

OUT OF INNOCENCE

by Rosemarie Hauer

Father had been right. Having Catherine so close was not easy on Vincent. He could sense her far more clearly and was constantly aware of her every emotion, of her every need. That was something he would have to get used to. Especially because he knew that he mustn't act on her sadness and despair as he would have liked. Catherine must be given time to mourn and to work through her loss on her own.

But what was reaching him now was different. Vincent was at a loss as to how to explain those feelings emanating from her tonight. She had been in the tunnels for several days now, and all the time he had been aware of the constant ebb and flow of her inner turmoil. Sometimes he'd let her struggle alone, knowing that she wanted it this way. At other times, he had gone to her, holding and comforting her when he felt that she had no strength left to extricate herself from the all-consuming grief that engulfed her.

But what she was exuding now puzzled and disturbed him. Somehow, it even made him feel guilty. He shook his head in an attempt to clear his mind. Maybe it was wrong to go to her while she was in a state like this, but he just couldn't help it.

The guest chamber lay in darkness. If not for the silent sobs, one might have thought it was empty. Softly, he called her name.

"Catherine?"

The sobbing ceased. Hesitantly, Vincent ventured closer. He could see her delicate form, wrapped in a quilt and huddled up on the bed. She straightened as he approached, and her voice was small and quivering as she spoke.

"I didn't mean to.... I mean.... I hope I didn't wake you."

"No, Catherine. No, you didn't. I was still up, writing and.... thinking."

With a sigh of relief she wiped her eyes with the back of one hand and turned her head as if to face him.

Knowing that she couldn't see him in the dark, as he could her, he asked quietly. "Would you have me light a candle?"

Catherine nodded mutely and drew the quilt more tightly around her shoulders. Her eyes shimmered in the candlelight as she gazed at him, thoughtfully, for a moment, before she averted her face in a gesture of... embarrassment? Was that what he had been feeling from her? Or even shame?

Vincent's confusion grew. Knowing that she was aware of his attempt to read her emotions, he queried cautiously.

"What is it, Catherine? Can you tell me what is troubling you?"

She slowly lifted her head. "Oh, Vincent, I don't know if that would be wise."

"Wisdom is not what I'm seeking right now - only honesty."

She searched his face for a trace of blame or accusation. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I think that your inner turmoil has something to do with me. I sense a conflict. I feel guilty about something I cannot even grasp. Does that make any sense to you? It doesn't to me."

Catherine shook her head slightly. "No, it's not your fault. I can't even say that it is mine, but maybe, somehow, it is."

"Your words don't help me to see any clearer."

At that, she smiled. "I know. But I'm not sure whether I'll be able to find words that might help. I'll try. But please, Vincent, come and sit with me."

She patted the bed beside her. Slowly, Vincent moved toward her and settled his large frame at the foot of the bed, watching her face attentively as she began to speak.

"I don't know where to start, Vincent. You know me so well. You can sense my love for you, always, but what I have been feeling lately, and what I try so hard to suppress, is.... desire."

Could she ever know how her words affected him? He dared not move, for fear she might lose her courage to continue. His heart beat so loudly that he thought she must hear it. He fervently wished for her to resume her confession, and at the same time prayed that she stop, or he might lose his resolve to face whatever had caused her so much pain... and shame.

He had to push these thoughts away when she continued to speak, her green eyes fixed so trustingly on his face that it tore his heart.

"Vincent, I feel so much for you, things I've never felt before. And there are wishes and dreams that... I mean... What I'm trying to say is that I never meant to touch your purity with that side of me that isn't pure at all."

Her voice trailed off, and her words left him stunned and bewildered in their wake. He didn't know what he had expected to hear, but certainly, least of all, this. Her solemn gaze made him struggle for words.

"Do you think me a saint?"

She smiled, that bright and open smile he loved so much. "Well, maybe not exactly that, but...."

"....but....?"

"I believe that the purity of your heart is an essential part of who you are, because it makes you reach for things that so many others have given me and lost along the way. I always felt that what you have been dreaming for us is so much more than what I'm able to find words for, or even to comprehend. There is something about you that silences the selfish urges in me. I always knew I mustn't rush things between us, lest I break something that cannot be mended."

His voice was hoarse when he asked what he almost didn't dare to. "And what would that be?"

"Innocence," came the shy reply.

"Innocence is not what we are headed for, Catherine. It's where we come from."

"Then, what are we headed for, Vincent? Can you tell me?"

"I'm afraid mere words will never be enough to describe that final goal that is meant to be our eternal destiny."

"Please try."

"Beauty. Truth. God."

"Love."

"Yes."

"Unfortunately, these words have been abused most of all. Why, Vincent? Why would people spoil them

and betray their true meanings?"

"Maybe these are things that happen to people who only took the first step on their journey to that final goal."

"What first step?"

"The one out of innocence, away from it."

"And what would cause that loss of innocence?"

"Finding themselves alone in the center of their needs and wishes, and remaining there."

Catherine's look became pensive as she mulled over what he had just said. Then she whispered, "Is that why I feel so guilty about wanting you, longing for you in every way?"

"There is nothing wrong with longing, Catherine. Its wings are passion and joy, and it is headed for love and light. But there are always those forces that make flying so cumbersome, such as possessiveness, greed and envy. Those take the lightness of innocence away from us and tear us down."

She took her eyes from his face and looked at her hands that lay folded in her lap.

"Did we already take that step away from innocence, Vincent?"

He stood up and moved to sit beside her. Tenderly, he touched her chin with his finger and lifted her gaze to his. His voice was barely above a whisper when he responded.

"Yes, I think so. Without thoughts, in our dreams. But we won't remain where we are. We shall always move on."

Her breath was warm on his face. When he leaned forward, just a bit, she closed her eyes, her long lashes still glistening with forgotten tears. Tenderly stroking her chin with his thumb, he kissed her forehead first, then her cheek, lingering there before he went on to meet her trembling lips. Her arms came up to encircle his neck as she leaned into his kiss with abandon. He deepened the embrace, drawing her to his body more tightly. She was so soft and warm and he knew that he wanted to lose himself in the depths of her longing, in the light of her love.

Slowly, he broke the kiss and opened his eyes, just as she opened hers.

"I need you so," he whispered close to her mouth. "And I want you with all that I am. But most of all, I love you, Catherine. And wherever we shall go from here, we shall go together. We shall have it all, passion and joy, and we'll meet their darker brothers along our way. But as long as we are one, we are already there...."

She leaned her forehead against him, asking, "Where, Vincent?"

"At our final goal, Catherine. No matter what name you give to it."

With that, he sought her lips again.