

LOST?

by Stephanie Bruford

Catherine woke with a start at a noise from her balcony. Vincent, she thought. Half awake, she sent her greetings whilst struggling to rise from her bed. As she slipped her robe on, she noticed the time on her bedside clock. Three o'clock? Vincent has never come this late before, maybe I can persuade him to come in this time. Tingling with anticipation she ran to the balcony door and threw it open.

Far below, Vincent, in the act of raising a goblet of wine to his lips, felt her eagerness and wondered. Suddenly, there was a sharp stab of fear from her. Dropping his goblet, Vincent snatched up his cloak and was out of the door before the wine had spilled.

Catherine, calling Vincent's name as she stepped out onto the balcony, had not seen the intruder and was not aware of him until a hand slapped across her face from behind, covering her mouth so that she could not call out.

"So, the high and mighty Catherine Chandler has a secret lover does she?" a cold, hard voice whispered in her ear.

Struggling to escape his grip, Catherine threw herself backwards to take him by surprise; he was waiting for it and stepped sideways so that she hit her head on the doorframe. While she was stunned he twisted her around and pushed her back into the bedroom.

"Very nice," he drawled, gazing around. "Is this where you play your love games while innocent men get shot on your say-so?"

Catherine gasped. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Me? I'm just a man out to avenge his brother." He pushed her backwards until she fell on the bed, grabbed her wrist and twisted it so that she flopped over and he could reach her other wrist. Viciously, he tied them together with coarse rope that he'd brought with him, then he turned her back over trapping her bound arms underneath her.

"Well my sweet," his sneering voice sickened her, "I wonder if your 'Vincent' will still want you when I've finished your punishment." Slowly he slid an army survival knife out of its sheath at his waist.

"Why am I being punished? I don't know you or your brother." Catherine spoke calmly, trying to delay her 'punishment', to discover its cause.

"Liar!" Stepping forward, he drove the knife deep into the pillow beside her head, tearing at it, scattering its feathers.

"You remember my brother. You sent the cops to arrest him, to shoot him down like a mad dog. Johnny was innocent, he never killed anyone, couldn't have, he didn't have the nerve. Twelve people you said he killed, carved up with a knife, just like this." He held the knife up so that it glinted in the light. "Well I'll tell you lady, you picked the wrong brother."

Catherine went cold, she remembered now, Johnny Burton. She'd worked hard on that case, a dozen women mutilated and killed; all the evidence pointed to one man, this man's brother, if he was to be believed.

"If he was as innocent as you say, then why did he run? He could have proved his innocence, couldn't he?"

"Not our Johnny, especially after the frame-up I'd worked out. I thought he'd be stuck in prison for life, save me the job of looking after him. You shouldn't have had him shot."

Catherine lay helpless while he sliced through the belt of her robe. The straps of her nightgown were the next to go, then, holding the top with one hand, he slashed down the front of it, the blade sliding through the silk like a hot knife through butter.

"Pretty," he said, gazing down at her nakedness, he carried on conversationally, "I always think of a girl's skin as a nice fresh canvas for my patterns. Yours is the nicest yet. I'll have to think of something pretty special for you. Now where shall I start?"

She felt the caress of the cold steel against her throat then, as it moved down towards her right breast, she stiffened. No, she thought, I'll not give him the pleasure of hearing me beg. She made a conscious effort to relax, distance herself away from him, shut out the obscenities he was whispering.

The splintering of wood and glass behind him made Burton give an involuntary jerk, the point of the knife bit into Catherine's flesh. Before he could turn, a clawed, beast-like hand clamped itself on the wrist that held the knife. With one twist the weapon was flung to the other side of the room and Burton screamed in pain as he felt his wrist shatter. He felt himself flying through the air then blacked out as he landed on his injured arm.

"Catherine?" Vincent stooped over her, saw the blood. His roar of anger filled the room, he whirled to kill this man who'd dared to hurt his Catherine but her voice murmuring his name brought him back to her side.

"Vincent... oh thank God you came ... he was going to ..." She could not go on. The fear she had hidden came flooding through her mixed with relief that it was over.

Neither of them heard the scuffling in the corner of the room where Burton, having regained consciousness, scrambled about for his knife.

Vincent had gently pushed Catherine onto her side and was breaking the rope that tied her as though it were string. Catherine pulled her arms in front of her, was shocked to see that her hands were blue. Vincent took her left hand into both of his and started to massage it, talking gently all the while.

"This will hurt until the blood is flowing properly, if they can wait a moment, I would prefer to put a dressing on that cut. It does not look too deep."

Out of the corner of her eye, Catherine glimpsed a movement reflected in her mirror.

"Vincent!" she cried, eyes widening with horror.

As Vincent turned in, what seemed to Catherine, slow motion, the gleaming blade of the knife started its descent, aiming straight for Vincent's back. It never reached its target, Vincent raised his arm to take the blow, felt the knife grind against the bone, the pain was like fire burning his flesh, an exquisite agony. But Vincent never murmured, only Catherine through their bond could know his pain.

Vincent came to his feet and, with the knife still embedded in his arm, reached out for Burton. It was the first time that Burton had seen Vincent's face, he stood there mouth open, arms dangling limply.

"My God," he breathed, "what on earth are you?"

"I am your Nemesis." As he spoke, Vincent's good hand reached Burton's throat. Feeling the pressure on his windpipe snapped Burton out of his stupor. Flailing with his one arm, kicking, he struggled as Vincent carried him backwards towards the balcony.

"Vincent?" Catherine's voice was faint.

"You know I must do this, Catherine. He will tell of what he has seen."

"I know.... " Resignation was in her tone.

"Miss Chandler, are you all right?" a voice shouted from outside, in the corridor. It was accompanied by pounding at the door.

"Cathy!" it was Joe. "For God's sake someone, break the door down." Renewed thumping sounded.

Catherine knelt on her bed, naked, her gown spread around her in tatters.

"Vincent." The urgency in her voice alerted him to the sounds at the door, distracted him from Burton. They had reached the balcony rail now. Burton, knowing that he was done for anyway, made one last effort to kill Vincent. Wrapping his legs around Vincent's waist, Burton grabbed the balcony rail and pushed backwards. Catherine, mouth wide in a voiceless scream, knelt frozen in horror as the two figures before her disappeared from view.

The door burst open, shattered from its hinges. Armed police rushed in, guns at the ready. Lights flickered on, men hugged the walls, staring round, searching for trouble. Joe Maxwell, ignoring warnings to stay back, ran towards the bedroom.

"Cathy!" Bursting through the doors, he was just in time to catch Catherine as she toppled, unconscious, to the floor. "Jesus, what's been happening here? Cathy?" He pulled the cover off the bed and wrapped it around her, shielding her body from the policemen's prying eyes. "She doesn't seem badly hurt ... seems to be in shock. There's too much blood around, looks like someone else was hurt, search around." Joe picked Catherine up and lay her on the bed, pushing the torn pillow aside, tucking another under her head. "Anyone sent for the doc?"

"Yeah, he's on his way," a sergeant holding a two-way radio came towards Joe, "There's a message coming through from downstairs, something about a 'jumper'. Seems he's flattened all over the sidewalk, you know, a bucket and shovel job."

A scream from the bed made them all jump. Catherine had come round in time to hear the last few words. Jumping from the bed, she ran, screaming Vincent's name, to the balcony. Joe, fearing she'd jump, raced after her, glass crunching under his feet, bloodstained where Catherine's bare feet had trod. Grabbing hold of her, he swung her round.

"Cathy, Cathy, don't do this," then, as she collapsed in his arms, "Jesus, has the whole world gone mad?"

At that moment the police doctor hurried in followed by two medics pulling a wheeled stretcher. After a cursory examination, Catherine was strapped securely on the stretcher and taken down the hall to the elevator. As Joe watched, she was whisked from sight and, with a sigh, he turned back into her apartment to find out what the hell had been happening.

In an apartment two floors beneath Catherine's, a dog barked. Vincent, exhausted and bloodstained, hung by one hand from the balcony rail, cloak flapping like a demented bat in the wind that gusted around the tower, threatening his precarious grip. Painfully his injured arm came slowly up, the still embedded knife grating on the bone. Grasping the rail, he managed to pull himself up until he had a foothold then pushed with what strength remained to him and gained the safety of the balcony. Crawling behind a row of potted shrubs, he finally succumbed to the pain and passed out. He did not hear the doors open or feel the dog sniffing around him, settling down beside him to sleep.

Daylight, and something wet and rough moving over his face brought Vincent back from oblivion. That and a smell of dog? Vincent opened his eyes and promptly shut them again to escape the dog's warm, damp tongue that roamed across his face. He raised his hand to push the dog away and heard it whimper. Opening his eyes, he was surprised to see the dog cowering away from him. Vincent lowered his hand and, talking gently, offered it, palm up, to the frightened animal. The dog sniffed, then licked, then nuzzled his head into Vincent's palm. Rolling over onto its back, the dog shivered with delight when Vincent scratched gently on its chest.

In the hospital, Catherine opened her eyes to see Joe slumped in a chair by her bedside. Looking closer she saw that he was asleep. Wondering what he was doing there, she gazed around at the room, recognised it for what it was and remembered.

"Vincent! Oh no, Vincent." She began to cry, hugging her sorrow to herself. Joe, wakened by her cry, came upright.

"Cathy, what is it? It's all right, he can't hurt you anymore." Then, hearing the name she was sobbing,

asked, "Who's Vincent, Cathy?"

"He is my life." She broke into fresh weeping . "Joe, there is someone I must see. Call Peter for me ... Please Joe."

" O.K. Cathy.... if you're sure." Joe had met Peter, Catherine's doctor, several times.

"I'm sure Joe about the men who fell.... "

"Men? There was only one man, Cathy, sure you weren't seeing double?" Joe was sure she meant this 'Vincent'.

"Only one," her heart leapt to her throat, threatening to choke her, "was there anything.... different about him?"

"Apart from being flatter'n' a pancake, you mean?"

"Joe!"

"Sorry, I had a bad night. No, there wasn't anything 'different' about him, Okay. We should have an I.D. on him tomorrow," he looked at his watch and yawned. "I mean today. Have you any ideas why he did this to you?"

Catherine told him all that had happened up to Vincent's entrance.

"What happened then?"

"Sorry Joe, I can't remember. I must have passed out or something." Joe clearly didn't believe her but let it pass.

"So, he said he was Johnny Burton's brother, we should be able to check that out. Johnny was retarded wasn't he?"

"Yes Joe. Joe, you'll wear a path in the floor."

"What? Oh." Joe stopped the frenzied pacing he'd begun as Catherine had told her tale. "Yeah, see what you mean." He looked at her. "Why do you keep holding your arm like that?"

"It hurts." Catherine sounded surprised. She pulled up the sleeve of the pyjama top she was wearing to find a large bruise halfway between her elbow and shoulder. Joe whistled,

"That wasn't there last night, I couldn't have missed that." Catherine looked at him enquiringly. Joe turned bright red and stammered, "I got the cover round you quick as I could." Catherine, who had realised what was causing the pain, began to chuckle, gradually going off into peals of hysterical laughter.

Vincent was hurt, she was feeling his pain. *He is alive*. Her heart was singing with joy even when Joe took her by the shoulders and shook her.

"Cathy, stop it, what's got into you?" He raised his hand to slap her but, sobering slightly, she grabbed and held it.

"It's okay Joe, no need for drastic measures. I still need to see Peter. More than ever now."

"Okay, I'll call him on my way out. I'd better go and see if there's any work being done in the office. Is there anything else you need?"

"No thanks Joe, you've done enough. Thank you." Catherine started to cry again, this time tears of joy.

Joe passed her a box of tissues, kissed her lightly on the forehead, said: "Chin up, kiddo, see you later," and went out.

Left on her own, Catherine lay back and searched her feelings for Vincent, sending her love to him, hoping he was safe, hidden.

Vincent felt her love; was relieved that she knew he was alive.

Trying to sit up, the pain in his arm made him wince. Looking around at his hiding place, Vincent realised that he wasn't as safe as he thought. Apart from the bushes, the only objects the balcony contained were a table, four chairs and the dog's kennel in the corner nearest Vincent.

"Well, I will not fit in there, boy," he said to the dog. The dog wagged its tail and ran to the door leading to the apartment lounge. Vincent rose painfully and, following, saw that the door was slightly ajar. Warily he pushed it wider open and listened. Not a sound came to his ears but the ticking of a clock. Stepping through the doorway Vincent found himself in an apartment entirely different to Catherine's. Where Catherine's was bright, warm and full of charm, this apartment had a sterility, an absence of love in it, a sadness Vincent could feel. Moving quietly through the lounge, Vincent headed for where he knew the kitchen to be. Once there he had a desperately needed drink, soothing his parched throat; drinking cold water from his cupped hands, not wishing to dirty anything, to have his presence noted. After he had drunk his fill, he splashed the refreshing liquid over his face, cooling, invigorating. Dabbing his face dry with his sleeve, he turned to the dog.

"Do you think your owner will have any objections to me using the medical kit?" The dog barked once. "Very well, I will..." he broke off at the sound of a lock turning. He heard a door slam and a woman's voice saying:

"Oh no, he's in again. Vincent! Here boy!"

Vincent gave a start, then a low chuckle as he realised that it was the dog she was calling. The dog ran out of the room, tail waving like a banner.

"There you are. You know you're not supposed to be in here while we're out. If ever he'd come home first ..." She sighed with a sadness that Vincent felt deeply. "Come on boy, let's put these away and I'll feed you."

Vincent glanced around the kitchen, nowhere to hide. He pulled his hood over his head and resigned himself to discovery.

The woman who walked into the kitchen was small and plump with dark curly hair and eyes that looked large through dark rimmed glasses. As she saw Vincent standing there, her eyes grew larger still. She dropped the bag she was carrying and groceries spilled over the floor. The dog immediately ran to where a bag of dog biscuits had burst open and, picking up a biscuit, laid it at Vincent's feet and sat looking up at him, head cocked, tail wagging.

The woman stammered, "Whoever, whatever you are, you can't be all bad. I trust my dog's judgement above all others." She moved closer. "You are hurt?"

Blood welled out of the wound in Vincent's arm, dripping onto the floor. His efforts had opened the flesh around the knife.

"Yes," he said quietly. The woman gasped at the sound of his voice. With just that one word, his voice conveyed warmth, hope, understanding. The woman moved so that she could look up at his face. Vincent, looking down at her, could see no fear in her as she discovered his features.

"You are an unusual woman ..."

"Gwen. My name's Gwen." She spoke absently as she still gazed up at him.

Throwing back his cloak with his left hand, Vincent uncovered the knife that protruded from his arm.

"Will you help me?" he asked simply.

"Yes, of course." She sounded surprised that he had had to ask. "What do you want me to do?" She jumped as an unexpected noise came from his insides.

"You are hungry. I will fix you something."

"That does not matter. If you could apply a tourniquet above the wound" Vincent swayed; and almost fell. Gwen grabbed a high stool.

Vincent sat gratefully. He had not realised how weak he had become.

"Thank you, Gwen." As he sat and watched, Gwen got busy. First the kettle went on to boil, then she searched drawers to find something suitable to wrap around his arm. Next something to tighten the shoelace she had found, a pencil. Perfect. Before putting the tourniquet on Vincent's arm, Gwen ran to the bathroom to raid the medical cabinet, came hurrying back with bandages, antiseptic dressings and other accoutrements. Choosing her sharpest pair of scissors she started to cut away Vincent's sleeve, pushing it away from the wound. Vincent, watching her face, saw horror flicker in her eyes, heard her sharp intake of breath. Glancing down at his arm he saw the flesh, dark red, angry looking.

"It must be done, Gwen. Tighten it now." Gwen pushed the pencil through a loop in the shoelace tied about Vincent's upper arm and started to twist it around. As soon as the trickle of blood had stopped, Gwen held the tourniquet tight with one hand and reached for a handful of antiseptic swabs with the other.

"Ready," she said.

Vincent took hold of the knife handle and pulled. He growled with the pain as the blade was jerked from the bone. He pulled it free, splattering Gwen's face with spots of blood. Gwen quickly covered the gaping wound with a swab and held it there. Vincent's gasp of pain had not gone unnoticed by Gwen. She felt him sway and saw the sweat on his brow. Working quickly, she cleansed his arm, bandaged it firmly and removed the tourniquet. That done she opened a can of soup, heated it and produced a rather battered loaf of crusty bread from the bag still lying on the floor.

"Here, eat this, you will need your strength."

While Vincent gratefully cleared the bowl and half the bread. Gwen hurriedly cleaned up, a frown on her face.

"You are worried Gwen. What is it?"

"My husband may be home any moment. I'm afraid if he finds you here"

"I understand. I will leave."

"How?"

"I do not know is there somewhere I can hide until it is dark?"

"Not in the apartment, there's no place big enough to hide you," Gwen laughed. "You could stay on the balcony, I reckon, with some blankets to keep you warm. He never goes out there." There was weariness in her voice as she spoke of her husband. Vincent wondered why, if she was so unhappy, she did not leave him.

Gwen seemed to catch his thought. Smiling wistfully, she said, "He is my husband, I cannot change that."

Half an hour later, Vincent was asleep, curled up on the balcony close to the dog's kennel. Gwen had made good her word and provided two thick, warm blankets and a spare pillow. Wrapped in the blankets and with the dog curled up next to him, Vincent was as comfortable as if he was in his own bed.

Down Below, Father sat, forehead resting on his steeped fingers, listening as Peter finished his story.

"Dear God. Catherine is sure? Yes, yes, she would be. We must find him there are already helpers searching. When he did not come back I feared the worst but the worst did not quite cover this. He fell?" His voice held a note of incredulity as he looked up at Peter.

"He was pulled. Catherine thought he was dead. The other man did not survive, God knows how Vincent did. We will find him, now we know where to start looking we will find him."

"But in what condition, Peter? The longer he stays up there, the more chance that he will be seen; be caught."

"Don't worry, Jacob, he must be hidden. We would surely have had word if he wasn't."

Father sighed heavily. "Yes, Peter, you are right of course. We must trust our people to find him before anyone else does."

Vincent was woken by the sound of a voice raised in anger. The dog stood at his side, quivering with fright. From the apartment, the harsh voice ranted.

"I've told you before. If that mangy cur comes into this room again, I will personally kick it off the balcony."

The murmur of Gwen's voice trying to placate her husband sounded worried. Vincent stood up, gathering the blankets and prepared for trouble. The smell of food made his mouth water. Stepping close to the window, he could see Gwen at the table, moving around it, setting out plates, cutlery. Her husband sat, making no effort to help her, berating her for being late with his food.

When at last the food was served and he was helping himself to everything, Gwen's husband started on about the disturbance two floors up, the night before.

"I hear they had to scrape the man up off the sidewalk. There wasn't enough to put in a body bag, they had to use a bucket to take him away in."

"Please, George, not at the dinner table. I wonder who he was."

"Some call-girl's trick I should think. Probably couldn't pay his way."

"Oh no, I heard it was that nice Miss Chandler. They had to take her to hospital."

"Nice? I'll say she's nice. You can't tell me she pays for that apartment on wages from that job. She's probably got a good sideline as a hooker. She's certainly got the looks for it. I wouldn't mind a piece of that myself."

"George! She's not like that. Why, she works in the D.A.'s office."

"That's the worst type ..." he broke off as a low growl came from the balcony. "Shut that dog up or you'll be scraping it up off the sidewalk."

Gwen hurried to the door, trying to reach it before her husband made good his threat. Making her way in the dark to the corner where Vincent had retreated she hissed, "What is the matter?"

"I am sorry, Gwen. Hearing him talk like that about the woman I love made me lose control for a second."

"You love Miss Chandler? I've just realized I don't even know if you have a name."

"Yes, Gwen, I do," Vincent grinned at her, "it is Vincent."

Gwen clapped her hand to her mouth to stop a laugh escaping.

"Honest?"

"What are you doing out there? I swear you think more of that dog than you do of me."

Gwen's husband's voice grew louder as he got nearer the door.

"I must go in. I'll speak to you later," she whispered, then to her husband: "It's all right, I'm coming. The dog was only having a nightmare."

Ten o'clock. Vincent could hear the chimes from a clock somewhere in the distance. The door behind him opened quietly and Gwen stepped through, carrying a tray of food.

"I'm sorry I took so long. He has only just gone for his shower. I thought you might be hungry."

"Thank you Gwen, I am. Can you sit with me while I eat?"

"Only for a minute, Vincent. He'll be suspicious if I spend any more time out here."

They sat and talked. Gwen wanted to know where and how he had met Catherine. Vincent complied

with her wishes, knowing that he could trust her. At the end of the telling, Gwen sighed and said: "It is just like a fairy tale. I only wish that I had a love as beautiful."

"You have a heart that is. I am pleased that we have met, even like this. You are a true friend, Gwen."

"Thank you, kind sir. I've been thinking, your Catherine will be worried about you. She will not know where you are. Do you want me to get in touch with her, let her know you are safe?"

"Dear Gwen. Does your kindness know no boundaries? If you would deliver a note to her, put her mind at rest?"

"Of course I will. I will go tomorrow to the hospital, I might be able to see her. If not I will send your note in."

"Thank you again." Vincent's sharp ears heard the rustle of clothes from the bedroom. "You must go in now. Goodnight."

Catherine was listening to Joe's explanation of how he'd managed to be there, police in tow, on the night of the attack.

"So, you went back to the office?"

"Yeah, thought I'd pick up those files, you know, take them home to work on. What the hell, didn't have anything else to do. Couldn't sleep to tell you the truth."

"And?"

"I just tried the night answer phone, see if there was anything interesting going down. Boy, was there. Burton had 'phoned in, didn't leave his name of course, reckon he thought we wouldn't pick it up till morning. Anyway, he was boasting about 'carving up the great Catherine Chandler'. I tell you Cathy, I've never been so scared in my life. He was talking as if you were already dead."

"But you came anyway." Catherine smiled. "Thanks Joe. I..." She was interrupted by a knock on the door. A uniformed officer opened the door and came over to the chair where Catherine was sitting.

"Beg pardon, Miss Chandler but there's a woman outside, says she's a neighbour of yours, a Mrs Gwen Dukes." Catherine looked up at him eyebrows raised. "She said if she couldn't see you would I give you a note." So saying, he handed Catherine the note.

"Thank you." Catherine looked at the sealed envelope with her name on it, recognised the handwriting and said, "wait, I will see her, ask her to come in please." The policeman nodded and went out. "Joe, do you mind? I'll call you if I think of anything else."

"Okay, Radcliffe, I know when I've been given the brush off. Be seein' ya." Joe went, passing Gwen in the doorway.

"Close the door please, Gwen, is it?"

"Yes, Miss Chandler."

"Come, sit down while I read this."

Catherine carefully opened the envelope, took out the enclosure and read,

Catherine

I thank God you are safe.

Do not worry for me. I am well and safe for now thanks to the bearer of this note. She will explain all.

Please get word to Father.

Vincent

Catherine felt a warm glow inside her. Smiling at Gwen, she said: "Tell me."

"Well, Miss Chandler."

"Cathy, please."

"Cathy. I'm not sure where to start."

Catherine sat quietly while Gwen talked, only breaking into laughter at the story of the dog, Vincent. When Gwen had finished, Catherine spoke.

"We owe you so much. I don't know how to thank you. If ever you need a friend, you have two who will be there for you."

Tears appeared in Gwen's eyes.

"Thank you, Cathy, but I am only glad to have been of service to you. Meeting Vincent has been a dream come true. I don't mean Vincent as such, I never imagined a person ... I meant the love, the hope, the feeling of safety when he is near. Cathy, you are so lucky."

"I know." Catherine's heart went out to this sad woman. Leaning over, she took Gwen's hands in hers. "I think we are both lucky."

Gwen smiled, then frowned. "I'm not sure how long I can keep Vincent hidden. My husband is getting suspicious, I think. Vincent is safe in the apartment until he comes home, but the balcony is cold and wet with this rain. Vincent can't climb with his arm in that state, I might be able to get him up the stairs to your apartment, it's only two floors."

"Yes, but you must make sure that there isn't a guard on the door. Joe told me they had to break it down."

"Joe?"

"Joe Maxwell, my boss. You passed him in the doorway as you came in."

"Oh. You mean the man who looked like he'd slept in a ditch?"

Catherine looked shocked, laughed and said: "You know, I never even noticed." Then, "You are sure you want to do this? It is a great risk if you're caught"

"Trust me, Cathy. Vincent awaits your return."

They both laughed companiably.

One a.m. and the rain still fell . Vincent sat hunched up against the wall, waiting.

"Vincent," softly Gwen called. "Come in, it is time."

As Vincent rose, light flashed out through the window and he heard that hateful voice. "What have we here? Dear little Gwennie roaming about in the middle of the night? Come away from that door, you'll catch your death, just like that mongrel will after I've finished with you."

Vincent could only watch as George Dukes grabbed his wife by the hair and dragged her into the bedroom. Moving silently, Vincent glided to the balcony doors leading to the bedroom. What he saw there made his blood boil. George Dukes, a leather belt in one hand, held Gwen down, preparing to beat her. With a roar of anger, Vincent charged through the doors and grabbed George by the throat,

carrying him backwards, slamming him against the wall. Raising his injured arm to strike, Vincent felt it held.

"No, Vincent! No," Gwen sobbed.

"He was going to beat you."

"Please don't hurt him. He doesn't mean it."

"Very well." Vincent shook George. "If ever you touch this woman again, I will return."

Dropping Gwen's husband in a heap, Vincent started to walk away, stopping as he heard Duke's gasp.

"It's that dog. It's that dog. How did it change like that? I'm sorry Gwen, I'll treat it right, I'll walk it for you, I'll feed it."

Vincent turned back to him, "I will hold you to that," and growled, showing all his fangs. Dukes fainted. Vincent picked him up and lay him on the bed. "When he wakes, he will think it a nightmare. I am sorry, Gwen. I could not control my anger. I will go now."

"You can't go alone. I will lead the way."

"You will still help?"

"Of course. I know you were trying to protect me and you must admit you enjoyed 'being my dog'. George may or may not believe what happened but he will never be sure. This might be just the thing to make him realise what he has become. If he changes back to how he used to be, before he became wealthy, I will be eternally grateful to you, Vincent."

Shaking his head in wonderment, Vincent said, "Never will I fathom the mind of a woman. If your reasoning pleases you, I will not argue."

They gained the stairs in safety, moving as quickly and silently as they could. Up two flights of stairs, pause, listen, nothing. Up the next two and stop at the door leading to the corridor. Gwen eased it open and stepped through.

"Wait here, I will check..." Moving as though she belonged on that floor, Gwen walked straight to Catherine's apartment, prepared with a tale of missing her floor if she was challenged.

Vincent waited patiently, listening all the time.

"Vincent," Gwen called softly, "there's no one here."

Vincent opened the door to be met with, "I don't know if you'll be able to get in. The door's sealed."

Vincent pulled his cloak more securely around him and followed Gwen. "Is it possible to remove the seals and replace them once I am in?"

"I don't know. We could try I suppose. Vincent, be careful. "

Vincent started to peel away the yellow tape from around the door, careful not to damage it, laying it down in strips on the corridor floor. Finishing that, he tried the door, fully expecting it to be locked. Turning the handle and pushing gently, he felt a slight resistance, then the door opened with a sharp crack of its hinges. Catherine's scent came wafting out, making Vincent's senses reel. Cautiously, he pushed the door open, searching for danger. Finding none, he turned to Gwen.

"Gwen, I am forever in your debt. If ever you need me, contact Catherine, she will reach me." Bending over, Vincent kissed Gwen lightly on her forehead. "Thank you, Gwen."

Tears sprang to Gwen's eyes.

"Hurry, Vincent, I must put these seals back before anyone shows up." Taking his large hand between her two small ones, she continued, "Take care. I will never forget you. Goodbye."

Vincent closed the door quietly and listened to Gwen replacing the seals. When she had finished to

the best of her ability, she tapped on the door and left, holding back her sobs till she was out of Vincent's hearing.

Alone in Catherine's apartment, Vincent stood, breathing in the atmosphere, savouring every breath.

Catherine, he thought, *hurry home*.

Wandering around, touching this, picking up that, running his fingers over Catherine's furniture, Vincent felt privileged to touch the things that her fingers had touched.

Her bedroom. Vincent sighed, longing to share it with her. Remembering the last time he had been in it, he was glad that Burton was already dead. To Vincent, Burton's intrusion was the greatest desecration of all that was pure and sacred.

Settling himself down on the floor, not trusting himself to use her bed, Vincent prepared to sleep, happy in the knowledge that he would soon see Catherine.

"So, what you are saying, Peter, is that a stranger helped Vincent. This is unexpected. Catherine is sure that this woman can be trusted? And what of the woman's husband?"

"Catherine said that 'this woman' will try to get Vincent into Catherine's apartment tonight," he raised his hand to halt Father's interruption. "It makes sense. There is more chance that Vincent will get caught if he tries to come Below, remember his escape routes are limited because of his injury."

"Yes, yes. I know. I'm sorry Peter, it's just that I've been so worried. Will you be able to see him?"

"Catherine goes home from hospital tomorrow, I think I'll go along and make sure that she gets there okay. She will need some time to recover, they may as well nurse each other - right Jacob."

Father chuckled. "You are an incurable romantic. It might work, if Catherine is prepared to let him stay?"

"Jacob, I thought you would have realised by now. Catherine would gladly spend her life with Vincent. You may even have trouble getting him back."

"We'll see, we'll see. Now, a drink is called for. I seem to need something a little stronger than tea."

Catherine and Peter stood outside the door to her apartment. "Are you coming in?"

"Yes, in a few minutes. You go ahead Cathy, I'll just get rid of all this tape."

Catherine felt nervous about entering the place where so much had happened. She did not even know if Vincent was inside, she had not expected the police seal on her door. Pushing the door open, she walked in.

"Catherine."

Vincent appeared from her bedroom.

"Vincent! Vincent, when I saw you fall ... " Rushing to his arms, she cried, tears of joy cascading down her face. Flinging herself at him she was caught and clasped tightly to his chest. There they stayed till Peter, who had entered silently, cleared his throat.

"Cathy, Vincent, do you mind if I interrupt for a few minutes? I want to check your arm Vincent and Cathy, you promised me you would get off your feet as soon as you reached home. Those cuts will not heal while you're walking on them."

"Catherine? How did you cut your feet?" Vincent carried her to the couch and sat her down and removed her shoes to investigate.

"I'm not sure. According to Joe, I ran to the balcony across the broken glass. I guess I lost my head

when you ... I thought you were dead."

"Catherine. If anything happens to me, you must live. Live for me and I will live through you. Remember, our love will not die."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Vincent."

"Yes Peter?"

"The sooner I look at that arm, the sooner I can leave you in peace."

"Leave?"

"Yes Vincent, that is, unless you'd rather I didn't."

Catherine laughed at the expression on Vincent's face.

"Go ahead, I'm not going anywhere."

Vincent looked at her, seeing the glow of happiness radiating around her.

"Peter? When you say leave, do you mean ... leave me here?"

"Yes Vincent." Peter was busy unwrapping the bandage from Vincent's arm. "This is healing nicely, Mrs Dukes did a good job..."

"Peter."

"Oh, yes, well, I've informed Joe Maxwell that Catherine must have a few days off ... and Jacob has agreed that, until your arm heals, you will have to stay here. I trust you two to look after each other and ... enjoy your time together."

Peter finished re-bandaging Vincent's arm, said his farewells and a promise to call back in a few days and left.

Vincent and Catherine looked at each other in silence, both suddenly shy ... but both with a nurturing hope for what this new chapter in their lives would bring.

END