

DUSTBOWL CAFE

by Nan Dibble

(From PHOENIX FOUR)

This novelette is set in an alternate timeline where Vincent never knew Catherine. Its circumstances are unusual but, the author hopes, close enough to the characters we know, given other circumstances, that readers will enjoy imagining other possibilities.....

Vincent stretched his legs out in front of him. Sitting on the porch like this was grand. In the hot Arizona sun. With dust and tumble-weeds flying about everywhere. Covering his boots with a thin layer of white grit. Grand.

Eyes closed, he shifted his heel and toe a little and the porch squeaked, a nifty sound, like a mouse **Mouse?** Well, it didn't matter. These little nudges from the past didn't really matter. It would come to him, some day. Some day. That's what **she** always told him. Diana. That it would all come back to him, some day.

But it came in little nudges, tiny glimpses. Not all at once. Not in a rush, as he imagined it would. Should.

He didn't care much. The past was a long way off. The present was really grand. Sitting in the sun on the porch of the Dustbowl Cafe outside of Tucson, Arizona -- way outside, **she'd** told him. That was wonderful. But he didn't know where Tucson was and didn't much care.

Afternoons were especially nice, very hot. All his chores finished, until a car came by. **If** a car came by. Most afternoons there were no cars. No one arrived to eat in the diner, fill up on gas, use the restroom. Most afternoons it was just him, sitting on the porch in the sun, and **her** inside, scrubbing down the counter, sterilizing the coffee urn, checking if he'd done a good job cleaning the restrooms, inspecting the dishes and silverware to see if he'd missed a spot. Then chatting for a while with the old blind lady who'd arrived suddenly about three months ago and stayed.

What was her name, the old blind lady? He could never remember that name. A flower. Forsythia? No. What was it? Gladys? No. Vincent rubbed his temple, which started to ache whenever he pushed for a memory. Narcissa! That was it! Narcissa! Strange old lady. Knew his name. Or said she did, anyway. Called him "Vincent" the minute she got here. Tears in her eyes. "At last. I found you, child!" she said. Then, "Vincent"

She called him "Buster" before Narcissa came. He didn't like the name "Buster".

She wanted to know everything. Kept pestering the old lady with questions until he'd finally touched **her** -- carefully, on her arm; lightly, so she wouldn't be frightened -- and said to **her**, "Enough. Let Narcissa rest."

And **she'd** look at him, swallowed real hard, and said, "Of course. Sorry, Narcissa. I always push."

Then she'd put Narcissa into the best guest cottage she had -- of the three; the one with the fan that worked. And Narcissa had stayed through the spring, and now, into the summer. And never explained who she was or why she'd come or how she knew his name. **If** Vincent was really his name.

Bang! A big pot being struck with a stainless steel ladle. Ah, **she** wanted him to come in. He'd go.

Standing and stretching, pushing up his sleeves and staring for the thousandth time at the long red strands covering his hands, his arms -- **fur!** Vincent tried to remember, again, about his appearance. But the blinding pain in his head came, so he stopped.

The screen door squeaked when he opened it. He must remember to oil the hinges.

"Do you want something, Diana?" he asked, softly, respectfully, because he was here on sufferance, and it was her cafe, and her shed behind the cafe where she let him bed down. He was here because she let him be, and he was grateful. Because he had nowhere else to go. Remembered nowhere else. Looked strange. Like an animal. A big redheaded cat. Had fangs and claws -- not like a real cat's, though: he couldn't make them go away..... So he had to have a place, and Diana let him stay here and do a few chores, and he was grateful.

He hated her. Diana. Because she didn't find anything strange about him. He knew that must be wrong. There **was** so much strange about him. Why did she pretend there wasn't.

"There's a leak, Vincent, from the kitchen sink. Do you think you can fix it?"

She never knew what to expect. That's what she always told him. And looked at him as if he were one of those crossword puzzles she worried over. Never knew what to expect. From him. Because some things he knew how to do, and others he didn't.

She said that was very very odd. Amnesia, she told him -- annoyed, perplexed -- was supposed to wipe out **personal** memories. But things you knew how to do, you remembered. But he didn't remember right.

He could fix leaks, he knew. So he went and got the toolbox without a word, took it to the kitchen, and began repairing the pipe under the sink.

But **she** couldn't understand why he looked blankly at the telephone, and the juke box, and the radio. Was bewildered by her computer. Looked blank when she mentioned fax machines. Didn't know how to fix wiring.

She couldn't understand what she called "selective memory."

He couldn't understand how or why people connected with each other. Why **she** let him stay; why Narcissa had come, or stayed. Wondering about such things made his head hurt.

Vincent didn't really care.

He just liked the sun here in her Arizona. The heat. And the wide open pale blue sky. And the desert animals and insects and birds. And the silences.

The sun. So bright. So peaceful. So welcoming. That's all that mattered. The sun. It was grand.

"I've finished, Diana," he told her, and put away the tools.

Did you clean up after yourself? I've gotta cook in there."

She was a terrible cook. Most of the time, Vincent cooked, and she sneered that at least he was good for something. Maybe it wasn't a sneer. Maybe she was frightened.

Of what could she be frightened?

That they'd never find out where he came from; he'd never remember; and she'd be stuck with him. Perhaps that's what frightened her Perhaps.

She had taken a seat at one of the booths by the window, overlooking the porch and, farther, the road. Dusty, empty road. She had a book of poems she was always reading. Or at least looking through. Vincent's book. Tucked into his pocket when she'd found him.

She'd found him, six months ago, unconscious, by the side of the road. Thrown from a wrecked van with New York license plates. The driver was still in the van, unconscious too. **Him**, she's sent to the hospital, where he lay in a coma for a while, then died without regaining consciousness. Diana found out he came from Brooklyn. As far as they could discover, the driver had no family, and nobody seemed to know where he'd been headed.

She found out soon enough that Vincent didn't know how to drive. That was the worst of all, to her -- that he couldn't drive. "What kind of man can't drive?" she shouted, when he admitted the truth to her. "Where in hell did you **come** from?"

Later, calming down, Diana mumbled, "Of course, you can't drive. Probably been hidden away in some barn somewhere all your life. Hidden." Then she turned away from him -- in disgust, he thought -- and went to her room, a tiny cubicle with a cot and a wardrobe and a chest of drawers and a computer set-up, and nothing else. She didn't come out that night. And in the morning, she insisted he learn how to drive.

She had what she called a vintage car -- an old beat-up pink Chevrolet -- and she taught him how to drive on that. "We'll tool around out back, behind the cafe. You don't need roads to learn." She phoned into Tucson for a driver's instruction manual and went over and over the simple rules with him until he could repeat them for memory.

It made his head hurt to memorize those rules. But **she** didn't care.

Narcissa came into the cafe from her cottage, all swathed in colorful cloth, and smiled at him and Diana.

"Would you like some coffee, Narcissa?" he asked, mindful that Diana wished him to stay out of sight except when nobody was around. Narcissa was all right. Narcissa knew him. Knew his name. Anybody else was dangerous. They mustn't see him.

"Thank you, child, but not now."

Vincent stood by the counter, uncertain what he should do. Should he stay and talk to the old woman? Or go outside again, into the sun?

Dismissing him with a glance, Diana asked Narcissa, "Would you take a look at this? He doesn't remember this book, any of the poems. Nothing rings a bell. But don't you think they must have been important to him, if he carried it in his pocket?"

"It's a mystery, child. But Vincent was always a mystery, even when he was in his right mind."

"Sure, he's a mystery. How he looks and all. That's not what I'm trying to figure out. Or where he comes from. **You** know that, you old fraud, and when he's right in the head again, you'll tell me, and take him home."

Vincent listened to Diana and was startled at the feelings surging in him. He wasn't sure he wanted to go home, wherever that was. He liked it here, at the cafe. He liked his chores. And the sun. The old mutt, Lucifer, would miss him if he went away. And Vincent would miss Lucifer. He wanted to stay here.

"I just want him to remember, is all. No more, no less. When he knows who he is, then we'll worry about his future. Until then, he's a lump, a body without a soul. Narcissa, the man who liked poetry -- he's the one I want to meet. Vincent is okay, but **that** guy! He's the one."

"Perhaps you'll be very sorry to know him, Diana. He was not simple. Not like now. He was "

"Yeah, I know. A mystery. Well, I'm an ex-police detective, Narcissa. I always liked mysteries."

Narcissa didn't answer, and Vincent wasn't surprised. Narcissa, he knew, didn't speak often.

"Who was the driver of that van, Narcissa? Won't you tell me?"

"Vincent's friend, child, since he was a little child. A friend. That is all I can tell you."

"Where'd he **keep** Vincent? Where **can** you keep someone like him?" Diana was perplexed. She closed the book of poems and sat back in the booth, staring out the window again. "Someplace like this, maybe. A farm. Out west. But the van had New York license plates That man was from the city." She shook her head. "How could he keep him cooped up in New York? Where?"

Vincent was tired of the speculations. Diana turned the pieces of the mystery over and over again, every day, each night. It was tiring. Tiresome. Like Father. **Father?** A piercing pain flashed behind his eyes, and Vincent blinked, then left the cafe, banging the screen door behind him.

He walked about ten yards, around the side of the cafe, and out back, where he could see the mountains in the distance, like faint purple bruises on the horizon. He felt uncomfortable, itchy, hot. The jeans **she'd** given him to wear were tight. The belt cut into his belly, and the waistband rubbed against his furred skin.

There was no one there. No one at all. Just the mutt, Lucifer, who bounded up to Vincent with a welcoming bark and several quick licks to his hand.

Vincent patted the dog's head and the mutt scampered off. Lucifer wanted his dinner, Vincent knew.

If Vincent took off his clothes If..... No one would see him. There was no house or barn or farm or cafe for miles around. No one would see him back here.

Quickly, he kicked off his boots, unbuckled his belt and stripped off his jeans and briefs. He tore the long-sleeved shirt off, unable to stand the ribbing, the constriction. He breathed deeply, raising his face to the sun. The warmth felt wonderful on his skin. He could feel it penetrating his pores, where there was no fur. Feel it sit on his fur, where there was fur, which was almost everywhere. Slowly he stretched out his arms as wide as he could, as if to greet the sun

A lizard scampered between his feet, over his toes, then away into the sparse desert grass. He laughed. This is grand.

"Vincent!"

Slowly, he turned and faced her. **She** was angry with him. And something else. Her face was red and blotched. Very angry, then.

"Do you need help with dinner, Diana?" he asked softly, trying to appease her.

"What are you doing?"

"The sun

She was very angry. Her eyebrows wrinkled together in that frightening way, that meant she was angry. Her mouth was a thin line.

At last, Diana said, "Vincent, you're making me very tired, you know?"

He didn't know. So he said nothing.

"Well, you're right. I do need help with dinner. As a matter of fact, maybe you could cook the whole damn thing."

Why would she want him to cook? She insisted on cooking, except where there were customers and it was too hard for her to manage alone. Another chore. He had no choice.

Picking up his clothes, he started toward her, thinking to pass her on the way into the cafe. But she backed away, frightened. Why was she frightened?

"Vincent, put on your clothes before you go inside, please."

Diana was tired. That was it. Tired. That's why she wanted him to cook.

Obediently, he stopped and redressed before he went into the kitchen and began a meal of baked beans and salmon croquettes. William loved salmon croquettes. **William?** Vincent shook his head, then looked around to see if Diana had noticed. **She** asked him not to do that around food. He forgot most of the time. But there was no hair in the food, he made certain.

Out on the porch the next afternoon, morning chores all done, Vincent pondered the mystery of the weather. Today was cloudy. He sat hunched over on the porch swing, discontented and discouraged. Dinner was good last night, he thought. **She** took a second helping. Unusual, because she didn't eat much. The old lady complimented him on his cooking, saying something strange.

"You haven't lost your touch, Vincent. I remember the food you made for me when I was sick. Good, so good." And she thanked him.

But she left the cafe and went back to her cottage right after she ate. Why was she crying?

Had Narcissa gone into Tucson again last night? She went there faithfully, once a week -- to get news, she said. Never said what news. Was just gone, and then back. Vincent wasn't sure if Narcissa **had** gone. A bus passed by the cafe four times a day. Early in the morning, at lunchtime, after supper, and late in the evening, well past sundown. She might have gone without Vincent seeing her leave or return. She could catch a bus without passing in front of the cafe, just by walking up the dirt track to the highway and waving to the bus driver. People did that sometimes when their cars broke down but they didn't want to stay at the Dustbowl Cafe. One had, anyway -- gone out to the paved road and waved down a bus, since buses didn't always stop. They just went past with a bad smell. On the highway.

He didn't care. The man who'd driven the van had been his friend, Narcissa told Diana. But Diana didn't think so. She was angry with the man. Why?

The mutt, Lucifer, lay sleeping at Vincent's feet, head resting on his paws. A noise from the road woke the dog, who lifted one eyelid. Vincent heard the noise too. A car. Not far away. He waited to see if it would pull into the long dirt track leading from the highway to the cafe. It made him angry, that he had to hide, if the car came here, to Dustbowl Cafe. Customers made him angry.

The car was coming. A shiny new black car, with a silver animal on its hood. He stood, opened the screen door and went directly through the cafe to the kitchen.

Diana, standing near the window, exclaimed, "A Jaguar, Vincent. A shiny sassy sleek Jaguar! Wow!" **She** liked customers, especially rich ones who filled up at the gas pump and ate big meals they selected from the plastic-covered greasy menus. **She** liked customers, but only if they didn't arrive too often or stay too long. **She** didn't mind that Vincent must hide. Insisted on it. Because customers were dangerous. Not to her. To him.

Vincent hated customers. And cars.

This car was broken, he knew. The motor's sound told him. Over the months he'd lived here at the cafe, he learned to hear the different ways a car could be broken

"Woops," **she** would say, "busted transmission." Or sympathetically, "Nothing much, nothing we can't fix. But I gotta order the parts from Tucson, maybe farther away, for a foreign beauty like this one."

Then Diana would hunch over the counter and confide to the distraught driver, "We've got real nice cottages out back. No air conditioning, but ceiling fans. Or you can get the car towed into the city. Cost you an arm and a leg at the major mechanics. Hotels are high, too. My mechanic"-----**she** was speaking about him; they'd found he had a way with motors, though he drove "like a drunken sailor," **she** said -- "can fix just about anything, and cheap. He cooks, too. A regular Jack-of-all-trades!" Then **she** would laugh, and the driver (except the one who'd taken the bus) would agree to stay at the cafe. Most of them seemed to believe they couldn't resist her red hair. "Can't turn down a redheaded beauty like you," they said. Women with broken cars were rare; the one he'd seen had hired a tow truck and taken the bus to wait out the repair in Tucson. Vincent was glad of that. He didn't like the women. Knew they wouldn't like him. Diana didn't like him. He made her tired. Because he couldn't remember.

The Jaguar was broken. It sounded like the radiator, a major repair. But Vincent thought these people -- three of them -- would go into Tucson to wait out the repairs. They would laugh at the cafe. The rich ones always laughed. **She** wouldn't mind, but it hurt him inside. Made his head ache, too, when they laughed at the cafe. He liked the cafe. Most days, it was sunny. Only, not today.

Peeking around the edge of the kitchen passthrough, he could see the booth where the three sat. A tall thin dark-haired man, a small thin woman, and another tall thin man with cropped white hair who came in behind the Jaguar on a motorcycle. The motorcycle was beautiful. It was alone. If Vincent rode it, he could be alone. Go anywhere. Get away fast. Ride into the sun. To the mountains. **Mountains?** His head ached blindingly for a moment, and he closed his eyes.

The white-haired man asked, "Where's your phone, miss?"

Diana pointed and said, "That way. Restrooms, too lady."

The woman smiled gratefully and followed the man out. He made some calls and she went to the restroom. When she came back, the woman's hair was combed in a different style. She was wearing fresh make-up and a huge smile.

"This is quaint, Gabriel," she said, sitting down next to her cadaverous companion. "Did you notice the sign? Dustbowl Cafe?"

"Yes. Hardly reassuring, Catherine." Turning to Diana, he asked for a menu.

"Coming up." Diana bounded over, handed menus to each of them, and a third to the white-haired man who slipped into the seat opposite the couple. "Specials: salmon croquettes and baked beans; meatloaf with mashed potatoes; fried chicken, cajun style. Vegetables: corn or lima beans, or beets. Or I can make you a sandwich -- tuna or chicken salad, hamburger, or grilled cheese."

The three customers exchanged amused glances. Vincent felt such pain, he could hardly stand. The dark-haired man ordered. "Three chicken specials. Is corn all right, Snow, Catherine?" But he didn't wait for their responses. "And coffee." Slapping his menu shut, he handed it to Diana, holding on to one corner, keeping her at the table. Squinting at her curiously, he asked, for no reason Vincent could understand. "What are you doing here, miss?"

"What?"

"What are you doing here in this place, this cafe? Waitressing."

The woman put her hand on Gabriel's arm, and the man called Snow demanded, intensely, "Not now, Gabriel. Not here."

Diana ignored them both and stared back at Gabriel, who released the menu into her hands. Scooping up the other two menus, **she** answered, "I own this place, and everything in it. Free and clear. Land, road, buildings. The works. It's not for sale."

Backing off, his hands raised, palms up, thin lips curved in a parody of a smile. Gabriel insisted, "No interest. In the place. But in **you** ... " He lifted an eyebrow. "**You** are a work of art."

"I'm a burnt-out cop. Retired. Boring. Don't even think about it, mister,"

"A police officer. Interesting. New York, by your accent."

Without responding further, Diana came into the kitchen, glanced at Vincent, put a finger to her lips for him to be silent, and dragged him by the sleeve out the back door.

"What is it, Diana? Who is that man? Who are those people? You are frightened."

"No, not frightened, just flabbergasted. I can't believe such incredible luck."

"Why?"

"You remember a few years back? No, of course you don't. In a nutshell, that's Gabriel Blake, and his wife, Catherine **nee** Chandler, a society babe. The other guy, Snow, must be their bodyguard."

"You know these people."

"I don't know them." With a laugh, leaning against the wooden back door, she said, "Rarefied atmosphere, those three breathe. Money like you wouldn't believe. Power. Unbelievable scope, beyond the ken of mere mortals."

Vincent didn't grasp what she meant, but let her continue, wondering why she was so angry. Glad she was not angry with **him**.

"Ah, babe, never mind. It's just odd they'd be traveling alone like this - on foot, so to speak - not in a private jet. I can't believe Gabriel Blake takes time for vacations Must be for the woman. She must have wanted it. Maybe there's trouble in paradise."

He shook his head. "I don't understand, Diana."

Pushing off the building, she flung open the door and pushed Vincent back inside. "Just make three chicken dinners with corn. I'll get the coffee. They'll be out of here soon. They just ... piqued my interest. Old soldiers never die ... Forget it, Vincent. Go. Cook."

Vincent did what Diana told him, as he always did. He needed to decide whether there were enough potatoes, or if he should cook rice with the chicken. Would **she** mind if he served a little of both, each in a big bowl, with serving spoons, as in the refectory? **Refectory?** He saw a huge room with four long wooden tables and wooden chairs. **William?** He remembered no more than that, but it was a true memory, he knew. Part of his past. Later, when the customers left, he would tell Diana.

The man called Snow approached Diana at the counter, where she sat like a predatory animal, watching them all eat.

"Can you suggest a place to get the Jag fixed, m'am?"

Her nostrils flaring, Diana demanded, "What's wrong with here? It's only the radiator, right?" Snow nodded, looking surprised she knew. "My mechanic can fix it, if you get a new radiator delivered. We can ship it back to New York for you."

"Oh, we'll wait. Gabriel and the lady are on a second honeymoon. They're in no hurry."

Diana smirked. "Thought maybe it was something like that. Your type usually travels fast."

"Nearest town's Tucson. Suggest a hotel?"

"Nearest hotel's here. Two cottages out back. One for them, one for you. Good food. Wide open spaces. Great sunrises and sunsets, my cooks assures me."

"No entertainment?"

"Not a smidgeon. Not even TV. Great place for lovers to get reacquainted."

Lovers? So the man called Gabriel and the woman called Catherine were lovers? Vincent wasn't sure what that meant. It was one of the ways people connected, that made his head hurt if he tried to think about it. What was a honeymoon?

"Show me," the man called Snow demanded, and Diana stalked out the front door, with him trailing behind, his shiny black boots making a clicking noise on the porch, then scuffing on the sun-cracked baked ground. Vincent heard their voices off to the right, by the cottages, but couldn't make out what they were saying.

Gabriel and his lady ate in silence, his eyes fixed on his plate, hers alternating from her plate to his face, then to the view from the window by their booth. They both looked up when Diana and Snow returned.

"Anything, Snow?" Gabriel asked quietly.

"Tolerable. Clean. No air conditioners. Broken ceiling fans ... "

"I can get those fixed by tonight," Diana volunteered.

"Great view, Gabe, behind the cafe. Mountains in the distance."

"A pool?" the woman inquired in a low voice.

"No pool, Catherine. Showers work. High grade towels. Ivory soap." Snow's voice softened when he spoke to the woman, and there was a hint of a smile on his skeletal face. **He likes her**, Vincent thought with surprise. **He likes Diana, too. He likes women.**

The dark-haired man glanced at Catherine, who shrugged, saying, "Okay by me if you two want to wait here for the car to be repaired. Better than a glitzy hotel in Tucson. It's not as though the ones there are palaces, either."

"Very well. Only three days, according to Snow, to fly in the parts we need. Miss?" Diana straightened. "Good mechanic?"

"On site."

"Two cottages, then, for us. I saw a third: Who's in it?"

Snow answered quickly, "Only an old blind woman. No threat, Gabe."

"That's what I pay **you** for, to take the sting out of the threats. What'll **you** do, Snow?"

Snow regarded Gabriel steadily. "**You** look at the view. And at your wife. **I'll** watch your back. Division of labor." Snow laughed. "Any beer here, Red?"

Vincent's stomach contracted in fear. The man called Diana **Red!** Surely now the wrath of God would descend upon him. **She** hated to be called Red. Hated her long red hair. Vincent had seen Diana attack a man who called her Red, throw him out of the cafe.

But Diana answered mildly, "Sure. I'll get you one. How 'bout you two? Want a beer?"

Vincent opened his eyes wide, almost drawn from hiding. **She** wasn't angry with the man for calling her Red! When she slipped into the kitchen she was humming, and he stared at her.

In a fierce whisper she told him, "Not what you think, Vincent. Nothing like that!" But he didn't know what to think. Or what she meant. He only knew that suddenly he hated the man called Snow.

Fiercely. "It's them. Those people. If I could get something on them, it would be the bust of my life!"

"Bust?"

"Collar. Nab the crooks. Arrest them. Pry loose some of their fancy crooked secrets. Oh, Vincent, you just cook up a storm! Make 'em love it here. When the Jag parts come, take your time repairing the car. Keep 'em here as long as you can." Dreamily, holding the cold beers she took from the refrigerator in both hands, putting one up against her cheek, she repeated, "Bust of my life."

"I will do as you ask, Diana, of course," he agreed, bewildered by her interest in the three customers. **She** had forgotten all about the mystery of his memory, his past. **She** wasn't angry with him any more. Had forgotten all about him. That should have made him happy. But it didn't. Thoughts about the man Snow nagged at him, He wanted to please her too.

If Vincent cooked for her, and fixed the broken car – slowly - **she** wouldn't be angry with him for a long time, maybe a week. She'd be pleased with him. That would be wonderful.

Diana left the kitchen with the beers, her eyes shining. She was humming a tune-less phrase from one of the records on the juke box in the cafe. He couldn't remember the name of the song, though she'd told him several times. He didn't like it. But he liked the sound of her singing. When she sang, he knew she wasn't angry at him.

The woman called Catherine laughed at something he didn't hear clearly, something one of the two men said. He liked the sound of her laugh - throaty, on a descending scale. Peering again from his hiding place in the kitchen, making certain no one would notice him, he watched the woman. She was smiling. A wonderful smile. She reached out and touched the man Gabriel's hand. Vincent could feel her fingers as if they were stroking **his** hand, **his** fur. Without thinking, he stroked the fur on his hand, and it seemed as if the woman were touching **him**. It felt good.

He began to wonder if he liked women, too, the way the man Snow did. But no, Diana was a woman, and Vincent did not like Diana. Diana was always angry at him.

But not today. Today, she needed him. To cook, to fix broken cars.

Suddenly, he was hot and uncomfortable in his tight clothes. He needed to get out of the kitchen. Now. But dinner was over, and **she** would be angry if he did not wash the dishes immediately. "The grease cakes on, Vincent," **she** always said. Frightened at daring to disobey her, he decided he would clean the kitchen later. Now he must go to his room in the little shed behind the cafe. Take off his clothes. They hurt him, tied him in knots. He needed to be free.

Slipping out the back door just in time to miss Diana coming into the kitchen, Vincent went to the

shed, scarcely noticing the black night, the cloudless starry sky, the sounds of insects and desert animals, the crunch of pebbles, the grass clumps bending under his boots, or Lucifer at his heels, a friendly companion.

A moment later after he was inside, Vincent was undressed. He stood by the window looking out at the night, breathing in the fresh scent of desert air. Then he stretched out his arms - wide, wide - as if to greet the moon.

Diana sat on the cafe porch, idly swinging and staring at the yellow light attracting insects by the dozens. She hadn't felt this good for a long time. First, she'd been numb. After she quit the force, she'd bought the old Chevy, told her sister she was taking a trip, thrown some jeans in a carryall, drawn spending money out of the bank, and driven west. As far and as fast as she could go. Without a thought in her head except to get out of New York. For good.

Thinking back, it seemed impossible she'd done it. Couldn't even remember how she'd felt, **why** she'd left with such urgency. No. Desperation.

She'd stopped here, taken one look at the land and the mountains, and made a flat cash offer to the owner, a beat-up old guy who wanted out almost as much as she, to visit his son in California. It took a week to settle things by phone and fax with her bank and his. The longest week in her life. She'd been so scared something would go wrong, queer the deal so she couldn't buy Dustbowl Cafe. She hadn't wanted to leave. Ever.

For months after that, it was touch and go for her. Crying jags. Middle of the night jumping into her car and mad dashes down the road. To escape. Then returning at dawn. She's have been shamefaced, if there were anybody here to show her face to.

The loneliness got to her, sometimes, really bad.

On one of those midnight escape rides she'd come upon the crashed van. She'd driven back to the cafe to call an ambulance for the mysterious driver, then returned to the accident site. When the paramedics left, she walked to her Chevy, her flashlight turned on so she could see where she stepped, because the road stretched out for miles in both directions with no lights at all.

That's when she found him - Vincent.

Couldn't believe her eyes. Didn't know what to do with him. Surely, not call the parameds again. Not the way **he** looked.

She's pulled her car up near the shallow gully where he lay, managed to drag him out, pummel and shove him into the back seat. Knew what she was doing was dangerous, the worst thing she could do with an injured person - move him like that. Had no choice.

Didn't know if he'd survive. Thought he wouldn't. Unconscious, he was, his huge body still, scarcely breathing at all. Leonine face - furred, fanged, fine-boned, fabulous - still, too, unmoving except for an occasional flicker of an eyelid.

He'd surprised her and lived. Woke one morning a few days later, stood uncertainly, looked around, then turned his incredible blue eyes on her, opened his mouth, and spoke.

Cripes, what a voice he had! Unbelievably smooth and rough and sweet and tart at the same time.

But he didn't say much. Remembered nothing about the accident, or his past.

And here they were, six months later, and he still remembered nothing.

Simple-minded. But not really. Maybe it was just another corny hunch, but there was something there, inside him, that was not simple - minded or otherwise – something holy.

Chortling derisively at the fantastical idea - so unlike her to have flights of fantasy - Diana was startled by Narcissa's voice coming out of the darkness beyond the porch. "Diana, you must send those people away."

"Narcissa? Come on up here. Sit with me."

The elderly blind woman moved slowly around the side of the porch, holding onto the rail. She stepped up, coming to rest directly in front of Diana, blocking the view of the road.

"Send them away," she intoned mysteriously, too serious, as usual.

"Paying customers, Narcissa. Name of the game."

"Dangerous. Evil. The evil one himself set his mark on them. They will harm you, harm Vincent."

"Nonsense. They don't give a damn for me and they've got no idea Vincent exists. And they won't. You know how quiet he can be. Even their bodyguard, Snow, didn't think to check out the kitchen. A cook's harmless. Everyone knows that."

"Evil. They are evil. They bring evil with them wherever they go." Spreading her arms wide, as if she was trying to encompass the universe, then clasping them together across her breasts, Narcissa went on, "Their poison seeps from their souls. Its hideous fragrance surrounds them. You will breathe it with every breath you draw. Vincent, too. You must resist them, banish them. For Vincent's sake."

"What, the woman, too? Evil? Come on, Narcissa, they're no saints, I know that. They're pretty crooked, at least that Gabriel is. He's got a wide flung criminal empire. They've been trying to pin something on him for years. But the woman is just ... his consort. Wife. Whatever. Harmless. And Snow - he's only a bodyguard. A mercenary. He's done bad things, I suppose. But he's not *evil* with a capital *E*."

"Mark my warning well, Diana. You will be sorry you let them near you and Vincent."

"Nah. It's a great chance for me to do a little snooping. I've missed that. Haven't felt so good in months. Guess you can take the cop out of the city, but you can't take the city out of the cop." She grinned.

"You forsake your soul, pretend you are other than who you are, Diana. But you sense the evil, you always sense it. Do not be fooled, this time. Respect the evil. Fear it. Protect yourself. Care for Vincent."

Diana didn't answer, and after a long moment Narcissa left the porch, walking slowly toward her cabin. Diana couldn't help shivering at the old woman's final injunction.

Of course she'd protect Vincent, watch out for him. Poor helpless lump! As for her, she still had her gun. Remembered her stuff. She'd been a good cop, maybe a great cop, in the old days. She could take care of herself, *and* Vincent.

She sniffed and dismissed Narcissa's warning. Mustn't let the old lady get to her. Too easy to get spooked out here, miles from anywhere. Sometimes, at night, it seemed uncivilized, this land. Raw. Untamed. Primeval. At night. When it was really dark. Or in the daytime, when the sun burned mercilessly down, searching out every living thing - destructive, powerful. Large.

The mountains, the land, the sun, the night. All large.

Vincent, too. In her heart of hearts, that's what she felt, sensed about him. Vincent was large, too. Maybe too large for her to cope with. But not too large for her to protect. **That** she could do.

And maybe soon he'd remember. Or Narcissa would break down and tell her. Or her old contacts in the NYPD would find out something about his driver - his friend - and **that** would tell her. Who Vincent was. Where he came from. Why the two of them came out here to the desert, were driving around in a van, when it had to be more dangerous than anything for Vincent. If he were seen

When Vincent wakes up - that's how she thought of it, as if he were asleep, prince charming, to be wakened with a kiss - **that** would be a day! That would be something!

Diana was certain he'd remember the poetry then. Until that day, she'd protect him, all right. No need for Narcissa to worry.

In the meantime, Gabriel and Catherine and Snow - well, they were just a puzzle, like the crosswords she devoured by the bookful. Maybe she'd get something on them, pass the word to her old friends on the force in New York. Maybe she wouldn't.

Evil? No such thing. Just bad people who did bad things to other people. Not the woman. She was harmless. But the men. Maybe she'd get something on them. If she did, great. If not, nothing lost.

Smiling, Diana sank back in the porch swing, gave herself one gigantic push with her whole body, then let that push carry her back and forth until the swing stilled again. She watched the lights go out in each cottage. It was getting late. She ought to go to bed. But she was half-hoping Vincent would join her on the porch. Sometimes he did, in the evenings, to watch the night.

Well, that wasn't quite true. Sometimes **she** joined **him**. Startled him by sneaking up on him when he sat out here. She'd go out the back door of the cafe from the kitchen, come around the side, and appear. Surprise him. He'd stand, make as if to go. Sit down again, obediently, when she ordered him to. Like a good dog. Like Lucifer, who loved Vincent. He'd never come to sit on the porch when she was already there.

But he'd stay there when she showed up. He'd be tense, his hands clenched into tight fists, claws biting into his palms, teeth gritted. He hated her. God only knew why. She'd expect a person to be grateful that she saved his life. But **he** wasn't. Maybe that was just as well. Gratitude was a bitch, in a real relationship made things sticky, unbalanced. Well, Vincent wasn't grateful. But he was obedient, useful, kind - sort of kind, anyway - and easy on the eyes.

Cripes, he'd startled her when she'd come out back looking for him the other day. Naked as a babe, huge, powerful, incredibly golden in the fierce unremitting sunlight. She admitted it: godlike. A strange feline god. A big mystic cat.

That was the body.

And the mind, the soul, was swathed in gauze, memory lost, intellect and knowledge buried.

But the body lived on, magnificent. Vincent didn't even know what to do with it. Didn't connect with desire and sexual fulfillment. How the hell could **that** be? A male animal who didn't even know what to do with his maleness. That wasn't new, caused by the blow to his head when he was thrown from the car. That was ingrained. Ingrained repression. That was from **before**.

Oh, that friend of his had a lot to answer for, in Diana's estimation. How could he have allowed Vincent to bury his sexuality to that extent, that he didn't even know what to do with it, didn't even know it was there?

Where'd he **kept** Vincent? Why? When there was a whole country he could hide Vincent in, in plain sight. Free. Alive. Wide open spaces and mountains and sky and sun. Instead, he'd shut him away someplace in New York, let his skin become pale, his sexuality shrivel and die from disuse. Criminal.

Oh, Diana would protect Vincent, all right, she thought - angered anew at the wanton, needless cruelty he'd endured - and not simply protect him! No. She'd make sure he was free. For good. Never let anyone send him back to that darkness without air that was New York City. Never let anyone shut him away from the sunlight again.

Blood boiling, not even realizing she'd stood, gone to the porch rail, clenched it, her nails digging into the wood, Diana didn't notice Vincent until he was almost at her side.

"Diana, there is something I must tell you."

"Vincent! God, you shouldn't creep up on me like that. Come on, sit here with me," she offered, moving to the step and beckoning to him.

Obediently, he joined her on the step, sat when she sat, leaving a precise three inches between them.

"Gorgeous night, isn't it? The day was a little cloudy. I know that bothers you when there's no sun. But it's cleared up wonderfully. Look at those stars. And the moon," she added, pointing, then unselfconsciously slipping her arm through his and joining her hands.

Ignoring her small talk, Vincent carefully removed her arm, equally unconscious of the insult, and began talking, staring straight ahead, his entire being tense with the effort of remembering.

"I saw something today. In my mind. A ... big room, with tables and chairs. A place to eat. And a man. I think his name is William."

"When you were cooking?"

"Yes." Turning to her, pain in his eyes, he asserted, "It was a real memory, Diana. Not a glimpse that disappears when I try to hold it in my thoughts. A memory. A place and a person. From before."

"That's good, Vincent. A good sign. Don't push it." Waving her hand, with a contradictory little toss of her head, she added, "I know, I know. I always push you to remember. But it hurts. I know that too. So let it come when it comes. It's beginning now. Let it tumble out one piece at a time. Pretty soon we'll have all the pieces, and then we can put the puzzle together."

He didn't answer. She saw he was crying. Didn't ask him why.

"Diana, those people frighten me. I feel they will mean something Soon."

"Like what?" she prompted.

"I don't know. Something terrible. They will awake"

"You?"

"No. Not who I was, but something terrible. Inside me. The woman is beautiful," he concluded in a low voice.

Nothing to the point, Diana thought. Anyone could see that Catherine Blake was beautiful. Even Vincent. Even maimed, numb Vincent. "Does she excite you, Vincent?"

He frowned with the effort to concentrate, understand. "What do you mean?"

Groaning, Diana sputtered, "Nothing. I don't mean a thing. The woman is beautiful. Okay. Did something about her make you remember?"

"No. I was cooking. Trying to decide whether to make rice, and I remembered the man and the big room, the tables" His hands clasped tightly together, he twisted them, stared at them. He could see really well in the dark, Diana recalled with amazement. Hear, too, when there was virtually nothing to hear This is bothering him. At last he whispered, "The woman is beautiful. But I do not recognize her. She is not from my past."

"Maybe she's from your future. She's in your present, at any rate." Thinking furiously, Diana almost said what was on the tip of her tongue: that it was a shame Vincent couldn't talk to Catherine Blake, get to know her. That it would be good for him to spend time with a woman he didn't hate, like he hated *her*. "I dunno, Vincent. Things happen. Just keep out of sight. Don't let either of the men see you. Be careful."

"And the woman?"

Resignation seeping into her heart, Diana answered, "I think you're gonna meet Catherine Blake, whether you're careful or not."

"Why? I will keep out of sight, Diana. I promise you. I won't disobey."

Diana shook her head wearily. "You don't know women, Vincent. Catherine is unhappy in her relationship with her husband. Snow is out of bounds. So is any other man. She's restricted in her movements, at her husband's beck and call. Here ..." Diana lifted a hand, then let it drop to her lap with unconscious despair, "... here, she's free. She'll find you, Vincent. Women like that smell sexy strangers. She'll find you. You won't be able to hide."

"But I will," he insisted, terribly distraught, clearly afraid she'd be angry with him if he allowed Catherine Blake to find him. "I promise you, Diana. I'll hide. She won't find me." He was getting more agitated by the minute.

"Relax, babe. It's okay. She'll hide you. Women always will. Don't worry. Don't be afraid." Standing, Diana tucked her shirt into her jeans. "I'm tired, Vincent. I'm turning in." She smiled faintly, then patted his sleeve. "Sleep well, babe. You'll need all your strength."

Sounding frightened, Vincent asked, "Why?"

"Partying takes a lot out of you. Conserve your strength," she replied enigmatically, knowing that even if she told him straight out, he'd never understand until it happened. Never understand about women, about sex, about Catherine Blake. Couldn't imagine it. No earthly use warning him. Wouldn't do any good if she did.

"Diana"

"Yeah?"

"I will not let them harm you, these customers. I will protect you."

With a choked laugh, she said, "Me, too. I'll protect you. So we'll both be safe, right? Go to sleep, Vincent. Tomorrow looks to be a big day."

She'd almost reached her room next to the kitchen when she heard him murmur, "Good night, Diana, sleep well." Thought that was a lovely note to end the day on - no pun on his voice and musical notes intended.

Diana looked at her watch. Four in the morning. Awake before dawn. Talking with Vincent did that to her: she couldn't sleep, afterwards. Tossed and turned and finally got up, her nightshirt a sweaty rope around her waist, her hair smelly with perspiration, her heart pounding, her legs like rubber. With a headache, to boot.

A shower usually helped, and a cup of strong coffee. Very strong coffee. In the afternoon she'd nap on the porch swing. Vincent couldn't use it during the day when customers were around, so she might as well.

Coming back into her room from the shower she'd put in to replace a pantry she didn't need, she dressed quickly in jeans and a sweatshirt. She brushed her hair, wandering into the darkened cafe and looking out the window, thinking about Vincent, and the strangers.

Diana remembered the headlines when they'd married - juicy gossip filling both the society pages and the business section for weeks. A whirlwind courtship. Love at first sight. Catherine Chandler was engaged to a society lawyer with lots of money when she met Gabriel Blake at a party he'd thrown. The two fell in love and were married within a month of meeting.

Catherine's family had money, but Gabriel was a catch in a million. He was **big**. Bigger than Elliot Burch. Bigger than Donald Trump. Controlled multinational corporations. Small nations. Rumor had it, he could make and break governments, even in **large** countries. Rumor had it, his money was dirty: drugs, munitions. The worst. Nothing proved. Nothing ever proved. Gabriel just kept sailing along. He seemed to have everything. After he met and married Catherine Chandler, he really did. Money, power, and love. Plus that intangible something – luck - that money couldn't buy.

Why was Snow's light on? Couldn't the man sleep? No television even, in the cottages. What could he be doing? Maybe he could use some company. He was truly an attractive man, fascinating. Charismatic. Probably wouldn't tell her anything she could use to bust Gabriel, but he'd be interesting to get to know. Diana had to laugh at herself: she'd always been drawn to the wild ones.

Diana slipped on a pair of sneakers and walked in the dark over the flat familiar path to Snow's bungalow. She almost knocked, but stopped cold when she heard voices. Snow's. And a woman's. Catherine Blake's.

What the hell was Gabriel's wife doing talking to their bodyguard in the middle of the night? Maybe her husband was sick, needed help.

Diana went around the side of the bungalow and looked in at a window. What she saw chilled her to the bone.

Cripes, they're lovers! God in heaven, how could they dare!

Listening to the soft talk between Snow and Catherine, after they'd pulled away from a passionate clinch, Diana learned more than she wanted to know.

"Go back, Catherine. Gabriel wakes early," Snow begged, his bony hands gently cupping the woman's face. He placed a kiss on her lips so tenderly that it brought tears to Diana's eyes. Not lovers, then, Diana deduced. Not yet. Too romantic. Only would-be lovers.

"John, I can't bear it anymore. This is the last chance we'll have, out here in the boondocks. I'll never be able to get away from Gabriel like this again. Never."

"I can't, Catherine. Gabriel and I go back a long way I just can't." Snow insisted urgently, "We're together. Isn't that enough? As long as Gabriel trusts us, we can be together. No one suspects. No one gives a damn. I'm here - I'm your bodyguard, Gabriel's bodyguard. That's how it's always been.

Always will be. Go back now. Please."

Catherine pleaded with him, "No. No, please, John. I can't anymore. He curdles my blood! You can't ask me to go back to him. I love you! John, I need you!"

"I'm here. Always. Go back, Catherine. We're both dead if you don't. Not today, not tomorrow, but when he finds out. I can't risk your life."

"What life?" Catherine laughed. "What life? John, you know I haven't had a life for years - not since I met Gabriel. Not until I met you " Catherine's voice softened on the last phrase. "I can't go back. He suspects, I know he does. That's why he agreed to this trip. To find out for sure, trap us. I can't keep pretending. We have to get away. Be free. You can begin over, stop the endless killing. And I can stop this farce. If you won't tell him the truth, I will."

"No!"

"I have to, John. What could be worse than this?"

"You don't want to know. And I don't want you to know " Snow turned his face aside, and only Diana saw how grim and set it was. Then he kissed Catherine's hair and said gently, "Wait. Just a little longer. For now, go back. I ... I'll speak to him. I'll take care of it. I promise. But not here. Not now."

Catherine's eyes shone. "But you'll do it, you'll tell him about us?"

"I will."

A last clinch. Diana took the chance to get back to the cafe before Catherine left Snow's cottage.

Just to be doing something, she brewed a small pot of coffee. If she started coffee in the big urn now, it would be stale by morning. Taking her cup to a booth near a window, she sat in the dark and tried to digest what she'd overheard.

Gabriel's intangible something – luck - had just run out. Catherine and Snow were in love. She wanted to do the right thing - tell her husband the truth and then leave. And Snow had agreed, promised Catherine he'd handle it.

With a man like him, though, that could mean only one thing. He planned to kill Gabriel. He'd realize there was no other way to escape a person with that much power. With a mercenary like Snow, it was as good as done. Diana would read about it in the newspapers one day soon, maybe next week. Read about an accident, or a stroke, or a heart attack that killed Gabriel Blake, the billionaire. But it would be Snow who'd done it. And Diana wouldn't be able to do a thing about it.

She could warn Gabriel. If he believed her, he'd take precautions. Confront Snow and Catherine, maybe. Even if Gabriel didn't believe her, he'd be alert. Forewarned is forearmed.

If Gabriel told Snow, fired him, the mercenary would come after Diana! Fat chance she'd have against **him**, cop or no cop.

She could let Snow know she had his number.

And get killed for her troubles!

Terrific. Damned if she did, damned if she didn't.

At least Diana was pretty certain Snow wouldn't kill Gabriel **here**. Snow knew that would make him and Catherine the only possible suspects, the only people around who might conceivably have a motive. He couldn't want to implicate the woman he loved.

On that note, Diana decided she was duty-bound to warn Gabriel. When he left here, he'd be in

danger of his life. There was nothing else she could do. She'd have to leave it to Gabriel;s discretion not to drag Diana's name into it when and if he confronted the pair.

If he confronted them.

Maybe Gabriel would just arrange a little accident, or stroke, or heart attack of his own - for Snow and Catherine - once he knew!

Then Diana would be responsible for **their** deaths. And the only person who could pin a motive on Gabriel. Get herself killed, that way, for sure.

Oh boy, she thought. **Damned if she did, damned if she didn't.**

It was nearly dawn. She decided she'd better catch some shuteye before the customers strolled in. Vincent would see to breakfast, all she had to do was be wide awake enough to serve it. Her troublesome customers would be here for three days. She had plenty of time to decide how to handle all this. Maybe she was letting her imagination run away with her, anyway. Maybe Snow **did** only mean to talk to Gabriel. Yeah, and maybe pigs can fly.

Diana went back to her room, set the clock for six a.m. - an hour and a half sleep was better than nothing-----and collapsed on her bed without removing her clothes.

Vincent was up before dawn, but he couldn't watch the sunrise because the customers would see him. Angrily, he dressed and left his shed, petting Lucifer to quiet him. The kitchen was empty. He checked the cafe carefully. No one was there. They all were asleep. Diana's door was shut too, so she was still sleeping.

His chores took a while. Concentrating hard, Vincent put new plastic bags in the trash bins, then washed his hands. He studied the shelves, a pad and pen in hand, meticulously noting supplies they needed, for Diana to buy next time she went into Tucson, or to phone in an order to be delivered on the bus. **She** hated to run low on anything. When she ran out of something, her fury frightened him.

"The least we can do, Vincent, is give the poor sods a decent meal, fresh towels, soap, and clean linens. Cripes, it's bad enough they gotta stop **here**, when they'd much rather be in a Holiday Inn in Tucson. Bad enough their car is out of whack and they've gotta spend money to fix it. They don't have to put up with **our** incompetence too!"

Remembering about the linens and towels and soap, Vincent checked the closet where Diana stored them and dutifully recorded how many of each there was. **She** didn't trust him to decide if there was enough. Only to say how many there were. **She** did the rest.

He filled Lucifer's food and water bowls, then discovered he was hungry too, so he fried eggs and made toast. Usually, he brought his meal to a booth and looked out the window while he ate. But today he stayed in the kitchen, standing by the butcher block. He dared not eat in the cafe, with customers in the cottages. **She** would be very angry if they saw him. Angry at him.

Washing his dish and fork, thinking about the sunrise - which he could not watch because of the customers - Vincent grew angrier and angrier. His clothes felt tight. The neckline of his long-sleeved sweatshirt choked him. His jeans cut into his waist, hurt his groin. He must get his clothes off, let air reach his body But **she** was so angry when he did that. It made her tired. He promised to protect her. If he made her tired, he would be failing in his promise. But his body hurt from the clothes.

"Hello in there!"

The woman! Her voice rang out from the cafe, by the counter. She'd come into the restaurant without his hearing, noticing. Diana would be so angry at him. "Anybody home? I'd like some breakfast." He held his breath, not answering. He mustn't speak with her. When Diana heard the fuss, she'd wake up, come out of her room, talk to the woman. He would say nothing.

"Well, guess I'll have to wait," the woman said, a strange anger in her voice. Now **she** was angry at him, too. Vincent took a deep breath, and shook his head. Always, the women were angry.

He listened while Catherine walked back over to the door then changed direction and took a booth, a different one than she'd sat in with the dark-haired man and the white-haired man. He could see Catherine through the rectangular opening in the wall between the kitchen and the restaurant, where he passed plates of food to Diana to serve to the customers.

The woman was beautiful, like a sunrise. Golden hair. A red shirt with white buttons. White jeans with silver studs on the pockets, and a design of silver studs straight from each pocket to her thighs, ending near her Her **what?** He did not remember the name for the place between her legs, where on him there was what he thought of as the wildness. But on her there was a smooth, slightly rounded area, a triangle. No wildness at all. Women had no wildness, he concluded. What did they have instead? Breasts. They had breasts, where men had flatness. They had flatness, where men had wildness. He was satisfied with his analysis, until he notice that he felt an unbearable tingle, like an insatiable itch, in his wildness. The palms of his hands were sweating, and he rubbed them on his jeans. And it was like rubbing his hands on the woman's breasts.

Everything throbbed, and the room began to swirl. He couldn't understand. Why was everything changing like this? Why was he so disturbed by this woman? She made him feel so ...different, not like he was with Diana.

He ran to the back door, taking no care to be quiet, opened it, ran out, banging it shut behind him. Ran into his shed and banged that door behind him too. Locked it with the iron key.

Clamped his hands over his ears when he heard the woman's voice outside his shed. She'd followed him from the cafe! Out here, to his place! Diana was right: the woman **had** found him! He would be very quiet, not breathe, and the woman would go away. Then Diana would not be angry with him, for letting someone see him.

"You in there! Are you the cook? I'd like some breakfast. I know it's early, but we're both up. I'd make it myself, but I don't like to bang around in someone else's kitchen."

He didn't say a word. He knew she'd go away and leave him alone, if only he didn't answer her. Why didn't Diana come?

"Please? I'll settle for a cup of freshly brewed coffee. Doesn't have to be a three course meal. Won't you come out and make me my morning coffee - I'm a wreck without it."

He knew that could be true. Diana was a wreck without her morning coffee. "Gotta get my fix, Vincent. Then I'm fit to face the day," he remembered her telling him, the first morning he was awake, after the accident. Maybe this lady needed coffee too. How could he refuse? What harm would it do? The men were still sleeping.

Vincent turned the iron key, unlocking the door. But he was afraid to open it, because he knew the woman would see him. She wouldn't like him. Diana didn't like him. He'd make her tired. So he stood there, trying to decide what to do.

"I'll go back up to the restaurant. You can come out when you're ready," Catherine said, her voice low and soft and sweeter than strawberries. He felt a driving grinding sensation, unbearably sweet, like her voice. The sensation raced through him then settled in his wildness. He opened the door.

"Oh, great, you'll make me breakfast after all!" Catherine said. "Are you coming out? Or do you have the fixings for coffee in there?" She hesitated on the threshold, then stepped inside Vincent's shed. "It's dark in here. I can't see you very well. Do you have a light, or a lamp or something?"

Silently, Vincent went to the little three-legged stool by his cot. A candle in a saucer and a box of wooden matches rested on the stool he used as a table. He lit the candle then turned to the woman, forgetting that when he looked at *her, she'd* see him. He wanted to look at her. Forever. Touch her breasts with his sweaty palms. Touch her place where there was no wildness, only calm and comfort. Touch her face, her eyelids, her soft pink cheeks. Look into her eyes. Hold her.

He walked the few steps between them, so he could be close to her. See her. She opened her mouth, her hand flew to her mouth. Her mouth didn't make a sound but he could see her tongue, her white teeth. Then she sank. He grabbed her just before she fell, and dropped to his knees with her in his arms.

The woman was hurt! She would have fallen to the ground if he hadn't been quick to catch her! Holding her close, he lifted her, stood and went to his cot, laying her on the blanket, letting her head drop gently to the pillow. He remembered happily that the pillowcase was clean. He changed it when he woke this morning because the old one was sweaty and soiled.

He knelt beside the cot and studied the woman's features in the candlelight. His throat felt tight. He wanted something but he didn't know what it was. To look at her more closely, that was it. He moved the candle a fraction, bent his head closer, brushed her lips with his mouth, startling himself. He drew back.

He couldn't breathe! His clothes were choking him. He tugged at his collar, scratching his neck with his claws. At last he managed to unbutton his shirt. Closing his eyes, he breathed in and out, trying to calm himself so he could help the woman. His eyes went to her face, then down to his own body. He was frightened, driven by a need he didn't understand. He pushed the feelings away and stared at the woman. She was so still. Was she alive?

Anxiously, he waited for her to waken, but she did not. He thought maybe her shirt bothered her too. The button at her neck was closed; it seemed as if her collar was very tight. Gently, he unbuttoned her blouse, revealing her breasts, where he had only flatness. So white! Hand held flat and taut, he rested his palm on her breast to find her heartbeat, then snatched his hand back, stunned by the softness, the hardness. The nearness. But her heart was beating. She was alive.

She moaned and moved. Her jeans. They were tight too, hurting her belly and thighs, like his hurt him. That's why she moaned. He put his entire attention into opening the brass button on her waistband without disturbing her. He tugged at her blouse, pulling it free. Now the air could touch her body. Soon she'd awaken, and be well.

He touched her body - but only with his eyes - noticing everything. She was so beautiful! Her hair was soft and wavy, honey-blonde hair, like the honey in the kitchen, in the big jar. Her skin seemed blonde, too. Golden. Her mouth was full, soft and red. And her eyelids were thin, almost transparent. He couldn't remember the color of her eyes. She moved her legs again, startling him. Was she all right? She quieted, so he relaxed.

Suddenly, her eyes flew open and she turned her head to look at him. He tensed. Smiling, she

murmured, "I didn't imagine it, did I?"

"What?" Vincent asked.

"Never mind."

The woman pulled herself up and sat on his cot with her knees under her. When Vincent started to move away, she reached for his hand. "No, please, stay here with me."

"I will make you some coffee."

"That's all right. Don't leave."

He could see, then, that her eyes were brown in the flickering candlelight. He hoped hse'd still be near when the sun rose so he could find out their true color. Perhaps they were hazel. How beautiful she was

Without warning, the woman said something incomprehensible. "And I thought / had problems."

Then she laughed, that throaty laugh he'd noticed earlier, in the cafe. A free sound, like a bird's song. He liked her laugh. But in a moment the smile left her face and she stared at him again, then looked down at her hands.

"I do have problems, of course, but then, so does everybody."

"Are you ill?"

"No. Nothing like that. Just personal things."

"You are not happy?"

This time her laugh was harsh. "Who's happy?"

"Tell me what's wrong."

"Everything's wrong. I've made a mess of my life."

"How?"

Instead of answering him, she said, "My name is Catherine. What's yours?"

"They call me Vincent."

"What a voice you have, Vincent. I've never heard anything like it before."

"How have you made a mess of your life?"

"Talking about it won't help. Nothing will help."

"It might." But why should it? Vincent shook his head. Why had he asked her this? He'd never asked Diana anything about her life, why she'd abandoned her job, left her friends and family to come out here to the desert? He'd never felt the need to ask. Somehow, he'd known: Diana had been unhappy too. But not because she'd made a mess of her life. Some other reason But she was happy now.

Catherine was talking about her husband. She called him Gabriel. "I met him and I thought he was wonderful. He *is* wonderful, in his own way. Brilliant, focused. Fascinating. Powerful. He even has a kind of serenity. I suppose that's because he has no conscience."

When she paused, Vincent said, "Please, go on."

"He's intrigued by everything, all kinds of things. Art, and history, and certain animals. Predators. And people, of course. Always, people. Their strengths, their weaknesses, how they can be used, manipulated. The most efficient ways to get rid of them, afterwards"

"And this other man, Snow? What is he to Gabriel and you?"

It hurt to wonder about such things. About how people connected. Vincent bent his head, trying to ignore the pain that had started up behind his eyes. He had to listen to what the woman was saying. Understand why she was unhappy, so that he could know how to make the sadness go away.

Catherine was saying, "He's Gabriel's only friend. They've known each other forever, I think. John's worked for my husband for years, but I think they were comrades in arms to begin with."

"Comrades in arms?"

"Fellow mercenaries," Catherine explained with an odd grin, "fellow killers."

Vincent shrank back in horror.

"See what I mean? About messing up my life?"

The pain was worse, blinding. Then something shut inside him broke open and spilled the knowledge of how people connected. All the ways they connected, to help or hurt one another. As he was connected to this woman. To Catherine. He could feel her presence - bright and hot, almost, as the sun. But different. The nature of that difference was still closed to him. He only knew that her presence felt like sunlight. Intense. Burning.

"You love this man?" he asked, incredulous.

For a moment Catherine was frightened. Then she said, "Oh, you mean Gabriel. I did. Until I was forced to look beyond his power to the source of it."

She wasn't angry. Only sad - with a hopeless resignation, a sort of numbness. He suddenly knew that she, too, had shut things away

"Does he hurt you?"

"No, not me. But he's so cruel to John"

"John?"

"Snow. His *friend*. John wants out of this life: to retire, start over. Stop the killings. But Gabe won't let him go. It's as if he's cast a magic spell over John. They're tied together somehow, and John can't break the spell, cut the rope, and free himself."

Vincent understood about retiring. Although he'd never asked, Diana had told him that *she* had retired when the violence and ugliness of her work became too painful for her to bear any longer. She'd sounded so sad when she told him about it. If she hadn't left when she did, she'd have died, Diana said.

That was what Catherine had shut away: the knowledge that she was dying, inside. Dying of the sadness.

Vincent lurched aside to lean against the wall, the pain was so bad now. He felt as if his skull must crack. But he ignored it because nothing was more important than finding, in all the ways people could connect, the one way to keep Catherine from dying of her hopelessness.

"This must end," he said sternly.

"I know."

"You must help your friend to stop."

"If only I could. I want to. I'm trying." Catherine started to cry.

"You're in love with John Snow, and he is in love with you." Vincent was certain.

"I want to go away. I have to. But it's impossible. There's no place we could hide. Gabe would find us. He'll never let us go."

Vincent didn't know what to do, so he pulled Catherine into his arms and held her while she cried. Finally she pulled away, brushing at her eyes with the side of a hand.

"I don't know what got into me. I never cry."

"Perhaps you should."

"I think you're right." Looking around, Catherine asked, "Do you have a handkerchief?"

He went to his chest of drawers and found a clean bandanna. Taking it from him, she grasped his hands, saying, "You're very kind."

He didn't think so. But he didn't like to contradict her - she might become angry - so he said nothing.

"Yes, you're very kind. And a lovely listener. I feel better for talking to you."

"Will you speak to your husband of your love for John Snow?"

"John promised. He knows Gabe better than anyone. He'll know the best time to tell him. Then whatever has to happen will happen. And at least it will be over. Who knows - maybe Gabriel won't even care, after all these years "

"He'll care."

She smiled again. "You're right." She stood and kissed Vincent's cheek. "I'd better go. Gabriel doesn't sleep well. He's always up at the crack of dawn. Thanks for listening."

Then she was gone and he was alone. He ran out of the shed after the woman and stood watching as she entered one of the cottages. She was so unhappy. He'd tried to help, but he knew the little he'd said had been of no use.

Turning towards the mountains, he started to run. He felt frightened and confused, and dizzy with the pain of opening connections. Like scars tearing open. Like doors opening. Why did this woman's need pull at him so strongly? He never felt that way with Diana. This woman was so unhappy. How could he help her? He must help her. No matter how much it hurt.

Vincent ran until he no longer felt anything in his body. The wildness was numb, his own needs were buried. But something inside pushed up into his throat. Pushed and pushed. He ran and ran, away from the thing that pushed in his throat. Ran on and on, until he could run no longer. Stripping off his clothes, he fell to the earth, roaring, but the pushing wouldn't stop, it filled him, filled his body, his wildness, until he felt as if he would burst. Nothing would expel it.

The pain became overwhelming. He convulsed in anguish, tearing his hair. He roared until the sky split, opened, like the white, bright pain behind his eyes, like the lightning that cracked the old tree last month, like an explosion. His wildness exploded too, and he could feel his essence leave him, going he knew not where, going there ungently, hurrying there, like a raging river. **A river?**

His river. He remembered it now. Everything. Who he was, how he'd lived. Being with the woman, wanting so strongly to help her, made him remember.

The river. His river. Down in the dark, below the catacombs, below the inhabited tunnels. Where he went when he couldn't endure being who he was, living the way he lived.

His river. The river that broke free, raged over the rocks, flooded the tunnels, rose higher and higher, until everything was submerged, until it drowned everyone in its wake.

They were all gone. Everyone. Father. The children. Everyone.

Except him.

He'd survived, swam out of it through tortuous openings in the rock.

Gone back when the river subsided and calmed.

Everyone was gone.

He remembered now.

And knew why he'd tried so hard to forget.

Snow watched in horror as the cook – incredible! - collapsed sideways. Instinctively he reached out to break his fall, but he was too far away, and the cook dropped to the earth. Snow was certain he'd banged his head on the ground when he fell.

Leaving the cover of a boulder, Snow went and stood over the cook's body, taking a moment to assure himself that the creature was still alive. He was of no use to him dead.

Naked, huge, the beast's body was miraculously beautiful - finely-boned, long-limbed, muscular - made more so by the reddish gold fur covering most of him. His long red-gold hair was thick, lush - glorious. His face, a curious blend of lion and man - beginning nowhere, ending nowhere - was strangely attractive, compelling. His eyes were closed, but Snow had seen them for a moment, and their blue intensity was burned forever in his mind. Simply beautiful. An incredible animal. Mythic.

A shame and a waste, all that beauty. He'd known that when he first glimpsed the creature in the cafe. Did the cook believe he was invisible? Peeking from behind the passthrough counter, he'd moved forward slightly whenever anything interested him. And much interested him. Catherine interested him.

And the beast interested Snow.

Snow picked up the creature's clothes and threw them on the cook's naked body. Walking back to his cottage in the dark predawn, he was grateful his light was still on to guide him back. A few minutes later, when Catherine opened his door without knocking, Snow was inside, lying on the bed, fully dressed, wide awake.

"Catherine, what is it?"

"Now, John. It's got to be now."

"What are you talking about? Why aren't you in your cottage, with Gabriel?"

"Because I'm not. I haven't been for an hour." She sat on the edge of the bed, took his hand, and spoke slowly and carefully. "It's got to be **now**. We must tell Gabe the truth now."

"Why, Catherine? Why now?"

"Because I've found the courage to do it, and I'm not sure how long it'll last."

"Where'd you find the courage, Catherine? In the cook's shed?"

She looked at him strangely. Then it was as though she didn't see him at all but looked only inward.

"Yes. There's something about him, something very kind. He listens. Just being around him made me hopeful."

"I don't think hope's catching. Gabe won't be infected."

She looked up at him again. Saw him again. "We've got to try."

"Catherine

Shaking her head, Catherine repeated, "Trust me. Please. Let's do it now. Before the sun's up. And then we'll be free, John free."

Snow thought quickly, then said, "Let me go first, Catherine. Alone. I've known Gabe a long time. He wouldn't want a witness to his humiliation. Not even you."

"I should go with you. He's my husband

Putting his hands on her shoulders, Snow told her, "Friendship is longer, more important to him. It's better if I go in alone."

Catherine didn't say another word, just watched him snap on his shoulder holster, check his weapon, put a knife in his boot, and go to the door. "Where will you be?" he asked.

"I'll wait here. Come back when it's finished, and I'll go in and pack. John?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"You love me?"

"More than I ever dreamed I could."

"It's worth it, then."

Curious, Snow asked, "Worth what? To who?"

"Worth that much to Gabriel - losing his best friend."

Wakened by the jangle of her alarm clock, Diana forced herself to get out of bed, wash her face, brush and braid her hair, and go into the cafe to meet the day.

Having slept on the problem, she still hadn't decided what to do about what she was gut-certain, hunch-certain, was the planned murder of Gabriel. How to stop it before it happened. Without precipitating two more murders - three, if she counted herself.

She wandered into the kitchen, expecting to see Vincent at work making a big urn of coffee, frying up bacon, getting ready for the customers. He was really so sweet.

Narcissa might be right, that Diana might be sorry when Vincent remembered everything, and went back to being himself. She kind of liked him the way he was now. Sweet. Sexy. Docile. Innocent. Who knew what he was like before? She never had much use for literary types, and he was clearly that, what with the book of poems in his pocket, and his cultured speech, even if he didn't have much to say nowadays. True, **he** didn't much like **her**, but that could change. **She** sure liked **him**.

Where the hell **was** he? Annoyed, Diana surveyed the kitchen and tried to figure what could be done in the time she'd have. The coffee urn stood there, no coffee made. Well, she could serve the dregs from the small pot she'd brewed an hour and a half ago, she figured. No bacon frying.

He'd been here, done his morning chores. His little notes in his neat handwriting - just short of calligraphy - were on the butcher block. There were fresh plastic garbage bags in the trash cans. So

where **was** he?

Maybe after greeting the dawn in his customary way, he'd gone back to sleep. Anybody could oversleep, she guessed. She wheeled and went out the back door to Vincent's shed, planning to tease the stuffing out of him. Mr. Sunrise, oversleeping.

The shed door was unlatched. She knocked softly, and it opened a little. "Vincent? Wake up! Rise and shine!"

No answer. Diana pushed the door back. A wide band of sunlight from the open door met the light streaming in through his small window. The rays crossed on the rough wood floor, where Vincent lay - naked.

Dead?

Diana's heart stopped. She ran to him, fell knees-down next to his body, and felt for the pulse at his neck. Nothing. She listened to his heart and breathed a sigh of relief. There was a heartbeat. He was alive! Thank God, he was alive!

And naked. On the floor. Why?

"Vincent? Babe, wake up," Diana ordered quietly. "It's morning, wake up."

Vincent stirred. His eyelids fluttered, and his eyes opened, connecting with hers. A look of horror crossed his face. Then he rolled over onto his side and drew himself into a ball, arms tightly folded into his chest, knees up.

"Vincent? What's wrong?" Diana asked, knowing she'd get no answer. He was in a state of shock, completely out of it. Something had frightened the hell out of him.

Grabbing his blanket, Diana covered him, then sat back on her heels. What should she do? He needed a doctor, not a friend. But she couldn't call a doctor, damn it all to hell.

Her mind raced. Who could help him? For that matter, what was wrong with him? Had he seen something he shouldn't? Done something? Something that frightened him? Finally, she thought of Narcissa. Blind Narcissa couldn't serve breakfast, but she could stay with Vincent while Diana went back, fed the customers, and made a heavy-duty try at getting them to move on to Tucson or wherever with their leaky radiator and their tangled emotional crosscurrents. Puzzles didn't interest her anymore; what happened to Gabriel and his entourage seemed terribly unimportant. Vincent mattered; he was all that mattered. Get them out of here - claim something like she was having the fumigators in, maybe - then see what could be done.

"Listen, Vincent? Sweetness? You hear me?" He didn't answer, but he moved. Turned his head a little so he could see her. His face was fixed in a look of such sorrow, it broke her heart. She patted his arm, resting her hand there.

"You **can** hear me, I know. I'm gonna get Narcissa. She'll stay with you until I can get back. Then I'll be here." For no reason she could discern, she waited for him to answer her. Of course, he didn't. "Don't be afraid. We'll fix it, everything. Like the cars, you know? We'll fix you, just like a broken car. I promise, babe. Truly."

She gave his arm a final pat, just for good measure, and backed out of the shed, her eyes on him. He was staring at her. She hated to leave him.

Then she raced to Narcissa's cottage and banged on the door. "Narcissa! Wake up! Vincent's sick, hurt, something. I need you to watch him for me for a little while."

The door opened and Narcissa stood there, fully dressed, carrying the small basket she always took with her, full of seashells and the shells of snails, and a candle or two.

"Come, child, I'm ready."

Vincent hadn't moved, Diana realized when she opened the shed door and followed Narcissa inside. Not an inch. Not even his head. His eyes were still fixed on the door, and he transferred his gaze to Diana's face, after a quick look at Narcissa.

"Go, Diana. I'll stay with him. We'll be all right, the child and me."

"Do you think you can get Vincent to tell you what happened to him?"

"I already know."

"What?"

Narcissa looked at Diana. "The only thing that **could** happen and leave him like this. He remembered."

"You think so? It's this bad, what he remembers, to make him this sick?"

"So bad, Vincent made himself forget," the old woman replied.

"You know what it is?" When Narcissa nodded, Diana asked, "How come he let himself remember now?"

"He's had a shock. Something - terrible. Or wonderful. He couldn't hide anymore."

"A shock?" Diana looked around the shed. She went over to Vincent's cot. On the pillow she saw strands of honey-colored hair, gleaming in the sunlight. Not Vincent's hair. No red in it at all. Catherine Blake's hair. On Vincent's pillow. He'd had a shock, all right - supplied by Catherine. And so had Diana. Imagining it in advance, thinking it would be good for Vincent, that was one thing. Knowing it really happened, he'd really made it with Catherine, that was another. Terrific. Yeah.

Dully, Diana murmured, "I gotta get back to the cafe, Narcissa. You stay with him. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Diana slipped into the cafe and turned on the lights. She went into the kitchen and started to prepare coffee in the big urn, wondering how she'd manage breakfast for customers without Vincent, how she **ever** managed without him, before he came. Well, she had to, that's all. Until he was well. Then, she'd see. Maybe the **real** Vincent wouldn't be interested in cooking and doing the garbage and washing dishes. Maybe he was a writer. Or something. Maybe he'd want to go home, when he was well.

A lot of maybe's, Bennett, she thought. One step at a time. First, breakfast. Then, get the strangers gone. Third, get Vincent well. Fourth, and far in the future, from the look of him, what he'd want to do next.

Catherine stumbled into the cafe, hysterical, sobbing. "Is anyone in here? Miss! Miss!" Catherine ran to the door to Diana's room and began banging on it. "Miss? Are you in there?"

Diana came out from the kitchen wiping her hands on a dish towel. She shouted, "Hey, lady, here I am. What's the matter with you?"

Turning, sagging with relief, Catherine stumbled over to Diana. "Thank God you're here. It's Gabriel" Then she began crying again.

"What about him?" Diana figured she didn't have to pretend she didn't know who "Gabriel" was.

"He's dead. It's horrible. So much blood, everywhere I don't understand, who could have done it?"

Diana's heart sank: If it'd already happened, there'd be no getting rid of the problem anytime soon. Days. Weeks, maybe. The local cops "You're sure he'd dead?" she asked, already feeling she knew the answer but had to ask anyhow.

"Oh yes dead." Catherine choked and sobbed.

"Where? In your cabin?"

"Yes," Catherine said, nodding jerkily.

"Okay. Wait here. I'll check it out."

But Catherine wasn't staying behind. When Diana reached the cabin, the door was open. John Snow was standing a few feet away from the body. Catherine leaned against Diana's shoulder, staring at her husband's mutilated body.

A corpse it was. Diana knew that, first glance, from across the room. But she crossed to the bed and tried to find a pulse in Gabriel's wrist. His hand was hanging over the edge of the bedspread, which was pulled nearly off him, its fringes soaked in blood.

Gabriel's entire bed was soaked in blood. Somebody had slaughtered him.

Diana swept her eyes over the room methodically, one end to the other. Even in hot weather, the nights could get chilly: the windows were shut. The door showed no sign of forced entry. Either it was unlocked when the killer arrived, or Gabriel got up, unlocked it, let his killer in, then went back to bed. Unlikely, unless it was his wife - or his bodyguard. Must have been open to begin with.

No weapon or weapons visible. She strode to the bathroom, which was clean, then checked the closet. Ditto. Under the bed. Ditto. Couldn't move the body, but chances were good that the weapon wasn't under Gabriel either. No weapon present. Unless Snow or the woman had it. Couldn't search them. No jurisdiction here. Or anywhere, anymore.

"Okay," Diana said briskly, "anybody hear anything, see anything? Speak up." When neither John Snow nor Catherine Blake said a word, she repeated, "Speak up. Hey, I'm gonna call the police in a minute. Gabriel Blake came with you. Nobody here knows him but the two of you. No sign of the proverbial intruder. The police are gonna think one of you - or both of you - killed him. Is that what you want them to think?"

"Miss Catherine began.

Whirling, Diana told the woman. "You can call me Diana. I'm an ex-cop. Maybe I can help you two, if you didn't do it." But they did, her mind screamed, one of them did. If she could prove it, wrap it up fast, before the cops came, maybe Vincent could be kept out of the thing entirely. Had to be. Had to go down that way. No rush to call the cops.

Cover it up? Maybe.

"Diana," Catherine began again, "I I think I know who did it."

"Yeah? Who?"

"The man who lives out back, in the shed. The cook."

"What!" Diana's eyes flickered back and forth between Snow and Catherine. Cool as cucumbers, those two. Didn't even glance at each other. Did nothing to give themselves away. Angrily, Diana asserted. "You got no reason to say that. He's got no reason to kill a stranger."

"Yes, he does," the woman contradicted quietly.

Diana lifted her eyebrow. "What reason?"

"Me." Catherine walked to a chair near the cabin door, far from the body. She sank into it, then pulled herself up to the edge, clasping her hands tightly in her lap. "We met. I couldn't sleep. First I went to talk with John for a few minutes." She glanced at Snow, who was gazing at her impassively. Taking his cue from the woman, Diana thought. "Then - it was almost morning - instead of going back in here where Gabe was trying to sleep, I figured I'd get a cup of coffee if anybody was awake. If anyone was awake in your cafe."

"So?"

"The lights were off, but I could hear somebody in the kitchen. I thought it must be the cook, so I went over to the counter, but he left by a back door. I got a little annoyed. I followed him to the shed, and asked him to make coffee for me. He opened the door, let me in. Lit a candle. I saw him."

"What of it? Just because he's different doesn't make him a killer."

"I saw him, Diana. And I fainted. When I woke, he was there. We talked. It was so easy to talk with him. I could tell him things I've never told anyone before. He gave me courage, hope."

Snow drew a breath, moved fractionally, then grew still again, still as death.

"Really?" Diana tried to sound as if she found Catherine's story outrageously unbelievable, failing utterly. "So what? You talked. That's no reason for him to kill your husband."

"No." Catherine sounded determined to be honest and give Vincent his due. "But he seemed very upset when I described the kind of man Gabe was, that Gabe wasn't kind. He seemed distressed at what I told him about John and Gabriel's relationship, too. He said that it must end."

"So?"

"When I left, he followed me, watched me go back to my cabin. Gabe was awake. Angry. We quarreled. He hit me. I think maybe your cook heard. And when I ran next door, he must have gone in and killed Gabe."

"You're nuts. I found him unconscious on the floor of his shed. Naked."

"Maybe, afterwards, he went back to his room, got undressed to wash off the blood" Catherine's voice trailed off.

"You're speculating, lady," Diana said. "My cook wouldn't follow you naked. He wouldn't let anyone see him, not on purpose."

Snow broke in. "Maybe he's not right in the head, m'am. Maybe he fell for Catherine, didn't like to see her hurt. Decided to stop it."

Diana whirled on Snow. "Yeah, and maybe it was **you** who didn't want to see her hurt, and stopped it." When Snow stood there impassively, not reacting to her accusation, she changed her tack. "He wouldn't follow her to her cabin, not naked," she insisted stubbornly.

"You don't know that," Snow murmured quietly.

"Yes, I do."

They'd reached an impasse. Diana had nowhere to go but to the police. If she let these two know she was aware of their affair or accused either one of them of killing Gabriel, then Vincent, Narcissa, and she herself would be killed. Maybe they'd make it look like Vincent killed her and Narcissa. Snow'd claim self-defense, that the berserk beast has threatened them. And Snow was simply defending himself and Catherine. The evidence would be there: Gabriel's slashed corpse. Proving Vincent was dangerous.

This was a frame, pure and simple. Probably forensics would figure it out in time. But not before Vincent was accused, locked up. And even afterwards, they wouldn't let him go. They'd keep him caged. As good as destroy him. No way.

Diana was glad when Snow interrupted her thoughts, which were going around in circles anyhow. "Look, lady, what are you gonna do? You gonna call the cops, or should I?"

Nonchalantly, Diana turned to the mercenary. "Oh, I'll call. You two stay here, keep an eye on things. I'll get the cops."

Snow was right, Diana decided as she marched back to the cafe, through the screen door, into the kitchen: no more talk. It was time to act. Grabbing a pair of scissors, she strode out to the phone lines, cut the wires. Out to the Jaguar, ripped the mobile phone right out of its socket, methodically smashed it over and over on a big chunk of sandstone until nobody could ever use it again.

Through the kitchen door again to her room, Grabbed, from behind the clothes in her closet, the rifle left by the old man who'd sold her the place - a pump-action carbine, 30-30, with a leather sling. Whirling, she yanked open a desk drawer and grabbed a box of ammo for the rifle, then headed out but spun back again on an afterthought to collect the key to the gas pump. Throwing everything into her carryall and slinging the carbine over her shoulder, she went back out to the shed.

"Narcissa, go back to your cabin. Someone will come for you eventually. Or you can catch a bus into town. Whatever you want to do." Calm as you please, she grabbed Vincent's shirt, jeans, and a pair of boots. "Come on, babe, get dressed: we're getting outta here." When he didn't react fast enough, just stared at her with a bewildered look in his blue blue eyes, she grabbed his shoulder and shook him hard. "Come **on!**"

Slowly, Vincent stood. She shoved his clothes at him and he dressed mechanically, carefully buttoning each button of his shirt. He sat on his bed and pulled on his boots.

"Where are we going, Diana?" he asked.

"First, we're gonna get some supplies. Wouldn't do to get stuck in those mountains with nothing to eat. Then you'll see."

"What is it, Diana? Why are we running?"

"We won't be running. We'll be riding. In my car."

"But why? How can you leave this place? It's your home."

"Not any more."

Turning her blind face toward Diana, Narcissa said, "Child, do what you must. Protect him."

"Exactly what I've got in mind, Narcissa. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Protect me from what?" Vincent demanded.

Looking Vincent straight in the eye, Diana told him. "From a murder charge, Vincent. From the lock-up. From people. Bad people. Good people. People. Who mustn't find you. Ever."

Shocked, Vincent stepped back. Diana wanted to kick herself for irrelevant thoughts, but she couldn't help noticing how the sun glinted off his hair where the rays hit him at a new angle when he moved.

"Murder?"

"Yes." Then, realizing he thought the woman had been killed, Diana added, "No, not her. Not Catherine. Her husband. Someone killed Gabriel Blake, and whoever it was fixes to pin it on you."

"Someone?"

Diana's intuition kicked in, then, like a powerful motor turning over. Suddenly, a lot of things about Vincent came clear as a bell. What frightened him. What all his weird innocence about sex meant. And a lot more she'd rather not have known. Rushing to reassure him, she stated steadily, "Not you. You didn't do it, Vincent."

His voice was hoarse, low, and very ugly when he replied, "How do you know that, Diana?"

"I just *know*."

"How?" he demanded again.

Exasperated, Diana exploded at him, "Because *you* don't kill *after* you screw, you kill *instead*."

Pulling away fast, backing up, yanking the car into a tight turn - churned grit already dusting her face - Diana didn't look back at the cafe until the old Chevy had carried her and Vincent a quarter mile toward the blue-grey mountains in the far distance. When she looked, she could make out the figures of Snow and Catherine standing outside Gabriel's cabin, no doubt staring at the car and cursing her.

It wasn't until then that Diana remembered Snow's motorcycle.

"Diana, where shall we go?" Vincent gripped the dashboard with one clawed hand, the frame of the open window with the other. She couldn't blame him: she was doing seventy-five already, and she wasn't on a road. The land was relatively flat, but there were lots of sudden stony outcroppings. Too many, for a beat-up old Chevy like hers with an iffy suspension and only the memory of shocks.

"Into the mountains, babe. Be prepared."

Diana vaguely remembered caves in the foothills nearer than the big mountains. They'd hole up in one. Ditch the car, which was too easy for Snow to track on a bike, and find a hiding place until the mercenary ran out of gas. After *she* ran out of gas.

"Will they follow us?"

"Of course. How else will they pin Gabriel's murder on you? No one will believe their story without you for proof. My guess is, Snow will send Catherine to get the cops, then track us on his motorcycle himself."

"How fast can he travel on such a machine?"

"It's a beauty, Vincent. The biggest, the best. Harley-Davidson. He can go a lot faster than we can. Get into places a car can't negotiate. But we've got an advantage."

"Yes?"

"Sure. I know the land. I've lived here awhile. When I first came, I camped out a lot. I know the ground, and he doesn't. He can't take a shortcut and get ahead of us, because he'll have no way to

figure where we're headed." Without taking her eyes off the ground ahead, Diana patted Vincent's thigh. "Don't worry, they'll never find us, where I'm going. But I sure wish it was night, not morning." "So do I."

Startled, Diana glanced at Vincent, who stared impassively straight ahead, at the land. Vincent's voice dripped with humor and sarcasm, the first she'd ever known from him. She realized she was with the "new" Vincent, the "real" Vincent, at last.

Her distraction cost them: the car veered onto an upthrust ledge like a ramp, then slammed, nose-down, on the far side. The bumper and the undercarriage screeched, and the car nearly tipped over before it righted itself, swaying and bouncing on its burnt-out shocks. No more talk, she decided. Concentrate on her driving and getting away. There'd be plenty of time for observing him later.

Zig-zagging through the lower foothills, Diana occasionally thought she heard the buzz of Snow's cycle behind her. She wasn't certain. Maybe she was imagining it. She kept going, trying to outdistance him, cursing the plume of reddish dust the car left rising behind them - visible for miles. Have to go for distance, get some hills between until the dust-trail settled. She'd topped off the Chevy's gas tank the last time she'd been out in it. So she'd started out on full. But by late afternoon, the gauge was nodding toward empty. They were well into the foothills by then, weaving among high, stark canyons. Pretty soon they'd have to abandon the car and keep going on foot. She was almost glad of it, certain Snow was no Indian tracker who could follow footprints in the dirt.

What chiefly worried her was their supplies. Grabbing for cans of this and that, and two plastic jugs of water, she'd forgotten a number of things. For instance, warm clothes. It got cold in the mountains at night, but all they had was the thin blanket she always kept in the Chevy's trunk and a couple of sweaters. Vincent was wearing boots, but she hadn't taken the time to change out of her sneakers. No sleeping bags. Nothing that could serve as a tent, if the weather turned rowdy. They were ill-equipped to survive anywhere but in civilization.

Never mind. They'd survive. She knew a little about camping. Vincent was strong and capable. Their time in the hills wouldn't be long. They'd survive.

"Why are you smiling, Diana?" When she glanced at him, Vincent's head was cocked, his expression as sweet as she'd ever seen it.

"Thinking. Whistling in the dark."

"Not yet. Soon, though, you may whistle in the dark."

"Right." His humor was so unexpected, after the months of deadly seriousness and innocent literalness of his interpretations of everything she said or did. Would she ever get used to it?

The sun was gone behind the west ridge and the shadow was high on the rock face to the east when they ran out of gas. Diana steered and Vincent pushed until the Chevy nosed down into a deep gully. They piled brush on it.

"Nothing more we can do to hide this baby," Diana reflected. "Anybody looking for it will find it before long But they won't find us. We'll be long gone." She lifted her carryall and slung the carbine over her shoulder. "Come on."

After two long paces, she realized he hadn't moved, and faced around impatiently. Before she could say anything, he commented, "Not that way."

Discarding about five sharp retorts, she asked simply, "Why?"

"Water is this way." Head raised, he was looking off west.

"Who's the one who knows the ground around here?" Diana challenged. "You been doing some exploring I don't know about? Straight down the canyon's the only way out."

"The water," Vincent repeated patiently, "is that way. I can smell it. And I can climb. A motorcycle cannot. Even should a hunter find the car, he would have to go either ahead or back. We will go over. We will be long gone."

Nodding slowly, Diana felt the burden of decision slip from her heart. Though she halfway suspected him of choosing that direction to get a good view of the sunset, she admitted that Vincent's grasp was good - more than good: keen. She wouldn't need to figure everything out herself. He'd help. The "real" Vincent was an asset, not a burden. She wouldn't need to protect him up here. They'd protect each other. A sigh of relief, maybe even happiness, escaped her.

Collecting the backpack and rolled blanket, Vincent stood looking at her.

"What?" She asked.

"No. It's nothing, Diana. I'm grateful for your help."

"That's new."

"No. I've always been grateful. But now I'm happy for your joy, as well."

"My joy?" Diana squinted at him, uncertain what to make of that.

"Please, let's continue our journey. When the sun sets, we will camp and speak of many things."

Suddenly, Diana knew he'd been reminded, somehow, of what he'd been trying to forget all those months. Whatever it was, she hoped it wouldn't push him back into mental flight. She liked the "real" Vincent. A lot.

As they started out toward the canyon's shadowed west wall, she said awkwardly, "I'm sorry for what happened to you back in New York. Whatever it was. Did Narcissa give you news from home?"

"Yes. Good news. What I believed why I ran was wrong. My family survived. They've rebuilt our home."

"That man who was driving the van you came out here in"

"Sam Denton. He was a helper. An old friend. There was a flood. I thought my family were all gone. I went to Sam. He agreed to bring me out west, to someone else, another friend, with whom I could live. Hide."

"Like you did with me?"

"Yes. Narcissa was led to me in a vision. She came here, found me, waited until I remembered. Let me know I could go home."

So he'd run away from home by mistake. And he'd leave for home again as soon as it was safe. Wouldn't need her any more, when it was safe. Too bad. She'd gotten real used to him. If she told herself the truth, she'd fallen for him in a big way. Liked him a whole lot. Too bad.

What she didn't like was the heat. Going up the canyon - balancing along ledges where she could, waiting for him to find a foothold, then reach and lift her when she couldn't - the heat was unbearable. Riding in the car, fast, it hadn't been too bad. Walking - up, always up even after they reached the canyon rim, in the last of the light - it was unbearable. It radiated off the rocks. Sweat poured off her face. She tasted the salt of it when she licked her dry lips. Her sweatshirt was unbearably warm and she changed - behind a jumble of wind-etched boulders - into a white tee shirt, which was soaked with sweat within a minute after they began walking again.

Somehow, she found the grace not to complain, even though her thin-soled sneakers weren't so great on crooked rock, and her feet soon hurt with every step. Still the sun balanced on the far horizon as though stuck there. She thought if it didn't get itself down pretty soon, she'd collapse.

Marching stolidly by her side, taking slow strides to match his pace to hers, Vincent appeared unaffected by the heat or by the rocky, uneven ground under his boots. He showed no sign of tiring. He didn't mind resting when she plopped down to take off her sneakers and shake them free of stones and grit. But he never called a halt and was moving almost before she pushed back onto her aching feet again. He scanned the ground ahead, choosing their path, moving with steady confidence in a place he surely never could have been, before, in his life. If he was worried, frightened, tired, or anything else, he wasn't showing it. He didn't complain - not in words nor in behavior.

Absolutely closed.

So different from the Vincent she'd come to know, who was open and obvious. Whose thinking was written all over his face.

This Vincent was absolutely closed. She'd been right: she'd have to get to know him all over again. Too bad she wouldn't get the chance.

They walked for at least an hour in the dark because he didn't stop and she was too stubborn to be the first to suggest it. So she bumped into his back when he halted.

"What?"

"This would be a good place to camp, I think," he responded. "Sound carries well. I would hear anyone approach. And the rock will hold warmth far into the night. It will be cool, later. And we dare not risk a fire. It would be visible for miles."

He was thinking out loud, she felt but for her benefit. He already knew why he'd decided this was a good campsite. All **she** really cared about was groping around for a stone the right size to sit on. Dropping her carryall, she settled with a grateful sigh. Vincent came and went - checking out the ground, she figured. She was content to let him do it. It was almost spooky, how quiet he was in the darkness. She had to listen hard to hear him at all. Guessing he was close - pure guess, no way to be certain - she asked, "Is this water you were talking about anyplace close?"

"Just a dozen yards. A spring, and a catchpool." His voice wasn't really close, and came from off to her left.

"Any chance I could soak my feet in it?"

The silence was discouraging. Scandalized, maybe, at the idea of her sticking her feet in what might become their drinking water. All she knew was how much her feet hurt. Then there was a rustling - she thought he'd opened the pack. He said, "I'll soak this sweater and you can wrap your feet in it. But be sure to dry them well. Your feet. You mustn't get blisters."

"Right, scout."

He brought her the dripping sweater, and after awhile it did help. She dutifully dried her feet on a corner of the blanket. By that time the moon was up. Once she'd located him by his voice, offering occasional comments, she could make out his outline well enough to see him when he moved.

"I'm hungry," she commented. "See if you can figure a way to open that tin of corn beef hash, would you? I think I forgot to bring a can opener."

Silent, Vincent produced a pocket knife with lots of blades that glinted in the moonlight when he opened it. She recalled last seeing it on a shelf in the shed where he'd been sleeping.

"You sure you're not a Boy Scout?" she asked, as he worked at the can with the can-opener blade. "Always prepared," she added, when he said nothing. "Or is that the Marines?"

No comment. Grabbing a strap of the backpack and pulling it into easier reach, Diana fished for forks. "No plates," she reported. Looking up, she found Vincent holding the can out to her.

"Hearty appetite, Diana," he said.

"Me, first?" She smiled. "Sure, why not?" While she dug in, Vincent settled nearby. She heard him poking through the pack. Then he stopped, making a pleased sound - like mmm. "Find something?"

"Yes. Some chocolate. For dessert."

"Neat," she said with a smile. "Here. I've had enough. Finish the hash."

"I don't like hash."

"Just eat. Scouts need to keep up their strength."

But he didn't obey this time - just said mildly, "I'm not hungry."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Well, Okay then. Thanks. I guess ex-cops need to keep up their strength, too."

When the can was empty, the moon was high enough to actually see by. Everything was grainy and monochrome, like the print of an old movie that'd been one too many times through the projector. The site he'd chosen was a stretch of rock that shelved off to a drop, maybe twenty or twenty-five feet away. Like a J on its side, one wall curved around and was warmer than the boulder she'd been perching on. That had begun to matter: the air was turning chilly. Diana revived enough to put her sweatshirt back on when the goosebumps on her arms made her shiver.

"If you look in the backpack, you'll find an extra sweater you can use," she told Vincent, while she fished in her carryall for a moment, then produced *her* surprise. "Bet you'll be glad to see this now, huh?" She handed Vincent the book of poems she'd found in his pocket long ago.

"Yes," he replied, in a slow, puzzling drawl. Hard. Cold. "Thank you." He fingered the volume for a moment, set it aside, then took it up again. "Would you like me to read to you, Diana?"

"I didn't mean" she began, then stopped. "Or are you kidding? The moonlight's not *that* bright."

"It is enough. My differences have their uses. I will read to you, if you like."

"No, not unless you want to," she said hastily, put off by his lack of enthusiasm. "I'll get settled. And then maybe we can just talk until I fall asleep."

"Very well."

She improvised a pillow from a sweater, stretched out, and pulled over her what she figured was her half of the blanket. "You were right," she mentioned. "It's warmer over here." Maybe it was a hint. Anyway Vincent took it, settling crosslegged beside her: not too close, but not far enough away to be insulting - ah, the new Vincent was a gentleman - and leaned back against the stone, gazing at the sky. Perfectly clear. Millions of stars. Nothing like New York.

The moonlight silvered the contours of his lifted face. Diana shivered and pulled the blanket closer around her.

"Do you remember everything, Vincent?"

"About my past, who I am?"

"No. About these last few months, since you've been at the cafe."

"Oh, yes. I remember."

"So - what do you think of it now? Waste of time? Mad because I had you do all those chores? What?"

"There are no words." Then, after about a minute of silence she waited through, he said, "Paradise. If I must choose one word, that would be the one. Paradise. The sun on my face, on my body. Daylight. Walking in daylight. Simple work, in daylight. Company. Perfect company."

He turned his head toward her. His eyes were in deep shadow.

"I've dreamed of the mountains, and the desert. Of a flat landscape with no stone over my head. Of seeing the sky when I looked up. Of stretching my arms out as wide as I could, and touching nothing Of vistas so large that even my vision couldn't see to the end of them. Mountains that faded in the distance, like blue memories" He shook his head and his voice grew low, as if there were tears in his throat. "Diana, I'll always remember this time you've given me. Thank you."

"When this is over, you're gonna go back? To - the closed-in places?"

He didn't reply, and that was all right. He'd told her enough for one day.

Hands clasped behind her head, Diana was quiet for awhile, thinking she'd be able to fall asleep now, feeling absolutely safe and absolutely happy, as if there were nothing in the world but happiness, just as there was nothing for miles around but Vincent.

But she couldn't sleep. Her mind whirled with thoughts and with questions she didn't want to ask him. Finally, she did ask one: "Why didn't you like me, Vincent? When you were like you were? What was so bad about me?"

"It was I thought you didn't like me. I was frightened of you. I seemed always to make you angry"

"You did. You made me angry almost all the time. I don't know why."

"I desired you, Diana. But I was like a child."

"Whatever I felt for you - the desire - I pushed down deep. It would have been like taking advantage of a child, the way you were" Did she really say that to him? Cripes.

"Yes."

He'd slid down a little. Hitching a shoulder, he leaned the rest of the way, lying flat. Their shoulders almost touched. Like on the porch steps: a precise three inches. Enough, it seemed, that he didn't feel he was intruding; enough that she wasn't crowding him. Enough for company. The angle of his profile told her he was again looking up at the sky. She found that sight, and his company, incredibly reassuring.

They'd spoken words in this semi-darkness they could never have said in the light. Desire. They'd desired one another, frightened one another, made each other angry. Never acted on their desires, either of them.

Diana could hear him breathing and imagined she could see him breathe, too - his chest rising and falling slowly, so slowly it frightened her. Her urge to touch him, kiss him, do everything and anything with him, was so strong she could taste the exciting tart flavor of his skin in her mouth. Suddenly, there wasn't enough air coming in through her nose and she felt as though she were suffocating. She sat up.

"What is it, Diana?" Vincent sat up too, and reached for her.

"I can't breathe!" She was frightened.

He released her arm and searched for something. "Drink." She gulped some water straight from the bottle, then gulped some more while he waited patiently, steadying the bottle for her all the while, his hands covering hers. "Now, be still for a moment. No, don't lie down again. Come." He enveloped her in his arms, embracing her so lightly it was as if she were enclosed in an invisible, maybe imaginary, cloak.

Slowly, her breathing calmed and she relaxed. Leaned into him. Where her sweatshirt was pulled down over one shoulder, she felt his long hair tickling, and she smiled.

As if he knew she felt better now, and could bear it, he drew her closer and kissed her. Fire raced through her at his kiss, and she wanted him as she'd never wanted a man before in her life. But she pulled away.

After a minute, she asked in a small voice, "How was it with her?"

"How was what, with whom?"

"With *her*, with Catherine." She was just guessing now, a stab in the dark. "Your first time, wasn't it?" She watched him sit up, shift as if to face her, stare at her. Before he could say anything more, she added, "Your first time I wish it had been me," then hunched her shoulders and held her knees, and waited, miserable, humiliated and embarrassed, for his reply.

Out of the darkness came his voice, like thunder - frightening, thrilling, and unexpected. "It will be."

She knew it was true - he wasn't any kind of liar. He hadn't slept with that other woman. She would be his first. Glory. She went into his embrace, sought his mouth with her own - in a frenzy, mindlessly. She pulled every scrap of his clothing away, then ripped off her own. She had no idea why, except that she'd wanted to do this for months. With uncanny instinct, Vincent let her do everything, without speaking a word.

Ah, the feel of him! Thick sleek fur over nearly all his body: his arms, but not inside his elbows; his shoulders, but not the small of his back; his chest, but not his neck.

And muscles! No bulges, simply ling defined sections, like a wonderful map.

Flat sections, like plains. She groomed his fur on the plains like a cat, wondering whether she was tickling him.

Sharp dips, like valleys. Wonderful places to explore.

His sigh - a nearly imperceptible intake of air when she touched him - rocked her. She explored further, then kissed him again, with her soul, her hand stretching out over the rest of him, patting his body blindly - to learn him and to make sure all of him was still there.

She was wet with sweat; the chill of the night was sharp contrast to the heat of his body. Resting her cheek against the thick fur on his chest, she found that the feel of him made her shy.

Slowly, she stood. His hands reached up and she dropped down again, falling on the full length of his body.

She began to cry.

Silently, he turned with her, carefully arranging her on the blanket, his arm protecting her shoulders from the ground, his hand cradling her head.

His other hand roamed

Once, when she cried out, that hand moved to her lips and he said, "Hush." For a second, she remembered that they were hiding. Hunted. Then she forgot again in the drive toward release, and whatever sounds they made were wrapped in the vastness of the silence.

As soon as she'd climaxed she wanted him again - fully, completely. They were still joined, but quiet now. She didn't want quiet. She tugged at his arms. She thought he'd begun. But he hadn't. He was poised over her, and he waited.

She dug her nails into his shoulders, deliriously willing him to ease the intolerable ache inside her that hadn't ceased, even now.

But she did nothing, said nothing; waited too. After all, he was Vincent. Who could know what was in his mind, or why he waited, or what he wanted?

Diana thought they were raindrops, at first, the huge splashes on her breasts.

She thought it was raining.

That's what she thought, until she heard Vincent sob.

Not raindrops. Tears.

Then she didn't wait any longer. Pressing her arms around him, pushing hard against him, gripping him tightly, she moved. And as it began again, as he took motion from her motion, his arms no longer rigidly held him high above her. They were close, tight. Then he rolled onto his back, carrying her with him, so she was freed of his weight and cushioned from the earth by his body; held in place, kept from flying off into the sky, by his arms.

She realized, in a flash, that she knew how it felt for him to be with her this way, surrounded by warmth and the dark, his skin lightly grazed by her breasts, his face covered with her long swinging hair. How it felt for him, this sex under the clear night sky, with no limits, whichever way he looked, no limits at all.

After the convulsion of release, incredibly, he laughed: a sound light as fire, rich as gold. Purely joyous.

She rolled off him. Would have rolled away - rolled off the ledge and down the mountain, for all the strength she had left to stop herself - but his arms held her tightly.

She stretched out, their bodies hardly touching, and looked up at the sky and the lifting moon, that looked almost near enough to touch. Certainly near enough to reach for.

She started to say something about the moon but stopped when she felt his mouth on her body, kissing her. Stifling a squeak of pleasure, she relaxed into his lovemaking, opening her heart to his soul.

He slid his hands over her hips, and she closed her eyes tightly, not to be distracted by the moon's glare. Her fingers threaded his hair, and she held his head. Where he touched her, she felt entirely bound to the earth, but the rest of her felt light and cold. She held on to him for dear life, so she wouldn't lift off the ground and fly away.

Intensely pleased by his kisses, and by his fingers skimming her skin everywhere, she moved with him, lifting off the ground, wanting more, more, desperately, wanting closer, closer, frantically. Wanting faster, harder, incredibly. Until the rhythm took off with her and her being focused on the hard-light pressure of his incessant kisses; then her body erupted in wave after wave of seismic convulsions, a pleasure beyond words, an exhaustion beyond her body, a peace beyond love.

And it rained again. Rained that not-rain that was Vincent's tears on her breasts, then on her throat, then in her mouth when she kissed his eyes.

She fell asleep after he'd dressed her and rolled warmly close, together with her, wrapped in their one blanket. She imagined she'd wake at dawn, with him trying to see sunrise past her hair.

Catherine stood in the dusty road next to Snow, both of them staring into the distance where a beat-up Chevy was carrying Vincent and Diana away from them.

Moving fast, Snow started toward the motorcycle.

"No! No, John, please! How far can you go without refueling? You'll lose them and end up walking back. Let's cut our losses."

"How?" he asked, in that spare direct way she loved - so similar to Gabriel's yet so different.

"Call the police. Report the murder."

"You do it."

She turned and dashed back into the cafe. Within minutes she was back to report, with a like terseness. "The phone's dead. The lines have been cut."

He nodded, unsurprised. "The car phone is history, too." He waved at a pile of plastic junk on the ground. "And the gas pump is locked. Padlock. Take all day to get through it. Pretty thorough, for such short notice There'll be someplace with a phone on down the road. The Jag should get you that far if I fill up the radiator. Report the murder from there."

Catherine stood aside, watching, while he methodically popped the car's hood, brought water from the cafe, and began filling the radiator.

"What are you going to be doing?" she asked suddenly.

Bent under the hood, he looked around at her. "Taking care of things. Like always."

"What, precisely?" she pursued.

"Finding that cook. He's our insurance policy. No cop's going to look at **that** - those hands; those fangs - and "

"No."

Setting down the water jug he'd been using, he straightened, looking exasperated, amused - and loving, in a way that nearly made her lose her resolution.

"**That**," he said, indicating with a tilt of his head the cabin where Gabriel lay, blood all over everything, "we can't pass off as an accident. The cook's the key. Has been, from the beginning. We need him for proof," John explained patiently. "Nobody's going to believe our story unless they can see him. Close up. Or," he added deliberately, watching her, "what's left of him."

"No, John! It has to stop. We're going to begin fresh, no more killing. We can say we were carrying important business papers. A briefcase. Bearer bonds. And" She made a wide gesture, demanding he help formulate the scenario. "And somebody broke in: a thief, a vagrant"

He hadn't moved, hadn't changed expression. But his eyes were no longer amused. No longer loving. "Too complicated. And there's the old blind lady. We'd have to do something about her, to run a

story like that. I don't think that's what you had in mind, is it? I don't do old blind ladies."

She brushed hair away from her face, her mind veering to avoid considering the unthinkable implications of what he'd said. "Then find something else!" she insisted. "Some other way."

Almost dreamily Snow murmured, "Out here, some people collect rattlesnakes. Put 'em in cages. Call the place a 'snake farm,' charge admission"

"What's that got to do with" ?"

"The redhead - she kept her cook. It's that simple. The cook killed Gabe. Slashed him up. For any reason, or for none - who's going to know or care what a thing like that uses for reasons? Because if **he** didn't kill Gabe, Catherine, then one of us did." He regarded her steadily. She'd never seen his eyes as cold.

"But he didn't," Catherine found herself protesting. "He couldn't. He" Her voice trailed off as she realized that John Snow was jealous. And that he had good cause. "We didn't **do** anything," she declared, beginning again from this new angle, knowing as she spoke that John wouldn't understand. Or understood too well. "I swear it" nothing! We only talked."

But that had been everything. And John's steely eyes showed he knew it: that he'd been presenting her with a choice between himself and the cook and felt her every protest as a betrayal.

"It's not what you think," Catherine insisted in a low voice, looking at the ground. "We only talked. He was kind. It's just" She shook her head. "I don't want our happiness built on hurting someone innocent."

"Nobody's innocent," commented John - a flip cliché.

"**He** is." Her voice was only a whisper now - tight in her throat. Barely able to force the words out of her mind, into sound. "Why did you do it? That's not what I meant you to do. That's not what I wanted."

"I learned a long while ago, you can't always get what you want." The sharpness had left his voice. His tone was again the familiar one: wearily amused, rueful. She chanced looking up and found that his eyes were loving again. But distant.

She couldn't bear the distance. She flew into his embrace, his strength, his warmth that was only for her. After a minute or two he kissed her forehead and put her away from him, directing, "Go phone for the cops."

He strolled away toward his motorcycle, stuffing a hand in his pocket for the ignition key. Straddling the bike, he kicked it to growling life. It bounced off the kickstand and settled heavily.

Following, one hesitant step at a time, as though pushed, Catherine grasped his arm and leaned close to ask again, "What will you be doing?"

He looked around, smiling - except for his eyes. Over the engine's grumbling, he remarked, "Before you begin new business, you have to get all the old business cleared away. Robert's Rules of Order. Gabe insisted on it. That's how it's done. I'm a businessman too. Just a little old business to settle up."

"I'll come." She started to swing up behind him, but he let the bike yank forward. She staggered, unbalanced, still on her feet only because she was holding onto him.

He kissed her cheek lightly. "What you don't see won't hurt you. And it's my job to see you don't get hurt. See to the cops," he directed again, and let the bike move. She was pulled along a few steps,

then had to let go. The big bike instantly accelerated, spraying her with dust and small pebbles she belatedly lifted a bent arm against, protecting her face.

As the motorcycle's roar diminished to a hum, Catherine looked to the Jaguar, hood still gaping, then back to the cafe. She didn't seem able to make herself move, filled with a too familiar sense of helplessness. The same dull hopelessness from which talking with Vincent had temporarily freed her.

Vincent.

Why hadn't she mentioned his name to John? Diana hadn't used it, either. Strange. Hard to forget him. Vincent. Catherine went with many men before she met and married Gabriel Blake, but she'd never met anyone like Vincent. Always, there'd been a streak of cruelty in the men she'd attached herself to. Always. She wasn't sure why. Even John, who was tender with her now, would be violent, probably sadistic, later on. How could it be otherwise, with a man like him?

But Vincent was different. Unendurably gentle. Laughably shy. But many men were like that. The difference was that she'd enjoyed it, loved being with him. Never felt that way before with the soft ones, the sweet ones.

What did that mean?

She hoped she'd forget him. Vincent. Decided she would, once she got past this difficult time and could be with John. She'd better forget Vincent, because someone like him had no place in her life. None. Unless she wanted to live in the desert somewhere, like this place, instead of where the action was. Where there was power and excitement moving all around her. Where people were. Catherine knew that no man would content her for long, if she had to live out here. No man. And no beast.

He'd loved her, the cook, the beast. Simply. Completely. Love at first sight. Like what was supposed to have been between Gabriel and her, according to the tabloids, but never was.

For Gabriel, she'd been an appealing ornament, for her, he'd been the epitome of power. For John, she was Gabriel's woman, unattainable, and desirable for that reason alone.

But for Vincent, she was beauty. Vulnerability. Need. He'd wanted to take care of her, make her well, when she'd fainted. Heal her. How the hell did she know that? She just knew. His love was pure.

"You must protect Vincent, child." Startled, Catherine looked up and found the old blind woman standing on the porch. Though the remark took her off balance, she didn't answer, didn't ask anything. Couldn't. The woman continued, "Do not tell the police. Take your man, go away. Save yourself. And the man. Leave this place."

Catherine walked closer to the porch, close enough to look into the woman's film-covered eyes.

"What do you mean, leave this place? My husband was killed "

"The restless one killed the dark one. But it was for you. Protect the gentle soul from harm or the gods will punish you beyond anything you dream."

Catherine laughed incredulously. "The gods? What gods? My husband is dead murdered. How can I leave? Anyway, it's too late. John is gone."

"Child, it will only be too late if you let it be. All will be well if you protect the gentle soul. If you do not, you and your beloved will be destroyed."

Even listening to such nonsense was absurd. Yet the old woman's words struck a deep chord in Catherine as Vincent's had. **Only too late if you let it be. If you let it be.** As if it were all up to her. As if she had any choice, any power over events. Catherine wanted to protest that except for marrying Gabriel, she'd hardly taken an independent action in her life. Drawn by power, she admired

it and bowed to its force that swept her along easily, comfortably, without choices to make but the first choice: to submit.

Snow was gone: there was nothing she could do.

Except set the legal system grinding over Gabriel's death. As Snow had told her to do. As she'd have to do, to finally free herself of Gabriel. For in her world, as in Gabriel's, people didn't simply disappear. Each death had to be accounted for, tallied, and avenged by legal means or not.

The alternative was to disappear herself. Give up her own fortune as well as the billions more she'd inherit as Gabriel's guiltless widow. Surely nobody could expect her to keep silent, consign herself to a hidden, anonymous life, pretend nothing had happened. Besides, where could she go? What could she do? Who would take care of her if she were to give up all the power that great wealth bestowed?

Facing back toward the porch, she protested, "I can't "

And found she was alone: the old woman, having delivered her cryptic warning, was gone.

No, not quite alone. The memory of Vincent's kindness haunted her. Not alone. Not with a memory like that.

Vincent would be with her wherever she went. Always.

Catherine looked again at the waiting Jaguar - and decided.

Snow was half a mile down the highway before he unhitched his goggles from the handlebars and pulled them on. He was doing eighty and the needle still climbing when he spotted the Chevy's dust marker off to the west: nowhere near the road. Slowing, he yanked the bike around into a skid, then sent it bouncing and lunging over the left shoulder onto the cracked and mostly level ground.

No point in heading full-tilt in the wrong direction just for the satisfaction of going fast, trying to outrun his rage. No point cracking up before he'd done the job at hand. He'd always been able to get the job done. That was why Gabriel kept him on: Snow always got the job done.

No point in rage: it only made you stupid, do stupid things. Wrestling the bike around a boulder, he forced himself to breathe deeply, in a slow steady rhythm, trying to enforce calm. Nothing worked. His anger only grew.

Lost her. He'd lost her in the hour before dawn. Before he'd set himself up for a murder charge by killing Gabriel - for **her**: because it was the only way to protect her. Because the instant Gabriel **knew** instead of suspected - and Snow knew he'd suspected, and had enjoyed watching them suffer and twist in their trap - the instant he **knew**, they were both gone. Because Gabriel didn't tolerate losing. Not anything. To anybody.

And in spite of it - what he'd done; what he'd **had** to do - Snow had lost her. Lost her to a nobody. A cook in a desert cafe. A cook who was different. A freak. A beast. Not even a man. And now, Catherine expected him to sacrifice himself for this nobody. This cook. Catherine expected him to let the wheels of justice grind for him the way they did for ordinary people. Grind him to dust. Expected him not to protect her, or himself. Not save himself. Just let the wheels grind **over** him, destroy him.

Never.

Almost without thinking, Snow scanned the empty orange skyline of gradually rising ground. Unpeopled. That was the word for this part of the country. Christ! No cars, no trucks, no bikes. No gas: he was down past half a tank. But if he took the time to find someplace to refuel, he'd have a hard time picking up the trail again. Had to be gone gas around here somewhere

There! Off in the distance, a trailer and the back end of a truck, a red pick-up. Hanging a sharp left, almost toppling the motorcycle, Snow sped toward the truck. A 4X4, in good shape, with heavily cleated offroad tires. Window cranked down on the driver's side. Hardly believing his luck, he rolled close and pushed up his dusty goggles. The truck's keys hung from the ignition, their owner's four-leaf clover ornament steady in the breezeless heat of morning. Four-wheel drive. Stepping off the bike, he set the kickstand and eased his shoulder through the truck's window. Reaching, he clicked off the radio as an automatic precaution, then turned the ignition key just enough to activate the gauges. Full tank of gas. Perfect. Better than the bike, for this job.

He leaned back out of the truck and checked that nothing was moving. Nobody watching. Everything quiet from the trailer propped on cinderblocks about twenty yards away. Occupant, the driver, probably asleep inside. Alone, maybe. With somebody, maybe. Telephone? No poles. No lines. But a CB whip antenna on the truck, and the receiver and mike inside, set into the dash. Antenna on the trailer: therefore likely a CB unit inside, too. Bad luck. Bad luck for somebody.

Snow surveyed his options. Taking the vehicle would be easy, but the owner would sound the alarm as soon as Snow started the motor. And Snow needed time to overtake the fleeing couple and then get gone

He hesitated. He couldn't assume whoever was in the trailer would be unarmed - not in this desolate countryside. Deciding, Snow pulled out his automatic and checked the clip, then went to the trailer. When he pushed the door, it didn't give. So he kicked it in, bracing the gun with two hands. He scanned the interior, its cramped clutter and faintly rancid smell irritating him. He moved slowly toward a curtain that partitioned off the back. He flung the curtain aside.

A man and a woman, mostly naked, half awake and still trying to get clear of the sheet. The woman made a keening noise. Snow shot only twice - one bullet for each of them - to save ammunition. Nine rounds in the clip. Now, seven.

Back at the other end of the trailer he found the CB unit on a shelf. Remembering the redhead's destruction of the Jag's mobile phone, he smiled grimly while pulling the plug and slicing the power cord though there was nobody alive here now to try to make a call.

Returning to the pick-up, he stowed his bike in the back. Fastening the tie-downs, he noted a spare tire, a tire wrench and jack, hauling cable, a few rags, and a big can of fuel. Superb luck.

About time he had some.

Snow was on the road within moments, maneuvering the pick-up quickly and efficiently, shifting to four-wheel drive and feeling the tires dig in with greater power and confidence.

Cutting across the open ground toward where he'd last spotted the Chevy's tell-tale dust, he presently crossed a fresh set of tracks and turned to follow them.

Only then did he relax. He was on the right path, now. His accustomed path. Murders committed. Murders in prospect. The way it had always been, always would be, for him. Catherine had been a mistake, a distraction, from who he was; Gabriel was his destiny. Gabriel, who'd brought his soul years ago. His friend. Even in death, his friend. Gabriel's favorite edict repeated itself in Snow's mind as he drove. He hadn't forgotten it, not in the thirty years since they'd first trained together. **The road**

is narrow, John, that leads to eternal damnation, Gabriel told him. ***Don't fall off.***

As the sun began climbing toward noon, the temperature climbed. No air-conditioning in the truck. That would have been too much to expect. Snow tied around his forehead a bandanna he found in the glove compartment. Switching on the radio, he skipped through whining singers until he found a Tucson station broadcasting news. Nothing, yet, about the killing. The cops probably were still on their way. If Catherine had called them. He worried about the chance she'd broken down someplace in the Jag. But he reassured himself with the thought that she could stand on the shoulder and flag somebody down without even trying. Just by the fact of being a pretty woman in obvious trouble. Somebody would pick her up. Somebody always would.

By noon, he was in the foothills and still tucked tight in the Chevy's slot - allowing for necessary brief detours to avoid deep gullies or boulders - headed straight toward the mountains. Couldn't be more than an hour ahead of him, the redhead and her cook. They'd run out of gas before dark. So would he. They'd proceed on foot, but he had his motorcycle. His second wind - his edge. Always good to have the edge.

It was nearly dark when he found the Chevy where they'd ditched it. The pick-up was about done, too. Before switching to the bike, he cast around until he found their footprints. The boots, that would be the cook. The child-sized prints were hers. Sneakers. She'd been in too much of a hurry to change. Sneakers wouldn't hold up in rough country; she'd slow the cook down. Luck for Snow again. Sitting back on his heels, Snow made a closer study of the boot tracks. The cook's feet were large; the strides long and firm. A heavy man - not wiry, like him, not skeletal, like Gabriel. Tall. Well-built. He'd appealed to Catherine.

And different. But not so different that he'd put Catherine off.

Never mind Catherine. Forget her. No distractions. ***The road is narrow.....***

Backtracking to the gully, working out the pattern, Snow saw that the two had milled around for a bit, their tracks crossing each other in a small circle. Then they'd set out at a steady pace - not, he was surprised to find, either forward or back, but sideways. Toward the canyon wall. Whose idea had that been? The cook leading her prints on top of his. Interesting. What had they figured to do - fly? Or just throw him off long enough to turn in some other direction, make him follow them pace for pace to know which way they'd left the canyon - ahead or behind?

Not that, either. The steps dead-ended at the cliff face. Looking up, Snow knew he didn't have the gear to make a climb like that; and it would have meant leaving the bike behind. Shrewd move; by the time he circled back out through the canyon to reach the top, it would be too dark to find the tracks. Though he hated the delay - every hour lost made it that much more likely a full-scale police manhunt would have begun - helicopters, maybe dogs, the whole circus - Snow knew he had no option but the bed down here and wait for dawn to take up the hunt again.

Under the truck seat he'd noticed some beer and crackers. Returning, he made a meal of them though the crackers were stale and the beer was hot, practically exploding when he popped the tab. It didn't matter: he loathed beer anyway. It was no worse hot than cold. Since he was going to leave the truck anyway, he used some of the gas to run the heater as the evening cooled, and dozed to the plaintive laments of country singers on the radio, whining about some woman who'd left them, or they couldn't get, or some other ineffectual nonsense like that.

In the morning, he'd find them. They were on foot; he had the bike. He'd find them and tidy the last of the loose ends before the cops found all three of them. He had to. He'd a debt to pay - to Gabriel, to

Catherine, and to himself.

When Vincent finished refilling the large plastic bottles at the spring, he found Diana sitting up, blinking at the daylight, not really awake yet. He had secretly always liked to see her that way when first they met in the mornings, in the cafe, while he was doing his chores and getting things ready for breakfast. When she'd make her usual comment about needing hot, strong coffee before she was ready to face the day. He always liked her better before she'd faced anything. Soft, quiet, never angry at those times; friendly, her beautiful hair loosely tumbled over her shoulders, yawning sometimes, as she was doing now, behind her hand.

He was sorry he had no coffee to offer her. After a moment's thought, he said so, and she smiled at him uncertainly.

"I'll live," she said, looking around her. "Anything else you're sorry about?"

He felt shy with her again and said nothing. There was a strangeness. It was different in the daylight.

"Don't tell me," she said next, locating a sneaker and pulling it on over a fresh sock. "You got up to watch the sunrise."

He ducked his head - an admission. "It is very beautiful. I never could watch the sunrise. Where I was. Where I lived." Deliberately, against the strangeness, he added, "The light on your hair as you slept was also very beautiful." He looked at her. "I felt I had never seen anything so wonderful."

His arms opened quickly enough to hold her as she came to him, one foot bare, holding him hard with her cheek against his chest. He did then what he'd often wished to do: stroked a lock of her gloriously tumbled hair. It was as soft as he remembered from the time before the light. The feelings of that time began returning to him. He discovered wonderingly that the wildness could come even in the light.

And she was glad of it. Welcomed it. Welcomed him as they lay down together and loved again with eyes that could see one another, the flush that rose in her skin like its private dawning. And then the sun, the heat building, and the full noontime when there was only sensation, the final urgencies, and the peaceful declining warmth afterward. He'd known dawn and day and evening, he thought, in her arms and the heat of her body, the heat of his own. Holding her, not wanting to let go for a moment lest any strangeness again slide between them, he murmured a word into her hair and she made an inquiring sound.

"Grand," he repeated softly.

"We should get ready," she said presently. "If we haven't lost them altogether, they'll come today."

She moved, but he wasn't yet ready to release her or be in any way apart from her. A conversation of touches - questions of lifting, answers of holding, kisses, nuzzlings - that ended with her snuggled softly against him again, content to put off a little longer facing the morning and what this morning might bring.

He began, "Diana"

"Mmmmmmm?"

"I have dreamed of this. But it was only a dream."

"Not any more," she replied gently, smiling.

"Yes," he said. In the daylight, he knew that.

There was no immediate need to move on, and this was as good a place to wait as any. A hidden place; a secret place. A place with good water and a clear view of the crooked land for miles around, but one where any hunter would find it hard to see them. And last night he'd led them mostly over stone when he could, that left no tracks. He was certain he'd see any hunter before that hunter was aware of him.

They shared a can of Spam and cool spring water. Then they prepared the packs, in case they had to move. Sitting cross-legged by the end of the ledge, Vincent watched distances. The sun was hot on his head, but Vincent basked in it gratefully, lolling back against the warming stone.

He listened to the silence, hearing bird calls and the scurrying of small animals, the shimmering sound of insect wings, and Diana's soft motions, the rhythms of her breath from where she sat, a few yards off.

Turning, he asked, "Will you stay with me, Diana? When this is over? Will you make your home with me?"

She looked up quickly from wiping the rifle with an oily cloth. "I'm not going back to New York, if that's what you mean. That's where your home is, right? Where your family lives - the people who love you."

"I thought they were all dead. As they thought me. But it's been half a year," he reflected, trying to work out unexpectedly conflicted feelings. Of course he was glad to know they were alive - Father. Everyone. And yet

"They will have already done much of the rebuilding. They won't need me. Not really. I meant at the cafe."

She bent again to her task. "Ask me again, when this is over and we're free," she replied eventually, a mere murmur.

"I am afraid"

"Don't be. If you ask me again, I'll say yes. But - you've gotta ask me again, back in civilization."

"I will."

She glanced up at him again - a look like a kiss, a caress. "We'll see."

"I will ask you again," he insisted. And believed that he would.

"We'll see," she repeated, unsmiling, and he knew she did not.

Then he heard it: the roar of a motorcycle in the distance.

They both came to their feet together.

"Go!" Vincent ordered.

"Get outta sight," Diana directed in the same instant, tugging his sleeve, trying to push him behind her.

"No. Please. Go now. Hide until the danger is past. I will come for you."

"You're crazy. I've got a rifle. I can pick him off as soon as he comes into view."

"No. You must not risk your life for me."

"Look, we can't stand here and fight about it. He's too close. Okay, I'll draw him off. You're the target, not me."

Before he could protest, she was running along the ledge, then leaping off the far edge. And he didn't follow, wondering if she was right and being with him would be the greater danger. It had been so in the past. No: he should draw the hunter another way and so leave her safe. He set off in the other direction.

Moving quickly, he reached a tall, broad rock formation. Climbing to the top, he stretched out and looked down over the edge. He couldn't hear the motorcycle any longer. He thought Snow must have abandoned it. But he couldn't see the man either.

He looked for Diana. He could just make out where she'd hidden behind a stand of mesquite bushes. Although she'd leveled the rifle, she wasn't sighting along the barrel. So he realized she couldn't see Snow either, to take aim.

Then Vincent saw him. The man came cautiously out from behind some rocks, downhill and to Vincent's right. Stopping, Snow studied the ground, then lifted his head to scan higher. The glint in his hand was a gun.

So. Snow was armed. He must not be given the chance to fire his weapon. Vincent knew he must take him by stealth. There was no other way.

He waited until Snow was very close, passing beneath the pillar. Then Vincent leaped, knocking Snow's gun away as they rolled in the dust.

Stronger than he appeared, Snow held Vincent off long enough to reach the knife hidden in his boot. He stabbed upward as they rolled, grazing Vincent's hip.

"Stop this!" Vincent hissed, pinning Snow's arms to the ground and straddling him. "Stop this now. This must end."

"Never!" Snow wheezed from between clenched teeth. He twisted, managing somehow to loosen Vincent's grip on his wrists. In a second he found his knife and struck again. Vincent barely managed to deflect the thrust.

Straining to loosen Snow's grip on the knife, Vincent rolled and set his knees in the dirt to regain his balance. Snow lunged at him. But before the knife struck, Snow's body went slack. The knife fell from his hand. His head dropped sideways. He was dead.

Coming nearer, hop-stepping down a slope, Diana called, "Looks like I got him just in time. What were you doing, babe - playing with him?"

"You shot him?" Vincent asked, astonished. He hadn't heard anything.

"He didn't die of hay fever. What did you think I was going to do - wrestle him to death? For God's sake, Vincent, why didn't you finish him off?"

"I don't know."

"He had a knife! he could have killed you! But he was no match for you in hand to hand, So - why?" Standing, moving back from Snow's body, Vincent gazed into the distance. "I have no rage"

"Ah"

"It is as you said, Diana. I've never killed **after** making love. Only - **instead**."

"Well, that's a comfort!" He felt Diana's eyes on him, but didn't look at her. Perhaps she'd scorn him

now....

Vincent carried Snow's body to a crack in a stone face he then sealed with boulders no animal would be able to dislodge. Inevitably, he was reminded that was how it was done Below: crypts, catacombs, cairns piled high and then left in the dark silence. At least here, there were sun and seasons. At least here, one could be united with the living world.....

The remembered dark seemed to tug at him with its rightness, with a kind of inevitability. That was the truth of what he was. Who he was. As it had always been. A life of caring for others, with no thought for himself. A life of service. That was what he knew. Had this time all been a dream, then - a beautiful dream? A dream of life with Diana in the sun. Diana

He looked down the slope to where Diana was loading their small baggage on the motorcycle, that splendid, powerful machine. He wondered what they'd find waiting for them back at the cafe. Whether he'd have to escape, hide, or if he'd be able to stay and take up the accustomed routines. Whether he'd want to, now that he'd remembered. If she'd want him to, now that things were no longer simple, between them.....

He'd have loved to drive the machine, but a few driving lessons weren't enough to make it safe for him to handle a heavy machine carrying double on a steep, uneven downslope. Maybe later, he thought, clasping Diana's waist as she started the motorcycle rolling. Maybe sometime

And he remembered what he'd refused to think about until then: that Snow, who was dead, was the man Catherine Blake loved.

Except for the Jaguar, there were no cars near the cafe. No people moving. After watching for awhile from a distance, Diana sent the motorcycle down the dirt track and stopped at the porch.

Hand to her mouth and eyes enormous, Catherine Blake came onto the porch to see what portent the returning cycle's sound had brought. Seeing, not Snow, but Diana and Vincent, she instantly **knew** and burst into tears against Narcissa, who impassively held her. Narcissa, whose blind eyes seemed to look directly at Vincent.

Narcissa who told him, "Child, it's time now. You are well, and yourself again. You must come home now, Vincent. Your family Father, the others need you."

"I need you," Catherine sobbed. "I have no one, now. Nowhere to go. No way to live. Please."

For a moment Vincent's emotions went dead and he felt nothing. Then Catherine's words reached some deep part of him and his empathic sense reawakened to the feelings of the others. All eyes were on him, but his were drawn unflinchingly to Catherine's tear-streaked face.

He felt her need, a tide of anguished helplessness that flooded him, filling him completely. She needed love, compassion, care. Family. She needed the tunnels, the healing dark, where she could find all those things. She needed protection. His protection. She needed **him**.

And Vincent's heart swelled with a pure love for Catherine, and sorrow for her loss, and tenderness for her weakness.

He glanced at Diana who stood close to Narcissa. Her arms were folded under her breasts, her fists clenched. She stared at him defiantly, then nodded knowingly. Then she looked away, her face a mask carved in stone. He knew he must go, and his soul was pierced by agony beyond anything he could have imagined. It would never leave him.

But he did not hesitate. Walking over to Catherine, he opened his arms. She fell into his embrace with a grateful sob and buried her face against his chest. He felt he'd come home, to a sense of purpose

and power he'd lost.

Turning, he looked at Diana again, regretting anew her strength and their equality, that he'd never known with anyone else. No, Diana didn't need him. She couldn't. She simply loved him. That wasn't enough. For him, the situation defined itself, explained itself, answered all questions. Catherine needed him, his family needed him, and he needed their need. There was nothing more to say, no choice or decision to make. Nothing beyond the need - his, and theirs.

"Where are the cops?" Diana asked the other woman. "Been and gone?"

Catherine lifted her face. "Never came. I never called them. We were never here. Never came. Never went. Nothing ever happened. If anyone comes to ask, you don't know anything about us."

Slowly, Diana nodded. "I guess that's mostly true. Or true enough. I don't move in those circles."

"Neither do I," Catherine responded. "Not anymore."

"And what was in the cabin? Where?"

Catherine said, "We buried him. Narcissa and I. You don't want to know where. But the car?"

"You'll have to get rid of it," Diana deduced at once. "If you want, I'll see to it. Lots of empty space, out here. Transmission in one ditch, engine block in another It can be arranged. Though it's a waste, great car like that."

There were surprisingly few things to discuss, to settle among them the disposition of two lives lost, one to vanish away. When evening came, Diana walked up to the highway to catch the bus. Later that night, she returned in a rented van. Vincent assured her the van would be turned in - safely, anonymously - when it had reached its destination. And the cost of the rental would be repaid.

It was important to him to assure her she wouldn't be responsible for the loss of the van. She nodded without interest because the loss was immeasurable and there was nothing either of them could do to make it less. There was nothing to say, not with Catherine holding onto his side.

When Catherine started up the van, with Narcissa and Vincent hidden in the back, Diana was nowhere to be seen. Vincent wasn't surprised. He'd known he'd never see her again in this life, known that all along. Like the sun, she was lost to him forever. Like the sun, she'd stay with him always, a vivid redhot pain, a sweet perfect memory, alive and cherished, in his heart.

Months later, nobody had come asking questions at the Dustbowl Cafe. Diana followed the newspaper sensation of the unexplained disappearance of tycoon Gabriel Blake, his socialite wife and (a brief mention) his bodyguard, somewhere between St. Louis, where they were last known to have been, and Los Angeles, where they'd never arrived. The first bus tossed off a paper at the head of the track for her, and she went and collected it to read while having her first cup of coffee, each morning. Day by day, week by week, she watched the story sink from front-page news to middle pages and smaller type, shorter columns, and the disappear altogether except for tabloid accounts of claimed sightings, like those of Elvis, that she spotted sometimes in the market on her rare trips to the city.

That people disappeared was a fact of life. Judge Crater. Jimmy Hoffa. The Bermuda Triangle. Just

suddenly gone.

While the story was still hot news, some papers had it that Gabriel had crossed the Mafia one too many times and that several New York families had combined to put out a contract on him, with a seven figure payoff. Others had it that he'd vanished to escape just such a contract being completed.

Nobody mentioned the Dustbowl Cafe.

Which was probably for the best.

The annoying thing was Lucifer. The damn mutt followed her up to the road every morning. When she picked up the paper and turned back, he'd stand there, watching the road as if expecting somebody to show up any minute. Muttering to herself, she'd trudge back without him, slapping the newspaper against her leg at every step. She wasn't looking for anybody.

When customers came, the mutt raced out at the bang of the screen door, barking and wagging his tail wildly. Then he'd run off behind the cafe when he discovered whoever had come was just another dusty customer.

She thought of getting rid of the dog - it'd started out as a stray, after all - but never did anything about it. Too much trouble. And he was company of a sort.

She had the Chevy towed out of the ravine. It ran as well as it ever had, though that wasn't saying much. Anyway, it held together without the luxury of a resident mechanic so that was all right. Things were back to normal.

She did hear from Vincent once - a bread-and-butter thank-you note postmarked New York City, with a return address bearing the name of a stranger. It had come about a week after he left - about the same time the rental company reported the van, that she'd reported missing, had turned up surprisingly intact in a parking lot in Brooklyn. That was a real relief, she told the guy on the phone in a flat voice, and hung up. And the next day, the note had come. She almost hadn't opened it, thinking it was junk mail. She never replied. No point dragging it out.

By the time the last piece of the disassembled Jaguar had been dumped, Diana knew she couldn't stay in the cafe alone. Not any more. She let a few real estate agents know she was looking for a buyer. She wasn't deluged with offers. More than one night she thought about just dumping the mutt in the Chevy and taking off. But somehow she didn't. Had too much invested, maybe. Or maybe just no place to go.

In the late afternoon Diana sat on the porch, going over in her mind those strange months when Vincent was with her. At best she could make out, she hadn't done anything wrong. There'd been no real reason for him to leave her, leave the cafe. It was just the way he was. Something about him. But she worried the memories like a dog with a bone, came first to one conclusion, then to another, and was always thoroughly unsatisfied. She needed an answer, didn't have one. Hell, she needed Vincent and didn't have him either. No law things had to be fair, or make sense. People disappeared. It happened.

Occasionally - when a male customer made a pass at her - she perked up for a minute or two and exercised her limited repertoire of small talk, just to see if she could still do it. But nobody turned her on. So far, none of the men who hit on her came close to being as appetizing as John Snow - let alone challenge Vincent's incredible charisma

Diana began to suspect she'd end up a crotchety old maid, living in the past. The prospect held no appeal but she didn't figure she had much choice. Life was like that, sometimes. Left you with no options, none at all....

Toward dusk in late October, she was sitting on the porch, bundled in a cable-knit sweater against autumn's chill, swinging back and forth, when a black van turned in from the highway. Smoked windows, she saw as it came jouncing along the rutted track; New York plates. It stopped about a dozen yards from the front steps. Sighing, she waited for the customers to get out. She'd about decided to put a sign out: **CLOSED FOR THE SEASON**. She was tired of waiting on customers all by herself. She missed Vincent's generous help. Among other things. Among everything

The driver stepped down, and in the bad light, for a moment Diana didn't recognize her. Then Diana's heart leapt.

"Catherine?" She stood and walked to the edge of the porch. "Catherine? Is that you?" It was hard to believe how glad she was to see the woman, even if it wasn't Vincent. Catherine would at least still have news.....

"Hi, Diana, how've you been?" Catherine's hair was cut into a short, feathery cap. Definitely brunette. She was wearing a nondescript tank top (pink) and baggy grey running pants. Not bad-looking. Simply ordinary. In fact, wearing *ordinary* as if it wasn't even a disguise anymore. Like somebody you wouldn't notice twice in a hardware store.

Catherine stayed by the van, so Diana went over to her. "Passing through? I can fix something if you're hungry."

"Lots of customers tonight?" Catherine asked in an odd way.

Puzzled, Diana answered, "Sure. You see how it's all parked up. They come clear in from Albuquerque for my chicken-fried steak." Bad joke. Nobody laughing. Not even a smile. "No," Diana admitted. "Nobody here but me and the mutt. No photographers with flash cameras. It's safe to come in."

"I can't stay long."

Disappointed, Diana was silent. She wouldn't hear any news after all. Okay, if that's the way it was she'd survive the pain. She'd survived this long.

Forcing a smile, Diana patted Catherine on the arm. "Well. Okay. Thanks for dropping by, anyway."

Then Catherine strolled around toward the rear of the van - maybe to collect a suitcase. Maybe "not long" still meant staying the night. One of the cabins was fairly clean. Bedsheets changed only Tuesday Although Diana generally considered customers more nuisance than they were worth, it humbled her how intensely she hoped Catherine would stay - overnight, at least. And talk. Give her the news. Something. Even that much hope hurt, she'd done without it so long

Diana didn't dare ask. It would have been like begging. Figured she'd wait, and then she'd know.

Wandering along behind, she asked, "Are you still officially missing? I haven't seen anything in the papers....."

"I'm all right. Eventually I made contact with a lawyer I trust. I got my own money back. It's safe - under another name. And so am I."

Diana asked, "And all those billions?"

Catherine shrugged. "I realized I didn't need it. Or want it. I didn't like where it came from or what was done to get it. Blood money. Only Gabriel Blake's widow would be entitled to that money. And that person doesn't exist anymore. I have all I need. And enough, even, to help others sometimes. Special friends. People who helped me."

Diana couldn't help asking, "Everybody doing good in New York? How's Vincent?" figuring Catherine could at least tell her *that* much.

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" Grinning, Catherine yanked open the doors and flung them wide. As Diana gaped, feeling nothing: refusing to feel, refusing to hope - Vincent jumped out, holding a patchwork bag – carpetbag - and stood next to Catherine. He stared at Diana with those blue blue eyes she couldn't stand to look at, couldn't stand not seeing, and didn't say a word.

"Vincent?" Diana couldn't keep the question out of her voice, though of course it **was** him, standing there, wearing a loose white shirt, beige vest, dark slacks, high boots. It couldn't be anybody else. Nobody looked like him, not in this world.

Staring at him, she thought his hair seemed brighter, in the last rays of the afternoon sun - less red, more golden than she'd remembered. But he was very pale, and there were new lines at the corners of his eyes. Dark smudges underneath. He looked thin. Maybe he'd been sick.

But it was Vincent, all right. Thin or no.

"Diana" He let out her name on a sigh, as if he'd been holding his breath until he could say it. As if it were the only word he knew or cared to speak.

They stared at each other - both of them - as if each was seeing a ghost. Or someone they'd never hoped to see alive again.

Finally Catherine said, "Well, if you two are all right, I'll be on my way. My boss expects me back in four days. If I'm ten minutes late, he'll go nuts." Turning to Vincent, she added the warning, "Better write, love, or we'll get you. We know where you are."

Without taking his eyes off Diana, Vincent nodded. "I will write, I promise." As good as it gets, Vincent's promises, Diana thought. Except the ones he made to her.

"Well, okay then." Catherine got back in the van, circled wide and sent it back along the track, red tail-lights flashing and bouncing, toward the highway. And then there was only the silence and the two of them standing there.

Diana figured she and Vincent would have stood there staring at each other just about forever if the mutt hadn't trotted up to Vincent and begun jumping and barking with joy. Vincent lifted Lucifer into the air, then allowed the dog to cover his face with wet kisses. That seemed to break the spell. When he set Lucifer down, the dog scurried back and forth between the cafe and the spot where Diana and Vincent stood, until the message was clear.

"Well, come on, then," Diana urged, feeling lighter and happier than she had in months. Four months, precisely. "It's suppertime. Even the mutt knows that. You coming in, or what?"

Reaching out, touching her arms, Vincent stopped her from going in. But he didn't say anything when she stood there, waiting, so she turned toward the cafe again.

This time he spoke.

"I promised I'd ask you again, when we returned to civilization."

Making no pretense she didn't know what he was talking about, Diana answered, "Well, you didn't. That's okay. I forgive you. I didn't expect you would."

"I believed I would. Then somehow, I had to go back."

"So, what are you doing here now? What's happened with Catherine?" She tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice but wasn't sure she'd succeeded.

"As you've seen, Catherine is well. She lives Above, now. She's made a new life for herself. She's working at a job she loves. Her whole life is different. She's healed and happy."

"I thought she was gonna stay with you. Where you live," Diana muttered sullenly.

"So did I."

The silence was deafening, and Diana was about ready to scream. She wanted to change the subject but couldn't think of a word to say.

"Diana, the rebuilding is over. All the passages and chambers. All the walls that keep us hidden. They had already done much by the time we returned, now, with Catherine's help, they've done more. She's been very generous."

Diana thought, **No kidding, she sure can afford it.** But she said, "That's great, Vincent. So what are you doing here? Don't they need you anymore?" Who **they** were, Diana wasn't saying. Maybe Vincent's community, Maybe Catherine.

"Perhaps they do, but I need to be here."

Bluntly, and so loud she almost bit her tongue off after it was out, she demanded, "for how long?"

"For as long as you'll have me. Will you make your life with me, Diana?"

Letting out a breath, she muttered, "That **was** the question, all right, the very words."

"And the answer? You told me not to be afraid, that if I asked you again, you'd say yes. Is that true?"

Looking down at her sneakers, tracing a circle in the dirt with one toe, she admitted, "Yeah, it's true."

Before she knew what was happening, Vincent swept her into his arms, all his formality and strangeness gone, and the rain came again - great splashing drops on her face - Vincent's tears. By now she knew they were tears of joy.

Murmuring her name over and over, he kissed every inch of her face. until she began to laugh. "What is it, Diana? What makes you laugh?" But he was smiling too, broadly: nearly every tooth showing.

"You're like Lucifer: wet and sloppy." But she couldn't make herself sound seriously put out. Suddenly turning, she tugged at his arm. "C'mon. You gotta see something. You just gave me a helluva surprise, babe. Now I got one for you."

She dragged him around the cafe to the shed he'd used and hauled open the door. Inside was the big bike, propped on its kickstand. Waiting for him.

"Not as conspicuous as the Jag," she commented, watching him go and stand by it as though wanting to touch it but afraid to. It made her glad she'd taken the risk of keeping it, though it'd proved no risk at all: nobody had come. Well, nearly nobody: only her long-lost cook. And she figured they had a right to it. Spoils of war.

"Do you think," he asked, looking around, "I could learn to drive it?"

"Couple of lessons out back and you'll be tough to catch. I promise you."

Coming out of the shack, without a word he caught her up in his arms and swung her around, Lucifer dancing and yapping excitedly around them. They were both laughing all the way to the cafe and up the porch steps. He bumped the screen door aside with his hip. He was comfortable here. Knowing where everything was, how everything worked.

Home.

Among the restaurant tables he finally set her down, sniffing the air and asserting, in the tone of

someone deeply disappointed in the cuisine. "That's corn beef hash."

Defensively, she replied, "Yeah, it's what's for supper." By way of an excuse, she added, "No customers."

"I can make you something better, if you'd like."

"Like what?"

"Fried chicken. Hash browns. Succotash. Tossed salad. House dressing."

"Sounds great, but it'd take too long."

"Too long?"

"Much. Besides, your job as my cook starts tomorrow. Tonight, consider yourself unemployed. A customer. Just a sexy stranger, a drifter, and the lady of the place has her eye on you."

Vincent went quiet. Serious. Didn't like the idea, maybe. Didn't like *her*. The whole thing was a mistake, he hadn't at all meant what she'd thought he meant

Staring at her, still not saying a word, he lifted a hand to trace her face like a blind man making sure she was still there. Inspired, she made him a different proposition: "How about if I promise to get up and watch the sunrise?"

Scooping her up in his arms, he carried her into her room and set her on her bed. He undressed while she watched, then undressed her. Then, answering her question with eyes gone wide and suspiciously shiny, and voice gone hoarse for any of a variety of reasons, he replied, "Oh, yes."

So Diana guessed it hadn't been such a terrible idea after all.

END