

A FRIEND IN NEED

by Christine Cunningham

Catherine struggled to get the key in the lock, trying to hold onto numerous packages at the same time. The telephone started to ring and her answering machine obediently clicked to the 'on' position. Outside, Catherine heard the voice of her friend, Nancy.

"Dammit, don't hang up."

Getting inside her apartment she made a dive for the phone, but all she heard was the dialling tone.

"Shoot."

Nancy didn't ring very often and Catherine wished they could get together more frequently than they did. The message on the machine just said that Nancy would ring later, so Catherine went about emptying the grocery bags and making herself something to eat.

At nine-thirty Nancy called back.

"Hi, Nance, It's great to hear from you. How goes it?"

"Cathy, can I come and see you?" Nancy asked without preamble.

"You bet. When?"

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

"Nance, you still there?"

"Uh! Yeah. Look Cath, can I come now? I'm in town."

Catherine was somewhat taken aback by that statement, but recovered quickly enough to say, "Well sure. Come right on over, see you soon." She replaced the receiver with a thoughtful frown.

By ten o'clock Nancy was sitting in Catherine's apartment. "I'm sorry to spring myself on you like this, but I really needed to talk to a friend, Cath."

Catherine poured the coffee and sat beside her friend. "Hey, no sweat. You tell Aunt Cath what's wrong."

Nancy smiled wanly. '*Dear Cathy*'. "There's no easy way to say this, but I've left Paul."

Catherine choked on her coffee. "Would you run that by me again? You can't be serious, you and Paul are crazy about each other."

Her friend laughed weakly. "Yeah, I thought so too, but lately we've done nothing but fight. I had to get away for awhile."

It was no joke and Catherine was shocked. "Tell me."

Nancy sighed. "It's so stupid really, but it's just got out of hand. Up until six months ago everything was fine. Cath, while the children were young, I had plenty to occupy me. Paul went to work and I saw to the kids, no problem, right?"

Catherine nodded. "Go on."

"When the youngest started school full time, I found I had time on my hands, but what was I going to do

with it? I was at a loose end and then six months ago the school had their Easter Fayre. You know the kind of thing, hunts, cake stalls, children's rides and so on. I went along like the good parent I am, and of course took my camera, snapping away at anything and everything. Nothing unusual in that you might say and nor was it, except that when I took the photographs into the school to show everyone, the principal asked to borrow them. I thought nothing of it until a week later I was reading about the Fayre in the local paper and there were my photos staring up at me."

Catherine looked confused. "Well, what's wrong with that? You're a good photographer. I'd have thought you would have been pleased."

"I was, Cath. Pleased and flattered. So was Paul at first. Then I got a call from the Editor of the paper, saying how much he liked my work and would I be interested in covering local events for him."

Catherine smiled. "Well, that's great," then saw her friend's eyes fill with tears. "Isn't it?"

Nancy shook her head. "I thought it was. At last I could do something with my photography, even in a small way. I started doing local things of interest and it was great, Cath. It really was. I was filling my days with something I was good at without it interfering with the family, and then, without warning, Paul said he didn't want me working. I couldn't believe it, but he was serious. I told him it could hardly be classed as a job and besides, I enjoyed it and I need something just for me. Something outside the home."

Catherine couldn't imagine Paul in the way Nancy was describing him. He was always so laid back and it left her with one conclusion.

"Nancy, he's jealous, that's all, and feeling a little insecure. He's gotten into the habit of thinking that he and the children are all you should need to keep you happy. Let's face it, he knows how good you are with a camera and he knows you could have had a brilliant career. The fact that you've taken it up again has shaken him up a bit and that's not a bad thing. He'll come to understand, given a bit of time. Maybe he sees you jetting around the world and he's scared that he and the children will become second best."

Nancy sighed despondently. "Maybe you're right, Cath. I hope so. At this moment I'm more disappointed with him than angry. I really thought he was bigger than that. Look, could I stay here for awhile? I can't face going back to Westport just yet."

Catherine hugged her friend. "Do you really need to ask? You were there for me not so long ago and you gave me good advice. I needed you then, more than you'll ever know."

Nancy pulled out of the embrace. "How did it all work out with Vincent? Are you and he still together? With all that's on my mind I forgot to ask."

Catherine smiled, remembering her flight back to Vincent's arms. "Oh yes! Vincent and I are together, always, and we both thank you for all your help."

"Me? What did I do?"

Catherine laughed. "Brought me to my senses, that's what. Now let's go make up the spare bed." With arms around each other the two girls walked through to the bedroom.

When the bed was made, Nancy went for a shower and Catherine went back to the lounge just as the phone began to ring. She picked it up only to hear Paul's voice demanding to know if Nancy was there.

"Yes Paul, she is, **and don't speak to me in that tone or I'll hang up.**"

Paul apologized. "I'm sorry, Cath, but I've been frantic with worry. We had a few words and she just stormed out. She's never done that before."

"Maybe it's time she did then," stated Catherine without sympathy. "Don't take her for granted, Paul, or you'll lose her for sure. Look, would you do something for me? Call it an experiment if you like."

"Cath, I want my wife back. Tell me."

While she had been listening to Nancy earlier, a germ of an idea had taken root and if Paul hadn't phoned she would have rung him.

"All right then, listen up. I'm going to ask Nancy to stay with me for a couple of weeks."

Paul protested vigorously. "Hold on, Cath, that's too long."

She continued as though he hadn't spoken. "Then I want you to take your vacation and step into your wife's shoes. In other words, be a housewife, stay at home and see how Nancy spends her days. Then let me know how you find it. Will you do that for me?"

Paul was a smart man, and knew he was being set up for a fall, but, hell, he wanted his wife back. "You are one clever lady, Catherine. Okay, you got it. Two weeks. I do love her, you know."

"I know that, Paul. I think you both need some breathing space. Don't worry, she'll be fine with me. Bye."

Nancy padded out of the bathroom, dressed in one of Catherine's luxurious nightgowns which made her feel infinitely better.

"Thanks for this, Cath."

"No problem. As they say, *'Mi casa, Su casa.'* I hope you've left some hot water," and she went to have a shower herself, deciding not to mention Paul's phone call.

Vincent vaulted onto the balcony and hoped Catherine was still awake. They had not arranged to meet tonight but he wanted to see her, if only for a moment. It was becoming very difficult to go a full twenty-four hours without seeing her, talking to her, and more than that, touching her. This feeling called love was a wonderful experience, but it was also frustrating.

Lately he had taken to wishing the hours away until darkness descended and he could go to her. His patience with the daylight was extremely thin.

He was about to tap on the window pane when he saw her silhouetter approaching, her nightgown floating around her legs as she moved, so he backed away and turned to look out over the brightly lit buildings stretching out before him.

He heard the door open and he heard her step out, and then he heard a sound which froze his blood. A gasp of fright. *'This was 'not' Catherine. What should he do?'* As he contemplated his predicament, a female voice softly said, "Don't go. Catherine would never forgive me if I frightened you away. You have to be Vincent. From the back you look just how she described you and if you don't mind my saying so, I'd kill for a head of hair like that. Why is it that some men have beautiful hair and ridiculously long eyelashes quite naturally and us women have to go to extraordinary lengths to get the same effect. Ah, well, such is life."

Vincent had no idea who this woman was and though he knew he should get out while he had the chance, her words caused him to smile and stay glued to the spot.

"Thank you for the compliment, although if you had to brush this hair you might revise your opinion. I'm only too happy to let Catherine do it. She has infinite patience with the tangles, not to mention the gentlest touch. May I ask your name?"

Nancy quite literally had to pinch herself back to reality. *'God! What a voice!'* The sound of it reached inside her and coiled around her heart. She loved her husband, sure, even if they were having problems right now, but that voice was doing strange things to her equilibrium.

"Ah... Nancy. My name is Nancy."

Vincent nodded. "From Westport. Yes. I am happy to meet you, Nancy. I owe you much."

"You do?" she stammered. "How so?"

She could hear the smile in his voice as he replied. "Because you helped bring me back to life. You helped bring Catherine home to me. For that you have my sincere gratitude."

That was more or less what Cathy had told her. "Aw shucks. Think nothing of it. You can turn around, you know. I don't bite."

Vincent shook his head, his mane flying in the breeze. "I think not, Nancy. I have no wish to alarm you." He heard her take a step towards him and panicked. "Please, do not come closer. Bring Catherine."

Nancy halted within touching distance and tentatively laid her hand on his back, feeling him tense up immediately.

"It's really all right, Vincent. Catherine has told me a little of your life and your circumstances, and you can trust me. Come on. Turn around. I promise not to faint."

Vincent wished Catherine would come, he really did. Nancy seemed like a good person but she was a woman, and like most women she was persistent, and like most men he was helpless against it, so very reluctantly he slowly turned and looked down at her. He sensed no fear, only a mild curiosity and also a faint hint of excitement as she studied him. Though goodness knew why. Still, it was preferable to outright fright. He still had not realized that women were never, ever, repulsed by him. Probably he would never realize it.

The photographer in Nancy took over, noting the high cheekbones, the wary expression in his eyes and what eyes they were, the way he stood, graceful and majestic at the same time.

"I would give my eye teeth for just an hour of your time. I could take some fantastic shots of you. What a subject," she breathed wonderingly.

Vincent regretfully shook his head. "I'm afraid I could not allow you to do that, Nancy. Cameras and I are not compatible. If pictures of me should get into the wrong hands..."

There was no need to elaborate. Nancy understood perfectly.

"I guess but it's a real shame though. The world isn't ready for you yet, more's the pity. Anyway, I'm glad to have met you at long last. You stay right here and I'll fetch Catherine. Then I think I'll turn in. I hope I see you again, Vincent. Goodnight.'

She left him standing there, not knowing that this was one of the few times in his life when, after meeting someone new, he had not sensed any fear or rejection on their part, and he was immeasurably grateful to her for that.

Catherine came out of the shower and found Nancy waiting for her. "I'm glad you took your time, Cath. I've been having the most wonderful conversation with your Vincent."

Catherine dropped her hairbrush with a clatter and stared frantically at Nancy. "Oh, Nancy, no."

"Hey, don't panic. We had no problems, honest, and I have the feeling that he and I will be good friends. Now go on out, he's impatient to see you. I'm going to bed. Thanks for letting me stay, Cath and as far as the rest of the world is concerned, I've never heard of anyone called Vincent. Okay?"

Catherine relaxed completely. "Thanks Nance. Again." The she flew onto the terrace to be caught in the arms of the other half of herself.

Nancy watched and smiled. "And I think I've got problems. Way to go, Cath." She went to bed and left the lovers to themselves for all too brief a time, but not before she grabbed her camera for a few quick shots.

Long moments passed before any words were spoken. Then Catherine pulled back to say, "Are you okay? Nancy can be trusted to keep our secret."

He smiled ruefully and kissed the top of her head. "I know, but she gave me some bad moments earlier. Why is she here, Catherine? You made no mention of her visit."

"I didn't know she was coming myself until a couple of hours ago, and while it's wonderful to see her, I'm afraid she's going through a hard time in the marital stakes at present." She explained Nancy's problem and said, "I've asked her to stay with me, Vincent. I'm sorry that it interferes with our time together, but I have to be there for her. I owe her so much."

Vincent placed a finger over her lips and shook his head. "Sssshhhh, my love. Of course you must spend time with your friend. Do not forget that I also have much to thank her for. I do not know her husband but I find it difficult to understand why he would want to hold her back from doing something which is important to her."

Catherine pressed closer and wrapped her arms around him. "Yes, but not every man is as generous and giving as you, my love. I've spoken to Paul and asked him to participate in a small experiment which, with a little luck and compromise, should help him understand Nancy's side of the story. They really do love each other very much, but they seem to have forgotten for the moment."

Vincent held her tighter and whispered. "They will remember love, Catherine, just as we did, and all will be well again."

Up in Westport, Paul took his vacation time and settled into the routine of house husband. Cooking, cleaning, getting the kids off to school on time. Nothing to it, piece of cake. Except that by the end of the first week, he was beginning to suffer the signs of cabin fever. There was only so much housework to do and with the children gone all day, hours dragged like days.

The highlight of his week was the grocery shopping. At least in the supermarket he got to meet other people, mostly mothers, even if all they talked about was the rising cost of cereals, or Jimmy's case of the measles. Really riveting stuff.

With so much spare time, it seemed criminal to waste it, so Paul took to opening his briefcase at ten in the morning and working steadily, making appointments with clients, leaving the confines of the house to meet those clients for lunch and returning home in time to collect the children from school. This routine continued for three days before he realized what he had been doing, and then he admitted defeat. Nancy's work never intruded on family life. In fact, she always made sure of it. He and the children did come first with her. She was a talented woman, who could have gone far, and yet she gave it all up to be a wife and mother. Now he appreciated how frustrated she must have felt, knowing she had the time and talent to work with her photography, but held back because of his out-dated chauvinistic attitudes. It had been a hard lesson, but he learned, and would not make the same mistake again.

"Thanks to one Catherine Chandler," he said aloud to an empty house.

He learned his lesson half-way through the second week but held back from calling Nancy. He would see the experiment through and give her time for herself. He owed her that much, and more, he realized.

Nancy, back in New York, was having a wonderful time. After two days of talking with Catherine and ranting and raving about Paul's unreasonable behaviour, she picked herself up and determined to make the most of her time in the Big Apple. The opportunity was too good to pass up and her portfolio of photographs soon filled up. Every once in a while though, an image of a mythical lion-man would come into her mind and she would sigh with regret that she wouldn't even be able to capture him on film, except for the few she had taken without his knowledge or consent.

Catherine took a few days off, which took some doing, the workload at the office was overwhelming and Joe Maxwell was none too pleased.

"You owe me, Radcliffe. Don't forget it," he'd said.

They traipsed the streets of the city hour after hour until Catherine was exhausted. "Hey Nance, haven't you figured out yet that nobody walks in New York. It's just not done, except for rush hour."

Nancy had her face glued to her camera capturing anything which caught her eye through the viewfinder.

"Yeah, I figured, but look what you're missing. What can you see in a car? Anyway, I'm ready to call it a day." She cast regretful eyes to her friend and dropped the camera around her neck. "Run out of film."

"Praise be," groaned Catherine. "There can't be anything left to photograph. My poor feet."

That evening Vincent came to the balcony. He had made himself stay away, so that Catherine could be with her friend, but it had been hard. His only consolation was the bond which enabled him to know the contentment and pleasure she felt at having Nancy stay with her. And when she thought of him, usually at night, then her emotions flooded his being, wrapping around his heart and giving him solace through the lonely nights without her.

The three of them spent a companionable evening, making conversation and Vincent and Catherine had to suffer through what seemed like thousands of Nancy's photographs. Vincent thought that he could think of better ways to spend the evening, but was far too polite to say so.

Catherine did not feel so restricted though. "Okay Nance, that's it. I've had enough and I'm sure Vincent has too."

Nancy had the grace to look sheepish. "God, what a bore I must be. Nothing worse than looking at other people's holiday snaps. Sorry."

Vincent smiled that bone-melting smile that was uniquely his and waved away her apology. "I am by no means an expert in such things but I do know talent when I see it. Nancy, you must continue with your work, even if only in a small way. These pictures tell their own story, and you should seriously consider putting them into a book. I am sure you would have a best seller on your hands."

Nancy blushed profusely. "Thanks Vincent. You do a girl's ego the world of good. I'll bear it in mind about the book."

At the end of the second week, Nancy was ready to go home. She missed the children abominably. Paul too. This stupid argument had gone on long enough and their marriage was surely strong enough to weather the odd storm now and then.

Paul called Catherine and conceded that he had been wrong. "Well, don't tell me, tell your wife." She handed the phone to Nancy and left her alone to accept Paul's apology.

A while later Nancy joined Catherine on the balcony. "I'll be going home in the morning, Cath. I don't know what went on between you and Paul, but whatever it was, I thank you. Paul said to say, '*Tell Cath, thanks a million.*' He said I should carry one if that's what I want and he will support any decision I make. One other thing, Cath. Thanks for letting me develop my prints in your bathroom. That couldn't have been much fun for you. Smells a bit, I know."

Catherine laughed. "More than a bit, my friend, but what the hell. It's been great to see you again, Nance, and I want us to promise that we will keep in touch. There aren't many people I can talk to about Vincent and it gets lonely sometimes."

Nancy hugged her. "You got it. He's really something else and you should think yourself very lucky. Ninety nine point nine percent of the female population would love to be in your shoes."

Vincent came solely for the purpose of saying goodbye to Nancy and while Catherine was in the kitchen making coffee, Nancy pressed a large package into Vincent's hands. "Don't open it until I've gone and wait until you and Catherine are alone in your home. Wherever that may be. It's a token, nothing more and it didn't cost me a dime before you ask. Cathy tells me you don't like people spending money on expensive gifts."

Vincent put the package in one of the voluminous pockets of his cloak and thanked her. "Whatever it is, I am sure it will be something to cherish. Thank you, Nancy."

He lingered a while longer to wish his Catherine goodnight. "I will see you tomorrow in my chamber, sleep well, my love." To Nancy, he said, "I am honoured to know you, Nancy, and I pray your life will be full of joy from now on. Be well," and then he was gone.

Nancy felt the tears sliding down her cheeks. "I'm the honoured one, Vincent," she whispered. "Goodbye and God bless." To Catherine, she said, "He gets to you, doesn't he?" All Catherine could do was nod her head and sigh wistfully.

Catherine saw her friend off at the station and each promised faithfully to stay in touch. They waved until they couldn't see each other any more and Catherine let out a happy sigh. Seeing Nancy always made her feel good. Now she had mountains of work to get through if she wanted to get off early to go Below.

Vincent retrieved the package from his cloak and turned it over in his hands. It was about a foot square and rather heavy. He was really tempted to open it before Catherine came Below. Having to wait until she arrived would test his patience. He was as excited as any child at Christmas, where presents were concerned. Didn't matter what it was, a gift wrapped in paper was exciting. Now some people can savour the anticipation of opening a present, first by looking at it, then shaking it or squeezing it to see if they can guess the contents, but not Vincent. He kept thinking that if he just accidentally hooked a claw through the string and it broke, then the paper would sort of come apart by itself. Wouldn't be his fault, would it? He was itching to do it, could feel his claws scraping across the paper.

"I must not. I promised Nancy. Do something else to take your mind off it," he told himself, rather half-heartedly.

He was just putting the package to one side when Cullen came into his chamber. "Oh good, you're here. I need help moving some furniture into the new chambers. Can you come now?"

Vincent agreed instantly. "Of course, lead the way." As he left, he gave a lingering look back to the package sitting temptingly on the bed. "You came just in time, Cullen, my friend."

"Huh? What did you say?"

"Nothing, Cullen. Nothing at all."

That evening Catherine descended the ladder from the basement and made her way to Vincent's chamber. She knew her way along the tunnels almost as well as any tunnel dweller these days and that knowledge gave her a feeling of belonging, knowing that she no longer needed a guide.

Vincent was waiting impatiently for her arrival. Working with Cullen had successfully taken his mind from the package, but since returning over an hour ago, he found his fingers itching to open it. He busied himself tidying the chamber and making a pot of Catherine's favourite herbal tea, trying his best to ignore the

packet lying tantalizingly close.

"Hello Vincent, sorry I'm late. Had a lot to catch up on. Hmmmmm! Is that herbal tea I can smell?"

"Catherine, at last, you are here. Hurry, sit down."

He looked quite agitated and Catherine said, "What's wrong? Is everything okay?"

He pointed an accusing finger at the package. "I promised Nancy not to open it until we were together and I cannot wait a moment longer."

Catherine knew of Vincent's weakness where presents were concerned and smiled impishly. "Poor you. how long have you had to control yourself?"

"Nancy gave it to me last evening and the temptation has sorely tried me, but now we can open it."

They sat together on the bed, the package sitting on Vincent's lap. "Well, go on then," said Catherine. "Let's see."

He wanted to rip the paper to shreds, but heeding the rule of thrift, delicately broke the string and carefully spread open the paper. Inside was a folder, which when opened, revealed pictures of Catherine. It was obvious from the style of them that she had no idea that she was being photographed. They were mostly black and white which Nancy preferred to use. Vincent was overcome. No gift could have been more appreciated.

Some of the pictures made him smile. Catherine, first thing in the morning, barely awake, was adorable. And one picture made his eyes fill with tears. Looking out at him was Catherine on Fifth Avenue, holding an ice cream. It reminded him of the dream she had told him of.

Catherine was amazed. "Good Lord. I had no idea she'd taken all these."

Vincent looked at each one, seeing how Nancy had captured Catherine's every emotion. Laughter, pensiveness, playfulness. "She is a kind person, not to mention extremely talented. She knew how much this would mean to me. I must write her a letter of thanks. Would you send it onto her, Catherine?"

"Sure thing."

She spread the photos on the table and as she reached the bottom of the pile she was arrested by a shot of Vincent. "Oh! Wow! Nance. This is stunning."

Vincent looked over her shoulder and groaned. "How did she manage that?"

The picture showed Vincent on Catherine's balcony. He was staring out at the city lights and only a slight glimpse of his profile showed, but it was enough to make Catherine catch her breath. His hair covered most of his features, but that did not matter. Nancy had caught the magnificence that was Vincent. There were a few other shots of Vincent and Catherine locked in a loving embrace.

There was a note attached to the pictures which read: ***'I hope you enjoy this small token, Vincent. Anyone can see how much Catherine means to you and I wanted you to have a lasting image of your love. As to these pictures, I'm sorry, Vincent, really I am, but I just could not resist. They are the only copies and the negatives are enclosed, so you have no need to worry. I would still love an hour with you in a studio. You would be my best work. I know it. Maybe one day when prejudice is a thing of the past, we'll manage that hour. I'll look forward to that day. Look after each other always. Nancy'***

Catherine could not take her eyes from the pictures of Vincent and at that moment she wanted to rage against the injustice of it all. Her one wish would be to present this wonderful man to the world and say. ***'This is my man, and no woman in the world is more blessed.'***

Vincent felt her anguish and turned her face towards him. "Catherine, do not be sad for me. What others

think does not matter anymore, for as long as I have you and your love, then I have everything."

She touched his dear face, tracing the outline of his lips with loving fingers. "Vincent, you will always have me," and she leaned forward to brush her lips against his, whispering against his mouth. "This is one truth you can rely on."

Back in Westport, Nancy and Paul sat down together and talked about their marriage, compromise being the name of the game, and as Vincent had hoped, all was well again.

Six months later, on Halloween, Catherine received an invitation to attend the opening night of a photographic show at a prestigious gallery in New York. Costumes were required to be worn and Catherine's invitation also included a guest. No guesses as to who would accompany her on the one night of the year when the walls between the two worlds grow thin.

Father, as usual, tried to talk his son out of going. It was a ritual they went through every year, and every year Vincent would have his way, but only after promising to be extra careful.

Vincent rode the elevator to Catherine's apartment, inside rather than on top which was his usual method of travel, and strode confidently along the hall to rap on her door. She rushed to let him in, both of them gasping as they saw each other in their finery.

"Beautiful," they said in unison and then smiled.

They took a horse and carriage ride to the gallery and the gentle clip clop of the horses' hooves was the only sound they heard as they shut out the rest of the world for a brief time.

Inside the gallery they were met by Nancy and Paul. "Glad you could make it, Cath. Hi Vincent," said Nancy.

Paul looked at Vincent and was slightly envious. "Great costume. All I could get was a Confederate Soldier. My great grand-pappy must be turning in his grave."

The two girls shared a secret smile. Catherine suddenly wondered why Nancy was there. "Who's showing tonight? It didn't say on the invitation."

Paul offered his arm to Catherine, after seeking Vincent's permission. "This way, my lady." Vincent did likewise to Nancy and the four walked through to the main gallery. Vincent noted Nancy's nervous excitement and everything fell into place.

"Catherine is going to get the surprise of her life, I do believe."

She nodded. "I've been dying to tell you both. I only hope it goes down okay with everyone else. These last few weeks have been like a roller-coaster."

Vincent smiled. "I can imagine, but what does Paul have to say?"

"He's pleased for me, Vincent and I have promised him that this is strictly a one off. It's always been an ambition of mine to have a show of my work and now I have achieved it. It doesn't really matter if nothing comes of it because I have another surprise up my sleeve."

Catherine's squeal of delight ahead of them made Vincent and Nancy smile. "Nancy, you sly dog. When did all this happen?" They strolled through the gallery looking at the work of a very talented lady and their opinions appeared to be echoed by everyone else.

A while later Nancy drew her friends aside. "Come with me. I have something for you." They followed her into an office and sat down on the couch as Nancy made her way to the desk. She picked up a pen and opened the cover of a book and began to write. Vincent and Catherine looked at each other and shrugged.

"There you are," she said to them. "The very first copy off the presses. I took your advice seriously, Vincent."

He opened the cover and read the words on the flyleaf. ***'Dedicated to Vincent and Catherine, who believe that anything is possible and made me believe it too.'***

She sat beside Catherine and said, "You remember when I told you that there were times when I would wonder how far I could have taken my photography?"

Catherine nodded. "I remember, Nance."

"Well, I think I now know that I could have gone all the way - but if I had, I wouldn't have met Paul or had the kids. I made the right choice, Cathy, and I think you have too." As she glanced at Vincent caressing the rich leather volume. "Whatever you could have done with your life, it would never measure up to what you have with Vincent."

Catherine smiled. "I realized that the night I came home to him. I'm glad everything has come right for you, Nance."

Vincent touched Catherine gently. "We should go, Catherine." He stood up in one fluid movement and held out his arms to Nancy, who walked into his embrace without hesitation. "Thank you for the book Nancy, and the dedication. Be happy."

Catherine bade her friend farewell and they left the gallery to spend what remained of the night walking the streets hand in hand along with hundreds of other couples, not really noticing where they walked, or even caring very much.

That is until Catherine discovered they were on Fifth Avenue. Even though it was the middle of the night, and even though it was very nearly Winter, Catherine saw a vendor busily selling ice-cream cones. Vincent saw him too and digging deep into his cloak, retrieved some coins.

He looked at Catherine and asked, "May I buy you an ice-cream?"

To which she nodded happily. "Vanilla with chocolate sauce please."

He went to the vendor and bought two of the biggest he had. Vanilla for Catherine and double chocolate for himself. Those that knew Vincent knew of his addiction to chocolate.

They were on Fifth Avenue and Vincent bought her ice-cream. ***'AND NO ONE LOOKED TWICE.'*** "Another dream come true, Vincent," she whispered.

He nodded, tucking the memory away. "And now Catherine, there is room for a new dream to hope for. Anything is possible. We know this, don't we, my love?"

They savoured their ice-cream as they savoured the night, with pleasure and contentment.

The dawn came too soon as it always did for these two, but no matter. There would be many other times, simply because they wished it so.

END