

BLACK COVER

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

(edited)

by M. LOUIS

"Your face..." Vincent exclaimed softly, incredulously.

"They fixed it," Catherine replied as he stared at her.

"Yes..." He agreed backing away from her.

"Come inside," Catherine suggested gently, reaching for his arm.

"No..." Vincent replied, drawing away. "I have to go now..."

"No, don't!" She pleaded.

*Whirling from her he exclaimed, "I should **NEVER** have come here!"*

"Vincent!" She countered rushing after him and taking his arm. "I'm glad you did..."

Vincent sighed and closed his eyes, laying back on his bed, his trembling hands folded across his chest. He had been thinking about the conversation this evening when after eight months, he finally *had* to see Catherine again. But now his breath quickened and his heart pounded as he remembered another time in his life. It had been so long since he allowed himself to think of the happiest and the most heartbreaking passage in his past and he shifted his legs uncomfortably as his arousal awakened at the memories. Vincent wondered now, *will Catherine ever recall him, even in her dreams?*

The first time he had seen her it was so many years ago and it was dark. He was always hidden in the shadows lit by candlelight. Afterwards Vincent had continued to conceal himself in the shadows or his cloak when he went to her, never allowing her to have anything but candlelight when he was near. Vincent had only revealed himself entirely to her once all those years back, in the plush penthouse where she held her meetings with him. In those passionate times, he didn't know her as Catherine, he had called her *Belle...*

The alarm clock went off noisily. She reached over from under the covers to shut it off and her arm dropped back to the bed. The man beside her raised up, stretching and yawning groggily turning to the now asleep form beside him. He leaned over her and gently brushed the black hair from her forehead whispering, "Good Morning, Leandra!" He put his lips to her ear adding, "Wakey, wakey."

She groaned and replied almost mumbling, "Wakey my butt! Go away!"

The man chuckled and rose beginning to ready himself to leave as she rolled over again, pulling the covers over her head and resumed her sleep. When he was finished dressing, he gathered his briefcase and overnight bag moving to the door. He paused at the penthouse door and gazed back to the sleeping woman, shook his head smiling warmly, "See you next time I'm in town, Leandra."

"Yeah..." was the unenthusiastic reply, and the man left her alone, closing the door quietly behind him. She moved again, pulling covers back down from her head, glancing sleepily to her alarm clock. Her eyes widened. "**Dammit!**" She exclaimed and leapt out of bed, pulling the black wig from her head and shaking her own dark blond tresses down. She rushed to the bathroom crying out again, "**Dammit!**"

Catherine flew into her office, past the receptionist's hurried "*Good morning, Miss Chandler!*" and sat down at her desk. She promptly opened her briefcase and pulled out the files she was to work on for the day. Catherine hoped her father was in a meeting or at court so he wouldn't find out she was late again this week. Just as she thought she had a reprieve, the door to her office opened and Charles Chandler walked in, an expression of concern on his face.

Catherine smiled at him. "Hi, Dad."

Charles frowned and replied, "Hi yourself. You're late again."

Catherine shrugged and started stacking her files neatly replying, "I had a late dinner..."

"I'll say you did!" Her father exclaimed and sat down in front of her desk. "The doorman said you never came home."

Rolling her eyes Catherine sighed, "I thought when I got my own place, you were going to stop '*mother-henning*' me, Dad?"

Charles crossed his legs and watched his daughter speculatively. "I'm just concerned about you, Cathy. You've been different since you've gotten out of school for the summer and come here to work. You've been coming in late almost every day. Anytime I try to call you at home, there's no answer, we never have dinner together anymore..."

Catherine peered at him and smiled sweetly, tilting her head a little. "Is *that* what's bothering you? How about tonight then?"

Charles frowned again at her. Rubbing his chin in contemplation he replied, "No...that's not it..." Then he seemed to have difficulty putting his thoughts together as she shifted in her seat uncomfortably.

Catherine watched him, her green eyes wide and innocent as she waited for him to continue. When he said nothing more she asked, "Is it a date then?"

"I can't tonight, Kitten," he finally said and stood up. "I'm just wondering what you've been doing with yourself lately. That's all..."

"I'm *fine*, Dad!" Catherine exclaimed with a chuckle. "Really, I am!" Then she opened a file that was sitting before her adding, "I really have to get to work now, Dad. I have a conference at 10:00am."

Her father smiled at her somewhat dubiously and rose to his feet. "Okay then, how about tomorrow night for dinner?"

"It's a date!" Catherine exclaimed with a smile. He nodded his head, still with some apprehension in his eyes and left her alone. Blowing out her breath with relief, Catherine picked up the file she had opened and saw a message lying under it that she had missed when she came in. It said for her to meet a friend of hers named '*Merlin*' at a certain restaurant for lunch.

Must have a job for me, she thought and she took the piece of paper crumbling it quickly. Instead of tossing it into her waste basket, she stuffed it in her purse. She went back to the file at hand and began jotting down notes for her morning conference.

Catherine stepped out of the cab and peered around. She didn't see Merlin at first, then she heard a whistle and turned toward a small 'Coney Island' restaurant. She saw his tall, lanky frame standing in the doorway waving at her and she approached him with a smile, extending her hand to him.

"Merlin!" she said congenially as he took her hand. "You have something for me?"

"I do." He replied in his thick, Australian accent. He opened the door to the restaurant for her and allowed her through as he continued, "Someone new. It's a rather special person though."

Catherine glanced around the eatery and wrinkled her nose at it. "I hope this place isn't an indication of what to expect?"

Merlin laughed easily and led her to a table, pulling a chair out for her as she sat. He took the seat across from her and replied, "I've never set ya up with a bum 'ave I, luv?"

Catherine smiled and shook her head, shrugging. "No 'bums' anyway... What have you got?"

"A friend of mine," Merlin replied as his face grew serious. "A very *special* friend."

Catherine could sense the gravity of his words and realized that it was indeed a special case.

"What? Is he in some sort of trouble?" She asked frowning at him.

"Oh no, luv," Merlin replied immediately, holding a hand up. "Nothing of the sort!" He rubbed his chin then and said to her, "He's different."

"Different?" Catherine asked in confusion. "How?"

Merlin seemed to have trouble with his words then. "He's not like everyone," he shook his head and added, "he's a rather shy individual."

A slow smile came to Catherine's face then and she asked seductively, "Why? Do you mean you want me to show him...*how*?"

Then she burst out laughing though Merlin sat there very quietly, glaring at her with his steely grey eyes. Catherine glanced at him and saw the seriousness of his expression.

She said in a quieter voice, "Oh Merlin! Lighten up will you? You act like this is your son or something!"

Merlin shook his head slowly. "That's the trouble with ya, luv. You come to think of life as a big stinkin' joke! I know you're not in this for the money! People don't mean a damned thing to ya anymore!"

Catherine frowned at him with injury retorting, "Hey, I treat my clients to what they deserve!" She shrugged her shoulders. "Not that money means much to me - but they get what they pay for!"

"This lad *hasn't* any money," Merlin said sternly. ***But I want you to treat him like he's the richest man in the world.***"

Sighing wearily Catherine rolled her eyes replying, "Okay. A freebie for you, Merlin. But *only* for you!"

Merlin's eyes smiled at her now and he reached over the table taking her hand. "That's the spirit, luv! Now don't ya be surprising me mate with any of your wild tactics. Save them for your other clients."

"Okay."

"And another thing," Merlin added as she was standing up. She looked to him curiously as he

said, "He won't be showing his face or hands to ya and candlelight is the only lighting to be there. He probably won't let ya touch him either."

Catherine stared at him with puzzlement. "He's *that* shy?"

Merlin chuckled and nodded his head. "He's *that* shy, Cat'."

Catherine smiled and shrugged again. "Okay," she winked at him and added seductively. "Send him over..."

Catherine lit only four red candles in the plush penthouse she had been renting and paying for with her night *'job'*. She went to her dressing table and sat down before it to check her makeup. What she saw in the mirror was a stranger. She wore a wig of long raven black hair and though she normally wore little makeup to work, tonight she had it applied as if her face were a piece of artwork. She stared at the long, thin silver flares that swept from her eyes to her hairline, high-lighted with a slight dusting of golden powder. Her cheeks were rouged in copper, outlining her bone structure giving her a look of gauntness, yet elegance. She traced her lips carefully with a blood-red color, bringing out their fullness.

Catherine put on a gold lame dress, one shoulder and arm fully exposed, the material swept up to her other shoulder across her breasts and down her other arm fully covering it. It was ankle length and split up one leg, fully exposing the shapeliness of it. The only jewelry she wore was a single bracelet on her bare wrist, made of fine gold chain with diamonds sprinkled along it as if they were dew drops upon her skin. She looked like an Egyptian queen.

Sitting before the mirror staring into it, she waited for the strange young friend of Merlin's to appear. Tonight, there was something different. Catherine couldn't quite put her finger on it, but instead of the usual feeling of carefree expectation that accompanied the night's activities, the occasion actually felt solemn to her. Shaking her head, Catherine rose from the table. She was about to slip on a pair of silver, spiked heels but stopped. For some reason, she wanted to do without shoes tonight and she walked across the fine Persian rug barefoot, checking everything to see that it was in order.

Merlin had told her very little of the man who was to come to her. She didn't even know his name and for some reason of her own, everything *had* to have some meaning tonight. Catherine looked at herself in the full length mirror and worried that she may have over dressed, then she worried that she wasn't impressive enough. She chuckled aloud and turned away from the image. *Why did she want to impress this stranger who she was told would not even show his face to her?*

"He's probably a little wimpy nerd," she said aloud, "with a complexion that would shame the Andes!"

Suddenly she heard a soft swishing noise as if the bushes planted upon the terrace had been passed through with cloth and her heart began racing in terror. *What could be out there 24 stories up?* Catherine turned in fright toward the opened terrace doors and froze, her voice caught in her throat. There loomed a shadow, a large shape of a man in a hooded cloak.

"I frightened you," she heard a gentle, slightly raspy low voice say. "I'm sorry."

Catherine nodded her head slowly, staring at the imposing figure swallowing, "You know Merlin?" She was finally able to ask.

"Yes."

Catherine started to relax and said softly, "I know you didn't come here for the usual reasons men come to me." She took two hesitant steps toward the shadow. "Why *are* you here?"

She saw the head lower and shake slowly.

"I... I have few dreams... I wish to share one with... you."

The voice was entrancing her and she moved closer yet. She could just see the dancing flames of the candles in sky blue eyes when he raised a gloved hand.

"Do not come any closer!" He said quietly but it was not a request. His words had a curious slight lisp, and made her think of velvet and steel.

Catherine backed away slowly and held her hand out in welcoming. "Then come inside."

She turned and moved to a table setting of fruit and wine. She picked up the bottle of wine and poured two glasses not looking back at him wondering if he would follow her. When she turned back toward him, he was inside the penthouse peering around it curiously. In the dim light she could see that his cloak looked as if it were from medieval times. The air of the stranger was that of one of its contemporaries.

"This dream of yours," she began quietly, surprising herself that her voice hadn't took on the usual mocking flare that she normally used with her clients. Instead it was soft, almost child-like in its softness as she continued, "am I in this dream?"

He turned back to her and she heard him whisper, "Yes..."

Catherine was again startled at the fact that her heart leapt with joy at his response. "Who am I in it?" she asked in a small voice.

He sighed softly and replied, "You are what you are inside. You are... Belle."

"Belle?" She repeated in a whisper, then asked him in sincerity, "and you are..." She stopped herself before she said it, realizing she may hurt this giant, though seemingly fragile being before her.

"Say it!" he commanded her.

"La Bête..." she finished, her voice sliding into a sigh of awe. Catherine couldn't believe how this man was affecting her! Her pulse was quickened, her skin was prickling, and even without fully seeing him, she knew he was probably the most beautiful creature she had ever laid eyes on! She approached him again, pleading in a soft voice. "Please? Let me see your face?"

"NO!" His reply was abrupt as he backed away from her. He turned and started quickly toward the terrace doors.

Catherine's mind shouted *NO! Don't go!* - and to her surprise, he stopped. It was as if he had heard her!

He turned back to her slowly and she said aloud, "I promise. I won't come near you. Please?"

Approaching her slowly he moved to the small table near her. He sat down and once again she saw the color of blue sapphire reflecting in his eyes as he watched her. She set a glass of wine before him but he didn't take it. Catherine took her own glass and began walking around him taking slow, deliberate steps. She was fully aware of his eyes studying her, following the flowing lines of her dress that seemed to cling to her body like liquid fire in the candlelight. She paused for a moment, her one leg fully-exposed from the slit in the dress, and she could see his eyes following the line of it.

"Tonight is your night, La Bête," she said in a soft, sultry voice that was not mocking but was sincerely seductive. She saw the hooded head raise up from the sight of her leg and those eyes looked into hers. "Whatever you wish..." she whispered.

"I wish to touch you," he said, his voice trembling slightly and he slowly raised a gloved hand.

"Come to me," he beckoned holding his hand out to her.

Catherine walked slowly over to him and stood before him, expecting and waiting for his hand to touch a breast. Instead his hand gently took one of hers, the one with the bracelet of scattered diamonds and to her surprise, he lifted it to his hidden face and bowed his head over it. She felt the soft, warmth of his breath against her skin then a startlingly gentle touch of his lips against the back of her hand, his whiskers brushing against her skin gently, the feel of caressing down coming to mind.

Catherine shivered involuntarily and her hand grasped this gloved one gently, feeling the velvet covering over large bones. He allowed her this much contact but pulled away. He sighed with a shuddering breath standing up slowly. Almost ponderously, he turned toward the terrace doors and began walking toward them, his head bowed. "Wait!" She called with some desperation. "Is that *all* to your dream?"

He stopped with his back to her and she could see his head shake slowly as he answered, "No... there was much more, Belle..." and he continued out.

Rushing behind him Catherine grasped the back of his cloak and pleaded, "Please, tell me!"

He shook his head again and replied, "I must go..." He walked out on the terrace as she slowly released the fabric of his cloak, watching him fade away, blending into the night...

Catherine sat at her desk in her office, her mind far away from the work at hand and wondered. *He wasn't like anyone she had ever met before in her life! He was there for only a short period of time then he was gone like a shadow in a dream.* And she *did* dream of him last night after he left. Catherine had stayed on the terrace staring into the night for a long time after he vanished, trying to convince herself he hadn't been just her romantic imagination running wild. He had been the medieval prince of her dreams.

Finally she returned inside and took the phone off the hook so as to not be disturbed. Everything seemed trivial after his presence and she didn't want the warm, thrilling sensation of his being there to be interrupted. Catherine went to bed alone for the first time in months and dreamed of him. Dreamed of his hands, the soft downy feeling of his lips on hers, the feeling of that down extending over his entire body as he laid on top of her and gently penetrated her, their souls joining as they became one complete being...

Her phone rang. Catherine picked it up slowly and said automatically. "Cathy Chandler."

"Hey, luv?" She heard Merlin's chipper voice. "How was me mate last night?"

"Who?" She asked, almost hypnotized.

"Hey, wake up, Cat?"

"Oh!" Catherine said quickly, coming back to earth. "Your friend? I don't know..." she replied and frowned. "He didn't stay very long."

"I didn't think he would." Merlin replied with a chuckle and added, "I have someone else lined up..."

"No!" She said quickly then added softly, "Not tonight, please! What if he comes again?"

There was a long pause over the phone as Merlin contemplated her reaction then he said softly, "I doubt that he will, luv."

"I can only hope." Catherine said softly. "Please, Merlin! Just tonight? If he doesn't come back, I'll be convinced."

"Convinced?" Merlin asked gently. "Convinced of what?"

“That it was only a dream,” she replied with a tightness in her voice, “then it’ll be business as usual.”

“No problem, luv,” Merlin said in a quiet voice. “You need a night off anyway. Talk to you tomorrow, then.”

“Thanks, Merl,” Catherine said, and laid the phone into its cradle. Now *why* did she do that?

Catherine glanced to the wall clock with anxiety, wishing the day would go quicker! So she could return to the penthouse and find out La Bête was only a figment of her over-active imagination. So she could return to her own secret life again of parties, luxury and passionless love making. Passionless. It was what it had become and she always thought it would be, until *he* came into her life. The gentle touch of his lips to her hand was the single most passionate moment in her life and she trembled at the memory of it. But he left almost as quickly as he arrived. Catherine stared at the clock again biting her lip. Then trembling at the thought of his lips on her hand, she tried to resume her work...

Catherine was at the penthouse five days in a row, awaiting the return of the stranger in the cloak, but he didn’t come. And after another two days she was convinced he was over-dramatized in her helplessly romantic mind. He couldn’t possibly have been *that* magnetic!

She kept her promise to Merlin of *‘business as usual’* and resumed the secret life she had been keeping from all who knew her as the squeaky clean *‘Catherine Chandler, Law Student.’* She became *‘Leandra Belle,’* assuming the last name of that which La Bête had given her. It was all she had left of him, besides the memory of his velvety kiss upon her hand.

One night, some time later, she was prepared to meet with one of her clients, in fact one she found especially interesting because he had an especially *‘kinky’* appetite. She dressed for the occasion, turning the lights very low and lighting some scented candles in the penthouse. She was wearing only a black lacy garter belt and nylons, black leather gloves and spiked boots, a black cambre camisole and her wig.

She sat before her dressing table and was applying the finishing touch to the make-up that took away the clean, innocent appearance of *‘Cathy Chandler, Charles Chandler’s Daughter’*, when her phone rang. She answered it and to her disappointment her *‘date’* had to beg off, explaining he had an unexpected visitor he must attend to.

Catherine hung up the phone and chewed her lip in anger. “Probably his wife!” she said in a mocking tone. Sighing disgustedly, she sat on a wicker chair one leg crooked over the arm of it casually, the other stretched out before her. She began to pull on the gloves to remove them when she heard the sound of bushes parting again as she did that one night weeks ago. Catherine froze instinctively and slowly looked to the terrace doors. The tall shadow of La Bête fell across the curtains and began pacing back and forth as if in indecision.

Catherine’s heart began to race. “Hello?” she called apprehensively to the terrace.

The shadow stilled, turned her way and approached the opened door slowly.

She saw a gloved hand reach out parting the curtain and his silky-textured voice said, “I am disturbing you?”

“No. I’m not expecting company any more tonight.” Catherine replied with a sigh, returning her eyes to her hands and finished removing the gloves.

She began casually swinging the leg draped over the arm of the chair back and forth. Glancing back up to him she saw him standing there in the doorway, the reflection of the

candles dancing in his blue eyes, his gloved hands clenching and unclenching into fists as he watched her.

Suddenly, Catherine was sorely aware of her appearance before him, how, dressed as she was and sitting in such a way that was very revealing to her womanhood, she must be affecting him. Slowly she smiled at him and she could tell he was struggling with himself, by the hesitant way he stood there, unsure if he should enter.

“Come in, La Bête,” she called softly to him, standing up slowly.

Catherine wasn't sure if he had heard her, but he had already entered and was walking to the table he'd sat at that the first time, almost collapsing into the chair, a gloved hand over his heart. She approached him and began walking around him slowly, watching his bowed, hooded head and hearing soft gasps coming from him.

“I affect you,” she said softly, her voice low and seductive, “don't I?”

“Yes...,” was his weak reply.

Catherine moved close to him and stood in front of him, her barely-clothed body within reach of his trembling hands. In the brighter lighting she could see what he wore was not quite the medieval clothing she once thought. It was actually patch-work of old clothing, jeans patched and padded at the knees, his shirt and vest were sewed together remnants of discarded sweaters, the cloak looked as if it had been combined of old blankets and leather. His boots appeared handmade, especially for him. The combination of all this was strangely attractive on him. As he bowed his head, she saw a long, golden lock of hair fall out of the hood and drape upon his shoulder.

Catherine saw his head nod once, then he reached up and pulled the hood lower over his head. He slowly raised his eyes to her. She could see even in the shadowing of the hood, his almond-shaped, sapphire blue eyes were dark with desire, and in them there was something she had never seen in a man's eyes before... a hint of something feral. She began to tremble slightly. Within him, she sensed a primitive savageness that he held under tight control, and his hands trembled as she heard what sounded like the beginnings of a growl escape him.

Catherine felt a stirring in her loins and suddenly wanted this man as she never wanted anyone before. She wanted to awaken that bestial thing she saw within the gentle man. She wanted him to take her. Not for him to ask - but take. Catherine pulled a chair around in front of him and slowly lifted a leg upon it, again exposing her femaleness to him and she saw his eyes look to her quickly then he turned his head away.

“Why don't you want to look?” she asked him in a firm voice.

“I do...,” he replied somewhat breathlessly, his voice trembling then he shook his head saying, “This was for someone else, was it not?”

Catherine sighed wearily and demanded, “So what if it was? He's not coming tonight and here I am dressed to go and nobody to blow.”

Catherine could almost feel him wince at her crude statement and he gasped softly.

He shook his head again. “This is not really you.”

“Maybe... but you like it,” she said softly, bending down slightly and saw his eyes looking into hers. “Don't you?”

“I do...,” he finally admitted with a heavy sigh.

“Why did you come here?” She demanded of him, her eyes still holding his. “Was it to finish up what you came for the last time you were here? Do you want to get laid?”

He turned away again replying, “That was not why I came to you then, not why I come to you

now.”

“Then what?” She queried with genuine curiosity.

“I like you,” he answered simply.

Catherine lowered her leg and stared at him incredulously, his reply completely throwing her off guard.

“Like me?” she asked softly, her voice fading out.

“Yes,” he replied nodding his hooded head slowly. “I *do* know of prostitutes, I am friends with many of them... out on the streets.” Then he inclined his head and continued, “I am not so very naive as you think, Belle.”

“But I thought...,” she stammered and tried again. “I thought...,” she tried - but failed.

“You thought I came to you,” he said with some mirth now in his roughly smooth voice, “as you so aptly put it, to *‘get laid’*?”

Catherine could only nod her head, her usual cynical composure now shattered. She gazed at him and started walking again slowly in front of him saying to him.

“I want you to *want* me.”

“I do...” She heard his soft reply, then gave a fractured sigh.

Even with his unhesitating admission, Catherine felt like she was trying to seduce a monk. He had regained his composure quickly and his constitution never wavered. His honesty with her was startling. She felt some satisfaction however, that he was not all so calm as he appeared, as she saw his hands trembling, then he steadied them and folded them over his lap, hiding the evidence of his arousal.

“Then you have been with a woman before?” She asked as she paced slowly in front of him.

“No,” he replied with a quiet voice, shaking his hooded head slowly. “Not in the way you think.”

“You mean you have *no* experience at all?” Catherine asked incredulously.

He shrugged his huge shoulders. “I know how to give a woman pleasure.” He bowed his head. “I have done it before... for a girl I once loved, and others. I am familiar with the pleasures the hands and mouth can bring to a woman.”

“But what about *your* pleasure?”

Sighing again he replied, “Sometimes... I can feel what others are feeling... I can actually feel the sensations I bring to a woman.” He shrugged again. “Sometimes it is enough.”

Catherine shook her head. “What about the prostitutes?”

“They are friends,” he replied, and his eyes raised to hers again. “I... am different... too different, for a closer relationship with a woman.”

His statement tore at Catherine’s heart somehow and she wondered *how could it be?* He was probably the most attractive man she had *never* seen and now she wondered if it was they who were rejecting him, or he who was rejecting them, convinced that he was too different. That he would be willing to *give* pleasure to a woman and get secondary sensations from it, but not *receive* it directly?

Catherine sauntered her nearly nude body in front of him. “Tell me what you are feeling,” she asked him gently.

He sighed gazing at her body, his hands ever so slightly raised as if to reach to her. He replied in a strained voice.

"I wish to make love to you. I want to join with you. I want to know the sensation of being a part... of you."

Catherine narrowed her eyes at him. "You really mean that," she said softly in astonishment, standing before him. "You're not just talking about getting laid, are you? You mean joining with... *me*. Don't you?"

Nodding, his eyes returned to her flat belly then lowered to her thighs. Catherine was overwhelmed with his sincere statement and moved close to him. She reached to place her hands gently on his massive shoulders.

Finally, as if his hands moved of their own volition, he did reach for her, gently grasping her hips, then boldly pressing his concealed face into the soft lace of her camisole, his hands trembling. She felt rather than heard, a soft rumbling begin in him, his lips gently moving beneath the camisole, rubbing against the skin of her midriff. He moved his head lower to the dark hair between her legs and she felt the gentle whisper of his breath as he inhaled the scent of her, startling her slightly when he nuzzled there and felt his tongue slip between the pink folds of skin her hair concealed, gently tasting the gathering moisture there. He exhaled softly against her.

She knew it was totally instinctive and natural for him, what he had just done... and it was totally seductive. Catherine felt her skin prickle, as he affected her in this unfamiliar way again, and her legs became weak.

"La Bête ...," she said to him in almost a whisper, her voice not being capable of much more. Slowly she slipped to her knees before him as his hands slid up her shoulders. She pressed her face against the bulge in his jeans where his arousal was trapped. Gently, slowly, so as not to startle him, she took hold of the fastenings and began to release them as she felt him tense, his hands hesitantly moving to hers, gently grasping them.

"You mustn't...", he whispered, his voice now strained with apprehension.

Catherine shook her head, pushing his hands away. Then his erection was freed. She gazed at it for a moment, studying the almost golden color of his skin there, rubbing her cheek against the silky skin, drawing in the scent of him, which reminded her of fresh sandalwood and spices, as he trembled, reaching to restrain her. Before he could stop her, Catherine took him into her mouth, gently surrounding the tip of his hardness with her lips. Then she caressed him with her tongue, wanting him also to know what pleasures the hands and mouth could bring.

His head whipped back as his entire body tensed. Then he hesitantly placed his hands upon her head as she gently began to move up and down on him. He started to breath in pants, his chest heaving, his shoulders bending forward until his cheek was against her head. He wanted to stop her, she knew, but was unable to as she continued her ministrations of him with her lips and tongue, even against the restrictions of his arms and chest. Catherine could taste him as his hardness quickly filled to the point of release, his taste being of spices and salt, and he moaned helplessly, leaning onto her, his huge trembling arms wrapped around her shoulders in passion now, no longer trying to restrain her. She began moving her lips and tongue up and down on him again with fervor.

She felt him passionately kissing the top of her head, nuzzling into her hair, breathing in her scent as she gently sucked his hardness until it seemed to strain in its own skin. She raised up slightly taking his hardness into her hand and started to lick the sensitive head of his erection as he gasped and gripped her shoulders, rubbing his hands there, groaning softly, his body doing spasms from the overwhelming sensations she was giving him. Catherine's one hand moved up and down the length of him and she gently sucked the tip of him. Her

other hand gently pushed into the restriction of his jeans and grasped the soft, seemingly fur-covered skin below his erection, massaging him gently until he moaned again, his head leaned back, his breathing quickening.

Catherine peered up at him and could only see the underside of his chin, his golden whiskers glinting in the candlelight, his massive, heaving chest, his supple neck as she saw him swallowing.

Suddenly, she stopped her movements. He sat very still, breathing hard as his hands squeezed her shoulders. Still holding onto his hardness, she awaited his reaction and he seemed to be struggling within himself. Finally he leaned down to her, his hands rubbing her shoulders gently.

He pressed his lips against her hair, whispering in anguish, "Please... *don't stop!*"

Closing her eyes, Catherine began moving up and down again on his erection with her lips and tongue, feeling even more pleasure in doing this for him after the appeal was torn from him. His gasping pants turned into hoarse groans as his hands entangled into her hair and moved with her, his knees pressing into her sides tightly... she felt his erection harden for the final drive. His fists clenched into her hair spasmodically and he suddenly climaxed in a burst of hot fluid. His cry was a curious combination of a roar of a large cat and the anguish of a man. Catherine's hands gripped the base of him and he filled her mouth in pulses as she swallowed, then gently licked the areas clean with her tongue where his seed had overrun.

When Catherine was finished, she heard him breathing in gasps that were almost sobs, his gloved hands gently caressing her hair, her cheeks and her chin.

Sighing heavily, he wrapped his arms around her and held her to himself tightly, she felt him trembling as she pressed into his chest and he kissed the top of her head. Catherine had begun to tremble herself as she leaned weakly into him, the sensation of tearing such a passionate reaction from the gentle stranger overwhelmed her. Her hands gently caressed his muscular thighs and she felt them quiver beneath her palms.

Finally he gently pushed her away from him, steadied her own shaking and again caressed her face gently with his gloved hand. Reluctantly he released her, slowly rising to his feet and turning from her, rearranging his jeans as he did. Catherine remained on the floor speechless as he walked with hesitation toward the terrace, pausing only for a moment. Then once again he disappeared into the night...

More than two weeks after that night, Catherine's gentle visitor had not returned to her at the penthouse. Merlin had finally quit calling Catherine. After the second week she had refused any clients, and the last time she saw him, he wished her good luck, a happy future.

"You're not cut out for this sort of thing anyway, luv!" He had told her then gently kissed her on the forehead.

"Merlin," she called softly, as he walked away from her. He turned back to her and she asked tensely, "Would you tell him?"

He peered at her curiously and queried, "Tell him you've quit?"

Catherine nodded her head slowly and added hesitantly, "And that I won't be doing that sort of thing anymore?"

Merlin smiled gently at her and nodded his head. "No worries, luv."

Every night Catherine would dream of warm caresses and the downy soft feel of his body on hers. The gentle touch of his lips and hands, the taste and scent of him, the color of his

sapphire blue eyes, filled with desire and she would awaken to emptiness and aloneness. And though she had only encountered him twice, sometimes she would cry because she missed him so, fearing that she may have been too bold with him in his last visit. Then three weeks had gone by. Catherine, out of loneliness and frustration had called an old client of hers and he gladly accepted an appointment with her.

The evening had started out well enough, her old composure finally returning as she laughed and danced with him from nightclub to nightclub. Then late into the night, they returned to her penthouse. All went well until she and her companion were inside the room.

Somehow, the man's presence in this place where the young stranger had been, as well as *what* she was about to do with her companion here, had taken on an absurdness and seemed almost like a desecration. It was like doing a strip-tease in a church.

For her, the room had taken on almost a reverence after the gentle stranger had held her with such real and tempestuous passion, after she felt his release in that same room, over a month ago. Catherine cut the evening short, almost shrieking at the man who was with her not to touch her. When the man asked what was wrong, in genuine confusion, she begged the oldest excuse in the world of *'having a headache'*. Her companion knew she was lying and left in a huff, promising no more business from him, or any of his friends who used to frequent her boudoir.

Now, Catherine laid on the bed of the penthouse alone, two months after the cloaked stranger had enchanted her life and she waited. She was dressed in a simple, soft terrycloth jump suit, her face made up lightly and she listened toward the opened terrace. Every sound she heard from the terrace, every movement of the bushes made her heart leap in expectation and she would look to the opened doors in anticipation. Then her heart would drop in disappointment when she saw it was only the wind. Thinking of his voice and the feel of his lips once again, she finally fell to sleep.

Catherine was dreaming of gentle breezes blowing across her skin, her hair flowing lightly over her forehead like gentle, warm fingers brushing her skin and she sighed softly, nuzzling into the warm cloth on the body next to her. She inhaled the scent of leather, of candlewax and smoke, then of fresh sandalwood and spices... and tears came to her eyes. Catherine sobbed aloud and opened her eyes, her heart aching with loneliness and sorrow. Loneliness, because she missed him and his curious honesty. Sorrow for the gentle spirit trapped within the prison of his body and nature.

Why, her heart cried out, *WHY had he wanted her to call him of all people a beast?!* Catherine knew she must have still been dreaming when she looked into those sky blue eyes twinkling down at her, the hood of the cloak shadowing his face. She began crying in despair, not wanting the dream to end as she grasped the cloak and felt his huge, warm arms embrace her.

"I'm here, Belle..." She heard his gentle voice whisper and he brushed her hair from her forehead again repeating, "I'm here, Belle..."

Catherine became fully awake, her eyes widened as she saw him sitting by her.

"You're here?" she said in astonishment.

She could only see the nodding of his hooded head... but his arms were around her! Catherine sighed softly and leaned into his embrace. She felt his lips brush her forehead in a gentle kiss.

"La Bête," Catherine whispered and pressed her face into his shoulder.

"But you don't think so," he said to her in his voice of silk and gravel.

"No. I don't." Catherine replied and reached up toward his face.

He drew back abruptly and she settled for gently touching a length of long golden hair spilling out from his hood. She heard an intake of breath from him and he released it slowly as she caressed him through what seemed many layers of clothing.

"Why won't you let me see you?" she asked him in a small voice, the child-like innocence returning to it again she found.

He shook his head and replied quietly, "I would rather remain as I am in your dreams."

"You know of my dreams?"

"Yes."

Catherine swallowed uneasily, then slowly reached around his massive shoulders, gently grasping them and pulling him down to lay on her. He drew back at first resisting such an intimate move then he surrendered, helpless to the touch of her hands. He laid his head upon her breasts and Catherine began to gently stroke his hair, reaching under the hood and pushing it away from his face.

There were no lights on inside the penthouse and it was cloudy outside, making the place almost pitch-dark. She felt him trembling in her arms, then he relaxed somewhat and nuzzled into the open V of her jump suit between her breasts. Once again she felt the softness of down on her skin. Catherine continued to caress his silky, golden hair, then her hands reached to his shoulders gently. She could feel the sheer size of him, the powerful muscles moving under her palms as she moved them to his back. Sighing quietly, he hesitantly stretched out beside her on the bed, pressing his clothed body against hers. She felt the roughness of the cloth, the feeling of his warm hard body and she was filled with a passion and longing of a magnitude that she had never experienced before.

Suddenly, he lifted his head and she could only see the silhouette of his thickly maned head against the dimly lit background of the city from her terrace. But she knew he was looking at her, studying her face.

"You... *want* me?!" he whispered incredulously.

"Yes," Catherine replied softly, breathlessly.

"Why?" he asked anxiously, his trembling beginning again.

Catherine sighed and touched his hair gently, running a lock of it through her fingers. "I have... few dreams of my own..."

"And you wish to share them," he said with hesitation, "with *me*?"

"I do." Catherine saw his head bow and shake slowly as he braced himself over her, his hands on either side of her body as if he refused to believe her. She reached up to touch his face again and he grasped her wrist gently in his powerful hand and she realized that tonight he wasn't wearing any gloves. The feel of his warm skin sent shivers through her.

"No," he said and gently laid her hand aside. "You must not touch me."

Catherine sighed softly and brought her hand back from him. He began to move away from her.

"I shouldn't have come here again..." he said as he started to rise.

Catherine desperately reached for him and clung to his cloak, saying almost harshly, "Why *did* you come to me tonight? If you can't accept that I *could* desire you?"

He sat back down by her and shrugged his massive shoulders. "I don't know," he replied quietly then turned his head back to her and said to her in a low voice. "Because I haven't

been able to get you out of my mind... and because I felt your loneliness." He sighed heavily and continued, "I do not want you to feel the way I..." He trailed off.

"The way you do?" she asked quietly. "Is that what you were going to say?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you leaving now?"

He watched her quietly for a long moment as if searching for an answer then finally replied. "I don't want you having any regrets... because of me."

Catherine reached for him again and this time he didn't pull away. "The only regret I'll have... is if you leave me again."

She heard a sharp intake of breath as if he were astonished at her statement. Finally he allowed her to grasp his shoulders and he came to her willingly. He nuzzled into her hair at her neck and she felt his lips against her skin as he whispered to her in his slightly lispig voice, "You must not touch me, please..."

Catherine nodded in resignation, laying her hands at her sides awaiting the touch of his hands.

Raising up again with some hesitation, his hands went to the zipper of her jumpsuit. Gently he grasped the clasp and began to pull it down slowly until it was fully opened down to her navel. She felt his hands trembling as they gently touched her exposed skin then cupped a breast. He touched it lightly and she could feel the wonder in him as he caressed the smooth skin of it and carefully traced a circle around a nipple. Lowering his head he touched her breast with his tongue. She was startled by the texture of it, almost a roughness, and the feel of his hand, which seemed to have sharp nails.

Catherine trembled in excited expectation and she heard him moan slightly in response, almost as if he felt what she was feeling. She knew he was very inexperienced, not by the way he was handling her, but by the reverence with which he was doing it. Raising up slightly, she shrugged off the jumpsuit and pulled it off her legs as he watched her. She lay down again, fully naked, allowing him to study her, to touch her.

He began kissing her all over, gently tasting her here and there, exploring her with his lips and tongue over every dip and valley of her body and bent over low until he once again nuzzled into the soft hair between her legs. Catherine trembled, spreading her legs as he nuzzled deeper then into the awaiting moisture that was there. He gently dipped his tongue into her, tasting her as she released a trembling sigh then he began to lick her, drawn to her taste. He reached around her thighs with his hands and gently parted the hair and lips there, exposing more of her to him and he licked the sensitive, pink petals of her pleasure center, titillating her with the warm, wetness of the tip of his tongue with increased passion.

Catherine moaned softly and reached for his head, entangling her fingers into his mane, pulling him against her as he pleased her with his warm, slightly rough textured tongue. He teased her with only the tip of it then pressed it fully against her in a circular motion. He pushed his tongue between the petals and deep into her, beginning to move it and out of her. He moaned passionately in response to her as the area of her sensitivity became consumed in fiery sensations and her fingers clenched into his mane.

He was experienced at this! He seemed to know what to do and where to touch her with his tongue to bring maximum pleasure, and Catherine was surprised at how fast she came to a climax, her entire body doing spasms, pushing her now pulsing, sensitive area against his mouth. He continued to lick her gently until she was finally sated, her body relaxing. He sighed with a shudder, kissed her gently there once and raised himself back up. Laying

beside her once again, his hands grasped her gently and drawing her against the full length of him.

Catherine's head was still swimming from the intense euphoria he had brought to her, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, holding him against her tightly, moaning softly into his ear and hair as he shivered involuntarily. She could feel his arousal straining against his jeans as he pressed himself into her. He was once again nuzzling and kissing her neck, then her face and her shoulders. Catherine could feel his face was also strange, seeming to be entirely covered in the same soft down that surrounded his lips. His quickening breath gently caressed her skin.

Boldly, Catherine reached to his jeans and unfastened them. To her surprise, he did not pull away as she expected. Her hand went into his pants, gently grasping his hardness, and his entire body jerked, startled. She knew from his reaction now, and the last time he was with her, that she was probably the only one who has ever touched him in this manner. Finally he relaxed as Catherine caressed him, feeling the full length of him, the smoothness of the warm skin in her hand. She heard a sharp intake of breath from him as she pushed his pants partially down then rolling onto her side. She pressed her own place of arousal against his. Catherine heard what almost sounded like a growl come from him, as the tip of his hardness pressed into the soft hair between her legs. He raised up over her, pushing her to her back gently.

Catherine felt the roughness of his jeans as one knee crossed over hers, then followed by the other as he positioned himself between her legs and pressed his hardness against her own moist area of sensitivity. He paused for a moment, trembling in trepidation then he gently slid himself into her warm, still pulsing moistness.

"Oh Belle!" he whispered hoarsely, the veil of his long golden hair upon her face, the soft breath of his statement caressing her cheek as he grasped her shoulders in his powerful hands gently. Then slowly, he began moving his hips, pushing himself into her, then pulling out almost completely, then sheathing himself again.

Catherine could feel the power of his body as he moved and she was overcome by the sensation of him being in her. She helplessly wrapped her arms around his back and clung to his cloak. He was so very special to her and he was making a dream of hers come true by being a part of her. She felt exalted that he would choose to make love to her, and that only raised her arousal more. The scent of him and feel of him filled her senses. She blocked out everything around her except the physical and emotional sensations of this man in her. As Catherine's excitement ascended, so did his, and he increased his pace accordingly, pressing his downy soft lips against her forehead.

Catherine's legs circled his backside and she rubbed her heels up and down the rough texture of his pants and cloak, moving in rhythm to him until his breath began to come out in pants.

He raised his head and Catherine could see the silhouette of his face. In the dim backdrop of the city's lighting, she could make out long golden hair framing it and she saw the strange plains of his cheeks, the stranger shape of his nose and mouth. Catherine thought he was astonishingly beautiful.

He looked down to her as he continued his movements and saw her watching him. His sapphire blue eyes gazed into hers for a long moment then he pressed his lips against hers in steamy passion as his pace and thrust increased. A trembling moan escaped him and he raised his head again, his eyes closed tightly, moving his thrusting hips in a circular motion. Catherine gasped from the sensation of it, her hands clamping onto his shoulders as she

pulled herself against him. She reached up and pressed her lips to his neck as she growled, then she moved back again to look at him. She just glimpsed him as his lips parted unintentionally.

A gasp escaped her and he looked down to her sharply, closing his lips again, his movements increased to a feverish pace, plunging into her as hard as he dared, the fingers of his hands tightening on her shoulders until she could feel the tips of his sharp nails. He was still watching her, his expression unreadable as he moved. Catherine's heart was still pounding from the sight of his fangs and she reached behind his head drawing his face back down to hers, pressing her lips against his passionately. She pushed her tongue into his mouth, then seeking out and touching the sharpness of his fangs, her hands and fingers moved through his golden mane with increased desire. Suddenly, Catherine moaned and pulled her mouth away from him, crying out as she climaxed, her legs clamping around his back, her hands in shaking fists as she grasped handfuls of his mane and cloak desperately.

He thrust himself into her as he felt the pulsing around him of her release and gasped, his own arousal suddenly exploding into her. He pressed against her, sheathing himself entirely inside her and stopped, holding her tightly. He filled her in warm pulses, his entire body tensed and shaking as his own climax overtook him. For a moment he remained stilled, the sensation of movement becoming almost painful then he began plunging into her, crying out as he did so and continued until he felt the wonderful agony of his climax subside. After a short moment of pain filled ecstasy, he finally stopped, unable to move any more.

He rolled off of her and collapsed onto his back as he gasped softly, repeating in reverence, "Belle, my Belle..."

Catherine was too overwhelmed to move and she lay staring at the ceiling, knowing that what she just experienced was the most intimate and fulfilling moment in her life. Closing her eyes she sighed, feeling completely sated, sleep beginning to overtake her as she rolled over to him and nuzzled into his slightly dampened hair and neck.

The last thing she remembered was the feel of his strange lips upon hers again gently and a soft, silky whisper, "My Belle..."

Catherine held the sonnet in one hand, the rose in her other as she gently brushed the petals of the flower against her lips. She knew *he* had left these on her terrace and her heart raced in anticipation and joy as she awaited the return of her secret lover. Even without normal communication between them, she always knew when he would be there and her life had become that of patient waiting, really feeling alive only in those times when he would come to her, and only going through the motions when he was away. Thinking about the past year she had spent in school, and until just recently, selling herself for other men's pleasures because she enjoyed the contrast to her saccharine sweet, 'preppie' school girl life, she wondered how she ever felt any fulfillment from it? But she *had* been fulfilled, or thought she was, until she met her gentle lover. He was such a joy to her and brightened her otherwise dull life.

She always met him at her penthouse and always in the dark. A frown creased Catherine's face as she thought of him. Even now, after she already had seen his face and fangs, then after all the intimacy they had shared together, he *still* refused to show himself in any bright light, would not completely remove all of his clothing. Nor would he allow her to touch any uncovered part of his body save one. Catherine knew he was different from any man she had ever encountered, and she imagined that he was entirely covered in the soft down she had felt in her dreams, as on his lips and face. Sometimes, during his throes of passion, she would hear a soft, feral growl escape him.

Though he was a gentle and satisfying lover, she could feel in him a just barely harnessed primitive power, as if he made love to her under great restraints of a passionate dark being inside of him. *Was he a man?* she wondered, *or was he something more wonderful?* Shortly after their first time together, Catherine had begun refusing to call him 'La Bête' and since he wouldn't tell her who he was, she didn't call him by any name. That, to her, being preferable to referring to such a gentle being as *'the beast'*. Never having actually seeing him in any bright light, Catherine sometimes thought that she was only dreaming of him, that he was only an enchanted prince that somehow entered her life from the faery tales of her youth.

Catherine's days without him crept by and were tedious. She knew the new school year was quickly approaching, and she should be thinking about her classes, but she couldn't get him out of her mind. She would be graduating from college in only two more years, but the prospect of it now no longer interested her. Sometimes she would spend the entire day in bed thinking or dreaming of him, and she only wished she knew who he was, where he lived, so she could go to him, live with him, escaping the doldrums of her now meaningless life, when he was not near. Catherine's own life had become meaningless, an empty shell... without La Bête ...

Vincent sat in the chair in his chamber, his hands folded before him, pressing against his lips in silence as Merlin paced in frustration.

"How could ya have done this, mate?" Merlin exclaimed to Vincent's brooding form sternly, as he paced the chamber. ***"I shouldn't 'ave ever let you go to her. I thought when ya told me ya wanted to meet her, you meant the one time fling or maybe another only!"***

"Then why did you arrange it?" Vincent demanded angrily.

Merlin stared at Vincent, shook his head with anguish and replied, "I thought it wasn't fair that you 'aven't 'ad a woman," Vincent sighed and rolled his eyes at Merlin's statement, but Merlin continued doggedly, "then you saw 'er at the park and I knew she's a fine girl... so I agreed. ***Now you've taken 'er life over!***" He glared at Vincent hard and jabbed a finger at him saying, ***"I should be telling Father of your playing about Above!"***

Vincent gripped the arms of his chair with impatience as a small threatening growl escaped him. He glared at Merlin with defiance.

Merlin locked eyes with the angry young man and said evenly, ***"Vincent, you 'ave ta let 'er go!"***

Standing up abruptly with anger, Vincent demanded, ***"So you can take her over again? Control her life? So YOU can sell her body for meaningless passions in exchange for your precious dollar?"*** Vincent began pacing, holding a hand out to his side. ***"I can't let you do that to her again!"*** He whirled to face Merlin and exclaimed sharply, ***"I won't!"***

"Vincent," Merlin said with some anguish. ***"You 'ave it all wrong! Why won't you believe what I told ya about her? She WANTED what I had to offer?"*** He shrugged his thin shoulders adding, ***"She recruited ME, Vincent!"*** Then he shook his head. "I didn't recruit 'er!" Vincent turned away from Merlin in frustration and began pacing again.

Merlin continued. "Vincent, listen to me! Since you started going ta 'er, she's losing herself on a dream that can never be! She'll never go back to school and her own life as long as you keep going to 'er! You 'ave 'er living for something that can't be and she'll destroy herself over it!" He sighed and held his hands out to his sides. ***"She's only just starting out in life, man! You 'ave to let her go!"***

Vincent halted his pacing and stood there in anguish. He took a deep breath and shook his

head slowly replying to Merlin, "I can't..."

"Why?" Merlin asked, his face in a frown.

Vincent's eyes went to him and he tilted his head slightly, replying in a soft voice, "Because she doesn't care how different I am...and she doesn't treat me like I am." He moved over to his dresser and leaned on it, his golden mane dangling around his elbows adding, "She gives me everything...Everything a normal man has." He shook his head and sighed, his throat becoming tight. "I *feel* something in her," he looked at Merlin with anguish, trying to make him understand. "Sometimes I can feel what she's feeling... almost as if we were one..." He slammed his hand on his writing table and exclaimed. "***I won't let her go! I'll never know another woman, who will love me, make love to me again! If she's gone...***"

"That's an awfully selfish attitude, Vincent, and not like ya at all! ***She 'as a life Above!***" Merlin interrupted him sternly, "You can't expect her to come Below to live and you Are different, mate, and cannot lead a life Above!" Merlin said as gently as possible, then he added more firmly, "***You are destroying a young girl, who's barely a woman, who could!***"

Vincent whipped his head to him sharply, then he sighed heavily and nodded his head slowly, tears coming to his eyes. "Yes..."

That night when La Bête returned to Catherine, he brought a bottle of wine, but he didn't share a glass of it with her. It wasn't just any bottle, it was something Vincent had obtained from Narcissa. After Catherine drank the wine, he finally allowed her to remove all his clothing completely, let her study and revel in the sight of his golden furred, muscular body, then he made love to his Belle slowly and patiently, making the sensations and pleasure he was giving up last as long as possible. It would be the last time he would see his Belle, for when he arose in the morning, the memory of his would be as if only a dream...

Catherine awoke in the morning and yawned, stretching lazily, feeling sated after her erotic and satisfying dreaming. She glanced over to her alarm clock/calendar and her eyes widened. It was 9:20 am and August the 20th!

Oh DAMN! I have to register for classes." She exclaimed and jumped to her feet then began frantically readying herself for the day."

After cleaning up the last of the debris from his chamber floor, Vincent looked around apprehensively, hoping that nobody had heard his outburst. It had happened suddenly and he couldn't remember what had occurred. The last thing he remembered was his anguish over Catherine. Her heart had opened up and she was lonely, she wanted desperately to be in love... with Elliot Burch. Vincent *knew* in his heart that it should be so... but he recalled a recent fleeting dream he had felt from Catherine. His memory of making love to her so many years ago, the feel and taste of her, the sensations of submerging himself into her, his mind becoming a turmoil of images and words and then... he blanked. When Vincent became aware again, he found his chamber in shambles.

Mild incidents, such as what just occurred, had happened before to him, though not often. He was usually none the worse for wear afterwards. Nobody else in the tunnel world, not even Father, was aware that Vincent was certain that he would not become so caught up in his so recently-revived love and desire that he would experience such extreme upheavals again.

Now Vincent sat at his writing table in his darkened chamber, alone, satisfied that no one was the wiser as to what just happened to him. Fully calmed, he was able to think about

Catherine. He had no right to deny her a normal life with another man, but his mind cried out, *It isn't fair!* Vincent had almost lost Catherine again. He harbored in his heart the dull ache from the pain of Catherine falling for Burch, though now, he could feel that she had not fallen in love with the wealthy young man as he thought she had. Catherine was once again as close to being Vincent's as she ever would be.

But what about the next time, Vincent wondered? And after that? Will it never end? Though Vincent had never told Father of the love affair in his youth, Father always told him what he wanted was impossible, that Vincent could never have a lover as a normal man could. But Father was wrong. It *was* possible... and it *had* happened for him, even if only for a brief span of hours during a course of a long, hot summer.

It was against everything Father and others had ever preached to him. Although Vincent knew he could never offer her the things that Elliot Burch and men like him could give her, he decided to somehow remind Catherine of what a dream could offer. All Vincent had to offer her was that dream... and himself. Vincent wanted her to know that he didn't want to just be there, to wait in the background, ready to pick up the pieces when her world fell apart over another man. That to him, Catherine was more than just a friend... *much more!* Then Vincent thought of that dream Catherine had recently had. The one with *him* as the object of her desire!

He remembered how brief but intriguing the dream had been, and his wonder that she even had those feelings for him. How startling that she *did!* But shortly after that dream, Catherine became involved with Elliot Burch. Vincent was certain he had misinterpreted the dream then, dismissing the possibility that Catherine could consider such a passion for him! Though he had stolen a few, precious moments with her in his youth, Catherine was a mature adult now, and the possibility of considering him as a... a spouse, would put a burden of responsibility upon her that Vincent couldn't expect her to carry, along with all the secrets that she would have to bear with it. Catherine wasn't a young girl with a crush on him anymore. She was an adult woman now, with so many more wants and needs. But perhaps...

With determination, Vincent rose to his feet, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand and went to a bookshelf. He pulled down Shakespeare's book of sonnets and began paging through it. When he found the sonnet he wanted, he returned to his writing table, preparing to copy it then paused. Vincent decided he would give her the entire book because in it was the sonnet he had given to her years ago with one single, red rose. Tucking the precious book under his arm and after a quick stop at Mouse's hydroponics garden to beg a red rose off of him, Vincent began to make his way to Catherine's place.

Reaching the terrace of Catherine's darkened apartment Vincent laid the book of sonnets on the table. Then he stood there for a moment gazing inside her vacant bedroom. Vincent knew Catherine hadn't recalled him. If anything, she would only remember him as a dream. He sighed heavily, his hands trembling again slightly as he thought about making love to her, wondering if the future now would bring her to ever want him as more than a friend, as she once had.

Those years ago, when they had been lovers, Vincent *had had* to break it off, for Catherine's sake. He had promised himself that he would never lay eyes on her again. How strange that the fates had brought them together once more! It was as if it was meant to be! Though their lives seemed to be inextricably linked, Vincent knew it was extremely selfish on his part to expect her to want him again as she once did. Because of his differences, Vincent knew that he would be in conflict with himself always as to what is best for her. But Catherine *must* be reminded of what he once meant to her! Especially after her recent encounter with Burch!

Vincent placed the red rose inside the book to mark the passage he wanted her to read.

Catherine was still vulnerable and unsure of herself, but she had a strength and courage inside her now she hadn't realized before, nor had he. And Vincent could feel in her that she longed for a life with someone she could love. The bond Vincent had only fleetingly felt before with her was strong now, and though he knew Catherine was still apprehensive, feeling so new to the life she was leading now, since she had found Vincent, she had purpose. And Catherine would find out herself where her heart truly lay.

Vincent sighed heavily, with one last look at the book of sonnets. Hoping it would stir a memory in her, he left her terrace.

Catherine must have read Shakespeare's 29th sonnet twenty-nine times after Vincent had left it on her terrace with the red rose, knowing deep in her heart why he did it. Catherine had never wanted to cause the gentle leonine man, who entered her life so recently, *any* pain. It hurt her deeply that she *had* when she became romantically involved with Elliot. Thinking that Vincent was only a dear friend with an unusual empathic bond to her, Catherine never realized just how deeply Vincent was himself involved with her, that perhaps he thought of her in...other ways.

Vincent was indeed another type of man, and she was keenly aware of his differences and their possible limitations, but he was not a stranger to Catherine. She curiously felt as if she had known Vincent for years, and she was oddly drawn to him, not in spite of his differences but *because* of them. Those so very few times when he would hold her in his huge, warm arms, holding her tightly against his broad chest... Catherine sighed and shivered involuntarily at the memory of it, her skin prickling with excitement.

Though she would never admit it to Vincent, because of his seeming naivete, Catherine had recently started thinking of him in ways that she was sure would make the leonine man blush, if that were at all possible! She *knew* he was much too noble for that type of relationship, but yet... She trembled at her thoughts suddenly and rubbed her arms, driving down the feelings of desire that had surfaced in her.

"Watch it, Cathy," she said aloud. "He can feel what you're feeling and you don't want to shock the poor guy!"

Catherine remembered the first time she had begun to think of him in this way. It was almost as big a shock to her as it would be to him. She remembered spending the *entire* day thinking of him from the time she got up in the morning, through her work day, until she went to bed that night. Catherine was still thinking of Vincent's warm embrace, the feel of his hard muscles against her chest, his long, golden hair, which she loved, his beautiful sapphire blue eyes, the silky, rough-textured voice she never tired of, and how she felt she could listen to it all day and into the night... Then the warmth he always filled her with when he was near, the *maleness* of him. She fell asleep with these thoughts in her head.

She dreamed of being in a cornfield, a freshly-plowed one from her childhood in Vermont, and laying in the bright moonlight in one of the burrows of the plowed field. There had been a man lying passionately on top of her, the feel of rough cloth against her skin, the warmth of his body, his hands seeking out the sensitive places of her own body. She remembered feeling oh so aroused, breathless and happy and when she had opened her eyes, it was Vincent who was ministering to her with such skill, his golden mane a halo around his leonine face in the moonlight, the veil of the tresses tickling her face. She felt so comfortable in his strong embrace, the feel of his downy soft lips against hers. She felt as if it were right, normal that they should be in this intimate embrace.

Catherine woke up breathless and feeling extremely aroused... then disappointed and empty

that it had merely been a dream. Wiping the tears from her face, Catherine sighed softly and went into her apartment, closing the curtains to her terrace. She walked over to her bed, laying the book of sonnets gently on her nightstand, caressing the cover gently once.

Catherine frowned at it and picked it up, opening it to the inside cover where Vincent had written, *'Shakespeare knew everything'*. For some reason, she felt as if the handwriting was familiar.

Catherine recalled a sheet of parchment with another love sonnet, written in beautiful script, with a red rose, in a dream many years ago... Or was it really a dream? Slowly, she sat on her bed, staring at the writing in the book, then flipped several pages and gasped. She found the other sonnet!

Catherine smiled tenderly, remembering the recurring dreams she'd had years ago of a gentle, cloaked prince who used to come to her in the darkness, who had wanted her to call him *'La Bête'*... and now she wondered.

Was the exclamation of surprise Vincent had given her at the sight of her face that night on her terrace a few weeks back, just one of awe or of recognition?... You can't make yourself fall in love... it just happens.

With a trembling sigh, tears returning to her eyes again, but this time out of happiness with a warm feeling of familiarity, Catherine remembered the first time his voice had whispered her name in a dream and she fell in love forever...

END