

Journeys

by Lynn Wright

Chapter One

Father came as near to jumping up from his chair as his infirmity would let him. “Why I ever taught you this game is beyond me! Where in H...um, in the world did you get *that* attack?”

Vincent looked up, bringing his mind back to the conversation. “I made it up. Although I’m sure someone else has thought of it before. But it was rather neat, wasn’t it?” He pushed his chair away from the table and stretched his long legs out in front of him. “I’m sorry Father, I haven’t been a very good companion tonight, have I?”

“Hm! Good enough to trounce me soundly once again! But yes, you’ve been preoccupied tonight, and for several days, Vincent. Is there something I can do to help? I know it’s Catherine you’re thinking about; nothing else pulls you so far away from what’s going on around you. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. No, I must talk to Catherine. But I’m reluctant to do so, we have some...well, I must do it, I’m sure she’s wondering why I don’t come to her.” He got up and began to pace.

“Vincent, I know that this aborted trip of yours to Connecticut was a large disappointment to Catherine. She just has no idea of how unthinkable it is for you, of the dangers you face when you...”

“Stop! That’s enough, Father. Catherine has a very good understanding of all the dangers I face... we face...” He stopped, leaning on a table, his head down, his mane hiding his face. “I prefer not to discuss this subject, if you please. Another game, Father?”

Jacob understood that the subject was closed. “You mean do I want more punishment? No thanks, I think I’ve had enough for one night!” His eyes followed with love and worry as Vincent began to pace again, but he reseated himself at the table, resigned to learning no more tonight of what had upset his son.

Suddenly his head came up, as did Vincent’s; an emergency signal from the pipes brought them both to attention. “Intruders! Old Chinatown subway entrance...that’s been blocked for years!” Vincent jumped up and headed for the doorway at a run, scooping his cloak from the back of a chair as he went.

It was a few minutes before Vincent reached the entrance; it was a long run from Father’s study. As he rounded the last bend, he could see two teenage sentries confronting three very large men. There didn’t appear to be violence imminent, and as he drew near enough to see the men, he knew why.

He slowed to a walk, and strode up behind the boys. “It’s all right.” He put a hand on each shoulder. “I know them. They’re old residents. Lon, Allie, Vern...” He moved past the boys to open his arms in a welcoming embrace, and each man was enfolded in turn. “I’m happy to see you again. Father will be delighted! Come on, let’s go to see him. It’s been many years, we’ve got some catching up to do.” Vincent turned back up the tunnel, his arm around the nearest man. “He’ll offer you a cup of tea, nothing has changed here.”

Then he turned back to the young sentries. "I have some things to say to you two, as will Father. We'll talk later. You may consider yourselves to be in serious trouble." Two heads went down. They knew they'd overstepped all the rules by showing themselves and confronting intruders.

With a final stern look, Vincent turned back to his guests. "You boys have grown," he observed as they began the long walk back. All three of the brothers topped his height by an inch and were as broad shouldered as he also. They were a good-looking trio, blonde and muscular. "When you left us you were what, fourteen?"

Lon, who was the usual spokesman for the three brothers, answered. "We were fifteen, nearly sixteen. Papa thought it was time we started bringing in some money."

"I remember that very well. I have seldom seen Father so angry as he was when your father said you'd had enough schooling. But your father was just as angry. It was a battle of Titans." Vincent shook his head, amused still at the memory of the raised voices of two strong men who disagreed. "Father wasn't used to being flatly contradicted, but your father never was afraid to tell him exactly what he thought. Is he here with you?"

"Papa is dead. He died in an argument just like you're talking about. Just fell over dead. About... when, Allie?...ya, three years ago."

"I'm sorry. He was a strong man, and a man with a good heart."

"Ya, a good heart maybe, but he thought he was right about everything...his old country ways were best, he never listened to anybody else." Lon's voice showed still a trace of anger at his father.

Vern spoke for the first time, his voice hoarse, as if he didn't use it much. "We're better off without him."

Lon spoke sharply to Vern in the eastern European language of their father's homeland. Vincent caught some of it, something he thought about respect for the dead.

Vern dropped his eyes to look at the ground. "Ya, ya."

They walked on in silence for the most part. Vincent remembered that they had always been rather silent kids; he'd thought at the time that they were afraid to talk, afraid of their father's disapproval. But the silence was companionable, so Vincent didn't try to make conversation. When they reached the library they found Father sitting at his desk in a characteristic occupation, studying a map. As they entered, he raised his head.

"Is everything all right? What was...Well, look at this! These are the intruders? Well, well, very welcome ones! Hello boys, it's a pleasure to see you again." He came around his desk to embrace all three men. "Vern, Lon, Allie, it's good to have you back."

Lon smiled at his brothers. "I told you so, he can still do it. You can still tell us apart? It's been ten years."

Father shrugged. "I have no problem with telling you apart. Triplets you may be, but you're three separate people. Three very large people, too." He added, laughing. "Well, in ten years I expect there would be some changes, and the most certain one is that you would get bigger. Your father must be pleased to have three such strapping sons. Is he with you?"

"Papa's dead, Father. Three years ago.

I'm sorry to hear that. You must miss him very much."

"...Sometimes." Lon looked back at Vern with a stern command in his glance.

Catherine crouched on her knees in front of the fire, her head down, drying her hair in the warmth of

the blaze. In a minute she straightened, tossing her hair back. Her hairbrush was in her hand, but she didn't use it. Her body stilled as she stared into the fire, mesmerized by the dancing flames. She stared for a long time without moving at all, but at last her shoulders slumped, and she sighed. She hadn't seen Vincent for nine days, since the night after her disastrous attempt to give him a time Above, away from the tunnels, to bring to him some of the joys of that other world that he saw only in the light of the moon and stars.

He had come to see her on the night following his refusal to join her in that adventure that she had planned so carefully, longed for with such passion, anticipated with such joy. He was very much aware of her disappointment and his guilt had brought him to her to make another apology.

"Catherine... I came only to tell you again how sorry I am that I disappointed you. I should never have started it, never have let you believe for a minute that such a thing could happen. I feel how desolated you were, how sad you still are. I am very sorry that I showed such poor judgment."

They were standing on the balcony side by side looking out over the city. Vincent paused, but Catherine made no answer. She continued to gaze at New York spread out below.

When he got no answer, Vincent began to speak again, a bit uneasily. There was an emotional storm brewing in Catherine; he could feel it, but was at a loss to know its cause. "I should have realized how much pain it would bring you to be disappointed. I was careless of your feelings and those of the family Below...."

Catherine turned to him, her eyes blazing as the storm broke. "Stop it! Stop apologizing for the cowardice and selfishness of other people. Stop telling me that you're at fault because others... beginning with Father! No, don't you DARE try to defend him!"

To Vincent's astonishment, she actually stamped her foot. "They're nothing but a bunch of...of leeches! They all waltz in and out of the tunnels at will, spend days in the park, go shopping, go to concerts, live just as much and as often as they want to in the world Above! But let you suggest that you'd like to spend a week, *one week*...out of a lifetime!...seeing what everyone else has taken for granted all their lives, and you'd think the world was going to come down around their ears! I am so angry with them all! I can't believe how they *use* you and *use* you and expect you to just...just *knuckle under*."

Vincent said nothing, staring at her, stunned by the violence of her tirade. Then he turned back to the view of the night sky. After a minute he said, very low. "And I do, don't I?...knuckle under."

"Always, Vincent." She held her breath, hoping against hope that his admission meant that he was considering a different response to the tunnel folk's importunities.

Vincent remained gazing at the stars for a moment. When he turned again to look at her, she saw with a sinking heart that he had rallied his defenses, that he was prepared once again to bury his emotion under a calm exterior.

"Catherine, it's true. I do... knuckle under. I am unable, or I suppose you would say unwilling, to hurt or disappoint them, or to frighten them. They were *frightened*, Catherine, frightened of what could happen were I not there to defend them. What can I do against that? They are helpless to defend themselves; I must be there!"

"You *must*. There is no way for you to free yourself from...from virtual *slavery*. Is that what you're telling me?"

He looked at her silently.

"Yes, I guess that's what you're telling me." She turned away from him, struggling to contain a sudden rush of tears. As the tears subsided, she continued, "You're unwilling, and that *is* the word, unwilling, to reach out to see a little piece of the world you've been barred from all your life, because you don't want them to worry."

After a moment, the answer came. "Yes."

"You are wrong, Vincent." Catherine turned to look steadily into his eyes. "You are doing this to yourself. And perhaps there is more to it than your care for the people Below. There are other ways to solve their problem; you are not indispensable. Perhaps under it all, you're afraid yourself to take the risks involved." She looked at him speculatively. "Yes, that's possible...and understandable. But for whatever reasons, you're throwing away not just the chance we had yesterday, but every chance you might have in the future." Her eyes never wavered from his. "I'm bitterly angry with you, Vincent, for the very first time. I'm angry because you have given up."

He didn't answer, and as she stood looking at him, she realized that he couldn't. The calm exterior had cracked; his throat was closed by emotion. In a moment, tears welled in his eyes. He took a deep breath, held it, looked up at the sky, stood a moment more, then let it out slowly as his tears came under control. He put his hands on the rail and leaned forward, his head hanging down, his face shadowed by his hair. He turned his head after a moment to stare at her, his eyes still holding the remnants of his tears. A moment of complete stillness, while his eyes bored into hers, then suddenly he wheeled and reached for her, not with his usual gentleness, but hungrily.

Catherine was stunned by the way he took her into his embrace. He held her with his right arm around her waist, his long fingers spread down over her hip, and the other arm in the middle of her back with his elbow bent to let his hand cradle the back of her head. The result was that she was held against him tightly for the whole length of her body. His face was pressed into her neck, and she felt his lips move against her skin.

His arms tightened around her. "Catherine, Catherine...don't be angry, please, please! Your anger destroys me...don't leave me, oh don't..." His voice was hoarse, husky, broken; his words were spoken against her throat. "When I have you here in my arms, how can I ask for anything more? For whatever time it lasts, I've got *this*...oh, Catherine, I need you so..." His arms tightened yet again. "Let me...let me hold you, I dare not ask for the world too, only let me be with you, and hold you...and love you..." His words trailed away in a smothered sob.

Catherine's heart swelled with her love at his words, but before she could answer his arms moved to gather her closer and she felt his lips again on her neck; he was *kissing* her. With amazed joy she felt his mouth move over her skin. His heart was racing; she could feel it even through his heavy clothes so tight was his embrace, and her heart matched it. As she held her breath in anticipation, his mouth began to move up the side of her neck. It traveled with excruciating slowness up to the angle of her jaw, under her ear. There he stopped, moaning softly as his lips opened to let his tongue feel the smooth skin and taste the essence of her body.

He drew his head back then, to look at her face. His own eyes were hazy, unfocused; he looked as if he were sleepwalking. His gaze moved over her face, and stopped at last at her mouth. With agonizing slowness, his head came down, until his lips just barely touched hers. He stopped there with the slightest contact, the lightest touch of his lips on hers.

She heard a soft sigh and felt his warm breath, and he spoke against her lips almost soundlessly, "...*my love*..." Then his mouth came down on hers fully, softly, open and gently searching.

After a moment's stunned uncertainty she returned his kiss. Her hand caressed the side of his face and her lips moved against his, wanting to feel every part of his mouth, to savor all of him in this moment out of time, this longed-for and unexpected joy. And Vincent too searched out every soft surface of flesh. His tongue stroked the inside of her lips, moving inquiringly into the corners, sliding softly over the fullness of her lower lip, exploring her and just *feeling* her in his arms and under his mouth, before his tongue slid farther into her mouth to deepen the kiss.

It was more wonderful than she had dreamed. When he raised his head at last, her lips followed his with an involuntary motion, unwilling to end such rapture. He moved his mouth down to the side of her throat once more, kissing her with rapt attention to the smooth textures of her skin. His mouth

dropped down farther then, to the base of her throat, and further yet to the opening of her robe. She moaned with pleasure as he neared her breasts, and her nipples stood up through the soft slippery silk, begging for his mouth. Then he raised his head to look down at her breasts.

Catherine thought later that it would all have happened, it would have been so perfect, if she had only had a moment's patience. It was the sight of her naked breast that shocked him into awareness, and she had done it herself. Watching his rapt face and feeling his hot breath on her skin was too much; she couldn't wait an instant longer. She raised her hand to push her robe and the nightgown strap off her shoulder. The silk robe slithered down her arm, carrying the gown with it and baring her breast to Vincent's sight.

He stared for a moment longer, then his head jerked up suddenly. The soft mazed look in his eyes turned to alarm, and it was over. He turned away from her instantly and began the ascent to the roof. Before she could draw another breath, he was gone.

As Catherine sat in front of the fire, musing on what had happened nine days ago, she gazed down unseeingly at the hairbrush in her lap. *If I had just not been so impatient, if only...* Then she smiled ruefully to herself. What point in worrying about it now? Maybe it would have happened, but probably not. Vincent would have come to himself in a short time anyway; she was sure of it when she thought about it with more coolness. She shook herself mentally, and began to brush her hair. *He'll come, I know he'll be here; I know he can't stay away. God, I hope it's not much longer; I miss him so much.* How long was he going to be able to stand it? How long was *she*?

She straightened and picked herself up off the hearthrug. *Get a grip, girl. He'll come to you pretty soon...if he's all right. Suppose something's happened to him? He goes so far away down Below when he's upset. God! If he doesn't come tomorrow night, I'm going Below.* She settled herself on the couch with a book, but reading was beyond her, her thoughts turned only to Vincent. She got up restlessly, fixed a cup of tea, came back to sit down again. In a minute she put down the book and looked around the room for some occupation. The volume of sonnets that sat on the coffee table caught her eye.

When the knock on the door came, Catherine was lost on a romantic cloud of verse. Surprised, she got up slowly and moved across the floor. Who had got to her door without announcement, some neighbor in the building? She put the chain into its slot before she opened the door.

It was Elliott Burch. "Elliott?" She was bewildered. He was the last person she expected to find at her door.

"Cathy, how wonderful just to see you. Can we talk?"

"How did you get up here? Is there some reason why you're here, Elliott? I don't really have anything to say to you. I don't..."

"The doorman remembers me. Yes, there's a reason. I miss you, and I need to see you, just see you for a little while." He looked down at his hands. "I love you. That's the only reason." He raised his eyes to hers again. "Please?"

"Elliott, I just can't do this. I thought you understood that everything is over." Her voice and her face were not welcoming.

"Don't, Cathy. I know it's over, but I'm right at the end. Please." His face showed desperation.

She noticed for the first time that he needed a shave; that was not like Elliott. She sighed. Damn! She felt sorry for him! "All right, Elliott, come in." She shut the door, took the chain off, and opened it again for him to enter.

He sat down on the love seat nearest him. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his hands

hanging limp, his head down. "I don't know what I'm doing, or feeling, or where I'm going, Cathy. The project is gone, but that's not it. There's always another project." He didn't look at her, still staring down at his hands. "Burch Towers was my dream, I guess you know that if anyone does. But it's you, Cathy...it's you. There's another project, but there's not another woman. Not for me. Not ever."

He looked up then and as he looked his gaze was blurred somehow, as if he saw the future, or perhaps the past, rather than seeing her. Her annoyance with him disappeared as she looked at him. She straightened and began to give him her whole attention; there was something in his eyes that made her uneasy. Perhaps he truly was desperate.

She shook her head, and spoke more gently to him. "What can I say to you? It's over between us. It never really even started. Let go, Elliott." She hesitated, weighing prudence against the need to make him understand, and then she spoke slowly. "You must let go of it, of me. It's not just what happened between us. There's someone else, Elliott. There always has been."

His head came up, his eyes clear now, his keen mind again in the present. "Someone that you love?" "Very much. With all my heart. I'm sorry, Elliott, I really am. There just isn't anything at all left for anyone else. I've given all I am to him." Her face softened at the thought of that love.

"Yes... yes, I see that. I see it in your face." He smiled a little, ruefully. "I guess I should be glad for you, Cathy, that you've got someone who means so much to you. I... I *am* glad." He shook his head, amazed at himself. "I am. I feel better, somehow, knowing that you're not alone. I guess that's crazy."

"No, it's not crazy, it's very kind. Thank you. You know, Elliott, in spite of all our differences and the trouble we've made for each other, even when I was hating you, I've always *liked* you."

He flinched. "Ow! The *coup de grace*! But thanks, I needed to hear that you don't hate me. And thank you for seeing me. It was very much needed. I won't bother you again like this, that I'll promise you." He got up, stood looking down at her for a moment, then walked to the door and turned back to her. "If I can ever... ever do anything for you... or for you and him, just ask, Cathy."

Catherine's legal instincts brought her to attention. An offer, perhaps never to be made again! "Well, as a matter of fact, you can. You can lend me your jet."

Elliott stared at her for a moment, stunned. "My God, Cath! Just jump right in at the very top, don't settle for anything less!" Then he grinned with those smiling eyes that were one of his greatest charms. "But it's all right, it gives me a chance to redeem myself with you, and that's worth a great deal to me."

She shook her head. "This is just a favor. You don't need to redeem yourself with me, Elliott; redemption comes from inside yourself. Find something to give *yourself* to, anything, anything at all that will get you no return but the satisfaction of doing something that legitimizes that good side of you. I know it's there, I've seen it.

A wry grin emphasized his rueful acceptance of what she said. "Well, even without redemption the jet is yours. Anywhere, any length of time, no questions asked. Period."

Her smile was brilliant. "Thank you, Elliott."

He put his arms out and pulled her against him for just a second, his face buried in her shoulder. Then he turned and was gone.

Vincent didn't come the next night, which was Friday. Catherine waited until an hour after dark, and then she dressed for a trip Below. As she crossed the living room to the door, she paused for a second to glance at the bulging briefcase sitting on the floor by the dining table. But only for a second, resolutely she turned away and passed through the door.

As she descended the ladder from the basement she felt his presence behind her, but not his hands guiding her to the ground. That told her something about his state of mind. She turned to face him with some trepidation.

“Vincent? I had to come, I’ve missed you.”

“And I you, Catherine. Very much.” His face showed tenderness, but he came no closer.

She moved closer to him but was careful not to touch him. “Can we talk? I think we need to talk.”

He stood silent for a long moment. Then he let out his breath in a sigh. “Yes, yes, of course we need to talk. But... I’m afraid, Catherine.”

He glanced away from her for a moment, but his eyes were drawn inevitably back to her face. He couldn’t look away for long; he hadn’t seen her for ten days.

“In these last days I’ve given a great deal of thought to... us... and I have a clear idea in my mind about where our relationship should go, where it *can* go. But when I’m with you... I’m afraid I won’t remember what... what I need to remember.”

He paused for a moment, then with a deep breath, continued. “I... I’ve been delaying seeing you, hoping to find something... some place inside myself, a solid place to stand. But there’s quicksand inside me, Catherine. There is no solid ground.”

The admission cost him something; she could see the pain in his eyes plainly.

What he said next was even more painful for him. Catherine knew he’d prefer to forget that their last encounter on her balcony had ever happened, but his conscience wouldn’t let him ignore it. He forced the words out; she could see the effort plainly.

“Before we say anything more, I must beg your forgiveness for my... wrongdoing, lapse, failure... I don’t know what to call it. But I certainly had no right to...”

“You have the right! I gave you the right long ago, you *know* that. The choice is yours, Vincent. It always has been. Don’t punish yourself for what happened; it was not against my will, that must have been pretty obvious.” Her face flushed as she looked at him, but she went on, “I wanted it to happen, Vincent.”

She looked down at her hands then, not trusting herself to look at him any longer; she wanted so much to put her arms around him.

In a moment she looked up again, in control once more. “If your choice is not to do what you have the right to do, then I’ll abide by that choice, until the time when perhaps you’ll change your mind.” She smiled, her love plain in her face. “But until that time comes, I give you my assurance, Vincent, that I will not do again what I did; I will do nothing to provoke... any expansion of the situation.”

He shook his head. “The responsibility is mine, as was the fault. But the assurance you offer is gratefully accepted. I will come to your apartment, and we can talk about these things. I don’t think that there is sufficient privacy Below.”

“Now?”

“Yes, I’ll see you there in half an hour.”

As Catherine waited for him, she was conscious of butterfly wings in her interior; it was very much like what she felt before making an opening argument in court. The thought made her smile, but the situations were not very different, in truth. By whatever means came to hand, with whatever tools she could find to bargain with, she meant to make him at least accept the possibility of leaving the tunnels to get a glimpse of another kind of world.

After all, I've got a jet! She hugged the possibilities of that to her. So many things were feasible with private air transportation. Her mind soared with the promise contained in that thought. The desert, the mountains...there were so many beautiful places where the land was empty of people. Even the shore...there must still be places in the country where the sea crashed in on an empty strand.

As she dreamed of Vincent's delight in those places, he appeared on the other side of the balcony doors, but so deep in her dream was she that he tapped twice before she heard him.

When she opened the door he stepped inside. Seeing her astonishment that he had entered her apartment at last, he smiled his small smile at her, and said with a certain dry humor, "It's cold out there tonight. I think we should be physically comfortable during our talk. The mental discomfort should be sufficient to keep us from becoming complacent."

He changed the subject quickly then. "What were you thinking of, Catherine? When I looked in you were smiling to yourself."

"I was thinking about... the ocean." A lame substitution for her real thoughts, but the novelty of his appearance in her dining room had disconcerted her.

"Devin has just appeared Below, fresh from sailing on a three master. You should talk to him about it. A very interesting trip, to say the least."

"Devin is here?" Catherine was delighted to hear it. "Oh, great, I... yes, I'll be happy to see him, he always has some good stories to tell."

Devin was the very person she needed to help her in planning. Furthermore, he knew Vincent better than anyone did and she knew that she needed all the help she could get. Vincent was going to be difficult to convince; he'd made up his mind on the subject of travel Above.

They moved into the living room, and Catherine looked around the room rather vaguely, bent to pick up a book from the couch, straightened the magazines on the coffee table, then turned to him, the book still in her hand.

"Shall we sit here? May I take your cloak? A cup of tea?" She looked around her once more, looked down at the book in her hand and put it back where she had picked it up. Her nervous tension was evident.

Vincent held up his hand. "Catherine, don't. I know how you feel; I too am apprehensive about this talk. A cup of tea would be welcome, and I will take off my cloak and sit down while you go to make it." He looked down at her with tenderness. Then, surprising her, his hand came up farther and touched the side of her face. "We don't need to be afraid of each other, do we?"

It was the first time he had touched her since the kiss on her balcony, and somehow that light touch of his fingers on her face calmed her.

"No, Vincent, we don't." She relaxed visibly, and smiled at him with all of the love that she felt.

He dropped his hand, but remained looking down at her for a minute, until she saw awareness of her physical nearness appear in his eyes. He turned then and walked to the love seat, swinging his cloak off his shoulders as he did so. She watched him for a moment; his grace of movement always drew her eyes. Then she turned to the kitchen.

She returned in a few minutes with a tray holding the teapot, delicate bone china cups, and a plate of chocolate chip cookies. When he saw the cookies, Vincent looked up and smiled at her. She poured tea, and handed him a cup, and offered cookies.

He shook his head, smiling still. "Maybe later."

She moved to the fireplace, knelt, and touched a match to the already laid fire. Then she turned to the other loveseat, sat down facing Vincent and picked up her tea, without a cookie. She also had no appetite at the moment.

Vincent sipped his tea in silence, staring into the fire as it consumed the kindling and blazed up, then put his cup down and began.

"I've thought a good deal about our relationship, Catherine, and still I'm not sure quite how to express my thoughts. I think perhaps the best course is just to say bluntly what I'm thinking. And that is that... this... must not happen between us."

"Vincent, I..."

"Wait, please let me finish. I want very much to hear what you have to say, but I need to get this out."

His facade of careful serious thought broke for a moment. His hand came up to shield his face as it showed for a moment his pain at the course he felt was necessary. But he lifted his head and began again, with that effort of will that was so characteristic of him.

"Let me just finish what I have to say?" As she nodded her agreement, he went on.

"It must not happen, Catherine. I will tell you my reasons for this decision, because what has occurred between us has made straightforward discussion the only option now. There are some reasons pertaining to you, and some fears that I have, fears for you."

I think you know what my feeling is about you and your life Above. I believe that the freedom of that way of living is far more important for your happiness than you are perhaps willing to admit to yourself. The life I have Below is so... limited, it's unthinkable for you to live Below all of the time. Unthinkable. And if we continue on this course which began the other night, if it goes to... its only possible ending, I..." He stopped for a moment; the words were coming with great difficulty. "I will keep you with me. I will not be able to let you go away from me again to work Above, where you are in danger and I cannot be there."

His head dropped down, his hair hiding his face from her. "I should make a final break right now. I know that. It's the best thing for you; I am not right in any way for you to love." His head dropped lower. "But I can't... I can't do it, Catherine." His voice was a husky half-whisper. "I am too weak to do what is the best thing for you." He raised his face, and there were traces of tears there. "I love you too much... too much. I believe that I would die without you."

Catherine rose to go to him, her heart breaking with his pain. But he held up his hands.

"No! No, please, don't touch me!"

She stood still for a moment then sat down again, compliant with his wishes. He sat for a few moments silent, staring at his hands. Then the indomitable will of the man asserted itself again, and he went on.

"My fears for you stem from what I am, and what I am is unknown and unknowable. I don't know what could happen if I let my feelings for you be... unleashed, how they would express themselves. The..." He stood up and began to pace, then stopped himself and stood still with his back to her, looking out at the night. "The... desire... that I feel for you is so overwhelming, so overmastering, that I'm afraid even to think about what the consequences of it could be. Catherine, you are so fragile. I weigh twice what you do; how can I take a chance that my... passion won't hurt you? I have no confidence in my ability to hold back if once I come close to... to taking your body for my own... oh, Catherine, I want you so much!"

The last words seemed forced from him, spoken in an anguished voice. He stopped and leaned on his hands over the dining table, his head hanging down. When he spoke again his voice was once more under control.

"I shouldn't have said that. I know better. I *promised* myself I wouldn't... I'm sorry."

Catherine waited a moment. When he said nothing further, she answered him. "How do you think it

makes me feel when you say you want me? Do you truly think that an apology is necessary? I'd rather hear you say that to me even just once, than... than anything, anything in the world!

"It's too late now to worry about hiding it, Vincent. I know how much you want me, since you kissed me. I saw it in your face, felt it in your mouth on my skin." She lowered her head, and her next words were almost a whisper. "I want to feel your mouth on me again."

He was still standing with his back to her, leaning over the table, but he flinched as she said those words.

She sat for a moment, thinking about what she had just said, about his mouth on her skin. Then she raised her head and went on with the matter at hand.

"Vincent, it's better this way, out in the open, because this long silence has meant so much pain for both of us. For me, the pain was never telling you of my feelings, swallowing the words that would tell you of my love and my desire for you. Over and over again, too often, for too long.

"What happened when you were here last was more than all my dreams, more wonderful than I can ever express. And now you're telling me that it's all I'll ever have of you? That we have to go back to being friends? It's not in the cards, Vincent. It's not going to happen that way. Not given the way we feel about each other. I can't just *not* feel that way, and neither can you."

There was a long silence. Catherine waited patiently for his response. When he did speak it wasn't what she had expected to hear. He turned and came back to the loveseat across from her, and sat down. He stared into the fire for a few seconds and then he spoke of the incident on the balcony.

"I know how it happened. I was so frightened when you told me how angry you were. I thought that it could be the end, right there and then. I couldn't face that; I couldn't let it happen. I would have done *anything* at that moment to keep you with me. My... my baser self knew exactly what to do, what would bring you back to me, and I just... did it. My conscious thought was submerged, overwhelmed. I felt as though I were in a dream. And when it happened, when I kissed you, it was so wonderful, the touch of your mouth was so perfect, I wanted to stay in that dream forever. I haven't forgotten a second of it. I will remember it forever, the feel of your skin, the scent of you..." He threw his head back, his eyes closed.

"I'm right here, Vincent. It's all right here, and I want you so much." Her voice trembled on the edge of tears.

He was silent for a long moment, his eyes still closed, but when he opened them and looked at her his will was in charge again.

"No. It was a beautiful dream."

Catherine's resolve stiffened at his words; her tears were forgotten. "I am not resigned to that!"

"We must be resigned. We must remember it with love, and resignation. Catherine, there is so much more, so much that is wonderful in our relationship. We must not let go of what we can have."

Catherine shook her head. "We can have it *all*, Vincent. But I won't say anything further about this; there doesn't seem anything else to say. We don't agree, and I have promised you that I will do nothing further to... entice you. But I am not resigned, Vincent. I will never be resigned."

She stood up and picked up the teapot. "I'll make some fresh tea. There is something else I want to talk about. I think another pot of tea is called for; you're not going to be happy with this one either."

When she came back from the kitchen he was kneeling in front of the fireplace, adding another log. He looked up at her with a wry smile just touching his lips.

"I know what you want to talk about. It's about my going Above. I have been aware that we aren't through with it; how could we be, when you feel so strongly about it?"

"That's right, Vincent. We aren't through with it. I'm making more plans. If resignation is the order of

the day, you'd better resign yourself to hearing a lot more about... shall we call it 'vacationing', Above."

"Catherine, we have been through the reasons for this..."

"I'm not listening, Vincent. I'm determined on this one."

"Please, Catherine. I don't want to make you angry again, but I cannot agree that such a thing is feasible."

"I'm not going to be angry, but I'd like to ask you for a little compromise on this subject. If I can arrange to minimize all of the things to which you object, can I ask you then to look at my plans without making up your mind in advance?"

"I don't see how that is possible, but I can hardly say no to such a reasonable request. We will leave the matter open for the time being. How is that?"

"I can ask for no more than that. Thank you, Vincent."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, and then Catherine reached for the teapot. They began to talk in their usual vein, and soon they were relaxed and relatively comfortable again. Before long the chocolate chip cookies had all disappeared.

Chapter Two

Kanin was showing Father his plans for a new room when the emergency intruder signal made them both lift their heads from the drawings. Father turned to Kanin, apprehension in his eyes.

"I have been afraid that something like this would happen! What are we going to do? Vincent is gone to see Catherine, and we have intruders!"

"I'll go." Kanin got up.

"No!" A voice spoke from the doorway. "We heard the message on the pipes. We're on the way!" Lon turned as he spoke, and disappeared along with his brothers before anyone could reply.

"Wait! Wait!" Father called after them. He got up and hurried as well as he was able to the doorway, but they were long gone. "Do they know where to go? How will they find their way?"

"I guess if they haven't forgotten the language of the pipes in ten years, they can probably find the 17th Street entrance, Father." Kanin couldn't help smiling at Father's worried face. "Anyhow, they're on the way, and I think it's a brave intruder who'll stand up to the three of them."

The triplets were back in Father's study in a few minutes. "It was a drunk who stumbled into the entrance by leaning against it. He just wanted to find his way out, and he won't remember a thing tomorrow." Lon frowned. "But we gotta fix that entrance door, it opens way too easy. We wedged it shut for tonight, we'll go down there tomorrow and fix it."

Father was slightly disconcerted that everything had been taken care of so quickly and so easily. "Yes, yes, thank you boys, it was a good job done, and yes, it does sound like some repair is necessary. Thank you... thank you again."

The triplets ducked their heads in acknowledgment and left hurriedly before he could say anything else. They were embarrassed by his thanks.

Father sat down at his desk, relieved that the emergency was over, but not convinced that Vincent hadn't been needed.

"Vincent should have been here!"

Kanin was still in the room, having waited with Father to hear the outcome of the emergency. He had not been one of the group who besieged Vincent with appeals not to leave them, and he felt faintly contemptuous of the fears they had shown. He was one of a number of tunnel dwellers who thought Vincent was being taken advantage of, and he saw an opportunity to make his opinion known.

“Why? Everything that could be done was done. He wouldn’t have done anything differently. And the triplets aren’t the only men in the tunnels who are capable of defending them, Father. There are quite a few of us who are able and willing to take responsibility for defense.”

“Well, in ordinary circumstances I agree, we have adequate defenders, but in the case of something more serious...”

Kanin knew exactly what Father was aiming at: in case violence was called for. This was exactly why a number of tunnel dwellers thought that Vincent was being called upon unfairly. Defending the tunnels when violence and even elimination of the danger were called for was a terrible responsibility, and should be shared among all those able to do so.

Kanin said nothing further; he didn’t want to tackle Father on this subject alone. Father’s skills as a debater and his moral ascendancy over the tunnel folk made it a scary proposition to go up against him. But Kanin had much to be grateful to Vincent for, and it was time that someone stood up in his defense. This incident had decided him to call for a general meeting on the subject of tunnel guardianship in the near future.

Although Kanin had not met Devin before, he went to him for support in the matter of tunnel protection, and Vincent’s part in it. He’d seen Devin’s ability to face Father in a couple of small incidents that had taken place in the few days that Devin had been in the tunnels, and he thought that if anyone could cope with him, Devin could. He knew from stories told about their childhood, and from what he’d seen in the last few days of their interaction, that Devin cared a great deal for Vincent, so he decided to ask for Devin’s support.

Devin was enthusiastic about helping.

“God yes, let’s get something decided about this. I heard the story about his being crowded out of going topside for just a few days, after Catherine had arranged every detail. It’s time something was done about it. Vincent is too good-hearted to protect himself; I guess you and I are gonna have to do it for him, huh?” He grinned at Kanin, and stuck out his hand.

Kanin shook his hand with pleasure. “It won’t be just the two of us, there are a lot of people who agree. But Father thinks no one but Vincent is capable of defending us.” Kanin stopped short of mentioning the kind of violence that Father depended upon Vincent for, but Devin knew what was unspoken.

“I know what you mean. We’ll need to have some plain talk on the subject; I realize that. Do you think that there are people who are willing to go... all the way in defending the tunnels?”

“Well, I am. This place is my life, and I’ll defend it with my life. My wife and my child live here. You can bet I’ll do whatever is necessary.” Kanin’s face was grimly determined. “There’s no reason why Vincent should bear the whole burden of things that I know weigh on his conscience. We all benefit; it’s time we all took some responsibility. I’ll talk to some others, but I know there are at least ten of us. That’s enough to start with anyway.”

Father absolutely refused to hold a general meeting on the subject of tunnel guardianship. “There is

no need for such a meeting. I will not authorize it.”

“All right, old man. We’ll hold the meeting without you, but I would think that you would prefer to be there. There may be major decisions made.”

Devin was perfectly serious and, except for that one “old man”, treated the subject and the man respectfully. But Father was enraged anyway, as Devin very well knew he would be.

“You will do no such thing. I will not allow it.” Father’s voice was icy.

“I don’t know how you think you’re going to stop it. Many of the tunnel residents are very well aware that when it comes to Vincent, you are sometimes less than totally rational. In my personal opinion, you want Vincent to be trapped in these tunnels because you suffer from the delusion that as long as he’s here in the tunnels where you can see him every day, nothing can happen to him. However, the fact is that he’s not always *in* the tunnels, and I assure you, Father, he’s in more danger when he walks the streets of New York at night than he would have been on Catherine’s little jaunt to the country.”

Kanin stood beside Devin, staring at him, awe-struck at his audacity. He shifted uncertainly, caught between an earnest desire to be somewhere else and a naughty child’s delight at seeing his elders confounded. However, he literally cowered at Father’s next words.

“Get out of my sight! You may return when you are ready to apologize for every word you have spoken!” The older man was blindingly angry, and when Devin’s face broke into a wry grin, Father’s complexion turned a color that Kanin had never seen before.

Devin continued to smile as he spoke. “Old man, I am not fourteen years old any longer. If you want to join our meeting, you are cordially invited to do so. The pipes will let you know the time and place. Come on, Kanin.”

And he turned and left the room at a leisurely pace, arm in arm with Kanin, leaning his head toward him and murmuring something too low for Father to hear as he left.

He continued on down the tunnel, still holding Kanin by the arm, until they rounded the first curve that took them out of sight of the study doorway. Then he collapsed against the tunnel wall.

“Look at me, I’m shaking like a leaf! That old devil has got some powerful presence, doesn’t he?” He laughed weakly. “God, I *felt* fourteen!” He began to laugh harder, and Kanin joined him, the two of them leaning against the wall, helpless with laughter.

When they had calmed somewhat, they continued on down the tunnel, heading for the dining room, where they hoped to find others still finishing lunch. As they walked each of them erupted into renewed chuckles every few steps. “Well, it’s easy to laugh now,” said Kanin finally, wiping his eyes, “but you know damn well we’re both scared to death of him!” And they began all over again.

Catherine saw nothing of Vincent during the week following their talk in her living room. She wasn’t surprised. She knew that he was keeping his distance, hoping to cool down the feelings that had been stirred by their encounter on the balcony. But by the following Saturday morning, she was ready to go to him, since he seemed unwilling to come to her. So she got up early, and was ready to go Below by breakfast time.

Vincent did not meet her at the bottom of the ladder. That was somewhat surprising, but she had determined before she came not to be hurt or angry if he kept more than the usual distance between them. She knew that in Vincent there was not a trace of petulance or sulkiness. Whatever he did was from the purest of motives, and only what he felt to be the best thing for her. So she put on a cheerful face, although she felt uneasily that perhaps he wouldn’t be glad to see her.

She was wrong. When she entered the breakfast room his eyes were already on the doorway,

anticipating her entrance. He raised his hand immediately, gesturing for her to join him and Devin. She picked up a roll and begged with a silent look at William for a cup of his marvelous coffee, which he gave out only to those who in his estimation really needed it. Catherine got hers with William's equally silent grin and a hug to boot.

She sat down at the table beside Vincent with her roll and her coffee. Vincent welcomed her with a hand on her shoulder, although it was quickly removed.

"Catherine, I was hoping to see you today. I'm afraid I have some work to do this morning, a small repair job, but I should be free in an hour or so. Perhaps Devin will entertain you while I'm gone?" He looked at Devin enquiringly.

"Always a pleasure to entertain the lovely Chandler. And she is looking particularly lovely this morning, is she not, Vincent?" Devin was hoping to put Vincent on the spot, and his grin made that fact clear.

But Vincent was equal to such sophomoric banter. "Catherine is a truly beautiful woman, and never more so than this morning."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, please! Even with cinnamon roll on her chin? I'll become insufferably conceited with about two minutes more of this."

Conversation continued in a teasing vein for a few minutes, with Devin and Catherine trading friendly insults, and Vincent looking on, amused and pleased at the easy interaction between two of the people closest to him in the world. But after a little while he got up.

"I must go, Kanin is probably already started on our task. Devin, will you take care of Catherine while I'm gone?"

"At your service, bro! A more desirable trust than some I remember from the past. Take your time, Vincent, I assure you I'm more than capable of entertaining Catherine until your return."

They both looked affectionately after Vincent as he walked away from them, but Catherine was delighted with this chance to consult with Devin, and she pulled him up from his seat as soon as Vincent was out of sight.

"Come on, get up, we've got to find a place where we can talk in private. I've got some stuff I need to ask for your help and advice about, and I can't wait to tell you all about it!"

Devin opted for his guest chamber as the most private place they'd find at this time of day. It was down a quiet tunnel at the edge of the Hub. When they were inside Catherine began to talk in a rush.

"I haven't given up on getting Vincent above, Devin. I've got the beginning of a plan to take him somewhere really great, I'm thinking right now British Columbia!"

"Whoa! Why don't you aim for the moon!" Devin was laughing, but as he realized she was serious, his face sobered somewhat. "Catherine, how could you get him clear across the country? It'd kill him to lie down in the back of a van while the whole country went by and not to be able to see it, not to speak of the danger!"

Catherine's face was positively glowing. "Devin, I've got the use of a jet airplane, a Lear."

His expression brightened immediately. "That broadens our horizons! And makes it easier to keep Vincent in seclusion. The three of us on a plane will have complete privacy in the air, anyway. And no one inspects airplanes when you stop for fuel."

"The three of us? Are you licensed to fly a Lear jet?"

"Well, sort of. Not under this name." He was silent for a moment, thinking. Then he raised his head, and a grin spread over his face. "Besides, in Spain and the African countries, they won't ask. I'm flying it, aren't I? They figure I must be able to. Once we get out of the USA, it's a snap."

“What are you talking about? Spain?”

“We’ll have to stop somewhere on the European coast to refuel. Spain is the best one for not asking questions, or wanting to know who’s in the plane.”

“Devin, didn’t I just say I was thinking about British Columbia? Have you heard anything I’ve said?” Catherine was a little bit annoyed, but couldn’t help grinning back at him; he looked so amused at her.

“Do you think Vincent might like to walk across the sands at midnight and look up at the Great Pyramid, and then turn to see the Sphinx casting a long shadow across the desert in the light of a full moon?”

Catherine was unable to answer for a moment, it was so far past anything she’d considered in her most enthusiastic daydreams. Then she found her voice.

“Devin, please! That’s impossible. How could we protect him in a situation like that? Be sensible!” Catherine’s face took on a wistful cast. “...But oh, Dev, wouldn’t he love that...”

Devin looked up at her thoughtfully, and spoke with a little hesitation. “Some time ago, I found myself in a situation in North Africa where I had an opportunity to save a life. No heroism involved, nothing to do that was extremely dangerous at all. It wasn’t someone I knew, just an anonymous life. I just... could do it, or not do it, so I did it. That man whose life I saved is now the Finance Minister of Egypt and a very powerful man in the government. He and I spent three weeks crossing the desert alone together in scary circumstances after we escaped.” He grinned. “It got a lot more dangerous *after* I saved his life. We got to know each other very, very well in those three weeks, and neither of us will forget it, ever. We’ll be friends until death. He’ll do anything I ask, literally, and so will I for him.”

“But is he able to control access to the Pyramids? Come on!”

“It’s not as unusual as you might think. There are people who through influence, or just through having oceans of cash, request a private viewing and get it. It happens three or four times a year, according to Ahsidi. He’ll do it for us, no problem.”

Catherine shook her head, torn between giving Vincent something so marvelous and fearing the dangers to him, not to speak of the seeming practical impossibility of the undertaking.

“I trust you Devin, I know you wouldn’t do anything to endanger Vincent, but you’re a risk-taker. The story you just told me about your three weeks in the desert proves that! And I want to do this so badly that I’m swayed in the direction of not being careful enough also. We’ve got to be more cautious than either one of us would like to be. Let’s sleep on this one, OK? We’ll talk tomorrow, and see if we both still think it’s a good idea.”

Devin grinned at her serious face. “OK, counselor, we’ll take thought for the dangers of the idea. But Cathy, there are dangers inherent in the very nature of what you’re proposing to do here. Living is dangerous, and especially so for Vincent. He knows that better than anyone. What we need to do is lay this before him, and let him decide. But not until the plans are complete. I know Vincent, he’ll say no if we don’t show him the whole story.”

Catherine looked rueful. “He already has. Several times. It’s a pretty tender spot for both of us by now, but I got him to promise he’d look at any plan I made without pre-judging it.”

“You’re not going about it right. Trust me, I spent my youth trying to get him to do things. I know how to do this. When every detail is complete, we’ll put it in front of him.” He was quiet for another moment, thinking.

Catherine was learning fast to expect the unexpected from Devin, and she held her breath, wondering what other incredible plan he could come up with.

“Another thought, Cathy. As long as we’re there, we could swing down to the Akami National Reserve in Zimbabwe. I know the Director pretty well, and their airstrip’s just been improved, it’ll take the plane

now. Akami's the best game reserve in Africa, in my opinion, but it's small, and one of the most isolated, and they don't get many tourists. We'd see all the African animals up close there."

Oh, sure, we'll just take rooms at the hotel! How can we possibly---

"It can be done rather easily. We'll make plans to rent one of the bush camps. They're very comfortable, and the animals are something to see, believe me. I think anyone would consider it the chance of a lifetime. For Vincent it would be... well, it would be worth a little risk, but I think we can fix it so there's little if any. When I was there, I saw no one for three weeks except M'bago; he's the Director. I'll bet he wouldn't blink an eye if we introduced him to Vincent, but we needn't do that. He has entertained desert sheiks there who go veiled in public still, if you can believe it. There are quite a few nomadic tribes in the Sahara where the men go veiled. We'll have an easier time in Africa than anywhere else in the world, I think."

"Devin, if I could get him to a place like that and back in safety, I'd give every cent I have and five years off my life!"

"We won't even think about it unless we're assured of his safety. That has to come first, but Catherine, I think it can be done. Keep in mind, though, that we can never be absolutely sure he'll be safe. Accidents happen, and unforeseen events occur. Vincent would be the first to agree that total safety is impossible."

They continued to plan and discuss alternatives for the next few minutes, until Vincent appeared in the doorway.

"Come in, come in. I was just trying to convince Chandler to run away with me to Borneo. Women are worth big money in Borneo." Devin laughed as he put his arm around Catherine. "She wouldn't, though. In fact she said she'd pay if she didn't have to go. I think she was trying to tell me something."

"That you never stop talking, undoubtedly. I've noticed that myself."

Vincent lifted Devin's arm from Catherine's shoulder with elaborate courtesy, and replaced it with his own, pulling her against him in a wholly unexpected move. *Jealousy, Vincent?* she thought, astonished at his possessive grasp of her.

He turned to the door, carrying her along with him. As he moved he said over his shoulder. "My turn, Devin. You've had her for far too long. We'll see you at supper." He left the room with his arm still around her shoulder, and it remained there when they turned down the tunnel and walked away.

When they arrived at his chamber, his arm was still around her. He stepped behind her to let her enter the room first, but his hand remained on her shoulder. When they were inside he turned her to face him, and his blue eyes held hers fiercely.

"You're mine. No one else may hold you. You're mine!" He pulled her to him almost with violence, and his head went down until his mouth rested on the side of her neck. They stood that way for maybe a minute, Vincent moving not at all except for his heartbeat, which accelerated steadily. Catherine hardly dared to breathe, feeling his mouth on her and willing him with all her strength to kiss her.

He didn't kiss her mouth. His lips opened against her throat, and she felt his tongue and his cool wet canines against her skin. He made a low sound and pulled her closer to him, wrapping his arms around her until she was totally enclosed in his embrace. She felt the sharpness of the canines press on her throat as he opened his mouth wider and then bit down very gently, taking her into his mouth, his tongue caressing her skin. She sighed and moaned and throbbed in erotic pleasure at the sensations created. And then she moaned again as she felt the rise of his penis against her belly.

"Vincent...oh, Vincent..."

She wasn't sure whether it was the sound of her voice or his body's reaction that ended it, but he stopped. Slowly, with evident reluctance, he loosened his arms from around her, and lifted his mouth away from her skin. But he didn't step away from her right away. He stood, his arms still around her

loosely, looking down at her face. Then slowly, he bent his beautiful head until his mouth touched hers, tenderly, softly, for just a moment.

“My love...”

Her hands were against his chest, and she felt his pounding heartbeat. He dropped his hands and stepped away from her.

He turned away, and she was afraid for a moment that he was going to leave her, but he just stood, his head thrown back. When he turned back, his face was full of bewildered distress.

“I’m at a loss. I can’t seem to... I don’t know what made me... yes... yes, I do. It was seeing someone else’s arms around you. I seem unable to control impulses now, since... the other night... that I’ve had no trouble with in the past. I beg you to forgive me...”

“Don’t! Don’t say that, Vincent. You know what my answer will be. I loved what you did just now. Just those short moments were more wonderful than anything I’ve felt in my life.” She stopped for a moment, and then she thought. *He can only say No*, and she said what was in her mind.

“Vincent, I miss you so when you don’t touch me at all... and you have stopped each time you have held me, in spite of your fears. Do you think we could set the barriers a little lower? Do you think we could let what just happened, happen again? We both need so much to be close, to be... kissed. If you will let this much occur between us, even just once in a while, I will promise to help if you ever have trouble stopping.”

Vincent was shaking his head even before she finished speaking. “Catherine, what you suggest is that we play with fire. The feelings I have are so strong...”

“Do you think that mine are any less so? But if we’re in agreement, it multiplies our mutual strength. Between us, we can keep this thing under control. I’m sure of it... and I *miss* you so...”

“I know,” His voice was low and husky. “I miss the feel of you in my arms constantly. I don’t sleep... I think about you, I think about your skin, the scent of it, the smooth soft feel of it under my mouth...” He shook his head as if to clear it, and stepped back another step. He stood for a long moment undecided, but in the end temptation was too strong; his desire won out.

“If I agree to this lowering of barriers, it is against my cooler judgment, but I miss you, every moment that we’re not touching, I want you so much...” His hands came up to her shoulders, and he pulled her against him again. “I cannot resist, Catherine.” His voice was a soft whisper in her ear. “I want to hold you so much... so much. If you will agree to help, I will agree to your suggestion.”

Catherine felt inside herself a little thrill of victory. This was a great concession, and it opened doors that she had thought might be shut forever.

“Oh, thank you, Vincent. I will help, I will not let things go too far, I promise you. Just know that I’m grateful for any outward expression you can let yourself show of what I know is inside you.”

They moved apart then, and sat down to talk in their usual fashion. The ordinary interchange helped to regain emotional balance sadly shaken in both by the significant decision just made.

It wasn’t difficult to call the Tunnel folk to a general meeting. Pascal sent out a message that Kanin and Devin requested the presence of the community in the dining hall. Curiosity at such an unusual request guaranteed that everyone who was able would show up.

Father came in after everyone was gathered, and stood at the back of the hall, arms crossed, a stern face turned as Devin began to speak.

“Thanks for coming. Kanin wants to recruit some people for a schedule of tunnel protection that he’s starting, and he’s asked for my help.” A wondering buzz passed over the room, as people asked each

other why? Finally a voice was raised at the back of the room. “Why do we need protection? Is something wrong? Where’s Vincent?”

The low hum of sound grew louder as people looked around and saw that Vincent was not present. “Where is Vincent? What’s going on?” Anxious looks passed between those gathered as they began to sense a problem.

“Vincent is Above with Catherine. There is no emergency, and he’s fine, but he’s the reason for this gathering, and the reason I’m doing the talking. I’m here to speak in defense of Vincent. He’s not here, we’ve had to see to that, because if he were he’d have shut me up by now.” He stopped for a moment, as there was a general chuckle and murmur of agreement. “But I’ve got some things to say, about what happened here a week or so ago, when he was prevented from a few days’ trip Above by the fears and anxieties of some of you here Below.

“I have to tell you, I think that was wrong. Wrong of you to ask it of him, and wrong of him to cave in to your baseless anxiety.”

He stopped as he saw heads shaking, and someone said, “Not baseless! We need his protection!” There was a chorus of agreement from the crowd.

“You need protection at times, that’s true; you can’t exactly call the cops. But there are several dozen able-bodied men in these tunnels. Why in *hell* does it always have to be Vincent?”

There was a sudden silence. Men looked around at their neighbors, as if each expected someone else to come up with a reason why it had to be Vincent.

Devin shook his head. “I wonder if any of you have thought at all about how different Vincent’s life is from your own. Different in some very simple ways: he’s never in his life stood under a blue summer sky and felt the sunlight on his face. There are other differences also, and some of them are darker and more painful to him, and they are made more so by the expectations of this community.

“When Vincent was growing up, it was obvious that his size and strength were going to be unusual; I can see how it happened that he became the protector of the community. But for the life of me, people, I don’t see how it happened that you had so little feeling for him, that you made him the *sole* protector. Isn’t his life hard enough? Do you have to add to his burdens by depending on him for violence, which he hates? There are others here who are capable of physical defense of this place, and it’s time everyone who’s able took a turn!”

“Do you have any idea how much he wants to see the world Above? I do. I listened to him crying in his bed at night when he was twelve or thirteen, after he realized how limited his existence would have to be. Believe me, he has had a long hard struggle to accept those limitations that his body puts on his life.

“Now, added to the burden he bears of his differences is the burden of this whole community. Now he can’t leave the tunnels, because *you* are afraid. Now he’s trapped not by his physical differences, but by the emotional blackmail of people whose only thought is for their own safety.

“When you came crying to him not to leave you, even for a few days, did any one of you think for a minute of how *he* must feel? Of the opportunity you snatched away from him, the opportunity to look for once at a world you all take for granted? Did you think of how he must long for a single chance to look at the world in daylight? Well, by God, Vincent is *going* to see a little bit of the world out there, things that the rest of you don’t think twice about, and if you want to deny him that opportunity, you are *monsters* of selfishness.”

His remarks were received in silence. Faces were turned down to look at hands. Not one person in the room met Devin’s eyes, except Lon.

He stood up, and Devin nodded to him, offering the floor. “Got something to say. Dev’s right.” He paused, and his brothers rose slowly and came to stand behind him. “Don’t need to worry about the

tunnels. Three of us. Not as good as one of Vincent, but we'll be here until he's back. If he wouldn't come back, we'd stay forever. We'll do whatever it takes to defend Vincent's home while he's gone."

Lon was a silent man, he looked as if he was uncomfortable speaking in front of so many people, but he went doggedly on.

"He gave us a chance when we were kids, brought us here to live. My papa didn't speak no English, couldn't get a job, we were starving when he found us. And he gave every one of you a chance too. A chance to live here in peace, safe. Now Vincent's gonna get his chance."

His level gaze moved over the faces in the room, catching eyes, making sure they all knew he meant what he said. As he stood looking around, each brother stepped up closer behind him. And slowly, led by Kanin, other men stood, and moved quietly around the room to stand behind Lon, nearly twenty of them in all.

Father was astonished and gratified when he saw the support of so many volunteering for possibly dangerous duty, to give Vincent his freedom. He stood up, drawing the attention of the whole room with that ability he had to command attention without saying a word. He spoke with effortless assumption of control.

"Thank you all for your support in this matter." He looked around the room for a moment, and then he edged around the crowd to speak to Devin. "Well, you got your way. It was a very affecting speech, but it remains to be seen if your idea will work."

Devin was not proof against even such a halfway apology. Wordlessly, he put his arms around the old man and they stood for a moment embraced. Then both men quickly turned away and became very busy with something else; anything to avoid the appearance of affection.

Father spoke to Kanin next. "Kanin, my apologies to you. The two of you bearded the lion, and I'm afraid that I snarled in true leonine fashion. But we have seen that there are many of our residents capable of, and I'm glad to know willing, to defend us. Vincent will always be needed, but help is certainly not unwelcome. I should have thought of this myself."

And he began to circulate around the room, encouraging and congratulating those who had volunteered, giving good advice, kindly correcting those he felt to be in error.

Devin leaned to Kanin to speak softly. "I give him twenty minutes until it was his idea from the beginning." Both men chuckled in affectionate amusement.

When Vincent tapped on her door, Catherine went quickly to answer it, but by the time she got there he was inside. She didn't stop, but walked directly into his arms, and he received her gladly, pulling her tightly against him. They stood for a few seconds embraced, not moving, both so happy to be able to hold each other again.

Catherine lifted her head to look up into Vincent's face, and with a soft sound he brought his mouth down to hers. The kiss was leisurely; he explored her mouth slowly, with soft pressures and loving attention to what he was doing. He took his time; no guilt attached to this kiss. This he was allowed to do, both by Catherine's agreement and by his own conscience, although the latter was with less certainty.

Time passed, and still they stood there locked together, mouths joined, lost in the kiss. When Vincent raised his head at last he breathed deeply, willing his heart to slow.

"Catherine, to kiss you is so wonderful, such a joy, I want never to stop..."

"I want you never to stop. I love this, Vincent, this is making us both so happy."

"Yes. It is making us happy. It is enough... now; but Catherine, we will... want more."

“Yes, we will. We do. But it’s enough... for now.”

“It must be enough for always.”

Catherine put her hand up to caress his face. “Don’t, Vincent. Don’t worry about the future. Let this present happiness *be* enough.”

He didn’t answer; he was staring down at her mouth, watching it move as she spoke. With a groan he bent his head again to take that mouth for his own.

Chapter Three

Plans for Vincent’s adventure moved ahead, although there was a setback when Vincent learned about the meeting that had been held in his absence. He was hotly angry with Devin, not for the subject of the meeting, so much as for the secrecy in which it was held. But Devin was equal to his little brother’s rage. Years of familiarity had told him what to do. If you could make Vincent laugh the battle was won. You hadn’t won the argument; he wouldn’t give up his position, but he couldn’t maintain his anger for long after that.

“Just you shut up about this, Vincent. So help me, if I was big enough I’d bust your kisser! Goddammit, you never do anything to protect yourself, and someone had to stop it, since you’re too dumb to! These people have been using you unmercifully for years!”

Vincent’s reply was icily correct. “I’m sure you thought you were helping. However, in the future, please don’t *help* me so much. Tend your own garden, and leave my weeds to my pulling, if you please!”

Devin looked at Vincent for a moment, speechless, then shook his head in disgust. “Jesus Christ, Vincent, you’re such a stuffed shirt! ‘Tend your own garden?’ What kind of half-assed way is that to be mad? For Chrissakes *swear* a little!”

That did it. Vincent’s angry face melted into a small smile, quickly stifled. They argued for a few minutes more, but the bite was out of Vincent’s anger, and they both knew it. The argument ended with Vincent’s admission that he was glad of the outcome of the meeting, although he wasn’t thrilled with the way it was done.

“The offered assistance will be very welcome to me, and I have to thank you for that.”

There was a pause, then: “Devin, *am* I a stuffed shirt?”

‘I... I’d like to surprise you, but I think you should know because you’re going to be apprehensive about this. Devin and I have already made some pretty detailed plans, and I guess it would be best if we let you in on them.’ She looked a little wistful. “I wish we could have surprised you, though.”

“So, you have recruited Devin to help you with this project. And he undoubtedly has given you much good advice on how to handle me.” He smiled a little. “He has had some success in the past at that. I can’t think of anyone who knows me better, or has had more success at enlisting me in hare-brained schemes. I suppose one of the things he told you was that it must be a complete and detailed plan before you present it, if you’re to have any chance of success.”

Catherine’s eyes dropped from his. “Well... yes. He did tell me that.” She looked up again at him then, with serious purpose in her eyes. “I will do whatever it takes, Vincent, to get you to agree to my plan. Whatever it takes.”

Vincent shook his head. "Catherine, Catherine, this is not going to be an easy discussion. We are not agreed on any part of the subject."

"Not true, not at all. We are agreed that if I can minimize all of the problems that you see, you will look at my plans with an open mind. That is what you agreed to, isn't it?"

He smiled wryly, "Yes, counselor, I did agree to that."

"All right. Now, Vincent, if you will sit down here," She sat down at her dining table and indicated a chair across from her, and Vincent sat also. "...We can begin. First... we are going to Egypt..."

Vincent looked up quickly. "You're joking, I presume."

Catherine looked at him steadily across the table. "No, I'm not joking. We are going to Egypt. We have an appointment for a private viewing of the pyramids." She struggled with herself briefly to contain her bursting enthusiasm; she was determined to maintain a businesslike attitude. Then with renewed purpose she continued. "We can do it, Vincent, it is possible. The plans are all made."

There was a pause, while he just looked at her, incredulous. When he spoke it was with an effort to maintain a serious manner. "I see. First, we go to Egypt. What is the second stop on your itinerary?"

"Akami National Wildlife Reserve in Zimbabwe. We have reserved a bush camp there for ten days."

Vincent said nothing for a moment, looking down at his teacup; then, "Gods," he said softly, "that would be..." A pause, then he raised his head with a jerk and shook it briefly. "Catherine...! Devin has always got some wild notion in his head, but it was unkind of him to draw you into a situation where you are hopeful that this can work."

"It *can* work. I agree that Devin is... impulsive, but I am not Devin, and I am certain that this is a feasible plan. I have done extensive research on every facet of it, Vincent. Ask me anything. I can tell you."

Vincent sat back, his hands flat on the table. "For pity's sake, Catherine, think of what you're proposing here. How do you intend to get us there? I don't believe that American Airlines is the solution to our... unique problem."

"I've got an airplane, a Lear jet, and Devin can fly it. Next question."

"Passports?"

"I have a current passport. Devin has...several. You don't need one, you are not going anywhere, officially."

"And we are going to hope that no one notices me passing through the security gate?"

"We are very fortunate to have a Helper who has a part time job as airport baggage handler at Teeterboro. From 10 pm to 2 am, the very most convenient hours for us. You may be somewhat uncomfortable traveling as baggage, but only until you're inside the airplane. Next question."

They sat at the table for nearly two hours, while Vincent posed problems and Catherine solved them. At the end of that time, Vincent was not convinced entirely, but his conviction that it couldn't happen was shaken.

"All right, I can't think of any more questions at the moment." He pushed his chair back from the table, and sat staring straight ahead of him for a few seconds. Then he got up and moved to the door, swinging his cloak around his shoulders.

Catherine came around the table quickly. "Vincent?"

"I just need some fresh air for a minute or two."

He touched her face briefly with the tips of his fingers and then turned to the French doors. He stepped out onto the balcony, and stood staring at New York spread out below him. Catherine

followed him and stood beside him, her arms folded tightly, shivering in the autumn chill. Vincent sensed her chill, reached for her without looking away from the cityscape below, and pulled her into the shelter of his cloak. After a moment, he spoke softly.

“Africa? ...Catherine, could it be possible? Could I go to Africa?”

“I believe you can, Vincent.”

“If such a thing were possible...” He stopped, unable to articulate his feelings. He turned, and took her into his embrace, holding her tightly against himself, her head tucked under his chin. He tried again to speak what was in his heart. “If this thing could happen, it would be... I can’t say it, I don’t know what words can express how... wonderful such a thing would be for me. Catherine, I’m afraid even to hope that it’s possible.”

“I believe that it’s possible. I believe that we will go to Africa, if you will allow it to happen. Oh, Vincent, let it happen to us, oh please...” She looked up at him with melting tenderness.

He looked down at her for a moment, and his head began to drop lower, his mouth moving closer to hers. Then he dropped his arms abruptly from their embrace and stepped back. He shook his head, as if to clear it of confusion.

“I need to think, Catherine, and when I’m holding you... that is not possible. Come, let’s go inside where you’ll be warm.”

Vincent sat on the loveseat and Catherine knelt in front of the fire, warming her chilled hands. In a few moments she settled on the floor with her back against the opposite love seat. “What are you thinking, Vincent?”

He spoke thoughtfully, staring into the fire. “I’m enthralled with the possibilities of this thing, but I need to think about it seriously. I am aware that there is some risk - there always is. I can live with risk, but I need to assess more calmly just how great it is, and balance it against the gain.” He looked up at her then. “I want very much to do this. You have opened up an amazing world of opportunity here, things I never dreamed could happen to me. To see the sun rise over an African landscape... it’s unbelievable, impossible... but I see the prospect blossoming before me, and it’s so wonderful to envision that I... I don’t know how to keep a cool head.”

Catherine looked up at him, her face intent. “Vincent, trust in the future, in Devin, in... *me*. Trust that you deserve this, that the gods will not snatch it from you, that it will be all that you could hope for. I’m trusting like that. Every moment I’m saying to myself. “This will happen to Vincent, and I will be there with him, to see his happiness, to share his joy.”

He slid down to the floor and moved to put his arms around her and draw her close to his body. “I love you, I love you...” He began to kiss her, small kisses down the side of her face, and into that soft hollow just below her ear. “Catherine, you smell like heaven, like all the lovely, desirable things that ever were. I can’t, I *can’t* leave you alone.” He leaned back with his head against the loveseat and gazed at her, his eyes glowing blue in the dancing light of the fire.

Then he turned his eyes away from her, gazing into the flames. “I’m afraid that somehow the gods will let me choose this great adventure that you have planned, and then exact their price, and the price will be... that you will never be... mine.”

Catherine raised herself up straight with a jerk, chuckling and shaking her head. “Vincent, why, *why* would your darn worrisome mind make it an either/or proposition? Show a little trust, can’t you? Have a little faith in a *benevolent* fate?” She looked down at him where he still leaned against the loveseat, and her face softened. She raised her hand and her forefinger traced his upper lip lightly, lovingly.

Her voice lowered to a half whisper. “Oh, my dearest one, please, have a little faith...”

He looked up at her silently for a moment. Then he said. “All right. I’ll go.”

Catherine went shopping.

“Well, Devin, he can’t wear tunnel clothes!” She was indignant when Devin laughed at her. “The whole idea is to make him as ordinary as possible if someone *should* see him from a distance. He’s got to wear jeans and T-shirts and regular boots, and a leather jacket, and they’ve got to be the best, the kind that a man traveling in a private jet would wear. What size do you think? I guessed 46 long for jackets, 17 ½-35 for shirts. What would you guess for jeans?”

Devin was highly amused. “You can’t wait to get him out of those heavy clothes, can you?”

She grinned, blushing a little. “Well... yes, that’s true. But you have to admit there’s a practical reason as well. Besides making him look more... usual, he’ll need lighter clothes. It’s going to be *hot*; it’s spring in southern Africa. I’ve been keeping track of temperatures in Zimbabwe; it’s going to be hot during the day, cooler at night. He’ll be glad to have some hot weather clothes, he’s never had to deal with much heat.”

“All right, all right, I’m convinced!” He was still laughing.

Catherine hesitated for a minute. “Devin, I have a question that’s a little embarrassing. Um...does he wear underwear?”

That put him into a stomach-clutching spasm. When he could talk again, he shook his head. “No, he doesn’t. He said he couldn’t see the sense of it when he was about fourteen, and he never wore it again. He’d wear it if he thought you expected him to though, and then Mary would have to deal with acquiring it. Just don’t mention it to him. It’ll be a lot easier for everyone.” He was still chuckling, but his curiosity and more importantly his real concern for both of them made him ask the question in his mind.

“Catherine, is Vincent still holding back from committing... everything to your relationship? If you think it’s none of my business, just shut me up, OK?”

She smiled. “It is none of your business, but it’s all right, I’m glad you asked. I need to talk to you about it. The answer to your question is yes, he’s still holding back, but it’s getting harder for him all the time, and I think that his reasons are starting to look pretty thin to him.” She looked down at her hands. “To tell you the truth, I’m hoping that this trip will bring him to understand that... we belong together.”

“I’m certainly convinced that you do. I’m planning to stay out of your way just as much as I can, Cathy. The more time he has alone with you, the more likely he is to give in, right? I can’t believe this state of affairs has gone on as long as it has. I don’t know how you can keep from killing him, he’s so stubborn!”

She smiled reminiscently. “Well, he certainly does try my patience on occasion, but I love him, Devin.” Then she turned back to the subject at hand. “I wasn’t sure quite how to ask you to leave us alone. You’ve been such a rock through this whole thing; it couldn’t have happened without you. After all your help I didn’t want you to think we didn’t want you around, but I’m so glad you understand. I think the more we can be alone together on this trip, the better. Thanks for offering.”

When Vincent found that Catherine had bought him a complete travel wardrobe, he was disturbed. “My own clothes are quite adequate, no one will see me!”

“The trouble with your clothes is that they’re more than adequate. It will be hot in Southern Africa, it’s spring there, Vincent. You’ll have to have lighter clothes.”

“Oh. Of course. We’re going to the Southern Hemisphere! Catherine, this whole thing is beyond my grasp; I keep realizing new things, new wonders. We’re going to the Southern Hemisphere. That’s an amazing thing in itself, apart from everything else.”

He picked up a shirt. “This is new.” He shook his head. “I’ve never had anything new in my life, except a for few things that Mary has made for me. But this came from a store, new.” He looked at the shirt with wonderment in his face. “New.”

“Oh, Vincent, you look just like a little kid with a birthday present!”

He looked up, smiling a little. “That’s the way I feel about it all, everything. It’s all so... surprising; it’s all more than I expected.” He put the shirt down, and took her hand. When he spoke his voice was soft, but down in that deep register that always moved her. “Thank you, Catherine. Thank you for the shirts, and for... bringing this new experience to my life.”

She looked down at their clasped hands. “Don’t thank me, Vincent. It’s my great pleasure.” A little embarrassed, she picked up a box, and fumbled with the tape tied around it. “Look at these, I think you’ll like them.”

The box held a pair of pull-on boots, mid calf high, of the finest soft brown leather. They were very expensive boots, hand-made, the finest that Catherine had been able to find. Vincent opened the box and then stopped, just looking. His hand came out and touched one, stroking the supple leather for a moment, then drew back. “I don’t think you should do this, Catherine. This is too much.”

“No, it’s not too much. Nothing is too much.” She looked up at him with the softest of glances, her love in her eyes. She paused for a moment, just looking at him, and then returned to the practical. “And you’ll need boots. There’s another pair here somewhere...” She looked rather vaguely about at the welter of packages and shopping bags strewn over her bed. “They’re for wearing in the bush, for rough use. These... well, these are just for... just because I loved them, and I thought you would too.” She smiled a little bit shyly.

“You were right. They’re exactly what my ideal footwear would be. Exactly.” He picked one up and stroked his hand along the leather. “I shouldn’t let you do this, but I want them very much,” he looked from the boots to her, “and I can’t give them up.” And he smiled broadly at her, a real smile, one that showed his canines.

Vincent didn’t tell Father until they were nearly ready to leave. Catherine and Devin both offered to be present to back him, but Vincent said no. “Devin, he’s annoyed at you now about the meeting you held, it’s not a good time for you to present anything new. Catherine... well, I’m afraid he’ll blame you for this whole thing, and it’s better if you’re not there. He’ll be able to speak freely, and it will be better in the long run if you don’t hear what he says. I have long experience with this particular problem, and I think it will be easier for both of us if he hears it from me alone.”

Catherine smiled ruefully. “You’re right. He’ll blame me, and he should, it was my idea. To tell you the truth, I’m glad not to be there. It will be better for our future relationship if neither of us hears what the other thinks on this subject.”

Devin grinned. “You got that right. You scared to tell him, Vincent?”

“No, I long ago got over being afraid of him. He makes a great noise, but he’s a reasonable man in the end. We’ll come to an understanding.”

Father did indeed make a great noise. “I absolutely forbid you to do this insane thing! You will tell Catherine at once that you cannot go. I will have some words to say to that young lady also!”

“I am going to do this, Father. I did not come to you for permission; I am merely, in courtesy, informing you of my intention to be absent for some few days. And I trust that you will treat Catherine

with the civility that is due her as my chosen woman.”

“Your *what?* Show a little sense, Vincent!”

“She is the most important thing in my life, Father, and that is not going to change. I will not change, and neither will Catherine. This is a permanent and very serious relationship, a lifetime commitment.”

Sensing major resistance, Father answered this time with less anger in his voice. “Vincent, I do not know what has come over you in the last few weeks, but I am not happy about it. There needs to be some serious rethinking done, my son. You have let this... relationship with Catherine distort your thinking and your life, as witness this *ridiculous* proposal to go to Africa.”

“I will not discuss this with you any longer. I have told you that this is a permanent commitment. If you cannot accept that, it will become a major problem between us. Don’t bring it to a choice, Father. I will choose Catherine.” Vincent looked steadily at the older man, his expression calm.

Father’s face paled. “I never thought I’d hear you say such a thing.”

“I don’t mean to hurt you, but you must accept the way things are. And we *are* going to Africa, the day after tomorrow. I will be gone about two weeks, perhaps a little more. Catherine will let Peter know how we are, as often as is possible, and I hope you will be able to keep worry to a minimum. Try to think instead that I am going to see Giza. You of all people should know how much that means to me.” He smiled a little. “You certainly expressed enough weariness with the subject when I was in the middle of it.”

Father smiled also. “I remember.” He could see that further argument was of no avail, and so began to mend fences. “Vincent, you know that I love you, and that my only thought is of what is best for you.”

“I know. But it’s for me to decide what is best for me. We have never had a major disagreement before, but now that it has finally happened, I will make my own decisions. Of course I will seek your counsel, but I’m afraid not necessarily your approval.”

“Yes. Yes, you are a grown man, and I certainly have respect for your judgment in every other area. But Vincent... Africa?”

“Yes, Africa. I’m anticipating this trip with such excitement, Father. Catherine and Devin have spent weeks planning it, and checking every possible flaw in the plan. I believe that it will be as safe as it is possible for it to be, although of course there is some risk. But oh, Father, I want to go so very much!”

Suddenly, Father saw in Vincent’s face the boy he remembered so well, and his heart melted. “Of course you do. And I hope and pray that it will be everything that you expect and much, much more, my son.”

He held out his arms, and Vincent embraced him with love.

Catherine and Vincent emerged from the tunnel exit into the agreed upon meeting spot, a deserted alley which opened onto an equally deserted street. A black limo turned into the alley at the same moment, looking faintly sinister with its opaque windows as it passed under the one street light on the block. Devin’s head appeared out of the driver’s window, and he waved as the big car moved silently down the alley.

Vincent’s hand tightened on Catherine’s until she yelped. He turned to her immediately, full of apologies, but Catherine laughed. “I’d be surprised if you weren’t just a mite tense. Have you ever ridden in a car before?” He shook his head, mute. “Well, this is a nice one. Devin is doing us proud.” Devin got out, and they moved to meet him.

“OK? Still willing to chance it?” Devin grinned at Vincent and put a hand on his shoulder. “If you back

out now, I'm gonna be mad as hell, I warn you."

"I wouldn't dare. Catherine would... do something terrible." Vincent looked at her with laughter in his eyes and she nodded.

"I would. I'd wring your neck. Come on, let's get under cover." She grinned at Vincent, took his hand again and turned to the limo.

Devin had donned a chauffeur's hat while Catherine's back was turned. Now he opened the back door of the limo with a flourish and then straightened to attention, his eyes straight ahead.

"Oh, please! Spare us!" She laughed and shook her head as she got into the car. Vincent followed her quickly, falling into the seat with a rush of expelled breath, and subsiding rather limply.

"Scared?" Catherine smiled at him.

"Frightened half to death." He reached for her and pulled her against him, smiling back at her. "Hold me; I need help."

She snuggled closer and slid both arms around him. "Any time. Glad to be of service."

Devin pulled the limo into the warehouse and stopped. The big door rolled down behind them almost silently, and Devin got out of the car. He walked over to the small lighted room at one side that held the only human presence in the huge, nearly empty space around them.

Vincent looked around rather apprehensively. "This is the place where I get into the box?"

"Yup. It sounds like you're a bit uneasy about it; is that true?"

"Not the box. It's... will there be strangers?"

"Vincent, have a little faith! Would we do that to you?" Catherine grinned at him. "Well, as a matter of fact we might, if it was the only way to get this done, but we were lucky, we don't have to."

Devin was walking back across the floor with another man beside him, and Vincent peered out through the limo's smoky windows. "It's Edwin!" He opened the car door with no hesitation, and Catherine got out the other side.

"Hello, Vincent." The small black man beside Devin was one of the earliest of the Helpers, a man whom Vincent had known all his life. Vincent embraced him with pleasure, and Edwin grinned up at him. "I hear you're going to take a little vacation. 'Bout time, if you ask me! And here's Catherine; I understand this was all your idea. Good for you, girl!"

Catherine smiled and sketched a curtsy. "Thank you, thank you, sir. I'm proud of it!"

"And you should be! Well, Vincent, I got your traveling arrangements all made. I got to be at the airport in about twenty minutes, and you're going with me. Not traveling with much style for this first part of the trip, though. Come on over here, and I'll show you the accommodations."

He took Vincent's arm and led him back to the little lighted room. "This is my nephew's job, running this warehouse, but he gave me the key just for tonight. Well, here it is." He opened an expensive-looking leather bound trunk with a flourish. "Think you'll be able to fold yourself in here?"

Vincent nodded. "I can get in there. How long will it be?"

"About 20 to 30 minutes. Think you can stand it that long?"

"Yes, of course."

Catherine took his arm. "Devin and I will be in the limo, and Edwin is going to follow in the van. He'll have all of our luggage with him, and you'll be just a part of it. As soon as we're aboard I'll let you out. It's part of Edwin's job to pick up luggage for VIP passengers, so no one will think anything of it."

They put the trunk in the back of the van, and Vincent folded himself into it. Edwin shut and locked it, everyone entered their respective vehicles, and they were off for Teeterboro.

The transfer to the plane went smoothly, with a little grumbling from the handlers. "You sure you want this thing in the cabin? What you got in here anyway, lady? It weighs about four hundred pounds!"

Catherine gave a very convincing performance as the spoiled rich girl. "It absolutely *must* go in the cabin! Are you telling me it won't fit? It must be *made* to fit, then. There are some very expensive clothes in that trunk, along with some rare books that must stay at room temperature. If it won't go into the cabin you can put it back in the truck, because I don't go without it!"

"OK, OK, lady! I just thought you might want it in the baggage compartment! Jeez! OK!" The man turned to exchange a disgusted look with his partner, and they lifted it up the stairs and into the plane.

When Devin was aboard and the door was closed, Catherine opened the trunk immediately. Vincent unfolded himself, and stretched a little, and smiled down at her. "You were right about the very expensive clothes anyway," he said, looking down at his soft brushed denim shirt and blue jeans, and the leather jacket that matched his new boots. "Although the books don't appear to be in evidence."

"You heard me?" She giggled a little. "Wasn't I hateful?"

"Yes. A very convincing performance."

As they stood there talking, Devin started the plane.

"Oh!" Vincent took Catherine's hand, and put it on his heart. "Feel that."

"It feels like your heart is going fast enough to fly the plane by itself."

"I believe it could. Oh, Catherine, we're really going to do this thing, aren't we?"

Chapter Four

"I'm in an airplane, flying across the Atlantic Ocean. I never expected in my life to be in an airplane."

The moon was coming up to the full, and the Atlantic held a ribbon of molten silver below. Vincent turned away from the window where he had spent the last hour looking out, avidly drinking in the sight of the world from the air. First Manhattan Island had spread itself below, a jeweled crown even more magnificent from the air than from Catherine's balcony; then the span of the Atlantic Ocean in the lambent light of the moon drew his enthralled attention.

"The world is so *big*; the space, the size of it, amaze me. I thank you, Catherine. If we turned and went back right now it would be enough, I would be satisfied."

Catherine laughed delightedly. "I should be thanking you, Vincent, for letting me be a witness to your first sight of the world. Do you know how much fun this is for me? I'm loving it so much I almost feel guilty about it. I'm having as much fun as you are!"

"Not possible." He smiled at her. "This experience is...unbelievable. The whole thing is illusory, akin to hallucination." He looked around him, appraising the interior of the jet for the first time. "But this plane is no dream, no hallucination, Catherine. This is a very luxurious, and I would imagine very expensive airplane. Have you rented it? I hope you didn't buy it!"

"No, I'm afraid my fabled wealth doesn't run to jet airplanes, Vincent. I borrowed it. Actually, I borrowed it from Elliott Burch. I hope that doesn't matter to you?"

Vincent said nothing for a moment, not looking at her. Then: "No, it doesn't matter."

She reached for his hands. "Don't... oh, don't be hurt. Let me tell you how it happened. He came to see me one night not long ago. I guess I felt sorry for him; anyway, we talked for a little while, and I

told him about... you. Not about who you are, nothing like that. I told him that there always had been someone else, someone that I love with all my heart. And he said that if he could ever do anything for the two of us... well, it seemed like such a wonderful opportunity, I just..."

When Vincent looked up at her he was smiling. "I'm not hurt. You have many friends, and it seems inevitable to me that at least some of the men would fall in love with you. But Catherine, I'm amused at your... shall we call it initiative? Did you ask him to put it in writing? Best to get these things nailed down while the party of the first part is agreeable, isn't it, counselor?"

"Well, I have to admit he seemed a bit stunned." She giggled a little, remembering Elliott's astonishment at the request.

"I'm not surprised, and I'm certainly not upset. Elliott Burch has been a good friend to us before, and I hope you will convey to him, when you are able, how grateful I am for the loan of his airplane."

Vincent, do you know that you're perfect?"

He looked at her quizzically. "A rather abrupt change of subject, Catherine."

"Not a change of subject at all. Most men would have sulked for days when I told them what I just told you. I didn't have faith in you, Vincent. I waited until it was too late for you to back out before I told you it was Elliott's plane, because I was afraid you'd be angry. It wasn't honest of me, but I wanted so much for us to go on this trip. Am I forgiven?"

"There's nothing to forgive. And if there were, I couldn't be angry with you for very long. I...love you too much, Catherine. You can do no wrong." He looked at her for a moment, and she thought he was going to take her in his arms. But he took a deep breath and looked around the plane once more. "Is there a place to sleep?"

"The two chairs on your side and my sofa here convert into a bed. It's really very ingenious. I'll show you." She got up, but Vincent put his hand on her arm.

"No, no, I just wondered, don't do anything now."

"We should go to sleep sometime tonight, Vincent. Tomorrow is a big day."

He smiled a little. "They'll all be big days, for quite a few days to come. But I guess you're right, we will need to get some rest. But what about Devin? Even he is human, and needs to sleep sometime."

"He says he gets quite a bit of sleep when he flies all night."

"What!" Vincent stared at her. When he realized that she wasn't making a joke, he put his head down into his hands for a moment and then looked up with laughter in his eyes. "Oh great heavens, that's just wonderful. It makes me feel so *comfortable* to know he's getting his rest! And who drives this vehicle while he does that?"

Catherine laughed. "He puts the plane on autopilot, and dozes in his seat. The plane will let him know if anything is wrong."

"I see. The plane flies itself while he sleeps." He shook his head, chuckling, and stood up. "Well, we have to presume that Devin knows what he's doing. All right, let's get these beds made. We should sleep."

"Ah... I'm afraid there's only one bed, Vincent. But it's a double bed."

Disconcerted, Vincent hesitated, then sat down again. "Oh. I see." He paused, thinking. "Maybe this is a good time to bring something up that I've meant to talk about, Catherine. During this time that we're together every minute of every day, I hope you will understand if I keep more distance between us than has been our practice in the recent past. I feel... less confidence in my ability to keep things within bounds under these circumstances. Will this be all right with you?"

Catherine's heart sank at this request, and Vincent was immediately aware of it. "You are

disappointed. I'm sorry, Catherine. I never want to do anything to make you unhappy; you must know that. But please understand; I can't... I'm afraid, afraid that I won't be able to..."

"I do understand. It's all right, Vincent. I *am* disappointed; I thought... well, it doesn't matter. This trip is for you... no, for both of us to look out at the world, not to worry about our petty disappointments. I'm sure that this is not something that you're happy about either. We will do what we have to do, and not let it cloud our happiness in each other and this trip. OK?"

Vincent took her hands in his, and looking into her eyes, he spoke in his lowest register. "I love you more with each passing day, and I thank you with all that's in me for your loving heart, and for your tolerance of my... weakness."

"Oh, Vincent, oh my love..."

Their eyes locked and held for a long moment, all of the ardor pent inside of each of them in that silent look. Then they got up and began to work at getting the bed ready for the night. There was nothing else to say.

They made up two separate beds on the one mattress, folding two sheets, each one from the center out to opposite edges, so that each of them had their own envelope of covers. Vincent was not really happy, even with this arrangement, but there was no other place to sleep; even the floor wasn't wide enough in any one place for him to lie down comfortably.

He stretched out on his side of the bed, and Catherine lay down on hers. Both were careful to keep distance between them, and each thought *I'll never go to sleep*, but they were so exhausted by the excitement of the day's events, that in ten minutes they were both sound asleep.

In sleep, inhibitions are lost, and before half an hour had passed, Catherine was spooned tightly into Vincent's body. His arms folded around her, holding her against him. Both were still asleep; in the comfort of their closeness each sighed deeply, and sank into a more restful repose.

"Vincent, wake up. We're making landfall in Spain."

"Spain? Gods! Let me see!" He was up in an instant with his face pressed against the window. In the early morning sun the land was golden, but it seemed empty, until he realized that they were too high to see any sign of human habitation. The sea was burnished bronze by the morning sun where the land curved away to the southeast; bright, but no brighter than Vincent's mane, also gilded with the golden light.

Catherine looked not at Spain, but at Vincent seeing Spain, and she was as enthralled as he. She thought that he was more beautiful than a god in that light, and with the joy of discovery on his face.

"Will you two settle down, and let me land this airplane, for Pete's sake? I told you, this is taken care of!" Devin shook his head disgustedly as he turned back to the controls. "Now sit down, and fasten your damn safety belts."

Vincent and Catherine looked at each other, stunned, as Devin began to talk to the Cairo airport in what they could only suppose was Arabic.

"Is there anything he can't do?" Catherine whispered, laughing.

"If so, we haven't discovered it on this trip." Vincent smiled back. "And if our luck holds, we won't."

They watched in bemused silence as Devin expertly landed the plane, touching down imperceptibly and rolling to a smooth stop.

Vincent moved quickly away from the window, always conscious of showing himself to strangers, as Catherine moved between him and any possible view from the other side. They had perfected their moves in two previous stops, one in Toledo, Spain, and one at the Athens airport, where Devin had some mysterious business which took only a few minutes. Then he was back on the plane, and their journey continued to their present destination, Cairo.

“Now, I’m going to ask you to stay aboard for a couple of hours, Vincent, while I take care of the last minute arrangements here. I absolutely guarantee that you will not be bothered while I am gone. I’ve already been in contact with Ahsidi by radio, and he has taken care of the airport people, and the government people. Just sit tight for a couple of hours, and I’ll bring back dinner from the best restaurant in Cairo. OK?”

“Bring lots, I’m hungry already.” Catherine laughed up at him. She had been smiling almost constantly the last few hours. Her dream was coming true. Vincent was seeing the world, if only from an airplane window, so far.

“You’re coming with me.” Devin grinned at her. “Gotta let these people know that I have a passenger.”

Catherine was astonished by how smoothly things went. The airport people were downright obsequious, not only willing, but anxious that their every requirement be met, almost before it was expressed.

She spoke to Devin as they moved through the airport with VIP treatment all the way. “Your friend must be a powerful man! I’m astonished at what he has accomplished here. Bureaucrats are not usually this anxious to please.”

“This country is not exactly a democracy, Catherine. Bureaucrats here are not protected from losing their jobs. In fact, they’re not protected at all. They could lose more than their jobs, believe me. My friend Ahsidi could tell you a lot about that. How do you think he got into a position where he needed someone to save his life? A change of government, or even the displeasure of someone above you can make a life or death difference in a country like this one. Which means that we must be very careful not to criticize any arrangements that are made for us. Lives could change because of a word from us.”

“That scares me to death, Devin. I won’t say a word. I think I’ll pretend I don’t understand any language they try on me. That way I can’t say anything I shouldn’t. My God, you’d think having so much power would be fun, but this is not fun!” Catherine shuddered, horrified by what a word could do here.

“Unfortunately, it can get to be fun. It has for many people. That’s how this kind of system flourishes in many countries.” Devin shrugged. “I try not to get involved with it as a rule, but in this case I think it’s worth any amount of effort.” He smiled at Catherine, not mentioning anything specific about Vincent in a public place.

Arrangements had already been made for a limo with one-way windows to pick them up at the plane, and for Devin to drive it from there. “Ahsidi thought a police escort would be prudent, to keep us from having to explain anything to various bureaucrats, so we’ve got that, but it will be a plain car, with plain-clothes police. They’ll handle all arrangements, and get us to the Pyramids with a minimum of interference. Once we get there, we have the whole night. They’ll come back for us at dawn.”

“I still can’t believe it’s really going to happen. But Devin, let’s get back to the plane as quickly as possible, I’m sure V... I want to rest for awhile.”

“I’m going to send you back with someone to see that you get there. I want to go into Cairo to see Ahsidi, but I don’t think we should leave... the plane alone any longer. I’ll see to it that dinner is sent to you. I’ll be back shortly after dark, with the limo and our escort. See you then.”

Devin spoke in what she supposed was Arabic to the man waiting patiently to help them in any way he could, and the man beamed at Catherine, and then bowed and waved her in the direction of the

airfield.

She was back at the plane in a few minutes, and climbed the steps quickly, anxious to reassure Vincent that all was well. She turned her key in the door and entered. As she closed the door behind her, she found herself swept into Vincent's arms, and before she could react to that, his mouth came down on hers. They were lost in the kiss in an instant, both of them moaning a little, arms tight around each other, bodies melded into one aching entity.

Vincent raised his head at last, but didn't loosen his embrace. "You will not go away from me again on this trip! I was in agony lest you be in danger; how could I get to you? I won't let you go again. Ever." His mouth dropped to hers again.

The kiss escalated beyond any they had shared before. Without breaking it he lifted her off the floor, and they half-fell onto the sofa. His hands moved over her body, curving around her buttocks, reaching down to the inside of her thighs. They seemed to be everywhere; they came up under her shirt, moving over the skin of her back, sliding under the waistband of her trousers to touch her skin everywhere he could reach. His mouth moved from hers down the side of her neck to the V opening of her shirt. His breathing was fast and ragged, and Catherine could feel the pounding of his heart.

As his hand moved to cup her breast she gasped and arched her body into it. But as the heat of passion continued to grow, in a moment of clarity she remembered her promise. *Oh God, I don't want to stop!* In the past Vincent had been able to keep control without her help; but this time she realized that if they were to stop, she would have to intervene. She had promised, and she believed that he wasn't going to stop on his own.

"Vincent? My love... we must stop." She put her hand under his chin to lift his face away from her breast. "Vincent?" He was resisting, his mouth was at her nipple now, he took it into his mouth through her shirt, making erotic sensation arrow through her body. She shivered and caught her breath, but she spoke once more. "*Vincent!* Please... if you don't stop now, I won't be able to either..."

She knew he had heard her when he stopped moving. Slowly his head lifted, and he looked at her. "I... I want this so much, oh, Catherine... my dearest love..."

He loosened his embrace, pulling himself back from her, beginning to regain control. He sat for several minutes staring at nothing, while his breathing slowed. Then he turned to her.

"Thank you, Catherine. I don't think I could have done it... I wouldn't have stopped. Thank you."

He leaned forward, his hair hiding his face. "I was so frightened for you. I just needed to feel you here, in my arms again, and it got beyond my control."

"I believe that it was beyond your control, Vincent, but you were still so gentle, still the same loving man you've always been." She reached to stroke his hair lightly. "There is nothing in you that is a danger to me. You have only love and tenderness in your heart."

He looked up at her then; when he spoke his voice was rough. "Catherine, you have no idea what's in my heart. I am not always the gentleman in my daydreams, believe me. There is violence in my feelings for you. I know it. I've dreamed, I've imagined... things I can't tell you."

"You *can* tell me. I want to know, Vincent. I long to know all of your feelings for me. Tell me."

"No! I can't do that."

"Maybe I should tell you what I've dreamed. Shall I? I promised not to do anything to make it harder for you. I won't tell you unless you want me to."

He looked up at her. "Your dreams cannot be anything like the things that I dream. It's not... no. They cannot."

"You have no idea what's in my heart either, Vincent. I'm going to tell you one of my fantasies. I think you need to hear this.

“I’ve dreamed that you tie me to the bed. That you tease me and torment me with your hands and your mouth until I’m crazy, crying and moaning, and then you torment me more, and make me say and do things that I can’t believe I’d do. And then, when I can’t stand any more, you take me, take me hard and fast, and I love it. I love it, Vincent.”

Vincent’s head came up slowly, and he stared at her as if unbelieving of what he had heard. Suddenly he stood up and jerked her to her feet, his hands tight enough on her arms to leave marks. He pulled her to him roughly.

“Gods! You make me want you beyond bearing! If you say one more word I’ll...” His head came down and he kissed her hard, then let go of her quickly and walked to the other end of the cabin, where he stood looking at the ceiling, letting his blood cool and his breathing slow.

She waited a few minutes, until she saw the tension start to leave his shoulders. Then she said, “Was my fantasy anything like what you’ve dreamed?”

He wheeled to look at her, running his hands through his mane, pushing it back from his heated face. “Anything like it? Closer than I would have believed was possible! Catherine, how can it be that *you* want... that?”

“We all have fantasies, Vincent, you know that. I don’t know, maybe I wouldn’t want it in reality; maybe it wouldn’t be as much fun as the daydream, but we all dream of violent sexual behavior. At least all my friends do. When we were in college, this was a very popular subject of conversation. I think we tried to outdo each other.” She smiled as she thought back on those days. “I wasn’t in the running with some of them. In fact they all thought I was a bit of a wimp, because the one I’ve told you went much farther than my fantasies went then.”

His smile was a little bit shaky. “I’m not sure I’d survive anything you told me that went any farther!”

He turned away from her again, and stood in a characteristic pose, staring at the ceiling. Catherine waited for what he would have to say, not sure if she was scared or elated by what had passed between them in the last few minutes.

“Catherine... what shall we do? How can we go on like this? I am at a loss, I’m unable to think rationally about it at all.”

Her answer was impatient. “Vincent, don’t ask me that! You know what I think we should do about it, but I’m sure that’s not what you want to hear.” Then, as he turned to her, looking stricken, she relented. “Oh my dear, I don’t know how this is going to end. Whatever you decide to do about it, I will go along with, but let’s not try to decide anything now, both of us are too... too close to it at the moment.”

There was a knock on the plane door. “There’s Devin with our dinner. Let’s eat, and we’ll think about this when things have cooled off a little. OK?”

“Yes, you’re right.” He opened the door of the lavatory, and stepped inside. “Let me know when it’s safe to come out.”

Catherine opened the door and the dinner was brought in by three men burdened with napery and food, although Devin was not with them. He sent a note:

Tied up. Enjoy.

D

The men set up the table with practiced speed, and laid out a dinner that seemed to Catherine to be enough for four or more people. “Is this all for me?” She smiled at the nearest man. He answered in his own language, shrugging. “OK,” she answered, sure that that would be understood. And it was; he

smiled broadly and the three men bowed themselves out.

Vincent emerged from his seclusion, and Catherine showed him Devin's note. He read it, shook his head and smiled, and they sat down to eat.

Vincent was nonplused by the food. "There isn't one item of food on this table with which I'm familiar. Catherine, you'll have to guide me through it." But he found that he liked it all. "This is another unanticipated new experience. Egyptian food is very, very good. There are tastes, spices here that I'm totally unfamiliar with. I wish William were here; I'd like to see some of this food on the tunnel menu."

Catherine smiled. "I'll buy William a Middle East cookbook. That'll shake up the tunnel folk! Can you see Mary eating hummus?"

Vincent laughed out loud at that. Actually laughed.

My, my! This trip is causing new behaviors all over the place! thought Catherine.

The short walk from the plane to the car was the only time that Vincent had been in the open at all since he left the tunnels. Devin had parked the airplane purposely to shelter the door from observation, and he thought they had about a ninety-five percent chance that Vincent would be completely unobserved. The sun was very low in the sky, and the steps down from the plane were in shadow; nevertheless Vincent stood for a long moment looking out of the door before he stepped out into the open. He was down the steps and into the car in under five seconds, but they all breathed easier once he was again under cover.

The car moved away from the airport, picking up its police escort at the gate, and entered the highway that would take it to Giza. As the car gathered speed on the highway, both Vincent and Catherine were slightly giddy with excitement. "Is this happening? Am I on the way to see Khufu's tomb? I don't believe it!" Vincent pulled Catherine against him, nuzzling her ear, and nibbling at her chin.

"What the hell is going on back there? I've got a rear view mirror, you know!" Devin was grinning like a jack o'lantern.

Vincent didn't appear to be embarrassed at all; he didn't stop making love to Catherine for a moment.

"Keep your eyes on the road. Cars do not have autopilots, and I want to live to see Giza!"

Catherine chortled, and began to kiss him back, but both of them were too excited for any serious lovemaking. Devin could hear them laughing and whispering to each other like teenagers. He smiled and sent a silent prayer of thanks to whatever gods had sent Catherine into Vincent's life, to give him a piece of the joy of youth that he had missed so completely in his teenage years. As he looked in the mirror and saw them clinging so close to each other he thought also that it wouldn't be long now before Vincent would know another kind of joy, one that was long overdue.

"Go for it, Vincent!" He said softly to himself. "You deserve it, God knows."

Devin had been to Giza before, and when he had pulled the car to a stop, he turned to lean over the back of the seat. "I'll play tour guide if you want. I know a little bit about Giza, I had a good guide when I was here. Beautiful, too; and with other skills that... but that's another story." He grinned at Vincent, hoping to embarrass him.

But Vincent had other things to think about at the moment. "I don't think we'll need that, I've researched the subject pretty thoroughly, I think I can find my way around on my own."

“Good! Because what I want right now is a nap. I haven’t slept to speak of since night before last, and if I’m going to land the Lear on that little bitty strip at Akami, I’ll need to be awake when I do it. So if you two will just vacate the back seat, I’ll take possession.”

“We’ll see you later.” Vincent opened the door and swung his feet out of the car, then he stopped and sat looking at the sand under his feet for a moment. Catherine came around the car and watched him as he raised his head, the there it was in front of him, the Sphinx; behind it and to the right reared the enormous bulk of the Great Pyramid. He got out of the car, his eyes still on the sight before him, and stood for a long time just looking, his arm holding Catherine against his side, while tears ran down his face. At last he began to move forward, bringing her along with him.

“I want to get closer...I want to touch it...I want to touch it all!” His voice was hoarse with his tears.

They walked for two hours around Giza. The moon had just risen, full in a cloudless desert sky, and it threw the details on the shadowed side of every object into Stygian blackness as Catherine moved with him through the deep sand.

Vincent was silent for long stretches of time, drinking in the sense of antiquity that pervaded the night. When he spoke it was about Egypt, about its history and about the building of the pyramids. Catherine was astonished at the depth of his knowledge. He walked around Giza as if he had been there before, coming up to corners and telling her what they would see when they rounded them.

When Catherine expressed astonishment at his knowledge he told her, “I went through a long period when I was about twenty, when Egypt was the most interesting study I could imagine. I can’t tell you how many times I have walked this ground in my imagination. To be here is... unbelievable. If you had asked me where I’d most like to go, this would be the place. I never thought I would stand here in Giza, and see Egypt’s past in person, my feet in African sands, breathing the air that the pharaohs breathed.” His eyes filled with tears again. “Catherine, you have given me a gift beyond price.”

Catherine reached up to touch his face, tears in her eyes also. “I didn’t know! I didn’t know that this was a special place for you, but perhaps Devin did. He’s the one you should thank for this. I couldn’t have done it, I wouldn’t even have considered it, but it was the first thing he mentioned after he heard that I had a jet. And his contacts here made this whole thing possible. Did he know that Egypt was a special place for you?”

“Probably. I’ve spent many hours talking with Devin since he’s more often at home. We’ve covered just about everything, I guess.”

“Our relationship?” Catherine said, inquiry in her voice.

“We’ve talked about it, but not in any depth. I’ve been... reluctant to think about it, much less discuss it with anyone. But Catherine, it’s changed so much I don’t know what to think any more. Things that I have always held to be true about our relationship seem much... shakier. Things that I thought could never happen... well, look at where we are. I thought *this* could never happen, that it was beyond anything I could wish for, and... here we are. And here you are with me, in a relationship that I never believed could happen to me.” His arm came around her, and he pulled her against him as they walked.

“Vincent, could we sit awhile?”

“Yes, of course. You’re tired. I’m sorry, I have been so caught up... Well, let’s sit.”

They sat down on the ground in the soft sand with their backs against a stone wall, in a place where the whole panorama was spread before them. Catherine sighed and stretched her legs out.

“I don’t have your superhuman stamina; sometimes you’re pretty hard to keep up with.”

He chuckled. “And I think that you’re the one who’s hard to keep up with. Not physically maybe, but any other way you can think of, I’m always trying to catch up.”

Catherine said softly, looking up at him, "...I think you are catching up, Vincent. I think you're nearly to the end of the journey."

"Yes, I have come far in the last few weeks toward a... different view of our love affair."

"'Love affair'! That sounds wonderful, Vincent. I'll treasure it."

Vincent gazed thoughtfully at the view ahead of them without seeing it. "Catherine, I believe that one reason that I have been so apprehensive about any further closeness between us, was something that I wasn't really aware of. I believe that I thought you couldn't want me as a man. I thought you must feel sorry for me, and offered yourself out of pity. I came some time ago to believe that you love me, but... to have desire for me? I think I believed that was impossible, even with all the evidence of your feelings there for me to see. But... it isn't impossible, is it?"

Catherine shook her head with a wry grin. "Oh, Vincent, what does it take to convince you? I've wanted you almost from the day we met, although it wasn't on a conscious level until... I think until you were trapped in the cave-in. I knew after that; I knew how much I wanted you to make love to me when I thought I might have lost you."

Vincent caught his breath. "How much you wanted me to make love to you... I never thought to hear that from a woman at all, and to hear it from *you*..." It was too much; he pulled her to him, and his mouth came down on hers.

This time his hands moved over her body with no hesitation; she felt the warmth of his palm against her breast almost immediately. But something else was different this time; he spoke to her of his desire. With his mouth against her skin, between kisses, he began to tell her of his longing, making her thrill to the words he spoke.

"I want you... I want to see your body, to see it before me bare, to touch you everywhere, to kiss you everywhere, to feel you... enclosing me. I want that so much; I have for so long. My dreams have been of you for as long as I've loved you. Even at the very beginning... after you left the tunnels, my dreams were full of you, of your body, of my hands moving to that sweet place between your legs. I've wanted it, wanted to feel my body sliding into yours, to feel that you are *mine*... that I have you under me, captive to my lovemaking... oh, Catherine..." His hands moved to the front of her shirt, and he began to unbutton it. "I want to see you... let me... let me have this much... only this..."

His hands came up and pushed the opened shirt off her shoulders, leaving her bare to the waist except for a wisp of bra. As his hands fumbled with it, hers came up to the front closure, and it fell away. In the moonlight her skin was opalescent, and he looked and looked at her breasts, doing nothing else until she took his hand and carried it up to touch a nipple, which hardened and lifted to meet it.

"Oh please... Vincent, *please*..."

Both hands came up to cup her breasts then, moving slowly to feel the softness of the flesh under them. In a moment his thumbs rose to touch her nipples, moving around them, feeling the hardness of their erection, then pinching them softly between thumb and forefinger, making her moan with pleasure. His breath was coming very fast now, and Catherine could see his hardened penis where it pressed tightly against his jeans. Without thinking about it at all, the impulse seemed so natural to her, she moved her hand down to stroke that erection. His head jerked up and he stared at her for a moment, then his eyes closed and he moaned deep in his throat as her hand moved over his penis.

"My god, what you do to me... don't stop. Oh please don't stop..."

She continued to stroke him while her other hand deftly unbuttoned his jeans. He cried out when he felt her hands on the hot skin of his surging erection.

"Ahh, Catherine, I want it, don't stop... let me have it..."

She smiled shakily. "Yes, I'm going to do that, my love, my love... I'm going to make it happen for

you...” She continued to murmur encouragement as she stroked up and down his hardened shaft with one hand, and rubbed around the rim and the tip of its head with the other, making him writhe with pleasure. “That’s right, my love, let it come, I want it to come, I want to see it happen to you...” Her words enflamed his senses as much as her hands, and in a few moments his body arched up as his orgasm took him; he began to pump out his seed and gave a long growling cry.

He collapsed back against the wall, breathing hard, and nearly helpless in the aftermath of a soul-shaking orgasmic experience. Catherine snuggled against him and his arm came around her. In a few minutes, when his breathing had slowed somewhat, he looked down at her.

“Oh, Catherine, I’m sorry! I didn’t expect... it took me by surprise, I just couldn’t...”

She put her hand up to his mouth. “Hush, don’t apologize, Vincent. You couldn’t stop it, I know, and I didn’t *want* to stop it. It was wonderful.”

“It *was* wonderful. Wonderful for me, but...”

“Wonderful for me too! How many nights do you suppose I’ve spent thinking about your body, wanting you, wanting to touch you in just this way, wanting to make your body explode with pleasure? And it was better even than I dreamed. Your body is so marvelous, Vincent, so overwhelmingly masculine that I long to touch it whenever I see you. This was wonderful for me also, believe me.”

“But...you...?”

“Shall we not worry about keeping score? My turn is coming, I know it. I always have known it, but I feel it very close now, very close.”

He was beginning to come back to himself now. “Catherine... my reservations are not gone; my concerns for your safety and your future remain. I haven’t changed my mind. I am only... weak. I should not have done this; my senses begged me to let it happen, but I knew it was wrong, and my conscience pricks me now. I’m astonished by the power of this thing; I seem unable after a certain point to say no. I have never encountered anything in my life that so... disables my will.”

“Well, of course! Sex is right up there with self-preservation, a basic human drive.” She smiled at him, a little bemused at his innocence. “And even in the throes of that basic compulsion, there wasn’t a sign of violence in you. You *begged*,” she grinned more widely, “but you didn’t try any kind of force. I knew you wouldn’t.”

“Catherine, you make it such a light thing, but I feel very much more apprehensive about the future than you appear to. What will we do now? Will this become a common occurrence between us? Isn’t this a... subversion of the natural drive into something... less?”

“If it is, it’s a pretty common subversion. People have been doing this sort of thing as a substitute for sex for about ten thousand years, I bet. And yes, it is... less, but it’s pretty satisfactory as a substitute when the real thing is... withheld, for whatever reason.”

There was a long silence while Vincent thought that over. Then: “Catherine, could I... do that for you?”

“Yes, of course you could.”

“Now?”

“Do you want to?”

“Oh, yes!” He paused for a moment. “But Catherine, can I...” He stopped.

“Tell me.”

He looked down until his hair shadowed his face. “Is it... permissible... I would want to... could I do it with... my mouth?”

“Oh, Vincent, I would love that! But I think we’d better not...” she paused, looking for the right words.

“Have I said something... unacceptable?” He wasn’t looking at her; she could feel his apprehension.

“No! Not at all, not at all! But I’m afraid that what you suggest could make us both go totally out of control. It’s the most... *exciting*...”

Vincent got up abruptly, and reached his hand down to help her up. “Let’s walk. I don’t think I can talk about this any more, I can’t... well, let’s walk.”

They walked until the sky began to lighten in the east. By unspoken agreement they stayed on the topic of Egypt, not hazarding another excursion into the sexual realm. They talked about Egypt, but both of them thought about that which was unspoken. Catherine felt more hopeful of a satisfactory conclusion than ever before, but Vincent’s thoughts were more basic in nature. What repeated over and over in his head was the feel of her hands on him, and the words she had said at the last, *It’s the most... exciting*... How was he going to forget what had happened between them this night? How go back to kisses, when he could feel her hands on him yet?

Chapter Five

In spite of no sleep at all, Vincent hovered at the window all the way to Akami. The chance to see Africa, even only from the air, took easy precedence over sleep.

“I can sleep tomorrow. The Nile is below us, the great plains of central Africa, the Ruwenzori that the ancients called the Mountains of the Moon, the jungles of the Congo. Who could sleep?”

Catherine could, and did for a few minutes here and there, but she also was drawn to the window for much of the time. She was stunned by the scholarship Vincent showed. For a man who had never left New York City, his knowledge of Africa was unbelievable. He was familiar enough to be able to name mountain ranges and lakes as they passed over them, where Catherine was completely at a loss, despite a very expensive education.

The day passed too quickly for Vincent; they were at Akami by late afternoon, and Devin landed the Lear with no trouble. He left them in the plane while he went to get a Land Rover to take them to their bush camp.

Vincent stretched out on the sofa, exhausted by his lack of sleep and the excitement of the things he’d seen. While he slept, Catherine fixed them something to eat, and then sat across from him, watching him. She was glad when Devin’s return made it impossible to touch him, to lie down beside him; her desire to do so was almost overwhelming. Vincent heard the car also, and his eyes opened, catching her staring at him. He sat up and smiled at her.

“Sorry, I guess I haven’t been much company, have I?”

“You needed to sleep. We’ll eat before we leave, all right? Devin’s back; I guess you heard him.” She was slightly flustered at having been caught watching him sleep. And he knew it, as he knew most things that went through her head, and was amused by it. Sometimes it was a little bit uncomfortable that he was in such close touch with her emotions.

When Devin came in they ate a cold supper, and then packed up to move to the bush camp.

“Shall I bring food, Devin? My gosh, I never thought to ask about it, are we going to starve out there?”

“No, no, M’bago wouldn’t do that to his guests. The camp is fully stocked with everything we’ll need while we’re there. Just bring what clothes you’ll need; everything else is taken care of. This is a first class operation we’ve got going here, you know.”

Devin grinned at them. “Come on, we’ll be able to watch the sun go down at the overlook. There’s a waterhole, and at sundown is a good time to see animals. Get yourselves in gear, and let’s go!”

In a few minutes the car was packed and they got in. "What's *this* for?" Catherine was horrified to find a rifle in the front seat.

"That's to save our skins, if we run into something that doesn't want us here." Devin was matter-of-fact about it.

"Do you expect that to happen?" She was scandalized at the thought. "Surely we won't have to use that thing!"

"I devoutly hope not. The chances are very small, particularly if we stay in the Rover. But I'd hate to die out here because I was too civilized to carry a gun. This isn't a civilized place. Vincent, I'm going to give you a couple of lessons in the use of a revolver, too."

Catherine turned to Vincent. She was sure he would refuse. "Vincent?"

"He's right, Catherine. The animals are wild; this is not a zoo, and we must do what is necessary. I will learn."

Sundown was a good time to see animals; there were elephants at the waterhole. The overlook was well camouflaged, on the top of a bluff overlooking the waterhole, and the approach was uphill from the opposite side. Devin cautioned for silence as they neared the top. They moved silently and slowly up to the observation point, and all three of them stopped, holding their breath, as they looked down on seven mighty elephants standing knee deep in the water, snorting and blowing and squirting water over their backs

Vincent reached blindly for Catherine's hand, not breathing. When she looked at him, there were tears running down his face. She squeezed his hand, blinking back a few tears of her own.

They stayed until dusk. A few small antelope, and a large number of zebra and wildebeest came after the elephants had drunk their fill and moved slowly away. And just before the dark closed down completely two giraffe ambled up to the pool and spread their legs wide to stretch their heads down to the water.

The bush camp wasn't exactly what Vincent had envisioned, and Catherine agreed. "I thought tents, not an outpost of Holiday Inn!"

Although there was no electricity and no running water, they weren't missed. There was a reservoir on the roof of the lodge, and each bedroom had a bath with a shower. The water wasn't heated, but if one showered in the afternoon or early evening, the sun had warmed the water in the reservoir to an acceptable temperature. There were four bedrooms with comfortable double beds, and a fully equipped kitchen, with a bottled gas stove and refrigerator.

Cooking was a group effort, and there was much laughter over the results. The meat in the freezer wasn't exactly Texas beef, and there was wild speculation over exactly what kind of animal had provided dinner. The men found out in short order that cooking was not Catherine's forte, and Vincent took charge of the cuisine after the second day.

Devin said, "Catherine, you go and rest. We'll cook; we want to live to get home!"

They packed sandwiches every morning, and spent the day in the Rover. Devin had spent three weeks in this same place several years before, and he proved to be an excellent guide. They came home to the bush camp at night tired out. After supper had been disposed of, they sat around the firepit in the cool of the evening, watching the flames and drinking tea for only an hour or so, before

retiring to their beds.

The animals were a wonder. The highlight of the first few days was a glimpse of a leopard, which Catherine and Vincent both saw, and Devin missed.

“God, I’m really getting the short end of this deal. I do all the hard work, make all the arrangements, fly the damn plane for endless hours, and *you* see a leopard. *I’ve* never seen a leopard. You can walk home!” He grumbled about the leopard for three days.

They saw many lions, some lying beside the road as if waiting for someone to take their picture. Giraffe, several kinds of antelope and seemingly endless numbers of zebra and wildebeest, along with the lions, became an ordinary sight after a few days. One day they saw a herd of Cape buffalo in the distance, but on Devin’s advice made no effort to get closer. He said buffalo were notoriously fearless and ready to go to war.

The most beautiful sight, which Catherine enthusiastically photographed, was a cheetah sitting on top of a huge boulder looking out over the plain, with a cerulean sky as his backdrop.

There was a helper who could be trusted to develop pictures with discretion, and so she took many pictures of Vincent also. She was enchanted by the sight of him, beautiful and strong, standing in the sunlight, and she snapped pictures until he laughed at her.

“You’ve *seen* me! Look, there’s a giraffe, take his picture!”

Vincent was enthralled by the experience of sun, wind, open air, long vistas, and the world in the daylight as much as by the sights they saw. He stayed outside from daylight until full dark, drinking up sunlight like an intoxicating brew. As Catherine watched him reaching for every moment of daylight, she had to make a strong effort to keep herself from grieving at the thought of him going back to the tunnels, to live in the gloom forever. It hurt her to think that, and it hurt her also to know that he must be thinking about it too.

On the fourth day, Devin took the Rover back to the Reserve Headquarters to visit with his friend M’bago. As they sat around the fire on the preceding evening, he had said, “I’m leaving early, I’ll be back around noon, but don’t wait lunch for me.”

Vincent heard the Rover long before Catherine did. He got up. “There he is at last.”

Catherine sighed. “Thank heavens! He’s four hours late.”

“I’ll go to meet him. Can I ask you to put on some water, Catherine; we’ll have tea. Better pour a scotch for Devin, now that I think about it. He hates tea.”

“He does?” Catherine was horrified. “Why didn’t you tell me that before, Vincent? The poor man, I’ve been putting it in front of him about six times a day!”

Vincent chuckled. “It was good for him. And I wanted to see how long he’d stand it before he said something. I’ll see you in a little while.”

Vincent walked the short distance to the end of the road and stood waiting for the Land Rover’s approach. In a few minutes it pulled up, the afternoon sun blazing off the windshield as it stopped. Vincent moved around the car to greet Devin, and found himself instead dumbstruck, face to face with a complete stranger.

The man climbed down from the Land Rover and put out his hand, smiling. He said, “M’bago Kalemombe. You must be Vincent.” in an impeccable British accent. Vincent, stunned, automatically put out his hand in return, and M’bago shook it with decision.

“Devin?” Vincent felt a cold wind down his back. He knew this couldn’t have been Devin’s plan.

“He’s all right. He got into a slight disagreement with a warthog and had to have a few stitches. Actually, about sixty-five. But he’s fine. He’s sleeping now; the vet gave him a shot. I knew you’d worry when he didn’t come back. I hope I’m not causing undue anxiety, but I couldn’t think of how else to let you know.”

“No, no... thank you for coming. Will you come back to the lodge and have a cup of tea?” Vincent was in the grip of a feeling of unreality. How did it happen that he was standing in the bush in Southern Africa, offering tea to a stranger who accepted his physical differences without the slightest sign of surprise?

“Did... did Devin tell you? Did he warn you?” Vincent had lost a good deal of his equanimity in this astonishing circumstance.

“Warn me? Oh, about how you look? No.”

“Well, then I have great respect for your self-possession.” Vincent smiled his small smile, beginning to recover from his confusion.

“What is, is. The world is full of things I didn’t expect to see.” M’bago smiled, a brilliant grin that transformed his features. “I encounter them every day.”

Vincent knew why Devin trusted this man. M’bago radiated an air of serenity and good will that Vincent felt washing over him almost the way Catherine’s emotions flooded through him. Aside from Catherine, only Father had touched so directly on his empathic sensitivities. Vincent knew without any doubt that with this man his secret was safe.

M’bago was a big man; their strides matched as they walked back to the bush camp. As they entered the clearing, Catherine emerged from the lodge and turned to greet Vincent. She saw M’bago and stopped in mid stride.

“Oh!” Then, immediately, “Devin?”

“He’s all right. Slightly damaged, but nothing that won’t heal.” M’bago smiled his beautiful smile, and Catherine was reassured that this man would do them no harm even before she turned to Vincent.

“It’s all right,” He reassured her. “I know. I can feel him.”

Catherine was astonished. “Really?”

“Yes. Not like you, but he’s there.”

M’bago smiled again. “I know also. I can feel you,” to Vincent, “and you also, a little, ” to Catherine. “You are Ms. Chandler. M’Bago Kalemombe.”

They shook hands, and Catherine said, “Catherine, please.”

“All right, Catherine. So... we have this... unusual sense... in common. Did I hear someone say something about tea?” His smile turned to a grin. “Then we have that in common as well.”

They sat down in the camp chairs around the fire pit, now cold in the heat of the day. Catherine poured tea, and then asked, “Please, tell us what happened to Devin.”

“He was just taking a little walk, and he ran into a mama warthog with her brood. Mama took violent exception to his presence, and he sustained an injury to his... right thigh I think; yes, the right one. It’s not a serious injury, very shallow, her tusk only caught him a glancing blow, but the vet took sixty-five stitches to close it, and he lost a lot of blood. He couldn’t stand on the leg right after it happened; he had to shoot her before she could do more damage.”

Both Catherine and Vincent looked sorry to hear this news.

M’bago smiled. “I know; he was devastated that he had to do it. When he staggered into the

compound, bleeding like mad, the only thing he said before he fainted was 'Warthog. I had to shoot her. Babies, go get 'em.'

Then he passed out. Now we have five tiny baby warthogs. I love to have baby animals to raise; it's no hardship for me, and there are many warthogs in the Reserve. More than we want, actually. The babies will probably be shipped to zoos. Confinement in a modern zoo is not hard on some kinds of animals, and warthogs do very well there. They'll live longer than they ever would in the wild, also."

They talked for three hours, some of that time about the empathic phenomenon between them, but the conversation ranged widely. M'bago spoke at some length about the park and his ambitions for it, and of his fears for its future.

"There isn't enough money, of course. There never is for conservation of things that now belong in the past. The animals here are part of Africa's past that most of Africa is trying hard to forget, but not I. I will continue to try to preserve what is here until Africa is self-confident enough to appreciate its past, not denigrate it."

As M'bago spoke eloquently of his difficulties, Catherine's thoughts went back to her meeting with Elliott, and how she had told him to throw himself into something purely for the sake of his self-respect. She knew that he'd be very much impressed with M'bago; perhaps this would be the project. She filed the notion away in her mind for action later.

When M'bago rose to go, he apologized for taking up their time, and Catherine laughed, shaking her head.

"Time is what we have here. Time seems to have slowed the day we got here. We have loved every minute of our stay, and it has been counted by minutes. There is something wonderful to see in every one. Although some things are more... desirable than others. You have spiders here bigger than my worst nightmares, and they're everywhere! But I'm even learning to look at them without shuddering."

"Ah, you do truly appreciate my land, the beautiful things and the... merely *interesting* ones." He grinned at her. "I'm so pleased to hear it."

They walked back with him to the Rover.

"Dr. Uma, the vet, thought that forty-eight hours' rest was imperative for Devin. He lost quite a good deal of blood. We'll see what Doc thinks by the day after tomorrow. He's a little concerned about infection; there are some strange bugs out in the bush, and some of them are resistant to antibiotics. If Doc wants to keep him longer I'll come out to let you know how he's doing. You'll see me again anyway, so I won't say a final goodbye."

"I hope not," Vincent said quietly with a serious look. "We are friends, are we not?"

The affinity between them, multiplied by the empathic connection, assured that each knew the other's feeling. M'bago nodded, his face as serious as Vincent's. "Yes. Yes, we are friends."

Just before he got into the car, Catherine made a diffident request. "M'bago? If it's not something that you shouldn't do for the sake of the animal, maybe you'd bring one of the babies with you when you come back?" She did want to see a baby warthog..

"I will be delighted to do that, and the baby will be very happy. The little ones love any attention they can get." M'bago smiled, shook hands with both of them, then got into the Rover and drove away, waving a hand over his head as he went.

Vincent turned and took Catherine's hand as they began the walk back to the lodge. "I hadn't thought to find a friend here." He shook his head in bemusement. "How strange."

Dinner was unusually silent. When they finished they took their last stroll of the day to the to the

overlook. The sun was already behind the trees, the shadows were long, and the plains below were nearly empty of game. In the far distance, they saw the heads of giraffe moving over the tops of the trees and a few small antelope were crossing quite close by, but it was too dark to identify their species. The two sat on a bench hand in hand, without conversation. Both were intensely aware of the night ahead, when they would be completely alone.

“It’s almost dark. Let’s go back.” Vincent stood up and held out his hand to her. “I want to... I’ve got something to say to you.”

He built a fire when they got back to the camp. Catherine watched him with her usual pleasure in his economy and grace of movement, waiting patiently to hear what he had to tell her.

He sat down across from her, and picked up a stick that had fallen out of the fire. While he poked the logs with it, he began to speak without looking up at her.

“Catherine, if it is your wish, as it is mine...may I come to your bed tonight?”

When she didn’t answer, he looked up, alarmed at her silence. As the fire blazed up, he saw that tears were streaming down her face. Her throat was completely closed; she couldn’t answer him. He was around the fire in a second; he sat beside her, pulled her into his lap and cradled her in his arms, rocking her a little.

“Oh, Catherine, my love, don’t cry. I know, I know, I’ve waited so long... too long, but I give up, Catherine, I surrender. I want you beyond all reason; I can’t do it any longer. Please, oh please, let me come to your bed tonight. I want you to be my lover. I want to kiss your body as I kiss your mouth; I want to put my hands on you... everywhere.” As he held her he continued to whisper to her of his love and his longing while tears rolled down her face.

Her tears slowly quieted. After a little while she turned her face up to his to be kissed, and he kissed her for the first time without any restraint at all, moving from tenderness almost to violence, as his need dictated. Catherine responded in kind, giving back kiss for kiss through all the elements of his desire, thrilling him with the ardor of her response to his fiercest moves.

But Vincent’s nature was not violent, in spite of his misgivings. As their lovemaking deepened and he began to relax into the belief that this was really going to happen at last, his kisses softened and gentled to the intense, loving tenderness that characterized him in all his actions.

Catherine was lost in his lovemaking. When he lifted her in his arms finally, and laid her down on her bed, she was conscious only of the feel of him against her, his body, his hands... his mouth. He sat on the edge of the bed, bending over her to kiss her. Her hands reached up and moved over him, searching blindly for openings in his clothing.

“Your skin, I want to touch your skin...,” she murmured into his ear. Without a word, he straightened and pulled his shirt over his head with one smooth motion, baring himself to the waist. Then he leaned over her again, his mouth touching her face, her neck, moving over her skin while a soft growl rumbled deep in his chest.

“I want to see! Vincent, I want to see you. ... Lights...” He reached for the lantern beside the bed and switched it on, turning it on its end. The light bounced off the ceiling, giving a soft radiance to the whole room. “Yes... yes...” Her hands came up to bury themselves in the thick mat of his chest hair. She stroked him, feeling the contours of his muscles, sliding her hands over him, reveling in the contact with his bare body, and the sight of it at last. And it was more beautiful even than she had dreamed. “You are so beautiful...,” she whispered.

His only answer was that soft rumbling growl. He sat perfectly still, his head thrown back, his eyes closed, just feeling her hands on him, feeling her touch on his skin at last, letting his body luxuriate in the sense that her hands were on him and that it was all right.

His head came down then to look at her, and his hands began to unfasten her shirt. When it was

unbuttoned to the waist he pulled it open and his hand came up to touch the rising nipple of one breast. Then both hands moved to curve around her breasts as his head came down to kiss her once more.

Catherine put her arms around him and her hands moved over his muscled back, the feel of him so wonderful to her, so long wished for. He lifted his mouth from hers, and she made a little sound of distress, "No ..." but her back arched and her eyes shut in rapture as his mouth moved down her throat and fastened gently on her breast.

Vincent's breath was coming fast and hard as his mouth closed over her nipple. Catherine cried out as he drew it farther into his mouth, sucking gently, making his teeth felt, his tongue never still. One hand was under her, lifting her body to meet his mouth; his other hand moved lower, stroking, rubbing, sliding over her stomach as far as the waistband of her pants. After a few minutes, his hand pushed at her pants.

"Get this off... get it off you... I want to touch you, now... now, Catherine!"

His need was urgent, and his voice showed it. She began to fumble with buttons and zippers. His hands moved over hers: "Let me, I'll do it," and he had her pants peeled off her in a few seconds, then he stood and stripped himself of the rest of his clothes. He stood for a moment then, looking down at her, drinking in the sight of her naked and longing for his touch. And she looked at him, tall and commanding, his body perfect in the soft light of the lantern, and her whole body thrilled.

"Come, come here to me, I want you..." She raised her arms, begging for his lovemaking. "Oh, please..."

He lay down almost on top of her, his leg between hers, his surging penis pressed tightly to her hip. "Catherine ... I need... I need..." He was inarticulate in his desire.

His hand slid over her body touching her breasts, sliding lower to caress her belly, then lower to pause at the triangle of hair at her groin. His fingers curled into that place that he had wished for and dreamed of for so long, and he moaned as he felt the heat and wetness that spoke of her desire. His fingers moved gently, careful of his nails, and she cried out and lifted her hips into his hand.

Her hand pressed down between them then, reaching for his surging erection. Vincent stilled for a moment as he realized what she wanted, then he moved away from her, giving her access to him. When her hand curled around his penis he cried out softly, his head thrown back, his eyes closed. But after a couple of minutes, he lifted himself up suddenly, turned and came down on top of her, his mouth reaching for hers, his arms sliding under her to hold her against him. He moved until his knees were between hers, and began to separate her legs with gentle pressure.

"Now, Catherine, it has to be *now!*" He was breathing in short gasps, and long tremors ran over his body.

"Yes, now, I'm ready, love... now."

Her knees bent, and her legs came up around him, holding him tightly, making him gasp with surprised pleasure. He found that his throbbing penis was at the portal of her womanhood, and suddenly his movement slowed. His arms were under her, he leaned on his elbows above her with both hands cradling the back of her neck. His mouth came down on hers in slow motion, and he kissed her softly. Then his mouth moved over her face, as he slowly, slowly, began to press himself into her. Catherine made a low noise as she felt him sliding into her, a small moan of ultimate pleasure. Vincent was still making his soft growling rumble, a sound of joy and excitement as he found himself in reality in that place where his dreams had taken him so many times.

He stopped when he was fully inside her to look into her face, to make sure that she was all right. She smiled at him and reached up to kiss him, and the kiss was at once reassurance and invitation to continue. The heat and slickness of her interior were unbelievably wonderful, unbelievably arousing to him. When Catherine's hips lifted in a small movement, impatient to feel him moving within her, he

cried out in pleasure, then picked up the movement quickly, beginning an almost involuntary rhythm and gasping as he felt the friction of her tightly clasp sheath.

He had no conscious design, and no need to think about it. His body took him entirely, and he moved in her with long smooth strokes, feeling the sensation growing more ecstatic with each one, feeling the slick heat of her, knowing that this was Catherine, that his body was making her moan and writhe with pleasure under him, that she shared his ecstasy.

Then Catherine spoke brokenly, "Oh love... it's too much... God, I'm coming *now*... I can't..."

Her confession of uncontrollable excitement pushed him to the edge. He watched her face take on an expression almost of pain as her climax approached, and he felt the swelling and gathering of his own orgasm overwhelming his faltering effort at control. In a moment they came to climax together, both crying out in the extremity of their pleasure. Long moments passed as both were convulsed in passion's grip, then the involuntary motions slowed, and finally stopped altogether, as their bodies began the slow descent into consciousness again.

They lay without moving for some time. Vincent's body recovered before his mind lifted itself out of the emotional storm engendered by what had just happened. His breathing was slowed and his heart rate back to normal by the time he had his first conscious logical thought, and that was that he had *not* done anything violent. The swelling excitement of the act just completed had made control impossible, but his uncontrolled reaction had been one of tenderness and care for Catherine.

His care for her had apparently prompted him to roll his weight off her before he collapsed, although he had no memory of doing so. He lay beside her, and she was pressed tightly to his side, one leg raised over his hips. Catherine's eyes opened while he looked down at her; she smiled beatifically at him.

"Oh, Vincent, I love you so much, and you are so wonderful, and I am so happy!"

He reached over to kiss her softly and lingeringly. "I adore you with every atom of my being. You are the most beautiful, the most desirable... I can't believe yet that you want me. How does it happen that I'm lying here with your body pressed against me, with freedom to touch you, to stroke and kiss and make love to you?" Then his brow wrinkled with a sudden thought. "You are all right? I didn't... nothing hurt you, or... frightened you?"

Catherine stretched luxuriously, and snuggled closer. "I never felt this good before in my life, and... *frightened* me? What could frighten me?"

He shook his head, smiling down at her. "Nothing could frighten you, I don't believe, but I thought... well," his eyes fell from hers. "Well... I... growled!"

She closed her eyes, smiled and snuggled closer yet. "I know. I loved it."

"Catherine, you look... downright self satisfied!"

"I am. I knew you'd be a wonderful lover, and I was so right, and the growl was the icing on the cake." Then she looked up at him with a mischievous twinkle. "I haven't asked you... was it all right for you?"

"You're fishing. If it had been any more 'all right' I don't think I'd have survived it." He said nothing for a moment, looking down at her with laughter in his eyes, but his face became serious as he continued. "I love you with my whole heart and soul, and my adoration of you does *not* depend on your body, but oh, Catherine, I do love having you in my arms as well as in my heart." He looked down at her with tears welling in his eyes. "To have your body for my own is the most unbelievable, most incredibly wonderful thing that could happen to me. This trip is a lifetime thrill for me, but it is *nothing* compared to the joy of feeling your body enclosing me and watching your face as we make love."

He began to kiss her then, leisurely covering every inch of her face and her neck, and then beginning to move down her shoulders. As he neared her breasts, he looked up for a moment.

“Uh, I don’t know...there’s something that I don’t remember being covered in the literature. How soon... when is a reasonable time to... repeat this wonderful thing?”

Catherine smiled at him. “Well, Vincent... now would be a good time, if you’re able... yes, I can feel that you’re able, and believe me, my love, I’m more than willing.”

He woke sometime in the middle of the night to find that they were still intimately connected. They had fallen asleep twined together, and now Catherine lay on top of him, her head tucked under his chin, her weight a negligible burden. His heart swelled with the joy of her closeness, her love, and most of all her utter trust in him when he hadn’t trusted himself. As he thought about the hours just past he knew that she had been right from the beginning. The agony of the previous years had been the product of his own self-doubt, and he looked back on those years now with regret for the unnecessary pain he had caused them both.

His arms tightened around her in an unconscious reaction to his thoughts, and she stirred, but didn’t wake. However, the feel of her body moving against him even slightly was aphrodisiac enough. He felt his penis stir, still warmly enclosed in her body, and embarrassment clutched him. He removed himself gently from her, without waking her. *She’ll think I’m going to be after her twenty-four hours a day!* And then he smiled. *Well, I probably will, at least for a while, but she hasn’t complained so far. She seems to have a good deal of enthusiasm for this... activity... herself.* He looked at her sleeping form with love and with a certain amount of amusement. And then he was astonished at himself, that he could be so casually amused at her. *Everything is different now. This is a whole new level of intimacy that I didn’t know existed. I wish she’d wake, I want to talk.*

As he thought this, she stirred. But all thought of talk left his mind as she opened her eyes, smiled sleepily at him and said, “Hello. Wanta make love?”

“Yes. Oh yes, I do.” And it began again.

Chapter Six

Catherine woke up to find him gone, and daylight streaming in the open door. She stretched, smiling to herself, and slowly raised herself up to lean on one elbow. Then she fell back onto the bed to stretch once more, luxuriating in her own well-being. When she opened her eyes, it was to see a broad-shouldered silhouette in the doorway.

He said, “Good morning!” She couldn’t see his face, but she knew from his voice that he was smiling. “Are you ready for breakfast?”

“Come here and kiss me, and then we’ll talk about breakfast.”

He came with alacrity, and as she put her face up for his kiss and her arms around him, she found that he was wearing no shirt.

“M-m-m, I like this; no shirt, Vincent?”

“Well, it’s hot.”

She couldn’t resist. “It was hot yesterday, too, but you wore a shirt then.”

He kissed her again, lightly. “Yesterday was different. Yesterday, everything was different. Today is a whole new world.” He bent his head again to her mouth. This time the kiss was longer, warmer.

Catherine pulled away first, laughing. “Breakfast becomes more unlikely the longer you do that! We

have to eat to keep up our strength, Vincent.”

“You’re right. And I’m hungry. Let’s eat.” But he lowered his mouth to hers once more.

“M-m-m.” Catherine laughed into his kiss. “Stop! If you kiss me once more, there won’t be any breakfast.”

He planted a small kiss in the middle of her forehead, and then got up quickly without another word and went out. Catherine dressed herself in a pair of shorts and a halter, and followed him outside.

Vincent looked at her hopefully. “Could you take off that whatever-it-is, the thing you’re wearing over your breasts, Catherine? There’s no one here but me, and I’d like to look at you without it. All right?”

Without a word she unfastened the halter and dropped it over the back of the nearest chair. “For the chance to look at you bare to the waist in the sunshine, I’d shed a lot more than that.” She laughed up at him.

“Feel perfectly free to shed as much as you want to. I assure you, I won’t complain.”

“If either one of us sheds any more, breakfast is again in danger.

“Right. Let’s get this meal over with!” Vincent began to break eggs into a pan, and motioned with his chin to the toasting forks lying beside him. “Put some bread on those, and make toast, please.”

“Vincent, there’s a perfectly good kitchen about six steps away from us. How come you hauled all this stuff out here?”

“We’re roughing it this morning. We cook over the fire.” He made a wide gesture around him. “How could we go inside even to cook breakfast? Look at the world. It’s too beautiful to go inside. And anyway, I’m a better cook over an open fire. What do I know about stoves?” He propped the frying pan expertly over the fire, and sat back. “The eggs will be done in about three minutes; will the toast be ready?”

Catherine laughed and hurriedly put the bread on the toasting forks. As she sat holding the bread over the fire, she watched Vincent. He was obviously elated this morning; she’d never seen him so full of high spirits. The thought came to her that this must be what he had been like twenty years ago, when he was still a boy.

“You’re going to burn that toast.” Vincent was sitting at his ease, his chores done for the moment, his eyes leisurely studying her breasts.

Catherine started, jerked out of her moment’s reverie about a teen-aged Vincent, and turned the toast over to brown the other side.

Vincent reached over to hand her a plate of eggs, and his hand softly touched her breast for a moment before he drew it back. He looked at her, smiling, and then his face sobered.

“I love you. I want you.”

Catherine felt a rush of heat in response to his words. “Oh, Vincent, me too.”

“I see that,” he said, and reached one clawed finger to touch her nipple, now rigidly erect. Then he smiled again. “...After breakfast.”

When breakfast was over, Vincent got up. “Come on, we’re going to move the bed.”

“What?”

“I want to make love to you, and I’m not going to go inside to do it.”

They didn’t move a bed, but they did bring blankets and pillows out and make a nest in the shade. Catherine was still intent on the work, straightening the blankets, and fluffing pillows, when Vincent’s arm came around her from behind, and he pulled her down with him onto the makeshift bed. He turned to lean over her and looked down at her intensely.

"I want you just as much as before. Is it going to be like this always?"

"I sure hope so." Catherine grinned at him and began to stroke his bare chest.

"Take this off, I want to see all of your body in the daylight." He worked at the waistband of her shorts while he spoke. When he had opened them he pulled them off, then he sat up and just looked at her. "Catherine, you are so beautiful. How can it be that I am so fortunate, that you are mine?"

"You undress too. I need to see *your* body in the daylight." He stood and peeled off his pants. "Look at yourself, Vincent. Look at this magnificent body. You are the most perfect man I've ever seen."

He tumbled down beside her, pulling her against him. "Perfect? Perfectly crazy, maybe. Crazy to feel you under me, mad to make love to you."

He nuzzled into her neck, kissing and tonguing her skin, moving slowly down over her shoulder, to reach her breast. There he stopped, drawing a nipple deeply into his mouth, biting down just enough that she could feel his teeth, which sent shafts of erotic pleasure streaking down her body. His hand moved over her, curling around her waist, drawing across her hip, then sliding down to the inside of her thigh. His breathing began to quicken, as did Catherine's. She ran her hands over his body, tracing the contours of his massive biceps, and following the musculature of his back, all the while arching her body into his seeking mouth, still at her breast.

Then he stopped suddenly. He raised his head, just looking at her. Her eyes opened slowly; she was still lost in sensation, but as she saw the look on his face, she came to the present.

"What? What is it, Vincent?"

He kept looking at her wordlessly for a moment. Then he dropped his eyes and spoke, looking down, away from her.

"Catherine, I... I'm inexperienced at what we're doing here. If I do something, anything that is not... what you would desire, you would let me know? You would stop me if I go... beyond what is... natural?"

When she didn't answer right away, he looked up anxiously. She was smiling at him. "Vincent, I can think of *nothing* that you could do that I wouldn't love." Her hand came up to touch his face, and her smile widened. "And maybe I can think of a few things you haven't."

He said, still uncertain, "...I want to kiss you... everywhere."

"Oh, Vincent, I want you to, and I want to do the same for you, my love."

"I want to look at you... here." And he put his hand lightly on the mound of her pubic curls. "I want to look at it, and kiss it... and if I could *bury* myself in it, I would." He smiled a little. "I seem to be possessed by this part of your body. Is that all right?" His hand moved farther down, and his fingers found the opening. "May I put my fingers... in here?"

"Of course. You can put your fingers and your mouth, and your penis too, anywhere that you like. My body is yours, Vincent. Your pleasure in it is my pleasure." She drew in a quick breath and lifted her hips to meet him, as he slid two fingers into her. "Ah, that's wonderful."

"You like it? It feels good?" He was a little bit surprised.

"I love it. Um-m... yes. Move your hand a little... oh, yes..." Her hips moved in concert with his hand.

Vincent watched her developing excitement with fascination. His hand moved with growing skill as he watched her responses carefully, and after a few minutes he could see that she would come to climax if he continued. His own excitement was keeping pace with hers, the sight of her gasping and moaning in response to his stimulation was bringing him close to climax also. Something that he had read came back to him suddenly, and his thumb reached just to touch lightly on her clitoris. Her response was astonishing to him. She stiffened and cried out, and her hand came down to cover his, holding him there.

“...Yes, oh yes...again...” she moaned. As he touched her again and again in that most sensitive place, she went over the edge into an orgasm that convulsed her body.

Vincent held on to his control, but just barely. He watched her avidly, drinking in every nuance of her body’s response to his lovemaking. Finally her climactic thrills slowed and stopped, leaving her limp and nearly senseless. He took her into his arms then, holding her close against him, and kissing her face softly and tenderly. She opened her eyes after a few moments, and smiled at him.

“Oh Vincent, you are a marvelous lover.”

He smiled at her. “I’ve done some research. I didn’t spend *all* my time learning about Egypt.” His smile showed his canines; one might almost say he grinned, if it were anyone but Vincent.

“Hooray for research! But research isn’t what’s needed for *this*.” She reached down to take his throbbing erection into her hand. “What shall we do about this?”

“What do you want to do about it?”

“Can I do anything I want?”

“Of course you can. I am completely in your hands.”

Laughing, she looked down at her hands, now both around his penis. “As Devin would say, you got that right. Lie down, Vincent.”

Vincent laid back, and Catherine sat up and looked down at his body for a long minute. “You are the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.” She laid down beside him, leaning over him, and kissed him softly. “Um-m-m, I love to kiss you.”

Her mouth moved down his chin and she began to kiss his neck. His head went back to give her more access, and his eyes closed in pleasure as he felt her loving attention. Her mouth moved over his throat, and onto his chest. First her fingers, and then her mouth found the nipples there. Vincent jumped and gasped as he felt her tongue on one small nipple, and in a moment he was moaning. Catherine’s mouth moved further down his body then, kissing her way to his navel. As she moved lower she felt him tense.

She looked up. “Is anything the matter?”

“Are you going to...”

“Yes, I am.”

“Do you *want* to?”

“Do you want to do it to me?”

He looked at her quizzically. “I’ve told you how much I want to.”

She smiled at him. “And what makes you think it’s any different for me?”

She went back to what she was doing then, with no further comment from Vincent.

When he felt her mouth on him, he jumped and moaned, “Oh, Catherine, I love this, I love you, oh, please...” His words trailed off into that growl that Catherine loved, and she reached down between his legs and took his scrotum into her hand, stroking it softly. Vincent’s growl intensified at that, and he began to pant heavily, the growl changing pitch with each indrawn breath, but never disappearing.

With Catherine’s mouth holding him in its warm cavity and her hand cradling his testicles, he was transported out of himself. He writhed and growled and moaned, and she felt his testicles gather themselves for his orgasm. When it came he cried out with a growling roar, and arched his body into her mouth, his seed spurting strongly. It lasted a long time, and as his body finally relaxed slowly from its strained arch, she drew her mouth away from him with equal slowness, a little reluctant to have it be over.

He reached down to her as soon as he came to himself, to draw her up into his arms. "I adore you. You are my life, my love ..." His soft whisper into her ear made her thrill. "I don't know how to tell you of my love, it is more than I can express. You are everything, all I could ever want... I... I love you so completely..." His kiss was as soft and as sweet as love itself.

They lay quietly for a long time, both replete with loving, each content with the other's nearness. But at last Vincent stirred.

"Catherine? Was it all right, what happened here? I... I should have inquired before it happened. Should I have stopped before... should I have removed myself before I...?"

He was having a great deal of difficulty in expressing himself, and she took pity on him.

"No, no, I wouldn't have let you go. What happened is the only conclusion that would have been satisfactory to either of us. It's all right, Vincent. How could I let you pull free just at that wonderful moment? I'd have been heartbroken. It was perfect."

He lay back again, satisfied that she had answered him truthfully. "Good," he said, "because I don't know if I could have withdrawn. It would have required more courage than I believe I have, to give it up at the last moment."

She looked at him slyly. "Does that mean that my work is satisfactory?"

"You're fishing again. You couldn't miss how I felt about it."

She laughed. "You're right, I knew it was pretty good. I could tell by the way you growled."

He lifted his head to look down at her. "I have a feeling, just an intimation, mind you, that I may be hearing more about that growl in the future. Possibly even more than I want to hear."

"That is certainly a possibility." Her hand came up to stroke his cheek, and she chuckled.

They slept for a while in the afternoon; sleep on the previous night had been less than unbroken. Vincent woke first, looking down at Catherine's sleeping face, and a rush of love overwhelmed him. She was so beautiful, and so loving, and so clever, and so funny, and so... There weren't enough adjectives in the world to say how much he loved her, how wonderful he thought her, how grateful he was that her love was his.

After a little while she stirred and her eyes opened. "Hello. Were you looking at me while I slept?"

"I was. And I was thinking about how much I love you. And want you."

"Vincent! Again?"

He dropped his eyes. "I'm sorry. Am I expecting too much? I just..."

"No! You're not!" She smiled. "Women are more able at this than men, you know. As long as you can hold out, I'm right there!"

Vincent shook his head, chuckling. "Just say what you mean, Catherine. Don't hold back."

"Well, it's true." She laughed, a little embarrassed. "I'm quite insatiable where you're concerned. You might as well get used to it, I'm going to be a demanding lover."

"I believe I will be able to accustom myself to that with no difficulty." He turned himself until he was leaning over her on one elbow. "I want you again. I can't believe how much, how often, how impatiently I want you again."

"I'm here, Vincent. Right here."

His head came down and his mouth touched hers gently, just the lightest touch. In a moment her hands came up and pulled his head down, bringing his mouth down on hers. Then he kissed her deeply, slowly, with passionate attention. When he raised his head at last, it was only to move his mouth across her cheek, to touch her ear for a moment, then to move to that hollow between her ear

and her jaw, where his tongue came out to taste of her essence. He slid down the side of her neck, his tongue still on her, and she felt with a shiver the sharp edge of his canines slide along her skin.

When he reached her breasts he stopped, unable to resist their lure, but only for a minute or two. Vincent had a goal in mind. He moved very slowly but steadily down her body, kissing and caressing as he went, until his face rubbed across her pubic hair. Then he looked up.

“I want...to see. Catherine, may I look?” Catherine smiled down at him, saying nothing, but she raised her knees and opened them to let him have his long-held desire at last.

Vincent looked and looked. At last one hand moved to her hesitantly, and he touched her gently. He looked up again then. “All right?”

Catherine’s love was in her smile. “Of course, my love. It’s all right; everything, anything is all right.”

He touched, and looked, and then his head came down closer, and she felt his breath on her, and then a soft kiss. “Oh, Vincent...I love this...”

In a few moments she was panting and moaning, as his tongue made long strokes over her most sensitive areas. Vincent was equally excited; this was a long-wished-for dream. He could feel her climax approaching, and for the first time he made an effort to prolong the act, for both of their sakes. He slowed his strokes, and in a moment he pulled back entirely, breathing his warm breath on her and looking again, seeing that the excitement Catherine felt was visible in the flushed and swollen tissue drenched with her body’s natural lubrication. That excitement was communicated to his own body instantly at the sight. In a few minutes his head went down again, and he brought her slowly back up to the point of climax.

But this time when he pulled away, her hands came down to hold his head against her. “No...no...let it come... I want it now...” He couldn’t deny her. His mouth returned to her, and his tongue moved to her clitoris, making soft passes across and across it. She began to make a soft moaning cry that went on and on, and her body arched up into his mouth. Vincent had been growling low in his throat for some time, now he began to tremble; holding onto control was becoming more difficult with every evidence of her excitement. Without any conscious thought he slid two fingers inside her body. She cried out loudly, and her orgasm was upon her. He could feel the convulsive contractions in her interior, and a surge of warm fluid gushed from her. It was more than he could stand. He stiffened and cried out and joined her in ecstasy.

Chapter Seven

The next day Devin returned a little after noon, with M’bago to drive him. He was sporting a long bandage running the whole length of his upper leg, and walking with a pronounced limp.

“And you warned *us* not to go anywhere on foot!” Vincent couldn’t resist a gentle tease. “Is this a return of your childhood belief that nothing bad could possibly happen to you?” He turned to Catherine and M’bago. “When we were children, he had the most amazing ability to get into dire straits, and then against all logic to get out again. I, on the other hand, was usually left behind to take the consequences. I have to admit that I find it very satisfactory that for once the consequences came home to the person responsible. *I am not limping.*” While he talked, he pulled Devin’s arm over his shoulder and lifted him to a chair by the firepit.

M’bago, who was following behind Vincent and Devin, was carrying a baby warthog under his arm. “Catherine, here is your visitor.” He set it on the ground, and it looked around at its new surroundings with sturdy courage. As Vincent and Catherine got a look at it, they both laughed out loud.

“That’s the most comical thing I’ve ever seen!” It looked very much like a baby pig except that it was gaily striped in black and tan. Catherine knelt on the ground in front of it, and it immediately moved to investigate her extended hand.

“Here, I saved its lunch for you.” M’bago handed her a bottle, and the little animal squealed and fastened on it with great enthusiasm. The little warthog was the center of attention for a few minutes, but when the bottle was empty, he moved to curl up against Catherine’s leg, and promptly went to sleep.

“Thank you, M’bago! That was great fun; I’ve never been mother to a warthog before.” Catherine smiled sunnily and settled on the ground, loath to wake the little piglet. “Now, Devin, tell us what happened when you were so foolhardy as to go walking in the bush.”

“Vincent has slandered me! I was not foolhardy as a kid; I’m still in one piece, aren’t I? Damn, Vincent, you’d think I never took care of my little brother at all. I remember innumerable times when I rescued you from trouble!”

“Trouble you got me into!” Vincent was grinning, showing his canines.

Devin was grinning too. “Well, that’s possible. But no one was twisting your arm! You didn’t *have* to walk across the bridge over the abyss on your hands.”

“But you did have to rescue me when I fell between the slats. And the reason I fell between them was because I was so small. How old was I, Devin, four? I have a vivid memory of hanging in space, with skinned knuckles and torn clothes, scared out of my wits. And when we got back home, who got disciplined for having torn his pants? And who looked innocent and said he didn’t know how it had happened, but he hadn’t torn *his* clothes?”

The brothers laughed, looking at each other with affection.

Devin gave his version of his encounter with the warthog with numerous interjections of disbelief and mockery by Vincent. Conversation was lively between the four of them for several hours, and when supertime drew near, M’bago announced that he was going to cook them an African meal. He went back to the Rover to get the special supplies he had brought for this purpose, and made a meal that they all pronounced superior.

“M’bago, you should have been a chef! This food was wonderful!” Catherine sat back, putting her empty plate down on the ground beside her.

“No, no, an avocation merely. I wouldn’t give up what I do if I were offered a job at the best hotel in Paris.” M’bago grinned down at the baby warthog, now asleep at his feet after another feeding. “This,” he gestured at the baby animal, “is what I was meant to do.”

“I think you’re right. There are many chefs, but only one Akami.” Catherine slid to the ground, to pet the baby warthog, who grunted, changed position slightly to accommodate her scratching fingers, and went immediately back to sleep. Catherine stayed on the ground, leaning back to rest against Vincent, still in his chair. He opened his knees so she could rest against him, and reached down to caress her neck, his hand lingering on her skin. She snuggled into closer contact and relaxed, content.

The aura of sexual repletion around them was evident to Devin as he watched this byplay, and a small smile crossed his face. *So, you finally gave up and did what you’ve both been dying for. About time, Vincent! Catherine wore you down, didn’t she? Good girl, Chandler.*

Catherine turned her head to look at M’bago. “M’bago, do you want to come back with us to New York?” Vincent and Catherine had talked over the possibilities of introducing M’bago to Elliott, and Vincent had agreed with Catherine that it was an idea worth exploring.

M’bago looked up curiously. “An unexpected question. Is there some particular reason that you ask?”

Catherine answered, “I have a friend... actually, the man who lent us the jet, who might possibly be interested in giving some financial support to the Reserve. I haven’t ever broached the subject to him, obviously, since I’ve only known about it for a few days, but I know that there is a possibility that he’s looking for a project that will be worth his time and his money. I can think of nothing that is more

worthwhile than assisting you with Akami, and I think there is a possibility that he will agree. I will undertake to see that you get back home at no cost to you, if you would like to return to New York with us next week.”

M'bago looked down at his hands silently for a moment, then he raised his eyes and said, “I can think of no reason why I cannot be absent for a couple of weeks, and the chance of financial support for the Reserve, however slim, is worth any amount of time and effort. Yes, I will be very happy for an introduction to this friend of yours. I thank you very much for the opportunity. As a small repayment, if you like I will stay here and guide you for the next three days.”

Devin was the first to speak in support of this idea. “Yes, yes, yes!” He turned to Catherine and Vincent. “You people don't know how lucky we are. M'bago is on a first-name basis with every animal in the Reserve. If there's something to see, he can show it to us!” So it was decided that on the following Tuesday, five days away, they would all leave for New York, and that for the next three days, M'bago would stay at the camp with them.

Devin watched with some interest as they prepared to retire for the night, but Vincent surprised him. He followed Catherine into her bedroom without embarrassment, turning at the door to say goodnight to Devin and M'bago. *Just like an old married man!* Devin thought.

They climbed into the Land Rover at sunup every morning, and traveled by roads known only to the Park employees to all corners of the Reserve. They saw and photographed every African animal that Akami held, except rhinoceros.

“Sorry about that, but I believe we only have three, and they just don't appear on command,” M'bago apologized.

“Oh, right! We've only seen more animals in three days than I would have believed was possible. Please, M'bago, for Heaven's sake, don't feel bad about the rhino!” Catherine shook her head in disbelief that he could be sorry about such a thing.

Catherine was particularly charmed by ostriches. “Look at those beautiful eyes... and eyelashes!” She brought the binoculars down from her eyes to turn to Vincent. “Did you see?” He nodded, amused at her excitement about eyelashes.

M'bago smiled also. “Don't be fooled by big eyes, although I agree they're beautiful. One blow from an ostrich's foot can kill. They're not as soft and defenseless as those eyes would lead you to believe. The bush is a hard world, they wouldn't last long without some means of defense.”

They arrived back at the bush camp in the late afternoons tired out by the heat, the long ride and the various exciting things that they saw. Dinner was quickly over with, and everyone gratefully retired to bed early.

After the last day of M'bago's guided tour around Akami, when they had had a last dinner and said a temporary goodbye, Vincent shut the bedroom door behind them and turned to look at Catherine.

“Tired?”

“Exhausted. It's been quite week, hasn't it?” She sat down on the bed and began to unlace her boots.

Vincent wasn't ready yet to turn to practicalities. He stood in the middle of the room, watching Catherine.

“The most wonderful week of my life. Whole days in the sun, seeing sights few others have been

privileged to see. And the nights...” He shook his head, gazing at her tenderly. “...the nights will remain in my memory forever.” A small smile crossed his face. “You were so sure from the beginning that it would happen someday, and I was so sure that it wouldn’t, *couldn’t* be. When I think what my wrong-headedness almost cost me...” His eyes held hers with increasing intensity, and his next words were said slowly, in that deepest voice and half whisper that sent shivers rocketing through her. “Never to have held you naked in my arms... never to have felt your body convulse in ecstasy under mine...”

Catherine returned look for look, and still holding his eyes, with conscious seductive intent, she slowly pulled her T-shirt off over her head, revealing a bra that couldn’t have contrasted more strongly with the rest of her practical outdoor clothing. It was a confection made of light blue lace and satin ribbon.

Vincent’s reaction was everything she had hoped for, and more. He came swiftly to the side of the bed, and knelt before her. He reached up to touch the narrow satin ribbon that was the strap, and his clawed forefinger passed lightly down the strap to just touch the swell of her breast showing above the scanty covering of the bra.

“This is wonderful. It makes me... well, I didn’t need any *further* encouragement.” His hand continued down to cup the fullness of her breast, covering the lacy fabric completely. “Take it off. It is wonderful, but take it off, please. I want you.”

She reached up to the front closure of the bra and it fell away. Vincent looked for a moment, then leaned in and kissed a nipple softly. As his mouth drew it in, he pulled her forward until his body was pressed against her center. Catherine’s head fell back and her hands came up to bury themselves in his mane, as her whole being concentrated on the sensations coursing through her body. While Vincent made her gasp with delight, his hand slid between them to unzip her pants. In a moment, with one more soft kiss he slowly left her breast, and sat back to slide her legs out of the fabric. Then he sat still, just looking at her.

After a few seconds he shook his head. “It does something to me when you’re nude, and I’m still wearing my clothes.” He frowned a little, unsure that what he felt was acceptable to her. “It makes me feel... powerful, in total control of your body. It’s a heady feeling! But is it... all right?”

“Does it make you want me more?”

He nodded silently.

“Then I’m for it.” She smiled at him and put out her arms, and he came into them with a rush.

“Is there anything that I could do that you wouldn’t agree to?” His mouth moved over her face while he talked, and she could feel him smiling through the kisses.

“M-m-m, that’s nice... no, I can’t think of a thing. What else do you *want* to do? We’ll have to take this on a case-by-case basis, I think.”

He chuckled. “All right, counselor.” He sobered, and his voice went back to that lower register that made her shiver. “What I want... is to *lose* myself in you. I want to kiss every square inch of you, and I want you to do the same for me. I want to make love to you until we’re both unable to lift a hand.” He lifted his head away from her so he could see her. “I can’t get enough of you. And I’m afraid that I never will.”

She brought her hand up to caress his face. “I’m not afraid.” Then she smiled. “Anyway, you can keep trying. And the answer to all of your desires, at least so far, is a heartfelt yes!”

They took off on schedule the following Tuesday. M'bago joined them at the airfield at the last moment and swung himself aboard with a brief case and one small bag as his luggage.

“Is that all you’re bringing? How long are you planning to stay with us, anyway, about an hour and a half? I’d have that much luggage to go to the park for an afternoon!” Catherine laughed up at him.

“I’ve got it down to a science. I’ve traveled a lot to raise money for Akami. I’ll stay for a couple of weeks at the least; I’ve got some other contacts to make while I’m there.” He sat down gratefully. “There! I believe I’ve finished everything that was necessary, and I’m on the way!”

Vincent was as mesmerized by the view below him as he had been on the trip south, but this time M’bago was beside him, and they compared notes on geography, history, and anthropology for several hours. Since they were bypassing Cairo on this leg of the trip, going directly to Spain, they passed over the African continent farther to the west, and there were new things below for Vincent to enjoy, notably the enormous stretch of the Sahara.

Catherine watched bemused, entering the conversation only occasionally, as Vincent conversed with someone new whose interests plainly coincided with his own. His voice, his expression, his whole attitude showed her clearly how much he delighted in this extended dialogue. She stayed out of their way as much as possible, sitting back to appreciate the sight of Vincent enjoying himself so thoroughly.

She went up to the cockpit after a while, and took a very short lesson in flying a jet from Devin. “You can’t just hand me the controls! What if I do something... dumb?” Catherine was scandalized at Devin’s casual attitude toward flying the plane.

“I do dumb stuff all the time and I’m still alive. The plane is a lot smarter than you are. Don’t worry about it.” He was laughing at her. “Besides, I think you’re not so dumb. You finally got him into bed, didn’t you? ... Catherine, aren’t you a little old to be blushing?”

“Devin, I think you’re the only man alive who can *make* me blush. Except Vincent.”

“Now that’s a very interesting statement. What does Vincent do that makes you blush? ... OK, OK, I’m sorry, I’ll leave it alone.” He chuckled as he turned back to the controls. When he spoke again, it was more seriously. “Catherine, I think you’re the best thing that could possibly have happened to Vincent. I believe you were meant for each other, and I hope that stubborn brother of mine has finally got his head on straight!”

“I think he’s decided what he wants to do. I certainly hope so. I think Father will be the largest hurdle we have to face now.”

“You got that right. He’s a formidable opponent, but maybe this time he’s met his match. Between you, you and Vincent have got about half the world’s total of stubbornness. I don’t think the old man’s got a chance.”

Catherine laughed. “Maybe *Vincent* is stubborn, but *I’m* just the most easy to get along with person around.”

“Yeah. You’re not stubborn. You just waited him out for two years. Two *years*. Nope. Not a bit stubborn.” He chuckled again, shaking his head.

They landed in Spain late in the day, where they refueled and had some dinner sent in. Then they began the long nighttime trip over the Atlantic. M’bago went forward to spend some time with Devin, and Vincent and Catherine were left alone for the first time since morning. They sat together, embraced, but Vincent had fallen mostly silent, his mood changed from the elation of the afternoon. *He’s dreading the end of the trip.* Catherine thought. *He’s dreading going back to his life underground.*

“Are you going to tell me?” She said, finally.

“...No, I don't think I've anything to tell. I'm feeling a little sorry for myself. It's been such a marvelous time, I'm sorry that it's over. How are you feeling?”

“The same, I guess. But I'm looking forward to a new life now. The future is looking pretty good to me.” She snuggled herself closer.

His arms closed about her tightly, but he held her without answering. Above her head, his face was bleak. His vision of the future was not hers.

Father had been advised through Peter of the approximate hour of their homecoming, and he was waiting in his study. He rose when he heard their voices and came to meet them, taking them both into a welcoming embrace, and reaching over Catherine to squeeze Devin's shoulder in greeting.

Then, as he realized that there was someone behind Devin, “Oh! And who is this?”

Vincent answered. “This, father, is a very close friend. His name is M'bago Kalemombe, and he'll be staying with us for a few days, or perhaps weeks. I think you will find that he is very good company. I've told him that you will have a thousand questions about Africa.”

“You are African?” Father's hand came out, and then he took M'bago into his embrace also. M'bago returned the embrace without embarrassment, and admitted to African birth. “Well, then Vincent is right. I will have many questions. I have followed African politics in the papers with great interest, but there is never enough information. For instance, when the Congolese government...”

“Father, give the man a chance to get a night's sleep before the grilling begins!” Vincent turned to M'bago. “I told you, he's endlessly curious about everything.”

M'bago smiled at Father, “And I will be more than glad to satisfy your curiosity as well as I may. I hope then that you will reciprocate by giving me a short history of this fascinating world of yours.”

Devin laughed. “Woh, you said the right thing there. He'll be delighted to bend your ear for hours.”

While the conversation continued, Catherine had quietly found a chair and collapsed into it, totally worn out. In a few minutes Father looked around and found her nearly asleep.

“Look at this, Catherine is asleep in the chair! I *am* sorry, you must all be very tired. I've been thoughtless, but I'll let you all retire now. I'm so glad to have you home safely, and very anxious to hear all about the trip.”

“Tomorrow, Father, tomorrow.” Vincent hugged Father again, and then turned to Catherine. She smiled sleepily up at him, and bending, he scooped her up from the chair, and turned to the door with her.

“Catherine's guest chamber is ready for her. We thought she might want to stay here tonight,” Father said.

I'm glad you made it ready, Father; M'bago will use it. Catherine will be staying with me.” Vincent looked steadily at the old man, and Father, speechless, watched as he carried Catherine out into the hall.

Devin followed with M'bago, who turned at the door to take polite leave of Father. “Thank you for your hospitable welcome, sir. It is much appreciated.”

Father's mouth was still open in stunned amazement. He shut it with a snap, and replied, “Yes...yes, of course, you are a friend of Vincent and Devin's, you are most welcome here. Goodnight, and sleep well.”

M'bago passed out of the room, and Devin turned to say goodnight to Father, and added, grinning widely, "Nice recovery, sir. Well done."

Vincent put Catherine gently in his big chair. When she straightened to get up, he put his hands on her shoulders, his touch a caress.

"Just rest there, Catherine. I'll do it."

He left the room for a moment, picking up an unlit lantern as he went. When he returned he turned down the covers on the bed, then from the wardrobe he got her tunnel nightgown, the one she had worn when he brought her injured to this room for the first time. It had been there with his own nightclothes ever since. He knelt beside her chair and began to unfasten her clothing.

When she moved to help him he said softly, "No, let me do this for you. Rest there, I will get you ready for bed." She subsided sleepily, and let him undress her and slip the nightgown over her head.

He picked her up and carried her to his bed, where he covered her warmly. He bent to kiss her lightly. "I'll be with you in a moment." He moved quietly around the room, extinguishing candles, until only the one behind the stained glass window remained. Then he undressed quickly and slid in beside her.

"M-m-m." She smiled without opening her eyes and snuggled closer as his arms encircled her and pulled her against him.

"Go to sleep, my love... my love." His voice was as soft as velvet, and his arms held her cradled warm and safe as she slid into sleep.

Catherine awoke disoriented. She looked around her rather wildly, her body tensing, but as she saw Vincent's clawed hand cradling her breast, she relaxed, turning in his arms until she could see his face. He was looking down at her with tenderness, and his hand came up to stroke her cheek.

"Good morning. I thought you were going to sleep right through the day."

She lifted herself up on one elbow. "What time is it? I'll be in disgrace if I miss breakfast!"

"Too late to worry about that, it must be nearly time for lunch." He brought his mouth down to hers, and kissed her lightly. "You needed to sleep, and so did I."

She reached up to bring his head back down to her, and kissed him, not so lightly. "Don't you want me any more, now that you're home?" She smiled, teasing a little.

He growled low in his throat. "I want you... always. Wherever, whenever, all times, all places, all circumstances..." He rolled over her, pinning her to the bed. "I want you now!" And he kissed her hard, with tongue and teeth in evidence, his body heavy on hers. "Now! Kiss me... make love to me!"

Catherine's response was immediate, spontaneous arousal. As she kissed him her hands moved over him, reaching down to his buttocks to hold him tightly against her, moving under him until he groaned with pleasure.

They came together in a frenzy of desire, mouths searching, hands moving everywhere in an instant conflagration of appetite. It was over very quickly, both bodies arching in delirious pleasure, with soft outcries forced from throats nearly closed with passion.

They collapsed together, Vincent's body heavy on Catherine, but when he tried to remove his weight she cried out in protest, holding him over her.

As she came slowly back to reality, Catherine smiled, stroking his hair. "Well! I guess you're not tired

of me yet." His body still rested bonelessly on hers, his face buried in her neck.

"I'm insane with wanting you." His voice was muffled, his breathing still ragged. "How can I give this up? How can I ever..."

When Catherine heard what he was saying, a slow chill clutched at her insides. What was he thinking?

As his heart slowed and his breathing steadied, he lifted himself away from her and got out of bed, stopping only to look down at her silently, and to kiss her gently. He moved to the wardrobe for clean clothes, then said, "I'm going to bathe, I'll be back in a few minutes." He was gone with the words.

He was back while she was still getting herself out of bed and ready to bathe also. He came in and sat down at his table, pulling his journal toward him. Catherine moved slowly to the door, unsure of his mood.

"Wait for me; we'll eat...OK?"

He looked up. "Yes, Catherine, of course. I'll be here." He turned back to his journal.

She bathed quickly, in a fever of apprehension. Something was definitely wrong. When she returned to his room, he was still sitting at the table, but he wasn't writing. He was staring straight ahead, lost in thought.

Well, I'd better hear it, whatever it is. "What is it, Vincent? Tell me."

He glanced at her for a moment, then turned away again, and spoke without looking at her. "I'm thinking... about the future. I'm wondering what I have done to you." He continued to stare sightlessly ahead of him.

"I... don't know what you mean. Done to me? You've made me very, very happy, Vincent."

He looked at her then, his face softening. "Yes, it has been a happy time. A time for joy, for loving, for the realization of desires. It has been ... a splendid time, a magical moment... out of a lifetime." He turned his eyes away again, resuming his empty stare.

Catherine's face slowly drained of color. There was something bad coming. *Oh, please, Vincent, don't! Don't!*

He turned back to her, conscious of her tension, and put his arm around her loosely where she stood next to his chair, holding her against him with a gentle touch. Looking up at her tenderly, he spoke.

"Catherine... Catherine, my dearest love, now we are home. Now the time has come for consideration of realities, and the effect of our actions upon our future lives.

"I have not changed my feelings about the impossibility of your making your home Below. It has never been acceptable to me that you give up your rich life Above to live in... reduced... conditions Below, and this marvelous time we have had in the larger world has further convinced me that you *must* not give it up."

"I believe that that is for me to decide!" Catherine spoke with vehemence.

"No. I said it is not acceptable to *me*."

"Oh, Vincent, don't do this to us!" She was on the edge of tears, but trying valiantly not to cry. This was not the time for weakness. Their future could be in the balance here.

"You must know that I want this even less than you. How... *how* am I going to live without my arms around you, without the touch of your mouth on mine? How go back to a bed alone, when I have shared the bounty of your body? My god, Catherine, I don't want this to happen!" He was trembling with the intensity of his feelings. "But I cannot, I *cannot* countenance your giving up your life Above. I've lived in the tunnels all my life; I *know* what this life is, and *it is not for you!*

“Equally, and to my shame, I cannot let you go Above for any length of time, or resume your previous work. You are endangered there. It has always been a nightmare to me, and now... now I have feelings of *possession*, I have...jealous feelings of keeping you close to me that will not let me rest if you continue to live and work Above. Not admirable feelings, but... real and... unchanging. What can I do but let you go entirely?” His voice was hoarse, his throat nearly closed with pain.

Catherine couldn't believe what she was hearing. “Vincent, how can you say this? We can't be apart, you *know* that we can't. There must be a way!” Tears rolled down her cheeks unheeded as she pled for their happiness.

He reached for her hands. “Please, don't be angry.” His face was anguished as he spoke again. “Yes... there must be a way... it will kill me if I have to give you up.” His face softened as he put a hand up to stroke her face. “And I believe... now... that it will kill you, too.”

Catherine was a fighter. After the first shock, she quickly rallied. “There is a way to do this. I *will not* give you up. Hear me, I mean this. We *will not* be separated!” She gazed steadily into his eyes, intent on making him believe what she said, while she thought frantically, making decisions at high speed.

“This is not a problem that can be solved in an hour, or a day. I am going to go Above this morning to resign my job. Whatever we decide to do, I will not be working for the District Attorney any longer. Then I will move below...” As his head came up, she held up her hand. “...On a temporary basis only, until we have figured out how to make this thing work. We need to do some hard thinking. This problem is solvable.”

Catherine did as she had promised; she resigned her job effective immediately. Joe was devastated; he raved at her, accused her of disloyalty, shouted and tore his hair, but when his tantrum had worn itself out he hugged her close and wished her the very best.

By the following evening, she was moved into Vincent's chamber. Catherine was dumbfounded at Father's reception of the change in their relationship, but Vincent was not as surprised as she was. He smiled when she said, “I thought he'd raise the roof! Isn't he going to say a word?”

“He's not an unreasonable man, whatever you and Devin may think. He knows that this is an accomplished fact; what can he say about it now that will change anything? I expect I'll be called on the carpet eventually so he can vent his frustration, but that's all right. I made it very clear to him before I left that I will make my own disposition of my life.”

“Well, I'm very happy that I don't have to face him. I'm afraid he blames me for this.”

“I don't think he's assigning any blame. Some of the reason for his opposition was because he was afraid of the same thing I was.” His arms went around her, and he held her close to his body. “Afraid that I'd hurt you.” His arms tightened further, protectively. “But he can see now, as I can, that that fear was without merit. You're not hurt.” He looked down at her. “As a matter of fact, I think you're more beautiful now than ever before. There's a sort of... glow.”

“Vincent, spare my blushes. That 'glow' is pure sexual satisfaction.” She grinned up at him.

He smiled back, and reached down to kiss her. “Are you satisfied? Am I a satisfactory lover?”

“Now who's fishing!”

This exchange was part of a valiant attempt by both to keep an optimistic attitude, but Catherine knew that Vincent was not sleeping well. Several times, she woke to find him sitting at his table, staring down at his open journal. Her more naturally sunny temperament made her confident that a way would be found, but Vincent struggled to keep from falling into a black depression.

Catherine had the glimmering of an idea, but before she told him she thought it would bear further

investigation. No reason to raise his hopes, if they were only to be dashed down again.

Chapter Eight

M'Bago's meeting with Elliott was a great success. Catherine had called for an appointment, and when she got Elliott on the phone she first conveyed to him Vincent's thanks and her own for the use of his plane.

"Did you have a good trip?" was his answer to her thanks.

"It was glorious. It was the best trip of my life. There is no way to thank you enough for making it possible."

She heard his smile in his voice. "You enjoyed it. That's thanks enough. I'm happy that you're happy, Catherine."

"Thanks, Elliot, that's very kind of you. Now I have another favor to ask."

There was a pause and a chuckle. "All right, shoot. What now?"

"I don't think this will be a hardship, Elliot. I have a friend I'd like you to meet. I think you'll like him very much, and I hope you'll be able to help him with a project."

"All right, Cathy. When would you like to come?"

"Elliot, you're really very nice. Thank you. We'll see you at your convenience."

They met in Elliot's office the next morning. M'bago was prepared with photographs and brochures, and made a very professional presentation. Then he relaxed and answered questions, and his charm, as well as his dedication to Akami, came through with great effect. In half an hour Elliot was deeply involved in planning for Akami's future.

Catherine looked on with amusement. After a few minutes in which she was completely ignored, she whistled and waved her arms for attention. Elliot looked up and grinned.

"Sorry, Cathy. This is very interesting stuff. Did you want to say something?"

"Yes. I wanted to say... goodbye. Somehow, I don't think you two will miss me very much." She laughed and stood up. "I'll see you later, M'bago. Goodbye, Elliot, and thank you again for all your kindnesses."

She left the office jubilant that her gamble on Elliot's interest seemed to have paid off, and indeed it had. The next morning M'bago came to say goodbye. He and Elliot were taking the Lear back to Akami, leaving at noon.

M'bago was very happy. "Elliot seems extremely taken with the idea, and we seem also to be compatible as people. Catherine, I thank you for your help in this matter. You may have made a large difference in the future of the animals in our Reserve.

He turned then to Vincent. "Sorry to leave you so soon, my friend. I hope to see you back at Akami whenever you are able to be there. Write to me."

Vincent assured him that he would, and they embraced and parted regretfully.

It was necessary for Catherine to close out her cases in an orderly manner to help Joe out as much as possible, but she did no more work for the DA's office. Her attendance at the office was purely to close out her work, and a few days sufficed to make a business-like end to her job. But she continued to go Above every day, on business of her own.

She was looking for a building, not new and not in the best part of town, a building with at least three stories and with windows on two sides. She found the search to be discouraging for the first ten days; she looked at many places without seeing anything like what she was looking for. However, she was persistent, and the perfect building did appear at last.

She stopped by Joe's office to share her enthusiasm. "Oh, Joe, it's absolutely perfect. The neighborhood is... I would call it shabby but still hanging onto respectability, the building has four stories, and it's got a garden in back! Well, at least it can be a garden someday; right now it's a trash heap."

"Radcliffe, perfect for what? What in the *hell* are you going to do with a four-story building?" He turned his eyes to heaven. "I knew it when you quit. You've flipped."

"No I haven't! I'm going to *live* in it, what do you think? My law office will be on the first floor, and I'll live above it. It's perfect!"

"Oh, you haven't quit practicing law, huh? Gonna sit on the other side of the courtroom for a change?"

"Maybe." Her chin came up.

"OK, OK, that's fine with me!" He put up his hands as if to ward off an attack, grinning. "I'm just glad you're not giving it up completely. You're a good lawyer, Radcliffe. I'd hate to see you quit."

She looked at him soberly. "Thank you, Joe. From you, I appreciate those words."

Catherine approached Vincent very carefully with her idea. Following Devin's advice, she tried to cover all bases before broaching it. When the evening came that she was ready, she did what had been successful in the past, sat him down at the dining table in her apartment.

"All right, Vincent. Here is my solution for our problem." She slid a photograph across the table to him. "This is a picture of a building. I'm going to make an offer on it."

He looked down at the picture, then up at her. "You're buying a building?"

"I'm buying a home for us. Let me tell you my plan. This building will serve as a law office in the storefront on the ground floor, and it will be a home for us upstairs. I'm planning to open a small office for a private law practice. I expect to do a great deal of pro bono work, and I do *not* expect to work eighty hours a week. And I thought..."

She stopped suddenly. What was she doing? Maybe he didn't want to live with her! Maybe he didn't want to leave his chamber, where he'd spent all of his life. She looked up at him anxiously.

"I guess I *didn't* think... not enough anyway. ... Well, I'll have to go ahead and tell you what I'm planning, and hope that you'll be truthful with me if it's not to your liking. OK?"

"Yes, of course I'll be truthful. Why would you think I'd be anything else?" His eyebrow went up in a quizzical look.

"Well, maybe you don't want to move. Maybe I've taken far too much for granted."

He shook his head, amused. "Catherine, tell me."

"I thought we could remodel the upper floors of the building to make a home for the two of us to live in. Mouse says that access to the building from the tunnels is very easy. In fact, he offered to make me an entrance the day I asked him, but I told him I thought it better to buy the building first. He couldn't see the sense of that at all." She laughed, shaking her head. "I had a terrible time keeping him from tearing down walls on the spot."

Vincent smiled. "He can become over-enthusiastic, but if he says access is easy, it's easy."

"I'm hoping that this compromise will be satisfactory to you. I would be in the office about eighty percent of the time, the other twenty in court. I'll hire someone to do investigation; I will do none at all. I'm expecting to spend my days pretty much right there in the building. You could spend your days in the tunnels as you usually do, but we'd be together after the workday is through, very much as we would if we lived Below." She stopped and looked down at the picture on the table. There wasn't anything else to say so she took the plunge, her heart beating fast.

"Well, what do you think?"

Vincent looked again at the picture of the building. "What's the address?" She told him, and he nodded, satisfied. "Not a long walk from the Hub at all. How many rooms?"

"The second and third stories have no partitions now; they were used for warehousing. It was a wholesale hardware distributor's building. The fourth floor has four rooms off a center hall. The ground floor is very suitable without any remodeling at all, once it's cleaned. It's basically in good repair, but I don't think it's been cleaned for thirty years! It has a small storefront area with one large office and two smaller ones behind it, as well as a bathroom and a small storage area. The stairway is at the back. There is a full basement, and the stairs are not visible from the first floor at all. And there's a freight elevator. Oh, Vincent, it's just perfect. I'm so excited about it. Can you tell?" She grinned at him.

He nodded. "I can tell." He looked down at the photograph for several minutes, deep in thought. Catherine found that she was holding her breath. She let it out in a long exhalation as his head came up and his hands came across the table to clasp hers; he was smiling.

"Catherine, I think you have come a long way toward solving our problem. This sounds like a very good arrangement indeed. I can think of no major objections. I just wish..." His head went down.

"What? Please, what?" Anxiety was plain in her voice.

He looked up from under his brows. "I wish you had let Mouse tear down the wall, then we could go to look at it right now!" He grinned broadly. "I'm feeling more than a little excited about this idea, Catherine. A home of our own is something I never expected. It seems wonderful. Privacy, a place of our own, and both of us to continue our lives essentially unchanged. To be together, and still in both worlds. Catherine, this is a brilliant solution!"

He stood up and threw his arms out wide, exultant in his relief that the way was not closed to a future together. His smile showed his canines as he came around the table and swooped her up into his arms. He turned for her bedroom.

"We haven't made love in your bed yet, and I think that this is certainly an occasion to celebrate!"

He put her down on the bed and stood looking down at her, his face sober now. "I don't have to give you up." He knelt beside the bed and began to undress her. "I won't have to try to remember what it feels like to hold you close in my arms, and kiss you... and feel myself sliding into your body, feel you enclosing me in your warmth and your love... oh, Catherine, I couldn't live without this now..."

His hands were working at the fastenings of her clothes, and in a few seconds she lay nude before him. He stood then to pull off his clothes, still looking down at her lying naked, waiting for him. His voice deepened with every word.

"...So beautiful...so desirable...I can't stop wanting you, ever. Not ever."

He lay down beside her and turned until he leaned over her. Light kisses started at her forehead, and rained down over her face, stopping at her mouth for a deep kiss, then continuing on down to her breast. He stopped just short of touching the nipple, looking down at it reaching up as if longing for the contact it knew was coming. When he touched her it was not with his lips but with his teeth. They closed around the nipple and he tugged gently, then his lips closed warmly around it, and he drew it

deep into his mouth.

Catherine's back arched up into his touch involuntarily, her breath quickened, and soft words came from her lips. "I love it... oh, do this to me... more, more... again.. .oh, Vincent..."

Vincent's breathing had quickened also, and when he left her breast at last his fingers moved over her body with passionate attention, reaching to every inch, covering her with his hands as if learning the map of her body by touch. When he came to her soft mound of pubic hair, his hand slowed, and he reached down softly to just touch her outer lips, feather touches running up and down. Catherine moaned and opened her legs further, opening also her center to his fingers. Now they moved inside the outer lips, picking up the moisture that her body gave generously, and sliding with that wetness very lightly over the most sensitive parts of her. Catherine arched her hips up to meet his fingers, reaching for closer, harder contact. But Vincent kept the touch of his hand very light, teasing, making her reach for his touch. Her head began to move back and forth on the pillow, and she pulled herself down farther on the bed, trying for a more solid contact.

"Please, please..."

But Vincent was adamant. He moved as she moved, keeping the touch light and soft. She began to moan, saying words not understandable, slurred and softened in the heat of her arousal. When he thought she could stand no more, he took his hand away.

"No! Oh, no, come back!"

But he had other plans. When he touched her again, it was with his mouth. Her body stiffened and she cried out when she felt his tongue on her. Her head was whipping back and forth now, and her hips raised convulsively in a pumping motion. He teased just a little more, until her hoarse cries of "Oh, please, please..." dissolved into a moaning lament. Then he moved to her clitoris and steadily stroked it. Her body tensed with approaching orgasm and when it came she convulsed, and a long wail was forced from her. Her bliss went on and on, and he stayed right there, his tongue lapping and licking and drinking up the rush of fluid that accompanied her climax.

Her body relaxed slowly from its tense arch, and she breathed a deep sigh as she came back to the present. "Come up here to me, where I can kiss you." She smiled, looking down at him where his head was rising slowly from his loved task, trailing small soft kisses over her. "I love you so much, and you do such wonderful things for me." He kissed his way up her body to come into her arms and she held him close to her. But after a long soft kiss, she reached down between them and her hand closed around his rigidly erect penis. "I want this inside of me, please... now

Vincent was only too glad to comply. But instead of rolling over on her, he raised her shoulder with his hand under it.

"Turn over?" He asked hesitantly. Catherine smiled up at him and complied, turning onto her stomach, her arms raised, her cheek resting on her hands. He brought himself over her, and with his mouth next to her ear, he confessed in a half whisper, "I've wanted this, but I thought it was too..." He stopped, unable to go on.

"I know what you thought." With his cheek pressed to hers he felt her smile. "But it isn't. It's very human."

His body relaxed as she said those words. He began to kiss the nape of her neck, and soon his mouth moved down to her shoulders, and then followed her spine down to the swell of her buttocks. His hands covered them and he kneaded softly, but his mouth moved farther down and he began to kiss the insides of her thighs. Catherine made a soft noise and spread her legs farther to give him more access to her body, and while she did this she moved a pillow down and tucked it under her hips, raising herself for his convenience and her delight. Vincent took full advantage of the increased access, and soon she was moaning again.

Vincent moved slowly back up her body, kissing his way back to the nape of her neck. She felt his

penis then, nudging at her body's opening, and she shivered with anticipation of its burying itself deeply in her. As it slid inside they both groaned with satisfaction, and he began immediately to move with quick deep strokes, his excitement very evident.

Catherine moaned again when she felt his teeth on the back of her neck. He opened his mouth to encompass the skin at her nape, and she felt his firm hold on her, his teeth very much in evidence, his tongue laving her skin. It was incredibly erotic.

"Oh, god, Vincent, do that!" The words were pushed out on her panting breath.

She was sure that there was nothing that could make this any better, until she felt his hand come around under her, to touch the place where their bodies came together. She felt the jolt of excitement that the feeling of his hand on that joining gave him. His breathing was ragged and uneven now, and he was growling loudly. His hand moved back and forth between his body and hers, and she felt the quickening of his heart to a pounding drumbeat. Then she quit thinking entirely as his fingers touched her clitoris. Sensation rose in a heartbeat to an excruciating height, and she went over with a loud cry.

Vincent's overwhelming excitement was evident now in everything about him, his breathing, his thundering heart, and then in his rushing roaring growl, as his orgasm caught him in its grip. He pumped his seed vigorously into her, his body bucking and arching, his actions wildly uncontrolled.

When it was over, he collapsed on top of her; sweat dripped down onto her shoulder from his face as he lay trying to catch his breath. But in a moment he raised himself up, never forgetful of his great weight. He rolled off her onto his back, still breathing hard, trying to gain enough breath to speak.

"Are you...all right? ...Did I hurt you? Catherine?"

She was still recovering her breath and didn't answer instantly.

He raised himself up to look down at her, terrified.. "Catherine! Are you all right!"

"Yes! Yes, I'm fine. I'm... fine. That was... wonderful, Vincent."

He was looking over her body, examining her. "Are you scratched? Bitten? My God, I was totally out of control!"

"Vincent! Listen to me! I'm absolutely fine. Nothing is wrong at all. I'm all right; it was wonderful."

"Catherine, there are tooth marks on the back of your neck!" He was devastated.

"Are there? Quick, get a mirror, I want to see them before they're gone!" She turned onto her back and grinned up at him. "Vincent, you're making a great deal out of nothing. I loved it that you grabbed me by the back of the neck. It's the kind of thing that makes a woman feel wanted!" She put her hand up to the side of his face.

"My dear one... even if I had been scratched, or bitten, it would be no more than happens to most people at one time or another. I'm willing to bet that my nails will draw your blood sooner or later. Being uncontrolled on occasion is one of the greatest delights of sex. I don't want to worry about scratching you, and you mustn't worry either. OK?"

Vincent shook his head. "Catherine, if I hurt you... it would kill me. I can't allow myself to be uncontrolled. It's not *safe* for you." His head was down, he wasn't looking at her.

"Vincent? Vincent, look at me!" His head came up slowly. "Did you enjoy what just happened while it was happening?"

"That's not the point. I can't..."

She interrupted. "*Did you enjoy it? Was it good? Answer me truthfully.*"

Silence. His head went down again. Finally the answer came. "It was...wonderful. It was incredible." His head was still down, his faced shadowed by his hair. Shame was in every line of him.

“Are you sure that your shame isn’t *because* you enjoyed it so much? Are you burdening yourself with guilt, Vincent?”

When he looked up at her his face had an arrested look. “...Maybe I am. I have thought that... that position is one which I of all people should not ever allow myself. It’s... animal.”

“Now that’s downright silly. People *are* animals, and that position is the third most popular one, if I remember my Human Sexuality class correctly. Give it up, Vincent. You’re making something out of nothing.”

He looked at her in wonder. “How do you do it? It seems I have nothing left to worry about. You make it all unnecessary.”

“It *is* unnecessary. I won’t let you spoil your wonderful spontaneous lovemaking by worry!” She smiled up at him tenderly. “I have a vested interest here. I love you, and I absolutely *adore* the way you make love to me.”

Within the next few days the building was bought. Closing was immediate, since the building was empty and the seller was anxious for his money. Mouse was given the go-ahead to make an opening from the tunnels, and on the fourteenth day after Vincent had agreed to her plan, they made their first inspection of the premises, entering by the rough opening that was all that Mouse had finished so far.

Vincent looked around at the second floor for a few minutes without speaking. What he saw was one huge room with windows at both ends and at least thirty years of grime on every surface, and a floor strewn with whatever the previous owner had decided wasn’t worth taking. As Catherine stood with him, she suddenly saw the room through eyes that saw the dirt and the trash, not the possibilities inherent in the large space and tall windows. *My God, he’ll think I’m crazy!* Her heart beat hard as she waited for his comment.

“There are wonderful possibilities here, Catherine. I believe we can make a beautiful home of this place.”

Catherine let her breath out with a whoosh. “Oh! I’m certainly glad for your imagination, Vincent. It doesn’t look like much now, but it will be a home when we’re done. I *know* it; if you just look at those great windows and the space, and ignore the trash.”

“There does seem to be an oversupply of ... oddments.”

Catherine snorted. “That’s one way to put it! The previous owner offered to clean it up, but I thought Mouse might want to go through this stuff. It was a wholesale hardware company, and Heaven knows what treasures may be here, and if they’re here, I have every confidence that Mouse will find them.”

“He will, and he’ll enjoy the search. You’re right about the windows - they are beautiful. We won’t do anything to change them.”

The windows were huge, each about three feet wide, and stretching from two feet above the floor to gracefully arched tops that were a couple of feet under the twelve foot ceiling. There were six of them, stretching across the whole front of the building.

“The third floor is just exactly like this one, except the ceilings are not quite so high, so the windows are a little smaller. Come on, let’s go look.”

She pulled on his arm, and he came with her slowly, looking back at the space, obviously charmed with the possibilities. The freight elevator was at the rear of the building, next to the stairs. Both were against the side wall, so there was space for five of the same large windows in the back.

Catherine bubbled with enthusiasm. "One of the great things is that the buildings directly across the street are only two stories, and they're newer than this one, so they were made with regulation eight-foot ceilings. No one is on a level with our second floor windows. And the third floor... *our* floor, is way above everyone else. The back garden..." She stopped to grin as Vincent looked at her quizzically; he'd seen the back yard. "Well, it *will* be a garden, you'll see! And it will be as private as we could wish. The buildings on both sides are warehouses, and have no windows on the side looking into the garden. And across the alley is a parking lot. When we've built a wall, the garden will be completely private."

They took the freight elevator up to the third floor, and looked at it briefly. It was very much like the second floor.

"Mouse will be mining here for days," Vincent said, as he bent down to pick up a piece of angle iron. "There are a lot of usable things in this trash."

The fourth floor had been used originally for living quarters. It was divided off into five rooms and a bath, and the woodwork and the floors were beautiful old oak, and still in good condition.

"We'll have guest rooms for tunnel kids when they go to school Above, and there's a bath up here, too. I have no idea if this plumbing is working or not, but I sure hope it is."

The bathroom was out of a 1910 Sears and Roebuck catalogue. The toilet had a wooden tank raised up at eye level. There was a claw-foot tub with beautiful old brass hardware.

"I don't think we'll change the fixtures, do you, Vincent? They're charming, and if they still work, let's leave them. We'll add a shower though; there's plenty of room for one."

Vincent looked doubtful. "Would you want to have tunnel children living here?"

"Of course I would. This place is for our friends and family. I hope we will have many house guests from the tunnels. Will you mind?"

He shook his head. "No, of course not. I will be happy to have my family around me. ...Thank you, Catherine. It is a generous thing for you to open your heart and home to the tunnel children."

"It is *our* home; that means *both* of us. And the tunnel family is my family also, Vincent. I hope to entertain my friends from Above here, too, on occasion. Oh, Vincent, this is going to be fun!"

Vincent and Catherine spent hours drawing and redrawing plans, making sure that everything each desired was included. In the main they were in remarkable accord; only a few things, like the size of Catherine's closet, caused discussion.

"Catherine, there must be some mistake here. The closet space in our bedroom is as big as the bath!"

"Our bedroom.' I love the way that rolls off your tongue, Vincent." Catherine put her arms around him from behind; she was looking over his shoulder at the plans unrolled on the table. "No, there's no mistake; that's right."

He turned and looked up at her. "You have enough clothes to fill that space?"

"Well... I'm a professional person, I need to... well... I... yes. I do." She looked a little embarrassed.

He shook his head, nonplused. "Amazing."

They began the renovation almost immediately. When Mouse saw what was just for the "taking" in the building, he was ecstatic. In five days he had removed a mountain of equipment and supplies that

was a treasure beyond price to him.

“Tools! And good stuff to build things!” As a thank you, he worked long hours cleaning up the two warehouse floors. In another two days, the two floors were ready for work to begin.

Catherine hired outsiders to clean up the storefront on the ground floor, but the rooms upstairs were entirely the province of Vincent and the tunnel workers. Cullen and Kanin both volunteered to help in the planning and execution of the work, and their offer was gratefully accepted. Soon Vincent was besieged with offers of help from all sides. He accepted many of the offers; there was a great deal of heavy construction work to be done.

Work progressed slowly; the regular tunnel work and Vincent’s classes scheduled for weekdays had still to be accomplished. But on weekends, and most evenings, Vincent was busy in “The New Home,” as the project began to be called. Catherine worked along with him, learning to handle a hammer and saw with some expertise. She was the general contractor as well, planning the work and coordinating the many jobs to be done, while Vincent estimated times and materials, and recruited help as needed.

“We’re a great team. We could hire out!” Catherine sat back after a planning session had solved several knotty problems.

Vincent looked up at her from under his brows. “I think not, Catherine. There could be some problems not connected with construction when I appeared to start work.” His eyes glinted with humor as he said it.

Catherine was pleased to hear him joke about his appearance. It was only one of several ways she had noticed that he was less concerned about how he might appear to others. The most surprising one was that when heavy labor raised body temperatures uncomfortably for men used to the tunnel chill, he stripped casually out of his shirt while working, along with the other men.

That new behavior was a surprise to Father also. He came often to view progress, and when he appeared one day and saw Vincent’s state of undress, his brows went up in astonishment.

“Catherine, Vincent hasn’t taken his shirt off in public since he was a child. I have to credit you with that change in him. He appears to be much less conscious of his physical differences than he ever has been before.”

“Well, you know, they really aren’t that great. I think he’s had an exaggerated idea of how different he is all his life. His body is beautiful, Father. There’s no reason for him to be ashamed of it at all.”

Father looked at her with disbelief in his eyes. “Come now, Catherine, his differences are significant.”

“The most significant differences are the ones that everyone sees, his hands and his face. His body is perfect, and not much more heavily haired than some other men.” Catherine believed that Father was responsible for a good deal of Vincent’s self-consciousness about his body, and she wanted to make sure he knew that she didn’t agree with him. “He has a body to be proud of, and I think it’s too bad that he didn’t know it sooner.”

Father shook his head doubtfully. “Well, whatever makes him more comfortable with himself is a good thing. And he does seem to be that, so perhaps you are correct.”

But Catherine didn’t think he believed it. *Too bad, old man, you’re wrong. ...My word, I sound just like Devin!*

The plan was to make the second floor the common living area of the house. The living room, dining room, and kitchen made up that floor, along with an entrance hall and a powder room. The kitchen

was going to be big and comfortable, with an eating area that could accommodate eight people easily, and five huge east facing windows made it bright and cheerful. The entrance to the house was going to be at the back, through the garden. The elevator and the stairs were just inside the door, and on reaching the second floor the visitor saw a long entry hall stretching alongside the staircase past the kitchen and the dining room to the living room at the front of the house.

The third floor was Vincent and Catherine's sanctuary. It was partitioned into their bedroom at the back, bath, dressing room and closets in the center, and at the front was their private study/sitting room.

Cullen was mightily impressed with the quality of the carved newell post, the stair railings and the woodwork of the fourth floor.

"You couldn't replace this stuff at any price! This is just..." His hand passed reverently over the panels of a door. "...Just magnificent. Trust me, you're lucky to have it."

The windows on the second and third floor had the same beautiful woodwork, and they had been boarded over for many years to about six feet up from the floor, so the woodwork didn't show the harsh treatment that the oak floors on these two stories had received. But Cullen said that the floors could be pretty much restored to their original beauty by sanding and refinishing. Catherine put her foot down about letting the tunnel crew do this enormous job. She hired professionals, and work stopped for five days until the floors were dry.

They left the renovation of the bathroom on the fourth floor entirely in Cullen's hands, with Kanin to do the tiling of floors and shower.

"Just so there's a shower, in addition to the tub, and if it's possible, we'd like to keep everything pretty much the way it is. Do you think you could figure out a shower stall that would harmonize with the rest of the bathroom?" Catherine had fallen in love with that bathroom.

"I'm your man! I wouldn't change anything in here either. These fixtures are irreplaceable, and just as good now as the day they were made." Cullen stopped, thinking, his lower lip caught between his teeth. "Hm-m. I could... yup, Catherine, I think I see what I can do with a shower that will fit in. I'll have a sketch for you tomorrow."

His sketch was perfect. Dark wood and etched glass made the shower Victorian in feeling and fit perfectly with the rest of the bathroom. With linen cupboards on each side, it covered the end wall of the roomy bath.

"Cullen, you are a talented designer!" Catherine was very much impressed.

Cullen gave a stiff little bow, hiding a smile. "Thank you. Then it's all right?"

"It's perfectly wonderful, and what's more, you *know* it is." Catherine grinned at him, and he grinned back quickly before he turned away.

In a remarkably short time, considering that everyone was working only evenings and weekends, the partitions were up, doors were hung, and the house began to take shape. Vincent and Catherine stood in what would soon be their sitting room, looking out into the westering sun.

"It will be pleasant here in the afternoons, with the sun coming in the windows." Vincent was not yet entirely used to the blessing of sunlight. "I think we should put some sort of couch or daybed right here, so that one could stretch out in the afternoon and read in the sunshine."

"A good idea. Speaking of couches, have you thought at all about furnishings? Have you a preference for some particular style of decoration?" Catherine turned to him, interested to hear his answer to her

question. It was something that they had not yet discussed.

“Yes. Big, soft, and comfortable.” He smiled down at her, putting his arms around her. “I care not about color or style. Except... perhaps... I favor blue.”

Then he frowned. “Catherine, this is all costing a great deal of money. I have to admit I didn’t really think about it when we started, but when I watched load after load of lumber and millwork coming up the elevator... and now there’s furniture! And carpets, and appliances and... I don’t know what else, but I’m sure there are many things I have not even thought of. Are we in danger of running through your fortune?”

“I blush to admit that we are not. My father’s family was very well-to-do, and he made a great deal of money himself, which he was too busy to spend for the most part. So set your fears at rest, my dear, we have a long way to go yet before bankruptcy looms.”

“I’m happy to be assured of that. It appalls me to think that I didn’t consider this until now. I’m enthralled with our new home, Catherine, and I’m finding the work to make it happen immensely satisfying, but nothing, *nothing* is worth the sacrifice of your security. I am not able to... to do what would be needed to ensure that your circumstances would not change, if anything should happen to me. There are the tunnels, of course; you know that you would be welcomed there as a family member. But I would want you to keep your life Above as it is now. Do you assure me that your money is adequate for that purpose, even with the outlay for the new home?”

“Yes, Vincent, don’t worry about it. It’s more than adequate. While I worked at the DA’s office I lived on very little more than my salary; I was too busy to spend money, so it just piled up. I have a buyer for my apartment; and I think he’ll come up to my price. If he does, it will realize more than the initial cost of this building. Truly, there is plenty of money, and I’m loving spending it on this, on our place, where we will be together.”

She looked up at him with the love she felt written on her face, and his head came down to touch her mouth with his almost involuntarily. The kiss was tender and full of their love for each other.

He raised his head after a few moments. “I love you... you are all there is... my life...” The kiss that followed was equally tender, but now there was passion in it. When he raised his head again, it was to look helplessly around the room, which was completely bare. “Not even a chair! Buy beds first. Lots of beds. One for every room.”

Catherine chuckled, and drew him toward the door. “Come on, it’s supper time. Let’s go Below and eat, and then we can go to bed early. I’m really, really tired, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Really, really.” He smiled, amused at her little game, and put his arm around her as they walked to the elevator.

Catherine went on a furniture-shopping spree. The large landing area on the fourth floor was intended for a lounge for the students; it and the four bedrooms were to be furnished in the Victorian style that complemented her pride and joy, the bathroom.

“Victorian, but not too fussy. I know there will be boys using these rooms. And there’s a little fridge and a hot plate in the lounge; it’s a long way to the kitchen. Oh, Vincent, I’m having such a good time!”

Her face was bright with happiness as she told Vincent about her purchases, as they got ready to go to work on a Saturday morning.

“A double bed, a comfortable overstuffed chair and a desk in every room. And plenty of reading

lamps. And wardrobes. What were the Victorians thinking of, to build bedrooms with no closets?"

"And for our bedroom, I bought the biggest, most comfortable king size bed I could find. The room will be carpeted, and the furniture is all large scale. The bedroom is big enough to handle it, and the man who'll be living there is built on a rather large scale himself."

Her hands wandered across his shoulders and down his sides. Her hands moved lower, and Vincent drew a quick breath, his head back, his eyes closed.

Catherine chuckled warmly. "Hm-m, yes...a very large scale."

"Catherine, my love... what are you starting? We have a full day's work ahead of us." He didn't move away from her hands in spite of his protest, and after few moments he added, "...But maybe we could take just... a half hour to... finish what you've begun here." His breathing was fast and heavy now, her busy hands were making him shiver and pant. "Lie down on the bed... I want to talk to you..."

"What do you want to say to me, love?" She smiled at him, still caressing him.

"I want to tell you how much I love you... I want to *show* you how much."

She smiled again, slowly, and began to unbutton her shirt. "All right. Show me."

So he did.

Chapter Nine

The back garden was Kanin's province. Since a high stone wall and a gate were needed, his expertise in stonework made him the logical choice. He searched through junkyards and companies that specialized in rescued architectural parts, and found the perfect gate. Wrought iron arched over the top, and the gate itself was solid oak and eight feet tall. It was a double gate, large enough for a car to pass through, but Mouse was recruited to engineer a smaller entrance into one of the doors, for foot traffic. Kanin was a little hesitant when he approached Catherine.

"It's pretty pricey, Cathy. I hope not too much for the budget, though, because it's really nice, the perfect thing."

Catherine assured him that if it was right, it was not too expensive. "This is going to be our front door. We'll take a look."

She looked, agreed that it was perfect, and wrote a check. So Kanin went happily to work, with the cooperation of Mouse and Hank, another tunnel dweller who had been an electrician in his former life. Doorbells, an electric gate opener, and an inconspicuous TV surveillance system for the gate area were installed along with the wall and the gate.

But not without some problems. Mouse had Mouse's way of doing things, and it nearly came to a pitched battle when Hank insisted on doing everything according to code.

"Code? What's the use of code? *This way is best.*"

Vincent was finally called in to mediate, and explain to Mouse about code. Mouse listened with poorly disguised impatience, and said stubbornly, "*This way is best,*" when the explanation was finished.

Vincent was obliged to tell him that code must be followed. Mouse sulked for about fifteen minutes, muttering to himself, and then returned with his usual sunny smile and began work again.

Catherine was surprised when Kanin recommended the TV surveillance. "What do we need that for?"

"Do you want to know who's ringing the doorbell before you open the door in the gate?"

Catherine thought for a minute. "Yes, you're right. We need to know that. OK, go ahead."

Vincent said the same thing she had when she told him about it. "Why do we need that?"

"Well, if we're stretched out in the garden, soaking up sun, and a stranger rings the bell, we'll have to move. But if it's someone from the Tunnels, or someone you already know, we'll just push the button and let them in. Right?"

"Stretched out, soaking up sun? That sounds marvelous. I'll agree to anything that promotes *that* idea."

Target date for moving into the new home was April 12, their third anniversary; as the winter passed and work progressed, it was seen to be easily achievable. Wallpapers were up and carpeting was down by March 15, and the furniture began to be delivered. Vincent had second thoughts about the cost again when he saw how much furniture it took to fill up what had turned out to be a very large house.

"Catherine, would you care to tell me how much you estimate this whole project has cost?"

"No, I would *not* care to tell you! Better you should not know, Vincent. Just be assured that there is plenty left for whatever I may need in the future. Plenty! There are some kids we'll be putting through college in a short time, and I've made a special separate fund for college expenses. But even after that, there will be ample money left. And actually, the work that you and the tunnel people have done has saved many thousands of dollars in labor cost, which is usually the biggest expense in building. Don't worry, Vincent. Trust my word, there is more than enough money."

"I do trust it. I will. But Catherine... college? Do you mean the tunnel children?"

"Yes, of course I do. We can't let them try to do it on their own, although I certainly will expect them to do as much as they can. I know they will, and they should, but college is beyond what they can do alone without great hardship. If we don't help, they'll be years getting through, and living on the edge all of that time. It's not necessary and we're not going to let it happen. I've been thinking that when they're employed after they graduate, we could ask them to contribute to the fund for subsequent kids, as they're able to. What do you think about that?"

"Good. It sounds right. A good plan. Catherine, your generosity continues to take me by surprise." Vincent reached down to kiss her lightly.

Catherine answered, "Speaking of generosity, think about the hundreds of hours that were given by all of the tunnel residents to help us build our house, without any expectation of return. Vincent, as at least a partial thanks for the magnificent help we've had from the tunnel folk, let's throw a real bash!"

"Catherine? A... bash?" Vincent was puzzled.

"A blowout. A... a *party*, Vincent! An open house."

She laughed up at him, her hand reaching up to touch his face lightly.

"Everyone deserves a chance to walk around the whole house and to see what their labor has produced. This house is truly a product of the love and effort of our family Below. I want to be sure that they know that we understand that, and that we love them for their help and their caring. Every single person Below has had some part in the creation of our home, and every single person should know that we know that, and that they're always welcome here."

Vincent thought for a minute. "How would the twelfth of April be for the celebration?"

"Oh, yes, a wonderful thought."

The guest list posed very few problems; no one was to be left out. The tunnel inhabitants of course, included all of the children. Catherine spoke about her thoughts on the matter to Vincent.

“There are others too. All of the helpers should be invited. Devin has already promised to be here. I made sure that he understood that we want him here without fail on the twelfth of April. And M'bago too. He was planning to be in New York the next month anyway, so he's changed his plans to be with us.” She paused, and looked down, unsure of his reaction to her next thought. “And... Vincent... how to you feel about... do you think we could invite... Elliot? Would you be comfortable meeting him? I...” She stopped. “Maybe not. You have no way of knowing whether he's trustworthy, and his past certainly gives you no reassurance. I just thought that he's at least as responsible as anyone else for our happiness... and...”

Vincent stopped her, holding up his hand. “If you think that Elliot is trustworthy, that's all I need to know. Invite him; I will be happy to meet him, and thank him in person for all his kindnesses in the past. Yes, I think that's a very good idea. ...And while we're on the subject, is there anyone else?”

She looked up at him, smiling. “How did you guess? There is: Jenny.”

“Then by all means invite her also.”

“Jenny is a perfect candidate for helper, Vincent. I've thought of this before, but it just never came up when I was with you. I know she'll be thrilled to help. She's a Jew, and she knows from her parents and their friends about secrets and hiding. Her father escaped from Germany one step ahead of death.”

“I will talk to Father immediately.” Vincent smiled ruefully. “I learned my lesson when we surprised him with M'bago. Although he liked M'bago very much, and agreed that he's perfectly trustworthy, he was *not* happy that he and the Council were not consulted beforehand. I was obliged to listen to a long and repetitive tirade on that subject; I have no wish to go through it again.”

“I will be happy to witness for both of them before the Council if necessary. Elliot has many resources that can be invaluable to the Tunnel community, and they're going to love Jenny. Everyone does.”

Catherine smiled, thinking of Jenny's ability to charm anyone in the world. “Maybe she'll charm Elliot. Wouldn't that be nice for both of them? Hm-m.”

Vincent looked quizzically at her. “May I offer some unsolicited advice? Matchmaking is dangerous. I speak from experience; many years ago I nearly drove a man, who shall be nameless, out of the Tunnels, because I thought he'd be a suitable mate for a woman... who shall also be nameless. ... No, don't ask. I promised.” He smiled as Catherine looked at him curiously.

Her look turned to one of chagrin. “Oh. You promised... well, that's the end of that. But I think you're right about matchmaking. I'll stay out of it.” Her curiosity came back, in a different area. “Did you do something? Try to set them up?”

“No! I merely made a suggestion. But I was treading on very dangerous ground without knowing it, and the reaction was out of proportion to the stimulus. I learned that it's not wise to meddle with someone else's life. One can never know where the tender places may be.”

Catherine was indeed planning a bash. She hired a caterer to come in and set everything up, and then leave. She made arrangements to have additional food delivered to the door if she called, so she wouldn't worry about enough to eat and drink, and then she spent the last few days before April 12th

putting in the final additions to the New Home.

Catherine had take care to furnish the third floor study with mostly old furniture found combing the antique shops. Both side walls were solidly lined with built-in bookshelves, another treasure from architectural salvage, seamlessly reinstalled in the study with Cullen's skill and artistry. Many of the decorative items from Vincent's chamber had found a new home on the bookshelves, along with his books and hers. There were two large and richly colorful old oriental rugs complementing the polished oak floor. She had found a huge and beautiful old carved mahogany desk that she was keeping for an anniversary gift for Vincent. The desk presently in the study, which he thought would be his, she intended for her own use. And lastly, there was a large divan strategically placed, where Vincent could 'stretch out in the afternoon and read in the sunshine.'

On the eleventh, they had still not heard from Devin. "If he doesn't show up I'm going to...I don't know what!" Catherine was annoyed.

Vincent smiled. "I don't know what to say to you. If he's here, he'll be here. If he's not, there's probably a reason, though we may never find out just what that was."

"Well, his room's all ready for him. I know he freezes staying in the Tunnels, he should be happier in our guest room. Maybe he'll even stay awhile."

"Don't count on it." Vincent smiled indulgently, being well aware of his brother's irresponsible and unpredictable behavior on occasion.

"As he would say, 'You got that right!'"

The day of the party dawned warm and clear. The garden was not yet in bloom, but it had been landscaped and Kanin had put in a beautiful flagstone terrace with raised flower beds. Catherine spent part of the morning on a ladder hanging lanterns in the young trees that had been planted. Vincent came outside in midmorning and stood on the stone terrace watching her.

"Catherine, couldn't you find someone else to do that?"

"Well, yes, I could have, but I wanted to do it myself." She grinned at him. She had a tendency to want to 'do it myself', which Vincent found amusing.

He smiled, amused now. "Really. Anything else that isn't done yet that you don't trust anyone else with?"

"You know, instead of making fun of me, you could get that ladder over there, and help!" She frowned down at him in mock anger.

"I'm flattered. You trust me to help?" His smile broadened.

She chuckled in spite of herself. "Vincent, get your body up on that ladder!"

They laughed comfortably and finished the job together.

Catherine had kept Vincent away from the study while the men moved the new desk in. When all was ready, she brought him to the door, and then stopped him.

"There's something here for you."

She followed him into the room. His reaction was all she could have hoped for; he stopped dead

when he saw his new desk in the space where the old one had stood, and then slowly approached it.

“Oh, Catherine, is this for me? For me to use? It’s truly wonderful.” He ran his hands slowly over the surface of the wood. “It glows! What a magnificent piece. What a wonderful finish it has, and the carvings...look,” He looked up, smiling, “...a lion’s head. Thank you, Catherine, thank you.”

He turned to her with a face full of love. “My sweet one, I love you so...” The kiss that they shared was as tender as any they had ever known. When Vincent lifted his head he looked down into her face wordlessly for a long moment, then whispered, “...My love...” and another soft kiss followed. “I have something for you, also.” He put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a small carved wooden box. “Oh, Vincent, what a beautiful thing!” Catherine exclaimed over the little box.

“Open it.” Inside was a ring. A gold ring, very plain, two strands of gold entwined. Catherine looked down at it for a long moment, and then Vincent saw tears falling on it.

“Oh, my love, tears? Don’t, don’t...” His arms went around her, and she cried quietly in his embrace for a few moments.

Then she raised her head and smiled at him.

“I’m a little overwhelmed... I love it so. It’s absolutely perfect. I couldn’t be more pleased with anything in the world. Thank you, my love... thank you.”

“Cullen made it. I wanted it to be from the tunnels, from my world.” He took her hand and slid the ring on her finger. “You’re mine. This ring says you’re mine.” He looked up at her. “Is that all right? May I say that you’re mine?”

“I *am* yours. Just as you are mine. I have no objection to being yours,” she grinned. “After all, I worked for it for three years!”

Vincent’s smiling face sobered as another thought took him. “Catherine, would you like to be joined, formally, in the tunnels?”

“No, it’s not necessary. I’m yours, and you’re mine. We both know that. What more can we ask of life than to live together?”

They stood embraced for a long, long minute. Then they separated, looked at each other, smiled, kissed, and went on with their very busy day, having snatched a few moments to express their love for each other, on this their third anniversary.

As they parted, Vincent turned back and spoke, “Catherine...”

She turned.

“Later...” His voice was a purring half-whisper and his gaze warmed her all over. Then he went on his way.

By five in the afternoon all was ready, and the guests began to arrive. The elevator ran continually, bringing tunnel folk dressed in their party best up from the basement entrance, and the “front” gate bell rang so often that Catherine stationed Kipper there to be “the official gate keeper”. He was thrilled with the job, but Catherine told him that after half an hour he should trade off with another child. “You don’t want to be stuck there all night, Kipper; there’s food inside.”

The tunnel folk were particularly interested in the fourth floor when it became known that the rooms there were meant for the young people ready to enter college.

“It makes it seem that all those who had a part in making the New Home are helping them to go to school.” Mary’s face glowed with the thought of her beloved children having the chance to go on to

college. "I must make quilts. I'll start tomorrow. ...Oh, maybe you won't want to disturb your decorations, Catherine. I don't need to do that. You already have many beautiful blankets."

"Yes, you do need to! Do you think that blankets could ever take the place of one of Mary's quilts with the tunnel children? And what could be more in keeping with the decoration than a hand made quilt? Mary, what a lovely idea. Do you think that you could make enough quilts for the kids to take them for their own when they finish school? I know there's not one kid that wouldn't love that! But it's really a burden to lay on you, Mary. Do you think... maybe you could let some of us help? Could we have a ladies' sewing circle?"

Catherine and Mary retired for some time to a quiet corner to make plans for "Mary's Quilting Circle". Vincent watched with tender amusement, and with a warm upsurge of love for Catherine, who had made Mary feel an important part of the New Home in two quick minutes.

Catherine looked up, as she often did, searching for Vincent. When she found him, his eyes were on her, and the message in them was clear: *I love you*. And there was another message, one that disturbed her peace for the second time that afternoon. *Later...*

Elliot arrived at the back gate, and the child on duty sent a message to Catherine, as he had been instructed. Catherine came to the gate and opened it herself to welcome Elliot in.

"I'm going to introduce you to Vincent, Elliot, but we need to talk for a moment first."

"The man you... have chosen?" Elliot looked around quickly. "Where is he?"

"I'll take you to him, but first I need to tell you... well, he's... an unusual person. His looks are... extraordinary."

"Cathy, please! I'm a pretty cosmopolitan person, I believe. If he's disfigured or ill or whatever, I believe I'm able to meet him without my jaw dropping." Elliot was insulted that she thought he needed to be warned.

Catherine smiled. "All right, I'll say nothing more. We'll see."

Elliot was mystified by this whole situation, but he followed her up the stairs to the third floor, where the crowd had cleared, since dinner was being served downstairs.

The lights were low in the study, and Vincent was alone, looking again at his new desk.. Elliot moved quickly toward Vincent, his hand out.

"I'm very pleased finally to be able to shake your..."

Vincent turned and his head came up. Elliot's jaw did drop, for just a moment, but being in truth pretty cosmopolitan, he recovered his poise almost instantly. "...your hand." His hand remained out, and Vincent took it.

Vincent shook his head at Catherine, smiling his small smile. "Catherine, did you give the man no warning at all?" His arm came up to close around her as she moved to his side.

"He said he didn't need it." She smiled at Elliot. "That's what you said."

"Cathy, you took advantage of my ignorance!" Elliot shook his head, still looking at Vincent. "She's a handful! But I'm sure you know that by now."

Vincent's low tones were gentle as he looked down at Catherine. "I do know. Catherine is her own person." His glance lingered on her for a moment, then he looked back at Elliot. "I'm very pleased to be able to express my thanks to you in person for the loan of your airplane." He smiled his small smile again. "Perhaps it's clearer now that you have seen me why it is that we needed a private plane. I have lived all my life in the tunnels, and for me to see Africa was a pleasure and a privilege that... well, it was a lifetime experience for me, and it was made possible by the loan of your airplane. I can't thank you enough."

Elliot answered graciously, and then spoke about M'bago and his own experiences at Akami. In a minute, the two men were comparing notes about the wildlife, and then Elliot told them about some of the plans he and M'Bago had made for Akami. Vincent was very much interested in that, and what looked like a long-term discussion was initiated.

Finally, Catherine said, "Dinner is on downstairs, and I really should be there. Will you two excuse me?"

Elliot said, "I'm hungry, how about you, Vincent? Let's talk about this while we eat, all right? I warn you though, I can discuss it all night!" Vincent agreed and the three of them headed for the stairs, the conversation continuing between Elliot and Vincent without interruption. Catherine watched the instant affinity between them with bemused wonder. Was there anyone whom Vincent couldn't charm within five minutes? Apparently not.

When they got to the buffet, they found M'bago just filling a plate. Vincent and Elliot descended on him immediately, and Catherine wondered when they sat down at a table if they knew what they were eating, they were all so deep in Akami. She saw them settled and then went to take care of her guests, but as she left she turned for a goodbye look at Vincent, and found that he was looking at her. There it was, that same look. *I love you...* and that second expression, the one that made her shiver... *Later...*

The guest that she found first was Jenny, who had met Vincent several days before the party. Catherine thought the logistics would be too difficult if there were two people to be introduced to Vincent amidst the confusion of the party, so she invited Jenny to see the house, and the introduction was accomplished. Jenny's reaction on first seeing Vincent was rather different from Elliot's.

"My God, Catherine, he's *beautiful!*"

Catherine and Vincent both laughed helplessly, and Jenny got a view of Vincent's canines seldom allowed to anyone but his intimates. In fifteen minutes they were laughing again at Jenny's tales of woe in the publishing business. Vincent said afterwards that he could see why she was Catherine's best friend. "She lights up the world wherever she goes."

Catherine was struck by his insight. Sometimes people thought Jenny was nothing but a comedian, missing the fact that her view of the world was real. The sunshine that she radiated was not a comedic self-protection, but a reflection of her soul. *But I guess I should have known that he'd go to the heart of her, and see the gold shining there.*

She found Jenny at the buffet table. "Wow! Great food, Cathy! I've gained weight just looking at it!" Catherine filled a plate, and they went to sit down. "Cath, who's the great looking guy talking to Elliot Burch and Vincent?"

Cathy turned to look. "That's M'bago, the director of Akami. I told you about him."

"You didn't tell me he was so big...and so good-looking. Is he married?"

"No. Are you looking for an introduction?"

"Not sooner than about thirty seconds from now!"

"How about Elliot, do you want an introduction there, too?" Catherine was surprised at the direction Jenny's interest had taken. Elliot seemed the more obvious choice, he was handsome, rich and charming. Then she shrugged to herself; Jenny had never been predictable.

"Sure. Maybe he'll write a book. 'My Life as a Captain of Industry'. You know the sort of thing; if they're willing to dish some dirt, it's a sure best seller."

Catherine smiled. "I'm not sure that's Elliot's kind of thing. He's very much involved right now with Akami, that's what they're talking about over there. I wish they hadn't decided to do it tonight, in the middle of the party. I can't very well leave my other guests to hear what they're saying, although I'm sure they need me to tell them how it should be done." She laughed with Jennie; it was an old joke between them that Catherine was sure she knew the best way to do everything.

Jenny got her introductions, and the party drifted away from the buffet, into the living room, where Catherine had installed the baby grand piano from her father's house. Catherine was stunned when Elliot sat down and began to play skilled lounge piano. She walked over to him with a delighted smile on her face. "Elliot! Undiscovered talents!"

"I put myself through college playing the piano. Don't have much time for it any more, I'm pretty rusty."

"It sounds wonderful, you're really *good*. I'm afraid you'll be besieged with requests as long as you sit here; if you don't want to play I suggest you get up right now, or you may be forced to stay all evening."

Elliot smiled, and kept on playing. Catherine moved away to greet some other latecomers, and when she looked back there was a circle of admiring listeners around the piano. *Well, I warned him.*

Devin showed up late, but he got there. "And it's a good thing, Devin. You'd have been on my list for sure!" Catherine laughed and hugged him. "It's good to see you. Where have you been? No, I'd better not ask, I might not want to know."

Devin laughed in return and shook his head. "You wouldn't."

Vincent came up to embrace his brother. "You came. I'm pleased to see you, Devin. The evening wouldn't have been complete without you."

"Well, here I am. How's the old man? Don't see him around."

"I think he's up in our study, let's go up and see."

As they moved toward the elevator, Devin looked around him with admiration. "Pretty elegant quarters you've got here, bro!"

"Yes, they are. We, that is the tunnel folk and I, and Catherine of course, did it ourselves. I had no idea how satisfactory it would be to make a home for Catherine and myself. I have enjoyed this winter's work more than any other task in my life, I believe." As he spoke, they got off the elevator, and started down the hall toward the study. "This floor is for Catherine and me. Our bedroom and our study."

They entered the study on that remark, and found Father sitting in the desk chair in front of Vincent's new desk. He looked up as they came in, and a smile crossed his face as he saw Devin.

"My boy, I'm glad to see you!" He got out of the chair and they embraced. "There now, how was that? A better greeting? I'm learning, you see. Even an old foggy like me *can* learn!"

"'Foggy' is not the word I'd use to describe you, sir." Devin's smile was wry.

Father quickly held up his hand. "Don't...*don't* tell me what word you *would* use. Let's keep this meeting friendly!" They all laughed, glad to have the first encounter over on an amicable basis.

Father turned to the desk and sat down again, his hands moving over the deeply translucent surface. "I must say, Vincent, I admire this desk. It is a truly beautiful piece."

"Catherine knows what pleases me. She couldn't have found anything that I'd rather have had."

"I believe that. It is a rare find, I doubt there's another like it in the world." Father's eyes dwelt on the desk with appreciation and no small amount of envy.

"This was a gift from Catherine?" Devin asked.

Vincent answered after a moment's hesitation. "...It's our third anniversary." He felt a little reluctant to admit to such a sentimental occasion to Devin, the least sentimental of people; derision was likely to follow.

"Ah. And what did you give her?" Devin grinned. He knew exactly why Vincent had hesitated, but decided not to tease.

"A ring. A gold ring. You might call it a wedding band, I imagine."

Father's head came up. "Are you planning a joining?"

"We hadn't thought it was necessary. Do you think so?"

Father shook his head. "No. Not unless you want to do it."

"I think not, then. This celebration can stand for our joining."

Father stood up. "All right. Let's rejoin the party; you have guests, Vincent."

Vincent smiled at the chiding tone; Father never got over being a parent.

Chapter 10

The party went on until very late by tunnel standards. It was long after midnight when Elliot closed the piano at last, and smilingly refused any more requests.

"I ought to pay you the guild rate for entertainers! Thank you so much for your patience with the family tonight, Elliot." Catherine was truly grateful that he had sat at the piano for a good part of the evening, taking requests for every kind of music, and fulfilling them all.

He looked down at her, smiling. "They *are* your family, aren't they?"

"Oh, yes. There is no question about that; these people are my family. I am closer to them than I have ever been to anyone in my life. Elliot, I want to introduce you to their world also. We'll make a date to go Below. I think you'll find it very interesting."

"Below? That sounds mysterious."

"It is. Mysterious and wonderful. You'll see." She turned and smiled as Vincent came up to them, taking his arm. "I was just inviting Elliot to come Below with us in the near future."

"Yes, we will do that. I have to thank you once more, Elliot. There have been many comments about your kindness in entertaining everyone tonight. I add my thanks to those of the tunnel folk."

"'Tunnel? Below?' There is a large mystery here. I look forward to the solution. Now I wish you good night, and thank your for a very entertaining evening, and a great dinner." And with that, Elliot was gone.

Father had long ago retired, and the tunnel folk had made their thanks and gone also. M'bago had elected to stay Below. "I like it; it's the friendliest place I've ever been. I'll see you tomorrow, Vincent." He had gone with Rebecca, who volunteered to show him to his chamber.

Devin was the last to leave, and Catherine remembered just in time to tell him that there was a room prepared for him on the fourth floor.

"Great! Believe me, I don't appreciate the tunnels, even overnight. The chill is still in my bones from fifteen years of living there."

"We hope you're going to stay more than just overnight, Devin." Vincent was not hopeful, though.

"Nope. Got important business that I left just for this occasion. I'll be here tomorrow, but I leave in the evening. See ya." He turned away, heading for the elevator.

“I’ll walk you up,” said Vincent, but before he left he turned to Catherine, and spoke in a low voice, “I believe that ‘later’ is... now.” He took her hands and gave her a long possessive look before he walked away.

Catherine, warmed again by his look, headed for the stairs and their bedroom.

She was surprised when she opened the door to find the lights on, but not as surprised as she was when she got inside. The room was full of white roses.

As she looked around, she realized that it wasn’t full, as had been her first impression, but at least four dozen white roses stood in vases all around the room. As Catherine looked around at them, for the second time that day tears began to fall. *I love him so much, how could I have been so lucky...oh, my dear...*

She pulled herself together in a moment, and hurried into the bathroom, wiping her tears. She stripped herself out of her clothes, and stepped into the shower, hastening so she could get into her nightgown and be ready when he returned.

But she didn’t make it. The shower door opened while she was still rinsing off, and Vincent entered, his arms going around her from behind her, pulling her against him.

“I’ve been longing to feel your skin against mine all day! When I looked up at you on that ladder this morning I nearly pulled you down off it right there and then.” He held her tight against his body, while with every word his voice lowered, and he spoke into her ear in the half-whisper that she loved. “I love you, I want you... Catherine, I need you... you are all there is for me... Catherine, oh my Catherine...” He crooned softly into her ear, while the hot water sluiced down her body, so that she didn’t know which was water, which was his hands moving over her. “Come with me to bed, Catherine... I want you now, I want to feel you open to me, ready for me... you are so beautiful, I love you, I want you... my love....”

She felt his erection hard against her, and the feel of it made her bones turn to water. She turned to face him, pressing herself against him. “Please, take me to bed... please...” Her voice was husky with desire, inflaming him even more. “Put your hands on me, all over me, I want to feel your mouth on me, I want you so much, all the time, every minute... love me... take me... Vincent...”

He reached around her and turned the water off, then picked her up in his arms and stepped out of the shower. He set her on her feet, and taking a bath sheet from the shelf, he began to dry her body. Slowly, he drew the towel down over her shoulders and patted it softly on each breast, then continued on down her body all the way to her feet, while she moaned a little, and caught her breath when he reached gently between her legs to pat her center dry.

He moved behind her then, and beginning at her feet he toweled her body lovingly, passing over her buttocks with soft pressure, following the curve of her waist. Now Catherine’s body was all sensitized to his touch, her breath was coming fast. When he reached her shoulders, he began on her left arm, drying it down to the ends of her fingers, then the right arm. She was hypnotized by his actions; she stood absolutely still, waiting for what he would do next. He came around her again to stand in front of her, looking down at her body.

“So wonderful... so soft... so beautiful...,” he whispered under his breath, not taking his eyes off her while he toweled himself quickly. Then he picked her up again, carried her into the bedroom, and put her down on the bed.

She reached her arms up to receive him, but he shook his head.

“Tonight, it will be slow. Tonight we will savor every touch, every sound and movement.” He smiled

tenderly. "Tonight is a very special night: our third anniversary, and our first lovemaking in our new home. I want us to remember this night forever." He knelt beside the bed. "Tonight is for me to show you how very much I love you. I will begin ... now."

He bent his head, and began to feather kisses over her face. Her hands rose to hold his face between them while she turned her head to make her skin completely available to him. Soft sounds came from her as he continued to brush his mouth across her cheeks, then moved to her ears, and down the side of her neck to that place he loved at the angle of her jaw, under her ear. As it always did, his tongue came out there to taste of her skin.

Just that touch of his tongue caused her to shiver, so sensitized was she to his lovemaking.

"Yes, oh yes..." she whispered, as he moved further down her neck.

Vincent's body and his lovemaking were so wonderful to Catherine that she lost touch with the rest of the world when she felt his hands and his mouth on her. He became her world. The silky touch of the short hairs of his face against the palms of her hands was an aphrodisiac; she needed no other stimulation.

But there was more; Vincent seemed inspired tonight. He still knelt beside the bed, he still had not touched her body, and she was totally ready. He stopped for a moment, just looking down at her.

She opened her eyes, "What? Vincent?"

He smiled his small smile at her, touching her face with one clawed fingertip. "Nothing is the matter. I just need to stop to look at you, to believe that this is happening. I don't want to forget how it was, how much I longed for this. For so many months and years..." His face showed remembered pain as he looked back on the past.

"Oh, sweetheart, I know. I wanted you so, and you... do you know, I wasn't sure for a long time that you wanted me at all? You were so... controlled, sometimes I thought you just didn't have any... physical feelings for me at all."

He looked down, away from her eyes. "... I was afraid all the time that you would know how I felt, and be disgusted. I thought I had to hide my longing from you." His eyes came back to hers, and then his glance moved slowly from her face down her body, and as slowly back again. "I wanted you so much. I laid awake at night, trying not to think about your body, trying to keep my thoughts of you away from the physical desire that was eating me alive. I wanted you so badly that I ached, my body ached when I saw you. I got used to it; the pain was there, but it meant that I was with you...and I wanted to be with you more than anything in the world. Just to see you, just to touch you now and then. To hold you in my arms was such...sweet torment. I loved it, it was balm to my aching soul, but I paid for it, in the nights...those endless nights when I wanted you with such passion, such agony..."

She smiled up at him, "I remember sleepless nights too! Vincent... I'm so glad, I'm so *grateful* to have you make love to me. I thought I'd never be free to touch you... here, on your skin. I wanted to see you bare before me so badly, to touch your body, to kiss you, like this..." Her arms went around him and she drew him down until his mouth was on hers. Then he slid his arms under her and lifted her upper body clear of the bed while his mouth explored hers slowly, with passionate thoroughness.

Her hands traveled slowly over his back, feeling the hard muscle under the smooth warm skin and the soft pelt of his body hair. When he lifted his head at last, she smiled up at him.

"I don't want to disturb your plans for tonight, but do you think it's the right time yet for you to get into the bed? I really need to feel you against me."

He chuckled softly. "I love you so... you are my white rose, my lovely darling, and I want to feel you against me also... so much."

He lifted himself as he spoke, and moved over her to lie down beside her. She made a soft sound as she felt him press himself against her. Their mouths came together again; the kiss was long and slow,

and warm with tender care. His penis was pressed against her, she could feel its hard length against her hip, and she turned without conscious thought to bring it closer to her feminine center. It moved between her legs, sliding over her nether lips, picking up the moisture that her body was giving generously in testament to her excitement.

Vincent groaned with pleasure as he felt her wet heat against him, but he drew away. He wasn't ready yet to come to the final part of this special lovemaking. Catherine made a sound of dismay as she felt him pull back, but it turned to a sigh of pleasure, as his mouth began to travel down her body. He stopped for long minutes at her breasts, tonguing and drawing on them with great pleasure and with great skill; he had learned quickly to know exactly what would bring her to a frenzy of excitement.

When he left her breasts at last, and started down her body, she was panting; her hands followed his head down her body, pressing him against her a little, as if to make sure that he didn't lift his head away from her. He moved slowly down her body. There was a certain place on her sides, just above the hipbone, that always made her jump when he touched it. Tonight he took time to explore that particular place in more detail. He kissed her, and got the expected shiver; then his tongue came out, and with gentle pressure it began to explore the whole area. Catherine moaned, her hands still on his head, still holding him to her. When he left that place at last, she was rolling her head on the pillow.

He moved lower, and her head stopped, as she anticipated what he would do next. As his mouth crossed over the soft brown hair at her groin, his hot breath made her shiver again. His breath was all she felt, he didn't touch her at all. He moved further down, until he knelt between her legs. Then he moved her knees apart, very gently, very slowly. His head bent down further, and now she felt that hot breath on her most sensitive part.

He stopped then, and she waited holding her breath, for what he would do next. When he didn't move, she lifted her head.

"Vincent?"

"Have patience. I'm looking." He glanced up at her, smiling. "Are you having trouble waiting?"

"Yes!"

She smiled back and laid her head down again. He never got tired of looking, but she knew how to make it too difficult for him. She began to lift her hips into the warm breath she could feel on her, and as she expected, it was too much for Vincent. His mouth came down, hot and wet, and she sighed deeply as she felt his lips and tongue on her at last.

But he only pleased her in this way for a few moments. He lifted his head then, and slid back up until he was beside her.

She laughed and shook her head. "What are you trying to do to me? You're driving me crazy!"

"I wouldn't want to do that." He smiled at her, showing his canines fully. "I'm merely trying to make this night a little more memorable, so we will not forget our first night in our new home."

He paused for a moment, looking down at her with tenderness in his eyes. Then he spoke with earnest gravity, caressing her cheek softly as he spoke.

"Let me stop making love to you for a little while, so I can *tell* you of my love. I feel somehow that I don't say it often enough, strongly enough, clearly enough, so that you can have no possible doubt that you are the most precious thing in heaven and earth to me. Can you wait," he smiled again, "For a little while, to let me talk?"

"Oh, Vincent, I love to hear you tell me how you love me. I'll wait until morning, if you want to talk that long." She put her hand over his, holding his fingers against her cheek and smiling up at him.

"...My lovely one... my white rose," he whispered as his head came down to kiss her with aching tenderness. "I want to tell you how much this night means to me, how much our home means to me."

I... I've tried before, but I seem unable to express just how deeply I feel the joy of a home of our own, a place where we are alone together and can see the future stretching ahead, a lifetime in this same place." He hesitated again, gathering his thoughts.

"I have had difficulty believing in this happiness. I have wondered when I wake in the night to find you warm and sweet beside me, how long it will last, what unforeseen calamitous event could take you away from me. I don't think I could... survive that. Sometimes I think that you will stop wanting me, that some morning you will wake and think *What am I doing here? What has happened to the good life that I lived Above?* And I think that you will leave me, that you will find another life without me." His head went down, his hair hiding his face from her. When he spoke again, his voice was very low, a half-whisper. "This life with me is so much less than you have had..."

"Stop! Stop right there." She raised her hand to brush back his hair so she could see his face.

"Vincent, how...*how* can you say that? This life with you is so much *more* than I could ever have Above...*ever!* Do you think that our love, the love you give me is *common*? Do you think that this... this wonderful thing we have together, is something that could happen to me without *you*?"

She shook her head at him, stroking his face tenderly. "You have no idea how wonderful you are, do you? You don't see that the tenderness and care and commitment that you give me are... *matchless*. You don't see that the lovemaking we share is so much more, orders of magnitude more than *anything* I have ever experienced before... Vincent, if you left me, I would die of it." Her eyes filled with tears as she gazed at him. "Don't worry about my ever, ever leaving you. It's not going to happen." The tears spilled over, and his mouth came down quickly to kiss them away.

"My most adored one, my lovely rose... I love you so much..." His voice trailed off as his mouth moved over her face and down the side of her throat. "I want you so much... always... I think about this, about kissing your breasts, while I am working, while we are separated even for a little while, and I want you until I think I'll not be able to stand it."

While he whispered to her of his love and his desire, he kissed and caressed his way down her body. His mouth covered a nipple, and his tongue laved it while his hands moved over her. He began to suckle then at her breast, making her moan under his mouth and hands. Excitement struck at both of them immediately, as the small interlude of talk gave way to lovemaking again.

She spoke with urgency in her voice as excitement took her once more. "Vincent, oh please, go farther... do more... I need your touch all over me, everywhere." Her body arched up, pushing her hips against him, and her leg reached around his to pull it against her center, where the desire to be filled was raging in a moment. "Please, love...oh please..."

"Catherine... I want to feel your mouth on me. The feeling of your mouth on my body is beyond anything I ever dreamed of. Please don't let this night go by without your mouth on me. I want that so much... oh, please..." As they both whispered of their desires, his voice blended with hers in a duet of passionate longing.

Catherine loved it when he told her what he wanted, when he was explicit in his desires, and she heard what he said. She raised herself up, leaning over him.

"Lie down flat, my love, let me pleasure you," she whispered, and lowered herself until she knelt between his knees. She looked then at his phallus, distended with the blood of his passion, and her mouth watered to take him inside. But she too, wanted to make this an evening to remember.

"Do you want it? Do you want me to take you into my mouth? Do you want to feel it close around you, hot and wet? Tell me, Vincent, tell me how much." She lowered her head until it was just above his throbbing penis, letting her breath warm him.

He moaned and began to speak in a growling, semi-audible whisper. "Yes, oh yes... take it in your mouth, I want to feel the heat of your mouth... give it to me, Catherine ... Catherine, now... oh, now..."

Her mouth closed around him all at once, without any preparatory kisses or caresses. He jumped and groaned when he felt her heat on his surging member.

“Ah... god... do it, do it...” He became incoherent very quickly, and speech turned into growls. Her hands, curled around his testicles, very soon could feel that drawing in that was the precursor of orgasm. He was far past being able to stop now, and she wanted very much to feel his seed come pouring out in a spurting, delicious flood. But she slowed her motions, and in a moment she drew her mouth slowly away from him.

“Oh no... no, don't stop... no...” But in a moment or two his protests stopped, and he opened his eyes. “You are so wonderful to me, I love you beyond the end of desire and time and love...”

He was still nearly incoherent, still wanting very much for her to continue the sliding, slippery motions of her mouth to bring him to an ecstatic orgasm. But he was beginning to remember his own recipe for tonight's lovemaking, and so his next words when he had had time to cool a little were, “Thank you, love, I'd never have stopped on my own...thank you.”

Catherine moved up to lie beside him and he pulled her tight against his body. She looked down, away from him as she said, “Vincent, would you... I'd like...” she stopped, unaccountably feeling shy of telling him what she wanted.

“Tell me. Anything...I'll do anything you want. Anything.” His hand reached up to stroke her hair.

“Would you...take me from behind...like you did that other time?”

Vincent still had guilt about that position, and they'd never done it again after the night in her apartment when he had totally lost control, and had been so frightened that he had hurt her. But he remembered also the supremely satisfying orgasm that had happened to him that night. And he had said he'd do *anything*.

As he moved to place himself behind her, his heart started to pound. “Catherine, I want this. I want it so much... oh, love, I want you so much...”

“I want it too, I have ever since...” She stopped and gasped as she felt his erection nudging at her. She rolled onto her stomach and reached to put a pillow under her hips.

In a moment, he was over her, holding her tightly against him, his penis just touching the opening of her body. As he felt again the overwhelming excitement, the power of the *forbidden* that had taken him the first time, he had time to think, *it's all right, I didn't hurt her before, this is all right!* before he lost the ability to think at all.

Catherine's heart was pounding too. She remembered this as the one time that Vincent had let go of everything, all his inhibitions, and sunk into sexual excitement with his whole heart, and she wanted to feel that happen to him again. The very thought of it brought her to the edge of orgasm.

And so it was again. In a moment his body entered hers with a rushing plunge, and he began to growl and take long strokes. She could feel the steely tension in his body, the excitement taking over, leaving fears behind. As before, his hand came around her to feel the joining of their bodies, and then to touch her in that place that brought the most intense of sensations. She began to make a small sound, a continuous moaning that was drawn from her unaware.

Vincent was shaking now, his whole body trembling with excitement. His strokes quickened and lengthened, and his growl became deeper, more elemental. His usual tender care of Catherine was not gone, but transformed into a supremely masculine *possession* of her body. As they came closer and closer to that place of ecstasy, both let go of everything but the sensations they were feeling.

When the climax came, it was shattering for both of them. A swooping reach for the top, and then a long long slow slide of gradually lessening spasms down into utter exhausted satiation. Vincent came

to himself long enough to slide off Catherine, and then subsided in utter weakness.

He came slowly back to reality apprehensive of guilt, but strangely, it wasn't there. In spite of having completely lost control of his actions, he felt no terror that he'd hurt Catherine. He hadn't hurt her; he *loved* her. As he lay thinking about it, he was mystified as to how he could have ever thought that he would hurt her. He turned his head to look at her. She lay still on her stomach, her face turned toward him, and as he looked at her, her eyes opened.

"Lo," She said, slurring the word, "D'you feel a little bit out of it, too?"

"I may never recover totally. In fact, I hope I don't." He rolled toward her, and reached to kiss her. She turned her head a little more to touch his lips, and then relaxed again into a heap. He smiled at her, then his face sobered as he began to tell her of something important to him. "Catherine, I didn't hurt you. I *couldn't* hurt you! I love you."

She shook her head without raising it, raising her eyes to heaven in disbelief of his obtuseness. "I know. I've been *telling* you that for four years."

"Well, I may be a little slow, but I think I've finally got it." His eyes laughed at her.

"Vincent, you're marvelous at making love, and when you're not scared of hurting me you're even better!" Having recovered somewhat from exhaustion, she raised herself up on her elbows. "I think that your apprehension about this 'animal' position was a good thing. You were so excited by it when you finally got to do it that you lost all your inhibitions. You just went into it with your whole heart, and that was the best thing that could have happened. How would we ever have known that you were holding anything back if you hadn't let go that one time?"

"Was I holding back? Yes... yes, I was. I didn't realize... but when I think about what just happened... it was different, wasn't it? Better?"

She nodded. "Better! I loved it; it felt to me like you were only feeling, not thinking at all... then I quit thinking myself. It was so wonderful. We were just two people loving each other and loving what our bodies do together. Oh, Vincent, it was so lovely... talking about it isn't enough... let's do it again..."

His body moved over hers and his mouth reached for hers, hunger unabated, and in a few minutes both were gasping again. This time the excitement and the freedom were there without his being behind her. He looked down into her eyes and growled as the arousal built and multiplied and grew to unbearable heights, before spilling over into a starburst of passionate emotion and physical sensation, and a long delicious slide into exhaustion.

After long moments of silence as both recovered, Vincent said softly, wonder in his voice. "I wouldn't have believed that it could get any better."

"Me either. It did, though!" She smiled at him with her love in her eyes. Then her expression became serious. "I *love* it when you're not afraid, when you hold nothing back, Vincent. I've been so sorry that you were apprehensive of hurting me; it was *bound* to detract from your pleasure. But I think you're finally learning to trust yourself, to trust your love for me. That's the best anniversary present I could ever have!"

His arms tightened around her. "I believe that I have learned, finally. Catherine, my love for you is so overwhelming, it takes precedence over any other feeling. It... it rules my actions completely." He stopped for a moment, examining these new feelings, new ideas, feeling his way to the truths buried there. "Violence is intensity, expressed in a negative way. Whatever impulse to violence I have is channeled through my love for you, and comes out the other side as a...a loving, *positive* intensity, a compulsion to make our lovemaking... so complete, that you take the most possible pleasure from your body, and from mine pleasuring yours."

As he stopped speaking his mouth began to move over her face, kissing her softly, and her hand came up to stroke the side of his face.

They laid quietly then, pressed together, Vincent's arms enclosing Catherine in a tender protective embrace as they floated in a warm sea of satisfaction and happy contentment. After a few minutes, tired out from both a long day and the intensity of their lovemaking, they both drifted off to sleep.

Vincent woke sometime toward morning, to find the last light of the moon shedding its beams through the window, to cover the bed in a lambent shower of soft light. He gazed enthralled at the sight; he'd never slept in a bath of moonlight before. *So many things, so much that I've never experienced, and never thought to.* He turned his head to look down at Catherine, sleeping quietly, and a wordless prayer of thanks went up from him for this lovely woman who had made his life into something entirely new. *It's been a long and arduous journey, but I've come at its end to this marvelous woman who is my mate, and to our home, and to this new life.*

As if in answer to his thoughts Catherine opened her eyes, to see tears on his face. "...My love?" Her hand came up to touch his cheek, smoothing them away.

"It's only that I'm so happy, so content to be where I am... and what I am. Catherine, we have come so far. So many chances taken, and so many happy hours to reward us for those odds dared." He stopped for a moment, thinking. "So many journeys! Journeys of the body and of the soul, to bring us here, to this moment. When I look back on what I was before you came into my life, I can't believe how far I've come. When you came to me, I thought that I would be on the outside forever, only looking in on your warmth and your love... and your body... oh that too! And then, even when I knew that you loved, that your love for me was real, I thought...I thought that you would be repelled by the idea of physical contact between us." He moved closer to her, and tightened his arms. "This is so far beyond anything I dreamed..." He reached down to kiss her. "I am so blessed, to have come finally to this place, the journey over, at rest at last." Renewed tears came to his eyes.

"Oh, my love, I too am blessed." Catherine's arms closed around him. "I thought sometimes that it would never happen, that your fears for me would keep us forever apart." She smiled up at him. "And now we start a new journey, Vincent."

"Oh, yes, a lifetime journey... but now we are together, truly together at last." He smiled down on her in return, answering her happiness with his own.

They lay there for a long time, talking quietly, remembering the past and making plans for the future. And while they talked the sun came up, and the splendor of sunlight laid a blessing on their bed, their home, and their new life together.

The End

The author apologizes for any remarks about African countries that are inaccurate or otherwise unfair. Put it down to ignorance; I've never been there, and I hope you will allow me artistic license to facilitate the movement of my story. Thank you.

