

The Darkest Hour

(An Arabesque Epilogue)

by Debbie Ristick

When Catherine finally looked up, Vincent's eyes were still tightly closed. The pain she felt tumble from him was staggering; Lisa Campbell had wounded him so greatly, and the agony and distress had been so unnecessary! He'd confided all of his shame to her earlier, and she'd listened, transfixed, wanting only to offer him consolation and to ensure to him that nothing had changed between them.

Squeezing his hands, she softly cleared her throat. "Everything this all right, Vincent," she whispered. "Everything's okay."

A shudder enveloped the cloaked figure, and Vincent shook his head. "No, it's not, Catherine. While the agony of that memory still holds me, until I can forget the anguish horror of that night, it will never be all right."

"You must have faith, Vincent," she urged, her eyes flashing an appeal. "You must believe in us, in what we have together. You have to forget about that day; you were a child then, with a child's innocence. You were in love, first love. It's special; you dreamed of her, yearned for and desired her. You couldn't stop that from happening. It's time you stopped blaming yourself...."

The leonine face turned into the balcony's obscurity. "How can you even look at me, Catherine? How can you stand there, offering me all your love and support when you've just listened to what I did?"

"Because I love you," she reasoned gently. "I love you, Vincent, and I need you in my life. Without you, there is nothing left for me."

The despair in his eyes was not lost on her, but he didn't attempt to pull away at her assertion. Instead, his grip upon her tightened, the wounded heart inside him near to bursting with the force of her love.

"What can I say to you?" His words echoed her own of so many months ago. "How can you hear this shameful admission and remain steadfast in your feelings for me? How can you love me, Catherine, knowing what I am?"

Trying to smile, she raised her eyes to meet his and her heart lurched at his obvious uncertainty.

"Vincent, don't you know? Don't you know how deep my feelings are for you? How true? I'm not Lisa; I would never do what she did. You would never hurt me, I know it, I feel it. I think you do, too. You cannot permit the actions of a teenage girl to control your mind or heart. You can't allow the memory of that day to prevent you from living your life. Search the bond, Vincent. Can't you feel my love for you? Don't you understand what you mean in my life?"

An obscure nod was her answer, for Vincent had turned his troubled blue eyes toward the dawning of the New York day. After a long and silent moment, he sighed, then lifted the hood of his ebony cloak up and over his head.

"I must go," was all he said, but he didn't move.

Gathering her nerve, Catherine took a hesitant step towards him, but stopped as she saw him stiffen.

"Vincent, you must promise me that you won't allow this to come between us," she insisted sternly. "I

need you in my life so much. I couldn't bear it if you stayed away because of the past. you must learn to live again, to live without the pain. With love, you don't need it anymore. Ever...."

Vincent stared at her, unmoving, then turned, hiding his leonine face inside the darkened folds of the leather-trimmed hood. The hands that had, at once, been held firmly in her grasp, were gloved again, hidden from her view. They held the side of the balcony wall, as though it was a lifeline and he a drowning man. After a long moment, he finally turned back to her, the gold of his mane slipping out of the protective cover. Whirling to face her, tormented blue eyes met determined green, then dropped away almost shyly.

"I will remember," his silky voice trembled hoarsely. "I could never be without you either, Catherine. You are my life."

At the conclusion of his words, she watched him disappear into what was left of the night, leaving her alone. With a frown, she watched the sunrise, trying to suppress a yawn and knowing that no matter how tired she was, she'd have to go into the office today; the work on her desk was two feet tall. Yet, after all that had just transpired, she knew it would be impossible for her to concentrate on any of it. The words would jumble before her and make no impression.

With just a hint of a smile on her face, Catherine Chandler turned toward her apartment. The day before her suddenly seemed to promise more than just another boring eight hours at the office. She had hopes now, hopes for the love of a man that she could no longer live without.

She was his life. He could not be without her.

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