her in that incredible velvety voice of his, perhaps from some new book one of them had discovered, or just dipping into an old favourite.

And they made love, sublimely, a long, slow, glorious love, many times. They never seemed to tire. Not of each other. Not of loving. There was always room for more. Always. And it was magical, this sharing of each other in the soft evening darkness, alone in her apartment and made all the more poignant, all the more heartbreakingly sweet, because it was stolen, hidden, secret from all eyes but their own. And Catherine was finding it hard, increasingly hard, to give Vincent up, even when dawn was hovering, threatening at any moment to break.

But the changes in Catherine, so obvious to Joe, were becoming equally obvious in Vincent too, and Father was beginning to notice. And he didn't much like what he saw.

"Can I have a word?" he caught his son one morning, in the early hours, as he was returning to his chamber. And Vincent, for once, couldn't avoid the encounter.

"Must we, Father? Now? I'm tired...," Vincent demurred, but to no avail.

"Yes Vincent, we must," Father was adamant. "I'm not surprised you're tired," he added, in exasperation. "You're never home at night anymore."

"Surely I'm old enough to make up my own mind about that," Vincent snapped, now thoroughly rattled. "I don't have to answer to anyone anymore," he went on, his irritation rising with every word. "I'm not a child. I can stay out if I wish and, go where I like."

"Yes, yes of course," Father agreed hurriedly, nodding, realising at once what he'd said and trying to ease the situation.

Many a parent, whose child still lives at home when they are grown, finds it hard at times to accept that they are adult, independent. And Father was no exception. But the last thing he wanted at the moment was to be sidetracked from his true purpose into some irrelevant discussion on Vincent's right to stay out late if he wished. That was something he'd bowed to years ago and he didn't want Vincent using it now to avoid the real issue. He'd waited up to speak to him and speak to him he was going to do. So he took a deep breath and tried to go on.

"But Vincent," he began again, "Surely you understand; for you, it is different ..."

He didn't get time to finish his sentence. Vincent whirled round and snatched up his cloak again, ready to leave.

"If you're going to lecture me on my differences, my inhumanity, then you can save your breath," he responded furiously, but the hurt in his face was plain, crushingly plain and Father caught his arm, refusing to let him go.

"Vincent, please," he pleaded. "That's not what I meant, and you know it. You know it," he insisted.

"What else, then?" Vincent demanded. But he paused, waiting to hear Father's words.

"Sit down, Vincent, please," Father said, breathing again, but for a moment truly thought his son was going to ignore him. Vincent didn't move, didn't comply, and his expression didn't alter one jot. But after an initial hesitation, he shrugged and threw himself into the nearest chair.

It wasn't an auspicious beginning, with his son glaring at him from across the room, but at least, Father thought, sitting down, Vincent had less opportunity to bounce out of the chamber without hearing a word that was said. So it was better than nothing.

"You have responsibilities down here," Father began carefully, but not carefully enough.

"Are you suggesting I am not fulfilling them?" Vincent growled, immediately on the defensive, but Father took a deep breath and nodded. It was time for the truth, even if his son didn't like it a great deal.

"Yes," he said quietly and, ignoring the swift intake of breath, the angry shake of the head, he continued, "You sleep half the day now, later than you ever did before and, when you are awake, you aren't with us. What about the last Council meeting," he added, knowing he had Vincent's attention now, however reluctantly. "You didn't hear a word anyone said, not one, so you couldn't vote at the end. You couldn't even summarize the findings correctly. So don't tell me you were listening."

"Once," Vincent conceded savagely.

"More than once," Father insisted. "And if you are honest, you know it. What is it, Vincent? What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong." Vincent rose to his feet again but Father rose too, and stood between his son and the door.

"Is it Catherine?" Father persisted, bravely facing Vincent's sudden glare, his furious face.

"And why should it be Catherine?" he breathed, and Father shook his head, sadly.

"What else would make you forget... so much? Produce such thoughtlessness, such irresponsibility, in you?" he asked, but gently, quietly. He knew he was on very dangerous ground here and he didn't want to antagonize Vincent any more than he had already. He wanted to reason, not fight with him. "You wander Above," he went on, "constantly risking being seen, being caught..."

"And if I was, do you think I would say anything..."

"No, of course not," Father dismissed the angry suggestion with a wave of his hand, "It's you I'm thinking about. But we need you down here, too. Remember that when you're out walking with Catherine; we couldn't manage without you." he stated candidly

"And that means I can have no life of my own?" Vincent demanded.

"That isn't what I said," Father said, shaking his head.

"Oh, yes it is," Vincent shouted. "It's exactly what you said. Or at least, it's what you meant."

"But your life is here, with us," Father tried to reason with him, tried to make him see, but Vincent would have none of it.

"My life is my own, to share with whomever I please," he began, slamming one huge fist against the wall. "Have I no right to that?"

His voice changed, dropped, took on a note of fear, of desperation. And he looked over at Father, his pain, his confusion, evident in his eyes.

"Am I not entitled to that, Father?" he asked quietly.

"You've become lovers, haven't you?"

Father's words were rhetorical, more of a statement of fact than a question and Vincent turned his back, away from him, avoiding meeting his eyes.

"Yes." The word was brusque, its very brevity stating that this wasn't a subject open for discussion, that it was nobody's business but his own. Not even Father's.

"Vincent..." Father started to say, but Vincent whirled on him, beyond reason.

"No! No!" he snarled. "I tried it your way. For two years, I tried it your way and it didn't work. Can't you understand? It didn't work. Now," he gestured, his face suddenly tender, "Catherine loves me, really loves me. I know it. I feel it, every time we ..." He broke off, silenced, then continued softly, "We give each other so much, so much," and he looked to Father for understanding, for acceptance.

"Do you think I don't know what it's like, to love a woman with every thought in my mind, every fibre of my being?" Father began. "But..."

"But But! For me it is always but!" Vincent cut in, not prepared to listen to another word. "Well, it's too late, Father. Catherine is mine now and she wants to be. And I'm not going to give her up. For anything. Or anyone."

Father looked over at his son, at the impassioned features and the raised, clenched fists, and he heard the message in his words. Loud and clear. So he smiled and shook his head.

"No," he said, his voice suddenly old, and ineffably sad. "Of course not. I wouldn't expect it of you. Not now. Just be careful, that's all I ask. And remember your duties in future, your responsibilities."

"Yes." Vincent sank into the chair again, bowing his tawny head. And he stared hard at his hands, not raising his eyes, obviously desperate to say something more. "Father," he asked at last, slowly, as if every word was being torn from his very depths, "It gives us so much joy, this sharing. Can it be so wrong?"

"Only you can decide that, you and Catherine," Father answered simply.

"Catherine," Vincent said and he smiled over at Father, his eyes very gentle. "When I listen to her, I can only believe that it is right, wholly right and natural. It is what she believes."

"Then it is so," Father said.

Vincent had used the one word deliberately, watching Father carefully to see what his reaction would be. And he let out his breath in a small, relieved sigh, when there was none.

"Do you know," he continued then, wonder filling his face, "that she likes to hold me. She really likes to hold me."

There was such a note of pleasure of incredulous pride in his voice that a lump came to Father's throat and he had to put a hand to his eyes to brush the sudden tears away.

"Of course she does," he smiled, "She loves you. What could be more natural than that?"

"Thank you, Father," Vincent said quietly.

He had fully intended to tell Catherine about the encounter, to assure her that Father knew of the new depth to their relationship, even if he wasn't too happy about it as yet. It was purely circumstances that prevented it, not any fear at the time on his part. Vincent was no fool and he knew that Father's acceptance was limited at the moment, still bounded by the fears that had gripped him for as long as Vincent could remember. Fears he had done his best to instill into Vincent himself. But he had every hope that Father would come round, eventually.

"Give him time and he'll get used to it," Vincent did his best to sound reassuring, even to himself, but a small worm of suspicion refused to leave him. Father had always been afraid, for some reason he never explained ... afraid of what?

Whenever there had ever been any suggestion of any interest however childlike, with Lisa, with Catherine at the beginning, even with Lena, or any friend of his childhood who happened to be a girl, Father had stepped in to dismiss it, and crush it if necessary. Remorselessly, it had often seemed to

Vincent. And what was more, he made sure the temptation was removed for good. There had never been any going back. Father had raised his son to believe that love wasn't for him. And therefore, it was best left severely alone.

But now memories came into his mind, unbidden, unwanted, sending out doubts, fears, that there was something being kept from him. Something Father hadn't told him. Something too terrible for him to know.

"Don't be ridiculous," he told himself, mentally shaking his head. "You have loved Catherine, you have been part of her and it brought only joy, only. What else can there be to fear?"

He had arrived early at Catherine's apartment, but she had been so busy at the time, obviously not expecting him yet, that he had hesitated at disturbing her. And anyway, he loved to watch her. Not until the rose tree she'd been planting out on the terrace caught her in its thorns, cruelly drawing blood, had he moved, unable to continue standing by. But they'd been interrupted almost at once, and before they had time to talk, to think even, they'd been drawn into a veritable maelstrom of events, involving Elliot Burch of all people, that had left bodies all over the waterfront. And blood all over Vincent's hands again.

But this time, Catherine had left, left him with his guilt, his horror; alone with the bodies of the men he had killed for her; uncomforted. She hadn't looked back, not once, to show that she knew, she understood, not even to check that he was alive. Although she must have heard the sound of gunshots, and how could she have known he was safe after that? And his injury had gone unnoticed, uncared for; an injury sustained in defending her. She had gone, left him, intent on taking Elliot Burch to safety. Gone, with that man, the one who had kissed her. The one she had kissed back. And they had disappeared for hours.

She had come to him, of course, finally searching him out in his chamber. And they had loved. But it had been different, he had been different. He had demanded almost too much, loved her almost too long staking his claim on her.

She was his, his, and she should remember it. And she shouldn't go off and leave him uncared for while she comforted, protected another. So he had let her know, in the best way he knew how. He had wanted her, taken her, and had kept her with him all night.

The morning that followed brought with it a strange mixture of feelings; joy and shame, disgust and contentment, all vied together in Vincent's heart. None uppermost, just all there, confusing him. That Catherine was with him, in his chamber, in his bed, when he awoke, as if she belonged there, brought him a satisfaction such as he'd never encountered before. For this wasn't a stolen moment. It was every day, accepted, a part of their lives.

But he couldn't forget how he'd been throughout the long, silent night, how he'd acted, had sought and taken the delights of Catherine's body and he went hot and cold all over at the thoughts, the feelings, the memory evoked in him. He knew he should be thoroughly ashamed, and part of him was. Utterly. But another part of him gloried in the possession, total and unequivocal, he'd claimed of the woman he loved. And, as much as he tried to subdue it, that part kept invading his consciousness, blotting out his feelings of guilt. And he didn't know how to deal with it. To keep it in check. So he kept his eyes shut, feigning sleep himself, when he felt Catherine waken beside him.

"Vincent?" she breathed into his ear, and when she got no response, she kissed the back of his neck. Actually kissed the back of his neck.

And she didn't stop there. Taking advantage of his apparent helplessness in sleep, she put her arms about him and held him close, her body moulded to his, into the warmth, the angular curves of his own. And she began to caress him.

Her fingertips were innocent at first, merely tracing the outline of his muscular frame, stroking the silky fur on his chest, sketching a feathery line from his ear to his shoulder. He could feel her fingertips in his

hair, in its golden, early morning tangle, but he couldn't quite work out what it was she was doing. And the only way he could have found out for sure was to move, feel for himself, let on he was awake. So he kept still. He wasn't prepared to do that yet.

"Vincent?" she whispered again, cooing into his shoulder, and when he still didn't answer, she smiled. And he felt the smile, a sweet upward curve of her lips, against his skin.

She grew bolder, as he almost knew she would and he held his breath, totally unable to do otherwise, as her mischievous little fingers found his nipples, those small, naked islands in their sea of fur, so vulnerable, so responsive and she began to tease them awake. Her fingertips circled and stroked, infinitely softly; she seemed unable to leave them alone. And she followed with her lips, her tongue, until he found himself holding his body rigid, fighting to hide his reactions, as her mouth continually sought and found the tender little erections. But still he didn't speak.

"Mmmm," she sighed and she moved, provocatively stretching her body against him, skin against skin, lightly touching. And he bit his lip, hard, but he felt the soft noise of his growl, deep in his throat, start before he had chance to stop it.

Her hands claimed him then, with as total a possession as he'd claimed her the night before. His eyes shot open, but he was unable to move, to breathe even. He couldn't have stopped her if he'd wanted to, and dear lord, he didn't want to. Not ever. He found himself squirming, as he'd made her squirm and moaning, just as she'd moaned. And he loved it, loved every moment, every glorious, glowing, golden moment.

"Catherine, Catherine," he moaned, almost in supplication and she smiled again. Sweetly.

"So you are awake," she whispered.

Oh, he was awake, he was sure of that. She was playing his body like a violin, tuning it to her music and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. He was perspiring, tossing his beautiful head, panting, but still she didn't stop. Until, with a final, inarticulate cry, he convulsed against her, clutching her close and subsided like a small, sheepish boy into her arms.

"That will teach you to pretend to be asleep," she murmured, so smugly that he had to laugh. Out loud. "And who was it who said," she enquired innocently, "That I was kidding myself? Who said he would never beg? Never give in? It couldn't have been Vincent, could it? Not the same Vincent who's just been begging, and pleading with me not to stop? Who'd have promised me anything. Anything.

For the wild fleeting space of a moment he was sorely tempted to turn her over and smack her bottom, hard. And the thought shocked him to the core. To slap anyone, let alone his beloved Catherine, was anathema to him and he couldn't for the world understand why he possessed such an overwhelming desire to do so. After the demands of last night, for her, it would be the final straw.

It took him some time to get his breath back fully, and to get his thoughts under some sort of control. Though that wasn't easy, not with Catherine curled up against him, still giggling like a schoolgirl into the warm crook of his shoulder. But when he finally thought that he had, when he felt he might be able to speak without forgetting what he had to say the moment she looked at him, he tried to bring up the subject of the previous night.

"Catherine," he breathed, unsure of how to begin. "About last night..."

"I know," she said, instantly contrite, drawing him even closer, holding him to her. "I'm so sorry, so sorry. I shouldn't have left you, I know. Do you forgive me? Please, Vincent. Please?"

She was in an agony of remorse, he could tell that by her clutching hands, her whispered, anxious voice and, for a moment he didn't know how to respond. He had been fully expecting to beg her forgiveness and here she was, begging for his. Then his arms went about her and his lips found hers, silencing her protests. And for a time, all else was forgotten.

"But Catherine," he persisted, when his mouth was his own again, "I mean later, in bed..."

Again, he was interrupted before he could finish, before he had a chance to make his own apologies.

"Now don't start boasting," she warned, her voice firm.

"Boasting," he repeated weakly. Somehow, the world had just turned right upside down; with him still on it.

"Yes, boasting," she nodded. "Just because I've had you at my mercy for once, there's no need to remind me how good you were last night. It's very ungentlemanly and, not like you at all," she added severely.

"Good," he repeated again, his mind in a positive whirl. There seemed to be only one totally certain thought to hang onto in this suddenly roller-coaster world, and that was Father was right. He would never understand women. Never. And Catherine least of all.

"Did it please you?" he managed to say, needing to hear it again; from her.

"What do you think?" she smiled. "Didn't you just enjoy what I did to you? Well, I was returning the compliment. And teaching you a lesson before you get hopelessly conceited."

"Oh, Catherine," he had to laugh, "I love you so much. Yet a moment ago, I almost felt like..." and he hesitated, unwilling to go on, unwilling to admit his feelings.

"What?" she queried, definitely intrigued.

"I felt like putting you over my knee and..."

"Enough. I get the general idea," she broke in, horrified, green eyes wide with shock. "That, my dear Vincent, would be taking it just a touch too far."

"Would it?" He was subdued, but not quite subdued enough for her liking. He had too ready a glint in his eye, for all it was hidden at the moment by an anxiously bowed head.

"I don't know," she gasped. "I'm not sure about anything with you anymore. You learn too quickly, Vincent. Far too quickly for comfort."

"Do I?" Already he was perking up a little and she watched him carefully. "And that which I felt earlier," he queried, "it was wrong?"

Catherine was torn, completely torn. The last thing she wanted was to open up the floodgates of real horseplay; with Vincent she would always be the loser. He was far too big to take on. And his strength was enormous, in more ways than one. But at the same time, she could feel that he wasn't really sure and, just as strongly, she couldn't bear for him to experience shame, disgust, at what were perfectly normal feelings. So she continued, in a hurried voice, desperately avoiding his eyes.

"Sometimes it's all right," she conceded, trying to get the words out as fast as she could, so that she could change the subject. "It depends on how and who with," she finished weakly.

"You mean, when it's instinctive?" His voice may have been innocent but his expression certainly wasn't and she broke in hastily.

"Not always. Now, can we talk about something else?"

"Not yet, it's still not totally clear," he demurred and he took her arm in a grip of iron.

A tiny thrill of fear shot through her. She really wasn't sure of him, though a few weeks ago, a few days even, she would have sworn such a conversation wasn't even a possibility. Now, she just didn't know. Until she caught his sly grin and realised he was teasing her.

"Beast," she flashed and realised immediately what she'd said. "Vincent," she whispered in a horrified voice and she took his face between her hands and kissed his high, alien cheekbones, the velvety sheen on his nose and finally, she pressed her lips to his mouth, touching his cleft upper lip with her tongue.

"I love you," she insisted, "I love you. And everything about you. What I said," and she paused, sighing, trying to find the right words to explain, "is something we women say when faced with attempted male domination. Like you just tried," she finished lamely.

She hardly dared look at him, but when she did, she could see he was smiling. A slow, deep, speculative smile.

"So," he said softly, "Being a beast can sometimes have its attractions, then?"

Blood rushed to her cheeks, turning them a swift rosy pink under his scrutiny. And for the life of her, she couldn't find a voice to answer him. Not even a squeak. She was totally devoid of coherent thought and her very bones had turned to water.

And when he took her into his arms, very firmly, she could do nothing but go, her body pliant against him.

But from then on, it really wasn't her body at all. It was his. Totally his. And he knew it. It rebelled against her, ignoring her attempts to control it, answering his will not hers; every protest, every tiny atom of independence, given up entirely to the sweetness of his touch.

And she knew, in that moment, just what it meant when heroines of romantic fiction claim to drown in their lover's eyes. For wasn't she doing that right now? She had always laughed at the very idea, been faintly, patronizingly amused. But here she was, drifting down, drowning just as they said, in the glittering blue depths of Vincent's eyes. And wasn't his mouth silken with love, his hair like spun gold? Just as they said. Just as they said.

"Vincent," she sighed, finding just enough breath to utter his name. But there was no need to say anything more, that word said it all. Everything else, everything, the world and all that was in it, were superfluous now.

"Vincent," she repeated, one last time, before he took control completely, of her body, her mind, every thought, every feeling she possessed.

It was a beautiful, a wondrous possession and she was lost in it. He demanded all she possibly had to give and a demand it certainly was, but she gave it gladly, with every fibre of her being; until she was quite unable to give any more.

"Like that, Catherine?" he finally said, when she was lying in his arms, her body sated, her mind at rest. "You mean," he repeated, "something like that?"

She looked up at him, with eyes still scarcely focusing and saw that he was smiling down at her with a distinctly proprietorial air.

"You have no right to be able to do that," she whispered. "Not so soon. There should be a law against it."

He gave a soft laugh, head on one side and he put out a hand to touch her hair, her cheek.

"It's the beast in me," he said gently.

"Boasting again," she countered, but the protest was automatic, she hadn't the strength to put her heart into it. And she laid her head on his shoulder, still totally his.

"Hold me," she commanded softly and his arms closed obediently about her. If he had the power to demand, then certainly so had she.

Already, some of his hurt, some of his earlier fears, had evaporated, soothed away by the force of Catherine's love... love which could still surprise him, even now, by its depth, its strength; a depth that seemed to know no end, no limits.

"Vincent?" she asked, her voice very small against his chest.

"Catherine?" he responded, smiling.

"Have you forgiven me, about last night?"

"It didn't matter," he began, but she broke in, swiftly cutting short his comforting words.

"It did matter," she insisted. "Don't you dare tell me it didn't, when it did."

"All right," he conceded mildly, "It mattered. But it's over now."

"Yes," she agreed, adding fervently, "And it will never happen again. Never. I promise, I promise."

"I know." He gathered her to him, stroking her silken hair, soothing her troubled spirits.

"Do you?" she asked, her eyes doubting his reassurances. "Do you, Vincent, truly?"

"Of course I do," he smiled, "There's no need to worry, Catherine. I'm all right."

And he was, almost. But there was no way he could tell her how betrayed he sometimes felt, and betrayed by those he loved most. A machine, that's all he seemed at times, a killing machine with no other purpose in life but to defend them, protect them. And taken for granted, too. As if he had no feelings, no sensitivities, of his own. As if he didn't care. As if it didn't matter. How could he possibly tell Catherine that? When she had done the same herself and, only last night.

And how could he say, ever put into words, that there were times, too often of late, when he couldn't seem to wash the blood off his hands? The stains just wouldn't go. But no one noticed but him. No one else saw, or bothered to see, how the blood stayed with him, always there, haunting him with its memories.

And what memories they were. Dark and infinitely terrible, they returned to him night after night, in the darkness of his chamber, when the world Below was silent and everyone else was asleep. And they filled his mind with pictures, pictures he'd much rather forget, of final, horror-struck moments, of faces crazy with fear. Fear of him. And of men, men screaming their agony, their terror, as they were forced to face their killer. 'Their killer'.

The thought still had the power to shock him, to horrify him to the bone, and Vincent shook very slightly, his body filmed coldly in sweat. And a sweat that had nothing to do with love. Could this be the man brought up by Father to respect life, to nurture it? A man to whom kindness, and the soft answer, the reasoned approach, had always been the first impulse. A man who now had more blood on his hands than Jack the Ripper himself.

And he was here, now, warm and comforted, with his love in his arms. But the men he had killed last night were cold, bloody, torn to shreds. They would never see their families again. He had seen to that.

And he always would. He had no other choice. None. To hurt Catherine, to threaten her life, was to die. That was the other side to their love and, if he couldn't have one without the other, if he was not allowed to love her as tenderly he had that day without killing for her, then so be it. She was his, and he was responsible for her, more now than ever before. And he accepted it gladly.

But there were times, he had to admit, to himself if to no one else, when he wished, when he yearned, secretly, from the bottom of his breaking heart, for the loving alone. The other seemed such a high price to pay, even if Catherine was worth it.

"Vincent, are you cold?"

Catherine had felt his shudder and she held him closer, wrapping herself around him. And he felt himself relax, become easier, in an enveloping warmth of her love. It would be all right, he was sure. If he took care, if he watched himself, it would be all right. He had nothing to fear, not with Catherine at his side. And he sighed, finally allowing himself to relax completely, holding her close. Together, nothing could hurt them. Together, they could face the world.

Afterwards, Catherine could only think of those days as a nightmare, a living nightmare from which there seemed no escape, a terrible blur of fear, of desolation, the like of which she had never experienced before, even when her father had died. She couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, didn't want to work.

"Vincent, Vincent. Be well, my love, be well," were the only words, the only thoughts, that made any sense any more, and she repeated them incessantly. Like a prayer. Like a frantic plea for mercy. "Dear Lord, make him well again. Please make him well," she beseeched and found herself adding those desperate words, as old as Man himself, promised by frightened people since time began when all other avenues of hope had failed them, "And I'll never ask for anything else, I swear. Just give me this and I'll never ask for anything again. Ever."

The message from Below had finally come, but it had arrived while she was out. Still at work. And maddeningly, she had been held up at the office, that day of all days, caught up in some totally fruitless discussion with Joe, that had started nowhere and led equally nowhere. But one she'd seemed unable to get away from. They'd gone round and round, trapped in a corkscrew of words, until she'd finally rebelled, too worried, too distracted, to stay another minute. There had been no news as yet, one way or the other and she had no idea if that was good or bad; all she knew was that she had to get home. Soon. In case. In case.

On anything further than that, she didn't allow herself to dwell, and she'd cut Joe short, without an explanation, without another word in fact and just left. Like that. Joe had watched open-mouthed as she walked towards the door, but he hadn't called after her. It was obvious from her face that already she was somewhere else, with someone else and nothing he could say or do would bring her back. So he let her go, sadly, without comment. It had happened often of late and each time, Joe felt more helpless than the last to reach out and comfort her.

And to add to her troubles, her frustrations, the traffic on the way home was worse than ever, clogging the rush hour streets until they were immovable. Or so it appeared to Catherine, sitting in her taxi for what seemed like hours, hands clenched into fists, fighting back the tears. Or maybe it was just her overstretched nerves that made it seem that way. She couldn't tell any more, what was real and what was in her mind. Put there by her despair, by the growing agony of her fears.

But the note was waiting for her when she finally got back, pushed under the door of her apartment, and for a space of a second she was too numb with fear to open it. But only for a second. Then she snatched it up and read it.

It contained one word, one word only. "Come." But that was enough, more than enough. Catherine knew at once that Vincent was in trouble and such trouble that he may already be beyond help. Beyond reaching. Even to her. And she flung the door shut, herself beyond reason now and she raced out and across the park like a madman. Every sobbing breath an invocation, torn from the very depths of her being.

"Keep him safe, keep him safe 'til I get there. Please, please. Just give me one more chance, Lord, just one more chance."

Father was waiting for her, just inside the tunnels, looking grey-faced and drawn. And she knew it was bad the moment she saw him. He looked old, old and frail. Catherine couldn't remember him ever looking so old before. But he looked up, as soon as he heard her footsteps and he said her name, just once.

"Catherine." It was all he could manage.

"Tell me." Nothing else mattered, so there was nothing else to say and he shook his head at her words.

"It's getting worse, beyond his control. He asked for you..."

"Take me to him, Father. Now." She didn't want to hear anything else. Anything. She just wanted to go. To be there. With Vincent. Everything else was pointless. "Father," she repeated, desperately and he nodded, understanding her need.

"He wants you," he sighed, finally stumbling into a walk and Catherine took his arm, in a fever of haste, hurrying him along as fast as she dared.

But the old man was going as fast as he could, and he looked so stricken, so terrified, that she hadn't the heart to harass him further. So she slowed a little, matching her pace more carefully to his.

"Catherine," he said at last, his voice a little more than a strangled whisper in her ear.

"Yes?" she encouraged, pity gripping her. She was losing a lover, but he was losing a son. And that should be drawing them closer, not pushing them farther apart. That wasn't what Vincent would want.

"Catherine," he repeated, struggling to find the words. "I think, I think, some of this may be my fault. Is my fault," he finally blurted out.

He looked at her, waiting for her condemnation, but when it didn't come, he continued, anguish heavy in his eyes, in the droop of his head.

"I did my best to discourage him, you know, when he first met you. I thought it was a mistake. In spite of all the joy you brought him, I tried to stop it. Keep him from you. And even now, when he told me, about you... about your..."

"Becoming lovers," she answered for him.

"Yes," he nodded, avoiding her eyes. "He wanted my approval, my acceptance so much," he added sadly, "But all I did was remind him of his responsibilities. His duties to us. Not one word of encouragement did he get from me. No word of pleasure for him. I let him down, Catherine. When he told me the greatest news of his life, I let him down."

"We both let him down," she whispered, a veil of tears misting her own eyes.

"You?" He was incredulous, disbelieving.

"Yes, me." Her voice was low, very low. "I expected too much, I took him for granted, that he would always be there. I took too many chances with him. And I let him be hurt, here," she gestured towards her heart. "Too often. I didn't stop to think what it was doing to him. And I should have realised sooner that he was too gentle... too caring... for it not to be having an effect. I didn't understand, Father," she finished wretchedly. "quickly enough. And I should have been the first to know."

"We didn't look out for him, not the way he looked out for us," Father said, "and we took, but we didn't always give back."

"At least, not enough," she agreed, her breath ragged with unshed tears. "And Vincent would never ask for more. Not Vincent. Not for himself."

There was a short silence, a silence tense with unspoken remorse, of a grief beyond words. Then Father broke in hoarsely,

"It was only because I was afraid of him. There was nothing else, I swear. I didn't know anything else. But he imagined I did. And such things, too. Impossible things. Maybe if I'd talked to him more, made him understand, perhaps he wouldn't have believed John Pater's lies so quickly. I just didn't want him to be hurt, to get... involved... and then be ... disappointed... abandoned..."

"Did you consider him so unlovable, then?" Catherine demanded harshly, her pain momentarily getting the better of her.

"Did I? Dear God, did I?"

His anguish, his despair, was almost palpable, and Catherine rushed to comfort him. She had no right to condemn. Hadn't she been lacking, too? She'd never been able to make up her mind, to give up her world. Father was right, for all her high moral tone, she'd never loved Vincent enough to do that.

"We shouldn't be talking like this...," she said swiftly, and she squeezed his arm, hard.

"Catherine?" His tone was dubious, as if unsure of what her reaction would be.

"Yes, Father?"

"If Vincent... when Vincent... will you ... do you think you could possibly..."

"Live down here?" she finished, and she gripped his hand in her own, eyes bright with tears. "Just try to keep me away," she breathed, and he nodded, silently. Smiling. Unable to speak.

But if the time until then had been bad, the hours to come were worse. How she lived through them, she never really knew. She hadn't been able to believe at first that Vincent was gone, really gone, without waiting to see her, and she'd stared in a daze at Mary, unable to comprehend the words the woman was saying.

"Gone? Gone where?" she'd repeated numbly, but the only answer she got was was silence, and empty frightened eyes.

But Pascal knew, thank God, and it was he who led them, silent and shaking, down, down below the Chamber of the Winds, into darkness, into cold, to the tunnels beyond the catacombs. To where the roaring began.

And the sound of Vincent's rage, of his despair, was shocking indeed. But Catherine's heart lifted to hear it. Horrifying as it was, filling the world with its noise, it was no matter. It meant that he was alive. Still. And that, at least was cause for hoping.

"Catherine, no!"

Father tried to stop her, putting out a hand as she stepped forward, but she brushed him aside. Didn't he realise that this was all that was left for her now. Without Vincent, her life meant nothing. Nothing at all. Oh, she was frightened, she admitted it; it would have been stupid to deny. Who wouldn't be frightened? But it was Vincent not herself she was frightened for.

It was cold, bone-chillingly cold and the darkness pressed in on her. Oppressively close. And Catherine shivered. Numb to the core. All she could see was shadows. Shadows everywhere. And none of them Vincent. But the sound of his pain, the roars of his despair, drew her like a magnet, inexorably leading her to him.

But there was nothing of him, of the Vincent she knew, in the creature she finally found. He was crouched, more animal than man, raking the walls, head thrown back and eyes crazed and unseeing. Lost to the world, to her, to everything he once held dear. And Catherine's throat closed unbearably tight at the fearful sight. He was so hurt, so lost and confused, her beautiful Vincent. And so far away. Beyond all help. Beyond all love. And he was flinging himself at the wall, bodily against the granite surface, until the dark rock face was streaked and caked with blood.

"Vincent!" His name was torn from her, but it was more of a scream, a scream for him to stop, piercing the darkness with her fear. And he heard, Vincent heard and he whirled, fangs bared, snarling, to seek her out.

Afterwards, long afterwards, Catherine wondered if she should have been frightened. But at the time, all she could see was Vincent. Her Vincent. Needing her. And her only thought was to hold him.

So hold him she did. She reached for his hands, upraised in his fury and she put them to her lips.

"My hands," she breathed.

They clenched and shook, as if fighting for control, but she only held them the tighter.

"My hands," she repeated. "Remember, Vincent?"

But if he remembered, he gave no sign at all. He drew back, away from her, but she followed. And she touched his face, a face devoid of all recognition, very gently with her fingertips.

"My face," she told him and she kissed his mouth with all the love, all the tenderness she could muster. She lifted his hand, ignoring the warning growl and she pressed it to her breast. Her heart. "Catherine," she said softly, "Your Catherine."

He was listening, she was sure of it, but he didn't want to hear. He backed still, top lip lifted to expose the dripping fangs, threatening her to stay away.

"Your Catherine," she insisted. "Do you remember, Vincent? The nights we've lain together? Loved together? Do you remember the feelings of your body on mine

The roar was immediate and deafening in its intensity. Vincent staggered, arm up flung to ward her off, away from her, away from her knowledge of him, of his former self and he fell back against the wall with a bone-shattering thud. The struggle within him was terrifying to see, but she wasn't afraid. She stood silently, watching, her eyes never leaving his face and he raised his hands. Nails of steel, curved and deadly, hung above her. Ready to rend her apart. But he couldn't strike. He threw his head, hair wild and eyes blazing, snarling his defiance, scorning her trust, but he couldn't move towards her. Not a step. And she had no intentions of leaving him.

"It's Catherine," she said softly. "I love you, Vincent. I love you."

For a second, he hesitated, seemingly quietened by her words, and hope flared in Catherine's heart. He was hearing her, he was listening. And he paused, almost as if he knew her again. But the hope was short lived, heart-breakingly short lived. Even as he appeared to win his battle, as the beginnings of light seemed to dawn in his eyes, it all became too much for him. He just couldn't take any more; his heart, his mind, were too tired, under too much stress and he rocked unsteadily on his feet.

He stepped forward, groping, unbalanced, but she didn't have time to reach him. He went, suddenly, his consciousness extinguished without warning, like a candle flame in the wind. And he crashed bodily to the ground, taking her with him in a tangle of arms and legs.

They hit the ground together hard, joltingly hard and Catherine's eyes dimmed. The world spun crazily for a moment, then it pulled away, fast. Giving her no time to even breathe his name. And then there was nothing, nothing but darkness, hot and heavy and streaked through with pain, filling her head and claiming her for its own.

How long they lay, lost to the world, she never really knew. But when her eyes finally opened, her limbs were cramped and stiff with cold. Vincent was lying half over her, his great frame inert, unmoving, spread-eagled and still across the soft, living cushion of her body.

"Vincent?" she whispered, but got no response. So she tried again. "Vincent."

This time more urgently. He was a dead weight and she was finding it hard to catch her breath.

But still there was nothing, so she struggled to move him, to roll him over, though it wasn't easy, trapped beneath him the way she was. She had only the use of one arm and her movements were severely restricted, but finally after much heaving and pushing, she managed to wriggle free. But Vincent didn't move, didn't respond. He just lay, very still; too still. Unnaturally still. And Catherine started to panic.

"Vincent!" she all but screamed, throwing herself across him.

She snatched at his clothes, frantically, tearing at tapes and pulling buttons from their threads in her haste, until she could press her ear to the exposed fur-covered chest. But she couldn't discern even the faintest flicker to say that his heart might be beating.

"Vincent, Vincent." She shook him as if to make him listen, make him hear. Dear God, he had to hear!

But he was still lifeless, his body draped as it had fallen across the cold, hard ground.

"Vincent," she scabbled upwards until she was lying the length of him, and she breathed into his mouth, hard. But his head kept slipping aside in spite of her frantic efforts to keep it still and his mouth was cold under hers. And he didn't breathe back, no matter how hard she tried.

"Vincent, Vincent," she implored. "You can't leave me. Not now. Not like this!"

She was crying by then, uncontrollably, her body shaking and racked with sobs.

"You promised," she repeated hopelessly and she laid her head on his chest. It seemed such a little time ago that he had held her, loved her. And now the arms that had held her close, been her refuge, her right, keeping her safe, would never be hers again.

It seemed so hard, so unfair, that she had never had the chance to love him again. That he had left her while he was so confused and angry, doubting himself, doubting the world. Doubting her. That he had thought, even for a moment, that she didn't love him enough brought such a sharp, unbearable stab of pain that for a moment she thought she would die too. And it seemed incredibly important that he should know it wasn't true. So she scooped him to her, rocking his tawny head to her breast, and she whispered endearments, reminders, promises of love; holding him, telling him, one last time, how much she loved him.

She wrapped his cape about them, folding him to her, trying to keep him warm. As if it mattered. But somehow, it did to her. It was all she could do for him now. And she smoothed his brow and stroked his tangled mane, moistening the hair beneath her hand with the hot tears of her anguish. At least now, she told herself, he was safe, free from pain. No one would ever hurt him again. And he would see the flowers at last, as he'd always wanted to, and feel the sunlight on his face. Even if it was a different sunlight from hers.

If someone had come in that time and tried to take him away, she honestly thought afterwards that she would have killed them, killed them with her bare hands, as Vincent had so often killed for her. For she still had her most important news to tell him. And he had to know.

She rocked him again, cradling his beautiful head and she whispered, very softly, very tenderly into his ear, the words only he should hear. He had to be the first to know.

She'd only learnt the truth herself, for certain, that very day. Though she had suspected it for some time. But the call confirming her hopes, telling her the test results, hadn't come until that morning, at work, almost as soon as she'd arrived. And she'd carried it with her all day. A small gem of hope in an otherwise hopeless world. That first time together, and it had been then, she was sure, had been special in more ways than one; very special. It had given them a child.

A child! The joy that gripped her to know she was giving Vincent a child, a child to share, their child, couldn't even be dampened now. And she whispered the news, smiling into his hair, her cheek against his. And she put his hand, his poor, lost, gentle hand, against her stomach. To feel his son; for somehow, she was certain it was a son.

"You'll be a wonderful father, Vincent," she promised.

It was then she realised what she'd said and it proved altogether too much. She broke down completely, clutching Vincent to her, holding him, determined to never let go. And she cried in the desperation of her loss.

"You promised forever," she gasped, breathless with weeping. "You promised, Vincent, you promised. Forever. That's what you said. And I believed you. I believed you. How could you leave me now?"

It was only a tiny sound, a brief sigh that she almost missed, but a sound it was and she clutched him tighter in an agony of sudden hope.

"Vincent, Vincent, can you hear me?"

But again, there was no response; nothing. And the pain of losing him again was more than she could bear.

"Vincent, Vincent," she begged, shaking him, repeating his name, refusing to give up. "Come back to me, Vincent. I can't manage without you. Not this time. I can't."

"You can."

This time she wasn't mistaken. It was a sound. It was words. But in her confusion, she almost thought it wasn't him. She looked round, for Father, for Pascal, thinking someone had come in to find them. But it wasn't so, they were still quite alone.

"Vincent?" She was trembling now, with shock, with disbelief; she didn't dare hope, she didn't dare. But she turned his head, very carefully, to look at him.

And his eyes were open. Dazed they were, and still not focusing properly, but they were open. Open.

"Oh God," she said softly, then louder, louder. "Oh God. Oh God!" Until she was shouting at the top of her voice. Shouting and laughing and crying. All at once. Like a maniac. And all the time rocking him, holding him and covering his face with kisses.

"Catherine! Are you all right?"

It was Father's voice, coming out of the darkness, shocked by her apparent hysteria. And obviously worried half to death.

"Yes, yes," she laughed, or did she cry? She wasn't sure.

"And Vincent?" he whispered. He almost didn't dare to ask, he was so afraid of what the answer might be.

"Alive. But very weak. He's hurt, Father. Can we get him back? Oh, Father..." Her voice failed! Cracked by tears again, and the old man hurried to reach her.

"Catherine, Catherine," and he put his arms around her, holding her, soothing her quiet; for the first time, really loving her, accepting her. And she realised, only then, how very much like Vincent, her Vincent, he was.

They got Vincent back to his chamber, at last, carrying him in a makeshift stretcher. And it seemed that almost everyone Below was there, fighting for the chance to help, to give a hand. And Catherine relinquished him, let them take him, for he was hers for good now. And she had a lifetime to be with him. Besides, Father needed her with him. He had so many questions, questions only she could answer, and the last few hours had quite obviously taken their toll on him. So she wanted to be close; to comfort him and be comforted.

"Did Vincent hurt you? Did he try ..."

"No, Father, he only hurt himself."

"Typical," Father smiled, shakily. "Just like our Vincent."

The importance of that comment was not lost on Catherine and she smiled back through her tears.

"Yes," she agreed, "just like our Vincent."

It was several days before Vincent was able to talk, apart from the occasional word and, even longer before he could walk. He was appallingly weak, and he'd lost an awful lot of blood. So most of the time he was sleeping. But Catherine didn't care. She sat beside him anyway. Watching him. Nothing would have moved her. Not even an earthquake.

Though some of his friends did try, at first. When they stripped him off and bathed him, washing off the dust and grime of the caves and the crusted blood of his wounds. They hummed and hawed, waiting in embarrassed silence for her to leave so that they could finish their work, until she shot them an

incredulous look and began to finish the job herself. Then they grinned, exchanging sly glances, as they realised that Vincent, naked, was not a new sight to her.

But the novelty soon wore off and they were glad to accept her help as the full catalogue of Vincent's wounds finally came to light. He was bruised, battered, his golden fur dotted and stiff with blood, and together they cleaned and sterilized and dressed, with Father supplying the stitches whenever they were needed. Until they finally had him settled on his couch, supported by pillows and wrapped around with quilts to keep him warm, as comfortable as they could make him.

"You'll stay with him?"

It was a statement rather than a question and Catherine nodded at Father's words.

"Yes," she said simply.

"I'm glad. I'm tired myself and if he should waken, it's you he'll want."

"I'll be here. I'll never leave him again. Never."

There was a slight sound from the bed and they both turned, unsure if Vincent was trying to speak, or if he was just murmuring in his sleep. But Catherine took no chances. She went over to him and took his hands in hers, and said loudly, loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear.

"Yes, Vincent, I'm staying here."

He moved slightly, uneasily shifting a little, as if what she was saying was disturbing his rest, but she refused to give way. Much as her heart ached for him.

"I've earned it, Vincent," she insisted. "I've earned it. I've done everything you've asked. I've worked. I've done my best. But now it's time for me to rest. To have my family. To be with you."

"Yes," the word was barely audible, but she heard and she smiled. "It was... true, then... He paused, too weak to continue.

"It was true, is true," she murmured and her heart was singing with joy, for now she would have them both. Vincent and his son.

He turned his head on the pillows to look at her and his eyes were tired, shadowed. But they were clear, clear and calm and deeply blue. Like jewels. And Catherine was lost in them.

"Catherine," he smiled and her heart burst to hear it. He had said her name. Her name. And she would have promised him anything, anything, in that moment.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Will... I ever again be... master in my own chamber?"

"Oh, Vincent," she was laughing, but there were tears in her eyes as well. "Really," she added, "You know me better than that."

"I was afraid... you'd say that..."

That he should try to joke almost devastated her completely. And she put her head on his chest, oblivious to Father, oblivious to any one else in the room. There was only Vincent. And an arm, weakened maybe and not as firm as usual, but an arm nonetheless, an arm she'd never thought to feel about her again, stole up from its nest of cushions and drew her to him, holding her close.

For the rest of her life, Catherine remembered that moment. It was perfection. No less. And she couldn't stop thanking God for granting it. *Thank you, thank you*, that he was alive. That he was back safely. And that he was hers, *thank you, thank you again. For ever and always, never to part again; dear God, for that most of all, I thank you, I thank you.* He's safe, he's home, there are no words, there are no words. It was a paean of thanks -giving, an invocation, with every word springing deep from her heart.

She held him for a very long time, until she was sure he was sleeping. And she sat with him, through the long hours of the night; watching. It was she who stroked his head when it ached, or when his injuries were troubling him and it was she who held his hand when he awoke, and changed his bloodied dressings. Making him comfortable again. Soothing his pain away. She was never too tired, nothing was ever too much. She was thankful that he was there and everything she did for him was an act of love, carried out joyously and with intense pleasure. And every time, he smiled; even when he was hurting, or too weak, too exhausted to speak, to form any words, he smiled.

"True?" he would whisper and she nodded, her eyes like lamps.

"True," she would smile and he would sleep again. At peace.

The days moved into weeks as Vincent got well again, grew strong again and Catherine's old life, her life away from him, slipped more and more firmly into the past. There were times occasionally, when she would have like to let Joe know, or Jenny perhaps, that she was well. And happy, but Fate had decreed otherwise and, she wasn't going to take any chances by tempting it now. Vincent was hers and getting stronger by the day. And that was enough. More than enough. It was a miracle.

"Catherine," he was watching her now from his bed, and reached out an arm.

Gladly, she went to him, leaving her seat in the corner and she curled up beside him, her head on his shoulder.

"Happy?" he asked, when she was safely settled in the crook of his arm. And how good she felt there. How right.

"I'm more than happy, I have you."

She rolled over until she was lying alongside him, her chin resting on his chest, and she sighed her contentment.

"Be careful, or you'll make me conceited, and you know you won't like that," he laughed, but nothing could shake her satisfaction. It shone out of her and it was useless pretending otherwise, especially to Vincent of all people. He knew what she was feeling almost before she felt it herself.

"I don't care," she said, "You can be as conceited as you like."

"Mmmm, you say that now, when I am lying here helpless. But how will you feel when I'm well again?"

"I'll answer that when the time comes," she smiled and she kissed his neck. Very tenderly. Twice. Once just wasn't enough.

"Do that again and it will come sooner than you think," he breathed and he rolled over, trapping her very effectively beneath him

"Vincent," she demurred, "You're still too weak..."

"Am I?" he asked and she seriously began to wonder as she wriggled, ever so slightly, testing out his purpose. And she found she couldn't escape. He wasn't expending much energy at the moment, it was true, and he was keeping his hands to himself. But nevertheless, it was just as obvious that he had no inclination of letting her go.

"Vincent," she said again, starting to giggle, "Don't start anything you can't finish."

"Can't finish, you impudent wench! Who says I can't finish?"

As if to prove his words, Vincent began to kiss her. For the first time in weeks, he truly began to kiss her. Not weakly, in gratitude or with thanks, but firmly, meaning it, as a lover kisses the woman he loves. And Catherine, who had scarcely dared hope it would ever happen again, gave herself up completely to the incredible joy of the moment. If Father came in unannounced, he'd just have to see more than he bargained for!

It was like the first time all over again. Only even more sweet. It had been so long since they'd loved, since they'd been at peace, and they'd just lived through the most terrible time of their lives, when they'd really believed they'd lost each other for good, so there was an added piquancy, an extra touch of unbelievable wonder, which made every kiss, every touch, a heart stopping miracle in itself.

"Oh, my love," Catherine murmured, feeling his lips in her hair, on her throat, her shoulder. And she stretched against him, breath caught as her clothes were removed, slowly, carefully, each button undone and bow untied, until she was positively quivering with anticipation. But then his patience gave out and his own nightshirt came over his head in one fell swoop and was flung unceremoniously to the floor. And he scooped her close into his arms once more.

"Vincent." It was more of a sigh than a word, but he heard it nonetheless.

"I think it's me," he whispered.

"It had better be," she smiled.

"It had better be," he agreed with mock severity, "Or I'll want to know what you're doing in bed with a strange man."

"You will, will you? And what gives you the right to ask?"

"This." He kissed her eyes. "And this," his mouth found hers, seeking it out with a desperate searching tenderness that made the world fade about her; leaving only the two of them in the entire Universe. Vincent and Catherine. What more could there be?

"And, of course, this."

His lips sketched a line of kisses from her neck downwards, seeking more intimate targets, each touch as light as thistledown. But her breasts were already wide awake, tingling, knowing he was coming. And they weren't disappointed. She gasped involuntarily, her senses swimming as he found what he was looking for, her body automatically reacting to his touch.

"Vincent!"

"Mmmm," he laid his cheek in the hollow of her shoulder and smiled up at her. "I think that must be the tenth time you've said my name in as many minutes, are you really not sure it's me?" he teased.

"Oh, I know it's you," she breathed. And she did. But she wanted to hold him, feel him, absorb his very being into hers. To keep him safe. To keep him with her. So she took his face between her hands, lifting his head and she kissed him back, on the mouth, passionately, tenderly, aching with love for him.

"You are my love, my life, the only thing in the world that matters to me. In my world, your world, anybody's world," she told him, punctuating each word with a kiss, until there wasn't an inch of him she hadn't covered, and the growl, the soft, passionate growl she had been yearning to hear, started up in his throat.

From then on, things moved fairly quickly. Vincent's reaction was swift and very definite. He clutched her to him, enfolding her in a bear hug of mammoth proportions, burying his face in her neck, her hair, her breasts, with a fierce desperation, as if he couldn't feel her enough, touch her enough, love her enough.

"Catherine, Catherine," he groaned. "Come to me, I love you."

He waited no longer. He spread himself carefully over her small form, and without further preamble, he finally claimed her body with his. He made love to her slowly, sweetly, generously, every moment a declaration of his passion, his need, his desire for her. Until her own need crystallized and peaked, exploding within her time after time, like a shower of shooting stars. But the last was the sweetest, most precious of all, for they reached their climax together and she could give as well as receive. Then, the whole world receded and paled, frozen in one long, diamond-bright moment when time truly stood still.

And no one existed. Above or Below. Only them. Vincent and Catherine. Lovers. Alone in their own world, a shared world, in a shimmering universe of their very own making.

For a brief time they remained closed, as one, unwilling even now to give each other up. Then Vincent rolled onto his back, tucking Catherine in carefully alongside him, and he steeled himself again among his pillows. A little more exhausted than he cared to admit.

She was half asleep, her head drooping onto the silky fur on his chest, her body pliant against him in that relaxation which only comes with total satisfaction. Satisfaction and safety and peace. And Vincent could feel all of those things, humming gently through her and his own satisfaction widened to encompass them. She had seen him, at his worst and she still wanted him. Still loved him. As much as ever.

"More," she suddenly said, startling him with her perception. "I know you," she said, addressing his navel since she was far too comfortable to move, even to look up at him. "I can just guess what you're thinking now, my precious, furry friend."

"You can?" He was smiling, she could hear it in his voice, but she still didn't move. So he reached down and lifted her up.

She wriggled her protest, like a kitten objecting to being moved from its place in front of the fire, but he was ruthless. And he wouldn't let her sleep. He tickled her ribs until she squirmed and giggled and squeaked. And was finally wide awake.

"All right, clever," she said at last. "I'm awake. Now, let me look at you," and he obediently lay back among the pillows and allowed her to look her fill.

He had lost weight and her eyes misted over to see each rib so starkly outlined beneath the silky fur. And there was a pattern bruises across his shoulders and arms, yellow and fading now, but still very obvious against his fair skin. She bent her head to kiss each one in turn and his hand came up to caress the back of her neck.

"You've certainly seen me at my worst," he began, but she broke in at once. "I've seen you at your most sick, your most confused," she corrected, "And that's very different."

"But I didn't frighten you," he mused, half to himself. "That much I remember. I didn't frighten you."

"You did frighten me," she corrected him again. "I thought you were dead, I truly thought you were dead and that frightened me out of my wits. But if you mean all that noise... well, if you think a few roars and snarls can put me off, you're sadly mistaken."

He threw back his head and laughed, genuinely laughed and she suddenly thought how good it was to hear that sound again. It had been so long since he'd laughed out loud. Since they both had.

"You are incorrigible," he smiled.

"I just love you," she said simply, meaning every word.

"I know, but what you did could have been dangerous..."

"For me, never," she insisted. "Surely, you realise that by now?"

"Maybe," he still sounded a little dubious and she sighed, with- a long-suffering air, and added firmly:

"My own love, you have no 'dark side'. Not you. That other part of you, the part that makes you so afraid, can't hurt me and it can't hurt you either. It's part of you, so I love it. And accept it. So why don't you?"

He had to smile again; her face was so earnest, so determined, that he couldn't help himself.

"You may smile," she persisted, "But you know it's true. I love all of you. Both of you. The Vincent now, and the Vincent then. I wouldn't want you any different. If you were," her voice dropped, became small, and her eyes clouded over, "Then you wouldn't be you. And I want you the way you are."

"I really think you do," he said softly and he drew her to him.

"Of course I do," she dismissed any further comment on the subject. "I love you the way you are, the things that are the same and the things that are different. I love everything about you that makes you Vincent. And you must learn to love them, too."

"You think so?"

"I know so. Didn't you love me when I was hurt and confused, when daddy died? You were there when I needed you. Surely, you can see it's the same for me? You can't always be the strong one, you have to learn to lean on me at times."

He was silent, digesting this, and she plunged on, determined to bring her point home.

"I love you, no matter what. Just as you love me. And you even carried on loving me when I hurt you, when I went back Above. Can't you believe that my love for you is the same?"

"It seems I have a lot to learn," he smiled, but his eyes were gentle, at peace. "But," he suddenly warned, "don't think I'll be quite so understanding this time. If you think for one moment you're going back Above, then you're wrong. I shall say no."

"Will you indeed? We'll see about that."

"No, we won't. You stay with me."

His voice was soft, but there was no doubting he meant every word. Catherine glanced up at him, searching his face, but his expression was set and determined, his eyes like chips of blue ice. And he shook his head.

"You stay with me," he repeated. And the words couldn't have been more final. They brooked no argument whatsoever. He had never laid down the law before, but he was certainly doing it now. And for the first time ever, she realised that nothing she could say would make any difference, would make him change his mind. Not that she wanted to. So she smiled and kissed him. Mollifying him. But he was hers, wasn't he? And she knew when to insist and when to let him have his way. And now was a time to give in gracefully.

"I know," she conceded. "I'm not arguing with you."

"Good. But ..." He was disconcerted again, not sure how to go on, and she was intrigued.

"Well?" she encouraged.

"Well, if we're committed now," and she nodded, agreeing, "and there'll be..."

"A baby to consider," she finished for him, her expression innocent.

"So, I think perhaps..." He was in an agony of apprehension and she couldn't bear to tease him any longer.

"We should get married?" she queried and she kissed him very gently on the mouth. "Of course. That's my condition for staying Below. I have my reputation to consider, after all. What will Father think and..."

She didn't get any further. Vincent caught her up, his eyes ablaze, almost unable to believe his ears.

"You want to marry me?"

"Try to stop me. I'd sue you..."

"For what?"

"I'll think of something, don't fret. And Father will back me up. He's from a more traditional age, he'll think you have to make an honest woman of me. And legitimize your child. You'll see," in a tone of total triumph.

"Catherine, as long as you're sure. You know I'm..."

"If you dare to tell me you're different," she threatened, "I'm warning you, I'll scream."

"I wasn't going to say anything of the sort," he protested mildly.

"Well, see that you don't."

"I can see," he began, brows raised, "That you're getting out of hand again, my love. You've had your own way for far too long and I'll have to do something about it."

"Try it," she countered, somewhat rashly. Vincent may have been weakened, but he was still more than a match for her. And he obviously knew it.

"If you insist," he said.

"You and whose army?"

It was her final defence and he laughed and shook his head.

"Oh," he said softly, his blue eyes glittering with promise. "I don't think I'll need an army. I can just about manage you myself."

And of course, he could. He took her, and held her, and loved her. Totally on his terms for once. Utterly possessing her. And she glorified in every golden moment of it.

"I thought you were sick," she gasped, when he finally allowed her to rest.

"You make me well," he murmured. And he drew her down into the warmth of his body, protecting her, loving her, promising his life forever. And together, they finally slept.

And they were still sleeping, wrapped around each other, pillows awry, when Mary and Father found them.

"I think," Father muttered, looking somewhat abashed, "That we can say Vincent's definitely on the mend."

"Thank God," Mary added fervently, then she smiled, seeing Father's flushed face. "Really, Father," she asked gently, "this won't be much of a surprise to any of us. Did you think it would be?"

"I don't know..."

"You worry too much. Leave them alone and they'll be fine."

Father looked at the two heads, so close together, and at the faces, relaxed and peaceful. And he saw Vincent's arms, wrapped about his love, holding her where they both knew she belonged, close to him. And he nodded.

"It's been a long journey," he mused, "For all of us. Perhaps me most of all. But I think we've reached the end at last."

"They belong together," Mary whispered, preparing to withdraw.

"They belong together," Father agreed, smiling.

And so they did. For, as everyone knows, from the smallest child upwards, whatsoever begins 'once upon a time', must always end: 'and so they lived happily ever after'.

END