

# WHEN ALL IS LOST

by Sandy P Shelton

(from All Things Are Possible VII)

"Dr. Hamilton?"

Charlie looked up from his patient's chart at the eager young nurse standing in front of him. With a polite smile, he closed the file and gave her his full attention. "Yes, Ms. Barrett."

The young nurse blushed a little under his intense gaze. "You're off-duty as of twenty minutes ago."

"You're absolutely right. Thank you, Ms. Barrett." The young woman's attraction to him was obvious and had caused Charlie some embarrassment over the last few weeks. She was wearing her heart on her sleeve, as his mother had often said. It was too bad he harbored no such feelings for her. She had a great body, a charming smile, and a beautiful face. A man could do a lot worse, but there was too much going on in his life right now for any romantic entanglements.

She stood there waiting as if she was expecting him to ask her something and Charlie was keenly aware of it. He didn't want to hurt her feelings because she was truly a nice person. Who knows, maybe a few years from now... A few years ago, he would have pursued the possibility. "Well, I guess I'd better get out of here."

"Would you... I thought maybe, I could buy you a cup of coffee," she hesitantly suggested.

"Maybe some other time. Right now, I'm so tired all I want to do is sack out. I'm going somewhere where there are no phones, no loud neighbors, no traffic noise, just quiet."

"Sounds heavenly," she answered with disappointment.

"It is. I have seventy-two hours off-duty and I intend to do as little as possible. I would like a rain check on that cup of coffee though."

The nurse smiled a little more hopefully. "You have it."

"Good. Goodnight, Ms. Barrett. I'll see you in seventy-two hours."

"Good-night, Dr. Hamilton."

At four o'clock in the morning, the streets of New York were far from deserted but the people occupying them now were not the polished business types. Everything from drug pushers, hookers, the homeless, to yuppie club-hoppers and up town party-goers could be seen making their way along the streets.

Charlie pulled his coat collar up around his neck. He had been on duty for twenty-four straight hours and eight of them had been in the emergency room. Those had been eight of the most difficult hours he had spent in his medical career to date.

The constant stream of battered and broken bodies almost overwhelmed him. Accidents and illnesses he could deal with but the senseless violence offended him as a human being. In particular, he remembered the fifteen year old boy who had been shot in the back. His spinal cord had been severed and he would spend the rest of his life in a wheel chair. He thought of the sixteen year old girl who had been brutally beaten and raped. Her pain would stay with him forever.

Those images sent a chill up his back that had nothing to do with the November night. It made him long for the warmth and comfort of the community he had discovered living beneath these cold, concrete streets. The acceptance and compassion that he had immersed himself in over the last

few months had changed him. That world he shared with the most important person in his life — his sister.

The thought of her made him smile despite himself. Since the loss of his mother, Cathy was the only person he had allowed to get close — and get close, she did. Once accepting him as her half-brother, she had reached into the depths of his heart and had firmly and permanently ensconced herself. Not only had she reached out to him but she had opened her own heart to him as well.

His niece and nephew had totally captured his heart. Little Jake, with his father's sky blue eyes and strawberry blond hair, was every bit his mother's son. Many times he had seen the same devilish glint in the boy's eyes that he had seen in Cathy's. Katie, on the other hand, had her mother's beauty tempered by her father's shyness. She was going to be a real heartbreaker. Charlie laughed out loud. He pitied the boy she brought home to meet her parents. He could just imagine Vincent's response.

Vincent — now there was someone truly unique. The man's sensitivity, his strength, his courage were boundless. The patience he had seen him display with the children seemed limitless. But the thing that impressed him the most was the depth of the love he had for Cathy. The power of that love had often left him speechless. How can two people love so deeply?

As he walked toward Central Park, he wondered if perhaps that was why he wasn't interested in any more casual relationships. Maybe he was holding out for what Vincent and Catherine had. He questioned if that was even possible. All those thoughts and feelings were tumbling through his mind as he headed for the one place he considered home.

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Vincent knelt by the mirrored pool and gazed into his own reflection. As he stared at his own image, a voice behind him put his feelings into words.

*"Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?"*

The reflection that appeared in the pool beside his was beauty beyond compare and pointed out the stark contrast between the two of them. She continued.

*"In what distant deeps or skies  
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
On what wings dare he aspire?  
What the hand dare seize the fire?"*

"You've been reading Blake again, haven't you?" Vincent asked with a teasing smile.

Catherine put her arm across his shoulder and continued to gaze at the reflections. "I've always had a passion for William Blake."

"Should I be jealous?"

"Considering the fact that he's been dead since 1827, I don't think you have anything to worry about."

Vincent turned and looked up into his lover's mischievous green eyes. "I am ashamed to admit that anyone who distracts you from me arouses my jealousy." He stood up so that she could straighten her back. He could feel her body's fatigue.

"I wish I could arouse you in other ways and be able to relieve you as well."

He took her gently into his arms. "Catherine, this is only temporary and nothing you should concern yourself with. I am quite content with my lot in life just now. You are here with me and the children — that is enough."

"Is it really?"

He leaned over and kissed her full lips. "Yes. Stop worrying about me. I am fine."

"If you're fine, why are you down here at four o'clock in the morning?"

"I couldn't sleep — that's all. Instead of disturbing you, I decided to just take a walk and ended up here. Speaking of which, why aren't you in bed?"

Catherine rested her head against his solid chest. "When I woke up and you weren't there, I was worried. I've felt some troubling emotions in you lately."

In an effort to comfort and assure her, he began to tenderly stroke her back. "There's nothing to be concerned about. Now, let me escort you back and put you to bed."

"Only if you'll read to me."

"Catherine, it's late."

"Only one poem, I promise."

"I find myself unable to refuse you anything. What would you have me read to you?"

*"To The Evening Star."*

"I should have known," he laughed.

Shortly; thereafter, back in their chamber, they both lay beneath the warmth of the quilts. Vincent opened Catherine's cherished book and began to read."

*"Thou fair-hair'd angel of the evening,  
Now, whilst the sun rests on the mountains, light  
Thy bright torch of love, thy radiant crown  
Put on, and smile upon our evening bed!  
Smile on our loves, and, while thou drawest the  
Blue curtains of the sky, scatter thy silver dew  
On every flower that shuts its sweet eyes  
In timely sleep. Let thy west wind sleep on  
The lake, speak silence with thy glimmering eyes,  
And wash the dusk with silver. Soon, full soon,  
Dost thou withdraw; then the wolf rages wide,  
and the lion glares thro' the dim forest;  
The fleeces of our flocks are cover'd with  
Thy sacred dew; protect them with thine influence."*

As he read the last line, he looked over at Catherine. She was sleeping peacefully. Carefully, he put aside the book and pulled the covers snugly around her. "Protect them —her with thine influence," he repeated softly then closed his own eyes to join her in slumber.

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Upon reaching the last truly familiar intersection in the maze of tunnels, Charlie stopped and picked up a rock to tap out a message. Just as he was about to strike the pipes, he heard a groan or, at least he thought he did. Not really sure he had really heard something, he waited for a moment. He

was about to dismiss the sound as wind in the tunnels until he heard it again. The sound was definitely that of a someone in pain.

Following the sound, Charlie turned down an unfamiliar tunnel. With every step, his better judgment was screaming at him to turn back. He couldn't. Something in that anguished groan told him someone needed help and he could not simply walk away.

As he turned a corner, the dim light of a torch illuminated a crumpled human form propped against the opposite wall. "Hello," he called out. After getting no response, he walked cautiously over to the form. "Do you need help?"

There was a slight movement and Charlie knelt down. It was then he saw the pool of blood forming just under the right arm. Acting on instinct, he lifted the arm and found the injury. There was a deep gash in the wrist. "Damn!" Charlie muttered as he leaned over to check the other arm. There, he found a similar gash. "Oh great!"

He used his tie to stop the blood flow on one arm and his scarf on the other but he knew it was only a stop-gap procedure. The wounds needed to be closed. It wasn't until that moment he realized his patient was a woman. "What in the world made you do this, lady?"

Frantically, he tapped out the SOS message Cathy had taught him. It was the only thing he could do. Taking her Above would require carrying her all the way across the park then waiting for an ambulance to arrive. He didn't know if she had that much time. If he could get her to Father's hospital chamber, he believed she would, at least, have a chance. It was a gamble, but one he felt justified in taking.

Charlie made use of the time by monitoring his patient's pulse and working with the tourniquet. When he heard hurried footsteps approaching, he sighed in relief then called out. "In here!" Vincent, along with three young men Charlie recognized as lookouts, appeared in the tunnel.

"What is it, Charlie?" Vincent asked.

"We have to get her to the hospital chamber. She's critical."

When Vincent knelt down to look at the woman, he gasped. "Cassie!"

"You know her?" Charlie asked.

"She's the daughter of two of our helpers. I've known her since she was a child. Her name is Cassandra Stephens — Cassie."

"If we don't do something soon, she'll be a former helper. Got any ideas?"

Vincent rose and removed his cape. Upon hearing the emergency call, he had dressed hastily, grabbing the cloak as a reflex action. Now, he was glad he did. "Geoffrey, you and Zack grab those old pipes in the next section of tunnels. We'll make a stretcher."

It only took a few minutes to put together a makeshift stretcher. The five of them carefully moved the limp body onto the stretcher. With Charlie walking beside his patient to do what he could, Vincent and the others carried the stretcher quickly and smoothly through the tunnels. They stopped briefly to signal ahead for Father and Mary to prepare for the emergency.

When they arrived in the hospital chamber, Father, Mary, and Catherine were waiting. Catherine smiled in relief when she saw that Charlie was not the injured party. From the moment the SOS had been heard, she had feared the worst. She well knew the dangers the world Above held in the cover of darkness. Just the mere possibility of losing her younger brother after having him in her life for only such a short time, was something she just couldn't deal with at all.

"What do we have here?" Father asked.

"Attempted suicide, I'm guessing. Both wrists are slashed."

"Cassie!" Mary gasped when they placed the body' on the treatment table.

"We've got work to do. Vincent, why don't you take Catherine to my study. Zach, you should return to your watch point." Father's orders were given in a tone of voice that demanded compliance.

Without question, the room emptied quickly. Those left, worked rapidly to cleanse and close the wounds.

"What happened, Charlie?" Father inquired.

"I just found her like this. Vincent said she's a helper or something?"

"Actually, she's the daughter of Ronald and Abigail Stephens. They were helpers almost from the beginning."

Charlie took a moment to really look at the girl lying on the table. She was so young and beautiful. Her short raven hair framed the delicate features of her face. The full lips, the petite nose, the high cheekbones, and smooth skin were comparable to any model he had ever seen. "I don't understand. Why would someone like this try to kill herself?"

Father sighed. "I know she's been through a great deal lately but the whys will have to wait. What we have to do right now is see that she gets a second chance."

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Vincent and Catherine sat at the big table in Father's study. He was staring at his clenched fists and she was studying him. The pain she felt in him brought tears to her eyes.

To show her concern and support, she reached over and placed her hands on his. "She'll be all right."

Vincent took a deep breath. "I hope you're right. I know Father and Charlie will do all they can..."

"But?"

"But what about after. Catherine, to have committed such an act, she must have lost all hope. We may be able to heal the physical wounds but what of the emotional ones? The ones that drove her to this."

She squeezed his hands lovingly. "I only met her a few times. She seemed so nice. I never suspected anything was going on. Do you know what might have contributed to this?"

"She's been through so much in her short life," he mumbled as he slipped Catherine's hands into his. "I remember her as a child. She was bright, happy and full of life. Just after her fifteenth birthday, her father was killed by a drunken driver soon after her mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. Her mother's death was a slow, horrible one and Cassie was the primary care giver. Instead of enjoying her last two years in high school, she had to accept the responsibility of caring for an invalid mother."

"That's terrible. Was there no one to help?"

"We did all we could. We had someone there while Cassie attended classes during the day but she had so much responsibility. Too much for a young girl."

"It's hard to imagine how devastating that must have been. To lose both your parents so quickly."

"We did our best to help her and she seemed to be making a life for herself. She found a job and had moved into her own apartment. Last we heard, she had even met a young man. I can't understand how this could have happened?"

"It sounds like a case of love gone wrong or maybe everything just caught up with her. We won't know until she's able to tell us; that is, assuming she lives."

The sheer waste of it all weighed heavily upon his heart. Another concern also began to gnaw at him. "Catherine, the children will be up soon. Why don't you try to get some sleep before they wake? You should be resting."

"I don't think I could sleep."

"You should at least lie down."

"Vincent..."

"Catherine, we all have enough to worry about right now. If something were to happen to you..."

His concern touched her and made her think about her own limitations. He was right. They all had more than enough to worry about tonight. "All right. You win. I'll go lie down for a while but promise me you'll let me know how she's doing."

"You have my word."

With a greater effort than usual, Catherine rose from the chair then leaned over and kissed the top of his head. "I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too," he replied.

A short time later, Father walked into the study and sat down by Vincent.

"Well?" Vincent asked anxiously.

"Oh — physically, she'll recover. She'll be weak from the loss of blood for a few days and the wounds on her wrists will take a while to heal. I'm more concerned about the emotional wounds. Those are much more difficult to heal."

"Is she awake yet?"

"No. I gave her a sedative. She should sleep for several hours."

"What then?"

"I honestly don't know. But, at this point, I don't think sending her back Above is a wise idea."

"I agree. We must watch her closely. She might try it again," Vincent agreed.

"I'm afraid so. Right now, Charlie is with her."

Vincent sat back and looked questioningly at Father.

"I suppose, since he found her, he feels some sort of responsibility for her. A feeling that should be familiar to you."

A warm smile of remembrance graced Vincent's face. "That was the night I truly began to live."

"Yes. That night changed us all," Father reluctantly admitted.

"Do you require my assistance any further? The children will be up soon and Catherine is anxious for news of Cassie."

"We could all use some rest. You go to Catherine. I'll have someone relieve Charlie in a few hours."

"You think a great deal of Catherine's brother, don't you?" Vincent observed.

"He is a very bright, dedicated young man. A lot like his sister."

"And perhaps someone to follow in your footsteps?"

"I admit it's been nice having someone to talk medicine with. Watching him go through the training, learning all the latest discoveries from him has been — invigorating. But I don't think Charlie would give up that world for life down here."

"But, as Catherine has proven, a balance can be struck between the two."

Father sighed deeply. "Perhaps. We'll see."

"Goodnight, Father."

"Goodnight, son."

When Vincent entered his chamber, Catherine was in bed and just barely awake. A smile played across her face as he approached. Her sensitivity to their bond had grown over the years until she could sense his presence and his stronger emotions. "Are you asleep?" he asked.

"Almost. How's Cassie?"

Her eyes fluttered open as she asked that question. "Better. Father said she was going to recover physically but emotionally — a lot of work needs to be done."

Catherine rolled over and stroked his arm. "At least she'll have the chance. Where there's life there's hope."

He took her hand in his then gently kissed it.

"I can sit with her," Catherine offered.

"Charlie is doing that right now. Mary and Father will do it tomorrow. You'll have the kids and you don't need to be exerting yourself."

"I'm not an invalid," Catherine flatly stated.

"No, but you are my most precious treasure and I will do what I must to protect you."

Catherine smiled mischievously. "Whether I need it or not!"

"Absolutely!"

They both laughed. "You must try to get some sleep, Catherine."

"The kids will be up soon," she argued.

"I'll take care of them until you've rested. Now, go to sleep." Her eyes were already closing.

"You spoil me — too — much."

Quietly watching as she drifted into deep sleep, Vincent was once again awed by her beauty and the miracle of her love for him. That miracle never ceased to amaze him. He watched her for a little while longer then made his way to his children's chambers.

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Charlie had been sitting in the same chair for over an hour. Although he had dozed off from time to time, sleeping in the old hard back chair was impossible. But then again, he wasn't supposed to be sleeping. He was watching the patient.

He stretched in an effort to relieve the tension in his aching back. A deep sigh, another stretch, then a walk around the chamber were also attempts to stay alert for any change in the young woman. Above, he knew the sun was coming up on another day. Here Below, the only difference between day and night was the level of activity of the citizens. One of which came walking through the chamber's entrance.

"Good morning, Charlie," the elderly man said as he limped over to the cot. "How's the patient this morning?"

"Still sleeping."

"That's something you should be doing, young man."

Charlie rubbed his tired eyes. "I know but I hate to leave her."

Father smiled. "You sound like someone else I know."

"What?"

"Never mind. I'll have one of the other cots moved in here and you can get some sleep while we watch over Cassie."

Putting his hands on his hips in mock disdain, Charlie asked a rather cynical question. "Now, why didn't you think of that last night?"

A very loud chuckle escaped Father. "Didn't you know that all young interns must suffer for their profession?"

"Yeah — but I'm off-duty now."

"My dear boy, a doctor is never off duty. Remember that."

After a preliminary examination, Father looked over at Charlie and smiled. "Her vital signs are strong."

Returning the smile, Charlie nodded. "Good." The overwhelming relief he felt surprised him a little. He wasn't at all prepared for such strong feelings about a perfect stranger.

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After a few hours' sleep, Charlie was awakened by a gentle pressure against his chest. When he finally managed to focus, he found himself staring into two bright green eyes. "Cathy?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you," she whispered softly as she sat down on the cot next to her brother. "How are you?"

"Tired." He looked over at the young woman lying on a nearby cot. "Has she regained consciousness yet?"

Shaking her head sadly, Catherine looked over at the girl. "No."

Charlie slowly pulled himself up into a sitting position. As he did, a book fell into his lap. "What's this?"

"I thought you might enjoy something relaxing to read. I've marked a poem that I think you might have a particular appreciation for — in view of current events."

Noticing the nod of her head toward Cassie, Charlie perceived her meaning fully. "You're doing it."

Catherine's bright green eyes reflected a mock innocence that was betrayed by her smile. "And just what am I doing?"

"What I've heard all big sisters do — matchmaking for her lithe brother."

"I never..."

"Yes, you have!"

"Okay, okay, I confess. You can't blame a girl for trying. I just want you to be happy. I want you to find what I have."

Charlie reached up and stroked her cheek. "I know. You don't know how much that means to me. All the things other guys may complain about regarding their sisters, I relish. You can hover over me, match make to your heart's content, pick out my clothes, or whatever your big sister instincts tell you to do. It's okay with me. It just means you care and I wouldn't trade that for anything."

"I do, you know." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Why don't you get yourself something to eat? I'll watch Cassie."

"I don't know..."

With great indignation, Catherine glared at him. "I can handle that. I'm not totally incapacitated!"

Charlie gently patted the swell of her belly. "Maybe not, but you don't need any stress."

"We're talking about sitting in a chair watching an unconscious person. How stressful can that be?"

"Well — I suppose..."

"Go!" Catherine ordered.

"Okay, okay!"

After a filling but simple lunch, Charlie returned to the hospital chamber. There he found Catherine sitting quietly in the chair with her eyes closed. "Are you asleep, sis?"

Catherine was startled by the voice. "Charlie!"

"Now who needs a nap?"

"I wasn't asleep. I was just remembering."

"Anything you want to tell me?"

"Someday — I'll do just that," she answered. "Let me make a suggestion. Try reading to her. You might want to start with this." She handed the poetry book to him. "You might be surprised at the effect a soft, soothing voice has."

Charlie studied the book as Catherine pushed herself up into a standing position. "Blake?"

"Give it a shot," Catherine suggested with a wink. "I've got to go. We'll see you at dinner?"

"Of course."

With a smile, Catherine patted him on the shoulder and left him contemplating her suggestion.



"Oh well, it couldn't hurt." He pulled the chair closer to the bed and opened the book to the page Catherine had turned down.

He cleared his throat and began reading.

*"Can I see another's woe,  
And not be in sorrow too?  
Can I see another's grief,  
And not seek to kind relief?"*

*Can I see a falling tear,  
And not feel my sorrow's share?  
Can a father see his child  
Weep, nor be with sorrow fill'd?*

*Can a mother sit and hear  
An infant groan an infant fear?  
No, No! never can it be!  
Never, never can it be!*

*And can he who smiles on all  
Hear the wren with sorrows small,  
Hear the small bird's grief and care,  
Hear the woes that infants bear,*

*And not sit beside the nest,  
Pouring pity in their breast,  
And not sit the cradle near,  
Weeping tear on infant's tear;*

*And not sit both night and day,  
Wiping all our tears away?  
O, no! never can it be!  
Never, never can it be!*

*He doth give his joy to all;  
He becomes an infant small:  
He becomes a man of woe:  
He doth feel the sorrow too.*

*Think not thou canst sigh a sigh  
And thy maker is not by;  
Think not thou canst weep a tear  
And thy maker is not near.*

*O! he gives to us his joy  
That our grief he may destroy;  
Till our grief is fled and gone  
He doth sit by us and moan."*

The message of the poem became clear to him and he understood why Catherine had insisted he read it. It was as much for him as for Cassie.

As he flipped through the pages, a soft moan broke the silence. Quickly putting aside the book, Charlie rushed over to the cot and began to examine the patient. All signs indicated that Cassie was waking up.

Charlie watched as the young woman's eyes fluttered a few times then opened slowly. "Hello there, Cassie. My name is Charlie. Now — just relax. You're safe and you're going to be all right."

It took a few seconds for her to focus her eyes. While she did, Charlie noticed just how dark brown those eyes were. When she finally looked at him, he was immediately captured by their dark depths. But the initial warmth he had seen in them quickly vanished. Those soft brown eyes turned into cold dark spheres then turned away.

Very gently, Charlie lifted her hand and clasped it in between his. There wasn't a lot he could say to someone in so much pain so he simply held her hand and repeated a verse from the poem.

*"Think not thou canst sigh a sigh  
And thy maker is not by;  
Think not thou canst weep a tear  
And thy maker is not near."*

Cassie looked over at Charlie with a stunned expression. "You're the one... You read to me."

"Guilty. My sister thinks reading has mystical healing powers. Perhaps, she was right."

"Sister?"

"Cathy Chandler. She and Vincent..."

"You mean Catherine?"

"Yes. Do you know her?" Charlie asked.

"Everyone who knows about this world knows the legend of Vincent and Catherine."

"The legend? Does my sister know she's a legend? Gee, her ego is big enough already."

She shook her head.

"I'd better get Father. He wanted to know when you woke up."

"NO!"

"Take it easy. He just wants to make sure you're all right. He saved your life," Charlie tried to explain.

"I don't want to see him. I don't want to see anyone!"

"You don't have to see anyone you don't want to. But, I'll be honest with you, it's going to be next to impossible to avoid everyone down here."

"It's not so difficult if you know where to go."

"I suppose one of those places would be the tunnel I found you in."

"You — found me?"

"Yep! If I hadn't, you wouldn't be here now."

"You'll excuse me if I don't thank you. Being here right now is not what I had in mind."

Charlie's instincts told him he should not pursue the conversation because she wasn't strong enough yet. But he sensed she was leaving the door ajar for him and he could not back away.

"And just what did you have in mind?"

"I should think that was obvious. Why the hell didn't you leave me alone? Everyone else has."

"I am not everyone else. I could no more leave you to bleed to death in that tunnel than I could leap over the Empire State Building. For some reason, I happened to find you in time. Whether it was purely a coincidence or predestined, I don't know. Personally, I tend to believe in destiny."

Cassie swallowed hard then licked her parched lips. "I stopped believing in anything a long time ago."

"Apparently. You want to tell me about it?"

"What's the point? I'm tired of talking. I'm tired of — everything. Just leave me alone."

"It's like I said, I'm a stubborn man. For some reason, the thought of someone as young and as beautiful as you giving up on life makes me as mad as hell. If you don't feel like fighting then I'll fight for both of us. I don't know what drove you to this but, Cassie, nothing is worth your life. You can't just quit."

"You're right. You don't know. Just leave me alone."

"You do need to rest but I'm not walking away from this and I won't let you. You try to get some sleep. I'm going to tell everyone that you're feeling better. Someone will be close by at all times in case you need something."

"You mean in case I try to finish the job?."

"The thought crossed my mind." He favored her with his most charming smile. "After all the hard work I've done, the very least you could do would be not to do anything stupid. Let everyone have a restful evening and a good night's sleep. Can you promise me that?"

She stared at him briefly, considering his request. "Whatever."

"That's not good enough. I want your word," Charlie insisted.

"All right, already! I promise not to spoil anyone's day, okay?"

"That'll do, I guess. Now get some rest. I'll bring you some liquids. You need to get down a lot of fluids."

"I could use a stiff drink about now."

Charlie laughed. "See — I knew you had a sense of humor hiding in there somewhere."

"Who's joking?"

He watched as she closed her eyes. That fragile, young girl, so bereft of hope, was calling out to him for help and something in him was responding. But something stronger was stirring in Charlie. A sense of destiny, a feeling of purpose, perhaps even a feeling of belonging had awakened in him. Finding his sister had restored some of those feelings, but what he was experiencing now went way beyond that. He began to wonder just where it was going to lead.

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Vincent and Catherine were managing the colossal task of feeding their offspring, when Charlie entered the large dining chamber.

"I see it's feeding time at the zoo," Charlie commented with a big friendly smile. Considering Vincent's questionable heritage, anyone else would have hesitated to make such a remark but Charlie's brother-in-law took it in the spirit in which it was given. In fact, Charlie found him to have an amazing sense of humor — under the right circumstances. He was sure his sister had something to do with the way he saw himself these days.

Jake and Katie greeted their uncle with the usual enthusiasm. The new distraction only served to fuel their mother's exasperation. "Katie — please!"

"I'm sorry," Charlie apologized. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"I think meal time is over anyway," Vincent remarked. "How is Cassie?"

"Awake."

Catherine finally joined in the conversation after wiping off Katie's hands. "That's great."

"How is her emotional state? Did she tell you why she did such a horrendous thing?" Vincent lifted Jake into his lap as he awaited Charlie's answer to his question.

"That's a little difficult to determine." Charlie began putting together a meal for himself and Cassie as he spoke. "She seems angry that we interfered. She refuses to get into what drove her to it. Getting her through this is not going to be easy."

"Anything worthwhile seldom is," Catherine commented as she winked at Vincent. To her, it was easy to see that her little brother was taking a more than professional interest in the young patient. "Did you read to her like I suggested?"

"Yes — it worked, actually. How did you come up with that?"

A warm smile brightened Catherine's face as she glanced lovingly over at Vincent. "Personal experience."

Charlie noticed the look that passed between the two. He was convinced that that intangible, but intensely felt, something between them could melt the coldest of hearts. It always made him sit back and think. I want to be loved like that. Maybe — someday.

Vincent lingered in the warmth of Catherine's smile for a moment then stood up. He placed Jake on the floor as he did. "I want to talk to Cassie."

"No!" Charlie protested. "She doesn't want to see anyone just yet. I think she's ashamed."

"Allowing her to hide isn't going to help her. She needs to confront her demons. She needs to know that her family down here wants to help her and that we love her." Vincent's argument continued.

"I think she needs a little time first. Besides, we can't help if she won't let us. We have to take this one step at a time."

"Charlie's right," Father interjected. He had overheard the conversation from the entranceway. "If we all go in there trying to right all the wrongs of her life, we'll simply overwhelm her. Charlie's the only one she's had contact with and is talking to so far. I think we should wait until she feels that she can handle the rest of us."

"I realize that, but aloneness is probably part of what drove her to this. It has been known to destroy one's will to live," Vincent said softly.

Everyone in that chamber knew that Vincent spoke from experience. The years he spent as a prisoner to his uniqueness were testimony to that.

Catherine got to her feet slowly. As she straightened up a wave of dizziness caused her to sway unsteadily. Vincent rushed to her side to support her. "Easy, Catherine."

Both Charlie and Father hovered about her asking questions in an effort to determine the problem. "Catherine — what is it?" Father asked.

"I just felt so weak — so dizzy. It's better now," she answered in an effort to calm the panic she felt in Vincent.

"Vincent, let's get her to the hospital chamber. I want to check her blood pressure," Father commanded.

Charlie noticed Vincent's frantic glance at the children who were frightened by their mother's condition. Before he could say anything, little Jake took his sister's hand and looked confidently up at his father. "You take care of Mommy. Katie and I will be all right."

"Jacob, I..."

"I'm grown up enough to look after my sister," the little boy proclaimed.

Catherine clutched Vincent's vest to get his attention. "Let him," she whispered. "Trust him."

After hesitating for a moment, Vincent gave in to his concern for Catherine. "All right. You will take your sister to her chamber and stay with her until I arrive. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir. I can handle it."

"He's a big boy now," Catherine added. "They'll be fine. Besides, we won't be long."

The adults watched as Jacob led his young sister out of the chamber. The second they were out of sight, Vincent swept Catherine up in his arms and headed for the hospital chamber. Father and Charlie were close behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Your blood pressure is elevated. Did you take your medication today?" Father inquired.

"Yes," Catherine responded.

Father studied her for a moment. "I want to increase it. I also want you to lie down as much as possible."

"Will she be all right?" Vincent asked nervously.

"I am going to be fine. Isn't that right, Father?"

For a moment, Father looked as if he had some serious doubts. "Of course. Vincent, take her to bed immediately."

Catherine looked at Father in shock. She raised one eyebrow and tilted her head. "Why Father! I never thought I'd hear you order Vincent to take me to bed! Especially, after all those years of ordering him not to."

Father's serious scowl began to fade into a smile. She had a way of doing that to him and he found it utterly charming. "If you'll let me finish. She is not to exert herself in the least." He returned her teasing, raised eye-brow look. "She will have breakfast in bed and only get up when someone is with her. Is that understood?"

She glanced over at Charlie. When he nodded in agreement, she blushed slightly. "Is this that serious?"

Father took her hand in his. "Yes, Catherine. If left untreated, you and the baby could be in serious trouble. Your condition is not to be taken lightly."

"I'll do whatever you say to protect my baby."

"And I will see that she is taken care of as well," Vincent added.

Once again, he lifted her into his arms then carried her out of the chamber. Charlie watched them go then stepped closer to Father. "It's getting worse, isn't it?"

"It appears to be."

"She could lose this baby, couldn't she?"

"That's a strong possibility at this point. What concerns me more, however, is Catherine. Not only could she lose the baby, but with her elevated blood pressure, she could suffer a stroke. I've seen it happen."

Charlie clenched his teeth. That was a possibility he wasn't prepared to face. "Then we'd better be damned sure it doesn't happen to her."

Placing his hand on Charlie's shoulder, Father responded. "We'll do all that's humanly possible. Might I suggest an occasional prayer as well?"

Charlie walked into Cassie's chamber with food in hand. He found her leafing through the book of poetry Catherine had left earlier. "I warn you. It's habit forming."

Cassie put the book down quickly. "It's just words — silly, meaningless words."

"That's what I used to think!" As he walked over to the chair by her bed, he quickly assessed her condition. A little more color had returned to her cheeks along with a bit more clarity in her eyes. Those were encouraging signs. "I brought you something to eat."

"I don't want anything."

"Probably not, but you're going to eat something."

"Just what do you propose to do? Force feed me."

"If I need to, but I hope it won't be necessary." He stared into her eyes, meeting her challenge.

She blinked then looked down at the simple fare offered. Tentatively, she reached for the sandwich on the tray.

"It's a beginning. Maybe later we can shoot for the stew." Sitting back in the chair, Charlie watched as she ate. As he did, he couldn't help thinking about Catherine.

"You don't have to baby-sit me if you've got somewhere else you'd rather be."

"What? Oh — I was just thinking about someone."

"Your girlfriend?"

Charlie laughed. "Not hardly. I was thinking about my sister."

"Catherine?"

"Yes."

Cassie was interested in talking about anything but herself. "Is she in trouble?"

"In a way. She's pregnant and there are complications. I'm really worried about her." He sighed then looked over at Cassie. She had put down the sandwich and wrapped her arms tightly around her upper body. Her knees were pulled up to her chest. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be burdening you with this."

"Another baby. For years, everyone felt so sorry for Vincent. He was always alone. Nobody expected him to have any kind of a normal life. Certainly, no one expected him to have a wife and become a father. Funny how things work out. He was restricted to living down here and found happiness. While the rest of us..."

"...are still searching," Charlie finished the thought for her.

"Happiness is an elusive thing. The more you search for it, the less likely you are to find it."

Charlie studied her for a moment. She seemed to be letting her guard down a little. "Perhaps it is better to let it find you as Vincent did. And as Catherine did."

"Good things come to those who wait?" Cassie asked sarcastically.

"I suppose it depends if you're the one waiting. Cassie — is that what this was all about?" He could feel her shut him out again.

"I don't want to talk about it. How is Catherine?"

Realizing any progress with Cassie would be slow at best, Charlie decided to back off and follow her lead. "She's better. Her blood pressure is difficult to control and that's dangerous. Tonight, she became dizzy. I'm afraid if we don't get it under control, she'll pass out and hurt herself and the baby — or worse."

"There's more?"

"She could have a stroke and we could lose them both."

"Vincent could end up alone again. What's the point of it all?"

There was anger in her voice. "What's the point of love?" Charlie debated the answer to that for only an instant. "Whether he loses Catherine or not, he will never be alone again. Their love raised him out of that aloneness and fulfilled his destiny. Their love is an entity all its own. You see it in the faces of their children. You see it in their eyes when they look at each other. You feel it when you're around them. Their love will far outlive them. It will continue in their kids and in all the people whose lives have been touched by it."

Charlie was a bit surprised by the intensity of his own words. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that for whatever time we're given, we should live and love to the fullest no matter what form that love may take or how long we have to wait for it."

"Words. They can't get you through a lonely night. They don't help when you've been betrayed yet again. They don't help when you've lost everyone you've ever loved. Your words are empty. Why don't you save them for someone who gives a damn?"

The bluntness of her words made Charlie feel as if he had run into a brick wall. Pursuing this now would be useless but he felt as if a response was needed. "You don't believe in much, do you?"

"I don't believe in anything anymore."

"That means you did once."

Cassie closed her eyes and rested her head against the headboard of the bed. "As a child, I believed in Santa Claus, The Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy. I grew up."

"Personally, I still believe in Santa Claus but the Easter Bunny does stretch it a bit."

That comment almost brought a smile to the young woman's face. "One of these days, I'm going to get you to smile."

Her eyes opened and her head moved into a level position. "Hope springs eternal?"

"I've always been an optimist. I guess that's why I became a doctor."

"There are some things, Charlie Hamilton, that you cannot cure."

"But I can guarantee you one thing, Ms. Stephens, it won't be for lack of trying."

"Find another — cause."

"I happen to like this one. Now, if you'll eat some of this stew, we both can get some sleep."

Cassie studied him closely. "If I eat this stuff, will you leave me alone?"

"I didn't say I'd leave you alone. I said we could get some sleep. To assure that. I plan to read aloud. That should put anyone to sleep."

"Won-der-ful." Cassie responded in a very sarcastic tone.

Charlie picked up the book in a very grand manner. "That's what I thought."

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day, as Charlie walked toward Vincent and Catherine's chamber, he met Vincent carrying young Katie as Jake tried to keep in step with his father. "Where is everybody going?" he asked.

"To class, while I see to some repairs in the pipe chamber," Vincent replied.

Charlie looked down at Jake and made a face. The boy responded with one of his own that elicited a groan and a laugh from his uncle. "Where's Cathy?"

Vincent nodded toward their chamber entrance. "In there — resting."

"How is she?"

A very concerned expression crossed Vincent's face. "Better, but I'm terribly worried. It wasn't like this before."

"So I've been told. Look — try not to worry about it too much, Vincent. Cathy's a strong woman and with you and the kids pulling for her, she can't lose." Charlie was trying his best to put Vincent's mind at ease, but it was difficult when his own fears were threatening to overcome him. "Do you think she's up to some company?"

"She would love it and I would appreciate it if you would check her condition this morning."

"That's exactly what I had in mind. Have fun in class, kids. I'll see you later, Vincent."

"Oh, Charlie — how's Cassie this morning?"

"Extremely argumentative."

Vincent laughed. "That's a good sign."

"Let's just say it's an interesting development. I'll fill you in later."

After good-byes were said, Charlie walked softly toward the chamber. "Cathy?"

Her soft voice responded. "Charlie! Come in."

Tentatively, Charlie walked into the chamber. He was determined to put forth his most charming, optimistic face but when he saw her, he faltered. Her once bright, smiling face that seemed to flow with good health was pale and puffy. Her eyes looked tired and red. It was very obvious she wasn't feeling well at all. He smiled warmly then walked over to his sister and kissed her on the cheek.

"How's it going, sis?"

Catherine rubbed her swollen belly. "I'm afraid it's not going at all. I'm beginning to feel like a very large bump on a log."

As Charlie placed the earpieces of the stethoscope in his ears, he chuckled. "No, Cathy. You're about to give birth to a bump. Now, let's have a listen."

Several minutes passed as Charlie painstakingly checked his sister's condition. When he finished, he pulled the stethoscope earpieces from his ears and let his physician's training assess the information.

Catherine's patience was growing thin. "Well?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was just thinking," Charlie apologized.

"Look, Charlie, I expect Father and Peter to sugar coat the situation but, from you, I want the unvarnished truth."

"I'm only an intern, Cathy."

"A very good one. Besides, Father's been telling you everything. 'Fess up. It's not good is it?'"

He debated a moment as to what to tell her. "It's not the ideal pregnancy, no."

"I was extremely ill in the beginning with Jake, too. He developed fast. Hell, he was born full term at seven months. Why is this time different?"

"I can only guess. You're almost five years older and this is your third child by a man whose genetic make-up is beyond all current medical knowledge. The thought crossed my mind that you're having more difficulty with this one because it's more like him than the others. I don't know. Father and Peter don't know."

"But what about the tests that you've been running?" Catherine asked.

"All they tell us is that there's something unusual in the child's genetic make-up but we don't know to what extent. We won't know until the child is born."

Catherine took a deep breath. "Let's cut to the chase. Will this child be born?"

"Honestly, Cathy, your guess is as good as mine. I wish I could look you in the eye and tell you everything is going to be all right but you know me too well. All I can tell you is that we're using every trick medical science has to give you and this baby every possible chance of survival."

Determination filled her eyes. "Charlie, I want you to promise me something."

"I'll do the best I can," Charlie responded.

"If it comes down to this child or me — save the child."

"Cathy!"

"No — I mean it. Charlie, this baby is like Vincent — I know it. It has to survive at all costs. It's too important."

"This is crazy. Do you honestly think any of us who love you, could make such a decision? Do you think Vincent would actually even consider it? Be reasonable."

"Charlie, you're not only my brother, you're my friend. I trust you with my life. Please believe me when I tell you that, to me, this child is more important than my life. It has to survive!"

"I don't understand why you feel this way. We will do everything possible to save you both."

"I know that," Catherine smiled and gently stroked Charlie's cheek. "Just remember what I said."

Ever since meeting his big sister, Charlie had been captured by the look she was giving him now. The warmth and the love he found there drew him in and enveloped him in a cocoon of



compassion and acceptance. She trusted him with her entire being. "I don't think I could ever forget it."

She held his hand in hers then placed it on her stomach. "I can't explain how important it is to me to give birth to a child like Vincent. I'm not sure I understand it myself. It's almost as if things will finally come full circle. Do you understand?"

"I understand how much you love Vincent. That's obvious. Getting this worked up over something we don't have much control over is not good for you. That — I know. You need to relax and give both of you as much rest as possible."

"Charlie — when we first met, I wasn't very accepting of your heritage. I apologize for that. Since then, you have become my brother in very sense of the word and — I love you. Never forget that."

The morbid implication of her words terrified him. "I love you too and I plan to spend the rest of my life making up for all the time we didn't have as family. I will not lose you now — understand?"

She smiled then nodded. He watched as the tension eased from her body and her eyes closed briefly. Then, in an abrupt change of subject, she asked about his other patient. "Tell me about Cassie. How are things going?"

"I wish I knew. At times, she's hostile and angry. Most of the time, she's just — distant." "Has she told you why?"

Charlie shook his head in defeat. "No. Just when I think I'm making progress, she slams the door in my face."

"At least she's talking to you. That's a beginning. I just wish she would let us help."

"Me too. I have to go back on duty soon and I'm afraid to leave her."

An infectious smile graced Catherine's face giving it that old warm glow that Charlie loved. That particular smile never failed to draw one from him despite his best efforts. "Stop it!"

"Stop what?" she asked innocently.

"You do that to me every time."

"Do what?"

"Get to me, that's what. Mom used to do that. No matter how upset or worried I was about something, she would look at me like that and things didn't seem so bad anymore."

"I wish I had met her," Catherine responded with an almost wistful quality to her voice.

"Yeah, me too. She kept up with what you and — Dad were doing. At the time, I didn't know why. You're surprisingly like her."

"I take that as a compliment:"

One of the things Charlie had been truly grateful for was the fact that Catherine had not judged his mother harshly. She had accepted what happened between his mother and her father for what it had been — two lonely people briefly easing each other's pain. That thought led him back to Cassie.

"I feel some kind of connection to Cassie. Maybe it's because I found her and somehow feel responsible for her recovery, I don't know. Is it more than that? I'm not sure where the lines are drawn anymore. It used to be so clear cut."

The parallels between Vincent and herself and Charlie and Cassie did not escape Catherine.

"Don't worry. Things will sort themselves out. I know."

"You and Vincent?"

"You could say there are certain similarities. That's why I suggested you read to her. What happened to her was as horrible as what happened to me. Hearing Vincent's soft, reassuring voice made me feel safe. He helped me find the strength to go on."

The glow in his sister's eyes when she spoke of Vincent told him just how deeply she loved him.

"You were falling in love with him."

"Then — he was my savior, my best friend. Contrary to popular belief, it wasn't love at first sight. It took me a while to sort out my feelings."

"That wasn't what I heard," Charlie responded. "Vincent said it was love from day one."

Catherine laughed. "Vincent had the advantage of the bond. I was in shock. I was shutting out my emotions because I didn't want to feel anything. It took me some time to trust and accept my own feelings again. And, of course, we were heading toward a forbidden relationship. One that everyone said had no future and could not last. It took us both a while to really understand what was happening between us."

Charlie laughed. "Sounds like a romance novel to me."

"Better!"

"I get the point, oh wise older sister."

"Older!"

"Chill out! That baby's going to be doing flips."

Catherine stroked her protruding stomach lovingly. "So far, it hasn't moved and I'm getting worried. Jake was moving at this stage."

"Every pregnancy is different and this one is really different." He put his hand on her stomach and rubbed it gently. "This one is defying all the medical boundaries. Don't be too concerned, Cathy. It's just resting and you both need that. Speaking of which, I've got to get out of here. I do have other patients to see."

"I bet they're not half as much fun as I am," Catherine teased.

"You're right." Charlie stood up then leaned down and placed a kiss on the top of Catherine's head. "See you later, sis. Thanks for the advice."

"Any time, little brother. Any time."

That night, after eating dinner with Cassie, Charlie stretched out on the cot in the hospital chamber they shared. All was quiet and soon he drifted off to sleep. Several hours later, however, he was awakened by the sound of a book falling to the floor. The dull thud was just loud enough to cause him to sit up suddenly and look frantically around the chamber. When he looked over at Cassie, he saw her sitting up in bed looking wildly around. He immediately got to his feet and walked over to pick up the book. "It's all right. You just dropped the book."

"Book?"

Charlie sat down on the edge of the cot. "This one."

Cassie took a deep breath. "I was reading it. I guess I fell asleep."

"Blake again. Don't you want something else to read?" Charlie asked as he flipped through the now familiar pages.

"No. I like this."

Remembering Catherine's suggestion, Charlie made an offer. "I'll read to you."

"You don't have to," she responded.

"That's exactly why I want to. Now, just lie back and let me bore you to sleep. I've been told it's better than administering a sedative." He gave her a moment to relax then he began to read.

He had read almost every poem in the entire book before she finally fell asleep. Time passed unnoticed as he studied her face. In sleep, she was at peace but Charlie knew that somewhere, deep within her own mind, she battled her own private demons. It was a battle he desperately wanted to help her win.

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Catherine's restlessness had only grown worse. Vincent lay sleeping beside her, peacefully oblivious to her discomfort. Normally, he would have been awakened by her slightest move but he was exhausted and she was deliberately blocking their connection. He needed the rest.

She was lying on her side gently stroking her stomach when Vincent rolled over onto his side facing her. She smiled at his peaceful expression. His wonderfully strong, erotic features never ceased to stir her emotions. As she gazed at him, a poem came to mind and she began to whisper it.

*"I thought Love liv'd in the hot sun shine,  
But O, he lives in the Moony light!*

*I thought to find Love in the heat of day,  
But sweet Love is the Comforter of Night.*

*Seek Love in the Pity of others' Woe  
In the gentle relief of another's care,  
In the darkness of night and winter's snow  
In the naked and outcast, Seek Love there!"*

As she finished, Vincent opened his eyes and looked deeply into hers. With no words spoken, he reached over and stroked her cheek allowing one finger to linger on her lips. She kissed that finger then smiled.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"I'm glad you did," he answered. "Every moment we spend like this is a treasure."

"I have to be the luckiest person alive."

"No, I am the luckiest person that ever lived."

"No, you're not!" Catherine playfully argued.

"Yes, I am!"

They both laughed until Catherine's sharp intake of air ended their play.

"What's wrong?' Vincent asked with great fear.

Catherine rolled over onto her back and took a few deep breaths. She then rubbed her stomach with both hands. "I think the baby moved."

Vincent sat up and looked down at her stomach. "Are you sure?"

After a brief hesitation, she smiled. "Yes. This miracle baby of ours finally decided to make his presence felt!"

The look in her misty green eyes brought tears to his. Her joy was a living thing that drew him into its depths. He placed his hand on her stomach and felt the slight quickening. "No matter how many times I've done this, the miracle of feeling life in your womb is — is... There are no words magical enough to describe it."

"The look in your eyes tells me everything," she responded softly. "I feel the same way. Sometimes, I think that, in another place and time, you and I would do nothing but make babies."

Vincent sighed. "If it were painless for you and there was no risk, I can think of no better way to spend my life. But that's not reality. Reality is — I'm afraid for you. I don't think we should risk this again, Catherine. We already have two beautiful children and one on the way. I don't want to tempt fate again. You are too important to me."

"Reluctantly — I agree. I'm getting too old for this."

"You are forever young, Catherine."

"And you, my dear husband, are a wonderful liar."

"Beauty is in the eyes and heart of the beholder. Your beauty will never fade," Vincent assured her.

"That's what I've always tried to make you understand." The slight quickening she felt earlier had suddenly become a painful cramp.

"Are you in pain?"

"I'm just cramping a little. You know I tend to do that. It will pass."

"Are you sure?"

Although she told him yes, she wasn't truly convinced of it herself but she refused to worry him. "If you would rub my stomach for a while, I think the cramps will stop."

"Anything you want."

His gentle hands and soothing presence eased her discomfort quickly. The last thing she remembered was the steady rhythm of his hands and his heart.

The next day, Charlie decided it was time for Cassie to get up and about. After allowing her some private time, he reappeared in the chamber with her freshly laundered clothes. Without a word, but with a broad smile, Charlie dropped her clothes on the foot of her bed.

She glanced at them then looked questioningly up at him. "What's this?"

"I believe they're your clothes."

"I know that. Are you throwing me out?"

Charlie folded his arms across his chest. "Out of this chamber? Yes. Out of the tunnels? No. I'm moving you to your own chamber but first — we're going to take a walk."

Fear filled her eyes. "I don't want to go anywhere!"

"I know. You want to stay here and hide. I'm not going to let you."

"And just who the hell do you think you are?" Cassie shouted at him.

"That's more like it. Some of the fight's back. Now — get dressed and let's take a walk."

They stared at each other for a moment then Cassie reached over and grabbed the clothes. "I think I can change clothes by myself."

"I should hope so," Charlie responded. "I'll be waiting outside for you."

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They walked through the tunnels in no particular hurry. Along the way, they passed fellow citizens of the community who stopped to offer their best or simply smile their encouragement. At first, Cassie seemed very uncomfortable but, as the walk continued, the discomfort eased. By the time they reached the mirrored pool, she seemed almost content.

Standing side by side, they gazed into the depths of the dark pool. What they saw was the reflection of the morning sky.

Charlie finally broke the silence. "Amazing isn't it?"

Cassie continued to gaze into the reflection. For her, it held no particular fascination. "I would think you would prefer the real thing."

"You mean the sky? You would think so. I guess I've learned that who you're with is more important than where you are."

When he made that admission, Cassie turned to him and stared in disbelief.

Charlie felt her gaze and turned to her.

"Charlie — don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't get involved. Don't mistake some misguided sense of nobility for..."

"For what? Cassie, I care about you — maybe more than I should." He stepped closer and placed his hands on her shoulders. He held her gently but firmly.

Her mind was screaming at her to run, to flee any contact with anyone but she found herself unable to move. The look in his eyes, the need she felt in herself, and a myriad of confused feelings froze her to the spot.

Hesitantly, he leaned closer and pressed his lips to hers in a tender kiss. For a moment, she responded then suddenly she pulled away. Her eyes were filled with confusion and fear and he began to regret his lapse of control. He had stepped over the line and perhaps lost any ground they had gained. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have?"

The words wouldn't come. She continued to stare at him for a moment then turned and simply ran. She had to get away.

"Damn!" Charlie swore then began to run after her. He caught up with her just outside the hospital chamber.

"I'm really sorry, Cassie. I had no right."

"No, you didn't," she finally managed to answer.

"Can we just forget it happened? I promise not to be that stupid again. Come on —please. Being your friend is very important to me."

He studied her eyes as she considered his plea. "We can walk to Father's study. Do you play chess?"

"Actually, I do. I haven't played in years though."

"Good. That means I've got a chance to beat someone. I think we can get in a few games before I have to go on duty."

"On duty?"

"At the hospital. I'll be on call for twenty-four hours."

"So — you're not going to be here."

"I'll be back as soon as I get off duty. Cassie, I think you're ready to move into a guest chamber. It's time for you to begin putting your life back together."

The fear in her eyes suddenly vanished. It was replaced by something Charlie couldn't quite comprehend. "Are you all right?"

"You're right, Charlie. It's time I stood on my own two feet again," she responded.

At that time, Charlie believed that what he saw in her eyes was the determination to go on. He smiled. Maybe he had made a difference after all. He reported for duty that night feeling as if the future was indeed looking up.

Vincent walked through the darkened, deserted tunnels alone. It was well past midnight and all but the sentries and himself were sleeping peacefully. Normally, so would he, but tonight the nightmares had returned. The evil one's warnings about the coming child haunted him and would not let him rest. So, afraid of waking Catherine, he had left their chamber for the solitude of the falls.

As he neared the falls, he felt the presence of another. He hesitated for a moment, debating if he should turn back. After deciding that having someone to talk to wouldn't be a bad idea, he continued. He was very shocked at who he found there. Standing very close to the ledge was none other than Cassie Stephens.

Fear welled up in Vincent as he neared the ledge. *Had she come here to finish her attempted suicide? Could he stop her in time?* Cautiously, he approached the lone figure. Using his softest, most non-threatening voice, he called to her. "Cassie — what are you doing here so late?"

His voice startled her a little and she turned to him nervously. "I couldn't sleep."

Vincent looked out into the mist rising from the falls. "Neither could I. This is a wonderful place to collect your thoughts and find peace."

"There is no such place."

The lack of feeling in the statement caused Vincent to turn and really look at his companion. Inwardly, he was wondering what was going through her mind.

"Making peace with your enemies is far easier than making peace with yourself," she continued.

"It is a battle worth fighting," Vincent responded.

"Is it? You have to have a reason to fight; some hope that what lies ahead is better than what you have now."

Vincent continued to study her eyes in the hopes of finding some desire to continue. "As long as there is life, there is hope."

"No, Vincent, you have that backwards. Without hope, there is no life."

"What happened, Cassie? What destroyed your hope? What took your love of life from you?" Vincent asked in earnest. He watched as tears filled her eyes.

"Pain," she answered simply.

"We have all known pain. We survive it and go on."

"Not when pain is all you feel. Not when love has become the means by which others can either control you or destroy you — or both. Not when everyone you've ever loved has left you. Not when every dream you've had has turned into a nightmare."

"I have known a life that I thought was without hope. I thought I was destined to spend my life alone then — I found Catherine and discovered how wonderful life can be. I learned to dream again and I began to believe that all things are truly possible."

Cassie almost laughed out loud. "Too bad you can't bottle that and sell it." "You just have to have faith, Cassie. You call on all your inner strength."

"I don't have any. I'm tired of fighting losing battles. I'm tired of giving everything and receiving nothing. I'm tired of hurting — tired of losing."

"Then let us do it for you. Let the people who care for you carry the weight of your burdens until you're strong enough."

Cassie stared out into the mist. A parade of images began in her mind. She saw her father's battered and limp body, her mother's wasted body lying in a bed existing only on life support, and her lover's rage-filled face. She closed her eyes in anguish.

"Tell me what you're thinking?" Vincent asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," she replied.

"Tell me," he insisted. "I know the loss of your parents was traumatic, but .."

"That's only part of it."

"Then tell me the rest of it."

She folded her arms across her chest. "I... I can't."

"You can tell me, Cassie."

The images returned in all their horrible detail. His angry face, the words that hurt as badly as his fists, all of it flooded her mind. "He used to get so mad."

"Who?"

"Rob. I met him about a year after Mom died. We dated and soon, he moved in with me. It was all so wonderful then. I had dreams of a marriage and kids — everything."

"What happened?" Vincent prompted her.

"He began to lose his temper. He got so possessive and jealous. If another man even looked at me, he blew his top. One night, one of his friends smiled at me and complimented my appearance. After we got home, he..."

"Go on."

"He flew into a rage and — hit me. He apologized and said it would never happen again."

"But it did, didn't it?" Vincent knew the answer. He had seen the pattern of such violence before.

"Yes. He would find some minor thing and lose control. Nothing I did was ever good enough for him. Every time he hit me, it was all my fault. I had caused it. I was to blame."

"It was not your fault. This man was sick."

"He told me if I ever tried to leave him, he would kill me. There was no way out. He took everything I had, destroyed my dreams, and betrayed my love. There was nothing left —nothing but the peace of death."

"That's why you tried to end your life?"

"No. Hours before Charlie found me, Rob flew into one of his rages again. He was screaming that he was going to kill me. When he came at me, I ran into the bedroom and found his gun. He broke down the door and I..." She closed her eyes and shivered violently. "I pulled the trigger."

"You shot him?"

"I killed him. It was over in a split second. Everything — died. When I cut my wrists, I was already dead inside. Nothing mattered any more. Nothing."

Vincent reached out and pulled her into his arms. He held her gently against his chest offering her his comfort and compassion. "It was self-defense, Cassie. You had no choice."

Cassie shut off the tears and emotions so quickly Vincent was stunned. She stepped back from him and looked defiantly into his eyes.

"You must promise me that you will tell no one!" she insisted.

"Cassie — the truth must be told for your own sake. You cannot begin the healing process until you have faced your demons."

"No! I don't want anyone to know especially Charlie."

"I can't..."

"You must! I want your word, Vincent."

Vincent's word was his bond and, once given, was not broken. To give his word to protect Cassie's secret went against his better judgment. She needed help to make peace with what had happened, not a co-conspirator in her efforts to hide from the truth. But he couldn't risk her thinking that one more person was about to betray her.

"For now. You must tell Charlie soon. Do you understand?"

"I'll tell him. I just need some time that's all."

"All right. I'll give you some time. But Cassie, delaying facing the truth will only make it more difficult."

"I know."

Vincent reached out and took her hand in his. "Let me walk you back to your chamber."

"Thanks, Vincent."

After leaving Cassie safely in her chamber, Vincent walked back to his own. There, he found Catherine still sleeping peacefully in their bed. He walked over to the side of the bed and looked down at her. Even in the darkest part of that other side of him, he could not understand how any man could act so violently against the woman he professed to love. The thought sickened him so much he spent the rest of the night watching over Catherine as she slept.

Over the next few days, a noticeable change took place in Cassie. She was seen mingling with the community as if she was making an effort to fit in again. She visited Catherine on several occasions, ate her meals with the others, and could be seen strolling through the tunnels with Charlie. On the surface, it looked like Cassie was healing but Vincent wasn't so convinced. He knew her secret and until she was willing to face it and put it to rest, no healing could take place.

One night after dinner, Cassie and Charlie stopped by Vincent and Catherine's chamber. Throughout the very friendly visit, Vincent watched Cassie closely. Something wasn't right, he could sense it. When the visit ended, good-byes were said and he watched thoughtfully as they left.

"Are you going to tell me what's bothering you or am I suppose to guess," Catherine asked pointedly.

Vincent sat down in the chair opposite her and silently debated compromising his word to Cassie. "Let's put the children to bed first, then we'll talk," he answered as he watched Jacob yawn.

Later, when that monumental task was accomplished, Vincent curled up with Catherine on their bed.

"Now, tell me why you're brooding," she finally said.

"I gave my word I wouldn't?"

"You know as well as I do that some promises have to be broken for the good of the individual. I have a feeling that's what we have here. You know something about Cassie. What is it?"

"Things are not what they seem with Cassie," he stated simply.

"She seems to be getting stronger every day. There's no sign of the anger and depression that drove her to attempt suicide. What is it you sense?"

"It's more than just a feeling, Catherine. When something tragic happens, you have to face it in order to heal. She is not doing that. She is doing and saying exactly what she thinks we want her to?"

"You're saying you think it's all a show?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying," Vincent replied.

Catherine sat back and rubbed her temples. "You don't suppose she might..."

"... attempt suicide again?" Vincent finished for her. "Unless she openly deals with her problems, it's a possibility."

"That would devastate us all, but Charlie... He's falling in love with her."

"I know. I just wish..."

"I'm not asking you to compromise your beliefs but there are more people involved in this than just you and Cassie. My God, her life could be at stake."

Catherine's words put things into their proper perspective. She could always cut to the heart of the matter and that ability, once again, had helped him realize what was really important. "In the morning, I will talk to her. If I can persuade her to tell Charlie then I won't be forced to break my promise."

The statement was made in the hope she would confide in Charlie and he could help her find peace with her past. Despite that hope, Vincent harbored a feeling that something was about to happen. Something that would haunt them all for a very long time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Charlie and Cassie were sitting in her chamber talking about how well the evening had gone. He knew how much courage it had taken for her to join in the community's social activities. Progress was being made, he could feel it. He had even begun to feel as if he did not have to tread lightly around her.

"You're tired. Perhaps I'd better go," he said when he noticed her stifle a yawn.

"Not yet. I want you to read a little for me. That is — if you don't mind?"

The request was a strange one. He had not read to her since their days in the hospital chamber.

"You really want me to?"

With great reverence, she picked up the book by William Blake and handed it to Charlie.



A bookmark was carefully placed between the pages. Charlie opened it to the page and began to read:

*"Love seeketh not itself to please,  
Nor for itself hath any care,  
But for another gives its ease,  
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair."*

*So sung a little Clod of Clay  
Trodden with the cattle's feet,  
But a Pebble of the brook  
Warbled out these metres meet*

*Love seeketh only Self to please,  
To bind another to its delight,  
Joys in another's loss of ease,  
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite."*

Charlie closed the book and put it aside. The words haunted him but he didn't know why. Gradually, he looked over into Cassie's eyes. What he found there frightened him a little. There was a strange, distant look in her sad eyes. "What do you suppose that really means?" he asked. She took a deep breath and focused her eyes on Charlie. "I guess it's just a good example of the many ways people see the same thing."

"Yeah — but hell in heaven's despite? Really!"

"It's also like us," she added.

"How do you mean?"

"You look at love like the Clod of Clay."

"I don't know if I like that comparison."

"Just go with me, Charlie," she replied. "On the other hand, I'm like the Pebble of the Brook."

Charlie got up from his chair and sat down beside Cassie on the small couch. "I bet you would say the glass is half empty, right?"

"It depends on what's in the glass."

They both began laughing. Charlie had the most enchanting smile and his perspective on the world and life in it was one of his most charming qualities. As she let herself get caught up in those sparkling blue eyes, she couldn't help thinking. *If only I had met him before Rob. If only...* She quickly put an end to her musing. It was too late. Too much had happened to go back now. It saddened her to think that he would be the one left to deal with her actions. He deserved better.

The sadness returning to Cassie's eyes ended Charlie's laughter and erased his smile. "What's wrong? Did I say something?"

"No," she responded. "I was just thinking about everything that's happened, that's all."

Charlie reached over and lifted her chin with his finger. "We can't change the past. All we can do is remember the good and let go of the bad."

"I hope you can do that."

"Me?"

"I mean, I'd like you to forget how we met. You know what I mean," she stammered uneasily.

"I will forget the circumstances of how we met but not that we met. You've made a lasting impression on me, Cassie Stephens."

"And you, me. Charlie, you are the best thing that ever happened to me. I want you to know that."

"Cassie, I know I promised not to do this again — but..." Cautiously, he leaned closer and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. Unlike the first time, she didn't pull away from him or resist his kiss; in fact, she responded. That response gave him the courage to try again and he did.

His kiss was soft and reassuring unlike Rob's. Rob sought only to satisfy his own desires no matter how rough or demanding the method. Charlie offered a gentleness she had not known in such a long time. As much as she wanted to bath herself in that gentleness and fill herself with his strength and comfort, she couldn't. All the years of pain and anger could not be defeated so easily.

She pulled back and looked into his compassionate eyes. Hurting him was the last thing she wanted to do but she had no choice. She could not be what he wanted her to be. She could not give him the love he needed because she had nothing left to give. Silently, she prayed that someday, he would understand.

"No — please. I can't..." she protested.

"I'm sorry."

"No, don't be. It's not your fault. It's me. I'm just not ready." As she waited for his response, she thought about Rob. He wouldn't have accepted a no. He would have taken what he wanted by force. But Charlie was not Rob. Charlie, although disappointed, was more concerned about her feelings.

"It's a beginning at least, right?"

He was so full of hope and possibilities she almost wanted to believe again. But she couldn't. There was no belief or hope left. She lied. "Right."

"I really had better leave. You get a good night's sleep and I'll come for you in the morning. I have the whole day to do nothing but spend with you. Sweet dreams," he added just before he got up and walked to the chamber's entrance.

"You too," she answered with her most convincing smile. As soon as he walked through the entrance, her smile faded and tears began to burn her eyes. She could not tell him that her dreams had died a long time ago. Sleep was just a temporary escape from the hell her life had become.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent sat up in bed and looked wildly about the chamber. Perspiration burned his eyes and his heart was pounding in his chest. He took a few deep breaths and managed to get his terror under control. At least he had not awakened Catherine.

The dreams were becoming more frequent and more terrifying. They all stemmed from the messages and the so-called hallucination that followed. *Why couldn't he let it go? Why was it still haunting him? Had it really been a hallucination or was it a warning of things to come?* He closed his eyes and rested his head in his hands.

Once awakened like this, he knew he could not, go back to sleep. And, as his mind grew more alert, he became more and more aware of a feeling that something wasn't right. Something was about to go very wrong.

After assuring himself that Catherine was all right, he got dressed and went to check on the children. Both Jacob and Mary Catherine were sleeping contentedly and yet he still could not shake the strange and frightening feeling that something was wrong. He ended up wandering through the tunnels trying to put his fears to rest.

His wanderings led him down to the ledge overlooking the falls. He was just about ready to turn back and go home when a movement and a shadow caught his attention. Ducking back into the shadows, he waited.

\* \* \* \* \*

Charlie was lying in his bed staring at the ceiling and trying his best to understand his feelings for Cassie. *Was he confusing concern for a troubled woman for love or was what he felt for her real?* He was beginning to wonder if he would ever know the answer.

Growing tired of trying to figure it out, he simply pushed it from his mind and tried to relax. It didn't work. He couldn't stop thinking about the kiss he had shared with Cassie. It was a mistake, he knew, but it seemed so right at the time. Even more confusing was the fact she had responded then pulled away. She was still battling her demons and he had no right to interfere or add to her problems. He couldn't leave it like this between them. He had to talk to her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent watched as the shadow he had seen became a person. That person was Cassie. *Why was she here so late and where was she going?* he wondered as he watched her walk toward the falls. Maybe she needed the solace of the falls to think things through, but some nagging little fear in the back of his mind was doubtful. He decided he had better follow her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Charlie stood outside Cassie's chamber and called for her several times. When his attempts went unanswered, he walked tentatively into the chamber only to find it empty. *Where would she have gone this late?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent was very adept at following someone and not being detected. It was a skill he had mastered with surprising ease. His *heritage* he supposed.

Cassie was now standing on the ledge looking out at the falls. She seemed lost in thought and Vincent could feel a determination in her that had not been there before. There was also a feeling that a decision had been made. That particular feeling seemed out of place to Vincent. He decided it would be best to stay close and watch her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The trip to Father's study proved fruitless. Thinking that Cassie might have gone there to find something new to read, Charlie had gone in search of her. After leaving the study, he stood at a cross-section of tunnels and ran his fingers through his hair. He was beginning to get a bad feeling about this.

\* \* \* \* \*

So far, Cassie had not done anything other than stand on the ledge and look at the falls. Vincent was about to give up and go back to his chamber when Cassie stepped alarmingly close to the edge. His reaction was instinctive. He stepped out of the darkness and called to her. "Cassie — isn't it a little late to be down here?" He wondered if his question sounded as desperate to her as it did to him.

"Don't come any closer, Vincent."

Her response affirmed that deep seated fear he had felt earlier. "Don't do this, Cassie."

"There is no other way for me. Don't you understand?"

Vincent edged just a little closer and Cassie responded by backing nearer to the edge.

"No, I don't understand. Tell me about it, Cassie. Talk to me. It doesn't have to be like this."

"Talk doesn't do any good. It doesn't stop the pain."

"It can help. It can begin the healing. You were doing so well. We thought you were coming out of it," Vincent argued. At this point, he wanted to do anything he could to buy him some time.

Cassie turned to him and stared coldly into his pleading eyes, "I played your game. I got really good at that with Rob. I let him think he had won."

"This is not a question of who wins the game, Cassie. We want to help you."

"You're wasting your time. I'm beyond your help. In fact, I don't want your help."

"And what about Charlie?" Vincent continued. "Was he wasting his time? I know he doesn't think you're beyond help." Vincent saw a brief but very deep sadness in her eyes. "Think about him. If you can find no reason to go on, do it for him."

"I don't want to hurt him."

Her voice was quivering. Maybe there was enough indecision there for him to get through to her. "Then don't. You have the freedom to change your mind. No questions asked." She took a long, deep breath and, for a moment, Vincent thought she had changed her mind. Instead, she leaned further over the edge.

"No!" Vincent screamed. "Cassie, please let me help you."

With tears streaming down her face, she looked at him and pleaded. "Tell Charlie what really happened."

"He should hear it from you. Don't you think you owe him that? He has done nothing but care for you. Why do you want to hurt him so?"

"I can't tell him."

"Tell me what?"

Both Cassie and Vincent were surprised by the familiar voice.

"What are you doing, Cassie? Why are you here?" Charlie didn't want to believe what his eyes and ears were telling him. He wanted someone to tell him it wasn't true.

"Go away, Charlie. It's too late."

"It's never too late. We can start all over again. You just have to believe. You have to have a little faith that tomorrow will be better. We can work through this."

"No, we can't. It's too late."

Charlie changed his tactics. "Then it was all a lie. You used me. You used my feelings for you."

"For that — I am sorry. In another time and place, it could have been different," she responded. "If I had met you before — Rob, then maybe..."

"We still have a chance, Cassie. Don't give up on us."

"You deserve better than — damaged goods, Charlie."

"I deserve someone I care about and that's you!" Charlie adamantly responded.

As the two argued and pleaded with each other, Vincent moved ever so slightly closer to Cassie. Charlie may have been the distraction he needed to get close enough to pull her back from the edge.

"Cassie — don't do this," Charlie continued to plead.

"There's no other way. I can't bear this anymore."

"Why? For God's sake, Cassie, tell me why?"

"I... I can't. Vincent can tell you."

They were both looking at him now so Vincent had to freeze in his tracks. "You should do that."

"No. I... I just can't." She glanced back to make sure how close she was to the edge. A whisper of doubt briefly sparked but quickly died. "Charlie, please try to forgive me. There is nothing in this world that I will miss. But you — Charlie, are my biggest regret."

"Then don't leave me, Cassie." The voice may have been calm but the emotions were raging out of control.

"Let me go, Charlie. Let me find peace."

"No!"

"Goodbye."

With only the slightest movement, Cassie's foot stepped out into nothingness and she vanished over the edge. Vincent's attempt to pull her back left him with empty hands and the horrible realization of what she had done.

"No!" Charlie screamed as he bolted toward the edge.

With the instinctive grace of a cat, Vincent grabbed Charlie with one arm and shoved him back against the rock wall. He had to use his own body to keep him from the edge. No matter how hard he fought, what Vincent knew was now lying at the bottom of the ravine was something he didn't need to see. That horrible image would haunt him the rest of his life and that was something Vincent knew from experience.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hours later, Vincent was sitting with Charlie in his chamber. Not a word had been said since news that the body had been recovered from the bottom of the ravine had reached them. Charlie had only murmured something inaudible then he had retreated into his own world of pain. Father had come by and plans had been made. Still, no response from Charlie. All he did was sit on the couch and hold Catherine's book of Blake's poetry to his chest. There were no tears, no outward signs of the pain he was going through. That frightened Vincent.

"Charlie — it's all right to grieve. You have lost someone very dear to you. We all have. We all share the pain and guilt that we could not help her. Let the pain run its course. Don't fight it."

Charlie looked up at Vincent then simply shook his head. He clutched the book even tighter to his chest.

Vincent realized that if he couldn't get through maybe Catherine could. The two shared a very deep bond. After patting Charlie on the shoulder to offer his comfort, Vincent rose and walked slowly out of the chamber. Every step he took toward his own chamber was riddled with pain and guilt. If only, he had moved a little faster. If only he had talked her into revealing her secret to Charlie. If only... If only... Tears streamed down his face as the *if onlys* tore him apart.

\* \* \* \* \*

Catherine had heard the news along with the rest of the community. The loss of such a beautiful, promising young life was a tragedy she felt deeply but the loss of that life's effect on her brother concerned her even more. Charlie — she had wanted to go to him as soon as they returned from the falls but Father suggested she allow Vincent some time with him. With no word in hours, she was getting worried.

When Vincent walked in, the true devastation of the night's events became obvious. His eyes were full of tears and pain. Even his stance and gait reflected his anguish. "Oh, Vincent." She held out her arms to him and he sought comfort there. After giving him some time to regain his seemingly iron-clad control, Catherine asked about her brother. "How's Charlie?"

"In need of a sister's comfort. He is not allowing himself to grieve. He has closed off his emotions. He just sits there with that book of yours."

"The one he was reading to Cassie?" she asked.

"Yes."

"It meant a great deal to both of them."

Vincent looked into Catherine's compassionate eyes. "I understand how he feels. I have felt that pain."

They looked at each other with a deep, mutual understanding.

"I must go to him. He needs me," Catherine finally stated.

Vincent grabbed her hand as she started to rise from the bed. "Wait. Before you go to Charlie, there are things I can now tell you about Cassie."

"What she told you before?"

"Yes. Maybe if he hears it, it will help him understand. I believe he should hear it from you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Catherine stood outside Charlie's chamber. The tragedy of Cassie's death and what Vincent had told her made her concern for Charlie even more intense. Everyone, including herself, believed Cassie was healing and that she and Charlie had discovered something special between them. There was hope — now, it was gone. Gathering all her courage, she walked in.

She found Charlie sitting on his bed clutching the book of poetry she had given him. His eyes were blankly focused on some object on the far wall. He seemed unaware she was even in the room with him. "Charlie?"

There was no response. Catherine walked over and very slowly sat down next to him. As much as she wanted to say something, she couldn't. All she wanted to do was hold him and that's just what she did. She reached over, put her arms around him, and pulled him into her embrace. He resisted for a moment then lowered his head to her shoulder.

"I'm here, Charlie. Go ahead and cry. It's all right."

Charlie responded by reaching around her and holding on as the sobs began. His mother used to hold him that way when he was a kid. He needed that more than he could say.

Catherine held him, stroked his back, and used the sound of her voice to comfort him. There was little else she could do. The truth would come later.

When all the tears had been cried out, Charlie lifted his head from Catherine's shoulder. She continued to stroke his back as they sat for some time in silence. Finally, Charlie spoke. "I haven't done that since Mom died."

"I remember doing the same when Dad died. It helps."

"I don't know." Charlie looked at the book clutched tightly in his hand. "Here. You can have this back."

"You can keep it."

"No. I don't want to see it again," he answered angrily.

"I'll take it. If you want to borrow it again, you know where to find it."

Charlie closed his eyes and sighed. "Why, damn it? Was it all a lie?"

"No, honey. I don't think so. I think she truly cared about you but she just had too many wounds that just wouldn't heal."

"It's my fault. I pushed her too hard."

"You didn't push anybody. You did your best to help her. She just wasn't strong enough to help herself," Catherine argued. "Besides, you don't know everything she was dealing with."

"She said there were things Vincent knew that she couldn't tell me."

Catherine took his hand in hers. "Vincent thought it would be better if I told you."

"Did you know before?"

"I only knew she had confided in him but I didn't know what she had confided. He just told me. I just don't know if you're ready to hear it yet."

"I have to know, Cathy."

"You knew about what happened to her father and the demands made on her by her mother's illness and subsequent death."

"Yes."

"There's more. After her mother died, she met a man named Rob. She fell in love with him and they moved in together. The relationship became an abusive one. There were beatings, forced sex, and verbal abuse. He spent her inheritance and destroyed her dreams until she couldn't stand any more. One night, he came at her in a rage and she — defended herself. She killed him. That was the night you found her."

Charlie sat there in stunned silence.

"You see, Charlie, until she could face that, no one could help her."

"Damn! Why didn't Vincent tell me?"

"And compromise her trust? You know he couldn't do that. She would have felt betrayed again. The only choice Vincent had was to encourage her to tell you."

"Why couldn't she tell me, Cathy? I thought we had something special."

"You did. You were the only person that could get through to her. You have to understand, Charlie. Her feelings for you were frightening her especially after what she had been through with Rob."

"If I had only known..."

"If onlys can destroy you. We can't go back and change what happened."

"So what do I do, Cathy?"

"You let your grief run its course. You feel the pain and remember the good. You hold on to her memory and cherish it. But more importantly — never, ever forget what you felt for her."

"I don't think there's a chance of that."

"Also, don't forget you're not alone. We are here for you. Don't get so wrapped up in your pain that you forget how to reach out. That's what happened to Cassie. She couldn't reach out any more."

Charlie looked into Catherine's eyes and saw only love, acceptance, and an understanding of his pain. He stood up and walked across the room then back again. Slowly, he reached out his hand to Catherine. With a slight smile, she took his hand and let him help her to her feet. "I want to be alone for a while."

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" she asked.

"It will be a while before I'm all right again but having you around will help. You need to go lie down. Don't worry about me."

"I'm your big sister. It's my job to worry about you."

Charlie guided Catherine into his arms and hugged her tenderly. "Thank you, sis. I love you."

"I love you, Charlie. Don't forget that."

"I won't. Now go. I'll see you in the... Hell, it's already morning."

"I'll see you later. Try to get some rest, little brother."

"You too, sis."

Charlie walked her to the entrance then watched as she made her way down the passage. As she did, one of the poems from the book she carried came to mind.

*"The modest Rose puts forth a thorn,  
The humble Sheep a threatening horn;  
While the Lilly white shall in Love delight,  
Nor a thorn, nor a threat, stain her beauty bright."*

Charlie smiled sadly. A more apt description of his sister could not be found.

He turned and looked back into his empty chamber and thought about the Clod of Clay and The Pebble in the Brook. "Be at peace, Cassie."

Fini