

AGAINST A SEA OF TROUBLES

by Sandy P Shelton

(from ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE FIVE)

It was just after midnight on what had been a very hectic day. Catherine tiptoed wearily down the hallway of her apartment toward her daughter's room. Once inside, she could see Katie's sleeping form bathed in the soft glow of the nightlight. Despite her exhaustion, she smiled and crept over to the crib, stroking the baby's soft brown hair.

Earlier in the evening, the world Below had gathered to celebrate Katie's first birthday. 'One year', Catherine thought. 'Where did it go?' It seemed like only last week she was holding that newborn infant to her breast. Catherine curled the light brown hair gently around her fingers.

Since returning to work last summer, life seemed to move in fast forward mode. Katie spoke her first words before she was six months old and was walking at eight. By Jacob's third birthday, in December, her daughter had also weaned herself from breast milk. Yes, her little girl was showing her independence early in life.

Giving the child's head one last tender stroke, Catherine straightened up and winced. She was more tired than she thought. As she massaged the back of her neck her thoughts returned to the sleeping child.

She had noticed even though the mother/daughter physical resemblance grew stronger every day, their personalities grew poles apart. It was becoming quite obvious that Jacob was his mother's son, but Katie was very much her father's daughter. The quiet little girl's pensive moods were so like Vincent's, it was uncanny at times. Years of experience with her reluctant lover taught her the importance of constant reassurance and unconditional love. She knew the same would be true of their daughter.

Taking one last look, Catherine walked quietly down the hall toward her son's room. She peeped around the door and saw him curled into a fetal position, sleeping soundly. Pushing open the door a little further, she walked over to stand by his bed.

Her handsome young son had grown quite a bit in the last year. His empathic bond with the rest of his family, displayed at such a tender age, was still quite a mystery. The strength of it was yet to be determined but Vincent had proven to be a patient teacher.

About to leave the room, two dolls on the shelf caught her attention. A half smile adorned her face as her fingers touched Belle and the Beast. She remembered the afternoon she and Jacob saw the Disney movie. From that day on, Jacob was spellbound and spoke of nothing else. She had to admit, she was too. She wondered if it was the eloquence of this particular version, or the haunting parallel to her own life that had truly touched her.

She also remembered the night she brought the dolls home. Vincent's reaction to them stunned her. It wasn't the macho male objecting to his son playing with dolls, but something more painful. Her husband examined

the "Beast's" costume then looked at the handsome prince doll. Sighing deeply he said, "If only it were that simple." After that, he shunned the toy as if it were a reminder of his life's greatest burden. Never had she regretted buying her son a gift, but that night, she did. Jacob, on the other hand, refused to go anywhere without one or both of them. Vincent simply endured the painful reminder and did nothing to dampen Jacob's enthusiasm.

She turned to look at her sleeping son. '*Oh well,*' she thought. '*He's just a child with a lot to learn.*' Quietly, she walked back to her own bedroom in hopes of finding a few hours of blissful sleep.

The quiet of her darkened bedroom lulled her into a relaxed semiconscious state as soon as she entered. With eyes closed, she lowered herself onto the beckoning softness of the bed. Rolling onto her stomach, she buried her face in her pillow. Just as sleep was about to claim her, she felt two strong, soothing hands massaging her shoulders.

"God, that feels good," she moaned.

His deep masculine voice responded, "You're so tense. Relax."

"I wish I could," she answered as his strong hands continued to rub her aching muscles.

"Catherine ..." He hesitated a moment. "Lately, I've noticed how you are always exhausted. Perhaps you're trying to do too much."

"Me and every other working mother in the world."

"Perhaps, but you have to admit not every woman carries the load you do. A job and two children are quite a responsibility in and of themselves, but add to that the burden of our secret ..."

"Vincent, our secret and our children are the greatest joys of my life. It's worth the exhaustion."

She heard him sigh deeply as if debating the rightness of continuing the discussion.

"I don't think you need any added burdens. Catherine ..."

"Yes?"

"I don't think we should risk having any more children."

Suddenly, she was wide awake. Rolling over, she studied his face in the semi-dark. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying it's something to think about. We have two beautiful, healthy children. Frankly, I wonder if we should again tempt fate. Catherine, I think we should take some permanent birth control measure."

His words were sincere. She could see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice. A deep sadness filled her.

"Catherine, do you WANT another child?"

Her heart wanted to say yes, because something deep inside didn't want to let go of the possibility. However, she had to be realistic. Peter and Father had warned them with every child the chances of abnormalities increased. Although she would dearly love a child like Vincent, she knew Vincent lived in fear of this happening. She answered as honestly as possible.

"A part of me loves being pregnant and having a baby to love and cuddle. The wonder of feeling that life inside of me and the miracle of giving birth to your children have been the most beautiful experiences of my life. Motherhood fulfills me like nothing else." She sighed heavily.

"And the other part?" His head tilted as he attempted to read her every expression.

"The other part realized that I can only do so much and still be the kind of mother Jake and Katie deserve. Not to mention a good wife and an exemplary prosecutor at the same time."

"You are all of those things, but I fear for your health. Where would we be without you?" He clutched her hands as if the mere possibility frightened him beyond reason.

She smiled to reassure him. "I don't ever want you to find out."

The fear in his eyes slowly disappeared. "Then we are agreed?"

Reluctantly, she nodded. "As much as I will miss that part of my life, perhaps it would be best for us all."

They lay for a while, silently reassuring each other. "Father says a vasectomy is a simple procedure," Vincent eventually commented.

"Vincent! You can't take the risk."

"Catherine, I've had surgery before. According to what I've read, this wouldn't be half as serious as before."

Fear filled her heart. "But in your case, it might get more complicated. What if something went wrong?"

"Father and I have discussed it. We will be prepared for all possibilities."

"I'll have my tubes tied." She could hear the desperation in her own voice.

"No! After all you've been through to have the children, I don't want to subject you to anything else. It's more complicated for you. Please, Catherine, I feel this is the right thing for me to do. Can you understand?"

Studying the intensity in his eyes, she realized he meant every word. "Are you sure? Really sure?"

A smile teased the corners of his mouth. "I'm not so sure I can keep ... my distance from you until I heal. But, yes, I think it's right for all of us."

His words filled her with assurance. "All right, but let's make a deal."

He looked at her questioningly.

"We'll wait twenty-four hours before we make a final decision. Deal?"

Vincent leaned over, kissing her tenderly. After the kiss, he lingered for a moment, his lips barely touching hers. Usually, this signalled his desire to make love. He would determine her receptiveness by moving over her and letting his body lightly caress hers. Tonight, he moved away, resting his head lightly on her stomach. She responded by combing through his hair with her fingers in silence. Soon they both drifted off to sleep.

Catherine spent the next morning in court, presenting her closing arguments in what had turned out to be a long and difficult murder trial. The defendant was a particularly disgusting gang leader who had ordered and participated in the gang rape and murder of a sixteen year old girl.

Remembering the pictures she'd seen of the victim, her emotions were running high as she delivered her plea to the jury. The passion in her voice was almost uncontrollable, as she thought about how this excuse for a

human being had had the gall to proposition her while she was taking his deposition. Two hours later, when the jury returned a guilty verdict, the feeling of triumph overcame her well-polished professional demeanor. After returning to her office and enjoying a brief victory celebration with her staff of investigators, Catherine settled back in her chair. She exhaled deeply.

The neatly framed pictures of Jake and Katie caught her eye. She picked them up, studying the bright smiling faces staring back at her. "Twice blessed," she said softly, sighing painfully as she remembered last night's conversation with Vincent.

It was the same battle every woman fought - career or family. A part of her longed to live Below and give Vincent a large family, but the other part thrived in her role as Deputy District Attorney. Realistically, she knew the best she could do was to reach a compromise. To have more children and continue working, would be unfair to everyone. Vincent was right. In her heart, she knew it.

Once reconciled to that decision, she addressed her other concern. What of Vincent? He was more than willing to have the procedure, but was she willing to let him take the risk? His differences were always an unknown factor. Although in the past, he had been a fast healer, there were too many variables.

Carefully, she placed the picture frame back in its customary place.

"That's not the face of the hottest prosecutor in Manhattan."

Catherine looked up quickly to see Joe's beaming face peering at her. "Joe?"

"Congratulations, Radcliffe! Great Job!"

"Thanks, but I only argued the case. Stan and Rita did all the legwork."

Joe smiled, sliding his hands into his pockets. "Funny you said that, Chandler. I used to tell Moreno the same thing about you."

Catherine leaned back in the chair. "Strange. I never heard that."

Looking at the files on her desk he asked, "What's next?"

"I don't know. I haven't has much time to get into these yet. There is one drug dealing case up for arraignment that I have to look at." She scrambled through the stack of files until she found it. "Here it is. Javier Benito Rodriguez."

"Who?"

"Rodriguez," she repeated, looking up at her boss. She was stunned to see the shocked look on his face.

"Let me see that file!" He practically jerked it out of her hands.

"Joe?"

"I thought so."

"What's wrong? Do you know him?" she asked with growing concern.

"I'll never forget him," he answered coldly.

Anger burned in Joe's eyes. Without another word, he tossed the file back on her desk and stormed out of the room.

"Joe?" she called in vain as she watched his retreating form.

Later that evening, Catherine sat on the floor watching Vincent roughhouse with Jake. Nearby, little Katie was toddling around the room, reaching for whatever looked interesting. As tired as she was, Catherine was enjoying this time with her family.

The entire evening Vincent had not mentioned last night's discussion, but she knew him well enough to know it was on his mind. He seemed content and without doubt. As Katie toppled into her lap, Catherine knew the topic would come up for discussion after the kids were asleep.

She was right. After baths, stories, and goodnight kisses, the adults retreated to the sanctum of their bedroom. There, they quickly settled under the covers.

Vincent looked behind Catherine at the clock radio on the bedside table. "It's been twenty-four hours exactly."

"I know," she responded thoughtfully.

"Catherine, you've had time to think it over. Are we still agreed?"

She looked into his soft blue eyes. "I've thought about it a lot. Vincent, today I helped convict a particularly filthy piece of humanity. When the jury returned that guilty verdict, I felt an incredible sense of pride. It felt good knowing that I'd help take another murderer off the street and gave the victim's family some peace."

"I know. I felt it too."

"I know you did." She stroked his nose with her fingertip. "If you still want to have the vasectomy, then I agree. I'll worry about you but I'll be there for you."

"Good. I'll have Father perform the operation tomorrow."

"NO!" she protested.

"Catherine?"

"Vincent, I want to be there for you. At least wait until Friday. I'll take the day off so I can have a long weekend to care for you."

"You don't have to."

"I want to. You were there for me when the kids were born. I think I should be there for this major change in our lives."

He gently kissed her. "Very well, Friday it is."

Catherine scooted over until she could maneuver her leg between his and slid her arms around him. With her face only inches away from his, she whispered huskily, "That only gives us a couple of more nights before the big event. I think we'd better store up a little ... you know, for later."

Vincent's laugh was deep and heartfelt. "Catherine, I'm beginning to think you're one of those people who is addicted to love."

"The only thing I'm addicted to is you and that's your fault."

"Oh really?"

"You're just so incredibly sexy I can't get enough of you. If you weren't such a good lover, you wouldn't be so exhausted all the time."

Their intimate banter only served to heat things up and was a frequent part of their foreplay. The next step came as Vincent began to kiss and touch her willing body.

Passions escalated quickly. So quickly in fact, they both achieved an orgasm much sooner than they wanted. Vincent raised his head to look into her eyes. "I'm sorry. I just couldn't control it."

It took a moment for Catherine to catch her breath. "I guess we both got carried away."

Vincent took a deep breath. "I wanted it to be special. You know, slow and satisfying."

"We can't always control our passions. Sometimes they control us."

"I have an idea."

After a moment of silence, Catherine asked, "What?"

Vincent shook his head. "No, not yet. I have some plans to make."

"Vincent!"

"No. You go to sleep. We both have a busy day ahead of us."

No amount of coaxing would budge him. Finally Catherine gave up and curled up next to her mysterious lover.

Thursday morning, Catherine stormed into Joe's office. She barely managed to keep her anger from exploding in the short distance between the offices. Joe turned to her with a shocked look on his face.

"What the hell are you up to, Joe?"

He stared back coldly. "What are you talking about, Cathy?"

"I just spent twenty minutes on the phone with an irate Defense Attorney. It seems his client, Rodriguez, was interrogated and damn near physically assaulted by the District Attorney himself. According to the guards on duty, it took two of them to pull you away. What's the deal, Joe? What's going on?"

Catherine watched as Joe's expression changed from his usual easy demeanor to one of pain and anger. Her own anger turned into concern for her friend. "You've got to tell me, Joe."

He stood and walked to the window. Sliding his hands into his pockets, he stared down into the streets of New York. "When I saw that name on the file, it all came back."

"What did?" Catherine prompted.

"Do you remember what I told you about my father's death?"

She nodded, recalling the moment vividly.

"One of the two juveniles involved was Javier Rodriguez."

Now it all made sense. His anger, the way he stormed out of her office that day, all of it was understandable.

"Joe, I ..."

"The other kid was Miguel Santos. I found out that kid overdosed on coke not long after the killing. I lost track of Rodriguez until the other day." He laughed sarcastically. "From looking at his rap sheet, he's been busy since he got out of juvenile detention."

Catherine walked around the desk to stand by her friend. "Joe, we can't let our personal feelings get involved in this. I understand your anger, but what you did was way out of line. You could have jeopardized our case. I know you've destroyed our chances for a plea bargain. You've got to stay clear of this."

"How can I?" That ... **bastard** cut my father's throat and never did **one day** of hard time."

She could clearly see the pain in his eyes. "Joe, that was then. There's nothing we can do about it now."

"It's not right, Cathy. He killed a man in cold blood. A man with a wife and kids. Where's the justice we fight so hard for ... **WHERE?**"

She reassuringly rubbed his shoulder. "I don't know. The system isn't perfect."

"**Perfect!** Hell, we're not even close!" He studied her closely. "What if it had been Vincent? How detached could **YOU** be?"

The question shook Catherine to her very core. She shuddered. She fought to quell the tide of fear that rose quickly within her.

"I don't know ... Joe, if our case is thrown out because of your actions, he wins again. We have a chance to put him away for dealing. It's not his first time either. He'll get the maximum."

"Unless he plea bargains or turns state's evidence for immunity."

Catherine took a deep breath. "I don't think that's likely."

He turned to her and grasped her shoulders. "You can't let him get off, Cathy. Whatever it takes, we've got to put him away. We've **GOT** to!"

The desperation in his eyes brought tears to hers. There was a great deal of pain just below the surface that had been left to fester far too long.

She answered him in a soft but determined voice. "We'll do this by the book, Joe. I want a conviction that can't be overturned. That means you've got to stay away from him. No more visits to the Tombs. Let me handle this."

"Cath ..."

"No, Joe," she said, her meaning unmistakable. "Stay out of it. You have to."

Joe turned away and stared out the window again. After a few awkward moments of silence, he moved over to his chair, grabbed his jacket, and walked out the door.

"Joe?" Catherine called after him but received no response. Sadly, she thought about the frustration her friend must be experiencing. Also, his question echoed through her mind. What if it had been Vincent? Just how rational could she be? How rational had Vincent been when Gabriel kidnapped her? Again she shuddered,

wrapping her arms around herself.

Joe didn't return to the office that day and Catherine was worried. She was debating stopping by his apartment when a familiar face from Below was ushered into her office.

"Geoffrey? What are you doing here?" she asked delightedly.

From under his well-worn jacket, he pulled out a single rosebud and an envelope. He carefully offered them to her. "Vincent sent me. He said to wait for a reply."

"Really?" she smiled. Taking the rose, she sniffed its delicate aroma then opened the envelope. In his eloquent script was the message, "Mary and Father have agreed to watch the children Below tonight. If you're free, would you care to join me in our apartment for a very special evening? V."

Looking up at Geoffrey, she felt her face flush beneath his inquisitive gaze. "Would you please tell Vincent I would be delighted and that I'll be home around six?"

He nodded vigorously. "Yes, ma'am."

Geoffrey gave her a big smile and ran from the room. Smiling to herself, she again sniffed the rose, leaned back in her chair, and envisioned the romantic evening awaiting her.

At 6:05 pm, Catherine stepped off the elevator and walked toward her door. The closer she got, the faster her heart pounded. '*This is ridiculous,*' she thought. '*I'm an old married lady with two kids. Vincent and I have been lovers for three years. There's nothing we haven't experienced. Why am I acting like a teenager?*' She slipped her key into the lock, pushed open the door then gasped.

The apartment was aglow with candles. The sweet aroma from the scented ones quickly filled her nostrils. As she entered, she heard the soft sounds of a crackling fire blending beautifully with the concerto playing on the stereo.

"Oh Vincent," she sighed.

"I'm here." The deep voice resonated from the hallway.

She turned quickly, her senses further assaulted by the sight of him standing in front of her dressed only in a pair of drawstring silk pajama bottoms. Again she murmured, "Oh, Vincent."

With mesmerizing grace, he walked over and took her hand. His eyes worshipped her as he placed a lingering kiss on the back of her hand.

"You honor me by accepting my invitation, milady."

Catherine countered his Shakespearean mood. "Your invitation ... intrigued me. How could I refuse?"

His amused smile really intrigued her. "Just what do you have planned?"

"Patience, my dear Catherine. First you must change into something more ... suitable for the evening," adding, "that is after you've had a nice relaxing bath." He guided her toward the bedroom. "If you'll allow me?"

"Right now, sir, I would allow you a great deal."

Catherine bemusedly followed him, her anticipation growing by leaps and bounds. He led her into the bathroom where she was again awestruck. She turned slowly, taking it all in.

A soft glow, given off by scented candles strategically placed, completely transformed a merely functional room into a lover's paradise. She also noticed the carefully laid out blue satin gown. It was the one Vincent adored to touch. Smiling to herself in amusement at her husband's thorough preparations, she then noticed the tub was filled with bubbles.

"A bubble bath?"

"Nothing but the best." He stepped so close behind her, she could feel his breath in her ear. "Would you prefer to bathe alone or may I do the honors?"

The question brought to mind all kinds of possibilities. "I think your assistance would be most enjoyable," she answered playfully.

"Good," he sighed. "I would have been devastated had you refused." A smile teased the corners of his mouth. "In fact, why don't you allow me to do everything?"

"Everything?" she teased.

He made no answer as his hands gently removed her overcoat. With delicious slowness, he unzipped her dress, sliding it down. He lifted each foot to remove the dress and her shoes. Next, he moved to face her, removing her earrings and crystal pendant.

Placing the jewelry carefully on the sink counter, he massaged her neck with his strong hands. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, moaning softly. Hands, that could so easily snap her neck, showed only gentleness when they touched her.

Sensuously, his hands guided the straps of her slip off her shoulders and removed it as he had the dress. This time he allowed his hands to glide up her body until they reached the fasteners of her bra. He hesitated a moment, looking heatedly into her eyes. It was a look that warmed every corner of her being.

One quick motion released the material and he guided it away from her body. At that moment, she expected the usual loving caress of her breasts by those gentle hands. Instead, he began to remove her panties and hose. Suddenly, she was aching for his touch.

With great care, he led her to the tub and helped her settle into the mountains of bubbles. "I've never seen this many bubbles. How did you do it?" she asked as she playfully blew a handful of the suds aside. A few settled on Vincent's face and she laughed delightedly.

"Are you going to join me?" she asked.

"I've already bathed. This is for you," he answered, as he began to lather his hands. "Just relax and close your eyes."

Relaxing was the furthest thing from her mind as his hands moved in slow soothing circles. All the tensions of the day were washed away but her frustration was building. No matter what she did to entice him, he would not go beyond this casual body massage.

She looked at him seductively. "Are you sure you won't join me?"

He only smiled, moving to wash her hair.

After the most erotic towel drying she ever experienced, he dried her hair. At that point, Catherine was all too ready and willing to move back into the bedroom. Vincent, however, had other ideas. He dressed her in the blue gown then led her into the living room.

"May I have this dance?" he asked as he bowed gracefully.

"You ARE a tease tonight, aren't you?"

The tips of his canines glittered slightly in the firelight when he smiled. "It may be some time before we can have another ... romantic evening. I want to make the most of this one."

"I see your point," she replied, moving into his waiting arms. "But let's not spend the whole night in foreplay."

She slipped her arms around his broad shoulders, leaning into him. Whether hours or minutes passed, Catherine wasn't sure. She was only aware of the peace and love she felt in the haven of his arms. Their slow swaying motion was hardly any motion at all. They were one in heart and soul. Even the shadows they cast blended into one.

Eventually, she felt the touch of his lips against the curve of her neck. She sighed then returned the kiss to his chest. They spent some time tasting each other until Catherine pulled back to look at him. She smiled mysteriously.

"What are you thinking?" Vincent asked.

"I was just thinking of how enjoyable slow seduction is."

"What do you mean?"

"Lately, Vincent, we've had to steal a few moments for ourselves whenever we could." She laughed as the term 'quickie' came to mind. "Don't get me wrong. Occasionally, I'm in the mood for fast and furious. It's just that I SO love these long teasing seductions."

Vincent tilted his head slightly. "So do I. Do you suppose we're just slowing down with age?"

She smacked him playfully on the chest. "Speak for yourself."

They both laughed, their laughter leading to one kiss, then another, and another until they were deeply involved in more passionate foreplay. It was then Vincent pulled away.

Catherine was stunned. "Don't stop now!"

He smiled, teasingly, as he led her to the fireplace. Lovingly, he gazed at the pictures of their children spread across the mantle.

"Sometimes ... I look at them and am so overcome by the fact they are ours. I never dreamed I could be so blessed. Then I think of you and I can't describe what your love has done for me ... given me."

"And what you've given me - never doubt that," she responded.

He turned, looking deeply into her green eyes. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he said. "I love you, Catherine. You are my life."

Catherine smiled, sliding her arms around his waist. "I don't think I'll ever get tired of hearing that. I'll love you forever."

Responding to the magic of the moment and their hearts' desires, they blended together in a kiss. Time passed unnoticed as the lovers caressed slowly and sensuously. Vincent's hands removed her gown, Catherine's removed his pajama bottoms.

As hands explored and stroked familiar areas of pleasure, the lovers lowered themselves to their knees. The warmth of the fire added to the warmth of their passion. The dancing light of the flames brought out the golden highlights of bare skin and hair.

Strong arms gently lowered Catherine into the softness of the plush carpet. With practiced ease, he followed and stretched his own body along the length of hers. Capturing her head in his hands, he paused, simply to admire her.

Catherine let her hands find their way down his back to rest on the swell of his hips. "I take it you're in no hurry?"

He smiled. "No." Studying her closely, he commented, "Have I ever told you how beautiful you are when you're beneath me like this?"

She laughed loudly. "What a sexist thing to say!"

Tilting his head as if to interpret her meaning, he suddenly rolled over pulling her on top of him. "I believe in complete equality. You're beautiful from this angle too."

Placing her hands on his chest, she pushed herself upright. "You look pretty damn good from here too." She leaned back down and rubbed his nose with her own. "Are we just going to admire each other all night or are we going to get down to some serious sex?"

His arms encircling her, he rolled back over until she was beneath him again. In an easy sensual movement, she wrapped her slim legs around his waist and felt him position himself on his knees. But instead of feeling his muscles tighten in preparation for entry, she felt his hands move lovingly over her body again.

Although she was enjoying every minute of it, he seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of time with this phase. When his hand slid down her thigh, suddenly slipped inside and moved upward, she squirmed in anticipation. *'Why was he taking so long?'* Her thoughts were abruptly halted when he began to stroke her.

Just when she thought she'd reached the peak, he moved away and waited until she calmed a little. "That's damned unfair of you," she moaned.

"I'm not finished yet," he replied.

"Neither am I," she answered, stroking him. He closed his eyes and involuntarily moved with the rhythm of her vigorous stroking.

"No," he moaned, pulling her hand away and fighting to regain his senses. "Not yet."

Calming his raging urges, he lowered his mouth to her neck, working his way down. He cupped her breasts then kissed and licked the sensitive skin until she was writhing in both agony and ecstasy.

Moving lower, he continued to ignite her senses. "That feels so ... good," she managed to say before her breath was taken away. He'd found that spot again. Almost taking her to completion yet again, he back away and moved over her.

"Damn you," she muttered in frustration. Then, using all her strength, she locked her legs around him firmly

and grasped his shoulders.

"You'd better deliver the goods this time."

Vincent laughed. "The goods?"

"Yeah, give it up," she demanded in mock anger.

"Since you have me at such a disadvantage, I guess I have no choice," he replied, moving into position.

Catherine grasped two handfuls of his hair as she felt him penetrate. She took a deep breath and arched her neck as her head pushed back into the carpet.

Their pace usually started out slow and satisfying, building quickly to a shattering climax. This time, however, he seemed determined to continue his leisurely pace. It was so agonizing to have him almost completely withdraw just as she moved into him. Finally, she could not stand any more of it. She dug her fingers into his hips and held tightly.

He must have felt her desperation and her nearing climax because he ceased his teasing and thrust deeply. Within moments they both achieved an intense climax that lasted longer than anything they'd experienced.

Sometime later, they extinguished the candles and moved into the bedroom. Repeatedly that night, they reached out to each other to satisfy their desires. They experimented with unfamiliar positions and revelled in the freedom of their love.

As Catherine lay exhausted staring at the ceiling, she smiled. No PLAYGIRL fantasies, no wild orgies and none of her own most daring sexual fantasies could hold a candle to this strictly monogamous and very old-fashioned relationship she shared with Vincent.

Dawn came entirely too early. When Catherine rolled over, she was greeted by an empty pillow. She sat up slowly, looking at the clock. She was to join Vincent Below soon, but first she had to hit the shower.

Hours later, she walked hand in hand with Vincent to the hospital chamber where Father would perform the procedure. They arrive to find Father and Mary finishing their preparations. Catherine noticed Vincent blush slightly when he saw Mary. She knew he would prefer her not to be there, but realized Father needed her valuable assistance.

Catherine turned to him, "I think I should stay with you."

He shook his head. "No. It will be easier for us both if you're not."

"Are you sure? Really sure?" she asked, slipping her arms around him.

He responded by embracing her. "Yes. Now, go on. I'll be all right." He leaned over, kissing her tenderly.

With teary eyes and quivering voice, she whispered, "I love you, Vincent. Be well."

"I love you, too, and I'll see you soon," he answered, managing a brave smile.

It seemed hours, but Catherine knew it had actually been a short time. At the sound of footsteps, she looked

up anxiously to see Mary walking toward her.

"It's over. You can see him now."

Catherine jumped up and raced into the chamber. There, she saw Vincent lying on the surgery table. Father talking quietly to him. She went quickly to his side. "Vincent ... are you all right?" He nodded but she noticed his face was very pale.

She looked over at Father. "Is he all right?"

"Yes, dear. He's going to be just fine in a few weeks." He patted her shoulder as he walked by. "I want him to lie here until he feels stronger. Then I want him to take it easy for a week or so. He's going to be ... rather uncomfortable for a while so be patient with him. I don't think he'll be interested in ... sex for a good while either. That reminds me. When you're able, I'll need a semen sample. We want to be sure."

Catherine couldn't meet Father's eyes, but nodded her understanding. Vincent, on the other hand, closed his eyes and blushed. Father squeezed Vincent's arm then left the two alone.

She reached for his hand and kissed it gently. "Oh, Vincent, I hate to see you like this."

Slowly he lifted his hand and stroked her face. "I'm fine. There's no need to worry," he tried to reassure her. "Once we get back to our chamber, I'll be more comfortable."

That weekend would forever live in Catherine's memory as the three days Vincent became a little **TOO** human. Usually her husband bore his aches and pain with dignity and in silence, but not this time. It seemed everything annoyed him; the kids, the tapping on the pipes, her presence, any movement at all. Even sleeping with him became a chore. Every time she rolled over, he would groan loudly and almost push her off the bed. She ended up sleeping with Jacob. Finally, she gave up and left him to sulk by himself while she had fun with the kids.

Sunday night found her at the end of her patience. After putting the kids to bed and arranging babysitting services for the week with Mary and Rebecca, she decided to have a talk with Father.

"Well hello, Cathy. How's our patient doing?" Her exasperated look spoke volume. "Or should I ask how **YOU** are doing?"

Catherine flopped in the chair nearest Father. "I don't think I can take much more of this."

"Oh?" Father asked, trying to hide his amusement. "Isn't he feeling better yet?"

Rolling her eyes heavenward, Catherine responded. "I've never seen him like this. He's so moody and withdrawn. It's like he doesn't want me anywhere near him. Are you sure he's all right?"

Father laughed. He felt amusement and sympathy for her situation. All he could offer her, however, was a comforting pat on the shoulder. "He will be ... in time."

"I don't know if I have that much patience left. Father, I've seen him hurt before and he's always reached out to me. He's always been so unselfish and undemanding. He's like a different person. I don't understand?"

"Throughout most of those illnesses or injuries, he drew upon your strength, that connection you two have, to heal him. I have a feeling that connection to you is somewhat ... painful right now."

Catherine thought it over a moment. "Do you think he wants me to feel guilty because of the vasectomy?"

Father took her hand gently in his. "No, I don't think that's it."

Biting her lip in an attempt to control the frustration she'd kept in check for so long, she said, "He was the one who suggested it. I was willing to have my tubes tied."

He smiled reassuringly at her. "No, my dear, that's not it. Actually, I believe the problem is a very basic one."

She looked up into his gently amused grey eyes. "Okay, what could it be then?"

"May I be frank with you?"

She repressed a chuckle. "You always have been."

Father blushed a little before speaking. "I think he's a little angry because you arouse him and he can't do anything about it."

"Father!"

"I honestly think his desire for you is a continuous condition with him. Having you near and being unable and afraid to risk the pain is the reason for this moodiness. It succeeded in keeping you at a distance this weekend, didn't it?"

Catherine shook her head in disbelief. "Noooooooo!" She stared at him for a moment. "You really don't think so, do you?"

"Yes, I do. Why don't you test my theory?"

"I think I will. Thanks, Father."

"Anytime, my dear."

Watching her leave, he smiled to himself. "I wouldn't want to be in Vincent's shoes right now."

Catherine walked into their chamber and saw Vincent still lying in bed, looking very forlorn. "Hello there, sweetheart."

He smiled then winced. "Are the kids in bed?"

"Yes. I think it's time for us to have a little talk." She walked over and sat down on the bed.

"Catherine ... please," he moaned pitifully.

Instead of jumping up and moving away as usual, she held her ground. "Vincent, I realize you're uncomfortable, but need I remind you that you're the one who insisted on this procedure?"

"I know that," he responded.

"Good. Then I think it's time you were honest with me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he answered gruffly.

"Yes, you do. You've been ... moody because you're battling your desires. Your behavior has succeeded in keeping me at a distance, hasn't it?"

He looked up at her, guilt coloring his cheeks.

"All right, my **horny** husband." She watched his cheeks turn even redder. "I understand ... in a way ... how painful an erection could be right now. Perhaps I made a mistake in taking care of you this weekend. Maybe it would be best if I stayed away."

That ever suffering expression faded. "You truly understand? I didn't know how to ask you to stay away."

"I guess not." She patted his hand. "Why don't I move back to the apartment this week? I'll have someone bring the kids back and forth and you can come to me when **YOU'RE** ready. Okay?"

He sighed with relief. "Thank you."

Leaning over to kiss him but thinking better of it, she smiled instead. "Later, love."

At the entry way, she stopped, turned and flashed him her sexiest smile. "I suppose it's a compliment to an old married lady to know her husband still has a bad case of the **HOTS** for her, even if he can't do anything about it." She blew him a kiss and left the chamber.

When Catherine returned to work Monday morning, she found the usual stack of paperwork with one exception. Her notes on the Rodriguez case had been totally revamped. As anger burned a path through her, so did the realization of just who was behind it. Gathering up the notes, she stormed into Joe's office.

He was on the phone when Catherine made her entrance. Seeing the rage on her face, he abruptly ended the conversation.

"I've got just one question for you. **Am** I in charge of the Rodriguez case or not?"

"Of course," he answered slowly.

Catherine tossed her notes on his desk. "Then what the **hell** is this?"

He glanced at the notes. "I just thought it needed some punch."

Angrily, she glared at him. "You went through my desk, tampered with my files, and altered my work. Joe, I won't tolerate that from any one, especially **you**." Coldly, she added, "My resignation will be on your desk in an hour."

Joe was shocked. He leaped out of his chair. "**NO! Cathy, you can't!**"

Turning her back to him, she responded. "Yes, I can! I can walk out of here as easily as you walked into my office and interfered with my case."

"I was only trying to help. We can't let him squirm out of this."

It was evident Joe's frustration over his father's brutal murder was surfacing. "Joe, we're not prosecuting

Rodriguez for murder. The most we can get is a conviction on trafficking. I know the anger you're feeling, but .."

He didn't let her finish. "**NO, YOU DON'T!** You have **NO** idea what I'm feeling! What I felt then!"

"You're right, Joe. I can't. But I know it won't do you any good to let your hatred eat at you this way."

He immediately regretted his outburst. "I'm sorry, Cathy. You didn't deserve that."

"Neither do I deserve your lack of faith. I've worked with you for almost six years. In that time, I thought I had earned your trust. To have you overseeing one of my cases like a first year intern is infuriating, and I won't stand for it. If you want someone else to handle the case, just say so."

"No, Cath. You're the only one I trust to do it right and make it stick."

She sighed. "All right then. Let me do my job. And for heaven's sake, **stay** out of it. We can't let his defense attorney think the D.A.'s office is pursuing a personal vendetta."

Joe simply stared at the floor and shoved his hands into his pockets. The battle was still raging inside.

Catherine reached out, gently rubbing his shoulders. "We can't convict him on something that happened almost twenty-five years ago. We have to do the best we can with what we've got. That's all we can do."

He nodded slowly, but Catherine wondered if she had really gotten through. "Now, I've got to get to work on the bail hearing for Rodriguez."

"Surely, they won't give him **bail**?" Joe's voice was frantic.

"Don't worry. I don't think any judge in this country would grant a bail he could afford. Not with his record."

"All right ... all right, I give up," he responded, walking back around his desk. "Hey, Cath ... you're the best damned prosecutor we've got, besides me." His smile was awkward at best. "I'm sorry if it seemed I doubted that."

Giving him her warmest smile, she shook her head playfully. "Don't you **ever** forget it!"

They both laughed but Catherine could still feel the pain in Joe's heart. She promised herself she'd do everything within the system to find some justice for him.

The first part of the week flew by quickly for Catherine. Along with her other cases, she spent a great deal of time and effort preparing the case against Javier Rodriguez. Late Wednesday afternoon, she felt very confident about the bail hearing to be held the next morning. Pushing her chair back from her desk, she decided it was time she check in on her forlorn husband.

Stopping by Father's chamber, in the hopes of getting the medical lowdown on Vincent, she was surprised to find her husband playing chess with Father. He turned quickly, sensing her presence.

"Vincent!" A big smile warmed her face. She hurried down the stairs and, without thought for his condition, enveloped him in a bear hug. Almost immediately, she sensed his discomfort and felt him pull away.

"I'm ... sorry," she stammered.

Gingerly, he returned her hug. "It's all right. I'm feeling much better."

Father had been watching the scene with amusement. "Yes, Catherine, he's healing nicely. In fact, I thought perhaps this weekend would be a good time to provide me with that sample."

They both blushed. "We'll see," is all Vincent would say. "Is our game over?"

"It appears so," Father answered. It was very obvious the two lovers wanted a few minutes alone.

"I'll say good evening then." Vincent took Catherine's hand and led her out. She paused a moment then looked over her shoulder at Father. "Good night, Father."

Upon entering their chamber, discovering they were finally alone, Catherine turned to Vincent and slid her arms around him. "I've missed you so much."

"As I've missed you." He looked into her adoring eyes. "I'm sorry about my behavior last weekend. I treated you badly. Can you forgive me?"

"I could forgive you anything. I'm just so happy to see you're feeling better."

He winced when she leaned against him. "I'm not **COMPLETELY** healed yet."

"Oh! I'm sorry," she apologized, moving away from him. "I guess you're still pretty sore then."

"You could say that."

She studied him carefully. "Father mentioned getting a sample. If you're still too sore ..." She realized how difficult this was for him, but it was becoming a little amusing to her.

"Catherine, do I detect a hint of amusement?"

"Who me?" she asked, feigning innocence.

He stared at her until she broke out in laughter. "I'm sorry. I really am. It's just ... well, I mean ... just how are you to get a sample if you're too sore to ...?"

Vincent purposely walked across the room and sat down at the table across from her. "I'm glad you're enjoying this."

She smiled at him. "No, I'm not. I just thought a little humor would get us pass the sexual tension we're feeling."

An awkward moment of silence passed between them. "Catherine, I'm aware of your desires. If you'd like, I'll help you relieve your tension."

"No, I'll wait for you."

"I'm afraid, Catherine, that what Father had in mind wasn't intercourse." He couldn't meet her eyes.

His total humility and innocence touched her deeply. "Well my dear, there are a lot of ways to achieve our mutual goals without that." She smiled warmly. "When do you want to try?"

"Why don't I come to the apartment Friday night? We can try ..."

Catherine watched him blush profusely. "Have I told you lately how much I adore you?"

He looked up shyly. "No."

"Well, husband, I do adore you. Never doubt that."

His reaction to that statement was much like a flower blossoming in the spring. The embarrassment and hesitancy disappeared and a look of total gratitude sparkled in his blue eyes.

The bail hearing went as expected. With the bond set at a quarter of a million dollars, Joe and Catherine felt assured Rodriguez would have no means of raising that kind of money. Their mood was almost jubilant as they left the courtroom. Catherine hurried home for what was hopefully going to be a romantic evening.

She scurried about the apartment fixing Vincent's favorite meal, then changed into a negligee she knew he liked. Somewhere around nine, he walked casually in from the bedroom.

He was so graceful and quiet, she had not heard him enter the apartment. His sudden appearance momentarily startled her.

"Vincent!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"It's okay. I didn't hear you come in." She walked over and embraced him tenderly. "How do you feel?"

Looking down at her, he smiled hopefully. "Very well, actually. In fact, I've been looking forward to tonight."

"So have I," she responded.

Silently they looked into each other's eyes as the electricity between them sparked to life. As Vincent began to remove his cloak, something dropped to the living room floor.

"What's this?" Catherine asked, picking up the small plastic bottle.

A red tint crept up Vincent's neck and colored his face. "Father gave it to me for the sample."

The mischievous part of Catherine's nature surfaced. "I don't think it's big enough," she commented, studying the container.

"Thank you ... I think," he answered warily.

She laughed loudly. Looking up at her slightly embarrassed husband, the thought occurred to her that just a few short years ago, this kind of conversation between them was unimaginable. Now, she could see how much he enjoyed their intimate banter. The once lonely man who craved touch but denied himself out of fear, had truly blossomed in the sunlight of their love. Watching that shyness and fear slowly being replaced by confidence and sensuality was her greatest joy.

"Well," she finally added. "We'll save that for later." She took one more look at the jar. "I hope he told you just how we're suppose to do this."

"Yes, he did. At great length, I might add."

"I can imagine so," laughed Catherine. "I'd like to have heard **THAT** conversation."

"I'd rather forget it if you don't mind," Vincent replied.

After a casual dinner and an update on their children's latest achievements, they retired to the bedroom.

As Catherine finished brushing her hair, she sensed Vincent's apprehension. She knew it wasn't a fear of the unknown. In the course of their physical relationship, they had explored almost all the avenues that a loving and monogamous couple could. To be truthful, she felt he knew her body as well, or even better, than she did. She felt the same about his body. No, the apprehension she sensed in him was his fear of disappointing her.

She studied him a moment as she sat on the side of the bed.

He was stripped down to just his lightweight underpants and was holding the plastic jar in his left hand. His expression could best be described as terror.

"Vincent, are you sure you're ready for this? There's no rush, you know," she reminded him.

"Well," he responded uneasily. "Father needs this sample before we can ..." He cleared his throat. "Let's get this over with."

"Oh gee, thanks! That's about the most romantic thing I've ever heard you say."

A reluctant smile could be seen as he blushed and returned her gaze.

"I'm sorry. That didn't quite come out right."

"I hope not," she responded in mock anger. She took the bottle from him and asked, "Okay lover. How do we do this?"

Just as Vincent began repeating Father's instructions, a loud knock was heard on the door. "Who could that be?" Catherine asked.

Suddenly Joe's voice boomed out loudly. "Hey Cath ... let ... me ... in. It's ... Joe."

She stood up. "Joe? That doesn't sound like Joe."

"YO ... Radcliffe. What's ... going on in ... there?"

"Oh my God, he's drunk!"

Vincent stood up too. "Why is he here this late?"

Hurriedly, she put on her robe. "I don't know. Something must be terribly wrong. You stay here. I'll see what's going on."

She opened the door and Joe practically fell in. "Joe ... what in the world?" she asked, struggling to keep him on his feet. Being so close to him, she was nearly overwhelmed by the pungent odor of alcohol.

"Cath ... it's not right. It's just not ... right," he murmured, falling on the couch. "It's all screwed up."

Catherine sat wearily on the chair opposite him. "What isn't right? What are you talking about?"

"Rod ... Rod ... Rodriguez is out."

"What do you mean ... he's out? The bail was too high for him." She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Not for his buddies."

"Joe, you're not making any sense. Look, let me fix you some coffee and I'll make a few calls. You stay put," she ordered, heading for the bedroom.

Quietly opening the door, she discovered Vincent had disappeared. His clothes were gone and the French doors were ajar. The only evidence that he'd been there was the rumbled bed and the plastic container on the night stand. With a sigh for opportunity lost, she dropped the container into a drawer and headed for the kitchen. It was going to be a **LONG** evening.

Long and frustrating. It took a few calls to finally put together the story. After she left the courthouse, she'd gone directly home, confident Rodriguez would be in jail until his trial. What no one counted on was Rodriguez's suppliers putting up the money to get him out. Bail was made and Rodriguez was released at 4:45 that afternoon.

"Damn!" she muttered. "Sometimes the system stinks."

"What?" Joe asked. After a few cups of coffee, he was a little more subdued.

"Why would his suppliers get him out unless they're afraid he'll talk?" Catherine wondered. "I wouldn't be surprised if he suddenly disappeared."

"Or turns up dead," Joe added. "It would serve him right. Maybe they'll give him what he deserves."

"Joe!"

"I *mean* it. The courts will just ... slap him on the wrist."

She noted his slurred speech and inability to concentrate. The rage he was obviously feeling was barely held in check. It seemed getting drunk was his way of dealing with it.

"Look, Joe, why don't you lie down in Jake's room? You need to sleep this off. We'll see what we can do tomorrow."

"No," Joe protested, swaying dangerously as he tried to stand.

"You're staying here," Catherine insisted. "You don't need to be out there in this condition. Now don't argue."

Although she realized it was the only safe thing she could do for her friend, she was greatly disappointed in how the evening had turned out. '*Oh well,*' she thought. '*There's always tomorrow.*'

Tomorrow became today all too quickly. Catherine drove Joe home for a shower and change of clothes. Later, they headed for the office to sift through yesterday's events.

In reality, there wasn't much to 'sift' through. A lawyer, who would not identify his client, simply walked into the clerk's office and wrote a check. Half an hour later, he and Rodriguez simply walked out and hadn't been seen since. '*So much for the system,*' thought Catherine.

They sat in Joe's office. He was dressed in jeans, sneakers, and a METS sweatshirt. The look enhanced his vulnerable little-boy-lost aura. Catherine sat across from him dressed in jeans, boots and lightweight sweater, with her hair in a ponytail. They looked more like a couple getting ready to paint the kitchen than the District Attorney and his top Deputy.

"I don't know what to say. Unless he does something, we can't revoke his bond."

The District Attorney rubbed his temples. His head was pounding from last night's binge and the brightness of the morning sun.

"I'd be willing to bet he's out the country by now."

"He's sure as hell out of sight," Catherine added.

It was then she really studied her friend. Aside from the fact he looked awful from last night's overindulgence, it was obvious he was one raw nerve.

"Joe, why don't you go somewhere this weekend and just forget about all this? Tearing yourself apart like this won't solve anything."

"You don't understand, do you, Cathy? He **got away** with murder. It looks like he may get away from **this** too. There's something wrong here."

She watched him slam his fist onto the desk. First, his face turned red with anger then a deadly calm overcame him. The change was frightening.

"Joe, what are you thinking?" she asked anxiously.

He was lost somewhere in the past for a moment. "Don't worry about it, Cathy." He gave her an awkward smile. "Shouldn't you be somewhere with those kids and that husband of yours?"

"Joe, please. I'm worried about you."

"Don't be, Radcliffe. I've survived a lot worse than this. I'll be all right." He stood up and walked around the desk. "Now ... you get home to those cute kids of yours. You should be spending your free time with them, not holding my hand." He smiled broadly and 'escorted' her to the door. "Go!"

"Okay, okay. Just promise me you won't do anything foolish."

He didn't answer.

"Joe, **promise** me!" she insisted.

"Okay, chief," he answered, putting his hand up as if swearing on a Bible. "I'll behave."

Laughing, she patted him on the chest. "Good. I'll see you Monday."

"Right," he answered, opening the door for her. The smile stayed frozen on his face until he closed the door. It then changed to a look of determination.

On her way Below, Catherine couldn't shake a nagging little voice that kept telling her Joe was going to do something stupid. During her years in the D.A.'s office, she'd learned to listen to that voice. Listen and obey.

Her troubled thoughts vanished at the sight of Vincent sitting on the floor with Jake and Katie. Crossing her arms, she leaned against the passageway to watch her own private miracles at play with their father.

"Don't just stand there. Join us," Vincent said without looking up. It was just another testament to the bond they shared.

"Mommy!" Jake shouted, diving into her arms.

After a big hug and sloppy kiss from her son, Katie toddled into her arms calling "Ma-me." Catherine laughed at her daughter's attempt to say "Mommy."

With Katie still in her arms, Catherine managed to sit down, not very gracefully, beside Vincent. Jacob walked around behind her and wrapped his arms tightly around her neck. Finding a comfortable spot, Vincent leaned over and kissed her gently while his son giggled.

"I feel your concern. Tell me."

How strange it was that those two words could ask so much. "I'm worried about Joe," she responded while Katie climbed around in her lap. "By accident, we discovered that one of the men who murdered his father had been arrested for drug trafficking and I'm prosecuting the case. Today he made bail and Joe's afraid he'll skip."

Vincent tilted his head as he thought it over and sifted through her emotions. "His concerns are valid."

"I know and that's got me worried. I'm afraid he'll do something we'll all regret."

"Would you like for me to watch over him?"

"You can't risk being seen!"

He smiled. "Catherine, in the darkness, I'm only seen if I want to be. Joe will never know I'm near."

"It's just too dangerous," she argued.

"I'll take great care." He leaned closer, placing his hand on her arm. "Catherine, Joe means a great deal to you. He loves you and would do all he could to protect you. I think he's an honorable and compassionate man. I wouldn't want to see him make a dangerous mistake."

"I don't know about this."

"It will be fine. I promise."

Despite his promises, that nagging little voice didn't go away all afternoon. At least knowing Vincent would be watching over Joe gave her some comfort. For a while.

In the cover of darkness, Vincent found his way to the alley behind Joe's apartment building. A quick trip up a nearby fire escape told Vincent that Joe was getting ready to go out. He returned to the alley to watch and wait.

His wait was a short one. Joe came down to the street and got into a cab. Vincent's sensitive hearing picked up the address Joe gave the driver and he was quickly on his way.

The address was that of a condemned apartment building on the lower east side. Vincent moved quietly through the mist, watching Joe get out of the cab and study the building. He looked down at a small scrap of paper in his hand then walked cautiously into the building. Vincent slipped in via a broken window.

Hiding in the shadows, Vincent followed Joe as he moved from one filthy room to another. He still didn't know why Joe was here in the first place. As he pondered that particular mystery, a gunshot broke the silence.

Joe and Vincent both ducked protectively, looking around for the source. Common sense screamed at both men to get the hell out of there, but Joe's curiosity won out. He began moving through the rooms carefully. Vincent followed.

Just as Joe entered an upstairs room, Vincent heard him gasp. "What the hell ...?" He moved closer for a better view.

When Vincent peeked in, he saw Joe approaching the prone figure of a man. The smell of blood and death filled his nostrils as he watched Joe slowly roll the man over.

"Holy ... Rodriguez!" he exclaimed.

The name registered in Vincent's mind, but he had little time to dwell on it. Other people had entered the building. Frantically, he tried to think of a way to protect Joe without being seen, but if worse came to worse, he would save Catherine's friend.

Just as he was about to rush to Joe's side, several policemen entered the room with guns drawn. "Freeze! Police!"

Joe didn't move. "Hey, guys. I'm Joe Maxwell, the D.A." He started to reach for his ID when the policemen ordered him not to move. "Okay, okay. Just check the ID, guys."

Slowly, an officer walked over and searched Joe. After examining his ID, the officer reported. "He's for real."

Vincent heard Joe sigh. "Can I put my hands down now?"

"Okay," the officer responded. "But, Johnson, stay with him."

The officers examined the body. "He's dead," one of them reported. "The gun's over here," another shouted.

The officer in charge turned to Joe. "You have the right to remain silent ..."

"What the hell are you doing?" Joe interrupted. "You're not *arresting* me!"

The officer finished his recital of Joe's rights then added, "We find you here with a dead body, the murder weapon, and know you have a motive. What do you think we should do?"

It was then that Joe began to put things together. "How did you get here so fast?"

"We got a tip that you'd found Rodriguez and were going to kill him," the officer responded.

"Somebody called me and said he was going to skip," was Joe's answer.

Vincent decided that Joe was in no physical danger and the longer he stayed, the greater risk he was taking of being seen. Besides, Catherine should be informed of this turn of events. He moved quietly away and disappeared into the night.

Catherine had just put the kids down for the night when Vincent rushed in. "Vincent. What's wrong?"

He sat down beside her. "Joe is going to need your help."

"What happened?" she asked in a panic-stricken voice. "Is Joe all right?"

"He's under arrest," he answered evenly.

"Would you please tell me what happened?" she demanded anxiously.

Filling her in on what he'd seen, he saw awaiting her response.

"It shouldn't be that hard to get Joe out. This whole thing is so obviously a set up." Collecting her thoughts was not easy. "The first thing I've got to do is talk to Joe and find out what kind of case they've got."

Vincent looked up at her, disappointment in his eyes. "You must go tonight?"

Wrapping her arms around him, she answered. "The soon I get started, the sooner we can get Joe cleared. I'm sorry. I did want to spend the night with you, but ..."

"I know," he responded, "Joe needs you. You must go, Catherine. You and I will have other nights."

She smiled warmly at him. "Sometimes I can't believe how lucky I am to have such a generous, understanding husband."

"No, Catherine. I'm the lucky one."

Then, for the first time since his surgery, she pulled his face to hers and kissed him deeply. "I love you," she finally managed to say.

"As I love you. Now, go do what you must to help your friend. We'll be here when you get back."

"I'll be back as soon as I can. I promise," Catherine added, gathering her things for the trip Above.

Catherine sat uncomfortably in the detective's office. She was trying to put forward her most professional and detached demeanor. It wasn't easy. The guy across from her had a reputation of being a real creep.

"Well, Detective Jarvis, what have you got on the Rodriguez case?"

The arrogant young man who'd made detective a little **TOO** easily as far as she was concerned, glared at her. "Look **Ms.** Chandler, I realize you're from the D.A.'s office, but this is my turf. Your involvement here could be misconstrued as a conflict of interest. I don't **have** to tell you anything."

He sat back in his chair, surveyed her appreciatively then smiled smugly. "Unless, of course, we can discuss this in a more private location. Say, my apartment?"

Being no stranger to propositions, she wasn't stunned. She'd been subjected to them since junior high. However, this particular one, at this particular time, could not be politely brushed aside. Leaning forward in her seat, she carefully and clearly put him in his place.

"Detective Jarvis, I'm going to do you the professional courtesy of not taking that breach of ethics to your superiors. But let me be absolutely clear. I will not tolerate your disrespect or your pitiful plea for attention. I don't have the time to deal with your adolescent behavior, nor should the taxpayer's money be wasted. Now,

if you're through fighting a losing battle, let's do our jobs."

The brash young man sat back in his chair. He wasn't used to being turned down and having a woman put him in his place.

"All right. Your Mr. Maxwell is being charged with murder. We had a tip he went there to stop Rodriguez from skipping. That gives us motive. We found him at the murder scene. That gives us opportunity. The gun was his. That gives us means. I would suggest you get your **BUDDY** a good lawyer. He's going to need one."

There was that smug smile again. "It seems to me all you've got is circumstantial. A good lawyer could drive a truck through the holes in this case." She closed her notepad and got to her feet. "I want to see Mr. Maxwell."

She had to admit Joe looked pretty rough. After dismissing the guard, she asked, "How are you doing?"

"What do **YOU** think?" he answered sarcastically.

His tone of voice hurt but she could understand it.

Immediately, he regretted his harshness. "I'm sorry, Radcliffe. This place is no health spa."

"I'll bet," she laughed half-heartedly. "Tell me what happened."

"I don't know. I got this call that Rodriguez was going to skip and if I wanted to stop him, I'd better get to that ... place."

"Why didn't you call me, Greg, or even Diana?"

"There wasn't time. The caller said he was about to leave. I had to hurry."

"Joe ..."

"I know. It was a real sucker's play." He ran his fingers through his hair. "I just couldn't stand the thought of him getting away with this."

As much as she wanted to reach out and hug him, she had to keep her lawyer's mind clear of emotion.

"They said it was your gun. How did that happen?"

"I don't know. The last time I saw it, it was in my apartment."

Catherine made some notes on her notepad. "Okay. I'll work on that. Did they give you a paraffin test?"

"No."

"Umph! I think I'll request one!"

"Cathy?" Joe asked tentatively. "You haven't asked if I did it?"

She gave him her most reassuring smile. "I don't have to. Now you try to get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Cathy, tomorrow is Sunday. There's nothing you can do."

"Don't be so sure. Hang in there, boss. We'll pull this one out of the fire also."

A little later, as she sat in the backseat of the cab, her words came back to haunt her. As a prosecutor, she well knew how quickly juries would convict on less circumstantial evidence than this. She had personally gone to trial with less and won. Looking over the case, she'd believe it too. If not for Vincent's statements and the fact she knew Joe so well.

Vincent. He was the one witness who could clear Joe's name with one statement. But that was impossible. He could no more testify in court than she could risk exposing his world. Again, their worlds were at odds with each other.

'What if Joe was convicted because Vincent couldn't speak up for him? How could she live with herself knowing that? How could Vincent?' All those thoughts and fears rattled around inside her head until one idea surfaced. Elliot? He knew some powerful and connected people both through his dealings in real estate development and from his ties to the docks. Perhaps a visit was in order.

Arriving at their chamber later that night, Catherine found Vincent asleep. She sighed in disappointment then changed clothes and slipped into bed beside him. At least he wasn't pushing her out of bed anymore, she mused. He responded to her presence by enfolding her in his arms. She smiled at the knowledge they could communicate on an unconscious level and molded herself as close to him as possible.

The next morning, she found Elliot with Fiona and decided now was the time to speak to him. She filled him in on what had happened and asked if there was anything he could do.

"I don't know, Cathy. Those people are awfully tight-lipped about their activities. But I owe you and Vincent. Maybe even Joe. I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, what are you going to be doing?"

"I've got to make sure every detail of this case is examined thoroughly. You never know where you might find a loophole." She smiled warily.

Suddenly Vincent stood up, pacing worriedly across the chamber. "Joe would not be in this situation if I could come forward."

Catherine went to him, placing a loving hand on his back. "Vincent, that's out of the question. The only way you could help Joe would be to come forward and give a statement and that's not an option. Please don't torture yourself over something you can't do anything about."

He turned to her. "Catherine, I have always believed that each of us has a responsibility to do all we can to right the wrongs in this world. What I saw that night lives within me. If Joe goes to prison because I cannot come forward, that failure will live within me as well."

With that heart-wrenching statement, Vincent left the room.

"Cathy, aren't you going to go after him?" Fiona asked.

"No. He needs time to reconcile himself to reality."

"What?" Elliot asked.

Catherine smiled knowingly. "My husband has very high ideals. When the realities of our life fall short of those

ideals, it's very hard for him to accept. It's best to allow him room to balance things out."

"Oh," Elliot answered. He still wasn't sure he understood.

"Don't worry, he'll be fine." She looked at her watch. "I've got to go Above. If you find out anything, leave a message here or at the apartment. Thanks, Elliot."

She almost went to Vincent then, but what she told Elliot was true. He needed time. She laughed out loud. '*A few minutes with the kids will **ADJUST** his attitude,*' she mused.

Catherine did see Joe on Sunday and managed to wade into the case a little further. After her depressing visit to the jail, she went home to her family.

Mid-afternoon Monday found Catherine in her office reflecting on the day's events. Within moments of arriving at the office, a meeting was held to announce that a special prosecutor would be assigned to Joe's case. It was also announced that, as of that morning, an acting District Attorney would be appointed to fill in during Joe's suspension.

Seeing Joe's career being torn apart was no easy thing for her. The hardest part, however, was knowing that Vincent could clear him. Joe or Vincent. Although there was no real decision to make, it broke her heart to sit by while Joe was sacrificed.

Just as her thoughts set her stomach churning again, the phone rang. "Catherine Chandler."

"Hello Cathy, it's Elliot. Can you get away from the office this afternoon?"

"Not really. Is it important?" she asked.

"It is. My driver will pick you up at 4 o'clock. Is that all right?"

"Yes, but why all the mystery?"

"I've got a story that should be told in private. See you later."

The click on the other end of the line brought an end to the conversation, but gave birth to Catherine's curiosity. '*He must have turned up something,*' she thought happily.

Elliot's driver was punctual. In silence, he drove across town then had Catherine get into another car in a deserted parking garage. '*Sometimes Elliot's cloak and dagger games could be nerve-racking,*' she observed to herself.

Finally, she was taken to an old warehouse she remembered belonged to Elliot. After being greeted at the door by a man she recognized as one of Elliot's bodyguards, she was led to a small room on the second floor. Cautiously, she was shown in. In the dingy, dimly lit room, she saw Elliot, three well-armed muscle men, and one very nervous looking young man sitting in a battered chair.

Elliot finally broke the silence. "Hello, Cath. I'm glad you could join us." He looked behind him at Catherine's escort. "You're sure you weren't followed?"

"Positive!" the man answered.

Elliot's attention turned to Catherine as the bodyguard closed and locked the door. "Cathy, I'd like you to meet David Renfro. Better known as Runner."

Catherine studied the young man for a moment. "Hello, Runner."

The man known as Runner looked her over with a mixture of fear and curiosity. "You the D.A. lady?"

She smiled disarmingly. "I guess you could say that."

He looked over at Elliot. "He says I can trust you."

She smiled her appreciation to Elliot. "He's right. Have you something to tell me?"

Pain surfaced in his eyes as he nodded. "You bet I have."

Catherine sat in the chair facing Runner and removed her notepad from her briefcase. "Okay, let's get started."

Reluctantly he began. "Me and Javi were tight. We started running for The Man about the same time. We delivered, picked up and did whatever we's told. We worked our way up together." He shifted uncomfortably in the chair.

"When Javi got nailed, I knew he wouldn't talk. The Man said he knew it too. He said he looked after his own and he'd take care of Javi. When he got Javi out, I believed it."

Catherine could see the anger of betrayal burning brightly in his eyes. "Then what happened?"

"Me and Javi got this call. We was suppose to pick up something at some apartment building. When we got there, we couldn't find nobody. We went upstairs. We thought it was a set-up."

"Was it?" she prompted.

"Yeah, lady. This secret door, or something, opened and five of The Man's army came out. They said that Javi had talked and he had to be taught a lesson. He wanted a message to be sent to all his runners. No one would dare cross him again."

"And then?" Catherine asked.

"One of them pulled a '38 and put it to Javi's head."

She could see the raw pain of losing his friend in his eyes. "He killed him?"

"Not then. He put tape over our mouths then tied our hands. It was like he was waiting for something. When we heard someone come in downstairs, he pulled the trigger and Javi ... fell. One of them pulled me through those doors and we all left. Later, they turned me loose with a warning." He leaned over closer to Catherine.

"It ain't right. Javi was no angel, but he didn't deserve that."

Catherine felt compassion for the young man and, at the same time, remembered Joe's grief. "No. No one deserves that. Runner, if you'll give us a statement, we'll arrest these men. We'll put this whole syndicate out of business. You've got to tell me who this **Man** is."

The scared young man began to laugh. "He's one of you."

"One of us?" Catherine repeated.

"Yeah. His name is Jarvis."

"Jarvis? Detective Adam Jarvis?"

"That's the man."

Shock and disbelief rocked her. Then came the anger. "That slimy bastard. I'm going to enjoy cutting him down to size."

"Catherine," Elliot interrupted. "I'm sure you can understand Runner's need for security."

"Yes," she replied. Her personal feelings of relief and anger had to be put aside. "Of course. Once you've given your deposition, you'll be put into the Witness Protection Program until the trial."

"What about now?" Runner asked.

Elliot answered his question. "I can handle that. Marcus, you take Runner for a drive. Keep moving. Tell no one where you are, not even me. Call me every two hours. Don't let anyone see you. As soon as Cathy can arrange things, I'll let you know. You are to keep him secure at **ALL** costs. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," the bodyguard replied, leading the young man away.

Runner stopped and turned to Elliot. "I know you got your own reasons for this but thanks, man."

"You bet," Elliot answered then smiled. "You bet."

Catherine gathered her things and walked over to Elliot. "How did you find him?"

Elliot smiled. "Some things, my dear Cathy, are best not known."

"I owe you."

"No, you don't. I figure we're about even."

"Maybe," she answered then hugged him warmly. "Whatever you need, just ask."

"I'll hold you to that."

The deposition was taken late that night in the presence of Internal Affairs, the Special Prosecutor, and the Acting District Attorney. Immediately, Runner was taken into the Witness Protection Program until the trial and an investigation was launched against Jarvis. Joe would have to wait until Jarvis was actually arrested before he could be released.

The wait wasn't easy for Catherine because she couldn't tell Joe. But on Wednesday, Jarvis was arrested along

with half of his organization. Joe was released later that afternoon.

Catherine was waiting for him in his office. She was sitting in his chair with her feet propped on the desk, popping a rubber band. Joe walked in and stopped abruptly.

"Well, Radcliffe, making yourself comfortable?"

She looked at him indignantly. "Just preparing for my next move."

"Well, Chandler, you're going to have a long wait."

She couldn't resist it any longer. Swinging her legs off the desk, she jumped up and raced into Joe's waiting arms. "Welcome back, boss."

Catherine returned Below that night, visions of a romantic reunion dancing in her mind. Her steps were lighter and her spirits were soaring by the time she entered their chamber. There she saw Vincent, sitting cross-legged on the floor, playing with their daughter. She watched as little Katie would toddle into his arms and he would lift her high over his head. The child would giggle then Vincent would put her down to repeat the game.

In between Katie's charges, Vincent looked at Catherine and smiled as he read her emotions. All was well.

As she stepped into the chamber, Jacob suddenly barreled in from the tunnels and leaped at Vincent. In an effort to catch his flying son, Vincent reached out and caught Jacob just under his arms. His hold on him only served to throw off the child's balance and he fell into his father's lap, knees first.

From Catherine's vantage point, she saw one of Jacob's knees come down hard on Vincent's groin area. She gasped as Vincent quickly but carefully, set Jacob aside and rolled over onto his side in excruciating pain.

"Jacob, go get your grandfather. **NOW!**" she ordered.

The frightened little boy did as he was told. Quickly, Catherine picked up a crying Katie and struggled to get Vincent onto the bed. His face was ashen and he couldn't talk. It frightened her when he curled up in a fetal position and moaned.

Soon Father and Mary arrived. Father went to the bedside and Mary took the children to her chamber. Catherine simply paced back and forth impatiently as the examination went on.

"Well?" she asked when Father finished his exam.

"Well, my dear, he's badly bruised. This close after the surgery is really bad timing. Blood clots could form." He focused his attention on Vincent. "I know the pain must be awful. I'm going to start ice pack treatments." When Vincent winced, he explained. "The ice will reduce the swelling and numb you somewhat. I'm afraid to try any medications on you."

"How serious is this?" Catherine asked.

"It could be **VERY** serious if not treated properly. Vincent, you are to stay in this bed and follow my instructions about the ice packs. It looks like you're going to be out of commission for about four to six weeks."

A groan escaped Catherine as she fell back into a chair and rolled her eyes heavenward. ***"NOT AGAIN!"***

END