

# *If I Bring Thee Diamonds*

*By Cindy Rae*

*We shall find peace. We shall hear angels, we shall see the sky  
sparkling with diamonds. ~ Anton Chekhov*



*Leads you here, despite your destination*

*Under the Milky Way tonight.*

*'Under The Milky Way' ~ the Church*

*\*\**

*Slow down. Slow down or you'll break your leg on the stairs.*

Catherine rapidly clattered her way down the spiral staircase, knowing it wiser than the urge to cut across the park. The general consensus was that staying in entirely was a good idea, this evening.

The general consensus could go hang itself for all Catherine cared.

She'd had to enter the tunnels from the basement entrance. This evening, that had meant a trip down the fire stairs inside her building, thanks to the fact that there was no elevator in operation. She'd had to find her way through the basement by flashlight, then move the boxes and descend.

Power outage. Con Edison and its backup plans had chosen this particular night to be at their most unreliable.

"Please let him be there, please let him be home." Catherine wasn't even aware she'd said it aloud as the handrail slid smoothly underneath her lightly touching palm. Staccato footsteps echoed against the walls. It was foolish to descend this quickly. It was also necessary.

The sound of her own boot-heel-on-metal passage kept her company on the way down. There was a rhythm to her descent that seemed self-fulfilling. The more she ventured down at the steady, though foolhardy pace, the more that pace was reinforced. It was almost as if the sound was helping to move her down.

The metal stairs gave way to the long path where some of Vincent's people worked sometimes, during the day. The area was abandoned now, the treadle sewing machine a silent thing, the signs of human activity temporarily dormant. Torchlight and flashlight lit her way, and

the fact that she could now see better than just about everyone in New York was not lost on her.

She wondered how many of the tunnel residents even realized that the city was in the grip of a major blackout, as she followed the line of heavy pipes further down.

Every borough and even parts of upstate were struggling, the scope of the outage nearly unprecedented. The Powers That Be promised to have things back online "as soon as possible." Catherine had no idea how much time that might mean.

*He said he was making the trip to Chinatown today, going to see Henry and Lin,* Catherine thought, wondering what kind of itinerary that meant for him, specifically. Would he stop to visit with Lin's Grandfather first, or simply load the supplies they so generously offered? Would he accept an invitation to dinner, enjoy a chance to see how the newlyweds were settling in? Would he linger as he listened to their stories and give his thanks, or set right off for home, hoping to be back near the hub before it became impossibly late?

If he took the wide food cart, that would mean a slow return, and "slow" wasn't what Catherine was hoping for, just now.

*I wish I knew where he was. If he was still in Chinatown, I could have just driven over.* The roads weren't closed, though many of the stoplights were malfunctioning. Transistor and car radios reminded drivers to treat intersections as a four-way stop, but again, the simple advice: Stay indoors. The power would be back on as soon as possible.

She could have hazarded the drive, but the street lamps weren't working much better than any of the other electronic gadgets they all

used to make their lives easier. Road signs were hard to see, and it was easy to get lost. And if she got stuck on the way over...

*No. That wouldn't do.* New York was on emergency power only, and even that was at a bare minimum. Car traffic had been decreasing all evening, as people heeded the advice of the newscasters.

Most people were staying inside, and getting by on flashlights and candlelight. Catherine smiled a little to herself as she held her breath against a small stitch in her side.

*In nine months, there will be a rash of babies born, if history is any guide,* she thought, keeping up the steady pace as she jogged through the passageway. But none of that mattered to Catherine, right now.

*Stay focused or you'll need a trip to the hospital,* she chided her wayward thoughts as she made her way through the familiar hallway as quickly as she dared.

*I should have called the restaurant,* she realized too late. *Oh, well.*

There was no help for it now. She'd simply been too excited, and had gone dashing down the stairs of her apartment building like a crazy person who'd just remembered an important appointment.

One of the virtues of having known Vincent for the last couple of years was the fact that she constantly kept a supply of good flashlights on hand, and she shone one now as she trotted her way through some of the tunnels' more winding paths. The frequent turns made her slow her pace. It was a thing she didn't want, even though it helped with the oxygen debt-induced ache in her side.

*They said they would fix it as soon as possible, but the radio said the outage was major. How long do we have? An hour? Two? Less?*

She wove her way through what to anyone else would seem like a serpentine maze. When she reached the small chasm between her world and his, she remembered his words to her the first time he'd led her across it: "You can do it."

She could, and she had. He'd been leading her back to her world, at the time, giving her his steadfast encouragement, even then.

*Oh, Vincent, I so want to give this to you.* She leaped over the small chasm fearlessly, knowing she should keep to the wall, lest she fall.

She despaired that he must still be a good distance away, or he might have been here by now. He often greeted her when she came down, and in her current state of excitement...

But excitement was not "fear," and it was fear that purposely brought him on the run. She knew he could sense her through the bond, and knew where she was. But perhaps he really was too far away, or had his hands full of something and couldn't come. He'd regret that he missed her, but since she wasn't in danger...

She thought of trying to "call out to him" within their bond, then realized she had no clear idea how to do that. They did not communicate in words, per se, or at least, she knew she'd never "sent" such a message to him. She couldn't "pretend" to be frightened in order to bring him, but it was a testament to her level of desperation that the thought actually crossed her mind for a moment.

*Oh, Vincent. I want this. I want this so much, for you.*

Then she rounded a corner and her heart sank. Affixed to a wall, one of Below's few electric light bulbs glowed its bounty. The wire mesh cage that ensconced the dusty glass was beyond old, but whatever bulb burned inside it flickered with its customary glow. *Damn. The power is back on.*

"Oh, no," she lamented aloud, staring at its steady luminescence.

"Catherine?"

His voice. The one that always melted her heart, comforted her soul, and usually gladdened her very being. It was a balm when life left her feeling battered, or a lure to his side when she was lonely.

And now it was something she wished she could avoid.

"Is everything all right?" He stepped forward into the pool of incandescence, clearly having run to get to her, judging by his breathing. Hers was little better.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she reassured him, reaching for his outstretched gloved hands. Now she didn't know how to explain, and felt she couldn't. "I just..." But words faltered, and there was now nothing she could say.

She looked at the wall light again, powered from Lord only knew where, and wept a little, inside. *Lost chances.* This was another one. *It seems so unfair.*

"Something has upset you?" His tone conveyed his confusion. For the last thirty minutes or so he'd been feeling many things from her, mostly excitement or some bubbling kind of anticipation, and no small amount

of anxiety. But sorrow wasn't part of it. Now he didn't need the bond to see that she was unhappy. He could see it in her face.

"It's just... the power was out. I thought... I thought that meant something, for a few minutes." She shook her head and he continued to gaze at her quizzically. She knew she had to explain at least a little more. "Something for us. For you."

"Something for me?" He squeezed her hands and followed her gaze, trying to offer her whatever comfort he could. "Did you think I would be able to move around more freely in the dark?"

She shook her head, the motion sending her honey-colored tresses to softly dancing.

"No. Well, that's part of it, but ... no. It doesn't matter. It's all right." She was clearly trying to ignore her disappointment over some sort of opportunity lost. "So. Did you get to see Henry and Lin?" she asked, intentionally changing the subject.

He knew what she was doing, and for a moment he wrestled with the idea of letting her simply brush aside whatever this was.

"They are fine, and I was on the other side of the hub when I felt you come down," he explained, referring to the length of time it had taken to reach her.

Her voice dropped low. "But you wouldn't have come to see me on the balcony tonight. Would you." It was framed as a statement, not a question. And a sad one, at that.

Vincent scrambled to discern her. Was that what this was about? She was feeling lonely? As lovely a compliment as that was to his ego, he

knew it didn't sound right. They'd spent time together just last evening and he'd already told her that tonight would see him occupied with other concerns across the city.

There was still a wagon to cart back the rest of the way and unload, a very late dinner to have, a trip to the bathing pools that wouldn't be an option after the day's efforts, and maybe even some other chore that had gone begging, thanks to his trip to Chinatown.

And none of it mattered compared to the look on her face right now. He tried to ease her obvious dejection.

"The fact that I wasn't coming was just a testament to... other concerns. Not a reflection on how much I look forward to spending time with you," he said, trying to lighten her mood.

It also sounded like he was trying to apologize for her downcast spirits, when they both knew he'd done nothing wrong.

She gave him a weak smile and a nod. She was trying to be brave about something. As a matter of fact, she was struggling with it.

"Catherine? Can you tell me what this is about?" he asked.

"I... I just... I thought the lights might be out a little longer," she confessed.

"And you hoped they would stay out, rather than come back on?" He knew that was the opposite of the customary reaction to a power outage.



"The outage is widespread. They're not quite sure what the problem is. It started just a little while ago, and the radio said they were working on it, but didn't know how long."

"That might explain the city work crews I nearly encountered as I came through some of the eastern tunnels. Were you afraid, in the darkness?"

Was that what this was about? She'd wanted to be near him because her city was plunged in darkness? Again, that didn't sound right. Still, he knew she'd once carried a child's fear of the dark. Her talisman against that, an ivory rose, now hung around his neck. He drew her in for a closer embrace, so she could be near the rose charm, and closer to him.

"No, no, I'm fine," she hastened to reassure him as she stepped close. "I just..." But again, either the words wouldn't come, or uttering them threatened to overwhelm her.

"But you came down because the power was malfunctioning, Above?" Best to start with what he knew, and go from there.

"Yes. But... but it's... it's fixed now." She looked at the wall lamp.

"What makes you so certain?" He followed the direction of her gaze.

"The light. There isn't any, up Above. Or at least, there wasn't."

Vincent noted the lone bulb that had so disheartened her.

"Catherine, this light alone doesn't mean the power has been restored. Some of the tunnel lights work off a kind of battery system, a rechargeable source. Emergency lights. It is a system in place for just

such an occurrence. The lights in your world may still be out, even though this one works. But why do you wish it would still be so?"

Her face became as hopefully glowing as the light they stood near.

"For you. Come with me. Now." She moved out of his loose embrace and tugged on his hand.

He hated to deflect her, but felt the need. The supplies sitting abandoned were part of tomorrow's breakfast. "Catherine, there are supplies on the wagon, and it's more than two miles from here..." he gently tried to explain the obligation he'd been trying to fulfill when he'd sensed her anxious passage through the tunnels.

"I swear I'll replace them. I'll buy whatever is lost twice over. Please, Vincent. Please." Her green eyes held her entreaty.

He did not remember her ever offering to "buy" her way clear of a problem. Or ask him to shirk a responsibility.

"Catherine..."

She tugged harder. Much harder.

"Vincent, it might not happen, and if it doesn't, I don't want you to be disappointed. But I beg you to come with me now, and to do it as quickly as we can."

He needed no further urging. Whatever this was, it was important to her. Very. He simply nodded and fell in step with her rapid stride.

"Where is it we need to go?" He dropped all signs of protest, knowing that she so rarely asked for anything, and this seemed so small a wish to grant her.

"Up. Above. Anywhere topside, but preferably away from the tallest buildings, away from Midtown. But we need to get out of the tunnels." She looked around. "The park, maybe? Can we get to the park from here? Quickly?"

He inclined his noble head. "We can. The drainage tunnel is reachable from here. There is a way that connects, though it is narrow and the ground is... uneven."

"Please. As fast as we can. Please."

Vincent still wasn't quite sure what this was, but he knew she'd been excited about it continuously and had gotten a stitch in her side running to him about it.

And she was ready to take on another, if the rapid tattoo of her heels over the stones was any indication.

She didn't want to tell him exactly why it was important that they go Above, and it seemed like she was racing a foe she couldn't see. Vincent could only promise to help her.

He took her down a water-cut side passage that was too narrow to be of much use as anything other than a shortcut. They could no longer walk side by side, and in some places, he had to turn his big body to slide through. The walls were uneven, and the floor wasn't much better.

When the ground became wet and rock-strewn, she simply tramped through it as quickly as she dared, and as nimbly as she could. The low boots she wore were getting scuffed and damp.

And she was nowhere near calling a halt.

She'd been nearly silent since they'd left the wall lamp, and Vincent could still sense the tension in her. She was still afraid that something she wanted in the park would not be there, and was persevering onward over uneven, soggy ground with a kind of anxious determination. It was clear that something... or someone... who needed the cover of darkness waited for them. Vincent asked no more questions, and simply followed her rapid pace.

When they achieved the connection with the main passages, she knew where she was, and went unerringly left, toward the park.

She pulled the lever which moved the interior door and simply kept walking, barely waiting for it to slide back. She was at the gate just before him, her small hands tugging on the metal.

Vincent pulled up his hood as she pushed the gate open, his keen ears listening for sounds of unwelcome company as they stepped into the shadowy tunnel. She was travelling recklessly, and hadn't used the sentry view to make sure they were in the tunnel alone before she'd emerged. Her lack of caution was a testament to whatever force was driving her.

Fortunately, no sound or scent alerted him to the signs of any presence other than their own. She turned to make sure he was still following her as they made their way through the culvert.

Vincent knew that the park could be a variable place. Sometimes it seemed almost empty; at others, nighttime roamers all but made it feel crowded. Late hours were either one way or the other, but rarely both. Judging from the lack of sound reaching his ears, they were about to step into the former.

It had rained earlier, a hard spring squall at least in part to blame for some of Con Ed's current troubles. Water trailed into the opening of the culvert, and Catherine stepped through it with careless grace, her soft boots making little splashing sounds as she preceded him out of the low, round entrance that marked a line between her world and his.

He felt her relief through the bond as she emerged from the concrete portal and into the New York night. Eyes still on her back, he dipped his head low as the hood of his cloak caught the fresh drip of rainwater off the top of the concrete. The low ground was muddy.

It wouldn't do to slip, especially in the uncanny darkness that now enveloped the park. He watched his own step as he watched hers. She was just ahead of him, and picking up her pace.

"Come on," she whispered very softly, the darkness making whispering seem like an almost natural reaction. The path lights in the park were out, and the roofs of the tallest buildings were barely touched by generator lighting at their tops. The trees were a black line against a shadowcast backdrop of dim concrete and glass. Vincent realized that few cars prowled the half-lit streets beyond the verdant dark, and that an almost church-like pall enveloped the nighttime greensward.

Catherine climbed from the mud-soaked depression that led into the culvert with the nimble grace of a woman who spent hours in heels. Though Vincent knew her legs weren't long, she was a lithe climber, and took on the ditch at its steepest part, clearly not wanting to wait and walk down the trail until the ground rose more gently on the sides. Vincent followed her on instinct.

She emerged on the damp, grassy rise of ground a good distance from the nearest bench and sidewalk path, both the wind and Vincent at her back. When she held the high ground of the knoll, she simply stopped and turned to him, her soft smile a shimmering thing, even in the inky dark.

His blue gaze held hers, though he wasn't sure if she could see his still-quizzical expression from inside the deep folds of his ever-present hood.

"Vincent."

Again the whispered voice. It was as if they were in a library, or a sleeping child's nursery, or a sacred place. Except she could barely contain her delight.

"Yes, Catherine." Her lovely face filled his vision. His ability to see in the dark was better than hers.

"Look up."

She reached for the sides of his hood, and her beautiful hands brushed the fabric back in a way that reminded him of the way she'd done that the first day she'd seen him, the first time she'd intentionally exposed his face to her view. She'd been frightened, then, but resolute, and the gentle shoving back of the fabric had reminded him of someone tentatively opening a gift.

Tonight it was he who received the gift. He did as she bid him. He looked straight up as she pushed the fabric of his hood away. And the view made him take a step backward, he became so off-balance.



*Stars. A... a million stars. What in...? Is... is that the sky?!*

The incredible view seemed so astonishing and new as to be in doubt that it was, for surely he'd never seen a sky that looked like this. Vincent's brain struggled to recognize what should have been familiar, and suddenly wasn't. *It has to be the sky. It has to be.*

And in a way, it couldn't be. Because he'd never seen it before.

Her hands fell away from the soft folds of his cape and for a minute it seemed as if she fell away, as well. They both did. Vincent felt his weight seem to actually shift and fall, as he re-oriented himself on his own planet. *Am I still on Earth?* Ridiculous question. Of course he was. Yet it seemed as if his Catherine had drawn him not only out of his world but off of it.

Heaven had exploded over his head, casting light and color skyward, in every direction.

With most of the lights of the city cast into the nethersphere, the great vault of the obsidian sky was the most light-spattered thing he had ever seen in his life, or perhaps was likely to see ever again.

Catherine turned her body and stood with her back against his front, wanting to enjoy the same view she'd dragged him up to meet.

Stars. Everywhere. Great and small. Bright and dim and some with color. An impossible wealth of diamonds cast across a normally all but blank palette. *This was the sky?* His mind kept struggling with the realization. *Was this what it was supposed to look like?*

For Vincent, born and raised in New York City, the impossibly high ceiling of chaotic light looked like a foreign, almost alien sky-scape. In the city, the night sky was rarely black, or even indigo, but often a shade of deep grey or even a medium blue. It was a fact of his existence that the moon was the brightest object in the sky, and on a clear night, he had only some few bright stars or even air traffic for twinkling company.

It was a fact all city-dwellers accepted. The night sky was a vaguely dark, featureless thing that hung over the bustling city until dawn.

That wasn't true, now.

*Falling down. No, not falling down. Falling up.* He felt like he was falling up. *Falling Up* is a book of Shel Silverstein poetry. He couldn't remember a word of it now, save for the title. And he suddenly knew Shel Silverstein had had a view like this, once. *He must have.* Vincent's mind caromed from one stream-of-consciousness thought to the next, unable to hold any single impression firmly, for long.



She'd purposely kept them in an area away from the trees, an area he normally would not have chosen to stand in. They were exposed. They were out in the open. They were...

They were standing under a scattered, star-shot heaven.

Not just stars but constellations, Vincent realized. He stared, willing himself not to blink, and the light and colors blurred. Whirling, twinkling, dancing lights, each seeming a part of their own random pattern, random picture. There were swirls of color in the black and indigo blue, and, for the first time, Vincent felt he understood just what Van Gogh had seen one night in Flanders when he'd painted "The Starry Night."

Vincent's eyes teared from the shimmer, unaccustomed to seeing so much light in the night sky. It was almost too bright inside the shifting darkness.

With the city lights gone, the night sky revealed its treasure to his pilgrim's eyes, and Vincent felt disoriented for another moment as he reached for Catherine's shoulders, both to steady himself and to keep her near.

"My God," he breathed. Staring at it made him feel as if he were on the deck of a gently rocking boat, and she felt his body sway, slightly, as he righted his own ship again. *Sailors used this to find their way*, he realized. But the thought, like all the rest of it, was a wondrously confusing one. *This is a... a map? But... how can it be? Guideposts in the chaos. There must be. Guideposts in the chaos. Like Catherine*, he mused. *A guidepost. A way to find "home" when you were lost.*

He didn't need to see her smile. He felt it.

"Catherine."

Just her name, said on an almost prayerful sigh in what had become an outdoor cathedral. She knew what he was feeling. Joy bubbled inside her. *They hadn't missed it.* They'd moved as quickly as they'd dared, and they hadn't missed it. She'd been in time. Her pleasure overflowed their bond, just as distant suns now filled the sky above their heads.

Vincent could nearly feel his pupils blowing wide inside their irises, feel them opening to take in all the available light in the late night blackness.

There was a soft, fuzzy line of lightshadow above his head, as he looked into the belt of the Milky Way. Another belt, this one belonging to Orion the Hunter, blazed a line of welcome over his right shoulder.

"Colors. How can I see colors?" He took a step forward and moved her with him, as if walking could somehow bring the stars closer down. He stopped when he realized it wouldn't, and still stared at a shimmering blue diamond in the sky-scape.

Her lovely voice was soft, in her pleasure. "Some of them are blue." She must have seen it when he had. "There's a red one," she said, pointing up and to her left. He followed where she indicated. Yes. Red. Nearly pink.

"I've... never..." Words failed, and his hands on her shoulders were trembling with awestruck wonder.

"This never happened before?" she asked.

“No. One time, maybe. Back with Devin. But there were clouds. A storm.”

She nodded, understanding that power outages were rare, often brief, and generally went unnoticed by those Below. She felt incredibly pleased that her efforts to bring him here had paid such beautiful dividends. It was a night for stargazers and astronomers and dreamers. For small children and lovers and those who wished upon stars.

"I didn't want to tell you in case they turned the power back on," she confided. "Didn't want to describe it to you and have it yanked away. That's why I wanted so much to bring you here. Quickly."

Now the disappointment that had rolled off her slight body when they were Below made sense. Now her breakneck flight down the stairs, where he could feel the subtle panic in her, had a reason. The desire to leave the food where it sat, to pull him out and up into the nighttime air. It all made sense.

But “sense” was the last thing Vincent could make, right now. It was also the last thing he wanted.

*You wanted to bring me this. You wanted to show this to me. Give me this gift ...*

She'd flown to him on those impossibly short, shapely legs to pull him upward, not wanting to tell him of this miracle in case it didn't happen.

No book with any picture in it he'd ever seen could do this justice. No painting, though Van Gogh's was close.

The glittering carpet of night-swept sky glittered and blazed over his head, and he abandoned his sense of reason for his sense of wonder.

He felt his mind scramble for epic poetry and then pushed the urge aside. Children's verses seemed better.

*Star light, star bright...* It became stuck in his head for a long minute. But he had no idea what to wish for, not now. Not now, when it felt as if he had everything.

Not even a crescent moon interrupted the shimmering canopy, and the good smell of a rain-washed night came in on the breeze. Her shoulders were under his hands and an infinite and gorgeous universe was over his head. What could there be to wish for?

Vincent swallowed hard, and knew he couldn't speak for several long moments. It seemed profane to allow sound to break this peace. His body felt off-balance at least once more. He felt as if he were falling into the stars again. No, no, that wasn't right. They were above him, not before him or beneath him. One couldn't "fall" into stars.

But the feeling persisted, and he marveled at it, as the night sky filled his vision as it filled his heart. It was a dizzying impression, and one he'd never experienced, like this. Vertigo, from looking up. He wondered at the amazing sensation, which felt so very much like falling in love.

His hold on her shoulders kept him feeling both steady and blessed as he was covered by the incredible blanket of starlight over his head. He felt her silent pleasure as he felt his own burgeoning sense of spellbound wonder. Her feelings seemed to mingle with his, warming his chest from its center. He could not imagine a more complete feeling of unity with her.

She'd hurried. She'd worried. She'd known it wouldn't last, couldn't last. And once she'd realized it was happening, that the outage was of a possibly lengthy kind, she couldn't wait to rush her way down to show him this... this... impossible, jewel-cast night.

He took in a star cluster he couldn't name, and tried to remember where it was in the sky, so he could look for it again, later.

"They should never turn the lights back on." He whispered as he stared, and she enjoyed the view of the underside of his chin, wanting to see the wonder in his eyes, yet knowing she wouldn't tug his face down to hers for the world.

"Usually it's cloudy when we lose power. There's a bad lightning storm and it knocks something out. Even without the lights on, if it's cloudy you can't see it this well. The rain pushed everything through, with it. We're lucky."

They were. So lucky. So lucky, and fate-blessed and fortune-favored. How could he ever think differently?

*I am fortune's fool. I thought I knew what the sky looked like,* he thought.

"How long?" he rasped.

"I don't know. They're trying to get the lights back on. As long as it lasts, I guess." She was so sorry this was temporary. She could do nothing but offer him this momentary gift.

*I wish I had a book of constellations with me, so I could name them,* he thought. Then, *No. No, I don't. I wouldn't want to tear my eyes away from this ... splendor.*

"Is the bright one Polaris?" he asked, knowing he should be able to think up more names than just the pole star. His brain felt numb.

"I don't think so," she answered, loving the sound of amazement in his voice. She still kept hers low, out of respect. "Polaris is the one near the Dipper. I think that one is a planet. I think it's Venus."

Venus. The Goddess of Love and Beauty. Of course.

"You are Venus." He said it almost absently, taking another small step forward, instinctively.

Catherine blushed at the compliment, and was strangely aware he'd just uttered a thought he'd held, but never said to her. He seemed half stunned, and loving the sensation of it. Like being both drunk and sober, at the same time.

"If you want to climb one of the bridges or something... the view would be even better," she nudged.

*No.* Not for the world would he leave her side. And he was looking at a world, now. Several of them, probably.

"I will never think the stars are all white again," he said, still craning his neck back as far as it would bend, seeing more subtle colors with every sweep of his sensitive eyes.

He blinked and hated that he had to. A tear from staring too long tracked its way from the corner of his left eyelid into the mane at his temple. He knew he shouldn't be so fixated, that he should be looking for intruders, for other stargazers, for unwelcome company. But he knew the night wind brought him nothing but woodland smells, and that the woman in front of him would keep him safe.

"I'll keep watch. Just... enjoy it." It was as if she'd read his mind.

He set her only slightly away and turned in a circle, slowly, as if he was afraid that to lose one part of the view would mean he lost the whole, forever. He struggled to pull it all into his memory, and to hold it, but the random, scattered pattern was too difficult to memorize completely. After a moment, he just gave up trying to remember it all, and simply let it wash over his consciousness.

"Have you ever...? He asked it, but couldn't complete the sentence.

"In Connecticut. My father's cabin. It's because we're so far outside the city, there. You have to find a clearing through the trees, and just lie down in it."

*We have to go to Connecticut, then. There is no doubt.* He made the decision right there.

Different, warring thoughts tangled in his brain as the skein of stars flung itself across his consciousness.

*We should move. Try to find higher ground. Try to make it to her balcony, perhaps, or her roof. No. We should never move. This is holy ground, now, and my feet should never leave this spot. Is that little cluster the Pleiades? The Seven Sisters? And is that Leo the Lion on the prow? We should both just lie down on the grass. No. The grass is rain-soaked. We should climb a ladder to the sky, and try to touch the lowest star. Which one would that be? Did stars truly fall? Could I catch one for her, if it did?*

Fancy and fact both wrangled in his mind for attention, and he gave each their due as he continued to stare. Half a dozen conflicting

instincts overwhelmed him, and dozens of stories. Ares, the ram with the Golden Fleece, was up there somewhere. Sagittarius the archer, and the way to Never-Never Land. Which star was the second one to the right? There seemed like millions of them, over his head.

The park suddenly seemed crowded, yet without a soul in it, but for them.

"No wonder they wrote stories." He wasn't aware he'd said it aloud. "No wonder they... longed for it." He referred to ancient peoples, but saved just a little wistfulness for himself.

She stepped in front of him again, just wanting to feel near. He returned his hands to her shoulders and she wrapped them across her torso, stepping back into a loose embrace, while he stargazed.

"Thank... you." The whisper was full of his emotion, full of his heart.

"You're welcome."

He heard the catch in her voice. She'd been so afraid she couldn't show it to him, that the lights would come back on, that it would be too late.

They stood a few minutes more.

"I should have brought a blanket," she said, thinking how nice it would have been to lie in the grass with him while he gazed upward. But she'd come down on a flying impulse, and had no time to plan.

"You brought me everything I need," he answered, storing all he could in his memory. The mad panorama above his head. The smell of the greensward. The feel of his arms wrapped loosely around her shoulders. She was so small. And so mighty, in her way.



"I love you." His declaration was heartfelt. "I love you forever, for this."

Her smile was serene. "I know. I love you, too, Vincent." She turned in his arms on instinct.

He had to look down. He had to, for the chance to see the starlight in her eyes.

Kissing her seemed like the most natural thing in the world.

Warm. The night had been damply chilled, and she was warm. Even the stars seemed distantly cool, yet she was ember light, with soft heat. Undemanding. Open. Alive.

His mouth took hers in a gentle caress, and if he ever had an inhibition about the feel of his unusual mouth on hers, he forgot all about it in a lover's heartfelt kiss of thanks. She'd given him the universe. Did she know? Could she know?

"Love you," he repeated when the kiss broke. She wanted him to look back up. He was no longer sure that he did.

"You'll miss it." She tried to nudge him, loving his kiss but not wanting to be selfish with it. Especially not now. Who knew when he'd ever have this chance again?

"I will never miss it. I will see it again every time I look in your eyes," he said, brushing her soft cheek with his thumb. Her green eyes looked up, and she knew he saw stars in them, just as she did. Her smile was beatific.

"Should we make a wish? I don't think I'd know what to wish for," she said, loving that she knew how happy he was, even though his face remained half-shadowed, in the dark.

She'd thought of the same thing he had. Naturally.

"We have everything," he confirmed, bringing his forehead down close to hers.

"We have everything," he repeated. "And a star-filled heaven, too." He looked back up at it. It was almost as lovely as she was.

"I don't want dawn to come," she realized, knowing that even if the power company didn't work its will soon, that the rising sun would take the starlight away with it, before it even cleared the horizon. "The sun will come up and take it away."

"The sun is another star." He said it just because it was true. "It's just another star." The instinct for that thrummed in his mind, grappling with the incongruity of those tiny, distant lights and the sun being similar things. It seemed impossible. But he knew it was so.

Vincent squeezed his eyes shut tight against all the beauty that was before him, knowing it was simply too much to take in at once. This woman loved him. With an amazing, steadfast, race-to-him-with-a-stitch-in-her-side kind of love that utterly took his breath from his body, and left him feeling humbled. Like the star-scattered sky. Like a shimmering miracle. Like an impossible dream bound up in a constellation-wrapped heaven. Like the sun was a star, and it all went on, forever.

"I love you so much," she whispered, and his next breath nearly caught on a sob, at the acceptance of it. He looked back down at her.

"I know," he answered, after taking a moment to compose himself. "I know you do. So much. You love me so much, Catherine. How can you do that? How can you love so much? Love me with all you are?"

That was what he felt his role was, between them. But he felt it coming from her, and it stunned him.

"Maybe I just don't know any other way. Maybe there isn't one, for me, now. Not now that I've met you," she replied.

She kissed his mouth again, chastely, and with that tiny benediction, urged him to look up again, not wanting him to miss any more of it. He complied.

"Do you think we have much longer?" he asked. She knew more about the vagaries of the power company than he did.

She smiled and simply held herself against him.

"I think we have forever," she answered, as the diamond sky glittered and gleamed.

"I think you're right," he answered.

--fin--

*And it's something quite peculiar.*

*Something shimmering and white.*

*Leads you here despite your destination,*

*Under the Milky Way tonight. ~ The Church*

No matter where you are under the Milky Way, I wish you love. ~ Cindy

