

THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

by Lorraine Beasley

The room was crowded, noisy and hot, the atmosphere polluted by a blue haze of cigar and cigarette smoke, and an odd variety of perfumes, colognes and after shaves, as well as hot mince pies and warm sausage rolls ... and warm human bodies. In the background, barely audible over the noise of people chatting and laughing, Bing Crosby was crooning White Christmas, and outside, just to prove his predictions correct, small flurries of snow fluttered silently past the windows to hit the ground below, melting almost immediately in the puddles that had collected on the sidewalk during the afternoon. Raucous laughter filled the air, as, the alcohol making everyone less inhibited, someone cracked an unusually risqué joke, and the room began to heave as still more people congregated to bid each other season's greetings.

Catherine Chandler, looked particularly attractive in a soft grey wool dress. It had a large rollover collar and was fastened at the waist with a narrow black leather belt. She had long silver earrings of an intricate leaf design dangling from her lobes and her soft, honey gold hair was swept up in a pretty silver barrette. She stood slightly to one side of Joe Maxwell's open office door, where it was less crowded and cooler, sipping fruit punch from a Styrofoam cup. She had refused all attempts to ply her with alcohol, but, from the warmth that she could feel spreading through her body, and the pleasant glow that she felt emanating from her cheeks, Catherine was left in no doubt that someone had managed to doctor the fruit punch.

She was smiling softly, watching the proceedings in the main office, as she leaned lightly against the wall. It was unusual to see such revelry from her usually conservative and rigidly self-controlled colleagues here in the DA's office, and she was amused to see the more staid and poised members of the team letting down their hair and kicking up their heels. Her smile grew wider, as she watched her friend, Rita Escobar, accept the gentle flirtations of a colleague called Alan McFarlene, from the computer room. Catherine wondered if anything would come of it they certainly looked cosy with eyes only for each other and if the twinkle in Rita's eyes was any indication, she did not find his company unpleasant Catherine was happy for her friend, for it looked as if Rita the lonesome, was about to start the new year with a new man

A quick glance at her wrist watch informed Catherine that it was getting late, and she decided that she really should think about making a move for home, if she was going to get there in time for her 9.30 pm date with the special man in her life when, suddenly, strong arms were slipping around her waist and shoulders, spinning her around, and tipping her upper body back slightly. Joe Maxwell's familiar, handsome face, framed by thick black hair, loomed in front of Catherine, as his lips drew close and locked on to her own.

His mouth was soft, warm and gentle, moving slowly against her own, and caught by surprise as she was, Catherine made no attempt to push him away. Her heart was suddenly hammering against her ribs, her eyes wide, pupils dilated, as of their own volition, her hands found their way up around his back and shoulders, her fingers sinking into the thickness of his hair, nails digging into his scalp as she applied pressure to the back of his head, deepening the kiss, as she clung to him in order to maintain her balance.

It was utterly absurd, but she suddenly felt as though she were in the middle of one of those old boy/girl movies with Rock Hudson and Doris Day, or James Garner and Lee Remick, where boy meets girl, boy falls for girl, boy and girl kiss, and planets collide or trains run headlong into each other or bells ring or things explode leaving a cloud of multicoloured stars and swirls and

glittery things around their heads leaving both parties, shell-shocked, breathless and shaken The kiss lasted no longer than a couple of very ragged and erratic heart beats, before Catherine was able to gather her wits, and dragged her mouth away from Joe's, blinking rapidly at him in confusion as he gently righted her, and released his hold on her, as though he had been burned.

Breathing hard, and shocked beyond words, firstly by his boldness, and secondly, by her reaction to his kiss, Catherine continued to blink rapidly as she stepped back from him, and began to wipe the taste of his lips from her mouth with the back of her hand.

From his shocked expression, it gradually became obvious to Catherine that both of their reactions to the kiss had shocked him too Frozen for a moment, staring in mute disbelief at her boss, her mind racing, Catherine cursed herself, and Joe. What the hell had come over him!

'Joe, ' she gasped raggedly after a lengthy pause, her voice very deep and intense, drawing air into her lungs with some difficulty still, and cursing her treacherous body for it's unexpected and unwelcome response *Am I really so starved for affection?* she thought to herself bitterly.

'Cathy I I ' Joe stammered, a bewildered expression on his face. His gaze suddenly travelled up and over her head, and Catherine's wide eyes followed his gaze, understanding suddenly dawning in their grey/green depths. Without realising it, she had been standing directly beneath a large sprig of mistletoe, which someone had threaded through the string of balloons, rotund, jolly, red-faced Santas, tinsel, paper garlands, streamers and other Christmas decorations.

Immediately, Catherine realised that it had begun as a light hearted prank a Christmas kiss under the mistletoe innocent amusing fun Her reaction had not been something that he could have been prepared for, Catherine reasoned silently. How could he have been? She hadn't been prepared for it herself How could she have been? She had never thought of Joe in that way Even though she had suspected for some time now that her boss was a little in love with her Although she had offered him no encouragement. But she did value his friendship.

'Cathy ' Joe found his voice at last, just as Catherine found the use returning to her legs, and spinning on her grey high stiletto heels, started to walk quickly away from him.

'Cathy I'm sorry ...,' he called after her. 'Cathy please ...,' he implored.

'No Joe.' She half turned back to face him then, anger burning in her beautiful wide, grey/green eyes. 'No.'

'I'

'Forget it Joe ' She sighed deeply, noting the turbulent expression in his dark eyes. She turned away from him quickly and resumed her journey back to the main office, tears of anger springing to her eyes anger at herself at her own lack of self control and weakness She fought her way through the mass of bodies blocking her path to her desk, and noted with relief that Joe had not tried to follow her. The last thing she wanted was to have to talk about what just happened. It had been a mistake ... an accident She did not need to drag it out by going through a post mortem with him She felt bad enough about it as it was

She slipped her coat from the back of her chair and picked up her purse, then fought her way back across the office. She had to pass Joe's office to get to the exit, and he was standing just inside the office doorway as she drew close, having the good grace to at least look a little shame faced at his behaviour.

'Cathy I'm sorry it was ' He tried to apologise meekly, as she stopped to slip her coat around her shoulders, fumbling with the buttons because her hands were still shaking so badly, and this time Catherine knew that she had to let him apologise or else it would seriously damage their working relationship and she did not want that.

'What Joe' A joke that got out of hand?' She spoke softly, no reproach or accusation in her tone. He

looked hurt, dropping his head for a moment, then when he looked up, he tried to smile.

'Yeah' When that did not work as he had hoped, he sighed deeply too, but just for a moment, she could quite clearly see the disappointment in his dark eyes. 'We should talk'

'What is there to talk about, Joe?' She regarded him coolly. 'It's okay It was nothing really A touch too much of the Christmas spirit' Her expression was serious, as she prayed that he would take her meaning, that it was nothing and that nothing could come from it despite the way that she had reacted to his touch.

'Yeah?' He let out a long deep sigh. 'Radcliffe' His sudden use of the nickname that he had given her, was his way of trying to put things back on a professional footing, Catherine realised, and was glad that he had obviously understood her meaning, without her having to use long words, and Isaac Stubbs' favourite moves, to ram it home to him.

'Yes Joe?'

'You did good this year'

'Thank you.' She smiled softly then, hoping that he would not read anything into the simple gesture.

'Merry Christmas, Radcliffe.'

'You too, Joe. See you after the holiday.'

Catherine forced herself to walk away then, out of the office, without looking back, her heart heavy, her mood black, against herself. What had she done? How could she? How could she have Responded like that? How could she How could she have Betrayed Vincent Vincent Oh God He would surely know He would have felt her response as keenly as she had through their Bond Oh God What must he be thinking Feeling How could she have been so careless Reckless Thoughtless How could she have allowed herself to hurt him so much?

The answer was very simple. It had not been a deliberate action on her part. She had been taken by surprise in an unguarded moment taken unawares And It had not been an unpleasant experience And because of the heightened state of her emotions lately Her weak, wretched body craving affection craving the touch of another's flesh against her own had responded on a level beyond thought Instinct Chemistry

Reasoning with herself did not help her predicament, however. She now had a tremendously difficult situation to resolve with Vincent only adding to the stress, heartache and I'm sorry love So sorry Please forgive me It meant nothing Nothing I love you It was a completely involuntary reaction I love you She sent out these, hopefully comforting and reassuring thoughts to the man that she loved But deep down inside, she could not help feeling that this time, she had really blown it That her wonderfully sensitive and passionate love would find this the most convenient excuse to date, to end their romance, and bury himself deep in the bowels of his wondrous and mysterious world beyond her reach beyond the reach of all who loved him

Dammit Joe! Why did you have to go and do something so stupid! But It wasn't entirely Joe's fault If she wasn't so absolutely desperate for Vincent's love touch kisses If it wasn't for the fact that even the simple thought of him the sound of his name in her mind on her lips made her body ache for his touch If it wasn't for his total refusal to accept that she could think of him in that way That she needed him that way No! It wasn't Vincent's fault either! she railed silently, riding down in the elevator now. This was all so new to him. So Unexpected No wonder the poor love was having a hard time getting his head around it. It was a situation that he simply was not prepared for But in the meantime it didn't help her blood pressure, or relieve the very intimate itch that only Vincent could scratch

Vincent's attitude at the moment, was to ignore it, in the hope that it would go away But, of course, Catherine knew that it would not. So Until Vincent was prepared to accept the new direction in

which their relationship was heading, at full pelt Hot showers were becoming a dim and distant memory! How she had wished for months now but wishing did not make it so and trying to rush Vincent into something that he was neither ready for, nor comfortable about, would only make things worse

As she stepped out of the elevator into the lobby, Catherine let out a soft little sigh. Sometimes, she wondered if they would ever have more than a few snatched minutes on her balcony, or in his chamber, Below The odd hug The brief touch of hands to faces Arms linked as they walked together side by side If Vincent would allow himself to believe that he could be loved wanted desired that he could love her, want her and yes desire her in the same way too without feeling guilt and shame or revulsion self revulsion Catherine amended silently, as she pulled the collar of her heavy black coat up further around her ears, before pushing open the door to the street, and stepping out into the chill December night.

Flurries of wet snow clinging to her hair and her woollen coat, as she walked to the curb and hailed a yellow cab. Without feeling that he would be defiling something beautiful and precious

As she sat back demurely in the back seat of the cab, having given the driver the address of her destination off Central Park West, her thoughts naturally returned to Vincent. She was not so blessed as to be able to feel his emotions, but she could well imagine his turmoil, suffering the tortures of the damned as he imagined what had happened to her How she longed to go to him, to throw her arms around him, reassure him But She knew that he would have found that infinitely more embarrassing than facing their real problem Sexual frustration! Because Vincent hated her to see him any other way than the poised, courteous, controlled gentleman the Vincent he struggled so hard to be for the people that he loved and whom loved him

Catherine suspected that that was also a part of the problem Vincent was afraid ashamed to allow her to see him at anything less than his best It mortified him, she knew, that she had witnessed his loss of control the violence the Dark side of his nature which came to the fore whenever he found himself in the situation of being forced to protect her And she still could not make him understand that she loved him all of him even that side of him the part of him that gave him the courage and the strength that he relied upon to keep her and all the other people that he loved, safe and protected. Sometimes he could be so very stubborn exasperating wonderful And sometimes he could be so very hard to reach. It was hard to break down the barriers that he had built around himself over the years, for the sake of self preservation hard to get past the years of self denial and the belief that he was unworthy But One by one Catherine was determined to remove those barriers break down those taboos penetrate his defences one brick at a time, if she had to Because, for the sake of both their sanity Something had to give!

In his wondrous and magical home, deep beneath the sprawling Metropolis that was New York City, an equally wondrous and mysterious being sank to his knees, fists clenched, elbows digging painfully into his sides, as he fought not to give into the need to throw back his head and let forth a murderous, bloodcurdling roar of anger, disappointment, shock and despair Top lip curled back in a snarl, head moving jerkily from side to side, red/gold hair in disarray around his broad shoulders, Vincent felt the hot tears scorching their way down his rough, ginger down and whiskered cheeks, to his long, square chin, his lungs burning with the need to draw in precious oxygen.

Oh Catherine His heart cried out to her, sensing her surprise, shock, shame pleasure Momentarily overcome by her reaction to a simple kiss a kiss from lips other than his own His heart was thudding erratically in his chest and a thin red mist was creeping across his line of vision,

from the corners of his eyes, as he bowed his head, fighting for control, until at last, he could fight no more, and he threw back his head and bellowed loudly, voicing his pain and torment.

Oh Catherine he lamented silently, breathless and exhausted, on his knees in the dirt, grateful to be alone in a distant tunnel, returning, last as usual, from a work detail, long after the other men of the community Below had returned to their chambers. Oh Catherine How could you? He asked silently, reaching out with his senses, feeling her remorse her fear that he would know just how deeply she had responded to the kiss and her need to reassure him to make things right Oh Catherine How could you? Because she is only human he answered his own question silently too.

She is a beautiful woman, with certain needs he reasoned sadly, dragging air into his starving lungs, head bowed, hair falling in a soft, honey gold curtain around his unusual leonine features, tears forming little damp splotches on the sandy earth around his knees. And you do not deserve her love You do not deserve her tenderness her compassion her desire her passion

Vincent let forth another snarl of irritation, this time at the direction of his own thoughts, disappointed and angry with himself that, despite all that he had said that she was free to follow her heart to find love with a man from her world, Above, and that he would accept that, and be happy for her he could feel such despair such black-hearted jealousy such turmoil and torture

That love could have such a dark side jealousy and distrust That their love for each other could have this alternate side had the same facets and problems as lovers the world over had to face, made Vincent feel both anguish and elation

He loved Catherine with all his heart soul being and Catherine loved him truly loved him loved him as she would love any other man What they felt for each other was real, deep all consuming Catherine did not pity him. Hers was not a sympathetic touch but the tender caress of a woman who loved and wanted to express that love desire need

And because they loved because he loved Catherine Vincent was faced with a whole new set of circumstances that he was not emotionally equipped to handle yet

Catherine's very natural and very deep desire of him physical desire her need to take their love for each other on to the next logical step The physical expression of her love for him her need of him that he too could need Catherine in that way had both startled and amazed Vincent Her most tender caress awakening in him a need that he had never known possible a yearning that reached into his very soul And the physical reaction of his body had caused Vincent to feel an embarrassment and shame that went beyond words

How could he ever think of Catherine in that way? How could he ever think of touching Catherine in that way? That Catherine could think of him in that way need him in that way, set his heart soaring rejoicing whilst his mind balked at the thought reminding him that whilst he behaved like a gentleman, and appeared both cultured and civilised he was no ordinary man And If his control should slip if he should lose that slim hold on the other side of his nature the Dark side that which constantly struggled to break free that which gave him the power to protect the people that he loved Catherine included

If the beast should ever break free Vincent felt a shudder run down the length of his spine, and he let out a deep, ragged breath. What was he to do? If Catherine were ever to even suspect that he reciprocated her feelings that he knew of her need for their physical union the consummation of their love she would do everything in her power use all her feminine wiles to get him to give into his needs And because he could not give into those desires she would be disappointed frustrated angry her love would turn against him, and she would, at last, see him for what he really was not a man at all

He had never known that loving someone could be like this bittersweet feeling all at once, light hearted, giddy and free whilst also feeling such despair, and uncertainty and fear

Yes fear Fear of losing the warmth and the love and the joy that her nearness brought into his life a life that she had touched, and changed beyond recognition a life that would never be the same again now that he had known her love should he ever lose it And fear of losing control Fear of giving into his basic needs as a man and in so doing releasing the other that which could not be controlled or reasoned with that which knew only anger and power and death

Vincent squeezed his eyes tightly shut and let out a low moan of anguish his weak, wretched flesh betraying him even now as he felt the tightening in his groin area, and the uncomfortable stretching of the fabric of his breeches

Damn this wretched body! Damn! Damn! Damn! He should be rejoicing that his body was capable of such a reaction to thoughts of the woman that he loved the nearness of the woman that he lived only to love There should be no shame or embarrassment in such a reaction. It was natural. It was wonderful But it was also torture For he could never find the release his body demanded, in the natural way And any other course of action was undignified, degrading and an insult to the woman that he loved.

Vincent threw back his head, tossing his glorious golden mane about his broad shoulders, as he drew in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. The flesh may indeed be weak but I am strong he told himself sternly. I am not a hormone-driven adolescent who cannot practise self control

But disciplined as he usually was it still wasn't as easy as it sounded' Catherine did not make practising self control easy giving him tantalising glimpses of her delectable body cleavage thigh Glimpses into the wonder and mystery of physical intimacy with the one that he loved

But self controlled and disciplined he would have to be for it was obvious that he could not count on Catherine to restrain her ardour indefinitely

Sniffing loudly, and swiping at the tears dripping off the end of his chin, Vincent drew in another shuddering breath and expelled it slowly, feeling his heart beat gradually beginning to return to normal. Catherine knew nothing of the torment that he was in knew nothing of the turmoil of his thoughts the torture that her sweet, tender caresses brought to his body and his mind She knew only that she loved him and wanted to show him that love show him joys and pleasures beyond his wildest dreams And, of course she would know that her actions this evening had hurt him How was he to make her believe, as he must that he understood that it was all right when he was feeling such pain such jealousy such betrayal

If he could feel this wretched over a simple kiss how would he feel if Catherine, faced with no other choice, because he could not submit himself to his basic, natural needs and drives found satisfaction completion in the arms of another man? It would probably destroy him kill him Vincent acknowledged silently But what other choice did he have? What else could he do? Catherine must never know of his struggle his torment his despair his need

His resolve strengthened by his need to protect Catherine from the truth, Vincent rose to his feet, and leaning heavily against the rock tunnel wall, took several deep breaths, until he felt calmer and in control of his emotions once more. Vincent knew that Catherine had so been looking forward to seeing him tonight knew that she had gifts for the children Father Mary Mouse Jamie William himself and that she had been looking forward to giving them all these gifts expecting nothing in return, except the pleasure and happiness on their faces, as they each unwrapped their gifts

But Vincent also knew that he could not face Catherine not tonight not until he had had time to think to compose himself

The thought of disappointing Catherine of letting her down, tugged at his heart but he knew that it was the right thing to do. If he saw her tonight feeling this way knowing of her need of

him things would be said Things that would hurt each of them destroy their fragile relationship things that could never be undone unsaid things that they would each regret but would be unable to forgive or forget

But perhaps it would be better that way Better if he allowed her to believe that his jealousy was such that it would be better for both of them if they did not see each other again Vincent let out a soft gasp at the thought, his heart missing a beat, before pounding painfully in his chest as it resumed it's steady pumping. Was he strong enough to let her go? Give her up? Live without her? Why should he give her up? He loved her! But They had no future No future together And perhaps no future apart from each other either But, he also knew that he could not endure this limbo this half life for much longer It would be better to let her go and cling to the memories For he could see no other end for them but the pain and heartbreak of promises and dreams unfulfilled dissatisfaction and disappointment of needs and desires that could not now ... or ever be sated

Better to remember the happy times the warmth the love the joy the tenderness Yes Better to remember than to experience? A little voice nagged in his ear. Better to dream of the happy life than to suffer the turmoil and torment of trying to make that happy life a reality? Coward!

'Oh Catherine' Vincent choked out, fresh tears welling up in his beautiful china blue eyes. 'Forgive me for what I am about to do for what I must do for both our sakes' He mumbled thickly. 'I love you so much but we cannot continue' Leaning his forehead against his bent forearm, leaning as he was against the rough tunnel wall, Vincent gave into the silent sobs that suddenly shook his giant body And then, when they were done, and with a deep, shuddering breath, his decision made, his resolve in tact, despite the dull ache in his heart, Vincent forced his weary legs to carry him homeward.

Seated on one of the small, two seater couches in her living room, Catherine again glanced at her watch. 10.00 pm. She let out another deep sigh. Where was he? What was keeping him? Didn't he knew how desperately she wanted to see him how desperately she needed to talk to him

Of course he did! A little voice screamed inside her head. So why wasn't he here? Catherine had been in turmoil since arriving home from the office, her thoughts filled with Vincent, and how much he must be hurting how much she had hurt him how much she needed to put things right between them needing to reach out to him to comfort him to explain

She had stripped out of her work clothes and flung them into the laundry basket, before taking a long, hot shower and changing into green corduroy jeans and a fluffy white sweater, knowing that it would be chilly, as she accompanied Vincent to Father's chamber, with Christmas gifts for all her friends Below. She had prepared dinner, but had had no stomach for the bowl of hearty vegetable soup, and had only nibbled on a buttered crusty roll instead. After clearing away her dinner and washing the dishes, Catherine had sat on the couch, nibbling pensively on a neatly-manicured fingernail, and pretending interest in a paperback novel that she had been looking forward to reading, all the time trying to assemble her thoughts, and decide how best to explain things to Vincent As the time for his arrival had drawn closer, her heart had begun to beat a little more rapidly, and she suddenly had butterflies in her stomach

And when the appointed time had come and gone with no sign of Vincent, Catherine had begun to fret about his welfare fearing that something terrible had happened to him that something was terribly wrong He never missed a date And if he was delayed for some reason, he always tried to get word to her so that she would not worry It was simply his way. Considerate. Thoughtful chewing pensively on her bottom lip, Catherine rose from the couch and

crossed to the French windows, pulling back the drapes to peer out on to the darkened terrace balcony beyond. There was no sign of Vincent but she had known that deep down in her heart of hearts She always knew when he was close by always Something in her soul responded to his nearness Something to do with the Bond, she assumed She had never felt the need to question the feeling just accepting it as part of her love for this unique, wonderful man Vincent Catherine began to pace up and down the living room, her eyes constantly drawn to the French windows, and the balcony beyond. When he hadn't arrived by 10:30, Catherine knew that something was dreadfully wrong that he wasn't going to come to her tonight and she thought she knew why too

Damn him! Catherine marched into the bedroom, reached into her closet for a fleece lined suede jacket, which she swung around her shoulders as she marched back into the living room, picking up her door keys and flashlight on the way out.

On sneaker clad feet, made swifter by her anger, indignation and determination, Catherine made her way Below, negotiating the ladder down from her basement, and the twisting, turning labyrinth of tunnels that lead down to the golden hue of the home tunnels with practised ease. Catherine knew that Vincent would know that she was coming to him would sense her approach and if, for some reason he did not sense her sentries would warn him of her impending arrival.

What would he do? How would he react? Would he avoid her? Avoid the confrontation that he must surely know was coming? Or would he face her, calmly, rationally allow her to have her say, vent her anger, and then put forward his own feelings? They had never hidden the truth from each other never hidden their true feelings from each other They could not it was impossible for them They had never avoided facing things that were unpleasant either before They had always shared everything no matter how unsavoury or unpleasant They had faced them together worked things out together never afraid to say the things that had to be said no matter how painful.

They could do this, because they loved each other believed in each other trusted each other This time, Vincent had deliberately stayed away knowing that she would surely come to him bring the argument to him

And Catherine thought that she knew why he was avoiding her making her come to him face him on his own ground on his terms He was going to end their relationship out of some noble sense of honour and duty obligation Don't do this, Vincent Please, don't do this to us She willed him to focus on her thoughts. We can work this out, my love Just give me a chance to explain

Vincent wasn't in his chamber. He wasn't in Father's chamber either neither was Father, Catherine noted, her irritation mounting with every passing minute, so that when she did eventually locate Vincent, sitting quietly beside the Mirror Pool, gazing silently and thoughtfully into the inky reflection of the night sky, and the constellation of Orion, the hunter, as he marched across the winter heavens, Catherine had built up quite a head of steam, all tact and diplomacy and reason evaporating as she prepared to give him both barrels

'Catherine' Vincent spoke her name quietly, not moving, merely continuing to watch the stars, looking like so many rhinestones glittering on a black velvet cloth.

'Vincent' Catherine took a deep breath, piqued by his refusal to face her look at her

'You should not have come.' He said softly.

'Why?' Catherine demanded. 'What should I have done, Vincent' Sat around on my duff waiting for you to get around to me' She seethed, her anger in overdrive now, beyond reason.

'I had some thinking to do'

'I know me too I guess, by the very fact that you didn't show up, as planned that you have

come to some kind of decision'

'Yes.' He acknowledged softly, still refusing to look up at her seeing only her reflection in the Mirror Pool as she walked up behind him, to gaze down angrily at his reflection too.

'Well shove it, Vincent!?' Catherine declared, her face burning with rage and indignation, and her tone, rather than her actual words, or the look of anger and unhappiness on her beautiful face, finally drew Vincent's china blue gaze. Through the anger and self pity, Vincent could hear in Catherine's voice feel, via their Bond her genuine pain and sorrow and total incomprehension that he seemed prepared to accept that they could not go on.

She was disappointed in him angry and confused that he was not prepared to fight for what they had to fight for her love

'I don't care what you have decided you are not the only one in this relationship, Vincent. I have a say too!' she hissed through clenched teeth, her tiny hands clenched into fists at her side as she glared at him, willing the tears that she could feel burning at the back of her eyes, not to flow 'I won't let you sit back and watch something good and right and beautiful go down the drain just because of a simple kiss!'

'A simple kiss,' he echoed sadly, his voice low and rough with emotion held in check. 'The touch of another man's lips to yours, Catherine,' he reminded softly.

'Yes, Vincent and yes you have every right to feel angry and jealous and hurt' Catherine conceded, briefly lowering her turbulent grey/green eyes from his view so that he would not see the pain and the tears.

'Hurt?' Hurt that didn't go anywhere near covering what he felt Vincent thought to himself sadly.

'Yes but you don't have the right to just do nothing throw away what we have out of some misguided and misplaced sense of what you consider to be the right thing! I won't let you sit back and surrender to what you consider to be the inevitable, Vincent!?' Catherine railed. 'I would feel better if you'd roar and growl and snarl at me, Vincent and so would you, incidentally instead of just sitting there like so much vanilla pudding, wrapped up in self pity and'

Catherine flexed her clenched fists as she struggled to put into words what she was feeling, her beautiful stormy grey/green eyes shooting sparks of anger and indignation at Vincent, whilst all the time drinking in the beauty and uniqueness of his beloved face

And Vincent wrestled to prevent a smile from curving at the corners of his lips She was so incredibly beautiful when she was angry This must be what she was like in court a force to be reckoned with She certainly didn't pull any punches Vanilla pudding indeed! And how easily she could disarm him Send all his valid arguments and sound reasoning flying out of the window! With humour

She was amazing Standing up to him like this when she was in the wrong and she knew it! Bless her! Lord how he loved her in every guise happy sad vulnerable feisty weeping or laughing weak or strong He loved every aspect of her personality He loved her body and soul She had made herself a part of his life a life that would never be the same And he could not go back to that lonely existence not after having had a taste of what life could be like with her beauty, warmth, courage, laughter her touch her love

What had he been thinking? He could no more let her go, than he could stop the sun from rising, or the rain from falling or his body's need to draw in precious air And he understood what she was trying to do and he loved her all the more for it. She wasn't trying to shirk her responsibility or pass the buck She was simply trying to get him to fight for what he wanted to fight to keep her to not to push her away And she was right This was his problem to deal with as only he could But

'And?' He arched a heavy brow quizzically.

'Ooh!' Catherine screwed up her face in rage and he could quite clearly feel her desire to slap him across the face and her struggle to suppress the desire yet despite all that he still thought her beautiful still loved her with every fibre of his being

How could he possibly have believed that this they were not meant to be How could he love her so deeply and yet still believe that they did not have a future together that he could not overcome his fear of hurting her

Catherine had no fear of him She loved him with a passion and a fierceness that he had never known existed And Catherine had no fear of a union with him It was what she wanted more than anything to know him as only a woman could and have him know her in all the intimate little ways that only a man could know a woman And she was so frustrated by his lack of response to her sometimes less than subtle advances it was getting harder and harder for her to hide her needs to channel them in other directions in the hope that he would eventually come to his senses and find the courage to take the next step So-o-o in a way he was partly responsible for this precarious situation Vincent suddenly realised with surprise.

'Catherine I I felt your response to that simple kiss I felt your pleasure, ' he said in a low, sad voice, dragging his aqua gaze away from her face, to gaze instead at her reflection in the Mirror Pool, her expression one of anger, confusion and love

'Dammit, Vincent of course I responded!' Catherine railed. 'You've got me so wound up and frustrated' She faltered briefly, taking a deep breath and trying to calm herself, before continuing. 'Sometimes, Vincent, ' she continued in more reasonable tones, again drawing his beautiful blue eyes back to her face. '.... some responses are made involuntarily out of instinct chemistry' She explained patiently. ' without thought

'You cannot hold me responsible for something over which I had no control. If you weren't so damned uptight, noble and rigidly-controlled, maybe you'd know what it feels like to have me respond to your touch, Vincent You're the one I really want the only one that I want now and always and that, my friend is the real problem. You are the one with the hang-ups about intimacy and I have tried to be patient with you tried to understand how hard this must be for you because it is all so new'

Vincent had so much that he wanted to say to her needed to say to her his mouth worked around the words, but no sound came from his lips as he stared at her with awe.

'Oh my darling' Catherine let out a deep sigh, her fingers itching to reach out and lovingly stroke his precious cheek, amazed by the need, as only a few moments before she had been itching to slap him. Just another example of the very strong, and very complex emotions that he brought out in her How was a girl supposed to cope with that?

'This Bond that we share, Vincent is a magical and wondrous thing but, sometimes, if I am not quick enough to stop myself I hurt you like tonight that kiss But Vincent I can't be forever apologising to you because my Father's Uncle's second cousin twice removed kissed my cheek on my birthday!?'

There was an edge to her voice again, and she had to remind herself that losing her cool would get her nowhere with Vincent.

Meanwhile, Vincent had to admit if only to himself that she had a point. He could not allow himself to react so violently to every emotional response Catherine experienced. She was a very loving and caring woman, and she had feelings for other people It would not be natural if she did not He reasoned. She was right, of course, about involuntary reactions he was fast learning about those himself and she was also right about feeling that she must apologise for caring for someone other than him. There were special people in her life, people who loved and cared for her,

and he had no right to make her feel bad for returning those affections just because he loved her Their Bond was strongest on his side and the problem was his to deal with. He had accepted in the past that she had a caring nature He would not have her any other way Just because he felt what she felt it did not mean that Catherine had to stop feeling to spare him the pain and embarrassment of sharing her emotions

But what she was really talking about he had to acknowledge, was the very new and very strong emotions that he was feeling, and the needs and desires that he was experiencing that he must come to terms with if they were to go on. Catherine was no fool Despite the fact that he had tried to hide his fears and his embarrassment from her, she had picked up on both and it was true that she had been incredibly patient with him He acknowledged silently.

Two years was indeed a long time to exercise self control especially for such a sensual and caring woman as Catherine She knew his struggle after all understood his fears and his uncertainties and had tried to avoid putting more pressure on him by avoiding the subject although, her body had been reluctant to give up sending out the signals, he knew meant that she wanted and needed and desired him too

If he could overcome his fears about intimacy with Catherine if he could fulfil her needs as she craved Then never again would he have to suffer the pain of her reacting to another man's touch ... But it was a very big if and there was so much that she could never understand So much fear and anxiety about hurting her Defiling her beauty

'Why don't we talk about what is really going on between us, Vincent?' Catherine asked in a soft voice, breaking the lengthy silence that had hung between them. 'Or more to the point what is not going on between us?'

She waited for him to respond, and was disappointed when he awkwardly rose to his feet and took several paces away from her then, half turning back toward her, lowered his head, his hair falling forward to conceal his face from her unable to look her in the eye clear evidence of his embarrassment and shame Poor love How could she make this easier on him? She would have to if they were ever going to get the problem out into the open, where they could deal with it.

'We both know that this isn't about an innocent kiss or the way I reacted to it not really, ' she added, when he raised his head abruptly and made to protest. 'If we didn't feel all this angst, tension and confusion about where we want our relationship to go, Vincent then I wouldn't have responded to that kiss and you wouldn't have felt so damned wretched, that to live without me was the only sensible answer you could come up with to deal with the situation' She paused briefly, watching his beautiful face and the conflicting emotions that crossed his unusual leonine features. 'Vincent that is not a viable solution to our problem'

'My problem' He sighed softly.

'No our problem,' she emphasised. 'We are in this together We both have feelings both have needs, understand?'

Vincent nodded gently his beautiful red/gold mane swishing around his broad shoulders.

'And where as I have a little more experience in these matters I understand how difficult it must be for you, love truly, I do' She fought not to allow the smile she felt tugging at her lips to form there. This was a very serious subject, and they needed to talk it through

Seeing as talking about it was about as much action as she was going to get from him right now, she thought with a soft sigh of resignation. Patience Chandler patience Everything comes to those who wait and this has to be worth waiting for

'Okay now hear this, ' she continued, squashing her wanton thoughts, as much as for Vincent's peace of mind as for her own. There were some things that needed to be said needed to be set straight Then maybe there would be time for some action later 'Letting me go or pushing

me into the arms of another man These are not options that I am willing to consider.' She told him firmly. 'I love you. I want a life with you, Vincent and I thought that that was what you wanted too' She paused briefly, and watched as he hung his head, but when he looked up at her again, at last, his beautiful cobalt blue eyes were burning with love for her all the confirmation that she needed from him, at that moment, and it gave her the courage to continue.

'But I want more too I have dreams Vincent such beautiful dreams of our future together' She told him with a pretty smile now. ' and I know that you have the same dreams too my love even if you could never admit it even to yourself even if you can never begin to believe that you have every right to have such dreams to want such happiness for yourself'

'Yes' He breathed the word raggedly, sensing her happiness and contentment as she pictured in her mind the life that she dreamed that they would one day share

'But you do, Vincent you have the same right to crave those things as every other man on the planet, beloved so go ahead, and dream your dreams, and want to make them come true These things can be ours, Vincent but we both have to want them We both have to work toward making them come true Walk beside me Vincent believe in our dream and together we will make it come true ...'

She paused then, wrestling with the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat, and the tears that threatened to choke her. 'I want us to live together as man and wife I want a family with you lots and lots of little Vincents and Catherine's chasing each other through these wonderful tunnels, driving Father to distraction but that will never happen if you are afraid to touch me, Vincent afraid to love me'

She let out a deep sigh. 'Do you want these things as badly as I do, Vincent?' Vincent felt his heart constrict in his chest, as he felt again Catherine's need her yearning for his touch knew the truth of her words and the depth of his own need of her

'Yes,' he confessed in a low voice, velvet and gravel combined, sending a delicious little shiver down the length of Catherine's spine. 'But'

'Then let me love let me show you how beautiful it can be trust me please'

'I I'

'Oh Vincent let me hold you let me touch you,' she crooned, opening her arms to him, and he felt a pull greater than he had ever experienced, a need to press his body close to hers and never let her go But he could not move, seemingly rooted to the spot, hypnotised by the softness of her voice, and the images that her words were conjuring up in his imagination images of home and family and all the happiness that he had never dared hope to find She was offering all of them to him Offering him a promise of a life more rich in love and contentment than he had ever known The life that he wanted for himself, but had never dared hope for

'We have all the time in the world, to learn about each other no pressure no rush but I need to know that some day you and I will make love that all the waiting and the understanding are not in vain You have it in you to be a wonderful lover, Vincent and I am willing to wait for you to decide when the time is right only make it soon, my darling please make it soon I'm not getting any younger, and I don't want to be in my dotage before I present you with your first son'

She smiled wickedly at him then, and Vincent felt his heart perform a somersault in his chest. She was a truly remarkable woman What had he ever done to deserve such love from her?

'Catherine I have learned so much about life about myself since you came into my life You have brought so many blessings'

'And there will be more blessings, Vincent believe me if you can only overcome your shyness

and your fear and let yourself experience the most beautiful thing that can happen between two people who love each other'

Catherine reached out to him again, and this time, he walked into the circle of her embrace and gathered her close to him, with a deep, shuddering sigh. With a soft little sigh, Catherine buried her face in the broad expanse of his chest, and felt the familiar sensation of home coming that never failed to move her. He was her life. Her home. There was nowhere else she wanted to be except right here in his arms forever and always

'Catherine I know that what you are saying is right but what if I can never?' His voice trailed away then, and he closed his eyes briefly.

'Let go of the fear?' She looked up at him with a soft expression of love and contentment, and understanding on her face, which he found when he again opened his eyes.

'Yes.' He groaned in anguish.

'Then so be it we'll just have to do without the babies, and pour all of our love into each other I'm not saying that it would be easy because my love, with just a look, or a word you do the most incredibly erotic things to me'

Catherine grinned at the look of wonderment that suddenly appeared on his face. 'And whenever you're around, I get this incredibly intimate itch, that I want only you to scratch' She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

'But,' she sighed deeply. 'I'm not such a slave to my emotions that I can't live a celibate life if I have to and believe me, Vincent, that is the only other choice I have. There will never be anyone else but you and I will be content to accept whatever you are able to offer I love you.'

'I love you too, Catherine but'

'No don't spoil it' Tears suddenly welled up in her beautiful grey/green eyes, and her bottom lip began to quiver. 'With love, Vincent, all things are possible' She smiled bravely through her tears. 'You have taught me that We love each other, and that makes us so lucky, Vincent because we have a place to start' She nuzzled against his chest, and felt him stiffen, just for a heartbeat, before expelling a deep breath which fanned her fringe, and allowed his rigid hold over his upper body to relax just a little.

'Catherine?'

'Mm?' Catherine looked up at him curiously. She thought she knew what was coming next had been expecting it from the moment that she had found him sitting beside the pool And knew that he had the right to ask

'The kiss was it Elliott Burch?' Vincent asked in a soft voice, hating himself for needing to know who had evoked such a reaction in her and fearing the answer for if there was one man who could spoil their future happiness, by luring Catherine away from him it was Elliott Burch

'No.' Catherine looked up into his precious face and saw the look of relief in his eyes, which was then replaced by curiosity. 'Who else, then?' She said the words for him. He gave her a somewhat sheepish look, and she could not help but smile. 'Who do you think I know well enough to allow them to take such liberties, Vincent?'

'I I, ' he floundered, his ginger down and whiskered cheeks colouring becomingly.

'It's all right, love It was Joe'

'Joe' ' Your boss, Joe?' He could not hide the surprise in his voice then.

'Yes. Joe Maxwell.'

'Oh'

'Don't worry, sweetheart he'll think twice before trying to take such liberties again, ' she assured him, chuckling softly at the bemused look on his face, which she quickly realised he was using to hide his growing doubts and suspicions.

'I think my reaction scared the hell out of him he didn't expect it not that I did either, of course Oh hell Look Vincent, it was just an innocent kiss under the mistletoe something that people who work together seem to think they have the right to do at this time of the year It's crazy, but there you have it' She explained, hot colour suffusing her cheeks at the memory.

'He caught me by surprise, Vincent but there was really no harm meant Poor Joe he got more than he bargained for'

Catherine reached up then and lightly touched Vincent's cheek with the warm tips of her fingers. 'I'm sorry I hurt you, Vincent it's the last thing that I ever want to do you must know that'

'Yes?'

'Then am I forgiven?'

'For accepting your boss' kiss' Yes'

'I didn't exactly accept it, Vincent it was kinda thrust upon me although, I wasn't afraid more shocked and surprised at his unexpected boldness, ' she confessed softly.

'Very well' He hesitated for an instant, and Catherine frowned up at him

'Vincent?'

'.... However I do not believe that I can let you off the hook quite so easily for likening me to vanilla pudding!' He chuckled softly. 'When I saw you standing there, like some fierce amazon warrior in full flow, I really thought that you were going to hit me or worse push me into the pool, '

'Believe me I was sorely tempted, ' she confessed, her steady grey/green gaze never wavering. 'But what else was I meant to do, Vincent? I knew what was on your mind, and I know just how stubborn you can be when you set your mind to it and I knew that I couldn't let you do it Sometimes you are so very hard to reason with you can be rather high-handed at times, you know'

She paused for a moment to allow him to disagree with her, but he merely inclined his head gently, and allowed her to continue. 'So I thought I'd better get in there first, before you went too far, and spoiled Christmas for a lot of people not just you and I. Can you imagine how miserable we would have been if you had successfully managed to send me away in floods of tears, vowing never to see me again?'

'Yes, ' he admitted with a rueful look. And he could well imagine how miserable everyone around him would have felt, knowing that he had banished the woman that he loved from his life forever Sad for him, feeling his loss as their own but disapproving of his behaviour at the same time

'I was rather'

'Stupid?' she offered.

'Hasty, ' he amended wryly, and they both smiled, Vincent drawing Catherine closer to him, to drop a soft kiss on the top of her head, as she let out a soft, contented sigh and wrapped her arms around his middle with a tight squeeze.

'I think you can do better than that, don't you, love?'

She snuggled up closer to him, looking up into his precious face, noting the look of wonder and love in his beautiful soulful blue eyes, at the understanding of her very clear invitation. 'I think' Her voice was low and seductive now. ' that if you really put your mind to it, sweetheart, you could make me

forget all about that other kiss'

'But I er I don't have any mistletoe'

'Who needs mistletoe, Vincent all we need is each other now kiss me'

She snaked her arm up around his head, pressing her lithe body closer to his sturdy one, and twining her fingers into the velvet softness of his hair, guided his beloved face closer to her own. ' for I suddenly have a very strong craving for the taste of vanilla pudding!

THE END