

THE SOUND OF ALONE

by Sharon Reynolds

Catherine Chandler had long ago become accustomed to being the daughter of a socialite. She had not, however, been to any of the lavish parties thrown by her old friends. Not since that fateful day in April. A night, two and a half years ago. That changed her life utterly.

This invitation though, had perked her curiosity, more than any she had gotten previously. It was not the embossed envelope, or the fine watermarked paper it was printed on, but the line drawing of a coat of arms in the upper left hand corner of the page. She quickly refolded it and slipped it back into the envelope.

She had dressed and called a limousine service to pick her up. He would be there at any moment. Her face darkened as she placed the invitation into her clutch purse.

She had piled her soft brown hair atop her head and secured it there with a glittering rhinestone comb. She stood glancing down into her vanity mirror at the floor length ball gown. She snickered, thinking about her high-heeled boots underneath. They weren't fashionable with that type of dress, but they were usually comfortable.

She wondered silently what Vincent would think of her. Vincent. She sighed sadly. Their time earlier had been such a brief one. He had been so excited about the children's concert Below tonight, that he had come to escort her there. He had been understanding, if not a little hurt when she had not accepted. True, he had not formally invited her, nor had she known about it until that moment. Still, she felt guilty, causing him any amount of pain.

After the briefest of embraces, he was gone, leaving her feeling as if she had betrayed him. How could she make him understand the pull this invitation made on her, when she didn't understand it herself?

The reception was elegant and subdued, befitting the foreign dignitary it was meant to honor. Catherine stood in the receiving line for almost twenty minutes. Her boots pinched. She looked at the tall goblet in her hand, wishing she could have changed her mind and gone Below with Vincent.

She shivered involuntarily. Not knowing quite why, as she caught a bit of conversation between the Baron and a guest ahead of her. His native French tripped off the tip of his tongue like the melody of a gentle song. Warming. Soothing.

It was a soft velvet with graveled baritone that caused gooseflesh across her bare arms. The tones were mellower. The timber suiting a man of his years. And yet....

"Miss Catherine Chandler," the valet at his elbow announced. Up to this point, the Baron, a man who looked to be in his late sixties, early seventies, had appeared to be bored. His face brightened with a hint of a smile. She took the hand offered her, and obediently knelt to kiss the emerald and gold signet ring on his left hand.

She stood then. To address him formally, as was customary. But suddenly she did not see his face any longer, or the puzzled expression written there. She gasped and put a hand to her breast, almost swooning.

The deep set eyes widened at the strange reaction. Eyes that were the most impossible shade of sky blue. Catherine felt cold and dizzy.

The Baron was up and out of the throne-like chair so swiftly, and with such grace, that those close enough to see, were stunned. His satin cloak flew with the movement, and Catherine found herself suddenly supported by the elbow. The Baron looking worried down at her.

"Miss Chandler?" he entreated. Had he spoken her name before? Her mind tried to focus. She blinked.

"Are you ill?" he asked.

She forced herself to look up at him. An action that only deepened the strange vertigo. The Baron was as tall as Vincent. His hair was long, pulled back into a large black bow down his back. It was the color of burnished copper, mingled at the temples with gray.

"Can I get you something?" he asked, still holding her firmly.

"No... I'll be fine." The blush on her face turned a deeper rose. "I... guess I just had a little too much of the party." She cast her eyes down. "I'm sorry if I have embarrassed you."

"Nonsense." The Baron's smile was warm and understanding. "Jacques... carry on, please. Miss Chandler and I are taking our leave for a while."

Catherine tried to protest, but he turned and led her away. In a quiet room, away from the noise of the reception. He allowed her to sit down in a velvet-covered wing-backed chair.

"I feel so silly," she protested.

"It is quite all right," he reassured her. He busied himself at the small bar next to the dresser. He came back with a glass of water.

"Things of this sort," he explained in that unique voice. "Have... their time. Still... I... become disenchanted... very quickly. You have given me... a respite."

Baron DeLeonard removed his cloak in a sweeping gesture, draping it over the back of the chair sitting abreast and across a night stand.

"I do hope... it was nothing I had said," he chuckled.

"No... your Highness... It wasn't." Her voice trembled. She let her eyes travel again over his strange yet familiar contours. "I suppose I was was musing about someone. I really wasn't paying too much attention. I truly am sorry if I embarrassed you."

"My child... at sixty-seven, I am flattered that I would resemble someone so dear." He laughed. "A lover... perhaps?"

Catherine's face flushed anew.

"Ah... Yes." The Baron continued. He bowed his head in a strange nod, yet one Catherine recognized. "Then," he said slowly. "I am honored indeed."

She stood up, setting her glass down. "I should go."

DeLeonard looked up at her, then sat back in his chair. The slight slump of his broad shoulders said more to Catherine than any words could. "That is," she amended. "Unless you would like me to stay."

"I *would*' indeed," he hesitated. "You see... I have only had the pleasure of seeing... of sharing... a beauty such as yours... only once." The Baron's smile was a sad one. Shyly, Catherine resumed her seat.

Vincent stopped his nervous pacing. His cloak a swirl with the lost momentum. He stood in the sculptured

gardens behind the embassy building. He sighed impatiently. Looking up into the night's bright stars.

He had felt suddenly cold. The pull of their bond had been so strong. He had run from the children's concert and Above to her. At first, it had been shock and fear. Then it became a type of curiosity and then a sadness. He crouched down in the shrubbery, as one of the watchman's footfalls echoed from the stone path near by. When he had gone, Vincent resumed his pacing, wondering if he should go back Below.

He stopped in mid-stride, his eyes wide, full of pain. The color drained from his face as he reached up a hand across his heart.

A light knock on the closed door of the bedroom brought the turning of two heads. One the color of sun-washed fawn. The other warm browned copper. Catherine felt relief at hearing the Baron's story. She could tell that he had been carrying this burden with him, for a long time. She smiled timidly at the interruption.

"Entrer!" (*enter*) The Baron intoned in French.

She could not shake the sense of déjà vu that haunted her in his presence. The feeling pulled her in two separate directions, leaving her puzzled.

"Your Highness," Jacques said softly through the door, "the reception is about to end. Will you honor us again with your presence?"

The Baron glanced at Catherine and shrugged resigned.

"Yes. Give me....a few moments." His voice was soft velvet, tempered with warm tones and stone. Made warmer yet by the accent's inflections. Yet, his manner of speaking was familiar. "Such is my life now," he lamented. "Duty... ceremony and boredom." He took her hand in his. "But... at least, you have brightened my stay here... Dear Catherine."

The goose-flesh returned in force at the sound of her name. The way he said it, oh so softly. He stood and brought her hand to his lips. The touch sent shivers of pleasure down her back. The blue eyes turned soft and inquiring, as he looked down at her once again.

"Will I see you again?" he asked.

She grinned, patting the hand that still held her other one. "A friend of mine says, given time, anything is possible."

"A wise man."

"Yes," she continued with pride. "He is."

He watched her go sadly. As she left, he turned to the mirrored vanity and stared into the reflection. The shy blue eyes that gazed back at him were tired, full of regrets.

She hurried to the ballroom, through the music and the last of the revelers. To the terrace doors. A security guard warned her that the night had turned chill.

"That's all right," Catherine said, "I don't mind." She regretted her words almost at once. For it was not only chill, it was down right cold. Her breath made little vapor clouds as she hurried down the stone walk. Yet, she found that she had a very warm spot in her heart, for the strange lonely man, called the Baron DeLeonard.

Suddenly a hand covered her mouth and pulled her swiftly into the deep shadows. She turned to see Vincent, a finger for quiet to his lips. They had gotten out the back lot and were on their way to the closest

tunnel entrance before Catherine stopped. Glaring up at him.

"Vincent!" she protested.

"Catherine." His quiet velvety baritone was full of concern and puzzlement.

"Vincent... What?"

"I.. .felt you needed me." The tawny head was enveloped in the heavy folds of his black hood. She could not see his expression. "Then...."

"Vincent, I have met a very lonely man tonight," she said, as they stopped again. At the bottom of a metal ladder from beneath a manhole cover and the street. Vincent stepped down beside her as a car passed overhead.

Catherine watched him in the gloom, but could not make out his mood. He seemed unusually quiet. She shivered in the cold, but so engrossed was she in her own thoughts, that it surprised her. When Vincent draped his cloak around her, his patched worked and leather cloak did not go with her blue satin ball gown, but at least it would keep her warm. She smiled at his tall trim form, his gray vest and the extended puffed shoulders that made him appear even more broad across the chest. The long golden blonde hair.

"I felt... a sadness. In you," Vincent continued.

"Yes. For him. His name is Victor. He's the Baron of a small French province."

"A king then." The leonine's voice was soft.

"Of sorts," Catherine continued. "He explained it as more akin to our president."

"Yet... there is something special about this man." The tawny mane obscured his eyes. She could not see the deep furrow between his heavy brows.

"He's alone, Vincent. Truly alone. I don't know how, or why. But, when we were talking tonight, I felt it. It was as if he had never really had anyone. No one to just sit and talk to. As if he had been...."

"A prisoner?" Vincent offered.

"Yes... like a prisoner!" Vincent lowered his head.

"How well.... I....know that feeling," Vincent said.

Catherine stopped in their walk suddenly. Her face pale.

"Vincent," she said, gripping both hands in her own, and holding their soft fuzziness tightly. "I know what it was!"

He puzzled as she glanced up into his azure blue eyes.

"He reminded me so much of... of you," she said. She was trembling as he eased her into a gentle embrace. Her head resting against his shoulder. He fingered the curls at the back of her hair style and sighed deeply.

"How like you. To... feel so much for others."

Catherine stepped back. A frown marring her face. It was almost immediately copied on that which was lion-like. As the emotion traveled between them through the bond.

"Catherine?" His tone was unbelieving.

"I *felt* him, Vincent. I've never had that happen with anyone but you. His eyes... The arrangement of his body...."

The blue eyes narrowed. "You... You have seen it?" he managed tightly.

Catherine put her hands on her hips. "Vincent, I did not go to bed with the man. I am a woman. I do notice things."

The blue turned to ice. His face darkened with hurt and confusion.

"I don't want to hurt you," she said.

His head lowered. "Tell me then." She grasped one of his hair-covered hands and toyed with the softness about his thumb.

"I was going to leave when I met him, Vincent. At first, the shock, his voice, then his eyes, the color." Catherine looked up into the strangely handsome face. "Vincent. They were the same intense shade of blue as yours."

"You felt... a kindred to me?"

"Yes!" The tilt of his head. The angle of his shoulders, told Catherine to hold him as tightly as he would allow. She let the unspoken truth, the jealousy, the fear, the ache of longing and the shock pass through her. She replaced it with her all encompassing love for him, and her silent assurances that they would always be. He drew her closer. His chin resting on her hair. They stood there for some minutes before continuing down the passage.

Victor DeLeonard breathed in the cool night air deeply, from his suite's open bedroom window. Jacques had helped him prepare for bed as always. Without the fetter of so much clothing, he felt more himself. The loose-sleeved cotton shirt hung open to his slim waist. Secured there by a wide leather belt. The muscles exposed could have been those of a thirty-year-old.

The black stretch pants were tight against his flat stomach and followed the curves of his still powerful thighs. He moved long toes in the soft but heavy socks, relishing the feel of it.

The band slipped easily from his hair, as he pulled on the loop. Burnished copper tumbled down across the broad shoulders. The breeze tossed it softly. His sky blue eyes scanned the darkness without seeing it. He mused. How beautiful Miss Catherine Chandler had been. She seemed somehow to accept, without question.

Something warm about her. A familiarity. The *deja vu* bothered him. She had not mentioned his strange dimensions though he had noticed her eyes. She seemed relaxed in his presence, where others were so ill at ease.

He shook his head sadly, glancing down at the signet ring on his left hand. Accepting and familiar, yet he wondered. How '*much*' could she accept. Or believe.

Vincent looked up from his journal. Putting his fountain pen down, as Father entered through the lower level arch.

"Am I... disturbing you?"

"No, Father. Come in." Jacob Wells scrutinized the face of his son. His brow furrowed into tiny wrinkles. He hung the hooked cane on the back of the chair opposite the blonde, and sank gratefully into it. The cane did not go unnoticed by Vincent. It had the lower arm brace attached. Father was in more pain than he would

admit, to use that particular brace.

"You're bothered," he said, ignoring Vincent's look.

"It's Catherine."

"Is something wrong?" he asked. "Between... you?"

"No." Vincent's words were forceful. Spoken much too quickly. "Yes...." He shook the shaggy head, standing so swiftly that his chair almost fell over. "I don't know."

"Can you tell me?"

"She went to a party tonight... at the French embassy."

"The Baron?" Father questioned. Vincent glanced at him, surprised. "I... ah.... read it. In yesterday's paper."

Vincent closed his mouth and looked away. His shoulders slumped forward.

"Yes... the Baron." His velvet baritone gritted with sand. Bitter. "Catherine... was with him... tonight."

"You mean, at the party."

Vincent turned toward him, and for a moment Father thought he would bring down the clenched fist he held. He didn't. Instead, he opened the hand and placed it on the tabletop. A glint of tears softened his anger.

"Father. She was *'with'* him... alone, in his....bedroom."

Father's face paled in apprehension. "Vincent. They didn't...."

"No." The blonde put his head down. His voice deepening. "No. I would have felt it."

Jacob let so a soft relieved sigh. This only seemed to fuel his son's anger.

"You don't understand!" he snapped. "Something *'did'*.... happen," Vincent continued.

Father glared at him. "Then for God's sake, Vincent. Stop going around the bush and tell me what happened!"

Vincent sank into his chair again. His head low. Father could not see his face for the curtain of golden hair.

"I don't know," he confessed in almost a whisper. "I... felt her fear, knew that she needed me."

"That's why you ran out of the concert like that."

"Yes. Up to the back of the embassy. The gardens there. But...as I reached it, her fear changed to wonder... and a.... deep sadness." He glanced at Father through his long bangs. "I felt a pull."

"You mean, between she and you," Father puzzled.

"No," Vincent said huskily. "Between she.... and *'him'*."

Jacob put a fingerless gloved hand to his forehead in contemplation. "When you took her home, did she mention this feeling to you?"

Vincent placed a long-nailed hand atop his head and leaned into the supporting elbow on the table. His voice edged with something deeper than jealousy. The sound of it stung Father's heart.

"She told me," he began. "That though human," Vincent gritted his canine teeth. Choking on the words.

"That though human, he gave her the impression of me. How can that be possible?" He sat up. "This man is somewhere around your age. How could he remind her of me?"

Father forced a smile. "Vincent," he chided. "I'm not *'that'* old. Did you ask her why she felt that way? What

made her feel that way? Specifically?"

"No." Vincent's eyes were ice.

Jacob's expression twisted into a half frown. "Perhaps, the next time you see her, you should."

TWO

Victor looked down at the silver cart of prepared fruit, croissants and herbal tea. Jacques had done his best to please him once more. But Victor would not be appeased. The rooms in the hotel felt small. claustrophobic. He pushed the wheeled cart away and walked over to the window again. He could not force himself to eat. His thoughts were only on the sweet image of Catherine Chandler. It seemed like a dream. How so like Josette she had been.

He tensed as a shiver ran across his nerve endings. "No," he half-whispered to himself. Hot fire replaced it. Dizzy, he grabbed one trembling hand with the other. "Mon Dieu! Not now!" The heat reached out to all parts of him, throwing him aside in its wake. "Jacques!"

The middle-aged Frenchman turned away from the uniformed policeman at their door. He pulled his jacket down. Confident that the authorities would be the best to take care of the matter of another letter threat.

He had not let the Baron see it. They always upset him. Usually, nothing came of them. This time, however, their sender had followed them from Paris.

He hurried into the bedroom at the sound of toppled furniture. Quickly he swung the door open wide. His eyes growing large in terror. "My God!"

Catherine played with her fork. She'd forgotten breakfast again. The plain salad she had bought at the cafeteria for lunch just wasn't doing it. She glanced over at Edie. She was genuinely enjoying her microwaved hamburger. It was greasy, and chocked full of all manner of messy toppings.

"How can you eat that?" Catherine asked her, disdainfully.

"'Cause I waited all day for it. What's with you? No appetite?"

"Guess not," Catherine lamented.

"Don't surprise me," Edie teased. She watched her girlfriend put down her fork in disgust.

"Oh? And why is that?"

"You got the look of man troubles all over you."

Catherine's brow wrinkled. "Well then," she said sternly, getting up. "Maybe I'd better go and wash my face!" She tossed her napkin on top of the salad. She swung the strap of her purse over one arm and stalked out.

Edie looked after her. The gentle joking was something that usually went by good-naturedly. She took another bite of her hamburger, contemplating what nerve she had struck.

Vincent sat upright in bed. His chamber was as dark as he had left it upon retiring the night before. Except for his sunburst window. It was a bright beacon in the dark. His eyes narrowed against the filtered light. He looked away, putting his back to its brightness. Throwing off the blankets, he stood up.

The night shirt he had put on hung freely to his unclad knees. The woven belt had come loose in his thrashing and hung limply from the belt loops at his sides. His bare, hair-tuffed, long-toenailed feet, were cold against the floor. Like his palms, they were hairless on the soles.

He looked up, surprised at the odd sounding footsteps coming up the tunnel. Father's anxious face appeared at the lower level arch.

"Vincent?" he asked. "Are you quite all right?" The look deepened when Vincent did not move further or acknowledge his presence. "Vincent?"

"Father," Vincent blinked, a hand to his head.

Jacob ambled in as quickly as it was possible for him, and bid his son to sit back down."

"There isn't any fever," he pronounced, pulling his hand away from the pale face. "What is it?"

Vincent braced himself against the bed side. "I... I don't know." He swallowed, his mouth felt dry. The tone was full of gravel. "I worked late last night with the construction crew. I needed to do... something. I... got to bed sometime this morning."

"And you're just getting up now?"

"Yes, but... I...." Vincent's heavy eye ridges creased deeply over his flat down-covered nose. "I was dreaming. Then suddenly, it was as if I were somewhere else." He gripped Father's hand. "Some... one... else."

Victor opened his eyes to the worried face of his valet and friend. Something damp and cold lay across his forehead. Its coolness seeped into the hair at his temples. Jacques smiled tiredly down at him. It was only when he tried to move his hands again did Victor feel the bite of the thick nylon cord. Tears burned, brimming out onto his cheeks.

"It is fine, now," Jacques soothed. He touched the too warm face. "It is over."

Catherine put her pencil down and looked at the end of it. All around the wood shaft, beneath the eraser's metal casing, were toothmarks. her toothmarks. She pulled a loose lock of hair behind one ear and sighed. She just couldn't concentrate.

Her head ached awfully. Gingerly she rubbed at the temples. She had taken some aspirin earlier, but that had only seemed to aggravate it. She took a deep breath and sat back in her chair. The office clock only read three in the afternoon. She had at least two hours of work to do. Plus, she had promised Joe she would take the statement of one of the witnesses in the Arlando case. That meant at least another hour of paperwork afterward.

Taking a deep breath, she blew out as if blowing up a balloon. It seemed to ease the tension a little. She tried again, just as Joe rounded the corner of the neighboring desk.

"Deep breathing exercises?" he questioned. That quirky smile slipped across his lips. Catherine let go of her breath and blushed profusely. "You trying out for scuba diving now?"

Her smile widened. "What to come along?"

"Who, me?" he asked, incredulous. "No way. I like to keep my feet planted firmly on the ground."

Catherine laughed. The ache in her head receding at last.

"Got somethin' for you," he said, handing over another file. She shook her head, taking it and sighed. Joe turned back to her, after taking a few steps away from the desk.

"Radcliffe, you know anything about that French Baron visiting town?"

"I met him at the reception."

"Figures," Joe chuckled. "Some uppity up, I'll bet."

"Joe! Now who's making assumptions?"

"Okay," he laughed. "But, did he seem like the paranoid type to you?"

"No." She frowned at his serious face. "Why?"

"Oh, just something I heard," he explained.

"Like what?"

Joe's frown deepened. He chewed briefly on his bottom lip. "Just a rumor really. Seems like the Feds put some men around him. Seems he's been getting death threats. Letters. Nobody thought much about it 'till they started here."

Catherine's face lost color. "Why not?"

"You tell me," he shrugged. "I heard Moreno talking to one of them while you were out to lunch."

"Death threats," Catherine worried to herself.

"Hey," Joe asked anxiously. "You okay?"

"Ah, sure."

"Good. I need that last file in an hour." When he had gone, Catherine picked up the phone and punched up the special embassy number that the Baron had given her.

Father started at the sharp sound of a heavy book closing suddenly. He looked across the desk, but Vincent was already drawing his cloak from the back of the chair. He turned in a rush and hurried from the chamber, his swift movement causing a breeze that touched Father's hair.

Outside the office chamber, Vincent paused for a heartbeat. Then in an angry turn, he hurried out beyond the frequented tunnels. Out to those in the older places that only he knew well. His quick strides turned fluid as he ran through the dark places like a crazed wild thing.

Catherine had hardly expected the lavish greeting, or the dinner that was offered her. Upon her arrival at the embassy, she had come only to talk to the Baron about the letter threats.

"The Baron will join us shortly," Jacques explained, taking her coat. He led her to the private rooms he and the Baron occupied when they were not at the hotel.

"Jacques," she asked. "How long have you known him?"

The valet smiled nervously. "All my life, Miss Chandler."

"Didn't the letter threats bother you?"

"Yes, but up until now, nothing ever came of them. We dismissed them."

She puzzled. "But why would anyone want to harm...."

"Miss Chandler, the Baron is a nobleman, and as such, he has enemies, those that would crave his title."

She stared at him, amazed. "But, he told me his powers are minimal."

"Indeed. Yet, with any power comes resentment. Yes?"

The double doors in front of them swung open inward. "Ah." The velvet and stone voice intoned. "Dear Catherine, we meet again."

He was dressed less formally than at their first meeting. Still the elegance was very apparent. Her heart beat faster at seeing him, though it was a puzzle as to why. His presence, like Vincent's, demanded attention. His long copper hair spanned the broad black velvet clad shoulders in ringlets. He stepped aside to reveal an opulent table.

"Come. Dine and entertain me with your conversation," he said smoothly. An eyebrow raised at all the food, and only the one place setting.

"Aren't you going to join me, your Highness?"

"No," he said softly. "I have taken my dinner earlier. Please." His enthusiasm was infectious. As he pushed her chair up to the table, Catherine found that she was quite hungry.

Time seemed to have stood still for so long, Catherine blinked. She wondered if she were dreaming. After she had eaten, they had gone into the study together. Jacques had brought in a tray of tiny sweet cakes and a variety of pastry and drink.

She could hardly catch her breath, at the glow of the fire in the Baron's hair. In the darkened room, he sat easily in a padded chair. A bit of white lace at his high collar and wrists cast in an orange hue by the fire's ruddy glow. The black velvet jacket vest hugged his lean form snugly, as did the slacks that matched it, and the old style black leather jack boots he wore. She found she could not pull her eyes away.

He sat with his boots crossed at the ankles. Gazing intently into the fire, Jacques had put some soft classical music on the stereo.

Catherine breathed a contented sigh. Making herself more comfortable in another one of the large chairs. The letter threats forgotten.

She started suddenly. She had to fight to really see the Baron's face in the firelight. It was all so perfect. She felt as if she were sharing it all with Vincent. She had the same safe contentment that filled her whenever they were together. Yet, she was feeling it here, in the French embassy. With the Baron Victor DeLeonard!

Vincent's eyes shifted as he sat on the rooftop ledge of his favorite lookout place. The dark night was sprinkled with bright stars. But tonight they and the tiny glowing lights of the cityscape could not console him. Could not warm the cold pall that had fallen upon his heart.

Catherine was with *'him'* again. What he was feeling threatened to tear him apart. Wetness glistened at the corners of his eyes. He stood snarling at the stars. His clawed left hand up stretched. Cursing the Fates in a loud anguished roar to the silent wind.

Catherine sat up suddenly. Both she and the Baron stared oddly at each other. Victor forced a smile. Hoping that the dead cold he felt would not trigger another attack.

"Catherine?" he questioned. Worried for her, and himself. He knew they had both felt.... something."

"Just the wine, I guess," she edged. "It is late, your Highness."

"Victor, please."

Catherine lowered her eyes. "Victor. I really should go."

Victor's eyes betrayed him. He did not want her to go. Still, he stood and escorted her to the double doors. Jacques was there, an odd unexpectant expression on his face.

"Miss. Chandler is leaving us now," the Baron explained. "Pray find her some suitable transportation." The valet searched Victor's face, but could see nothing alarming about it. He bowed and hurried off to the task assigned him.

THREE

Catherine dropped the keys and her purse into one of her sofas. She did not need to look up to know that Vincent was there. On her balcony. Had waited there for some time. The gnawing at the pit of her stomach had nothing to do with the excellent meal, or the company she had had. The limousine had gotten her home quickly. The feeling ran much deeper. It frightened her.

The silhouetted shape was pacing back and forth. The pull of the bond beckoned her to run into his arms. But, as she unlatched the doors and stepped out, it was as if they had suddenly been transformed into statues, strangers.

His head down, his tawny mane obscuring part of his face. His shoulders squared. Vincent began to pace again, his gait strong and willful. Catherine turned closing the doors. She was frowning deeply when she turned back to him.

Anger, frustration, a deep ache permeated her very being. Her lip trembled as she extended a hand to him. He stopped, taking a strangled breath of air.

"Catherine." Her name was painful, for both of them. Catherine's jaw line set.

"Vincent," she insisted.

His eyes were full of pain as he took her hands in his and glared at the backs of his own. "I... have no right." His wonderful voice almost inaudible. She let go of one hand and took hold of his down-covered chin, forcing his unique face up to look at her.

"You have... every right!" she cried. He tried to look away, but she held him firmly. She felt the tear slide down her cheek, did not wipe it away. "Vincent." She let go. "I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you."

His face darkened. His chin against his chest. "No." He turned around slowly. "You... are entitled to a... a life, Catherine. He... can ... He can give you everything I can never... give you. He... can walk with you in the sunshine. He... can be... what I can '*never*' be."

Catherine swiped a hand across her cheeks and gently grasped the slumped shoulders in front of her. Her voice broke. "Oh Vincent. Don't you know?" she said. '*You are all*' I have '*ever wanted!*'

He turned to her slowly. The golden ginger-colored hair on his face tracked darkly with tears.

"And...." she continued. "What we have '*IS ALL THAT MATTERS*'. " She had not expected the cat-quick movement, but relished in the feel of the swift nearness of him. His arms around her. "I Love '*YOU*'."

Jacques worried as he cleaned away the remnants of their repast. His liege had finished the bottle of wine himself. He sat staring into the dying embers of the fire, quietly brooding.

"Victor, we should return to the hotel. It is late, and this building is not so secure."

The Baron's blue eyes had turned an icy gray. "I feel... as if I am caged in those rooms, old friend. They grow smaller with each day that passes." He glanced at the smaller man. Riveting him with the intensity of his gaze. "You have been keeping secret from me again, Mon Ami."

Jacques nodded. A life with the Baron had taught him many things, one was that you never lied to him. He would know it if you did, instantly.

"You have received another threat. Have you not?"

"Yes, my Lord."

The Baron's face furrowed.

"They upset you so, Victor. With the fever's return... I did not wish to burden you further."

The copper-crowned head lowered. The look directed at the empty snifter in his hand. "Very well. We will return to the hotel. But tomorrow, I will look for larger quarters."

"Of course, my Lord." Jacques took his leave quickly. Grateful for once to be out of the aura that seemed to surround his Royal charge. He had known about it, felt it since childhood. He had given up much to stay with Victor, but nothing could repay him for saving his life. The embassy kitchen was deserted. No prying eyes to see his unease. He picked up the telephone and pressed up the security guards' number.

Dark eyes watched through powerful binoculars as the armor-plated limousine pulled up in front of the embassy. They narrowed at the group of two who made their way into the back of the car. He turned to the dark shape of his companion with an acknowledged nod of his head. The unused apartment had proved a valuable lookout. He took firm hold on the semi-automatic gun tossed to him.

The Baron's bodyguards and two federal agents assigned to protect him stood waiting as he and Jacques entered the hotel. Victor was scowling as they exited the elevator on the floor they had taken over. There was an urgency in the Baron's manner, even with the amount of alcohol Victor had consumed. It was happening again.

Jacques let Victor walk into the bedroom first. Quickly he closed the door behind them and pulled a hypodermic syringe out of the top drawer of the bureau. Sky blue eyes looked up at him from the bed. Victor had already rolled up one sleeve.

"Are you sure, Victor?" he questioned. The dosage was almost twice the norm.

"Yes, Jacques." The Baron's extended hand trembled. "Do it. Hurry."

The clerk at the desk looked up from her paperwork at the two men who had just walked in. Neither had any luggage, and looked to be on vacation. Their clothes were so casual.

"Excuse me," the first man said, his manner of speaking, obviously French.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes. I am a friend of Le Baron De Leonard. I have heard that he has rooms in this hotel. Is this true?"

"I'm afraid I can't give out that information, sir," she said with practiced ease.

"Even to a friend, Cherie?"

She scowled. "I'm sorry."

"Then I will have to call on him at the embassy."

"Yes, sir." She smiled, watching them go. Something about them had made her uncomfortable.

Catherine stood in the threshold that connected her world with the tunnels. Vincent's receding figure going slowly home. Her heart ached as she frowned, turning back to the metal ladder. She loved him more than anything. Yet, even now, her mind turned to Victor. What was it about the enigmatic nobleman that just wouldn't let her go?

Phillippe Chauney frowned as he sat at the bar. Carl Cordran not far away. "There's got to be a way up there," he complained.

"I can see none, my friend," Carl said sourly. "He has many guards here, and the angles are such that a rifle shot at that range would miss."

"He is making friends here, Carl. That is dangerous." His frown deepened. "Did you see the woman who was taken away by his private limousine?" Phillippe's fist clenched.

"I saw her."

"She could be like my mother, Carl. Captivated by his charm, not suspecting what evil lay below it."

Carl touched his friend's shoulder. "It was so long ago, Phillippe."

"It was yesterday!"

Several tavern patrons glanced in their direction for a few moments.

"I will not rest," Phillippe continued, "until he is dead, and the taint avenged. You were not there to watch her slowly go mad. Crying in the night for a man who had left her adrift. Crying over a bastard child and hating you, because you were not that child."

"Then, what can we do?"

"Perhaps the embassy, a package?" Phillippe suggested.

"Phillippe, all parcels are gone over here in the post by the police."

"Perhaps, if sent," a malicious smile brightened his face. "But we are not going to send it. We are going to deliver it. Special. Personally."

FOUR

The following day, Victor had spent much of it on the telephone with his people. His illness had lifted, but had left him weak and slightly nauseous. The hot water of the shower felt good against his bare skin. Turning its slightly olive coloring a warm peach. He shook the shaggy mane. Water spraying all around him.

"You are feeling better?" Jacques asked, standing on the other side of the shower stall, with a set of several dry towels.

The shower had made him feel a little better, but he frowned in the steamy air. If only his people had located what he had lost so long ago. He turned off the water, thinking of Josette and Catherine Chandler.

Vincent looked up at the sound of feet as Samantha entered his chamber. She was carrying a note.

"For you," she said breathlessly. Vincent took the note and unfolded it. Then set it down on the table in front of him. "Is it important?" She wanted to know.

"Enough."

"From Catherine?" A smile slipped across her face. "Okay," she continued at his grin. "I know. My nose again." Vincent touched the end of her nose with a long-nailed finger. She giggled, turned, and hurried back out into the tunnels.

He pulled on his cloak and walked out after her. Catherine wanted to meet him at the French embassy's garden. She was going to tell Victor goodbye. He was uncertain in the long strides of what he was feeling. Relief certainly. But also, he wondered if she were really doing the right thing. His pace quickened.

Catherine's mouth was dry as she mounted the French embassy's front steps. Part of her rebelled at the thought of turning such a lonely soul away. Another part of her told her she had to, or give up the dream she shared with Vincent. She swallowed, reaching up for the door knocker. She would tell him. Somehow.

Vincent paused by the sculptured hedges in the back of the embassy building. He could feel Catherine was near. He looked around nervously. It had been almost forty-five minutes since his arrival. Still, he had seen no guards

"Perhaps some supper will do you good," suggested Jacques, handing a towel through the shower curtains. "I will make you a tray."

"That is not necessary." The velvety voice seemed to echo in the small space.

"I have left the mail on your dressing counter," his valet continued, as if he hadn't heard him. "There is a small package there. Did you order something?"

"Not that I recall." Victor said, pulling a towel around his midsection. Quietly he stepped out of the shower.

"At least you look better," Jacques offered. Victor glanced at him side long.

"I do not feel much the better, Jacques. In fact, once I am dry, I would like you to administer another injection."

The valet's look darkened. "Are you in pain again, Victor?"

"Only in my heart," he smiled. "Only there."

"Then why?"

"I have to attend another meeting tonight. One with the Missing Children's Bureau of New York. You know how such interviews affect me. I only wish to have some precaution."

Despite the misgivings, Jacques left the bath. The newly filled syringe was as he had left it in the top drawer. He hated doing what he did. Yet, like the Baron himself, Jacques knew it was a necessary evil. By the time he had reached the bathroom once more, Victor had dressed and was headed toward the bedroom.

"My Lord, are you sure?" he asked again. "You now what the doctor...."

"Yes. I *'know'* what the doctor said. I am constantly being reminded about '*What The Doctor Said*'... Please."

He sat down on the bed and rolled up the shirt sleeve of his left arm. When it was done, he rolled it back down again and pulled his vest off the dresser top. Jacques' eyes watched him uneasily. He pulled the scarlet cloak from the closet and handed it to Victor.

A knock on the outer door rang out in the quiet.

"Jacques, see who that is," insisted the Baron. "Please." He knew there were other workers in the house, and that they would answer the bell, but at that moment, he had wanted to be alone.

Catherine sat in the foyer, waiting unhappily. She had briefed through the magazines on the stand there, and stared enough at the portraits of old French ambassadors. Jacques smiled coming down the stairs as he saw her. Catherine stood up.

"Miss Chandler, we had not expected you today. You should have called."

"It's all right, Jacques. I.... I just wanted to talk to Victor for a moment. Is he busy?"

"The Baron is always busy. But for you... I'm sure he will find some time."

"Thank you." She stated, watching him go back upstairs. Jacques wondered at her nervousness. The strange look on her face, and hoped sincerely that what she had to tell Victor would not upset him anymore. Catherine shivered, but not from any cold air. She closed her eyes, trying to rehearse what she would say, and found herself at a loss for words.

"Miss. Chandler!" Jacques had returned. "Please, come up."

Vincent's senses could pick up no security people. His eyes narrowed as he approached the building in the evening's deep shadows. Catherine was sad, extremely so, but in no danger. Still, his nerves would not calm. The night's breeze was cold through the folds of his cloak. He stood. Waited.

Two shadows watched the window of the bedroom on the second floor of the French embassy. Both were hidden in the shadows of the building's blind side. Each carried a gun. The shorter one also a small transmitter. They said not a word, as they came close to the building.

Vincent's head moved from side to side. Someone else was in the vicinity. Two people. He climbed into a tall hedgeway by the wall and crouched down so as not to be seen

Jacques looked worried at his liege as Catherine left the study. The blue of his eyes had turned a murky gray. He had not been privy to their conversation, but he could tell that it had hurt Victor.

"I am going to my rooms," the Baron announced brusquely. A hand to his forehead, he almost stumbled on the stair. Jacques grabbed a wrist and under one arm. "I do not feel well," Victor confessed.

"Too much of the drug?" His friend worried, but Victor did not answer him.

An icy tingle ran through Vincent. He had to force himself to quiet. Catherine was coming closer. She would be in the garden at any minute. All his senses told him to run. That there was danger here. He fought for control. Remained.

Catherine's eyes were cast down as the back door closed behind her. Her booted feet rang out against the black flagstones. Wetness misted her eyes. She knew Vincent was there. Looking down at the stones she smirked sadly to herself. Black was how she was feeling. A few steps away from the main patio, she stopped.

"Vincent?" she called softly. "Vincent?"

"Here." She turned and watched him disentangle himself from the bushes.

Phillippe and Carl watched the two in the garden silently. The man in the cowl could have been the Baron, but the clothing he wore was all wrong. He looked down at the transmitter in his hand.

"Are you with me, Carl?" he asked earnestly. The other nodded, grasping his gun firmly.

Catherine wondered at the hurried pace to which Vincent had urged her to go. He looked down at her to continue their conversation when a loud blast ripped the air behind them. His move was instinctive. Sirens and alarms sounded as the debris fell all around them. Catherine peered out from under the shielding arm and cloak, at the heavy flames and thick smoke billowing from the top of the embassy building.

"Victor!" she shouted. Scrambling to stand up, Vincent grabbed her wrist as she tried to run back inside. The garden was still deserted. The lower level of the building still intact.

"Vincent!" she cried, insisting. He let her go and raced after her. Back into the building. The drawing room doors were open. But it was empty. Several workers ran passed them in a panic. Taking no notice of the tall cloaked figure.

Half up the stairs the way was blocked by fallen debris and a piece of the banister afire. Catherine fought her way up. Vincent grabbed the cooler end of the railing and shoved it over that which still remained.

At last they reached the landing. The cold of night and the wind fanned the flames around the inner door. Someone lay in the smoke-filled outer room. Vincent peered into the inner one, turning back in revulsion to the sight.

Catherine grabbed the gloved hand out of the hooded figure on the floor, and tugged as hard as she could. Pulling the man out from under the blast splintered door.

"Let me die!" it cried in anguish.

"You're hurt!" Catherine protested. "Please, let me help!"

"No... It... is done." It said, resigned. The tone dark with despair. Vincent stood tense at the outer doorway. The fire was spreading rapidly.

"Catherine! We must go!" he shouted.

"Vincent. Help me!" Her voice was almost lost as the fire crackled alarmingly. Fueled by the breeze....

"I will bring him." He stepped quickly over to the crimson cowed figure. "Go!" he said, regardless of the two other bodies that littered the hall. For a moment, she just stood, unable to decide what to do. Then she dashed down the stairs. The railing was slowly setting the carpeting ablaze.

"Come," Vincent knelt and reached out a hand to the stranger. "I am a friend. We must hurry." The figure reached for him, but as their hands connected, Vincent's heart pounded against his ribs. The firelight strongly illuminated the hand that gripped his own so tightly.

It had no glove on to cover it. Yet the deep gash across its back held no blood.

"Jacques?" the tortured voice cried.

"He's dead." Vincent gripped the hand tighter and pulled him up from the floor. Surprised at the weight and height, the odd angles, concealed within the scorched crimson cloak.

Outside, in the garden, Catherine pulled the gloved hand over her shoulder, so that he could be supported from both sides. The sound of the fire department and police arriving rang in the hot air behind them.

In an alley several blocks away, they set him down again.

"Victor?" Catherine asked Vincent in a disheartened tone.

"There was no one else alive, Catherine."

The crimson-cowled face looked up at them. Catherine came back to kneel down close to him. She gasped at the torn skin on the one hand, but it was not now the blood that lie underneath. It was the wetly matted red-brown hair. The hand pulled within the cloak swiftly, but not so quick that Catherine did not notice the gold signet ring on that left hand.

"Baron DeLeonard!" she cried.

Vincent's movement was so fluid that neither of them expected it. The Baron cried out as Vincent lifted him from the ground, pulling him close to the bestial face. The Baron's hood fell back at the action. Catherine took two steps back, her fist pushed tightly into her mouth. To prevent the cry that nearly burst from her throat. Vincent held the Baron's face at his own eye level.

Both sets of sky blue eyes widened in shock. Vincent let go, stepping back as if he had been suddenly electrically shocked. Victor fell to his knees, the blood at his shoulder and arm seeping through the material of his cloak.

"This... This cannot be!" Vincent agonized. He leaned up against the top of the metal trash can as if he were going to be sick. The Baron's long copper hair fell disheveled down over his back and shoulders. The length wispy around the frightened visage of an older leonine face!

Catherine swallowed, her face darkening with determination. She walked back over without hesitation and brushed the scorched hair from the face again. The Baron's eyes were glassy, filled with tears. He was in pain. Catherine reached within the cloak and drew out his hand. The disguise all but gone. The red-brown hair that covered its back matted with blood.

"It's okay," she said soothingly. "We'll take you to a doctor."

"No!" Victor cried out. "They would...."

"Not *'this'* doctor," Catherine assured him.

"It's a trick," Vincent snarled. He leaned further on the trash can's lid. He turned to them, his brow furrowed deeply. His teeth bared in a menacing way. Catherine had seldom seen him so angry. Yet so *'in'* control.

"I will *'NOT'* take him."

She glared at him. Pulling the gloved hand over her shoulder once more, she tried to support Victor enough to stand. They staggered.

"The drug," he nodded deliriously.

"Then I *'WILL'!*" Catherine spat. They nearly fell again when Vincent relented. Grabbing the other arm, he did not speak again until they both stood outside of the Hospital chamber in the tunnel world Below.

"Will he live?" Catherine asked, as Father emerged from the curtain at the entrance to the Hospital chamber. He wiped his hands on a towel he held and looked straight at her.

"Yes, he'll be in pain for a while. I wouldn't move him too soon."

"What was wrong?" she asked.

"To begin with," Father said. "He had smoke inhalation and a cracked rib. He's also coming off some type of tranquilizer. I removed two bullets from his chest and shoulder," he grimaced. "What happened up there?"

"It's a long story, Father," Catherine sighed.

"I seem to have nothing but time, Catherine." Father turned to his blonde son. "Vincent, he is asking to see you."

"No," Vincent said softly. Catherine glowered at him, allowing Father to lead her away a few steps.

"Catherine, where did you find him? Who is he?"

Catherine shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me," he insisted.

Catherine sighed heavily. "That *'man'* in there is the Baron DeLeonard."

Father's brow wrinkled deeply. "What?" he swallowed, amazed. "Did you know?"

"No." She shook her head. "I wish I had. Maybe then I would have understood what I felt about him."

"Has Vincent *'seen'* him?"

"Yes," she frowned. "He wasn't going to help me bring him here."

Father's frown deepened. "That doesn't sound like Vincent."

"I know."

"It's a trick," Vincent repeated, still angry.

Father glared at him. "That he was injured, shot, was certainly not," he scolded. "You would have left him there to die?"

"You, yourself, have told me, Father," Vincent growled, beginning to pace. "Over and over again. Let... the

topsiders take care of their own."

Father's mouth dropped open.

"Vincent," he said sternly, not liking the edge in his son's voice. "The Baron's condition is '*NO*' trick. '*NO*' actor's fake. He '*IS*' as leonine as you are. More so in fact. The humanity was a disguise. He has been asking about you. Ever since his mind cleared. And I think you owe it to him, and yourself to talk to him."

Catherine looked into the terror-struck face.

"Vincent, please," she said, remembering the talk she and Victor had had. "You have to hear him out at least."

Without speaking, Vincent gripped the curtain and pushed it aside, stepping into the Hospital chamber.

"He told me a little," Father continued. "My God, if it's true. Come on, to the office with me."

"The office? Why?" Catherine wanted to know.

Father grinned. "I'll make us some tea. You and I need to talk. Almost as much as they do."

Victor DeLeonard lay on one of the beds. Propped up by pillows, Father had put his right arm in a sling and dressed him in a clean cotton tunic. Yet even with that, Vincent noticed the difference. He was now totally free of the confining disguise.

The copper-colored mane framed a not unhandsome face, and spilled down the still broad shoulders. "So," Victor began softly. His voice a smooth velvet and sand. "I did not imagine you in my pain, or the drug. Please," he gestured. "Come sit by me."

"Why?" The blonde wanted to know. He stood staring down at him. But for the light olive skin color, and the shade of his hair, Victor could have been him at a later point in time. The mane at his temples had streaked with gray. As was the soft tiny hairs across his cleft upper lip. They were kept so closely trimmed that even Vincent almost missed it. The long olive-brown fingernails had been filed into blunted ovals.

"Let me hear your voice again," Victor asked. "Tell me your name."

Vincent cocked his head to one side. Victor's aloneness was like a pall around him. So alone. So lonely. Vincent shut his eyes and stepped back. "Vincent," he said, regaining his composure.

"Vincent," The Baron repeated. Smiling. "The Conqueror, Victorious one," he sighed. His smile revealed elongated canines like Vincent's. But these had been filed down, almost to the point of being flat. The smile was warm, inviting and longing all at the same time. Suddenly Vincent understood how Catherine could have been drawn to him so deeply.

"That is also the definition of Victor." There was irony in his voice. "My father thought it was a grand name." He looked down at his hands. "For such... a son. Why were you asking... about me?"

Victor looked up at him with such pain, joy, trepidation that Vincent could not help but be moved. He walked over to the chair and sank into it.

"The man called Father. He said you... were a foundling. Is... this true?"

"Yes," Vincent lowered his head.

"How... were you found?" the Baron continued.

"Why do you... wish to know?"

Victor smiled nervously. "it is... important to me... Vincent. Please. How... were you found?"

"I...was found at the coldest part of January, in the trash behind St. Vincent's Hospital. A woman from this place, Anna, she brought me here to Father."

Victor's eyes shut tight. Wetness seeping around the edges of the dark lashes as Vincent relayed the story.

"In the trash," he said sorrowfully.

"Yes."

" I am sorry."

Vincent frowned, feeling remorse from the creature named Victor.

"Why?" he asked. "That I was found? Or... that I survived?"

"Both." Victor caught the other's eyes. "Vincent, it is very possible that I... I have searched for so long." He swallowed, trying to begin again. "It... is possible, that I may be your paternal father."

Vincent sat heavily back in the chair.

"Hear me out. Please," Victor asked. "Many of the stories we tell children when they are young, actually have a base in fact. Do you remember... the story... of a beautiful woman, who, because her parents did something wrong, she was forced to live with a beast. Then, when she leaves him, his heart was so broken at the thought of never seeing her again that he almost dies."

"Yes, Beauty and the Beast. It... was... one of my favorites."

"Did you know, Vincent, that this is *'not'* just a child's story. All back through time imaginable. My family had carried *'the gift'* or *'the curse.'* It was something carried down from father to son to grandson over the course of centuries. Sometimes it would not show itself for generations, but all would know that sooner or later it would reappear. It did so with me."

"Why... tell me this?"

"Because I want you to know that with all my heart. I hope.... that you truly are my long-lost son. My father and grandfather were normal. As were the two brothers before me. Being of the nobility, it was important that the *'taint'* be covered up. I went through all manners of torture. Just to look like a normal person. They even went so far as to encase me in a costume, totally."

He paused, looking ill. "I hated that thing, but I had no recourse. My family was lost to the Nazis in the war. But I survived only through the servant's interventions. When it was over, I had to take my rightful place as the leader of my country. But, how could something like me rule? Again the disguise. Then I met Josette. She was the most beautiful creature I had ever met, Her hair...."

Victor touched a lock of Vincent's golden mane. "Was this same wonderful shade of gold. Her eyes clear blue. We fell in love, but it was not to be. My guardian found out about my plans to marry, and had her sent away. paid for from my own trust fund. Almost a year later, I received a strange telegram. It came from America, but the address was so mangled, it was unreadable. The letter read, *'Victor, you have a son. Josette'.*"

"And you have been searching for him all this time."

"Yes," Victor's frown deepened. "I have been plagued by a reoccurring fever whenever I came to New York to consult with my people here. This time was the worst. No amount of the tranquilizer could stop me from tearing at myself and at anything around me. Yet now, sitting here, across from you, I have no feeling of it. I am free. Whole. I... believe that it was a premonition. A meeting of souls. Between a father and his son."

Vincent's head tilted to one side. He understood now the odd dream that had awakened him, the rage he had felt at Catherine's emotions around the Baron. He looked down at his hands.

"Then... you will stay with us, until you are recovered." Vincent stood up slowly and looked back at him. "We will talk again later."

Father looked up, teacup in hand as Vincent entered the office chamber. Catherine turned around in her seat.

"Did he tell you?" she asked, concerned at the strange expression on his face.

"He did."

"And, what do you think, Vincent?" Father asked.

Vincent took the chair across from Catherine and sat down into it. "I... don't know what to think."

"You hear about the bombing?" Joe asked in his off-hand way. Catherine looked up from her work. "Never found him."

"Found who, Joe?" she asked.

"Your Baron."

Catherine chuckled. "Joe, he wasn't *'my'* Baron."

"Well, be that as it may. They found his valet and two unidentified bodies. But no Baron. You think, maybe, he skipped town before the terrorists got wise?"

"Sure, Joe," she patronized, pulling her purse from the bottom drawer of her desk.

"Where are you going?"

She pointed to her wristwatch. "Lunch."

Catherine chuckled to herself as she hurried home. The tunnels had an entrance at the old refinery. It had been almost two weeks since the bombing, though the subject was still in conversation in the DA's office. Without a body, they didn't have much of a case. Everyone was wondering what had happened to the French Baron.

Victor, the human, smiled at them as she and Vincent entered the guest chamber. She had brought him some clothes suitable for a Baron, and enough cash that he would have no trouble getting home. He embraced each one in turn.

Vincent smirked. "I think... I liked you better... the other way," he teased.

"Believe me, Mon Ami. If... I had a choice...."

"Well, we're all set," Catherine offered. "I've got a van waiting at the refinery, and you're booked on a flight to Paris in about an hour."

"What can... I say? To both of you? You... have saved my life. My sanity. Given an old man, a hope... for the future." The last was said looking at Vincent.

"Write," Vincent asked simply. "Long letters. To Catherine...."

"I will."

The morning sky was just beginning to brighten when Catherine returned home. She let the door slam shut behind her and ran across the apartment to the balcony. Vincent was waiting.

"Did he go safely?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, " she said, snuggling against the quilting at his shoulder. "He did. He promised me that he would write, as soon as he could, and would keep in touch." She paused, looking up into his eyes. "You did a wonderful thing, Vincent. You gave a very lonely man something no one else in the world could have given him."

"And that is?"

He slipped his arm around her back, allowing her embrace. Catherine held him tight. "A family."

END