

Lady Killer

by Melinda Madison

Catherine entered her apartment, but she really couldn't remember how she had gotten there. Her face was wet with tears. Her head hurt. The tightness in her chest was unbearable, crushing her, making every breath a struggle. She had barely closed the door behind her, when she broke down. Leaning against the door, she threw her head back and sobbed uncontrollably. She sunk to sit in a huddled mass on the floor, arms curled around her stomach as if needed there to hold her together.

Under any other circumstances, Vincent would have come to her by now. Catherine knew that tonight he wouldn't come. She knew that it could be a long while before she would see him again.

"No!," she cried out, hoping he would hear her through their bond. "I won't let you do this ... to yourself, or to me!"

Vincent was in his chamber, sitting at his writing table. He did not move. He did not blink. He stared blankly into the darkness, trying not to sense her, trying not to feel the emotion which was drowning her. He could not face her now. He did not want to be near her now. He wanted to be far away from her. He wanted the safety of distance between them. He thought now that he had it within his power to hurt her, for this day he had killed a woman.

The outsiders had invaded the tunnels, threatening his world, killing anyone who got in their way. They killed, not out of necessity, but seemingly for the mere sport of it. Father and the others had approached them with kindness, but were only laughed at and bullied. And then, these heathens had threatened the children.

That could not be tolerated! Matthew and Simon were helping to lead the children to safety above, when they were brutally attacked. Vincent went to their aid, but was too late. Two good men, in addition to Randolph, were now dead, innocent victims to these sweepings of the street.

Vincent did what he knew had to be done, and it came so easily to him now. Those responsible for his friends' deaths did not escape. Among them was the one called Lizzy.

Catherine was to have met a group of children at the park entrance. It was this group which was forced to detour by the outsiders' attack. Violating Vincent's warning not to venture into the tunnels, Catherine braved the danger knowing something was wrong. She wanted to help, wanted to be with him.

"If the worst should happen," she had told him, "I want to be by your side."

"No, Catherine," he had snapped back. "Not like that. Not ever again!"

Once below, Catherine's way to Vincent was intercepted by the outsiders, and as usual, Vincent flew to her rescue.

Reflecting on the evening's events, Catherine suddenly felt very guilty. She felt responsible for the pain Vincent was suffering now. If she had just obeyed his wish and not entered the

tunnels, he would not have been shot. He may not have killed again. No! Sooner or later, she knew he would have taken matters into his own hands. He would have rid his home of these vagrants. It had to be done!

Catherine then felt angry. *'Damn it, Vincent, what you did was inevitable. It was necessary! Why can't you see that?'*

The more she thought about it, the angrier she became. How could he have sent her away? She was there too. The wild child had pointed the gun at both of them. They shared that experience, and they should share the pain and consequences as well. However, Catherine did not know about Lizzy.

On the other hand, Vincent could not stop thinking about the woman he had killed. He was equally tormented by the fact that in killing these outsiders, on both occasions, he had acted very much on instinct. When he went to the aid of Matthew and Simon, he could not control his rage until the killers were themselves very dead. Then, again when he had gone to Catherine, the violence overcame him. He consciously wanted to tear these men apart, and he knew that even Catherine could not have prevented him from doing just that. He did not gain control of himself until he saw the child, shivering and holding a gun ... Catherine's gun.

Father had asked her to bring the gun below, hoping it would not have to be used. He wanted to protect his world. He wanted to protect his son. He wanted to spare Vincent the agony of acting yet again as the community's protector and chief weapon. And now, Vincent had been shot with that very gun. Catherine could not get that thought out of her head. Vincent could have been killed with her gun!

Vincent could still smell the blood. He could still taste the fury. He had to get out of the tunnels. He needed the night air. With one quick, sudden motion he rose, grabbed his cloak and headed out the door. He nearly knocked Father down, as the old man was approaching Vincent's chamber.

"Vincent," the old man called after his son. "Where are you going?"

"Above!" And in a flash, Vincent was gone.

The old man stood alone in the tunnel, worried, and unsure of how to help.

The night air was cool, and there was a stiff breeze rustling through the trees. Vincent walked through the park like a man on a mission, rapidly, with a lion's agility. He walked to the Bowery and to the East River, before settling on his favorite roof top. At no time did he proceed near Catherine's building.

It wasn't until the early hours of the morning that he headed for home. The night sky still shone above, and the near full moon hit him in the face. He had no sense of Catherine as he entered the drainage pipe, and was surprised to see her standing there.

Vincent stopped dead in his tracks and looked at her coldly. "Catherine, please," he pleaded, "go home!"

Catherine did not approach him. She mirrored his expression. "Father told me you were above. I knew you'd come this way, so I waited."

Vincent tripped the switch that opened the tunnel door. He threw open the iron gate and lunged into the tunnels, closing the door behind him, leaving Catherine behind.

Catherine had come below looking for him, determined that she was not going to let him shut her out emotionally, and now she refused to permit him to physically shut her out of his world. Hitting the hidden switch, she reopened the sliding door and followed him into the tunnels. The

tunnels and his world were very much a part of her now, as was Vincent, and Catherine knew that they were about to have their first major disagreement.

Vincent turned as she entered the passage behind him. The love that usually shone on his face at the mere sight of her was now replaced by hostility.

“Catherine! Leave me!” His voice was strong and loud. He had never used such a sharp tone with her. “Please!”

Like a defiant child, Catherine replied simply, “No!”

“Yes!” came his response. “You must!”

Vincent turned his back to her and proceeded down the passage, but relentlessly Catherine followed him. Suddenly he turned, teeth gnarling, half-growling and half-hissing at her. He did not raise his hand and made no move to strike, but his display was threatening enough.

Catherine gasped and stopped abruptly in her tracks. This was not the Vincent she knew. Before her stood a stranger, cold and demanding. Catherine was unable to tell if his action was meant merely as a deterrence, or if there was actually a threat of danger. Either way, she was shocked by his behavior! Her instincts told her to turn around and get the hell out of there, but her heart told her to continue onward. Perhaps he was only trying to invoke fear to get her to leave. She would not give in to such tactics.

“What’re you gonna do, Vincent? Strike me?”

Her words pierced him like a knife. If only she knew what he had done. There was a long pause, as the two stared each other down. Catherine was now being just as confrontational as he was. Vincent’s behavior towards Catherine had been deliberate. He had not turned on her instinctively. Rather, he had wanted to frighten her, hoping it would convince her to leave. Seeing that it hadn’t worked, he relaxed his posture and backed away from her.

“You don’t scare me, Vincent!” she yelled. “If you want me to leave, you are going to have to carry me out of here! And if you know what’s good for you, you won’t try it! I think that’s a fight you just might lose!”

Catherine’s certainty that he would never physically hurt her returned. Any doubts she had had just vanished when he backed away rather than challenging her further. She could see the distress on his face. She could see in his eyes that something was dreadfully wrong. She wanted to hold him, but she was still angry and upset. She also knew that if she tried, he would retreat.

Vincent did not move for a long while. He leaned back against the tunnel wall and closed his eyes. He turned to face the wall and pounded the rock with his fists. He let out a roar deep from within. And then he ran. He ran as fast as he could away from her, and he did not stop until he reached his chamber.

Catherine just stood there, debating whether to go or stay. It had been a rough night, and she was tired. It would take her at least a half-hour to reach either destination, her apartment or his chamber. Her persistence was growing weak and so was her body, but she decided to go on below. As she traveled, she took note of the quiet. There were only a few distant tappings on the pipes. Except for her and Vincent, most of the tunnel dwellers slept.

Vincent could feel her drawing nearer. He could feel her turmoil. He knew that his actions were tearing her apart inside, yet he could not reach out to her. Her need was great, but at the moment he could not see past himself. However, now she was getting closer and the bond was growing stronger. He tried, but could not block her out. Needing to release the anger and tension within him, Vincent picked up his chair, and in one forceful motion it was smashed to the floor. He did not stop there. Books and figurines, anything he could get his hands on, went flying, shattering against the walls and lying broken on the ground. The sound of his roar

awoke Father, who came stumbling down the hallway just as Catherine rounded the corner. Both waited outside the chamber until he was calm.

“Catherine,” Father cautioned her, “are you sure you should be here?”

Catherine nodded. “Yes, Father. This is exactly where I should be.”

Father sighed, knowing any further words would be wasted. He could see the determination on her face and knew she could not be persuaded otherwise. Reluctantly, the old man turned and left her.

Slowly Catherine entered the room. Vincent sat slumped over on the edge of his bed, head in his hands. The chamber resembled the aftermath of a hurricane. Practically the only thing left standing was the large statue of Justice in the entry.

Vincent did not move. He did not look up. But, he did not yell or tell her to leave. He was tired and did not feel like battling with her any more. Catherine took wary steps toward him, realizing that at this moment he might be unpredictable. Reaching his side, she crouched down, strategically placing one hand on his knee and bracing herself against the bed with the other. Still, Vincent did not say a word.

Catherine reached up and brushed his matted hair from his face, and she could see then that he was crying. Fearing that words or an embrace would cause him to blow up or retreat, she just looked up at him with tears filling her own eyes.

The silence and the tension in the chamber were intolerable. Finally, Vincent spoke. His tone was not harsh, but was not entirely welcoming to her either.

In a whisper he asked, “Why does it have to be like this?”

“Like what, Vincent? What do you mean?” Catherine was not trying to be condescending. She just wanted to understand.

“With me . . . with us. It’s not healthy for you to love me, Catherine. I can not give you what you want. I can only bring you pain.”

Catherine did not particularly like what she had just heard, but at least Vincent was talking.

“You know I don’t believe that!” her response was immediate. “If I did, I would have left you alone as you requested. I wouldn’t have come back here, and I certainly wouldn’t have followed you home!”

She took a moment to collect her thoughts, then continued. “Yes, Vincent, we have been through some painful times. The last few days have been hell. But don’t you see that I can’t just stop loving you? I don’t want to stop loving you. The happiness you bring to me, Vincent, makes up for any pain we must endure. We endure it, Vincent. Together!”

Catherine rose and sat beside him on the bed. “I know what you’ve been through, Vincent. I was there, and . . .”

She was cut off, as Vincent responded gruffly, “No, you don’t know. What you saw was only a part of it, Catherine. There are things, horrible things, that I have done. I cannot disclose them, even to you. I am ashamed and frightened by them myself. It is not safe for you to be here.”

“Vincent, there is nothing horrible about you! You are not capable of . . .”

“Please, Catherine, you have seen what I am capable of! On more than one occasion you have witnessed me kill! You have seen these hands rip flesh, human flesh, apart, tearing to the bone! I can’t stop it, Catherine!” Vincent rose to pace around the chamber. “When you or the others are endangered, it takes over. . . this. . . need within me. . . this drive to kill, to hunt and destroy those that pose a threat to my home. . . to my family. . . to you. It is not as if I think my actions through anymore, Catherine. My reaction is automatic now. . . pure animalistic instinct, and I don’t know how to stop it!”

“You protect those you love, Vincent. You protect your home. Without this place, you could not exist. In any court of law that would be justifiable!” Catherine tried desperately to convince him that what he did, what he does, was necessary.

“Your courts have no power here, Catherine, over me. Those laws are made by human beings for human beings! My very existence is contrary to those laws. Perhaps it would be better for all of you, if I did not exist.”

Vincent’s words sounded so final. He reached for his cloak and was preparing to leave again. Catherine had risen as he was speaking, and as he grabbed his cloak, she grabbed his wrist.

“Damn it, Vincent, don’t walk away from this. Stay here with me. Talk to me. Yell at me! Let me help you.” She tightened her grip on his arm, but he wriggled away. His strength was too much for her small arms to contain.

“You can’t help me, Catherine. No one can.” He started once again to leave the chamber.

“I’m willing to try! Let me try! At least let me try!”

“Catherine. . .,” he attempted to interrupt her.

“Then help yourself, Vincent.” She threw her arms up in the air and turned away from him. She was doing the pacing now. “Stop wallowing in self-pity. Yes, your struggle is great. Your life has been difficult. But, Vincent, look at what you have, not at what you don’t.”

Catherine was pleading with him now. Her voice softened as she faced him once more. “You have a wonderful home here. You have a family and friends that love you. The children idolize you! You’re intelligent, loving, gentle, and thoughtful. You’re not an animal, Vincent. You’re a man. . . and I love you.”

Vincent listened to her attentively, shaking his head, tears filling his eyes once more. Perhaps deep down inside him somewhere, he knew that she was right. At this moment in time, however, all he could see in himself was a dreadful beast. He took another step toward the doorway, when her words made him stop.

“If you walk out that door and leave me now, I’m leaving, Vincent. And I won’t be back. I can’t do this anymore. Either you let me in or you lock me out. But whichever you choose, damn it, do it all the way!”

She was crying now. She actually believed for a moment that he would go ahead and leave. He appeared to doubt her ability to turn away from him completely, but tonight she had come to terms with that possibility. She meant every word she had just said.

She continued, “I can endure this pain, Vincent, if you share it with me. But, I can’t endure it alone. Please. Stay with me.”

Vincent exhaled sharply, releasing the tension from his body. Maintaining eye contact with her, as if trying to determine if she were bluffing, he removed his cloak and reentered the room. Her closing argument had been successful. He threw his cloak on the bed and dropped himself helplessly to sit upon the corner of the mattress.

“If I stay, Catherine, can we please not argue anymore?” Vincent’s mood stabilized as abruptly as it had flared up. He could not take the risk that she would actually walk out on him, although he still held on to a portion of his belief that she would be better off if she did.

Catherine wanted to continue the conversation, but did not want him to leave. Hesitantly, she conceded for now.

“We’re both tired. We can talk later. . . and we will. Anything further we’d say now we might come to regret.” Vincent nodded in agreement. “Will you try to sleep?”

Vincent reclined back on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He wanted to hold her, to feel her close now, to comfort her, but he couldn’t bring himself to extend the invitation. He knew he had

treated her terribly this evening, and could find no adequate explanation for his behavior. Any explanation he would offer, she would surely interpret as an excuse, a crutch, or self-pity. Sadly he looked over at her. She had begun to pick up his things from the floor.

“Catherine,” he suddenly wanted her full attention.

Catherine only mumbled “Hmm?” When Vincent did not respond, she glanced inquisitively at him.

His eyes caught and held hers. “I’m sorry,” Vincent spoke timidly. “I’m sorry.”

Suddenly, Vincent realized that he needed her here, but he did not know how to articulate that to her. She really did love him, and was really willing to face this nightmare by his side, with him.

“Will you stay here, with me tonight?” he asked at last. “I know you are angry. I don’t blame you. I need. . .”

He was cut off by the pressure of Catherine’s lips upon his. She had fought her urge to touch him, but was unable to withstand it any longer. She wanted to be below, and she wanted to be with him. Was he actually going to let her get that close after expending so much energy to push her away?

Much to her surprise, Vincent did not pull away from her touch. He kissed her back, gently. His arms went around her and he held her close. When they parted, Catherine looked up at him. His blue eyes were docile now. She knew that he loved her, but also knew of his uncertainties.

“Vincent, I’m not angry with you. I was, but I’m not anymore, just worried. Yes, I’d like to stay here, with you.”

Vincent pulled her over to the bed, and Catherine curled up next to him. “You’re tired. Sleep now. I promise you, later. . . we will talk.” Catherine placed her head on Vincent’s shoulder and reclined beside him. His massive arm entombed her protectively. Soon she was asleep.

Vincent lay awake for hours thinking. The sound and the scent of her captivated him. He could hear her every breath, could feel her chest rise and fall against him. And he thought about that kiss. Simultaneously, he felt both relaxed and unnerved. The kiss Catherine had given to him was unlike any he experienced before. He had to tell her what he had done. She had to know about Lizzy.

At last, Vincent fell into a deep, though disturbing, sleep. He dreamed, first that Catherine was horrified at his revelation, then that in haste he struck out at Catherine. He woke with a jerk that caused Catherine to stir at his side.

“Vincent?” Catherine saw a look of terror on his face. “What is it? Are you alright?”

Vincent shook his head. On second thought, perhaps it would be better not to tell her. “It’s nothing, Catherine. Just a dream. Go back to sleep.” Vincent turned slightly to lie on his side, so that he was no longer facing her.

Catherine knew it had not been an ordinary dream. She could feel the tension in his body as he turned from her. She could hear the rapidness of his breathing. Catherine hesitated at first, then reached out and began rubbing his back. He let out a sigh and his breathing quieted.

“You’re so tense,” she observed, as she sat up so that both hands would be freed. Tenderly, she massaged his back, shoulders and neck. Her hands moved to the base of his head and then to his temples. Her fingers trembled only slightly as she began her exploration. Such contact had been off limits for so long. Suddenly, Catherine believed anything was possible. . . Vincent might allow her to get closer to him. She wanted to get closer to him.

He knew that. He could feel her desire through their bond, calling to him, loud and clear. And now, everywhere her hands touched, he was soothed. Vincent closed his eyes and gave in to her compassion. When her hand reached his shoulder again, he reached up and held it there, allowing his fingers to intertwine with hers. It was mid-morning now, and neither had any intention or ability to go back to sleep. Vincent did not want to return to his dreams, and Catherine was worried and wanted to watch over him.

"You know me too well, Catherine," Vincent whispered to her, "but there is something you don't know. . . something I need to tell you."

Vincent sat up and leaned back against the wall, still holding her hand. He toyed with her fingers, amazed by the sight of her pale skin against the thick fur covering his hand. In his mind, he compared their hands. Hers were small and delicate, and his large and strong. Her nails were neatly manicured. His were long and sharp. Her wrists were so tiny compared to his. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist and squeezed gently. At once, he pulled away, with the realization of just how easily his powerful hands could snap her fragile bones.

Despite her delicate form, however, Catherine was tough as nails. She was one of the bravest women he had ever met. She had faced him, unafraid, accepting his differences and loving him in spite of them. She had seen all that he was, all that he is, and did not fear him. On numerous occasions, including last night, she had risked her own life to be there for him, with him.

'We are not so different, after all,' he thought. 'I would risk everything for her, everything. So how can I refuse her desire to do the same for me?'

Vincent sat quietly for a long time. He held and caressed her hand, until Catherine broke the silence. "What is it you have to tell me, Vincent?"

"Catherine, what I have to tell you is something very difficult for me to admit. . . something horrific, monstrous. I am so afraid, Catherine, that when you learn of what I have done, you will leave me. That is why I sent you away. I don't want you to leave me, Catherine, but I don't want to burden you with fear." He paused, pleading quietly, "Please. . . don't leave." Vincent lowered his head shamefully.

Catherine could see his eyes glassing over. She could hear the shakiness in his voice. "Whatever it is, Vincent, we'll get through it together. I promise I won't leave!"

Vincent exhaled deeply as she spoke. Her words were strong and reassuring. She squeezed his hand tightly and tilted her head so that she could look into his eyes as he stared into his lap.

"Tell me," she urged, using the words he so often used to rescue her from her day-to-day troubles.

Vincent trusted her. He wanted to believe her when she promised she would stay, but feared it was a promise she would not be able to keep. Tears began to escape to his cheek, and his voice cracked as he spoke.

"Catherine, the intruders, the ones who killed Matthew and Simon. . ." Catherine was listening attentively, and bringing his hand to her lips, she kissed it. ". . .among them. . .among them was a woman, Catherine. She was wild with rage. . .the violence she exerted. . .she participated in their killings. . .her flesh stained with blood. . .the blood of my friends. Without taking time to think, I reacted, Catherine, on instinct."

Vincent removed his hand from Catherine's and held his two fists before him. "These hands took her life. . .tore into her. . .took out revenge on her. I have killed a woman, Catherine. She was no innocent weakling, but she was no match for me. I don't know how far will I go the next time? I fear I may. . .I don't want to. . ."

Vincent couldn't talk anymore. His emotions poured out, and he leaned into Catherine's arms, sobbing.

"Oh, Vincent," Catherine's arms were ready, always open to him. "This was no ordinary woman. The 'fairer sex' tradition does not apply anymore. She was as much a threat as her male companions." She stroked his hair, lovingly, then lifted his face to look up to hers. "Did she come after you?"

"Yes."

"Then she had the power, Vincent, to harm you, to harm the others, to harm the children, maybe even to kill them. She may have even killed you. You did what you had to do. You protected your home, your family, your loved ones, and yourself. That is not revenge, Vincent. It may have been instinct, but it's that instinct that allows you to live, safely. It's that instinct that preserves this community." Catherine wrapped her hands around Vincent's still clenched fists. He was trembling. It amazed him that once again, Catherine showed no fear, only acceptance and love.

"If she'd attacked me, Vincent, I would have fought back too."

She began to uncurl the fingers on his left hand. His claw had pierced his palm, and a drop of blood formed immediately. Catherine kissed it away and rose from the bed. Vincent watched her every move, relaxing only when he realized Catherine was not leaving, but was retrieving the first aid kit from his drawer.

Catherine returned to his side and doused his hand with peroxide before applying gauze and tape. Her touch was nurturing but cautious. "This is pretty deep, Vincent, but it doesn't look like it needs stitches. You're the doctor. . .correct me if I'm wrong."

"It's fine," he diagnosed, without really looking. Feeling some better, surrounded by Catherine's love and acceptance, he mustered a half-smile. "You're a good medic!" She returned his grin, and he extended his arm to enclose her, drawing her into his embrace. "Thank you, Catherine, for your tenderness." Vincent felt comfortable in her presence now. It was as if they were the only two people in existence. "And, for your persistence. Thank you for staying and not being afraid."

"There is nothing for me to fear, Vincent. You could never hurt me. Even earlier in the tunnel, when I followed you in. . .I knew you wouldn't strike at me. I'm sorry if I pushed you too hard, too fast. Sometimes I just don't know when to back off. You had every right to be angry. I'm glad I was persistent this time, though. I'm glad you told me about this woman. And, I'm glad you let me stay."

Vincent raised his sapphire eyes to meet hers, and was pleased to see the gentle green shining brightly back at him. He could see her contentment with him, with them. He could sense the love and understanding in her heart. The two sat side by side on his bed, Vincent and Catherine, at one with their relationship, each fully appreciating the qualities the other had to offer.

Vincent longed for the feel of her lips against his, but was not yet brave enough to initiate such contact. Instead, he lifted his hand to her face and stroked the soft skin of her cheek. Catherine was so beautiful, and his eyes examined her every feature. Gently, his hand cupped her chin, and his thumb traced the line of her lower lip. Catherine sat still, succumbing willingly to his scrutiny. The feel of him, so close, touching her so intimately, sent shivers through her. Her skin tingled wherever he touched her, and her desire was building fast.

Vincent felt her emotions surge at his touch, and he hesitated slightly. Then, he made his decision. His hand slid beneath her hair to the back of her neck, and he pulled her mouth to his. He kissed her slowly at first, then passionately. His tongue parted her teeth, and found

hers waiting for him. His arms pulled her body close to his. The softness of her was almost too much for him, but he could not end this touch.

Catherine wrapped her arms around him and held on for dear life. She wanted him, all of him, so much! But, she was unsure exactly where he intended this kiss to lead. She wanted to touch him, caress him, undress him, but she knew she dare not do so. She had to relinquish herself to him, follow his lead and let him take control.

Vincent finally pulled out of the kiss, but kept his face close to hers. He leaned his forehead against hers and softly spoke the words, "I love you, Catherine."

Catherine whispered back, "I love you, too, Vincent. I love all of you." Running her fingers over the whiskers on his face and then through his hair, she leaned in for a short, sweet kiss.

After a brief pause, Catherine asked excitedly, "Where is your full volume of Shakespeare?"

"On the table, there, why?" Vincent was curious. Why the sudden change in her demeanor?

Catherine rose with a mission and opened the thick book, searching for the passage which had just entered her mind. "Oh, where is it?" She ruffled the pages of the aged book. "Here," she announced at last, returning to Vincent's side. As she read to him, her voice filled the room, surrounding him, and he was tranquilized.

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments

Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove: O, no! It is an ever-fixed mark, that looks on tempests and is never shaken; it is the star to every wandering bark, whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken. Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks within his bending sickle's compass come; love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom. If this be error and upon me proved, I never writ, nor no man. . . (or woman)" Catherine added, "ever loved."

"You read so beautifully, Catherine."

"I read the truth, Vincent. My love is forever! You're stuck with me!"

"There is no one else I would rather be stuck with," Vincent replied, with a breathy laugh. He kissed her softly once more, letting his lips linger on hers a bit longer.

Catherine had never felt such happiness as she had found with Vincent. And, they were making progress. Not only had he learned to confide in her, but he was coming to terms with their relationship, and was beginning now to open himself to physical closeness. Having defended himself against a woman did not make Vincent a lady killer.

Sexually, however, Catherine mused only to herself, he was killing her! He was so oddly erotic, and Catherine imagined that any woman in her position would desire him. Catherine's desire was strong, and she struggled to contain it, hoping that Vincent had not yet picked up on her building passion. *'In time,'* she told herself. *'In time.'*

Catherine sat across the breakfast table from Vincent. Father sat to her left and Mary to her right. Neither mentioned the fact that she had spent the night with him, but Catherine knew they were well aware of the events of last evening.

"Would you like another biscuit, Catherine?" William asked her, proud of his cooking and glad she had eaten three already.

"Oh, no, thank you, William! I'm stuffed, but they are delicious. I'd love to have that recipe!"

William nodded enthusiastically and started to tell her he would be happy to share it with her, when an incredible crash came from the tunnel just outside the dining chamber. Catherine and Mary jumped, the older woman clasped Catherine's shoulder for support.

“What on earth. . .” Father began, looking at his son sitting across from him. Father’s query was cut off by the sound of a girl’s scream.

Vincent rose quickly and headed into the tunnel, recognizing the scream had come from Samantha.

‘Not again!’ he thought. “Samantha?” he hollered as he exited the dining hall. The sight before him caused him to stop dead in his tracks. Samantha was standing against the tunnel wall, pressing herself back hard trying to escape her aggressor.

The wild child stood before her, grabbing and tugging for the release of a basket of muffins Samantha had been delivering to the breakfast table. Samantha held on to the basket as if it were made of gold.

“Let go of the basket, Samantha.” Vincent directed.

“All right,” the girl commented, with obvious reluctance. “But all you had to do was ask!” she yelled to the child.

Vincent was unable to ascertain whether the scroungy youngster was a boy or a girl, but whatever it was, it was hungry. The child grabbed the basket and ran down the tunnel, in search of a safe place to enjoy its pillage. “Are you hurt?” he asked Samantha. He knelt down beside the frightened girl and checked her over for any sign of injuries.

“No, I’m ok.” she answered him.

Father, Catherine and some of the others had gathered in the doorway, seeing the child escape. Father motioned the others to return to their meal, including Samantha. Catherine stayed behind with Father, who approached Vincent. “Something has to be done about that child,” he told his son. “Not only for our sake but for hers.” Father assumed the child to be a girl because of its long hair, temporarily forgetting that Vincent had long hair and was without doubt male.

“Or his,” Vincent commented, bringing a solemn grin to the old man’s face. “I doubt if I can get anywhere near. The poor thing watched as I. . .as the others were. . .saw me only as an angry monster, Father.”

“Mouse was reluctant to your approach at first too, Vincent,” Father reminded him, “but, you were the only one he would take food from, and eventually he came to trust you, letting you clean him and teach him.” Father placed a reassuring hand on his son’s shoulder. “I think, perhaps, you have to try.”

Vincent nodded, and Catherine volunteered, “I will go with you,” but Vincent promptly replied, “You stay here, Catherine. This is something I must do alone.” He leaned in to her and kissed her on the cheek, not caring that Father stood there observing them. Then he headed in the direction the small outsider had run.

Vincent had walked only a short distance when his ears picked up a sort of snorting sound. Slowly, he walked around the bend, mindful to stay close against the tunnel wall in order to stay hidden in the shadows. There before him, crouched in the center of the passage-way was the subject of his search. The child huddled over the spilled basket of muffins, inhaling them at an outrageous rate, snorting with every bite.

‘Some table manners!’ Vincent thought to himself. He took a step towards this desperate creature, uncertain of whether to attempt to gain its trust or if it would be better just to grab hold of the little mongrel. Grabbing the child might be difficult, for Vincent’s recent gunshot wound was still sore. He had, however, against Father’s medical advice, removed the sling. Now he wished he wore it to remind him that he was still injured. Suddenly, he was spotted!

The child moved its food a few feet farther from him and resumed eating. Vincent advanced one step more, and the child repeated its mini-retreat.

"You must really be hungry," Vincent spoke in his most calm, velvety tone, but the child did not calm down.

"Must really be hungry," the child parroted back to him, watchful of his every move. The muffins, at least a dozen of them, were halfway gone, the rest spilled out over the dirt floor. Crumbs adorned the small being's hair and tattered clothes. Vincent attempted one further advance, then sat against the tunnel wall. By sitting, he hoped his presence would be found less overwhelming. The child had finished its meal, and grabbing a handful of sticky crumbs, tossed them into Vincent's face and ran away.

'Well,' thought Vincent, 'that's better than the gun!' Deciding not to follow the child any more, he rose and returned to breakfast and to Catherine. Catherine and Father were the only ones left at the table. They sat talking and discussing possibilities for the child. A council meeting would be held later to bring their ideas to the community's vote, if the child was ever caught.

Catherine looked up with astonished amusement as Vincent entered the dining hall. "Didn't go too well, huh?" she asked teasingly.

Vincent took the chair beside her and ignored her attempted humor. "This child is relentless. I could get no closer than ten feet."

Catherine could see the disappointment in his eyes. She put an arm around his shoulder. She couldn't resist the bit of muffin she noticed in his hair, and she leaned into him grabbing it with her teeth.

"Mmm," she quipped. "Very tasty, but could use some butter."

Father blushed, and Vincent reached across the table. "You are very cute, Catherine!" He said sarcastically, handing her a pot of margarine. Then with a more serious tone, he added, "As I said before, Father, I don't think I can get close to this child. And if I do, what then?"

Father shrugged. "Catherine and I have been debating that. I feel that the child would never be fully welcomed below, after what the others had done. Trying to raise this child here may lead to resentment and behavior problems that we are unable to cope with."

Catherine intervened. "But, child welfare may not be willing or able to tackle such extreme abnormalities, and may find it easier and more desirable to institutionalize her. . .him. . .it. There is something else we are all forgetting, this child knows of the tunnels, knows them well from following the others, and has seen Vincent. If the child is captured and sent above, there may be a chance, however slight, that it may lead others here, or someday talk of its experience here."

"You're right, Catherine," Vincent acknowledged, removing more crumbs from his hair and handing them to her, refusing to let her win their little charade. "But Father is also right. Either way, there are difficulties that seem to have no solution. But before we can decide what must be done with this wild thing, we must first catch it!" Vincent rose and shook the remaining crumbs from his hair. "Catherine, will you try? I will show you where it is. Catherine nodded and rose to follow Vincent. "Of course. I'll see what I can do."

Vincent led Catherine by the hand through the tunnels, back toward the home chambers and the place he had last left the child. Mouse came bolting down the passage, stopping abruptly, just short of ramming into them. "Trouble! Big trouble!," he shouted at them. "Vincent, come quickly!" Mouse ran towards the children's dormitory. Vincent followed and Catherine struggled to keep up with them.

Children were gathered in the hallway outside their room, crying, shouting and screaming. The snorting and snarling sound that Vincent had heard before echoed from within. The wild child was rummaging through their sparse belongings, rumpling the freshly made beds and tearing at the sheets. In one hand, shining in the light of the flickering candles, was a knife. Vincent recognized the knife as one from William's kitchen and realized that it must have been in the basket of muffins Samantha had carried. The child stabbed the mattresses over and over, as if it were killing its prey. At Vincent's command, the children scattered their separate ways, away from any risk of danger.

"Tried to stop it, Vincent. Couldn't. See." Mouse held his hand out to his mentor, and for the first time since Mouse had summoned him, Vincent noticed his friend was bleeding.

"Mouse," Vincent ordered, pointing back down the way they had just come. "Go to Father!" Reluctantly Mouse shrugged his shoulders and ran off in search of medical care.

Catherine started to enter the room. "Catherine, no!" Vincent's arm flew in front of her, blocking the doorway. "I'll go."

"And then what, Vincent?" Catherine's tone was harsh, but caring. "What can either of us do alone, but frighten the poor thing?" Catherine had to admit, she had never seen anything like it. The child that had shuddered and brandished her gun, was not the same child before them now. The earlier attack had been in fear, shooting at them defensively, mocking what had been witnessed. But now, the creature in the dormitory exhibited only violence, of its own making, and with no provocation.

"This child, Vincent," Catherine advised, "is not. . . well. . . I think the damage is too great and there may be no hope in this case for salvation."

"So, your institution may be the best place for. . . him." Vincent affirmed the child's gender as the violence ceased temporarily when the young boy urinated on the tunnel floor. Catherine did not have time to answer, because Vincent took advantage of this break to make his move. With one swift motion he grabbed the boy from behind, shaking the knife from his hand, wrapping both arms tightly around him in a basket hold. Catherine moved in to clear away the weapon and then summoned for help on the pipes. The pain which shot up Vincent's wounded arm was excruciating, but he held on.

The child kicked and squealed, trying to bite Vincent's hands and arms. At the top of his voice, having given up on attempting to calm the youth, Vincent repeatedly shouted "No!" After more than twenty shouts, the child finally gave in to his capture. Despite the sudden calmness in the youngster, Vincent did not let go, knowing that if he did the child would dart away.

"Wait here for the others," he told Catherine. "Tell them I've taken him to the cells." Catherine nodded and Vincent left with the boy tucked neatly under his good arm, resuming his kicking and squirming with less force than before.

"There, that ought to hold you for now." Vincent's voice was anything but comforting. He was tired from this battle. *'I'm getting too old for this,'* he thought, as he placed the boy inside the rock security room, closing the door behind him. The little room, no bigger than eight- by-eight, was immensely dark. Only a glimmer of light shone through the tiny slit in the top of the door. It was here they kept intruders who threatened their home, and residents who broke too many rules and required solitude. It was in this very cell that they had first placed the young man who had followed Catherine below, a curious boy from her building, who had now become a friend. It may have seemed cruel, but it was a much needed room this morning.

From inside the tiny room came more screaming, the child's eyes wild with fury. Peering in through the slit in the door, Vincent recognized that there was little hope of keeping this child

below. But what to do with him? Someone had to be able to help. Vincent stretched his weary arms, sore from their battle, and returned to the others in time to join the counsel.

“What do we do with him, now?” It was Pascal’s voice that began the questioning at the meeting. “He obviously more dangerous than we had thought!”

“We can’t keep him locked up forever,” Mary added. “There must be some way to help him, poor thing.” Mary’s first impulse was always one of gracious fortitude, but this time, she knew too that below would bring no solution for this child.

“Peter has been notified and will be coming down as soon as he leaves his office this afternoon.”

It was Father’s voice that offered them a solution. Peter Alcott was one of Father’s oldest friends, and had long helped the tunnel-dwellers with medical needs and supplies. “He has agreed to examine the child, if he can get close enough, and will bring what we need to sedate him. I’m afraid we have no other choice but to send the boy above. He needs more than love and our compassion. Any home we could provide, while a more stable environment than he is used to, is still not enough.”

It was obvious to all that Father had been reluctant in admitting this defeat. Any kindness they could offer this child would not likely tame him.

“But, it was Vincent who similarly captured Mouse, and taught him everything he knows.” William was not yet ready to give up on this kid. “And Mouse is now a valued member of this community.”

“William,” Vincent chimed in to rescue his Father, “Father is right. This boy. . .has suffered extreme neglect, like others here, but. . .the lashing out, the degree of his violence, points to a more deep rooted, emotional and behavioral disturbance than we can effectively deal with. Mouse was rebellious, yes, because he was afraid, but this child. . .this child harbors more than fear. There is an anger so far within him that it cannot be reached. And, part of that anger is centered on us and our world. We cannot deny the fact, that though it was done to salvage our home, I took the boy’s family from him. He does not know trust, and he will surely never trust us.”

Catherine was seated beside Vincent. She often sat in on council meetings when she was below. Her opinions and ideas were welcomed and respected, and she had become a true member of this community. She reached over and grabbed the hand of the man she loved, weaving her fingers into his. Slowly, he was coming to terms with what he had done. Painful though it was, he knew now that he had killed only to prevent the further destruction that the outsiders would have laid upon them. He was healing, but he was also hurting due to his inability to recommend sanctuary for their most recent visitor.

“I know I speak only as an observer, but for what it’s worth, I agree with Father and Vincent. Before, I felt the child welfare system would only break the child’s spirit and destroy him. But, now, I have come to think that an institution could possibly offer him the treatment he needs. At the very least, he’ll be sheltered, fed, and hopefully integrated socially, if even just a little. His spirit needs breaking! You must think of the children already here. They need to feel safe and secure in their home.”

The members all focused on Catherine. They trusted her judgment. One by one they all agreed that the child should be returned to the world above. God willing, Peter would be able to help them.

“My God, Jacob. You mean he has literally been screaming like this for four hours!” Peter was amazed at what he saw as he looked through the tiny opening in the security cell. “Be

prepared for anything. I'm going in." Peter lifted the bar from the door and opened it up just a crack. In an instant a small set of fingers wrapped around the door as the boy struggled in an attempt to push through.

Vincent approached the scene in time to put his body between the boy and his attempted escape. "Let me help you, Peter," he said. "We've had this battle before." With one massive hand, Vincent gently forced the boy back into the dark room.

"No!" he vocalized sternly, to little avail.

Peter followed Vincent into the small chamber, closing the door behind him. The boy, fearing Vincent's aggression, ran into the corner, spitting, kicking and swinging his arms violently.

"I'm sorry kid, this may hurt a little." Peter moved toward the boy with a shot to sedate him, as Vincent held the child firmly against his chest. "There. It won't take long, twenty minutes maybe, and he'll be asleep."

The two men left the child, who remained huddled in the corner, still screaming.

"I've arranged an admission to the Child Psych Unit," Peter informed Father and the others. "He has to be signed in by the court, without guardianship. Catherine, can you take care of that?"

"Of course, Peter. I'll go above with you."

Once the child was asleep, Vincent carried him to the park entrance. It was dark now, and he assisted with loading the child securely into Peter's car. The sleeping form stirred only slightly as the seat belt was fastened around him.

"He looks so tame now," Vincent stroked the child's hair, sorry for the life the child must lead. He realized now just how lucky he had been, how lucky he was. Turning to Catherine he kissed her forehead, regretting her departure from him this evening. "Be careful! Both of you," he warned.

"We will. Don't worry." Catherine squeezed his hand before climbing into the front seat beside Peter. "I'll see you soon."

Vincent stood by the road watching as the car pulled away. For the first time since the outsiders' invasion, he felt a sense of resolve. His world could not offer sanctuary to all of the city's troubled souls. Not every story could have a happy ending.

Or could it? . . .

Vincent sat on the rock bench overlooking the falls. He had felt Catherine's return, but did not go to meet her at her sub-basement. He knew she would find him. She knew her way well. And, he wanted her very much to join him in his world tonight.

She had left only yesterday, with Peter. But he had missed her terribly. He had now experienced the joy of having her close, so close, in his bed. He recalled how she had slept in his arms, how she had touched him, soothing his mind and his heart, massaging away his pain. She expressed her desire so openly to him. She trusted him completely, and he felt able now to trust himself, to allow and accept her love. He was ready to face his own desire.

"Vincent. . ."

It was she. He turned to see her enter his domain. Vincent knew how Catherine loved the falls. The smell of the clean, crisp air that hovered there and the sound of the water filled her with tranquility and a sense of renewal. He felt it in their bond. She sidled up beside him on the bench and his arm went fast around her.

Looking into her eyes, he asked, "How did it go?"

“Okay,” Catherine exhaled. “It was midnight before I could get the court order signed by the judge. He was none too happy about adding another odd case to his already eerie night docket. So, it was 2:00 a.m. before the admission was completed and by then the kid was wide awake. They had to restrain him and I felt so bad leaving him there. But I know it was the best decision. . .for everyone.”

“Yes.” His voice was always so reassuring. “We did the right thing, Catherine.” Pulling her even closer into his embrace, he asked, “Did you get any sleep?”

“I went into work late today, and left a little early. I took a short nap before coming here.”

“I am glad you are rested.” Vincent turned her slightly to face him.

Her emerald green eyes looked up at him, with curiosity. *‘What an odd thing to say,’* she thought. *What could he have in mind?* Before she could ask him, his lips were pressed firmly to hers. The passion behind his kiss ignited a flame deep within her, sending shivers through her, and she felt her stomach tighten. She kissed him back, hard, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck. His mouth toyed with her lips awhile longer before moving to the nape of her neck. There, his lips, his tongue and his teeth all played upon the milky softness of her skin.

Catherine squealed, alarming Vincent momentarily. “Did I hurt you?” he questioned.

“Oh no! That was pleasure, Vincent, not pain.” Vincent kissed her again, then ran his hands through her sandy brown hair, bringing them to rest upon the buttons of her blouse. An inquisitive look came over his face, and for a moment there was a slight uncertainty there.

Catherine inhaled deeply, hoping this meant what it seemed, needing to know that he wouldn’t turn away from her, wanting his intimate touch so badly. She nodded to him, gesturing her will for him to carry on with his intentions, and one-by-one he unfastened the buttons.

Eager to begin her own adventures, Catherine untied the laces of his shirt. He gasped at the swiftness of her movements, and before they knew it they were fully disrobed, each submitting willingly to the scrutiny of the other. Catherine wanted to pinch herself to be sure she was not dreaming. Instead, she pinched him, softly at the waist.

“Catherine,” he mumbled, wriggling away, revealing that he was very ticklish in that area. It was an admission he’d soon come to regret.

Like a delighted child, she longed to torment him. “Oh, you’re ticklish, huh?” she taunted provocatively as she used both hands to poke and tickle him everywhere imaginable.

A joyously irritated Vincent rose, and seeking safety dove into the icy waters at the point where there was just a short drop. “Try that now!” he teased back, splashing up at her childishly.

Catherine had never dreamed that he had such a playful side. She had gotten glimpses of it on rare occasions, as he entertained the children or let his guard down temporarily during concerts beneath the park. But, this was a whole new Vincent. He seemed perfectly at ease with her and with himself. Gritting her teeth she dove into the pool, swimming beneath the water until she came to his side. He did not see her nearing him and jumped wildly as she clasped him at the sides and tickled once more. Reaching under the water’s surface, he raised her up and into his arms. She pressed her body close to his and kissed him delicately.

“You win,” he said. “I surrender!”

Catherine understood the deeper meaning to his words. Not only was he admitting defeat in their ‘tickle war,’ but he was also giving himself up willingly to her, and to their desire.

“I love you, Vincent! Are you sure you’re all right with this?” Catherine’s expression was one of concern. “I don’t want to pressure you.”

“I am fine, Catherine.” Nuzzling in to her ear, he whispered, “This is what we have both wanted for so long. I know that. For you to want to be with me, like this, does feel strange. But, it also feels good... so good. If I told you I wasn’t nervous or a little frightened, I would be lying to

you.” He held her close, reassuring her that he had no plans to retreat or send her away. There was no turning back now. “I love you! And now, I want to express that love.”

Vincent swam to the edge of the pool and gracefully pulled himself back up to the shore. He assisted Catherine to the earth and led her to a pile of blankets and pillows accumulated behind a stone wall. He had planned this evening, and Catherine was warmed with that realization. She had gotten through to him. He had heard her. And now he was giving himself, all of himself, to her.

Vincent moved to the chamber door and fastened the drape curtain that hung there. “When it is tied shut, no one will enter,” he reported, sensing that she was used to doors with locks and may be a little uneasy with the seeming lack of privacy.

Catherine looked up at him and a smile lit her face. She opened her arms, inviting him to join her on the blankets. Nothing else in the world mattered to them now, not the D.A.’s office, not the outsiders, not Lizzy, and not the child. The disturbing situation had been brought to a close, and further obstacles had been averted by the strength of their love, the intensity of their bond had seen them through once again. The ‘lady killer’ had been tamed, and he now accepted his place as the man that she loved.

Emotions overcame them, and they made love to the rhythm of the rushing water. On this magical night, there was no one else in their world, but Vincent, the man, and Catherine, the woman. Filled with a sense of complacency, the lovers collapsed into the comfort of each other’s arms.

END