

Meet Me In The Forest

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



The late September rain was gently falling, making the tree leaves and still-lush green grass rustle all around. *A perfect day for a walk*, he thought, enjoying the moist air as he breathed it in deeply; even the slightly damp feel of his long cloak couldn't deter him from moving on, one soft step after another.

The sudden crunch on his left side made him stop and jerk, not out of fear but of curiosity. His eyes skimmed the area, his sharp ears trying to detect any more clues as to its origin. Were it night time, he would have assumed it was an owl taking off a branch, ready for its regular hunt. However, it was a guessing game for him now - he was still learning.

He sneaked to the nearest tree, as quietly as he could, looking for a safe hiding place to watch and reveal more. The hood on his head, shading most of his face, didn't obscure his vision; his whole cloak made him blend with the tree almost as if he had always been a part of it. The brief crunching sound repeated, and this time, he was lucky: seeing a familiar face emerge from behind the thick trunk of a tall oak tree, he smiled.

Still remembering the first time he saw the same face, he couldn't help but feel the same thrill spreading in his veins. The oblong head shape, the shiny, short, chestnut fur, the always-alert ears, the piercing, black doe eyes...

"Hello, Bambi," he whispered and, unhurried, he made a few careful steps toward the usually shy animal. "How are you today?"

The doe dared to walk out of its hideaway and meet the tall, veiled man ahead. His gloved hand reached for the cool and soft muzzle, gently caressing it. The animal seemed to enjoy the warm touch and tender ministrations.

"I didn't see you yesterday. I hope you didn't get into any trouble."

The rain kept filling the crisp air with moisture, and the man and his forest companion continued enjoying their little encounter: the doe listening, and the man not expecting any answers – he felt them even without words. As his hand slowly traced the length of the doe's back, another crunching sound disturbed both. The deer immediately ran off, leaving only a waft of its woodsy scent behind.

"I'm so sorry," Catherine apologised softly, from behind the same tree where Vincent stood only a few moments earlier. "I got a cramp in my foot and had to move," she explained.

Vincent chuckled and walked to meet her. "How long have you been there?" he asked. "Long enough to appreciate getting soaked in the lovely autumn rain," she replied, smiling.

She inhaled deeply, briefly closing her eyes. The expression on her face was that of pure bliss. Vincent remembered the first time he saw her in the rain – the same joy, the same excitement, the same beauty.

"I didn't expect you to come so early," he said, a gentle smile still lingering on his face. "Did you finish *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* with the boys?" He tenderly pushed a slightly damp strand of hair from her glowing face.

“I did,” Catherine confirmed. “You’d expect that after having it read with them for like twenty times, they would get less excited about it, but I guess I was wrong.” She raised her eyebrows, amused. “I guess I know who they get that from.”

Vincent’s smile widened; there were many traits his children inherited from their mother, but probably even more that they did from their father, especially their love of literature, even in their still tender age of six and four.

“I’m glad Jamie shares their enthusiasm,” Catherine said as they started walking down the forest path not far from the Chandlers’ lake cottage, hand in hand.

“I’m glad she agreed to come with us,” Vincent added. “Connecticut is beautiful this time of year. Last night, she told me how much she loves it here. She is very grateful that you invited her to join us on this trip.”

Catherine’s smile slightly turned into one touched by guilt. “I’m afraid I thought less of Jamie enjoying this place than seeing the chance to steal a lovely walk like this with you alone.”

Vincent chuckled. “I can assure you she doesn’t mind it at all. You gave her a chance to get out of New York and see a completely different place, a place of beauty that no books can convey to her.”

Catherine stopped and looked into his eyes. “Then I know exactly how she feels, for I felt like that the first time you took me for a walk around your world,” she said dreamily.

He reached for her cheek and wiped a few raindrops from it. “*Our* world,” he corrected her.

His eyes wandered around, absorbing the magic of the changing colours of the leaves on the many and various trees, reaching for the sky painted with grey clouds; each of them could surely tell a story from a long time ago, Vincent thought.

“I will never be able to thank you enough for taking me here for the first time, and every year since then.” His gravelly voice was softer than usual, quite moved. “The risk that you took... that you have taken every time we come here...”

“... has been worth it, every time,” Catherine interrupted him, with a deep conviction in her voice.

Tears stood in his eyes, just as every time she made him see and feel how much this meant to her.

“To have shared this with you for the first time was a dream come true, but to share it with our boys now is beyond any words I could ever find to describe the feeling,” she said, swallowing a tear.

“Then we shall leave the words to the poets and enjoy the feeling in blessed silence,” Vincent replied before pressing a warm kiss on her forehead.

Catherine sighed, yet again, feeling the ground beneath her shift, a feeling that didn't seem to diminish even after the years they had been together.

They started walking again; this time, she hung on his arm to get even more of his nearness, especially as he wordlessly offered her cover from the lingering light rain under the wing of his cloak.

"I hope Bambi won't feel offended I interrupted you so rudely," she teased.

Vincent smiled. "Animals have a much deeper understanding of the truth that we imagine."

"And what was that truth in this case?" Catherine was genuinely interested.

"That you wished to join me so much that your body subconsciously made it happen earlier than planned," her husband replied, amused.

Catherine laughed, her spirits high. "Very true. And you wished for the same thing."

Vincent looked at her, his look playful. "And how did you know that?"

She stopped again, pulling down his hood to see his face in full glory. She pressed her lips against his, then spoke with a wide smile.

"I heard your voice whispering into my heart. It said, 'Meet me in the forest...'"

