

THE SOUND OF ALONE

by Rowena Warner

(from SAFE PLACES II)

Catherine was not only frustrated---she was furious! The young, attractive blonde leaving the conference room was the fifth involved in an ongoing series of rapes. A date rape like the previous four, it was the most difficult type to prove in a court of law. The victims were all too aware of that fact, and Catherine had been forced to listen to a dozen and one excuses over the past weeks, from each woman, as to why she could not testify against her assailant.

The most maddening part of the whole situation was that Catherine had a name to go with each act of violence; the same in all five cases - Douglas Matheson. His victims had described him as pleasantly forceful in his approach, then turning ugly when the evening didn't end according to his desires.

Catherine needed no physical description of the man, for although she was not acquainted with him personally, she knew the name well. A defense attorney with the second largest law firm in New York City, Matheson had a spotless reputation, and rumors were thick in political circles that he was headed for the state senate.

Catherine felt certain this was the prime reason Matheson's five victims were refusing to press charges. It took a lot of courage for anyone to challenge that kind of power in a courtroom. In a way, she could understand why these women refused to testify, for she had seen in the past what defense attorneys had done to rape victims on the witness stand. Sometimes the verbal ordeal was worse than the physical, but the thought of Matheson going scott free infuriated her.

Slamming her briefcase shut, Catherine rose, shoving her chair back hard against the wall. Matheson would continue to have his way with women, until one of them was gutsy enough to take him off the streets or some jealous boyfriend broke his neck. The more Catherine heard about this throwback to the caveman era, the more she preferred the latter choice.

Snatching her case off the table, she stalked from the room, forcing the frustration from her brain and replacing it with a much more pleasant thought. She needed someone to talk to and felt an overwhelming desire to pour forth her troubles in Vincent's understanding ear. Unlike others in her past who had tried to find the answers for her, Vincent always allowed her to work through her problems, gently offering guidance to alternatives, and when there were none, helping her accept the fact that she could not always win.

Climbing into the car, Catherine tossed her briefcase and jacket on the passenger's seat and reached for her seatbelt. The anger and frustration were still there, but knowing she had someone with whom to share the emotions made them easier to bear.

Reaching into the pocket of her slacks, she withdrew a small square of paper and unfolding it, once again studied the computer image of a man in his early thirties, black hair playing in riotous curls across his forehead and dark eyes containing a look she personally interpreted as arrogance. Shaking her head, she stuffed the picture back in her pocket, unable to comprehend why Matheson's victims had ever been attracted to him. Perhaps it was his importance, but Catherine decided she much preferred long, tawny hair and blue eyes, accompanied by a soft voice and heart of gold.

Feeling much better, she pulled out of the parking garage, the smile on her lips remaining there long after she reached home.

"This is the man?" Vincent asked quietly.

Standing so close to one another, the night wind mingled the strands of their hair, Catherine nodded. "That's the piece of dirt," she replied, her blue eyes flashing with anger. "Matheson wines and dines these women, then when they're not willing to 'repay' him, as he puts it, he forces himself upon them."

"And all are afraid to testify against him?"

"It's not really fear of reprisal, but of what they would have to endure in a court of law," Catherine explained. "Date rape is one of the most difficult crimes to prove, especially in this particular case, where the rapist is well-known and liked in the community. The poor woman would have to go through all that suffering again, and probably for nothing because the odds are the creep would walk away."

"I don't understand," Vincent shook his head in confusion. "These women are the victims. Why should Matheson be protected while they are treated with so little compassion?"

Slipping her hand under his arm, Catherine rested her head against Vincent's shoulder. "Because, unfortunately, most do not see things as clearly as you do, nor do they have such gentle hearts," she answered softly.

A faint smile touched Vincent's lips as his eyes lowered to meet Catherine's. "And most do not have such courage and tenacity to correct a wrong, when they know one has been committed. You are rightfully angry at the callousness and indifference of this man; I have felt that emotion within you several times during these past weeks. I know you will not give up, Catherine. The solution is there; you need only time and you will find it."

"I think the time has already come," she returned in a decisive tone. "I have an idea which won't put our Mr. Matheson behind bars, but may keep *other* women from being subjected to his violence. Without witnesses willing to testify against him, the D.A.'s office can't touch the man, but there's no law against our going public with the information we have. Obviously, we can't use Matheson's name because that would result in a libel suit, but I know one of the assistant editors at the Times, and I think I can talk him into running an article in the interest of the general public. I'm sure Joe'll back me up on this. It can serve as a follow-up to the rape reports, describe his M.O., and state that this man is a 'pillar of the community'. As long as his name isn't mentioned, there's not a damned thing he can do to have the article retracted, but maybe it'll make him think twice before he takes advantage of another woman. He can't be so stupid as to believe his luck will continue to hold."

Vincent felt a cold hand of fear gradually close around his heart. "Your name will appear in this article?" he whispered.

Catherine hesitated a moment, then squeezed his shoulder. "It has to, Vincent. An article quoting an 'unknown source' wouldn't carry much impact."

"You must do as your heart tells you," he returned sadly.

"I'll be all right," Catherine promised. "Matheson likes to prey on helpless, lonely females. You must admit I'm far from being helpless, and because of you, Vincent, I am no longer lonely, either."

Catherine's spoken thoughts twinned his own silent ones, but he could not quiet the fear rising within him. "When will this article appear?" he asked, forcing a tone of calm.

"As soon as possible," Catherine replied firmly. "If I can get the ball rolling, it may be as early as tomorrow."

Vincent fought off the protest his heart pleaded him to voice, and sighing, drew her into an embrace of encouragement.

Living up to Vincent's expectations, Catherine departed Joe Maxwell's office the following morning with a sheaf of papers in her hand and a gleam of triumph in the green eyes. Dropping in her chair, she reached for the telephone and after dialing a number, requested, "I'd like to speak to Chris Donovan, please."

Minutes later, she returned the receiver to its cradle and leaned back in her chair with an air of satisfaction. "The ball's in *your* court now, Matheson," she muttered, and with a cold smile curling her lips, Catherine turned to the other work on her desk.

When Vincent arrived that evening, it was to find Catherine already waiting for him on the balcony, a section of The New York Times clutched in her hand. She held it out to him, and he had no need to search for the article, for the bold, black headlines jumped out at him from the page

"RAPIST REMAINS FREE WHILE VICTIMS FEAR COURT SYSTEM".

Scanning the article quickly, he lowered the paper with a frown. "This is extremely direct, Catherine," he pointed out in concern. "Your quotes are convincing and quite damning."

"As they were meant to be," Catherine returned in a hard voice. "It didn't preempt the trouble in the Persian Gulf or the upcoming Summit conference, but page two is still more than I had hoped for. The Times checked with their attorneys and were assured as long as they didn't print Matheson's name, he wouldn't have a legal leg to stand on. On the contrary, if he does raise a furor, the finger of guilt will point straight at him. We can't put this rapist behind bars, but this should at least get him off the streets."

"Then you have won," Vincent spoke softly.

"Not me," Catherine corrected with a smile. "The five women who have already been his victims and those who may have been tomorrow or next week - they're the ones who have won."

"But it is you who has given them the victory," Vincent whispered.

Catherine moved into his arms, resting her head briefly against his chest, then stepping back, she urged in a reluctant tone, "You must go. Sam needs his medicine and I'm sure he's looking forward to your visit."

Vincent stood his ground. "Will you be all right?" he asked worriedly.

"I'll be fine," Catherine promised. "I'm going to visit Daddy for an hour or so. He's finally recovering from his cold, and now he's getting grumpy."

"And then what will you do?" Vincent pressed.

"I'm coming straight home and going to bed," Catherine sighed. "It's been a long day."

Nodding, Vincent reached out to gently touch her hair. "Take great care, Catherine."

"I will," she whispered.

The hour stretched into two and Catherine was surprised that the evening went so well. There had been a time, right after her departure from the corporate firm, when she had feared things would never again be the same between her father and herself. Indeed, they were not the same, but instead better in many ways.

Unlocking the apartment door, Catherine tossed her jacket on the sofa and released a sigh of contentment. She would always be *"Daddy's little girl"*, but now she had suddenly become a woman in her father's eyes and was being treated with a new respect and affection that she had never felt from him before.

Smiling as she picked up her gown, Catherine started towards the bathroom. Going to work in the D.A.'s office had turned out to be the second best thing that had ever happened to her. Her features softened as she indulged in contemplation of the best.

Running as she stepped into the small, dark room, she reached out to flick on the light, but her hand fell abruptly as the walls and ceiling suddenly seemed to come crashing down upon her head. Collapsing on the tiles, Catherine was unable to feel even the slightest twinge of fear before her world disappeared in a tunnel of black oblivion.

Sam's health had improved considerably over the last two months, and Vincent knew it was due to the fact that his son was now in prison, serving a life sentence for murder and attempted murder. Sam could again sleep at nights knowing Mitch was now locked away from the society that he hated. The mere thought of his boyhood friend turned killer brought back to Vincent the heart-wrenching memory of that night in the alley, when he had cradled Catherine in his arms and had felt both their lives slipping away.

A shudder ran through his body, and as if reading his thoughts, Sam laid a gentle hand on his arm and asked, "You haven't spoken of Catherine. How's she doing?"

"Quite well, but it seems I feel a constant sense of fear for her," Vincent admitted wryly.

"Unfortunately, that goes along with being in love," Sam smiled. "What is it this time?"

Vincent told the elderly man of the women who had been raped, and Catherine's article in that evening's paper.

"Your Catherine is a very brave woman," Sam spoke quietly. "I wouldn't worry about her too much; from what you've told me, it sounds like she's quite capable of taking care of herself, at least with someone like this Matheson creep."

"I pray that is so," Vincent returned in a whisper, feeling his heart again quicken its normally rhythmic beat,

Consciousness returned to Catherine like layers of cotton slowly rolled back, gradually revealing a world of pain whose center resided at the base of her skull. Clinging to the safety of her closed eyelids, she tried to stretch and with a wave of horror discovered she was stretched out on the bed, her arms and legs spread-eagle and bound to the wooden legs. Realizing her sense of safety was but a fantasy, she reluctantly opened her eyes, blood suddenly pounding furiously through her veins as she recognized the man bending over her.

"Matheson!"

"Well, sweetheart, I see the blow to the head didn't affect your vision," the defense attorney grinned. "I was afraid you wouldn't recognize me."

"You knew damned well I would!" Catherine hissed. "I've seen your face in the newspaper - the so-called 'man of the working class'!"

"There was something else in the newspaper recently," Matheson nodded and his voice turned ugly. "That article wasn't a very smart thing to publish, little Miss D.A. You shouldn't have gone public like that."

"If we're going to discuss stupidity, let's talk about yours," Catherine shot back. "You've broken into my home, attacked me, and now you have me tied up. I wouldn't exactly call that the actions of a man who had any brains."

Grabbing her hair, Matheson jerked her head back against the pillow, his white, capped teeth gleaming in the lamplight. "***That article was a lot of crap, and you know it,***" he snarled, "***Every one of those women wanted me,*** they just tried to play innocent. When I didn't call back for a second date, they got their feelings hurt and tried to hang a rape charge on me."

Catherine's surge of anger gave way to fear, but determined not to allow the rapist the satisfaction of seeing it, she demanded curtly. "***Turn me loose, Matheson.*** You took those women against their will, but they won't testify because they know a trial would go in your favor. At the moment, the D.A.'s office can't touch you, so if you stop this right now, you may save yourself a long prison term."

"Forget it, honey," Matheson grinned and leaned forward, the heavy smell of cologne attacking Catherine's nostrils. "That's the great part about this - I can have any woman I want, because no one is going to take the word of a whore over that of Douglas Matheson."

"Those women weren't whores!" Catherine yelled back. ***"And neither am I!"***

"Maybe not," Matheson agreed, "but you're too good to pass up. I like my women with a little spirit, so you're going to do just fine. Admit it, baby, you want this as much as I do."

Catherine spat in his face. ***"GO TO HELL!"***

Matheson grabbed her, and Catherine tried to jerk back, her entire body rigid with fear. She made no sound as he pressed her into the bed, but in the depths of her pounding heart, she screamed... ***and screamed... AND SCREAMED.***

"Vincent, what is it?" Sam demanded in a tone of concern.

The leonine head had jerked up suddenly and now Vincent hesitated only a brief second before whispering in horror, ***"Catherine!"***

With the speed of one possessed, he was through the window and into the alley, his heart beating frantically against his ribs and the powerful legs eating up the distance between Catherine and himself. He knew only one thing could cause such unbridled fear in her, and with a sickening wrench in his stomach, realized he would not reach Catherine in time. He could ***hear*** her cries of terror so vividly, it was as if she was running beside him, screaming his name in his ears, and with his whole being engulfed in both Catherine's fear and his own, Vincent ran even faster, the black cape flapping behind him like the frightened wings of a bat.

Reaching the rear of the apartment building at last, he began to climb, his hands trembling so, he could barely cling to the cool stones. Catherine's cries were no longer filling his soul, and although he knew she was still alive, he tried to prepare himself for the worst. Even that was inconceivable, however, as he leaped over the ledge of the balcony and slammed the French doors open, the scene withering causing his heart to threaten escape from its physical restraints.

Catherine was alone, free of her bonds, and hunched in a ball in the corner of the bedroom, blood on the side of her face and on the fist pressed against her mouth.

"Catherine!"

Vincent started toward her, but she jerked her head up, her eyes gleaming with fury. **"Stay away from me!"** she yelled hoarsely, **"Where were you?"** she demanded with an anger Vincent felt at the very depths of his soul. "I cried out for you! My heart screamed and screamed your name, but **you didn't come! DAMN YOU, you let him do this to me!**"

"Catherine, please...", Vincent begged and started to reach out to her, but she pulled back as if about to be branded by a hot iron.

"Don't touch me!" she hissed. "If you really love me as much as you claim, you wouldn't have let him hurt me! **You lied to me, Vincent!** You don't love me at all!"

"That's not true," he shook his head in horror at the thought. "Catherine, you are my life."

"YOU'RE LYING!" she screamed in a voice mingled with wrath and hysteria. **" Don't ever try to touch me again! Just get out of here, DAMN YOU! GET OUT!...GET OUT!...GET OUT!"**

Vincent backed away, Catherine's words like a knife slicing through his heart. He could not reach her, could not break through that barrier of anger she had erected around her soul. Somehow, reason pierced his haze of pain, and reaching for the phone, he made a call, then turned back to Catherine.

"The paramedics will be here in a few minutes," he promised softly. "I will not leave you until they arrive."

Catherine still stood with her back pressed against the corner of the room, her fury like a tangible wall between them. **"Go on, leave!"** she threw at him, the words hitting Vincent like a blow from a tremendous fist. **"I DON'T NEED YOU NOW!** I wanted you then when he was... when he was hurting me! I prayed you would stop him, I wanted you to kill that **bastard, but you didn't come!** You let him... you let him do things to me! **Oh God, HOW I HATE YOU!**"

Vincent drew back, his heart withering like a rose too long in an empty vase. "I... I am sorry, Catherine," he managed hoarsely, and stepped out onto the balcony, his eyes remaining on Catherine as she glared at him balefully, her breathing rough and her body poised like an angry cat. In brief minutes that seemed like years to Vincent, there was at last a knock on the door and he heard a calm voice call out, "Paramedics!"

Lingering in the darkness, he listened to the sounds within, Catherine's voice still harsh with anger as she uttered a brief explanation of her attack, and the voices of the paramedics, soothing and compassionate as they examined her, then carefully lowered Catherine onto a stretcher.

Vincent remained where he was long minutes after all movement within had ceased, at last stepping away from the ledge to gaze into the dark and empty room. Tears filled his eyes, spilling over onto the velvety cheeks, and oblivious to the world around him, he dropped to his knees, a cry of unbearable pain savagely torn from his trembling lips.

Father had already retired for the night when Vincent at last returned to the tunnels, and alone in the chamber, he dropped into one of the intricately - carved chairs, resting his head wearily against the high back. There would be no sleep for him tonight; a hundred years of slumber could not ease the pain and anguish tearing into his soul. Through their bond, he could feel Catherine quiet now, but her harsh cries of condemnation still rang in his ears, the pain she had suffered still stabbing his heart like the jagged blade of a knife. Vincent remained motionless, his hands grasping the arms of the chair in a steel grip, his eyes alone revealing the soul-wrenching turmoil within.

He was still in that silent, unmoving position the next morning when Father entered the study, the older man drawing up short in obvious surprise when his eyes fell upon his son's slumped form. Crossing the room quickly, he stopped beside Vincent's chair, his hand going out to squeeze the broad shoulder.

"What is it, Vincent? What's wrong?"

Pulling away, Vincent rose jerkily to his feet, and turning his back on Father, spoke in a trembling voice, "Catherine was... attacked last night. I could... I could not reach her... in time to prevent the man from... hurting her."

Father's eyes widened in horror. "This man...was he Matheson, the one you had told me about?"

Vincent's head barely moved in an affirmative gesture.

"Oh dear God!" Father breathed low. "Vincent, where is she now?"

"The paramedics have taken her to Lang General. I overheard one say she would no doubt be kept there overnight for observation." Vincent paused, then added in a choked tone. "He also... hit Catherine, apparently more than once."

"It's good she's at Lang," Father nodded. "We have a helper there. I'll get word to him immediately, and he'll let us know how she's doing. Don't worry, we'll have some news in just a short time."

Vincent gave no response to Father's promise, but his heart and body cried out in silent anguish.

Gone only long enough to send a message through the pipes, which would in turn be relayed to the appropriate helper, Father returned to the chamber, his gentle eyes watching his son closely.

Vincent stood unmoving by the bookcase, the leonine head bowed in sorrow, and stepping beside him, Father pressed in a soft voice, "There is more you have not yet told me, isn't there?"

Drawing in a ragged breath, Vincent turned so Father could not see his face. "I am to blame for what has happened to Catherine," he whispered. "I should have been there to protect her, to... to keep her from being... hurt."

Father frowned. "Are those Catherine's words or yours?"

"Hers," Vincent admitted sadly, "but in my heart I know she is right. She was calling out to me for help, pleading with me to stop Matheson from... from doing what he was about to do, but I... I failed her."

"Vincent, you must understand that Catherine has been through a terrible ordeal," Father explained in a gentle tone. "You cannot hold her accountable for any harsh words she may have said to you."

Vincent whirled around to face Father, his eyes shimmering with tears of pain. "Then you, too, feel I am to blame because I was not there when Catherine needed me most."

"Of course not," Father replied immediately. "And you'll find that Catherine doesn't truly blame you, either."

"She... hates... me," Vincent whispered, the words torn from his lips in anguish.

Father shook his head. "No, she only believes she does at this moment. Rape is the most devastating thing that can happen to a woman, and obviously in Catherine's case, she is using anger as a barrier against her other emotions. Matheson is gone, so she can't vent her wrath on him; therefore, you, my son, are unfortunately the one upon whose head it must fall. But don't take it to heart, for Catherine's cries of anger is the sound of alone. Many women feel that way after they've been attacked. They believe they are being ostracized by family and friends, and it takes time and patience to convince them otherwise."

"You... you know of someone who has been subjected to this... this act of violence?" Vincent questioned hesitantly.

"The word is 'rape', my son," Father answered in a quiet voice. "Until you can accept and use that word, Catherine will not be able to. And yes, I know of three women who have been raped; they live here in the tunnels now. I won't mention their names, but perhaps someday they will tell you their stories themselves."

Any response Vincent may have given was interrupted by the arrival of Pascal who burst into the chamber, his short legs carrying him quickly down the steps and into the study.

"I just got word from Arthur, our helper at Lang General," he explained breathlessly. "He had already heard about Catherine being brought in last night and was about to send us a message when he received ours."

Vincent grabbed Pascal's arm, his voice taut with fear. "How is she?"

"Arthur said physically she's fine, just a couple of bruises," Pascal replied quietly. "Emotionally, she's not good. She would only give a brief account of what happened to the police, then clammed up. Her father's with her now, and Arthur said she'll be released sometime before noon."

"Well, thank God for that, at least," Father sighed.

Vincent remained silent, and Pascal offered in a hesitant tone, "I... uh... I... thought you might want to see this morning's Times. Winslow just brought it down."

Reluctantly taking the newspaper from Pascal's hand, Vincent's eyes scanned the page, the headlines as they had the day before jumping out at him, this time like a brand of accusation--

"RAPE VICTIM WARNED OTHERS DAY OF HER ATTACK".

Pascal's departure went unnoticed as Vincent grasped the paper, his hands trembling as he began to read in a whisper,

"Catherine Chandler, an attorney with the D.A.'s office, was attacked and raped in her apartment last night, according to police sources. Although Ms. Chandler cannot or will not reveal the identity of her attacker, she was quoted in an article in yesterday's Times warning women of a man who has allegedly attacked five others, in what is commonly known as 'date rape'. Because no charges have been filed against him, his name could not be revealed in the article. Ms. Chandler, however, told police she was struck from behind and could not identify her assailant."

The paper fell from Vincent's hands and tilting his head back, he filled his lungs with air. "Catherine will not press charges," he spoke at last in a choked voice. "She cannot bring herself to go through the humiliation of a trial."

"Then you must talk her into it," Father decided.

Vincent lowered his head until his eyes met the blue ones before him. "Catherine hates me," he returned hoarsely. "I have felt that emotion within her since early this morning. She would not listen to me, nor would I even try to convince her. I allowed this to happen to her; I cannot ask her to re-live that horror in a courtroom full of spectators."

"You **must** try, Vincent," Father coaxed. "You nor Catherine will ever know peace until this man is put behind bars."

"NO!" Vincent suddenly exploded in a roar, his arm sweeping across the table and sending an ornate candelabra crashing to the floor. **"Don't you understand? I... let her... be RAPED!"**

He had at last spoken the word, and with it came the accompanying pain that drove him to his knees beside the table. "I let her be raped," he repeated in a choked whisper and his head fell forward. "How can I live with that?"

Kneeling beside him, Father cupped Vincent's face between his hands. "It was not your fault, my son," he argued softly. "You can't go on torturing yourself like this."

Vincent moved his head back and forth slowly. "I cannot forget Catherine's feelings within me. There was so much pain in her, such terror at what was about to happen. I could feel her crying out to me as she had never done before, and I tried to reach her in time, but... but I couldn't. She is right to hate me for allowing that to happen."

His voice caught on a sob and Father pulled him into his arms, tenderly kissing the tawny hair. "Don't give up, my son. As with all pain, this will lessen with time. Catherine is trying to be strong, but it's a false strength. Somewhere deep inside, you must find a strength for both of you. She needs you now perhaps even more than she did that night in the park. You're part of Catherine, just as she's part of you, and what has happened cannot and will not change that. No matter what words she speaks, her heart tells another story; she will hear those words of love again, I promise you."

They remained in an embrace, the gold of Vincent's hair highlighted by the flickering lamp, and his heart broken like the candles now lying lifeless on the earthen floor.

Clinging to Father's words like a lifeline in the sea of turmoil within him, Vincent climbed over the ledge of the balcony and straightened slowly, ignoring the wind which gave his cloak a life of its own. It whipped about his legs in reckless abandon, brother to the chaotic emotions raging in his soul. Through the window he could see Catherine on the sofa, and could feel from her only a tiny echo of their bond, as if she had chased away all pain and heartache, leaving only an empty shell behind.

Drawing from a courage deep within the recesses of his soul, Vincent raised his hand to knock and immediately saw Catherine turn his way. His heart seemed to freeze for several beats and trying to rid himself of the painful lump in his throat, he formally announced his presence with a light tap.

Catherine remained unmoving on the sofa, her voice ominously void of feeling, "Go away. I **never** want to see you again."

Her apparent calmness disturbed Vincent more than the angry words she had flung at him the night before, and hesitating only a brief moment, he opened the French doors and stepped into the room.

Catherine rose slowly to face him, her eyes lacking the spirit Vincent had grown to love. "I did not give you permission to enter my home," she stated in a monotone.

"Friends do not wait for permission, but come when they are needed," Vincent returned quietly.

Catherine turned her back on him, her entire body rigid with control. **"If you think I need you; then you're badly mistaken. I don't need anyone."**

Vincent could feel nothing through their bond, only an emptiness that enclosed his heart in sorrow, and knowing desperate and possibly unforgivable measures were required to break through the barrier Catherine had erected, he stepped close behind her, his voice grim.

"Perhaps it is **not** I who you need, but someone else. Perhaps after last night you want Matheson again, and that is why you are refusing to identify him."

"YOU BASTARD!" she screamed and whirling around, slapped him with a force that brought tears to Vincent's eyes. **"I'll kill you for that!"** she cried out in fury, but before she could attack again, Vincent grabbed her wrists in a gentle grasp.

"At least you are still capable of anger," he spoke calmly, trying to control his trembling hands. "I am not here to ask your forgiveness, Catherine. You are right to hate me, but you can do so no more than I hate myself."

"Get out!" Catherine struggled to break free. **"Get out and leave me alone!"**

"Not until you have heard my words," Vincent insisted gently and his voice grew intense. "Catherine, I more than anyone know the pain and suffering you endured last night. I felt it within you, and knowing

I would not reach you in time was almost more than I could bear. If it is not in your heart to forgive me for having failed you, then after tonight I will never again force you to look upon me. But before I leave, for your sake, I must try to make you face and accept what has happened.

You were raped, Catherine, and no matter how our souls cry out against it, we cannot change that fact. You feel now that you are alone, and the sound of that aloneness is a terrible, heartbreaking cry. It echoes through the soul like a great emptiness, leaving it void of all hope. This cannot happen to you, I will not **let** it. I can feel in you an anger, like that of a raging fire, and as does a flame, your wrath reaches out in all directions, consuming everything it touches. You must direct that anger at the source. Matheson will no doubt try to rape another unsuspecting woman, but you now have it in your power to stop him. You owe it to yourself, Catherine, to press charges against this man, testify in court, and put him in prison, where he can never do to another what he has done to you."

"No, I WON'T do it!" Catherine yelled angrily. "Five other women were used by that... that... thing parading as a man! Let one of them take him to court!"

"They cannot," Vincent argued softly. "They do not have your strength."

"I don't have it, either!" Catherine shot back.

"You **do**," Vincent continued to press. "The others do not have as strong a case as you could present in court. You were not on a date with Matheson; he broke into your home and attacked you. He invaded your privacy and stole from you something which no woman should be forced to surrender. I can feel it within you, Catherine - the desire for revenge."

"Yes! Yes!" she suddenly screamed. "I wanted revenge that night! I want you to kill him, to rip out his heart right before my eyes! **But you didn't come!** You let.. .let him... you let him..." Throwing her head back, Catherine's eyes blazed with fury. **"Get out and leave me alone!** I won't press charges; I won't let them put me through that nightmare again! Just get out and **don't come back! I never want to see your face again!"**

Vincent backed away slowly, crushed by an unbearable pain. "Good-bye, Catherine," he barely managed to whisper. Stumbling onto the balcony, he stood motionless for a moment, his hand clutched to his chest, then moving quickly, he was gone.

Inside the apartment, Catherine glared at the French doors, then slammed them with a force that broke several panes of glass. Not satisfied with that, she stormed around the room, her arm angrily sweeping knick-knacks and porcelain figurines off the tables, sending them crashing in all directions. Spotting the crystal necklace on the glass bookcase, she snatched it up and threw the anniversary present to the floor where it lay silently, as unbroken as the love it symbolized.

Father was more than worried - he was afraid. After Vincent's return that night, he had simply whispered, "It is over," yet Father knew that was far from true, for his son's disappearance the following two nights convinced him Vincent has spent them on Catherine's balcony, no doubt watching over her in secret.

It was obvious he was not sleeping, nor would he speak of what had happened when he had tried to talk Catherine into filing charges. Father felt an ache in his heart as he watched Vincent move endlessly from chamber to chamber, as if in a daze, the gentle eyes clouded with pain and the massive shoulders slumped as if he no longer has the strength to care.

His son was dying before his very eyes, and trying to ease the fear that threatened to overwhelm him, Father inhaled deeply. It would be easier if he could hate Catherine for what she was doing, but he could understand all too well the nightmare she was going through. But Vincent was the most important thing in his life, and he would gladly sacrifice his son's love if it meant saving his life.

Sitting down at the desk, Father stared a moment at the sheet of paper in front of him, then picking up a pen, began to write.

It was nearly ten o'clock before Catherine turned towards home that night. Despite Joe's objections, she had developed a habit of continuing to work long after the others in the office had departed, for only during those hours on the job could she cram her mind with so much tedious information as to allow no other thoughts to filter through.

Now, however, as the elevator paused eight floors below her own to release another late worker, Catherine could feel her heartbeat quicken, her pulse starting to build to a frenzied pace. Nausea rose in her throat, and it took all the courage she possessed to force herself to step from the patient elevator into the hallway leading to her apartment.

Stopping in front of the door, emotions swept over her, feelings not to be put into words, and coupled with an anger she clung to as her barrier against madness. That anger kept slipping into sorrow, and again she forced her hatred to rise to fever pitch. He had pledged his love and yet had failed her when she needed him most. It mattered not that she had urged him to visit Sam, that she had assured him she would be all right. **DAMN HIM!** He should have stopped her from being ...

Catherine drew her thoughts up short, still feeling the sadness like a shadow around the edge of her heart. Inhaling deeply, she unlocked the apartment door and pushed it open warily, her eyes immediately spotting the small square of paper lying on the floor within. Convinced it was from him, she hesitated a moment before kneeling to pick it up between thumb and forefinger, her hands automatically unfolding the missive. The words were not written in his flowing gentle hand, but instead scrawled across the page as if the writer had been in a hurry to convey his message. The note was short, but filled Catherine with both anger and pain as she read:

Dear Catherine--You may believe I cannot possibly understand how you feel, and that is true to an extent, for no man can truly empathize with the horror a woman feels when she has been raped. There are others in the tunnels, though, who've also been subjected to this act of violence, and from them I've learned about the chaotic emotions you must now be experiencing.

*I also understand why you feel my son is to blame for not having been there for you, but there is something you should know--**Vincent is dying.** He will not tell me what happened between the two of you, but it's apparent he feels his life is over. I can do nothing to comfort him. Only you can*

*give him back that which he needs most--
your love. For his sake, Catherine,
and yours...
Father**

She crumpled the sheet of paper angrily in her palm and started to throw it in the wastebasket, when something on the floor caught her eye. Bending slowly, she picked up the crystal necklace, the lamplight causing it to gleam as if a tiny life force were pulsating within. Wrapping the chain around one finger, her hand closed around the sparkling crystal. Smoothing the crumpled sheet of paper, she folded it into its original shape, and going into the bedroom, dropped her briefcase and jacket on the floor unheeded. Three words kept echoing through her mind like a death knoll -- "**Vincent is dying**", and falling onto the bed, she clutched both the crystal and letter close to her heart.

The stars shone down upon Vincent as he assumed his accustomed place on the balcony. It had take all his strength to climb the building that night, lack of food and sleep weakening not only his spirit, but his body as well. Leaning heavily against the outer wall of Catherine's apartment, he breathed deeply of the night air, feeling its coolness touch the flames burning within him. He was no longer living, but merely existing for each night when he could come near to Catherine, standing outside her life and praying that she would once again open her heart and allow him to enter. It was a tenuous thread onto which he was clinging, but their bond was still strong and it was around that which he gathered all his hopes.

In the darkest shadows of his soul, he had never imagined that life could contain such pain and still continue to be. Catherine's hatred was like a whip, flaying his conscience, and adding guilt to that of his own. Father had said there would come a time when she would realize her anger was false, but bowing his head in sorrow, Vincent knew her forgiveness would not bring about his own. Hatred can quickly become a festering wound, and it was hatred of himself that caused him to wander the tunnels endlessly by day, and to stand long hours on Catherine's balcony at night, his soul crying out for release from the pain. Slumping against the wall, Vincent became lost in the depths of his despair, his world within blacker than the midnight beyond his sight.

Something tugged suddenly at his heart, bringing him back to reality, and his eyes flew open as he felt a touch of fear in the bond between Catherine and himself. It grew quickly into terror, and jerking away from his support, he ran to the French doors, his blood pounding furiously in his ears. It was the same terror he had felt in Catherine the night of her attack, and without hesitation, he threw open the doors and sprang into the room, ready to strike out at her assailant.

Catherine was alone in the dark room, her body stretched out on the bed and her head moving from side to side. "No, please don't," she mumbled, fear cutting jagged lines across her forehead. Her eyes still closed, she continued to plead in a voice that tore at Vincent's heart -- "Don't do this to me. Please don't touch me."

He paused beside the bed, uncertain whether to awaken her, fearful that his presence would only heighten the emotions pouring through their bond.

Catherine's head continued to move erratically, her hands now reaching out to clutch the air. "Vincent!" she called out in a voice like that of a child, and he hesitated no longer.

Dropping to the edge of the bed, he grasped her shoulders in a firm, but gentle grip, and pleaded softly, "Catherine, wake up. You are having a nightmare."

The green eyes flew open and Catherine stared at him a moment, then throwing her arms around him, she began to sob hysterically, **"Oh God, Vincent! I'm sorry! I never... I never ... meant any of those things I said to you! Oh, please forgive me!"**

"You were right to hate me," he whispered into her hair. "It is I who must beg forgiveness, for I have failed you, Catherine."

"NO! NO!" She shook her head violently against his chest. "I was afraid to face the truth. And... and... after what happened, I was... I was... afraid you wouldn't love me... anymore."

"Catherine," Vincent chastised softly and tried to draw back so he could see her face, but Catherine clung to him tightly, refusing to let go.

"No, don't," she sobbed. "I'm too...ashamed. Oh God, Vincent, I've hurt you so much!"

Frightened by the strength of her emotions, yet knowing he must let them continue, Vincent held her close, feeling hot tears begin to flow down his cheeks.

"Let it go, Catherine," he urged in a choked voice. "Release the pain in your heart."

Catherine was beyond words now, her body trembling against his as ragged sobs were torn from her throat. Resting his cheek in her hair, Vincent began to rock back and forth gently, now and again making soft sounds of comfort. Gradually, the sobbing lessened until at last Catherine was quiet in his arms, and looking down he saw that her eyes were closed and her breathing rhythmic as in sleep.

Tenderly caressing a cheek still stained with tears, he started to lower her to the bed, but felt her hand tighten instinctively around the folds of his vest. Gently wrapping his arms around her again, he rested his chin lightly on her head, ignoring his own tears which were continuing to flow.

Holding the sleeping Catherine to his breast, he lost track of time, but the night still lingered outside the window when she began to stir, her head coming up slowly to meet his gaze.

"Oh God, Vincent, what have I done to you?" she whispered hoarsely and her hand rose to touch his cheek. "There is so much pain in your eyes."

He turned his head away quickly, unable to meet her loving gaze. "The fault is mine, Catherine. You begged my forgiveness, but it is I who cannot even hope for yours."

"Oh Vincent," Catherine breathed softly and reached up to cup his chin, gently forcing him to look at her. "You do not need my forgiveness because you did nothing wrong. You **tried** to reach me in time; it just wasn't possible. You can't go on blaming yourself for something that was beyond your control." Her eyes filled with tears as she tenderly brushed back a lock of hair from his cheek. "I love you so much. I never stopped, but when Matheson... when he raped me, it was as if I wanted someone else to hurt as I'd been hurt. I couldn't face your compassion or even worse, what I felt would be your revulsion, so God forgive me, I drove you away."

"I should have been here," Vincent whispered. "I should have prevented this from happening to you."

Catherine shook her head sadly. "We have our lives together, but they're separate as well. In that way, we're no different from any other couple. It would be wonderful if we could always be there immediately for one another, but life unfortunately doesn't work that way."

"You needed me," Vincent protested hoarsely. "I could feel you calling out to me in our bond. There was so much terror within you, such pain and humiliation." He drew in a ragged breath. "I knew... I knew... what was happening to you."

"OH GOD!" Catherine exclaimed in a low tone of horror. "I'm sorry, Vincent, I never meant for you to feel my emotions so strongly. When he... when he... started touching me, I... lost control. I could feel... his hands like lumps of hot coals on my body, and then he... he hit me and..." The words suddenly tumbled from her like water gushing through a broken dam, her eyes once again clouded with that haunted look which tore at Vincent's soul.

As Catherine talked, he felt a change taking place within him, the anguish he had lived with for so many days slowly twisting itself into a black hatred. His hands clenched into fists as his heart became a cold shadow, the blood pumping through it into his veins with a white-hot passion. The leonine face grew rigid with fury, his lips curling back to reveal a silent snarl, and of suddenly awakening from her nightmare, Catherine grabbed his arm.

"Dear God, what've I done!" she cried out in alarm. "I'm sorry! I didn't want you to ever know..."

Jerking away from her, he stumbled to his feet, barely able to control the white-hot wrath within. "You were right, Catherine," he growled between clenched teeth. **"Matheson deserves to die!"**

"Vincent, you can't!" Catherine protested and rising quickly, stepped beside him, her eyes filled with tears. "I want revenge against Matheson, too, but I can't let you go after him. You would be caught, and if anything happened to you because of me, I... I... couldn't bear it. Please! I can't let you do this!"

Standing at the window, Vincent faced the darkness, his body trembling with the force of his anger. **"I must, Catherine."**

"NO!" she argued in a frantic tone. "It goes against **everything** you believe in. Matheson **will** be punished; I'll... I'll... I decided to file charges against him. You made me see that I have the strength to confront him, and no matter what the defense attorney says or does, I **will** put him behind bars."

"IT IS NOT ENOUGH!" Vincent roared, and his arm shot out, a clenched fist smashing through one of the panes of glass.

"Oh God!" Catherine grabbed his arm, but there was no pain, only faint surprise mingled with his wrath as Vincent stared down at his bleeding hand.

Pulling him into the bathroom, she quickly turned on the faucet at the sink, gasping as the water immediately became bright red. "I... I've got to get you... to get you to Father," she choked back a sob. "You may have cut an artery."

"It is nothing," Vincent snarled. "Give me a rag to bind it with. The night grows short and there is still something I need to take care of."

"I won't let you do it!" Catherine cried out in sudden panic. **"For God's sake,** look at how we're tearing each other apart! I thought rape was the most terrible thing Matheson could have done to me, but it's not! He's like a ghost hovering between us, trying to destroy our love! I've said things to you that I'll regret for the rest of my life, and now you want to sacrifice yourself for me. Don't you see what we're doing? **We are letting Matheson win!"**

He stared at her a moment, then with his uninjured hand, he reached out to pull her into an embrace. "Catherine!"

Burying her face against his chest, she pleaded in a choked voice, **"Please, Vincent, promise me you'll never leave me again!"**

His arms tightened around her, holding her close. "I promise, my darling Catherine."

She pressed charges against Matheson the following morning, breathing a sigh of relief as she signed the final papers. Although Vincent had denied it, she knew he had been not only hurt, but disappointed in her, the night she had refused to even consider taking the rapist to court. Those days between had been long and full of anguish for both of them, but they had served to make Catherine feel stronger in heart and mind than ever before.

The news of Matheson's arrest spread like wildfire, and Catherine found herself receiving support from unexpected places. After the newspapers hit the streets that afternoon carrying full coverage of Matheson's arrest, she found a note on her desk from Moreno with an offer of legal assistance if she

was in need of it.

Wasting no time with the written word, however, Joe Maxwell charged into her office unannounced, a wide grin plastered across his face.

"That's the way to do it, Radcliffe," he beamed and grabbed her in a bearhug. "I never did like that Matheson creep; his arrogance always made me feel like punching him out. Then when those women refused to testify, I had the urge to turn vigilante and teach the bastard a few lessons." He drew back, his features becoming serious. "I know it's tough, Cathy, you've been through hell already, but you're doing the right thing. I just want you to know that the D.A.'s office is behind you on this all the way."

Catherine's lips curled in a smile of gratitude. "Thanks, Joe. That means a lot of me."

"Good," he flashed another smile. "Now, let's get busy on this thing. I'll play the part of the defense attorney and try to tear apart your testimony. Show me your guts, Radcliffe."

It was a long and tiring afternoon, and Catherine knew it was only the beginning. Her resolve was still strong that night, however, when she tapped on the pipes, impatiently waiting for Vincent's appearance. In minutes he was by her side, and reaching out immediately, she took his hand in hers, tenderly touching the white bandages.

"What did Father say about the cuts?"

"That you missed your calling," Vincent smiled. "He said you would have made a wonderful doctor."

"Don't try to compliment me when I'm asking serious question about your health," Catherine retorted lightly, the memory of his bleeding hand still too vivid in her mind, the deep cuts she had seen across his knuckles and the one so dangerously close to the artery running down his wrist. The thought that he could have bled to death in her bathroom still caused Catherine to tremble with fear.

Feeling a shudder pass through her body, Vincent closed his bandaged hand around hers. "I am all right, I promise you. The wounds are painful, but not serious, and they have taught me a lesson. Anger accomplishes nothing, but instead only hurts those we love the most. I apologize for my outburst last night and for having caused you such pain."

Catherine met his concerned gaze with a look of sorrow. "It seems 'I'm sorry' has become a frequent phrase between the two of us," she spoke softly.

"Then let us say it no more," Vincent returned firmly. "Tell me of today. Mouse brought us a paper and I read of Matheson's arrest. I see, too, that he has already been arraigned and is now out on bail," he added in a grim tone.

"I'm afraid that's the way the system works," she sighed. "He won't dare try anything now, though, since he has become an even greater public figure than before. People always believe that where there's smoke, there's fire." Catherine hooked her arm under Vincent's elbow and started walking. "At least something good has come out of this. Susan Thompson called the office this afternoon. She's Matheson's third rape victim, and she said when she read the article in this afternoon's paper, she was... she was impressed with my courage and has changed her mind about filing charges against Matheson. I felt guilty taking the credit which actually belonged to you."

Vincent shook his head. "I can only tell you the courage is there, Catherine; it is you who must find it and put it to use."

"There were times this afternoon when I felt I had lost it," Catherine admitted wryly. "Joe played the Devil's Advocate, pretending he was the defense attorney at Matheson's trial and tried to rip my testimony to pieces."

"And what did you do?" Vincent asked softly.

"I almost hit him," Catherine laughed nervously, then her voice grew firm. "It's going to be hard, but I'm convinced now that I can do it."

"I only wish I could be there with you," Vincent returned sadly.

Catherine squeezed his arm. "You will be. Whenever I feel as if I can't carry on, all I'll have to do is think of you, and that will give me the courage to continue."

Vincent smiled down upon her, and reaching the chamber, he drew back slightly to allow Catherine to enter. Father looked up quickly at her approach, an expression of happiness and apprehension on his features.

Catherine greeted him with a silent kiss, then turned back to Vincent. "Would you... would you mind if I spoke to Father alone for a few minutes?" she asked hesitantly.

Vincent's eyes widened slightly in surprise, then he nodded. "I'll see if Mouse has gotten the latest issue of The Times."

Waiting only until he had left the chamber, Catherine turned quickly, her hands reaching out to Father. "Is Vincent going to be all right? Please, you must tell me."

"Yes, he's going to be fine, Catherine," Father assured her. "After he returned this morning, I bandaged his hand, then he managed to get several hours sleep. The change in him is amazing."

"It should never have happened," Catherine returned in a choked voice and jerking away, she dropped to the edge of Vincent's bed. "I hurt him so much, Father. Even with such a beautiful heart as his, I don't see how Vincent can forgive all those terrible things I said to him."

Sitting down beside her, Father put an arm around the trembling shoulders. "It *wasn't* your fault, Catherine," he spoke softly. "You've been through a devastating ordeal, no one can blame you for what happened afterwards, least of all yourself. Each woman reacts differently to having been raped--some become hysterical, others angry, and a few try to shut it out of their lives and pretend as if it never happened."

"I guess I was a little of all three," Catherine admitted, and her eyes rose to meet Father's. "I... I... I didn't tell Vincent about your note, but... but thank you for sending it."

"I know I shouldn't have interfered...," Father began, but Catherine interrupted quickly.

"No, you were right to do so, and you helped me to put things into perspective." Looking away, her voice dropped to a whisper. "When I read that Vincent was dying, it seemed... it seemed as if... if I was dying, too."

Father squeezed her shoulders gently. "That's over now, my child. You've made peace with Vincent, now you must do so with yourself. You also need to realize this trial will not erase your pain. Putting Matheson behind bars will give you relief from your concern that he would do this to others, and will in a sense be your revenge, but it will *not* undo what has happened to you."

Catherine dropped her head. "I know. That's something I'll have to learn to live with."

"Would it help to talk about it with someone who would know and understand exactly how you feel?"

"Do you... do you really know someone else who has... who has been... raped?" Catherine questioned in an ashamed, but hopeful tone.

"Mary," Father said simply. "I spoke with her this morning while Vincent was asleep. She said if you needed to talk..."

"I think I do," Catherine whispered.

Taking her hand, Father rose, helping Catherine to her feet. "Then I'll take you to her. Vincent will be here waiting for you."

It was more than an hour before Catherine returned to the chamber, and seeing her face, Vincent rose quickly from the chair, reaching out to draw her silently into his arms. The tears in her heart were gone, those on her cheeks already drying, and turning her face up to his, Catherine smiled. "I'm all right, Vincent; truly, I'm all right."

Caressing one of the lingering tears, he whispered, "Do you wish to return to your apartment now?"

"No, I would... I would... like... to walk in the park for just a little while," she returned low. "It seems like it's been a hundred years since we've done that together."

Without a word, Vincent took her hand, leading Catherine through the passageways and emerging from the drainage tunnel into the park beyond. It was after midnight and both were bone-weary from the emotional tidal wave that had swept over them the past few days, but walking hand-in-hand in the comfortable silence, sleep was the farthest thing from their minds. A distant streetlamp illuminated Catherine's features as she rested her head against Vincent's shoulder.

"It's so peaceful here," she murmured. "It's as if this is a whole different world from yours and mine."

A loud crack suddenly tore through the silence of the night, and Vincent jerked violently, feeling a white-hot pain slam into his shoulder just inches from Catherine's head.

She drew back quickly, her eyes widening with horror. **"God, you've been shot!"**

Rapid gunfire split the night, and grabbing her hand, Vincent urged desperately, "Run, Catherine!"

The grass flew by beneath their feet as they ran toward the only shelter, a small concrete structure that housed tools used by those who maintained the park's beauty. The gunfire ceased for brief seconds, then another explosive blast sounded and Catherine faltered, a low gasp escaping her lips.

"Catherine!"

Vincent grabbed her shoulders, but she reassured him between clenched teeth, "I'm all right. The bullet just grazed my arm."

In the faint light, Vincent could see a rip in the sleeve of her jacket just above the elbow, the material around it already soaked bright red. He could also hear behind them the footsteps of their unknown assailant and reaching the shelter of the building, he pulled Catherine behind it, wrapping his arms around her and using his body as a shield.

"Vincent, you're hurt!" she protested softly against his chest.

"It is of no consequence," he lied without hesitation. His shoulder was throbbing, sending fingers of white-hot fire through his chest and arm, but Vincent ignored the pain, his entire being centered around protecting Catherine.

The firing had ceased again, the park now ominously silent, and peering around the edge of the building, Vincent tried to see any movement in the distant darkness.

"Maybe he's gone," Catherine breathed in his ear.

Vincent shook his head. "I can hear his footsteps. He has come to a stop in that grove of trees."

Another shot rang out, the bullet ricocheting off the concrete wall less than a foot from Vincent's face. Pulling back quickly, his arm tightened around Catherine. "I know his location," he whispered, "but unfortunately he also knows ours."

"We're trapped," Catherine returned in a voice edged with fear. "There's too much light around this place. Any direction we try to run, he's going to spot us."

"We may have no choice," Vincent answered softly. "Our assailant will not be content to wait much longer."

As if to confirm his words, they heard a second shot slap the wall and a familiar voice cut through the

darkness. "Come out of there, you bitch, and bring that hippie with you! I know he's wounded. You made the biggest mistake in your life when you filed charges against me! I've got everything and I'm not gonna let you ruin it for me!"

Catherine met Vincent's concerned gaze, her own eyes wide with shock. "Matheson! He's gone crazy!"

"Talk to him," Vincent urged. "Perhaps he does not truly understand what he is trying to do."

Nodding in agreement, Catherine called out in a voice deceptively calm, "Matheson, this is insane. Raping six women is bad enough, but turning killer could get you life in prison, or even the electric chair. You're over your head now, don't make it any worse."

"Shut up!" Matheson yelled back in a tone that left no doubt he was losing control. "I've got connections in this city; they want me to run for state senate. I'm not gonna let a bitch like you take that away from me. You wanted me that night; you just got pissed off when I didn't come back."

Catherine went rigid in Vincent's arms, and pressing her head against his chest, he whispered, "His mind is twisted, Catherine. No one will believe the words of a madman."

Pulling away slightly, Catherine drew in a deep breath. "Matheson, if I am found dead, they'll know it was you who did it," she tried to reason.

They could hear his harsh laughter in response. "They will just think you were attacked by some mugger in the park. It's happened before, remember?"

"What about Susan?" Catherine continued to argue. "I'm sure your attorney has told you she's decided to press charges, too."

"She won't be a problem," Matheson threw back. "As soon as you're out of the way, Susan'll turn chicken again. The whore knows she doesn't have a chance without your testimony."

"It is useless, Catherine," Vincent sighed. "One cannot reason with a sick mind."

"What're we going to do?" she asked low.

"We have only one choice," Vincent decided. "Matheson obviously has not seen me as I truly am. If I step into the light, perhaps my appearance will startle him long enough for you to escape."

Catherine stared up at him in horror. "Vincent, no! I won't let you do it! Matheson is after me, not you!"

"Because I persuaded you to file charges against him," Vincent pointed out. "I am to blame for this, Catherine."

"That's not true!" she protested in a voice choked with emotion. "It's not your fault Matheson has gone crazy. I should be the one to go out there. If he kills me, hopefully he'll forget about you."

Vincent's arms tightened in an embrace impossible for Catherine to break free of. "I cannot allow you to sacrifice yourself," he spoke hoarsely. "Life without you would be unbearable."

"Vincent, don't you understand?" Catherine argued softly. "I don't have to put my love for you into words; you can feel its power through the bond. If you won't let me face Matheson alone, then we have only one other choice - we die together."

Vincent bowed his head, a velvety cheek coming to rest against Catherine's hair. "Perhaps that is the way it should be," he returned sadly.

The tender moment was interrupted by Matheson's harsh voice slicing the darkness like a knife. **"Get out here, you BITCH, and bring your boyfriend with you! I'm tired of waiting!"**

"YOU WANT US, COME GET US!" Catherine yelled back in fury.

Releasing her, Vincent moved away a step, his head cocked as he listened intently. "He is approaching, Catherine." He waited as the footsteps grew nearer, now at the edge of the building.

Timing it just right, Vincent stepped from the protection of the shed into Matheson's path, less than four feet away from the rapist, and throwing his head back, released a roar that would have chilled the blood of any man coming face to face with such a beast.

Matheson was no exception. The sight of Vincent caused him to freeze in his tracks, his eyes wide with terror and a gurgling sound coming from his throat--"Je... Jesus!"

Vincent could do no more. An attack upon Matheson was out of the question, for without the wall for support, he was barely able to stand alone. Hot blood continued to flow from the wound in his shoulder, the agony he had tried to hide from Catherine now causing his vision to blur. Matheson backed away and his eyes falling to the .44 Magnum clutched in the rapist's trembling hand, Vincent's heart grew cold. The weapon rose slightly, and desperation flooding his being, he prepared to spring forward, hoping against hope to take Matheson down before a bullet ripped through his heart.

Behind Matheson a voice filled with terror suddenly cut the night, **'NO!'**

Catherine appeared from the darkness, her hands wrapped around a length of pipe, the blood from her own wound having streamed down her arm and stained the metal a dull red. At her cry of anguished protest, Matheson wheeled as Catherine swung her weapon, the blow striking the rapist across his forehead with a sickening thud. The gunfell from Matheson's grasp and he stared at her a brief moment in surprise before collapsing to the ground in a motionless heap.

Bending carefully, Vincent felt for a pulse, and in answer to Catherine's unspoken question, whispered, "He is dead." He straightened quickly, his arm shooting out to catch Catherine as she swayed, her eyes clamped shut.

"I didn't...I didn't mean to..."

"I know," Vincent whispered.

Leaving Matheson where he had fallen, they stumbled back to the drainage tunnel, each trying to lend support to the other. At the entrance to the faintly-lit tunnel, Catherine collapsed, and sweeping her limp form into his arms, Vincent ignored the scream of pain cutting across his chest, his mind and body intent upon only one objective. Reaching a section of pipes, he dislodged a small rock from the wall and began tapping insistently, methodically repeating the action even after Father and several others rounded the corner of the tunnel.

"Good Lord!" Father breathed softly, gently forcing the rock from Vincent's grip. "What happened?"

"Catherine is injured," he whispered and not until Cullen and Pascal gently relieved him of his loving burden, did Vincent slump forward, feeling strong arms catch him as he slipped into welcome oblivion,

It was three days before Catherine had the strength to descend the ladder into the tunnels, her left arm still held in position by a sling. She had spent the remainder of the night after the attack in the special section of the chamber Father closed off for medical emergencies, she and Vincent receiving transfusions of life-giving blood. She had been totally unconscious as to where Father might have gotten the bags of plasma, instead only thankful for their presence.

The following morning had brought with it news of the discovery of Matheson's body, and with two helpers transporting her to the hospital, from there Catherine called the police and related the story of her attack in the park, omitting but one detail.

It was that detail which had caused her descent into the tunnels three days later, her features lined with worry. In a regular exchange of letters during that time, Vincent had assured her he was recuperating fast, but Catherine remained unconvinced until she saw him with her own eyes. In

minutes he stood before her, his right arm bound across his chest with stark-white gauze, but his left reaching out to her immediately.

"Catherine!"

"Oh Vincent!"

They moved together as one, each careful for the other's temporary frailty. Vincent drew back at last, his hand closing around Catherine's as he spoke in a worried tone, "You are troubled. I feel a deep sadness within you."

"It's... it's Matheson," she returned hesitantly and dropped her head, unable to meet Vincent's concerned gaze. "I can't forget how he looked lying there. I have... I have never... killed anyone before."

Vincent's hand tightened around hers. "You had no choice, Catherine. You saved not only your own life, but mine as well."

"I know," she whispered.

Vincent drew in his breath. "But that knowledge is not enough."

The dark head, still bowed, moved back and forth slowly. "I'm... sorry, Vincent."

Releasing her hand, his own rose to cup her chin, tenderly forcing her to meet his gaze. "There is no need for an apology. I feel and understand what is in your heart."

Catherine nodded once. "That... that night over a year ago in that apartment building, when you were forced to kill those men... I feel what I saw then in your eyes... the... the horror of suddenly realizing you had taken another's life. I never knew until now the price you were forced to pay to save my life."

"It is no greater than the price you have had to pay, Catherine," he returned softly. "Neither of us had a choice. The judgement of God does not rest in our hands, but there are those times when we are forced to kill in order to save our own life or that of a loved one. The decision must be made in a split second, but is regretted for eternity." He drew her into his arm, resting his cheek lightly in her hair.

"Time is a healer of all things, Catherine. There will come a day when all this will seem but a dream, and that day you will again look upon your world and find peace."

Raising her head, Catherine's eyes gleamed with tenderness. "I have already found my peace," she whispered.

*You told me to take the love we share
And give it to someone new
To go and live a "happy life"
A life devoid of you.*

*How can you tell me such a thing?
How fickle I must seem
To believe me truly capable
Of dreaming another dream.*

*Love's not a tent that one tears down
And moves it another place,
Nor is it a wound that given time
Heals without a trace.*

*I cannot shut it off at will
And stop loving you tomorrow
Even though you want the best for me
And cannot bear my sorrow.*

*Vincent, darling, don't you see"
We neither have a choice.
But to listen to our hearts' command
In its tender, aching voice.*

*It will not listen to your plea,
There's no order I can give.
I love you now and always will
As long as we both shall live.*

END