

# **“A Little Night Music...”**

A Story of **“Beauty and the Beast”**

By Judith Nolan ©

(With welcome and expert help from Jean Pratt for staging and costumes)

*“Floating, falling, sweet intoxication! Touch me, trust me, savour each sensation! Let the dream begin, let your darker side give in to the power of the music that I write – the power of the music of the night... you alone can make my song take flight – help me make the music of the night...”*

An intensely reverent silence descended in the great hall, as the last strains of the soaring music died away into the shadows. Playing the role of the Phantom, Tony Gilbert turned to offer Shannon O’Neill his hand, bringing her to her feet, helping her to step from the elaborate boat into which he’d just laid her down.

“Thank you, my Christine.” He smiled as he bent to press an appreciative kiss to the back of her hand. “You were brilliant.”

“That was wonderful fun.” Shannon smiled, inclining her head in tribute, as they both turned to the audience, looking a little concerned that their magical performance from Phantom of the Opera had somehow just fallen flat. Tony raised Shannon’s hand in his, spreading wide his free hand in a sweeping theatrical gesture, indicating his expectations of the crowd.

Pandemonium suddenly erupted. Previously spellbound audience members jumped to their feet, shouting, stamping and clapping before they crowded forward, trying to be the first to shake Tony’s hand, or kiss Shannon’s cheek.

“I have never been so moved...” Father clasped Tony’s hand tightly. “I forgot where I was for a moment there. Your incredible singing transported me to another realm entirely. And, to think, I taught you everything you know...”

“*Jacob!*” Mary admonished him. “Surely you can’t take all the credit.”

“Well, I *was* the first to realise the boy’s potential,” Father argued his corner stoutly. “Now look where it has taken him.”

“All the way to the bright lights of Broadway.” Elliot drew Shannon back against him, kissing her cheek. “And, for tonight, quite a way beneath it.” He laughed. “You were both wonderful. That was a very special performance.”

“Thanks, Elliot. You know, it really is great to be home again.” Tony looked around the vaulted ceiling of the great hall, shadowed with mystery in the dancing candlelight. “I never realised what excellent acoustics this old place has. Andrew would be envious. Pity we can’t stage the whole of Phantom down here. The cast would just love this hall.” He brought his gaze down again. “And all of you. You guys make the best audience.”

“Well, you know how much we would love to go Above and see the show and your performance.” Catherine came up, Vincent at her side. “You have been very generous to bring a sample of it down here, to us. We are simply grateful you could spare the time, on your one night off.”

“Anything for my family, you know that.” Tony smiled. “If it hadn’t been for Vincent, that long ago night on the subway, I wouldn’t be here now. I owe you all so much. It’s time to pay it forward, I guess.”

Angelo appeared from his place at the grand piano, his hands moving eloquently, expressing all his thoughts and feelings. His long fingers flashed around in the candlelight, impossible to follow.

Tony raised a hand. “Hang on, mate, it’s been a while. Slow down. Give that to me again.”

Angelo frowned as he shrugged his frustration and began again. This time he enunciated every word clearly, his face split by a huge grin.

“Any time, you know that.” Tony grasped his shoulder. “I’m sure you and Andrew would get along fine.”

Angelo nodded and clapped, bouncing up and down. They all laughed.

“I’m serious, I’ve never heard a kid as young as him, play like that.” Tony turned back to Father. “Send him up to me when you think he’s ready. I’ll arrange for him to have advanced tuition. One day we’ll be going to his concert in the park.” He stripped off the Phantom mask he was wearing and handed it to the boy. Angelo clutched it happily, knowing he had done well tonight.

A shaggy blond head appeared in their midst. “Okay, Mouse did good with the boat? Worked fine?”

“Mouse surpassed himself,” Vincent acknowledged. “It all worked perfectly.”

“Which is more than we can say for the real one.” Tony sighed ruefully. “Radio controlled, it has a mind and a life of it’s own, and it’s possessed by a malevolent spirit, I’ll swear to it. The one in London used to follow Michael around the stage like a puppy. This one here on Broadway sometimes chooses to ignore me entirely. I’ve been forced to walk on water more than once in the underground lake scene.”

“Okay great, need Mouse to fix?” The tinker looked hopeful. “Get tools, go now?”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea,” Father interposed quickly. “Better stick to all the work you have to do down here, Mouse.”

“Mouse find, Mouse fix, all the same to Mouse. Call me.” He curled and extended his fingers into an imaginary telephone receiver and held it to his ear.

Everyone standing nearby suddenly turned away, shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter at the intriguing idea of Mouse possessing a telephone. The tinker scowled at them all.

“What’s so funny?” he muttered, in an aggrieved tone.

“Nothing, Mouse.” Vincent ruffled the boy’s hair. “We are sorry to offend you. It has been a magical night, and you staged the whole show brilliantly. No one could have done it better.”

“Okay, good then.” Mouse shrugged. “Trust Mouse. He knows what he’s doing.”

Vincent turned to Tony. “So, you will go back Above tonight? You cannot stay with us for some of the Summerfest celebrations?”

“Oh, I wish I could.” Tony shrugged. “But I have early call tomorrow, for the matinee. I can’t afford to stay out late.” He clasped his throat. “Bad for the voice.”

“Well then, I shall ask William to pack you some of the banquet to go. You look like you need fattening up.” Mary bustled away.

“It is a shame you can’t come Above and see the entire show.” Tony sighed as he looked around the group. “I know you would all appreciate it. But I do understand the difficulties. One day, perhaps, things will be different...”

“I can walk among them on Halloween.” Vincent shrugged. “We make the most of our once a year treat. It is simply how it must be. Topsiders are afraid of their own shadows. Of what they don’t understand

and I remind them of what they are most afraid of.”

“But you have brought us some of the magic down here tonight, Tony.” Father took his arm. “We are so very proud of you and all you have achieved. Come and say goodbye to everyone, before you go.”

“Actually, guys, there could be a way...” Elliot put up a detaining hand, as the small group started to drift apart. “I mean, if you all really would like to see the show and Tony’s performance. I’m sure I can swing it, given a little time to organise things. I would love to try.”

“Really...?” Catherine was the first to turn back, her face alive with speculation.

It was very dear to her heart to help Vincent experience all he could of the culture of her old world. But she was ever wary of the possible consequences. “Jacob is old enough to be left for an evening. Samantha is an excellent babysitter. It would be so wonderful if we could do it. But, the risks...”

“Is that not a dangerous idea?” Father looked worried. “I mean, surely the dangers would be too great? What if Vincent was discovered?”

“Are you sure it’s even possible?” Shannon caught her lower lip between her teeth. “It would take a miracle...”

“Ah, I’m afraid you’re all wrong. None of you are thinking outside the box.” Elliot shook his head. “I’m on the board of several charities and they’ve all got events booked for the show months in advance. I’ve bought several blocks of seats to auction off for some of those charities. So, if I make a substantial contribution, I can secure all the bookings we might need.”

He smiled slowly. “Now I know that, on at least one of those nights, they’re planning to have a masquerade evening, to celebrate the show’s success. Everyone attending must come in masked fancy dress, or as his or her favourite character from the show. What could be simpler?”

“You mean, just walk in?” Vincent frowned. “Through the front door, like everyone else? Could it be possible?”

“The masquerade ball, what could be more perfect! You can go as yourself, Vincent. Who’s going to guess your face is real?” Tony gripped his arm excitedly. “You’ll blend right in with all the other characters. Think of it. You can come and see the show and even have a meal afterwards. I’m sure Elliot could arrange a private party just for you guys. And no one would be any the wiser. I think it’s a great idea. Paying it forward, remember?”

“And no one looked twice...” Catherine breathed, remembering that first, long ago Halloween night

when she and Vincent had walked the city unmolested. "I think it's a brilliant idea! If only we could somehow pull it off..."

"Mouse come too?" the tinker asked hopefully. "You got good stuff. Like radio controlled stuff and computers. Mouse could go up and see it all."

"I don't know..." Father frowned at Vincent, his expression mirroring his disquiet.

"How about we ask Tony to arrange a private time for you to go and see everything backstage, Mouse?" Vincent glanced at Tony, who nodded. "When it's quiet and you can take your time looking at it all."

"Tony can do that?" Mouse looked hopeful. "Mouse can come another time then?"

"Tony can do that," Tony replied, understanding Father's concerns. "You can look at anything you like."

"Okay, fine." Mouse nodded happily. "Not sure about all that singing anyway. Why can't you just tell the girl you love her?"

"You certainly know how to cut to the heart of the matter." Tony laughed, shaking his head. "Why, indeed..."

"I'm afraid it's still Elliot's call." Father looked across to his friend, hopeful, but prepared to be disappointed. "You could not surely take everyone up there..."

Elliot looked around the faces of the group, all expressing various degrees of hope, curiosity and disbelief he could actually pull it off. He pursed his lips thoughtfully, drawing out the suspense a little longer, trying not to smile.

"Stop teasing them," Shannon admonished him, kissing his cheek. "You know very well, the final say is yours. Anyone who wants to come is invited. Just give us the numbers and we'll arrange everything. We'll make it a Summerfest gift to remember."

"Are you sure we're not putting you to too much trouble?" Father worried the point. "But, I must say, to be able to see the whole show would be a real pleasure. Especially, since the Phantom himself, is now being portrayed by one of our own and no one, but us, knows of his origins. Aren't secrets wonderful things?"

"Then consider it done. I shall arrange everything." Elliot spread his hands. "Just give me some time to get things sorted. The masquerade night is in two weeks. We'll need to know who's coming, so we can be sure they have seats for everyone."

“Jacob, I think it’s a wonderful idea.” Mary reappeared with a basket of food. “It’s a long time since we’ve stepped out on the town.”

“This is not exactly stepping out on the town,” Father chided her. “This is far more dangerous than that. We’re putting a great deal at stake here. Vincent’s safety for one.”

“Then stay home, old man.” Mary linked her fingers with his. “Vincent will be fine, it will be night time after all and he will fit right into the theme of the night, as he does on Halloween. Where’s your sense of adventure? We will have Elliot to take care of us all. I’m going to see our sweet boy perform at his best and make us all very proud. And Vincent and Catherine will have a lovely, romantic evening together. What could be more perfect?”

“All right, all right.” Father subsided. “I can’t say I am unwilling to try something new. It has been a long time since I’ve attended the theatre.”

“Then, it’s a date.” Tony clasped Father’s free hand. “Two weeks from today you’re all coming to see the show. I can guarantee you won’t be disappointed.”

“I know we won’t.” Catherine kissed his cheek. “And Vincent will love it. It will be the first time we have been to the theatre together.”

“A palace of dreams...” Vincent mused softly. “Just like Father tonight, I will look forward to being transported into another realm. But it is truly more than I dreamed possible.”

“No pressure, then.” Tony grinned. “I shall make sure I don’t disappoint you. Just pray the boat behaves itself on the night. Or I might need Mouse’s help, after all.”

“I’m sure all will be fine.” Father took his arm. “So, we must look after your throat. Come on then, time to say your goodbyes, for now. I want to be sure you’re in good voice for our night of nights. I want you in bed by midnight.”

“Yes, Father,” Tony acquiesced meekly, his eyes twinkling, allowing the older man to lead him away into the crowd.

“Well, I’m off to alert the sewing ladies,” Mary said briskly. “They’ll need time to assemble the costumes. We’re going to need lots of things, feathers and lace, tons of velvet and brocade. And I know I still have some of that good Spanish leather set aside for a special occasion...”

“Come on.” Shannon linked arms with her as they hurried away. “Let’s go and see what we need. We’ll make out a shopping list of what we don’t have...”

“Why do I get the awful feeling this idea is going to cost me a lot of money?” Elliot laughed. “But, I also have a large debt to pay. Especially to you, Vincent.”

“Then consider this idea of yours payment in full,” Vincent replied, drawing Catherine in close to his side and kissing her hair. “One magical night to cancel all the debts. Then we will speak no more of what you owe us.”

“Somehow I don’t know if there could ever be enough to repay all you have done for me.” Elliot’s eyes followed Shannon’s progress across the hall. “All you have given me in these last few months.”

“Come on, you two. We’ll talk about who owes what to whom, some other time.” Catherine took Elliot’s hand. “It’s Summerfest and a beautiful night. Let’s go and sample some of William’s excellent cider and discuss our plans.”

She linked arms with both men and they walked with her to the tables groaning with food.

“Oh, Vincent...” Catherine walked into their chamber to find Vincent waiting for her.

Mary and her team of seamstresses had excelled themselves in the last two weeks with frantic periods of measuring and fitting. Every one of the thirty five people who had expressed an interest in the evening’s adventure, had been secreted from each other, only on the evening of the show would they finally be revealed in their finished costumes.

Vincent turned slowly before Catherine now, a slow smile lightening his features. The full length of his black evening cloak billowed around him as he paused, striking a pose as he faced her. Dressed as an eighteenth century gentleman in sumptuous formal style, his long, black thigh boots clung lovingly to his legs over grey leather breeches. Lace ruffles fell to his hands, now concealed beneath black leather gloves. A silk waistcoat of varying shades of emerald green and peacock blue set off the deep ruffles of a cream linen shirt beneath the elegant cut of his tailored evening jacket.

His hair had been combed and tamed, tied back into an elegant ponytail with long black silk ribbons that draped over his shoulder. He held a wide brimmed hat in his hands, complete with nodding ostrich feathers. His smile grew wider as Catherine stared at him. She returned his smile as she licked her lips.

“I did think the hat could be a little much...” Vincent ventured quietly, when she didn’t speak.

“Oh, no...” Catherine shook her head vigorously. “No, no, everything is just perfect.”

She drew out the last word like the purr of a cat. She licked her lips again as she advanced into the chamber. "You look good enough to eat."

"And you look like every one of my fantasies," Vincent teased. He flourished a gloved hand elegantly, palm uppermost, making a formal bow as he did so.

"Does that mean you like it?" Catherine went up on her toes and did a slow pirouette. "It seems they have matched us in our century, at least."

Her midnight blue velvet gown was cut low across her breasts, creating an inviting cleavage behind a narrow collar of fine cream lace. The gown clung close to the slender curves of her upper body, before flowing out from the waist to drape elegantly around her feet, now clad in neat lace-up boots of an antique cut with diamante studded heels. The length of her sleeves ended at her elbows where long falls of exquisite lace reached almost to her wrists, her hands also clothed in long evening gloves of cream kidskin.

Her hair had been gathered to the crown of her head and then teased into a riot of perfumed curls and ringlets. She carried a full-face, silver Phantom mask by its ribbons in one hand, an evening cloak of crimson silk draped over her arm. She lifted the mask to her face, making a sensuous moue behind it.

"I like it all so much that, are you sure we need to go out tonight?" Vincent murmured, capturing her free hand and carrying it to his lips, pressing a lingering kiss to her inner wrist where he could feel a pulse beating rapidly.

"*Merci, Monsieur...*" Catherine curtsyed. "*Tres bon, magnifique...*"

"*Mademoiselle*, shall we go, before I lose all my good intentions...?" Vincent drew her hand behind his arm to rest in the curve of his elbow.

"Ah, *Monsieur*, who says I wouldn't allow it?" Catherine replied, with a saucy smile, as she hugged his arm.

"We should get dressed up like this more often." Vincent laughed. "But I'm not sure my blood pressure could handle it..."

Catherine laughed gaily as they left the chamber, heading for the agreed meeting place of Father's room. She was extremely interested to see what miracles Mary and her team had performed for everyone else. But she was sure no one could compare to Vincent's magnificence.

Father and Mary were laughing together as Vincent and Catherine entered the chamber. "What do you think?" Father questioned, spreading his arms wide as they entered. "I believe I am costumed as one

of the opera managers. I trust I am rich enough to afford this night.”

He'd been neatly turned out as a wealthy Parisian man about town, complete with an elegant floral waistcoat, fob watch and a bow tie. He held his hat and gloves in one hand while leaning on a silver and ebony cane Catherine had not seen before.

“Madame Giry, at your service.” Mary smiled, as she curtsied. “I thought it was an appropriate character to choose, from the gorgeous costume drawings that Tony sent down for me to copy. I am, after all, in charge of the young ones and I do try to be strict.” She shook her head ruefully.

Mary was formally dressed as the Phantom's ballet mistress, the dark severity of her costume livened by an elegant evening jacket of silver and red brocade. She carried a ladies satin reticule looped over one arm and opera glasses on a long chain around her neck.

“You both look fabulous.” Catherine smiled. “This night is going to be such fun.”

“And you two look spectacular. We should do this more often.” Father looked Vincent and Catherine up and down. “I must say, Mary, you have excelled yourself tonight. Well done.”

The other tunnel dwellers began to appear, all beautifully turned out in period costume; some as characters from the musical, others masked and mysterious. Soon the chamber was full to overflowing, those who were not making the journey Above, gathering in the outer tunnels, watching and speculating on all the costumes. Mary's efforts and those of her ladies came in for much praise and comment.

“Shall we go to the opera?” Father extended his arm to Mary. “I think we are in for a memorable night.”

“Anywhere you go, let me go too...” Vincent whispered softly to Catherine, as they followed the others. “Love me, that's all I ask of you...”

Catherine reached up to kiss his cheek. “Oh, Vincent, I love you.”

To avoid unwanted attention, the various groups of people who were attending the show passed from their underground home by different exits. Catherine and Vincent, with Father and Mary, went out through the door to the basement of Elliot's building. Shannon and Elliot were waiting for them on the other side.

“*Wow!*” Elliot approved of Catherine's costume immediately. He turned to survey the others. “Look at you all. Thank you, Mary, you've done wonders in the short time you had.”

“It was great fun.” She nodded, smiling. “But, I did have a lot of help.”

“I’m impressed.” Elliot turned to scan Vincent critically. “I must say, you’re gonna take some beating. I hear there’s a great prize for the best costume at the end of the night. I excluded myself from the voting, because I’m far too biased.” He grinned at them.

“You’re not looking too bad yourself.” Catherine assessed his outfit. “The classic robber baron, I presume?”

“How did you guess?” Elliot looked down at himself. “I’ve always fancied myself as a highwayman.”

“And I’m the angel of mercy who hides him from the law.” Shannon indicated her elegant French aristocratic lady’s costume with a sweep of her hand. “My secret lover, I keep him only for my pleasure.”

“I know what you mean.” Catherine took her hand. “We almost didn’t make it up here tonight.”

“I’m not surprised.” Shannon’s eyes ran approvingly over Vincent, who tried not to notice, as he talked with Elliot and Father. “We were running late, too. Tony has a lot to answer for. He’d better live up to his billing.”

“If we’re going to make the curtain, we need to get going. I’ve got the limo waiting up there.” Elliot indicated for them all to go before him up the steps to the world Above. “The others are being met at agreed points and will be conveyed to the theatre by people I trust. I, for one, plan to enjoy myself hugely tonight.”

With Mary and Catherine on each side, Shannon placed herself between Father and Vincent, linking arms with them. “I love watching the audience reaction to the musical, especially those who are seeing it for the first time. You are in for a truly magical treat. I expect to see copious use of hankies, ladies.”

“Mouse wants a full report on the antics of the boat,” Vincent commented. “He’s sure he can fix it.”

“Tony will have his hands full with that one.” Elliot shook his head ruefully. “I do not envy him the task of keeping an eye on Mouse as he pokes around in all his stuff.”

They were all laughing as they reached the street. The city’s hectic pedestrian traffic paid them no attention as they appeared among them, even though they looked decidedly out of place on such a warm summer night, dressed in exotic period costume. Catherine breathed a cautious sigh of relief that Vincent excited no comment and few glances as they crossed the pavement. Elliot summoned the limousine with a wave of his hand and, when it drew level with them, they all climbed inside.

“I have champagne on ice, and anything else you might like.” Elliot indicated the coolers. “Strawberries, anyone?”

“I could get very used to this,” Father commented dryly, as he accepted a flute of sparkling wine, and helped himself to the dish of strawberries Elliot held out to them all.

Dusk was falling as they drove through the city streets. It was a different perspective from Vincent’s usual vantage point of the rooftops.

“Are you ready for this?” Catherine asked, with a trace of anxiety, seeing Vincent frowning at the crowds beyond the car’s windows.

“All life is a journey that begins with the first step.” Vincent looked back at her and clasped her outstretched hand. “Please don’t worry about me. This is one night I can truly be myself. I am looking forward to it.”

The limousine drew up smoothly at the front entrance to the theatre, and Elliot was the first to alight. “Come on,” he encouraged. “Get through this lot and we’ll wait in a private room for the others to arrive, then we will all go in together.”

A wall of sound, clapping and shouts of encouragement, as they all assembled on the sidewalk, assaulted their senses. Father immediately got into the spirit by waving to the crowd and sharing in their appreciation of his gesture. Cameras flashed, people called and chatted. Catherine linked arms with Vincent, Shannon moving up on his other side and, together with Mary, they quickly crossed the pavement, following Elliot as he entered through the front door of the theatre and into the plush interior of the foyer. Father followed reluctantly, turning back to wave at the crowd with both hands one final time.

As they regrouped inside, Elliot turned, shaking his head. “Sorry about the crowd out there. But, on a gala night, everyone turns out to see and be seen. At least we’ve made it this far without incident.”

“And, I entered by the front door...” Vincent smiled, releasing a long sigh, gazing around. “It is wonderful to be here. This place is amazing. And no one looked twice.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that, Vincent.” Shannon laughed. “I think you caught more than one woman’s appreciative eye tonight.”

“We’re in here.” Elliot led the way into a side room and shut the door on the hubbub outside. “It shouldn’t be too long before the others get here. Then we can go into the theatre by another entrance. You can leave your hats and extras in here, we’ll collect them later.”

“I can’t wait for the performance to begin.” Mary said, on a sigh. “I’m sure Tony will be wonderful. His Summerfest performance was incredible enough.”

“Remember, I was there at the beginning,” Father reminded her, as he removed his hat and gloves. “I knew the boy had potential. I could see it in him.”

“You just won’t let that old bone go, will you?” Mary shook her head in despair. “But, I will admit, you did say he would be great one day.”

As she spoke, a small rear door to the room opened and a man walked in. Tall and dignified, clothed in full evening dress, complete with a swirling cloak and wide brimmed, black fedora hat, he paused, surveying the tunnel group with cool disdain and narrowed eyes. He exuded an intriguing air of power and pride overlaying a striking sense of innate vulnerability. As if he was stealing himself to be seen in public.

Behind the white half-mask he wore, his cruelly deformed lips curled and his eyes became chill and menacing. He drew himself up to his full height, sweeping the cloak across his body with a flourish.

“More intruders into my theatre tonight?” he complained, in a deep, powerful voice filled with resignation. “It seems, once again, I shall have to speak to my managers. It is becoming utterly insupportable.”

Everyone stared, aghast at his haughty contempt, unsure of what to say next. It took a few moments before they began to realise the truth.

“Hello, Tony.” Vincent frowned, surveying him closely. “You did have me guessing there for a moment.”

“And I thought, if I made such a grand entrance, you wouldn’t recognise me.” Tony abandoned his haughty pose with a laugh. “It is so good to see you all here tonight. It’s not often I get to perform for my family.”

“Thanks to Elliot’s generosity.” Catherine took Tony’s hand between her own. “We are all really looking forward to this.”

“And I can see you’ve all gotten into the spirit of the occasion. Every one of you looks amazing. I’m one of the judges of the competition tonight, but I promise to be impartial. Well, I’ll try.”

The door behind him opened and a woman looked in. “Time to go, Tony, they’ve called the half hour. You need to get ready.” She beckoned to him.

“Kate, my dresser.” Tony acknowledged the woman’s summons. “She tries her best to keep me on the

straight and narrow. We'll meet again after the show. Have fun, everyone."

The door had barely closed behind him when the outer door opened and the rest of the tunnel community began to stream in. Soon Vincent and Catherine and all their family and friends were being shown to their seats. All around excited people greeted each other, showing off their costumes and speculating on the evening's events and the treat ahead of them.

"How are you?" Catherine took her seat next to Vincent, who was looking all around him. "You look pensive."

"No, I'm truly intrigued," Vincent acknowledged. "This truly is a place where dreams are made." He looked down at her. "I finished reading the Leroux book last night. I wonder what he would have made of all this."

"I'm sure Gaston would approve." Catherine kissed his cheek. "And I love that we can be here tonight, together. You have given me so much; this is a small measure of what I owe you. I'm glad we could do this together."

"It is wonderful to be here with you, on a night like this." He lifted her hand and kissed the backs of her fingers. "But I am glad I was able to lose the hat." He smiled wickedly.

On his other side Elliot laid a hand on his arm. "And this is still not payment enough for all you have done for me. Consider this night simply a down payment."

"Very well." Vincent shook his head. "But you and I are going to talk more on that subject. However, that is for another time."

"Another time, then. I shall look forward to it." Elliot nodded, as the lights dipped and a hush began to fall over the crowded theatre.

There was a long silence fraught with anticipation before the stage lit up with a scene of an auction and a gavel was pounded. After the first lot, the auction continued with bids for a music box featuring a monkey playing the symbols. That was finally sold to an old man in a wheelchair, who accepted it, addressing it quietly in song. Then the auctioneer recalled the audience's attention to the next lot, that of a wrecked chandelier.

The auctioneer's booming voice swelled with amusement as he remarked; "*Perhaps we may frighten away the ghost of so many years ago with a little illumination... gentlemen?*"

The auctioneer switched on the chandelier dramatically; there is an enormous flash of light and the chandelier began to rise from the stage, illuminating and changing as it began to rise towards the ceiling

far above them. Vincent tracked its progress with wondering eyes as it floated up high over his seat.

At the same time an organ was playing a long series of musical passages that built and began to unfold into an incredible passage of orchestral sound as the stage before them was transformed into a grand old opera house. Vincent felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise as the music began to pound through him, making him almost rise from his seat. The overture swept up and out, radiating through the audience on unseen wings, focussing all attention on the stage.

Throughout the beginning of the first act Vincent watched, fascinated, as the various scenes unfolded before him. Catherine was intrigued with all the colours and beauty of their mutual bond flowing back and forth between them as the subsequent scenes continued the story of a young chorus girl who was pushed to the forefront of the stage to sing for them all, against her better instincts and the difficulties that ensued from her performance.

Beside them, Shannon turned her head to watch their varying reactions. She smiled at their intense expressions. The music built again and swelled with the main female lead, Christine, moving on to her dressing room. Carried along with the music and the spectacle, Vincent and Catherine had almost forgotten Tony's part in the whole drama until his spectral voice whispered to them from somewhere in the shadows...

*"Bravi, bravi, bravissimi..."*

"That was Tony..." Mary leaned forward to whisper.

"Shhh..." Father admonished her with a hand on her arm, his expression intense.

The scene continued in Christine's dressing room, focussing on the full-length mirror that seemed to possess a life of its own. After a brief encounter with her childhood sweetheart, who had just left the room, a commanding voice suddenly spoke from the mirror's depths, though it only reflected Christine's startled image.

*"Insolent boy! This slave of fashion, basking in your glory! Ignorant fool! This brave young suitor, sharing in my triumph!"*

*"Angel, I hear you, speak, I listen..."* Christine's spellbound reaction was mirrored in the audience, as she continued to sing. *"Enter at last, Master..."*

All those watching were just as intrigued by the unseen presence. Even Vincent's night sensitive eyes couldn't detect any existence within the mirror beyond the menace of the powerful voice.

The Phantom's tone changed as he replied to Christine's plea to finally see him, becoming beguiling and persuading. *"Flattering child, you shall know me, see why in shadow I hide! Look at your face in the mirror – I am there inside!"*

Catherine clutched Vincent's arm as the mirror slowly revealed its secret and the shape of the Phantom could be seen highlighted within the ornate frame.

Vincent frowned at the apparition. Tony seemed so different now, commanding and aloof.

Vincent glanced down at Catherine's face, watching and loving the spell Tony was weaving around them all. This was far better than the Summerfest evening, and that had been powerful enough. There were so many other layers here, music and magic intertwined into a seamless whole as the Phantom moved to persuade Christine that she could love him for himself alone.

Vincent could sympathise and understand the other man's pain. Knowing what it felt like to be locked and alone within his own body, he could empathise with Erik's pleas for understanding and love all too well. He had once been that man, so sure he was destined to be alone because he looked so different.

But, as the subsequent scenes unfolded, the Phantom was ultimately betrayed by Christine's growing love for her childhood sweetheart. *"He was bound to love you, when he heard you sing...Christine... Christine..."* At the end of the first act, his words of pain and despair echoed from somewhere high above the audience.

*"You will curse the day you did not do, all that the Phantom asked of you..."* The music swelled and crashed with the Phantom's mocking laughter, before a cry of agony and final command rang out far above their heads. *"Go...!"*

There were screams and shouts of consternation as the chandelier, powered by the Phantom's despair and need for violent release, began to swing wildly towards the stage. Catherine gasped her shock, ducking her head against Vincent's shoulder as the ornate piece came flying down over their heads. With a crashing explosion, perilously close to where Christine was standing on stage, the first act came to an abrupt and climatic end.

"Well, I wasn't expecting that!" Father mopped his brow with a shaking hand. "I thought we were all for it then! Someone should have warned us!"

"That was amazing. I'm certainly impressed with Tony's athletic skills." Mary craned her head to look above them, but the shadowy figure had disappeared. "I do hope he's all right. What if he had fallen...?"

"I'm sorry, but I couldn't say anything about that bit because Tony asked me not to. And I didn't want to spoil his grand exit." Elliot laughed a little shakily. "Even though I've seen this musical three times now,

it always makes me jump when he does that. I guess I'll never get used to the experience."

"I can understand his pain and frustration," Vincent said quietly. "I would have done the same, if I ever lost you, Catherine." He leaned down to kiss her lips gently.

Catherine's hand flew to his cheek. "You could never lose me, Vincent. We both know that now. We will be together...always..."

After the intermission, the lights dimmed and the second act began. It flowed seamlessly from the masquerade assemble to Christine attending her father's grave, searching for elusive peace. *"Wishing you were somehow here again, wishing you were somehow near...Sometimes it seemed, if I just dreamed, somehow you would be here...Wishing I could hear your voice again, knowing that I never would..."*

Vincent enfolded Catherine's hand in his as he sensed her heart-rending memories of her own late father and her long held wish that the two most important men in her life could have known each other. How she wished her father could have met his grandson and still be a much loved part of their lives together.

"I'll be all right." Catherine nodded and smiled at Vincent; grateful he understood her pain and accepted it. She glanced around at the other audience members; seeing that many were as affected as her. There was hardly a dry eye in the theatre.

She sighed, wiping the tears from her eyes as the performance moved to the Phantom's inevitable confrontation of his deepest fear, being rejected by the woman he loved beyond everything. But, he was prepared to gamble all he possessed on one last attempt to win her love.

He took his courage in his hands and offered himself to Christine, as she suddenly realised she was singing with him and not her partner in the Phantom's *Don Juan* opera. Sensing the truth, she pushed back his cowl, showing him to the audience.

Revealed and exposed, the Phantom moved away, then hesitated, before turning to cross the stage and stand before her, begging for her love. *"We've passed the point of no return..."* Could she not see how much he loved her...?

*"Say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime...Lead me, save me from my solitude..."* He removed a ring from his finger and held it out. *"Say you want me with you, here beside you...anywhere you go let me go too — Christine, that's all I ask of —"*

Not allowing him to finish, Christine calmly removed the Phantom's mask and wig, finally exposing his

hideous face for all to see. There were gasps of horror and shock in the audience.

Vincent's heart contracted, as he frowned over the inevitable shame and disgrace of such a proud man being exposed in this way, to uninformed people who could not see the uniquely gifted, remarkable man who lived beneath the deformity over which he had no control.

The pathos and agony of the moment was beyond imagining...it made him want to leap from his seat and storm the stage. Catherine sensed the sudden tightening of his powerful muscles and the agony in his spirit. She returned the tight grip he still had on her hand.

"It will be all right, Vincent," she whispered.

"Yes..." Vincent nodded, on a long sigh. "I know it is only a story, but still..." he paused, shaking his head. "I understand his pain only too well."

Their fingers remained entwined as the agonising drama on stage continued to unfold, drawing out to its inevitable conclusion, and final moment of ultimate redemption. Far beneath the opera house, in Erik's underground lair, Christine approaches the unmasked Phantom, prepared to give her life and love to him, to save her young lover from certain doom.

*"Pitiful creature of darkness...what kind of life have you known...? God give me courage to show you, you are not alone..."* As Christine kissed the Phantom without revulsion, Catherine carried Vincent's hand to her lips, pressing a kiss to each one of his fingers, while the musical's finale moved onwards.

In the background, the men hunting this terrible creature of the night could be heard baying for blood and the Phantom's head. He crossed the stage, putting all thoughts of peace and a happy life with the woman he loved behind him forever. He spoke quickly to her young lover.

*"Take the boat — leave me here — go now, don't wait...Just take her and go — before it's too late... go...go now — go now and leave me!"*

Uncertain, Christine and her lover slowly desert the stage. The Phantom looked down at his discarded mask and then the monkey music box began to play. He turned to it, to softly sing the song it played. *"Masquerade, paper faces on parade, masquerade, hide your face so the world will never find you..."*

In the audience Vincent puts his hand to his own face. He shook his head. For a bleak moment, it was too close to the truth, too real. He also hid his face so the world would never find him...

He watched, transfixed, hoping for a miracle, as Christine suddenly reappeared, but she had only come back to return the Phantom's ring. Erik took it from her, to place it on his finger, his heart irretrievably

broken as his love turned away, leaving him for the last time.

Finally he told her, "*Christine, I love you...*"

Vincent inhaled, vividly remembering Mouse's comment from Summerfest. All Erik had to do was tell the girl he loved her...he smiled sadly, if only all life was that simple.

Another passage of subdued music began to build slowly as Christine and her lover stepped into the boat and pulled away into the shadows, singing together as they departed.

The Phantom looked after his lost love. "*You alone can make my song take flight – it's over now, the music of the night...*"

He moved to his nearby throne and sat on his cloak. As the mob suddenly appeared onstage the Phantom threw the garment around his body and disappeared. All that is left to be seen was the white mask lying on the seat, mocking and silent.

The music swelled and the spell was complete. The last strains floated away into the shadows, but no one moved, no one breathed for suspended seconds and then the audience showed their appreciation by cheering, shouting and stamping their feet for a full ten minutes after the final curtain fell.

"That was just so wonderful..." Mary breathed, dabbing at her cheeks. "And it was so sad. I just want to hug him right now. Tony has made me very proud."

"I never dreamed our boy could be that good..." Father wiped his eyes. "It was so powerful. I feel as if I have just been on a runaway roller-coaster."

"And so poignant." Catherine sighed, passing her free hand over her face. "To have gone through so much and to have lost everything in the end."

"Not everything," Vincent replied, shaking his head on a sigh. "He gave up everything for the love of his life. There can be no greater sacrifice. In the end he regained his soul, because he paid the greatest price for his desire. He was redeemed by his unconditional love."

"How did you get to be so wise?" Catherine wrapped both hands around his arm and hugged him, her head cradled against his shoulder.

"You taught me how to truly love. I can understand Erik's pain all too well. I have lived with that pain for most of my life. Until the night I found you, Catherine."

The stage began to fill with performers, all accepting their due and stepping back to allow others to

take their place. Finally Christine appeared to rapturous applause. She curtsied and waved before relinquishing her place to Tony, masked once more as the Phantom, and the whole theatre went mad. Mary jumped to her feet, waving at the stage, Father not far behind her.

Vincent stood and turned to Catherine, drawing her to her feet beside him as they both saluted the stage. Tony scanned the crowd closely, searching and finally finding their group among the other cheering and shouting audience members. He made a special bow and again flung his arms wide in that same sweeping theatrical gesture from Summerfest as he extracted his full due from the rapturous audience.

The actress playing Christine rushed up to grasp his arm and whispered something to him. He laughed, turning to the audience and bowing before he turned back to scoop up his partner into his arms and they saluted the audience one last time before leaving the stage together, passing into the darkness beyond. The curtain fell once more and the audience didn't stint in their appreciation for quite some time.

"He certainly is a showman." Elliot laughed. "Only Tony would have the cheek to pull that last bit off."

"All because I told him that night at Summerfest, it was what we all wanted to see." Shannon wiped her eyes and smiled. "Just for once, Erik finally getting the girl. Mouse was right all the time; it was so easy, after all. Pure magic, I'm overjoyed."

"It was certainly a magical show." Catherine linked arms with Vincent. "Perhaps we should make this a new Wells family tradition."

Father shook his head. "For you young ones maybe, I'm not sure I could take all this excitement more than once a year. That chandelier was nearly the death of me. But, it has been a wonderful night; I shall remember it forever."

"Then perhaps you need to get out more." Mary kissed his cheek. "But it has all been quite breathtaking. I don't know if I should laugh or cry."

As the audience began to file out of the theatre, Elliot said, "We still have the costume judging to go yet. I'll keep an eye out for the result, and then Tony will be free to join us for the rest of the evening. We had better all adjourn again to our private room. We don't want to get caught up in the crush in the foyer."

As the excited and chattering group of tunnel folk re-entered the room, Catherine linked her fingers through Vincent's, drawing him aside into a quiet corner, bringing him close to stand before her. "Was it everything you expected?"

"Everything and more. It was beyond anything I could have imagined or dreamed. And to be able to share

it with you, Catherine...was the greatest magic of the whole night.”

He drew her close against him, uncaring of who might be watching, and kissed her with searching tenderness that left her weak and clinging to him. Catherine threw her arms around his neck, drawing him closer still, threading her fingers through the black silk ribbons tying his hair behind his head.

Finally, she pulled back fractionally from the wanton temptation of his smiling mouth. “Better than better, better than great. Better even than William’s apple pie?” she finally managed to tease him gently, imitating Mouse’s speech patterns to perfection.

“Better than anything, except the love we have for each other and our son. That is a gift beyond all price.”

Catherine rose on her toes to whisper in his ear. “It is rather a shame we are not heading home right now...because I want you very badly.”

Vincent inhaled sharply as he shook his head. “I think we might be missed if we left now. But, I couldn’t agree more. We have the rest of the night together. We shall just have to make the best of it, until we can be alone once more...”

“Ah, *Monsieur*, I am not sure I can wait that long...”

“Tony does weave a powerful spell.” Shannon approached them, obviously reluctant to break into their whispered communion. “I am so glad you all got the chance to see it. I have loved it, every time I’ve seen it.”

“We cannot thank you and Elliot enough for your generosity and goodwill.”

“If you hadn’t given me sanctuary when I needed it, Vincent, I would not be here now and I wouldn’t have Elliot in my life. As we said before, we owe you more than we could ever repay.”

The door opened and Elliot reappeared. “Sorry, everyone.” He spread his hands wide in apology. “We lost the contest to someone who came dressed in a half woman, half man costume.”

“I saw that costume.” Mary nodded. “It was spectacular. They deserve to win.”

“Never mind, you all look wonderful.” Catherine turned to the gathering.

“Then we are free to continue on our evening’s adventure. I believe our carriages await, *Mesdames*

and *Messieurs*.” Elliot stood aside, indicating they should all go before him. “Tony said he will join us at the restaurant.”

The line of limousines swept them through the night-shrouded streets to one of New York’s top restaurants. Elliot had booked a large private room and they were all ushered to seats at a long communal table and were waited on in unobtrusive style.

As soon as they were all seated the lights were dimmed and large candelabras that had been placed down the middle of the table were lit. The whole atmosphere became very reminiscent of the recent Summerfest celebrations. Elliot was at the head of the table, Father at the other end with Mary beside him. Elliot seated Shannon on his left and he placed Vincent at his right hand, grinning as he watched his good friend’s changing expressions of curiosity and interest.

Vincent turned his attention to the staff as they went about their duties, deeply deferential to Elliot, calm and courteous to the rest of the group. Helping to select wines and discussing each course, the waiters worked the table quietly, making sure everyone was comfortable and at ease, and had everything they needed.

No one gave Vincent a second glance. He marvelled to himself how, even dressed like he was, as a man from another time, the illusion of normality made all the difference, making people feel safe and blind to the truth.

*Truly, no one looked twice.* He looked to Catherine at his side and she smiled at him, fully aware of the trend of his thoughts. “I know, isn’t it wonderful?” she whispered, her eyes sparkling. “Tonight is everything I hoped it would be.”

“Yes...” Vincent breathed. “I think the night’s only expression of disappointment will be from Mouse, when he finds out everything worked perfectly. He was so sure the boat would break down again and he would be needed to fix it.” They laughed softly together.

Tony suddenly appeared and everyone cheered, leaving their seats to gather around him, all expressing their collective approval and gratitude for his incredible performance.

“It was magical for me to be able to perform for you guys,” he said, as they all resumed their seats, and he took his place beside Catherine. “It meant so much to me to have you all there tonight.”

“It was simply breathtaking,” Catherine acknowledged. “But, surely, you must be exhausted.”

“No, I’m fine. There’s a legend in the theatre world about Dr Footlights.” Tony shook his head. “Think of the audience as a living entity, all you have to do is put in your best performance each and every night and their collective energy just flows through you, lifting you higher still. Get it right and it’s equally the

most incredible and the scariest thing in the whole world.” He grinned cheekily. “And I *love* it! I can’t imagine doing anything else with my life right now.”

“So, there is no young lady on the horizon then?” Catherine questioned, as the first course was delivered. “Well, there is Anna, she played Christine tonight. She and I have been seeing other for some weeks now. We’re taking it easy, just seeing where it might go.”

“Oh, she was delightful, especially at the curtain call,” Shannon observed. “I have always wanted to see Erik finally get the girl. We all loved it.”

“I’m glad we could please the true romantics among you tonight.” Tony inclined his head. “When you first suggested it, Shannon, we thought, why not? It certainly went down well with the audience.”

“One day, if things get truly serious between you, you must bring Anna down to meet us,” Vincent told him. “You deserve every happiness.”

“I did think to bring her tonight, but she understands, this is our special time. There will be other nights.” He looked around the room at all the happy faces. “Many other nights like this, I hope.”

At the head of the table, Elliot raised his glass. “To Summerfest,” he intoned formally. “To my beautiful, beloved Shannon, and to a truly wonderful night with the best of family and friends.”

“To my Elliot, for being so generous.” Shannon smiled as she raised her glass and then leaned over to kiss him. “I love you.”

“To life.” Father acknowledged the third toast from the other end of the table.

“To Tony.” Mary was not to be outdone. “And we are going to do this again soon. It has been such fun.”

“To Erik, the Phantom.” Tony raised his own glass. “To a wonderful and passionate character who has given me room to grow and allowed me to become more than I thought I could ever be. *Merci, Monsieur.*”

“To love...” Vincent looked around them all. “To being who we truly are and knowing we are accepted, no matter what happens or whatever comes.”

“To love.” Everyone nodded, raising their glasses to toast Vincent and Catherine.

“To Vincent.” Catherine raised her glass, clinking it with his. “For being all you can be...always...I love you so much.”

“Um, guys, I don’t know how to say this…” Tony sighed as they all finally sat down. He looked suddenly thoughtful. “I’m sorry to disappoint you all, but, at the end of this year, unfortunately I’ll be leaving Phantom. I’ve accepted the role of Enjolras in Les Mis. But, I know you all would love to see that show, too.”

There were immediate cries of disappointment from around the table, as everyone had an opinion to express. Tony shook his head ruefully, allowing everyone to have their say.

“It is Tony’s decision, after all.” Finally Vincent raised his hand for quiet. “But, now that you mention it, Tony, it has always been an ambition of mine to see Les Miserables…” He looked back to Elliot. “After all, Victor Hugo is a particular favourite author of mine. I’m sure we would all enjoy the show as much as we did tonight. If it could be arranged…”

“Are you asking me if I can get you all tickets to that show now?” Elliot sighed ruefully.

“It was merely an observation.” Vincent shrugged. “I will understand if you must decline. But, you did say you felt you still had a large debt to pay…”

“I did say that, didn’t I?” Elliot lips curved wryly, as he shook his head. “I guess I’ll have to see what I can do…” He raised his glass for a final time. “Of course, I would be happy to do my best to make it so. To Tony and Les Mis, then, and to a new Wells family tradition!”

He frowned and then laughed. “I don’t know how we’re going to tell Mouse…”

**“A Little Night Music…”** is a work of fiction and as such does not intend to infringe upon the copyrights of Andrew Lloyd Webber, Charles Hart or THE REALLY USEFUL GROUP PLC.