



“The Beginning of Always...”

By C.J. La Belle

*"I used to think that I was strong
I realise now I was wrong
'Cause every time I see your face
My mind becomes an empty space
And with you lying next to me
Feels like I can hardly breathe
I close my eyes the moment I surrender to you...
Let love be blind, innocent and tenderly true...
So lead me through tonight
but please, please turn out the light...
'Cause I'm lost every time I look at you..."*

~ Il Divo

It took Catherine several anxious moments of frantic searching to realise she had somehow misplaced the keys to her apartment. "Aw, come on, for Pete's sake! You just gotta be in here somewhere..."

She cast a narrow-eyed glare at her wristwatch. *I don't have time for this!*

It was well after dawn, and if she couldn't get showered and changed, then she was going to be seriously late for a deposition that was set to begin at 9am on the dot. She simply couldn't turn up to work in old sweat

pants and a leather jacket. But making the trip to her dad's place, where she still kept a wardrobe of clothes, would take more time than she had. And if she missed another deposition, her boss, the no-nonsense Joe Maxwell, would have her head on a plate! He would make certain sure everyone in the bull-pen knew that the rich girl thought the rules about getting to work on time didn't apply to her.

Cathy's relationship with Joe was often good, but sometimes thorny, as well. He still wasn't convinced that being told by John Moreno to hire her last year hadn't been a complete waste of his time and the city's overstretched resources. For not the first time in her new career in the D.A.'s office Catherine was aware she was pushing the famously non-existent limits of Joe Maxwell's patience by coming in late again this week. All he needed was one final excuse and here she was handing it to him, gift-wrapped!

"Give me a break!" Catherine complained as she blew the bangs from her eyes, willing her heart-rate to slow, and logic to help her out in her quest for the elusive keys. They simply *had* to be her bag somewhere, just not in the place she usually secured them as she hurried Below through the basement entrance beneath her apartment building.

"*Think* logically," she admonished herself. Her breathing slowed as she mentally backtracked to the last time she'd handled her keys. She visualised the scene that had taken place hours before, just a few steps from her front door.

She had left her apartment quickly, hurrying towards the elevator, concentrating on shaking off the prolonged effects of lack of sleep and

the hectic hours. There was so little time she and Vincent could be together, she was determined to wring every precious moment out of their secret meetings.

Given Isaac's rigorous training she was more aware of her surroundings that she had been in the past. There was someone else on her floor with her. Now that she thought about it, she remembered the kid *had* been loitering further down the hallway, like he was waiting for someone...

Okay, he'd hurried along to get into the elevator immediately after her. Catherine frowned, nodding jerkily. He *had* crowded her a little too close, watching her out of the corner of his eye, like he was judging the distance between them. But surely he hadn't taken the keys from her purse...Catherine grimaced, thinking she'd paid more attention to the descending numbers, willing them to hasten, than to the boy hovering just a shade too close to her elbow. Isaac would have chewed her out for not paying more attention to potential threats.

Mentally she pictured the young teenager. Yankee's baseball cap askew, clean denim shirt and tidy grey chinos over white sneakers. Tall and thin, he hadn't looked like much of a threat. He looked like what he probably was, someone who belonged in the building. Just another rich, latch-key kid with too much time on his hands, riding the elevators out of sheer boredom and looking for easy sport. Annoying but harmless. She couldn't report him for that! His face had been open and honest as he'd cheerily wished her a good evening, saying this was his floor and he'd see her around, before he'd sauntered off on third, looking very pleased with himself.

What then? Catherine sighed, trying to remember. Deepening frustration and lack of sleep was making her more than a little paranoid.

“Okay, Chandler, pull yourself together. Joe is waiting for you.” Catherine dragged her attention from its morose introspection of her life to renew her quest in her purse. *The keys just had to be in there somewhere...*

“But where, *dammit!*” She upended her handbag in frustration, dumping the contents onto the side table in the hallway before her apartment door. All sorts of things tumbled out, threatening to spill across the table’s highly polished surface and scatter onto the floor out of sight and beyond her easy reach.

To her relief the keys rattled out among the scattered contents. “Oh, thank goodness!” Of course she hadn’t lost them! They *had* been there all the time! Snatching them up, she inserted the key in the lock, opened the door and hurried inside. Maybe she would make it after all...

Catherine turned slowly under the shower, sluicing the tiredness from her limbs. It felt so good, a guilty pleasure under which she must not linger. Moments later a hurried cup of black coffee did nothing to settle the rumblings of her stomach, so she munched through a slice of toast and jam as she sorted out her wardrobe, trying to decide what to wear. Right now her world seemed to turn on last-minute decisions.

After donning fresh underwear and stepping into a pencil skirt, she dragged up the fastening too quickly, catching her finger in the zipper.

Mumbling under her breath around the last of the toast held between her teeth, she managed to button and tuck in her blouse one-handed.

Flexing the offended finger to relieve the pain, she shrugged into her jacket. Back in the bathroom she cleaned her teeth and applied fresh make-up. Her internal clock told her she was already out of time.

Misplacing her keys had cost her precious minutes.

“Okay, make this day count, Chandler.” She glanced at her watch as she headed for the door, and her eyes widened with surprise. Fifteen minutes, a new record.

She was painfully aware her beloved father no longer recognised or even approved of the new Catherine. The old Cathy would have spent at least two hours in front of the mirror. It lifted her mood, making her smile as she snagged her handbag. Maybe it would be all right after all...

Of course it wasn't Vincent's fault she was now seriously late for work, it was her own tardiness. The growing habit of spending as much time with her love as she could, balancing the almost overwhelming desire be with him against the need to be in her apartment early enough the next morning. She needed to change her clothes before hurrying out the door again to get to work in time, was fast becoming unworkable. Something would have to give, and soon. When she punched the elevator buttons, she was relieved when the doors slid open almost immediately. At least she'd lose no more time waiting to reach the basement.

Her underfed stomach growled in protest. Of course after showering, changing and applying her make-up in record time, a decent meal wouldn't even register on her radar! Perhaps she should have accepted

William's offer of a very early breakfast. The cook had seemed surprised to find her still discussing poetry with Vincent in his chamber after sunrise, but William didn't comment. He'd simply shrugged at her hurried refusal and stumbling apology when she realized how late it really was, and continued on his way to his own domain to begin the new day.

Car keys in hand, Catherine quickly settled herself into her sedan and braced for the drive into work. As she merged into traffic, Catherine remembered Vincent's concern for her, along with the amazing evening they'd shared.

"You will be late for work again. Forgive me," Vincent had stated the obvious as he'd hastily pulled on his cloak and took her arm, hurrying her towards the entrance to the tunnels beneath Catherine's apartment building.

"There's nothing to forgive." Catherine had told him, needing to jog to keep up with his much longer strides. "We both got lost in the moment."

"And the magic of Oscar Wilde's poetry," Vincent had acknowledged with a reminiscent smile. "*And over our heads will float the Blue Bird singing of beautiful and impossible things, of things that are lovely and that never happen, of things that are not and that should be...*" He had paused to look down at her, his smile widening. "At least I am now privy to the knowledge that you do not snore." He allowed the intimate comment to hang between them.

"Glad to know that I don't." Catherine's cheeks had warmed as she'd ducked her head, hurrying beyond him, choosing not to look back to see

if he followed. “But if I hadn’t fallen asleep to your reading of Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, we would not be in this predicament now.” She glanced sideways at him as they continued their hurried progress. “Not that your reading wasn’t very beautiful and moving...”

“But you were tired.” Vincent had nodded. He seemed about to say something more, but changed his mind and Catherine didn’t push the issue.

She had been tired. And now the clogged traffic on Lexington wasn’t helping things any, other than to give her a chance to daydream about being with him.

They had continued upwards through the tunnels in silence until they finally arrived at the shadowed entrance to Catherine’s own world. She’d turned to him. “It’s all right Vincent, truly. I don’t mind.”

“A small white lie, but I will accept it.” Vincent lifted his shoulders in frustration. “Sometimes I wish...” He shook his head before continuing, “I didn’t want to wake you. You looked so peaceful lying there against my arm.”

“I’ll admit to resting my eyes...just a little. And you were so close...” Catherine had gone into his arms gratefully, even though she knew any more time alone was seriously scarce. “I have been so tired lately. None of which is your fault, Vincent. It’s just this job of mine is more difficult than I thought...” She rubbed her cheek in apology against his vest. “Sometimes, I wish...” she sighed long and low.

“I know...” Vincent breathed sadly, pulling her closer against him. “You work far too hard and that work is dangerous. You must be careful. I cannot protect you up there in daylight.” His hold on her tightened until she could barely breathe, but she didn’t care or protest.

“I feel I’m making up for so much lost time, spending it with you and working in my new job. I felt so useless before when I worked for my father’s firm.” Catherine had rested against his heartbeat for more moments that she had left. But it had felt so good to be able to hide there, be accepted and cherished for *who* she was, not *what* she represented to the cynical world Above.

As the heavy traffic started to move again and her final destination loomed, Catherine knew why she’d so often lingered in his embrace, rather than face the world she’d been born into. Things always seemed so much simpler when she was with him.

Other men’s close embraces had often made demands of her, imposing expectations she was often at a loss to know how to fill beyond the physical. They didn’t care for her, but for what she represented. It was a singular game she had become very adept at playing. Without exception those other men thought wining and dining her gave them certain rights. They had sometimes expected and received access to her body, but her heart had often been left out of the equation. It remained lonely, uncharted territory that none of her previous male friends seemed interested in exploring.

Catherine, like other women, was a product of her time, and her time was almost defined by the sexual revolution. Sex for its own sake,

fulfilling a need to be close to someone in the long, lonely hours of the night, had become a habit Catherine had formed early in her college career. The mundaneness of going through the motions of making it through foreplay and faking her own climax had soured her ideas of love-making to the point of almost making her physically nauseated when she looked back on her life.

These frustrating experiences advanced her nothing except heartache and regrets that she'd been taken in once more by a good pick-up line and a handsome face. Only her father knew what she had gone through in her college years, the bad choices she had made, and the money it had cost him more than once, to rescue her from the consequences of her own thoughtless actions.

Finally seated behind her overflowing desk, Catherine stared into the middle distance, instead of dealing with the depositions Joe wanted immediately after she had finished them. Her poised pen remained unused in her slackened fingers.

"I feel so safe with you..." She had told Vincent that, moving her cheek once more regretfully against the grey ribbing of his thick vest. It was so different from anything she had known. This was the dream she had dreamed once when she was so young and innocent of the life she was born to lead. That was before her mother had died, leaving Catherine bereft and alone, with only her father trying to make the best life for her.

Vincent expected nothing from her, beyond her simple acceptance of his existence. He had arrived on her balcony that night only to satisfy himself she was well. It had been at her insistence that he had stayed

beyond the time when he should have left her alone once more to get on with her new life and forget all about him, and his secret world.

“I miss you when you are not with me.” Catherine sighed, shrugging against her love’s broad chest, her troubled thoughts and mood communicating themselves to him through their growing emotional connection. But he refrained from commenting, from asking awkward questions to which she had no answers. He simply held her closer, pressing a comforting kiss into her hair.

Catherine was grateful for his reticence. She was well aware of what she was to everyone in the world, except this man and his secret life. She was the daughter of a very rich and powerful man. A desirable human commodity who would eventually be auctioned off to the highest bidder, if only she would play the time-honoured game and accept the inevitable.

And only a few months ago she had reluctantly accepted that fate with the regrettable Tom Gunther. *Signed, sealed and delivered*, as the song said. Until one terrifying night of mistaken identity, marriage to Tom had been her predictable destiny. Her father’s best client had been an excellent catch, young, ambitious and going places. *What more could a girl want, right?*

It tied up so many things very neatly. But nothing about him or his touch filled the aching void in her heart. Long ago Catherine had decided the fault must be with her. Perhaps she was truly unlovable in the deepest sense of the word. It was a frightening thought she kept neatly tucked away out of sight, well beyond any chance of discovery. But in the

loneliest places of her soul, she knew it to be an immutable fact. She felt nothing beyond the physical release of sex and how it gave her a fleeting sense of complete disconnection from her world and whoever she happened to be with that night. Ultimately however, she was still alone...

Once Catherine had recovered from the surgery, she and Tom had picked up dating where they had left off as if nothing had happened, in an attempt to patch up the relationship. It had all come to a very unpleasant head when Catherine refused to sleep with her fiancé as she had freely done before the attack. Confused and upset, Charles Chandler had reluctantly accepted Gunther's swift exit from his daughter's life and his firm's books.

Charles had refused to discuss her kidnapping with his daughter, deciding best left alone, soonest forgotten. He had arranged everything, eradicated even the smallest detail. Then Catherine's father watched anxiously and waited for his beloved only child to return to being the young woman he had known, one who had always been pleased to accept his advice and sage reasoning. Become again the submissive and softly-spoken debutante with a secure future as the bearer of the next generation of Fortune Five Hundred wheelers and dealers.

Catherine had tried to please her father. But her burgeoning relationship with Vincent was something she could not share with him, though she longed to tell him she was finally happy. Her father had been pathetically overjoyed when Elliot Burch had suddenly set his sights on her three months ago, when the self-made billionaire had contributed a priceless art collection to the museum. Her father was so sure her future would be

secure if only Catherine would entertain the idea of marriage to Elliot, even if his family roots were decidedly shady and more than a little suspect. Possession of huge sums of money easily forgave any number of sins...

Sitting there behind her desk, with her eyes still unfocussed and contemplating nothing but her inner turmoil, it took Catherine several moments to realise her view of the bull-pen had been firmly blotted out by a white shirt-front, and the indignant sigh of her boss, standing with arms folded and dark eyes blazing.

“Late night *again*, Radcliffe?” Joe questioned sarcastically, his look saying he wouldn’t believe whatever she was about to say in her own defence. “I know you weren’t here on time, again...”

Catherine made to speak, but he forestalled her with an upraised hand. “Skip it, I don’t have time for a blow by blow account. I figure those depositions are ready for me then...” An accusing finger stabbed at the piled folders and his dark brows arched.

“I’m really sorry, Joe. Can you give me another thirty minutes?” Catherine grasped her pen firmly, ducking her head over the work. “I promise I’ll make it.”

“My desk in thirty, or don’t bother coming in tomorrow!” Joe barked, shaking his head as he turned back towards his own office.

Breathing a cautious sigh of relief, Catherine began to work in earnest.



“You don’t need to count it, it’s all there.” Elliot Burch watched the boy standing before his desk calmly counting the two hundred dollars he’d just extorted for his dubious services.

“Can’t trust people these days.” The boy’s open, honest face settled into a disapproving frown. Reaching into his pocket he dropped onto Elliot’s desk a pick-pocket’s block of soft clay into which several key impressions had been neatly pressed. “You get what you paid for. Your bit of skirt didn’t even know I was in and out of her bag in under three floors on the elevator. New record. She was too busy watching the numbers and talking to herself. Nice legs, but all women are crazy. You sure you want to get mixed up with someone like this?”

“What I do with my time and money is none of your business!” Elliot flared angrily. The kid had only been in his office for five minutes and already Elliot wanted to throttle him. “And you will not go anywhere near

her ever again. Is that clear?" he stabbed a warning finger at the boy's thin chest. "We're done here!"

The boy's shoulders rolled dismissively. "Whatever, man. But if you ever need me again, you know where I hang." He bid Elliot a cheery good morning and sauntered arrogantly through the office door he'd left open when he entered.

Elliot surged to his feet and crossed the office to slam the door behind the boy's disappearing figure. He leaned back against the wood, expelling his breath harshly. It had been a calculated risk, but one he was prepared to take. He wasn't about to leave anything to chance. He'd messed up over that thwarted development of the old people's apartment building. He never made the same mistake twice. He'd pushed too hard to make her date him, and Chandler had shoved him right back with interest.

But after a stubborn silence she had suddenly come to him asking for an urgent loan of some mining equipment. She had agreed to see him after that, but not for long. It had been a few precious weeks of hoping against hope she would stay for good this time...

"There's something here I'm just not seeing..." Elliot's grey eyes narrowed. "Or someone...I *hate* this!"

He's had the distinct impression when they first met at the museum gala that however available and enticing she may have at first seemed, Catherine Chandler was already seeing someone else. And she was pretty cagey about it too. She became evasive when he pushed her to

confess, saying there was no one, but she didn't meet his disbelieving eyes when she'd said it. Always a tell-tale sign any woman was hiding something. Elliot made his fortune by knowing how to read people, how to tell who was lying from who was telling the truth, and when. It had saved him the cost of both time and money.

He speculated if her father knew who the mysterious lover was, but somehow he doubted he knew anything at all. The old boy had been grateful to see Elliot paying court to his daughter, watching their interaction like a wary hawk. Calculating the likely odds of a marriage too, no doubt, even if Elliot was not the kind of husband he had hoped for. He was not *old money* and that mattered to some. Elliot had faced down that kind of societal prejudice all during his meteoric climb. A relationship with Catherine Chandler would do much to quiet the critics who correctly charged him with being one of the *nouveau riche*.

Elliot had to admit they had done a stunning job on Catherine's face. He'd seen the police files on her and the attached photo, made it his business to know what happened to her last year. Her father's money had effectively erased the past. But Elliot also liked Catherine's spirit, and it didn't hurt she was once more incredibly beautiful and street smart. He detested submissive women who couldn't make decisions for themselves.

"Okay, let's see who we can turn up." Elliot grimaced, his eyes narrowing. He headed back around his desk, sitting down and reaching for the phone to dial Cleon Manning's number.

“Tell Manning I need to see him, like yesterday,” he told Manning’s receptionist. Dropping the receiver back into its cradle without waiting for a reply, he sat back to frown at the work piling up on his desk. That could wait.

Elliot linked his fingers, tapping his thumbs together impatiently. Now he had Catherine’s keys he was going to stake out her apartment. Wait until she went to work tomorrow and then a Manning operative would let himself into her place and snoop around, note down anyone who came and went, left messages or phoned her to make a date. He’d tidy up and leave before Catherine came home, so she would never know she was being investigated. A week should do it, give him everything he needed to know.

Elliot already knew she was deeply into the classics, music and the arts. Shakespeare in the park and some heavy-weight concerts by dead masters. He shook his head, knowing he could take or leave both himself, he was more of a Billy Joel fan. But if pretending he liked music and art by dead white men could get him what he most wanted right now, then he would become the classical world’s most ardent admirer.

He already had another project he’d been working on for months that would dwarf the art collection he’d contributed to the museum. An audacious plan to finally woo the city fathers and allow him access to their exclusive, ivy-league halls of power. He remembered telling the reporter back at the museum that night how he thought the true value of great art lay in its ability to influence and enhance the quality of humanity, and contrary to popular opinion, he believed New Yorkers still qualified.

He grimaced sourly. He hadn't mean a word of it, of course. But that was not the point. He was going to make an even bigger splash and get noticed again, and he would know everything there was to know about Catherine and who she was seeing, like yesterday!

Elliot never played second fiddle to anyone, not in business or romance, and he wasn't about to start now. Not over a woman, because they didn't play by rules any man could hope to understand. They needed to be told what was good for them. They were a lot like the city fathers, that way.

He fully intended to discover who Catherine was seeing, size up the competition and find their weak points. Lean on them a little, make them squirm and think twice about having anything to do with the woman Elliot fully intended to marry. Sooner rather than later. He wasn't getting any younger...



“Catherine sees herself as unlovable, Father.” Vincent sat with his forefinger resting on the head of the white queen. “And I don’t know what to do about it.” He studied the patterns of candlelight reflected in the chess piece’s gleaming ivory surface. Polished from constant use over the last thirty-plus years she had been loved and played with, the queen felt warm to his touch, as if it truly lived.

“Surely you exaggerate.” Father leaned forward to peer closely at his precarious position in the game between them. He sighed roughly, not matter the angle he tilted his head, it did not look good. He glanced up at his son’s brooding expression. “Catherine is young, beautiful, and rich. Those qualities are very desirable in the world Above. She will never be short of admirers and rightly so. Men like Elliot Burch, who can give her everything. That is her world. I have recently read about their affair the newspapers. He is a ruthless man and will not hesitate to crush any opposition to his wishes. There are certain expectations for such a woman as Catherine. I’m very much afraid you would figure in none of

them. Those high-powered lawyers and robber barons know how to protect their own.”

“It is not her admirers I am referring to, Father.” Vincent watched as his opponent reached to make a move, hesitate and frown, anxiously seeking an escape route where there was none. “I am talking about her soul, the very heart of her being, where she hides her true self, and thinks no one can see her pain. But I can, Father. I have seen the depth and breadth of her anguish, but I am helpless to know how to help her, how to diminish that pain. I try to reach her with words and gestures, but...” He raised his broad shoulders helplessly.

Father sighed as he peered at his son over the rim of his glasses. “Ah, then I’m afraid, you will need Narcissa’s help, not mine. I am only a doctor, I don’t have the skill-set to tamper with souls.” He leaned back. “What you and Catherine share is truly remarkable. You saved her, took the dreadfully broken pieces of who she was and made her whole again, Vincent. You can be very proud of that. Her scars were not only physical. You have allowed her to live again in the world where she truly belongs.”

He shook his head. “But it can never be more than a fleeting aberration between you. You are from such different worlds. She has no place in yours, and you certainly can have no place in hers. It is a beautiful dream, but that’s all it can ever be, a dream. Perhaps you have finally come to a natural parting of the ways. Let it wash over you, Vincent and be content with what you have achieved. One day you will see that I am right. To go on can only bring you the same pain you see in Catherine now.”

His son sighed. "Yet in that dream, within those stolen moments when we are together, she is content." Vincent lifted the white queen into the light of the tiffany lamp beside him. "I can feel it in her. The self-doubts retreat and she can see a little of what I see within her, the true beauty she carries inside, her ability to love, her compassion for her fellow human being. But then she goes Above once more and those doubts return."

He put down the queen. "Then her aloneness creeps in to whisper in the back of her mind, saying that nothing she does, nothing she thinks about herself, is ever going to be good enough. That she is truly alone and unloved in the midst of so much beauty, power and privilege. I can go to her only at night, stand with her on her balcony and hold her. She deserves better from me, Father. I am deeply aware she wishes me to enter her apartment, and yet I hesitate..."

"I did say once that you have the soul of a doctor." Father stared at his son in wonder. "But to see all that in a woman I thought had everything she could ever want is truly remarkable. You are remarkable." He reached across the table to clasp Vincent's free hand. "And you can understand, know all that after a few meetings, a few stolen moments of togetherness?"

He grimaced. "Sometimes I can only wonder at the boundaries and levels of your intuition, your ability to perceive such things in others that no one else can see. It is your gift, but also your curse where Catherine is concerned. You have become too close, as I feared you would. You cannot help her, Vincent. It is an impossible situation. You simply cannot be together. Surely you can see how impossible that is. She is destined

to be with a man like Burch, a man who can give her everything and not count the cost.”

“Perhaps...” Vincent inclined his head, moving his shoulders helplessly. “But I can sense it every time I hold her. I can feel that her heart is untouched and deeply troubled. That there are things she wishes she could share with me, but she doesn’t know how to make me understand, thinking perhaps that I am innocent of the things that happen between a man and a woman. We both know that is not so, living as we do down here, so closely connected to each other.” His blue eyes meet Father’s squarely, and his parent wisely did not ask.

Vincent inclined his head in quiet acknowledgement as he continued, “I have no idea how to ask for such a confidence. Each time she is in my arms I am aware of the hurtful betrayals she has known in her life and those who have lied about loving her. No one has tried to take care of her as she deserves. Understand and see her for who she truly is inside. The love and the beauty that I see there, humbles me. Sometimes it is even more than I can bear, and I must leave her alone for fear of hurting her even more. I must leave her wondering what she has done that I must desert her when she needs me most. When she wants me to understand.”

Vincent leaned forward with both arms folded in the table’s edge. “But I am at an enormous loss how to comfort her, how to make her see that she is loved and cherished.” He shook his great head. “Once I thought I could reach her through poetry, through words of love and understanding.” His mouth quirked wryly. “But she fell asleep on me last night, right in the middle of some of Rilke’s most beautiful passages.”

“Then perhaps it’s not poetry she seeks,” Father said slowly, frowning over his belated move and chewing his bottom lip. “Perhaps you have done all you can in healing her, Vincent. Now it is finally time to let her go, and move on with both your lives. It can only bring you both heartache and despair.”

“I am well aware of your thoughts on our safety and the security of this world. Know that I would never do anything to endanger those I love.”

“And what about Catherine?” Father’s eyes rose challengingly as he finally made his move with a fatalistic sigh. “You endanger her every time you go Above to see her. Surely you can both see it is an untenable position.”

“I know that, but I cannot abandon her, Father.” Vincent reached to counter the move with his queen. “I cannot leave her alone once more with her doubts and fears as I have done in the past. My heart contains only her, and my arms are for her alone. There will never be anyone else for me, Father, never.” He surveyed the board and smiled wryly. “I do believe that is check-mate.”

“Again?” Father questioned bleakly, without heat. He snorted as he studied the board before capitulating. “Very well, you win.” He looked up. “But please know this, Vincent, Catherine deserves the very best of everything. She deserves a whole life, not one half-lived, hiding in the shadows and concealment for safety’s sake. She can never take you home to her parents, to meet her friends and co-workers. She can never show them an engagement ring and say she is yours in front of

everyone. And you can offer her no more than a life full of half-truths and deceit. A life lived in the shadows, fearful always of discovery. You have lived it yourself, Vincent, is it any life for a woman such as her?”

“All I can offer her is myself, Father.” Vincent fell to toying with the white queen again, his expression tormented. “Everything that I am and all that I am to be.”

Father studied his son’s tawny, down-bent head for a long time before he replied gruffly, “Then you must ask yourself, Vincent, is that precious gift good enough to last you both for a lifetime?”

Elliot eased a weary hand up and around the back of his neck beneath the open collar of his shirt, relieving the tired muscles and the cramp dogging his hunched shoulders. He glanced sourly at the clock on the wall. Another midnight had passed un-noticed. It was becoming a bad habit to work the day from both ends. But if he went home he found he couldn’t sleep. He would pace the floor until dawn and feel no better for it. At least work distracted him from his inner turmoil.

Those nights had been the longest to endure, wasting his precious time staring out at the cityscape sprawled beneath his penthouse window. “Nothing but the best, right?” He lifted the crystal whisky tumbler mockingly and downed the fiery liquid in one long swallow. It burned all the way to his empty stomach.

A few weeks ago there had been nights when he could easily tear himself away from work, but that was when ‘*she*’ was in his life.

“Catherine Chandler...” Elliot’s frowning gaze quartered Central Park, but he still had no answers. “What are you hiding from me?”

He had determined to know why she’d come to him seeking those explosives and detonators. He’d wryly joked about hard rock mining at the time, but it had been much more than that. She had been in deep emotional pain and serious trouble when she had demanded he instantly supply what she needed without any explanation.

Like it was a case of life or death...*but for who? And where?*

After that night, to Elliot’s bemused amazement, Catherine had kept her word. She had seen him on several occasions over the following three weeks. They had gone out to dinner and she had allowed him to escort her to the opera. They had been photographed and speculated about in the press. Elliot couldn’t help that, even though Catherine seemed deeply displeased to be exposed like that.

She had placed limits on anything more than that. Even her father’s cautiously delighted approval of her new beau did nothing to change her mind. Old man Chandler had met with Elliot behind his daughter’s back and made his views clear. He was not happy, but he was prepared to make the best of the only deal on the table. He wanted grandchildren to continue the Chandler legacy.



But Catherine had set her own limits. Stay the night with Elliot, make love with him, assuage the intense ache for her softness that burned deep within him, she steadfastly refused to do, no matter how many times he asked. *Okay, demanded...* It was like she had already made promises to someone else, and she wasn't about to break them.

Elliot knew it wasn't Tom Gunther. That relationship had ended some months before. The man had moved on and not looked back, recently marrying a New York heiress who was rolling in seriously useful connections and old money.

It drove Elliot crazy that Catherine would not let him in, help him understand who or what she was seeing. Suddenly their enforced acquaintance had dropped away. She stopped taking his calls, she ignored his messages and his occasional dropping in at her place of work, as if he was an annoying puppy that needed to be taught its true place in her life. As if she had other places to be, other people to see, another man to share her life with... *and her bed, no doubt.*

Elliot didn't operate like that. He ruthlessly chased down what he wanted, it was who he was, and it had been there right in front of him, all along. He was just too blind, too in love to see it. What she wouldn't share with him, she was sharing with someone else. Elliot knew he had been used, he could see that. So he went after her keys and found a different way to be into her private life. To delve into all her secrets and finally ferret out the truth. He would bring her back to him by threatening that which she was protecting and that secret had to be really big, because no one else had any idea.

"A means to an end." He grimaced at the memories. They left a bitter taste in his mouth along with the dregs of the whisky. He slammed the glass down on a nearby table, his shoulders hunched in physical pain.

All along Catherine had someone else waiting in the wings, waiting for her return to him, duty done. *But where was he now and why was he never around taking care of business?*

Catherine turned the expensively embossed invitation over and over in her hands. Staring into the middle distance, she wasn't even looking at it. After two weeks of silence Elliot Burch had reappeared to personally deliver his invitation to an exhibition he hosting at the Met, along with a very glossy brochure as if he was touting his wares. He stood on her doorstep, looking beyond her into her apartment, demanding she agree to attend the masked gala he was giving on Saturday night, three weeks hence.

“You *are* free, aren’t you?” His sharp grey eyes had hunted over what he could see of her living room, obviously looking for signs she was not alone. “Or you got company?”

“I do not think that is any of your business,” she told him, pointedly half-closing the door. “Goodbye, Elliot.”

“I say it *is* my business.” Elliot had inserted his foot in the aperture, forcing her to agree she would at least consider his invitation before he retreated slowly towards the elevators where three of his hulking bodyguards waited. Elliot watched her as she pushed the door closed, before she locked and bolted it securely. But she could still feel his narrowed gaze assessing her reaction through the wooden panelling. He knew she was hiding something, or someone, and he didn’t like it. Catherine sighed gustily, knowing she was making a hash of things right now.

It had been a difficult week already and it was only half-over. Making it to a Saturday night three weeks from now seemed an impossibility. Giving in to Elliot’s demands made the blood thump unpleasantly in her temples. She had liked him, she could admit that, until she uncovered the truth about that unfortunate project of his that required a group of old people to be evicted from their rent-controlled building.

She had been forced to ask him for the means to rescue Vincent and Father from their rocky prison after a cave-in. Elliot had made the most of that awful situation, ensuring she kept to her breathless promise to see him again. Despite Catherine’s best efforts to dismiss his attentions, there was a growing sense of possessiveness she couldn’t tolerate. Like

he knew things and was finally about to make his ultimate move to win her for himself.

The sound of soft footfalls on her balcony drew her attention from her troubled introspection. She sighed with welcome relief. If only Vincent would consent to enter her world, through the privacy of her apartment and they could have more time together. But he steadfastly refused and Catherine didn't want to overrule his stoic reluctance. But for now he was here again, and her heart lifted.

"Vincent..." she breathed, kicking off her high-heeled shoes before pushing open the doors to her balcony and stepping straight into his arms. *This* is what she lived for, *this* was what got her through the trying uncertainties of her day. And rescued her from Elliot Burch's too-close attentions. *This* was where she belonged...*always*...

"Catherine..." Vincent responded, his hands lifting to massage her shoulders and neck, his powerful thumbs bent carefully back at the first joint to prevent his claws from marking her soft skin.

"It is so good to see you again." Catherine moved her head, giving him further access to the knots of tension in her neck and upper spine Elliot had so recently inflicted. She closed her eyes in blissful contentment, groaning softly as his thumbs worked their magic, turning within his embrace.

"You had a visitor," Vincent replied quietly, continuing his ministrations smoothly. "He upset you. I can feel it."

“Elliot Burch.” Catherine’s eyes flared open in surprise. She pulled away to look up. “How did you know?”

“Elliot...” Vincent tested the flavour of the name. “*The Lord is my God.*” He shook his shaggy mane in disbelief. “I have taken an added interest in his work around the city after that terrible incident with Mischa and his friends. Elliot tears down the old so he may create something bigger and better. To his way of thinking anyway. He thinks a lot of himself, but money is his only god. Such a man worships wealth before anything else. He made himself out of nothing.”

“And yet he gave you the means to save us that night...” He looked back to Catherine, his hands sinking to clasp her shoulders. “Without question. But when I arrived tonight, I could feel his presence like a dark cloud in your mind, and he wants something from you, Catherine. Something you are not at all sure you’re prepared to give.”

“Of course he does, he’s the great Elliot Burch. He brought me this invitation.” She held it up, forgetting she still possessed it. “And he expects an answer. But I don’t know what to tell him.” The picture on the front of the brochure caught the moonlight. Vincent frowned, taking the glossy page from her grasp to study it closely.

“What is it?” Catherine rose to her toes, peering at the page over his powerful forearm.

“Rodin’s statue of The Kiss,” Vincent mused, turning the picture so she could see it better. “That I should like to see. It seems your Elliot Burch has gone to considerable expense with this exhibition.” He turned the

pages of the brochure slowly. “He’s secured loans of the most remarkable items from some of the best museums around the world. He has a specific goal in mind, unless I am very much mistaken.” His blue eyes assessed her mutinous expression. “He intends to make quite an impression. A reprieve for past mistakes.”

“He’s not ‘my’ Elliot Burch,” Catherine disputed hotly. She sighed as she studied the photo of a naked couple embracing, freely and without inhibition. They seemed so equal in their embrace, the man’s hand resting lightly on the woman’s hip, appearing to ask for her love, rather than demanding her surrender. And the woman’s arm was flung around his neck, drawing him down to her as they kissed passionately, her unspoken permission given in every slender line of her body. It made her heart ache, for it was both so romantic and erotically compelling.

‘I was born to love only you. Love me truly and make me yours... forever...’ Catherine gasped as the words seemed to echo in her mind. It was her own voice, but the words confused her. She shook her head, even as the voice continued sadly, *‘Without you I am nothing, and if you abandon me I will never love another...Please do not leave me here, alone and cold in the dark, without your love...’*

“What is it?” Vincent took her arm, turning her to face him. “Are you all right? Catherine, you’re shivering. Come here.” He put out both arms, opening them wide to enfold her inside the shelter of his cloak, pulling her close against him before resting his chin on the top of her head.

“It’s nothing, I’m fine.” Catherine sighed against his chest. “Just for a moment there, I thought...” The words in her mind puzzled her, were

they even hers? For a moment she contemplated asking Vincent to stay with her.

Come inside, my love and keep me warm. Love me and be mine always... The idea heated her body, but she couldn't voice the request. What if he refused? Withdrew hurriedly and left her there, wanting and alone. Then all the progress they had made as a couple could be damaged irrevocably. She couldn't risk it, not yet. But she still wished...

Instead she grimaced. "I guess I'm just tired. But I agree, this must have cost Elliot a considerable fortune. He does have the reputation of being very single-minded. My father thinks he is suitable." Her mouth turned down at the corners. "He wants the best for me."

"But you disagree," Vincent replied quietly. "Catherine, this is your world, not mine. Only you know what is for the best. For you, for your father, for everyone who loves you."

Catherine sighed roughly. She noticed Vincent was very careful not to include himself by name in that list. She was aware he cared for her, cherished her as no man had ever done, but he had never said he loved her, not once. It added to that aching hole in her heart. She wanted to say those words aloud, '*Please do not leave me here, Vincent, alone and cold, in the dark without you...*' but she managed to bite back the plea before they escaped her control.

What remained always was that same profound sense of aloneness he had mentioned when he'd appeared on her balcony for the first time. He had said then he had only wished to see she was well and that he

wanted to see her one last time. He had told her there was no place for him in her world.

She had hotly disputed that statement and begged him to stay, saying it was still dark, there was still time...and compelled by forces larger and more powerful than both of them, he had acquiesced, settling back to listen to her read the last chapter of *Great Expectations*...

Now here he was again, watching and waiting for her. He was her one and only safe place in either world. She felt so incomplete whenever she was without him being there to hold and comfort her. Sometimes, recently, he had withdrawn from her for days on end, not seeing her, or responding to her tapping out his name on the pipes. He left her feeling bereft and very much alone, as she had felt all her life. It was almost as if he was beginning to discover he could not love her as she wished he would.

*And yet...*she sighed deeply and long. And yet she didn't know how to tell him that without him here beside her always, there would be truly nothing for her indeed. She couldn't tell him for fear such a revealing confession of her innermost thoughts and feelings would finally scare him away for good. That he could not, or would not respond as she secretly wished to such a confession. And she could not allow him to desert her, no matter how much she wished for things to be different...



The operative staking out Catherine Chandler's apartment had finally hit pay-dirt. Elliot had almost given up, figuring he'd been mistaken after all in his suspicions. He was not at all pleased with the discovery, but it finally gave him a target to aim at.

He frowned at the photographs in his right hand and the piece of paper with the neat notation in the other. Both detailed the quotation that had been found on the folded-down flyleaf of a carefully hidden book of Shakespeare's sonnets the operative had uncovered in Catherine's bookcase. Like it was precious, and she didn't want it to be easily found.

There was also a pressed red rose inside the book, marking the location of one of the sonnets. The sonnet's last two lines caught Elliot's frowning attention. He traced them with his well-manicured fingertip.

*For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings...*

Cleon's man had copied the quotation, then photographed everything before replacing the book exactly as he had discovered it. He'd been paid the fat bonus Elliot had promised. Elliot returned to read the flyleaf quotation again slowly, trying to pierce its ultimate truth.

*With loves light wings did I o'er perch these walls;
For stony limits cannot hold love out...*

Vincent

"Vincent..." Elliot breathed roughly. He frowned. "*The conqueror...*"

So the guy had a name after all. And a powerful one at that. But he was also a hopeless romantic and a fool. Choosing love over money was not an option, not in Elliot's book. Money was power, it gave you leverage over the competition and made your mark in the world. And this guy Catherine was seeing was competition, all right.

Elliot smiled tightly as he studied the flowing script with deep curiosity. It looked as if it had been written with a fountain pen, but there were no hesitation marks or ink blots where the pen had stuttered in its passage over the paper. And by the smooth slope of the lettering the guy appeared to be left-handed. That smacked of a broad imagination and powerful drive.

In fact, everything about the dedication spoke of power and certainty. Of the confidence this unknown man had about his place in the world and his right to exist, to be able to send love notes to Catherine asking for her love in return. Vincent gave no quarter and expected none to be given.

“But then nor do I.” Despite his chagrin over the discovery, Elliot found he had a lurking admiration for the guy Catherine had been seeing behind his back.

He was a truly worthy opponent. Now all Elliot needed to do was meet the man, and set him right about how things now stood with Catherine. She was private property and this Vincent guy had better get used to that!

“I know it’s late and I’m really sorry to bother you, Miss Chandler. I know you’re a very busy young woman, but...” Catherine’s elderly neighbour from her floor put a restraining hand on her arm as the younger woman hurried from the elevator towards her apartment door. “I thought you needed to know.”

“What is it, Mrs. Tigwall?” Catherine frowned at the interruption. The old woman was the building’s resident busy-body, always with her nose in someone’s business. Catherine tried hard to keep it out of hers.

Mentally she frowned at her wristwatch and hoped this wouldn’t take long. It was already after 7 o’clock in the evening and Vincent would be

waiting for her on her balcony. Their time together was so precious.

“Well...” The old lady drew Catherine to one side, her lined face becoming conspiratorial. “That boy, you know, the one who’s been riding the elevators for the last couple of weeks. This tall...” She held one hand above the level of her own age-bowed shoulder. “Yankee’s baseball cap, denim shirt and grey chinos. Harmless looking enough, I guess. They always are, dear...”

“Go on...” Catherine’s wandering attention snagged and held. “What of him?”

“Seems he wasn’t what he said he was.” The old lady’s faded grey eyes sparkled with intrigue. “I decided to follow him down in the elevator the other day, after I saw him once too often hanging around your door. He doesn’t live in the building at all. Said he lived on the third floor, when I asked him last week. But he went right past it to the lobby. Knew he’d lied because he acted like he didn’t want the guard seeing him when he headed out for the street. I watched him down to the corner.”

“You followed him...” Catherine echoed, frowning. “Was that wise?”

“Kid didn’t scare me.” The old lady stiffened. “Thing is, it’s where he went that’s so odd.”

“I’m not sure I want to hear this, but please go on,” Catherine urged.

“Burch Towers...” The old lady leaned closer, her voice dropping to a stage whisper pregnant with meaning. “The boy walked right in, as if he

owned the place. Went all the way up to the top floor too, I watched the numbers on the elevator.” Her eyes fixed on Catherine’s for any sign of reaction. “Elliot Burch is your boyfriend, isn’t he?” A knowing smile curved her lips and she pounced at the troubled look in Catherine’s eyes. “I thought so, you want to know more, eh? Burch was here too, the other day. I saw you and him when I came back with my mail. You were talking with him, but you didn’t let him in. He had those three great brutes with him again.” She grimaced, her eyes wide with intrigue. “Thing is, what’s the boy got to do with a rich man like Burch?”

“Thank you for the information about the boy, Mrs Tigwall.” Catherine stepped away. “I will deal with that. But I am afraid you are very wrong. Elliot Burch and I are nothing to each other. Never have been, never will be.”

“Oh, but, I was so sure you two would be getting married. It’s been in all the papers, and you look so good together.” The old lady made a grab for her arm, but Catherine avoided the contact. “And I’ve already reported the boy, so if he comes back he’ll be arrested. Surely that deserves something...”

“Thank you, Mrs Tigwall,” Catherine replied sharply. “You have done well, but now I really must go...” She fished for her keys in her purse, finding and inserting the right one in the lock, before opening her door.

“Well, there’s gratitude for you...” her neighbour huffed as she flounced towards her own door, head held high, thin body stiff with indignation. “I was only trying to help...”

Catherine stepped inside, shutting her front door sharply and leaning back against it. Mentally she recalled the boy, his open, cheeky face and broad smile. He looked like he knew more than he was telling and it gave him a kick to hoodwink her. But how could he be used as a stooge for Elliot? *To what end?*

The ongoing puzzle was distracting, the facts scarce, and none of them fit together. Catherine pushed away from the door and hurried to change out of her office suit into something more comfortable. But still the thought nagged at her. What could the boy and Elliot possibly have in common...?

Vincent was waiting for her on the balcony when she opened the doors and pushed through the curtains. She walked slowly into his embrace and gloried in the feel of his powerful arms closing around her. She sighed long and deeply, causing Vincent to rest his cheek against the top of her head and draw her closer still. They stood that way, leaning on each other for some minutes, before Catherine finally pulled back and looked up.

“Hello, Vincent...” Once more the thought of asking him inside her apartment with her rose unbidden, in her mind, and she opened her mouth to make that suggestion when her breath caught and she gasped. “Vincent...no...of course...Oh, I’m such a fool...”

“What is it? What has happened?” Vincent was instantly alert to the

sharp change in her mood. *“Tell me!”*

“There was a boy...” Catherine took a quick turn around the small balcony, coming back to stand in front of him again. “A couple of weeks ago my keys went missing from my purse...or so I thought.” She glanced into the dark apartment. “After you walked me up that morning...the morning after I fell asleep on you.” A slight flush warmed her cheeks momentarily, only to flee again just as quickly, leaving her chilled. “I didn’t think anything of it at the time, but he must have lifted my keys from my bag and somehow had them copied.” She looked into the apartment again, studying every clinging shadow and dark corner. “And he used them, I just know it.”

“Why would he do that?” Vincent’s frowned, putting a hand on her arm, to hold her still.

“Elliot...because he works for Elliot...” Catherine inhaled deeply, expelling her breath angrily. “That man...he will do anything, risk anything...it is unforgivable!”

“How is Elliot involved in any of this?” Vincent’s sharp gaze searched the shadows. “To what end?”

“Oh, Elliot doesn’t need an excuse,” Catherine flared angrily. “He sees what he wants and goes after it. But he has been in here. I just know it. Or someone who works for him!” She rounded to face her love, indignant fire sparking in her shadowed green eyes. “Someone to do his dirty work! He’s found something that has led him to you, or the belief he knows about you! It’s too dangerous, Vincent and I would never forgive

myself if anything happened to you because of me. We are no longer safe to meet here. We must go Below immediately.”

“No, Catherine...” Vincent shook his head slowly at her agitation. “Not even Elliot would be bold enough to come here at night. I will admit he is a dangerous man who wants you, and does not count the cost.”

Vincent’s keen eyes lanced the surrounding shadows. “But to go to such lengths. It is possible?”

Catherine’s laugh was short and wry. “With that man anything is possible and nothing is quite as it seems. Not him literally, of course, he would have sent in a Manning operative to do his dirty work.” Her furious eyes widened. “I was right, of course. It was that kid, the one in the elevator. He did get too close. He stole my keys, copied them somehow and replaced them in my bag without my knowledge.”

“Elliot must want you very badly to go to that kind of trouble.” Vincent slowly turned full circle, still probing the shadows and finding nothing. “There is no one here, Catherine.”

“No, whoever he was he’s been very careful. But still I know things were moved, and I’ve had a feeling of being somehow violated. Everything has been too neat, too ordered. I could have sworn my tablet of phone messages had been flipped closed one day, when I’d left it open. My bills were in a neater pile than I’d left them. Even my dirty dishes had been stacked in the sink, and who does that? Little things I just couldn’t shake it. I put it all down to lack of sleep and my job.”

She set her fists on her hips, glaring around the room. Her eyes settled

on the bookcase and its carefully hidden book of sonnets. If it been moved, she couldn't say, but it chilled her even further to think it may have been. "I will get the super to replace all the locks first thing tomorrow and put in a dead bolt. Oh, Elliot, you are such a fool. And more fool me for believing you could ever change."

She looked back at Vincent. "I'm so sorry," she confessed. "I asked you into my world, asked you to stay and thereby putting you and your whole world at risk."

"I disagree," Vincent pulled her back into his embrace. "There is nothing to apologise for. There will always be the Elliots of this world. He has made his choices. He fought for you the only way he knew how, even if he lost you. I can admire him for that. I would fight with everything I have, to keep you by my side."

"You're being much too generous to that man," Catherine snapped. "Elliot deserves a good ticking off and I am just the one to give it to him." Her searching eyes fell on the Rodin exhibition flyer lying on the table inside the door.

She picked it up, showing it to Vincent. "I had made up my mind not to go, after all. Make a clean break of it. But I still need to know what he found and where. Defuse the situation and make him believe he's found out nothing at all about you. A little smoke and mirrors will do nicely."

She began to smile. "And I will tell you all about it the moment I get back." As she spoke she leaned back into his embrace, and laid her cheek against his shoulder.

“And I will be waiting...” Vincent drew her deep into his arms, holding her tight against the possibility of his no longer being able to come to this place, because of one man’s ongoing obsession...

Sipping her champagne, Catherine stood before the Rodin statue, surveying it with clinical detachment. Or that is what she wished any casual observer to think. Inside she was a mess of nervous tension and seething annoyance.

She had yet to see Elliot, but she knew he was attending the gala, the cluster of reporters and television camera lights in the distance told her that. No doubt he would come to find her in his own good time. She was not looking forward to seeing him again, but her resolve was unchanged. The strength of her resolve would carry her through their next encounter. But she wished Vincent could have been close at hand...

“But, he can’t be...” She inhaled, squaring her shoulders. Tonight she was going to settle the situation between her and Elliot. She would not marry him, no matter how much pressure he applied to get his own way. He was too used to having everything exactly as he willed it to be. Her heart was already spoken for, she could not betray Vincent with another man, however many obstacles stood in the way of their ultimately being together. Her father would get over his disappointment in time. It was her life after all, and she intended to start living it by some new rules.

Her eyes followed the sensual lines of the statue. “Vincent, it is beautiful...” she whispered, wishing again her love could be here to see it. It made her heart ache. She half-raised a hand towards the statue, wanting to reach beyond the security ropes and caress the cool marble. She could almost feel the man’s hand caressing her own hip...

“There are signs everywhere saying you must not touch the exhibits,” a very familiar voice remarked quietly beside her. And the hand that now rested against her hip was indeed real! A very familiar hand too, her soft flesh yielding to the gentle, warning pressure of his claws.

“*Vincent...*?” Catherine all but squeaked with dismay. Her heart leapt into her throat. She turned to find him standing calmly beside her. “How did you...? I mean, *what* are you doing here? You must leave, before someone sees you! Go back to my balcony and wait for me there!” She made a tiny push at him, trying not to be obvious.

“See me, yes...” Vincent shrugged, letting his hand fall even as his eyes travelled over her elegantly formal costume of a fourteenth century English gentlewoman, complete with fan and beribboned reticule, before rising to study her frightened eyes behind her fantastical mask of black feathers and ribbons that covered her entire face, except for the generous curve of her mouth.

“But recognize me as an uninvited intruder, I very much doubt that would be possible since none here appears to be who they really are. Remember our Halloween adventure? Surely on such a night as this, in such a sea of masked strangers, I can truly be myself.”

As he spoke, he swept a hand down the front of his own costume, taking a step back from her, and Catherine could only stare in awed wonder. The full length of his black evening cloak billowed around him as he watched her reaction closely. Attired as a seventeenth century French gentleman in formal style, his black thigh boots clung lovingly to his powerful legs over black leather breeches. Lace ruffles fell to his hands, neatly concealed beneath black leather gloves. A silk waistcoat of black and silver set off the deep ruffles of a cream linen shirt beneath the severe cut of his evening jacket. Someone had gone to a great deal of trouble. Catherine wondered who would have such skills in the world Below.

For once Vincent's hair was combed and tamed, tied back into a ponytail with a single silver ribbon. His black, wide brimmed hat complete with nodding ostrich feathers cast most of his face into concealing shadow. His beautiful, beloved face, where his deep-set blue eyes gleamed, patiently watched and waited for her reaction. He looked as immovable as a rock, and just as stubbornly set in the earth. Her heart quailed.

"How did you get in here?" Catherine demanded furiously, in a low voice. "Why did you come? It's so dangerous for you here. Father must be having several different kinds of fit right now! And for once I would agree with him!"

"I did not tell him where I was going Above, and I came to see this." Vincent swept a hand at the statue. "As to how I attended the gala without an invitation...that was easy. When we were children, Devin and I always made use of the museum's basements and hallways. It was often our night-time playground, until they installed the new security

system and ruined our fun. We almost got caught that night. Of course Father never knew. There is still an old entrance hidden beneath the main building, if you know where to find it.”

“Just as well,” Catherine muttered, her eyes hunting the immediate foreground, praying they were not being observed. She indicated the statue. “Now you have seen this, you must go. You cannot be here! It’s far too dangerous. Elliot could appear at any moment.”

“If it will give you peace, then I will leave.” Vincent slanted his head regretfully at her, but the shadows of his hat could not conceal the determined gleam in his eyes. “However I would rather stay. It was not dangerous the night we walked the city on Halloween. We didn’t waste the opportunity to be together that evening.” He glanced back at the statue. “It still amazes me that such beauty as this, and Father’s chess set, can be carved out of cold marble and made to seem as if alive. It is almost as if there truly is a spirit living within the stone simply waiting to be discovered.”

“This is *not* the time or the place to be talking about chess,” Catherine muttered worriedly. “And this isn’t Halloween. You need to go before it’s too late. *Please...*”

“So you decided to come to my little party, after all. You’re looking very lovely tonight. Who’s your friend, Cathy? Anyone I might know?”

The silken question from behind her made Catherine start badly. She swallowed tightly, before turning her head, schooling her face into one of studied surprise.

“Elliot...” She arched her brows. “I didn’t see you there.” For the moment they stood alone, the throngs of party-goers having moved away to where the buffet tables stood, groaning with free food and drink.

“Obviously.” Elliot’s eyes moved beyond her to Vincent, studying his tall, broad frame inch by inch with predatory thoroughness.

The ever-wary beast within Vincent bristled at the other man’s narrow-eyed inspection, and a barely suppressed growl hovered in his throat. Nor did his eyes miss the proprietary hand Elliot placed on Catherine’s arm, drawing her closer to him. His own gloved hands curled into fists at his side.

“Elliot Burch.” Elliot extended his free hand. “Under that great cat mask you could be anyone, a friend or a rival. But I’m sure I don’t know you. I think I would remember you. Yes, I would remember.” He switched his attention to Catherine, his taut smile lethally urbane. “Where are you manners? Aren’t you going to introduce me, Cathy?”

“No, you do not know me, Elliot Burch,” Vincent growled softly, ignoring the other man’s still out-stretched hand. “We move in completely different worlds, you and I. My name would mean nothing to you and is of no importance.”

“I disagree, but I’ll let that pass, for now...” Unabashed by the other man’s warning tone, Elliot shrugged, dropping his hand to his side. “From over there, you two were looking quite close before. Like I was interrupting something important. How do you know my Cathy?”

“We were just looking at the statue.” Catherine pointedly removed her arm from his grasp. Attempting to distract his attention, she said quickly, “This whole thing must have cost you a fortune. You have been too generous, or cunning.” Her look was tight and challenging.

“Impressed?” Elliot cocked his head at her, but his grey eyes never left Vincent’s. “I did all this for you, Cathy. I know how much you love the classics. I’ve made a point of finding out all about you.” His mouth turned down at the corners. “I can do so much more for you, if only you would let me.” He lowered his voice as he moved closer, coming between them and turning his back on Vincent.

“You are being rude, Elliot,” Catherine told him coldly. “I think this discussion is over. And I think I have seen enough. I have a heavy work schedule on Monday. Good night, Elliot.” She turned to walk away, shoulders braced. Then she stopped, turning back to glare at him. “No, that should be goodbye, Elliot. For good. I know what you did, how you managed to find your way into my apartment. You used that boy, a child, against me. Any means to an end, I think you once said to me. That was unforgivable. I had the locks changed, so you can throw your worthless set away.”

“He might be young in years, but that *‘child’* has a world of experience, and none of it good. Do not underestimate him.” Elliot’s dark brows drew together with displeasure. “I am sorry I had to use him to get to you, but not sorry for what I have done for you, to keep you with me. I had to know what, or who, my competition is.”

He squared his shoulders defensively, his angry expression showing a flash of remorse. "But I will deal with that boy so he won't bother you again. I'm not a bad man, and I do love you." His eyes flicked briefly to an impassive Vincent who did not react. Elliot looked back. "All's fair in love and war, Cathy."

"Don't call me that!" Catherine flared. "I didn't give you the right, and if this is your idea of what love means..." She turned away again, tossing him one final dismissive glare over her shoulder. "Then I pity you, Elliot. But I could never love you."

"You're angry and overwrought right now." Elliot raised a dismissive shoulder. "Very well, this round is yours. I concede on this occasion to the better player." Again he eyed Vincent. "So, tell me, Ms. Chandler, are you going home to Vincent tonight?"

Elliot's silky question brought Catherine spinning around to face him again. Her dangling reticule banged heavily against her thigh. Horrified questions about *how could he possibly know that name, and exactly where did he find it*, flared through her mind like sparks, making her feel dizzy with concern. She dared not ask, of course, knowing he was waiting for her to react with horror. In her apartment though, that much was obvious. The name 'Vincent' appeared in precious few places, and it utterly offended her to think that anyone had touched either the book of sonnets, or some other keepsake she held as precious. But that had to be it.

She bit the scattered thoughts back, catching her bottom lip between her teeth to prevent their escape. Behind Elliot's arrogant stance she could

see Vincent bristling with anger. She needed to diffuse the situation and quickly, before someone got hurt.

“Are you talking about my old English Lit teacher?” Catherine shrugged and frowned, feigning confusion. “What on earth for, I don’t understand? What has he to do with anything?” She shook her head slowly. “He’s eighty if he’s a day, and besides, he lives in Chicago now. I haven’t seen him in years. Oh, Elliot, is that all you have? I feel sorry for you, truly I do.” She managed a scathing laugh. “Give it up, you won’t win. It’s over.”

To say Elliot looked taken aback was an understatement. Behind him Vincent’s broad shoulders began to shake with suppressed laughter. Smiling triumphantly, Catherine held out her empty champagne glass to Elliot and he took it automatically. “Good night, Elliot. I won’t be seeing you around any time soon. Believe that, if nothing else. There is nothing left between us, and I will never be *your* Cathy.”

Stepping around the other man, Vincent crooked his arm for Catherine to place her hand on his elbow. “May I have the pleasure of escorting the fair lady home?” he asked in a low, intimate tone that broadened Catherine’s smile.

She swept a slight curtsy, her skirts rustling softly. “Thank you, sir. I would like that.” They quickly left the room, hurrying towards the museum entrance, before Elliot could collect himself enough to prevent their exit by demanding answers, or sending someone to stop them.

“You refused to give Elliot your name. That was wise,” Catherine remarked softly as she collected the silk cloak that complimented her

costume. "Let him go on thinking Vincent is an 80 year old man."

Vincent's broad shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Oscar Wilde would have approved. There is power in a name. Power in knowing the one that belongs to your rival." The last sentence was out before he could call it back. He settled the beige silk on her white shoulders. *The white queen. She's smooth as the silk, infinitely more enjoyable to hold...and yet...*

"You and Elliot are not rivals." Catherine's reply was both predictable and firm. She reached to strip off her mask, twining the ribbons around her fingers before pushing the whole thing into her reticule along with her fan. "How could you be?" Her brow furrowed. "But he is still a very dangerous man. You must never underestimate him. He goes after what he wants, no matter what the cost."

"I won't, I can assure you of that." Vincent inclined his head as they wound their way through the myriad of costumed guests, Catherine being careful to keep them away from the all-seeing eyes of the cameras and the nosy event reporters swirling around them. Everyone leaving was being photographed and speculated about.

It was Elliot's style to make a huge splash in all the papers, marking him as a force to be reckoned with in a city that did not tolerate losers and upstarts. They found the courtyard area and fountain were less crowded, but costumed guests still strolled everywhere, obviously reluctant to leave Elliot's excessively fulsome largesse.

They had taken several steps down the block before Vincent continued softly, "You say we are not rivals. But is it because you do not care for

him that you can so easily walk away tonight and not look back? Or because I cannot compete for you with a man like him...in that way, no matter what you feel for me?"

Catherine jerked to a halt in the middle of the crowded street. It forced Vincent to do the same, and the mass of night-time humanity flowed around them. "What I feel for you..." Catherine's green eyes studied him helplessly. "I..." Her slim shoulders fell. "It is indefinable..." Her lawyer's mind balked at that complete lack of definition. She sighed and tried again. "I have the sense of it being as intimate as my own shadow, and yet as large as the universe itself, and a billion times more complicated. I don't know." Pain entered her expression. "Do you understand?"

"I understand almost too well. It is all right, Catherine. You don't have to try and define your answer." Vincent clasped her linked hands. He followed the stream of costumed pedestrians around them, with his eyes. "Please forget I asked such a foolish question. It's a beautiful night. We shouldn't miss it." He offered her his arm again, the courtly gesture he so regularly used.

He was offering her a way out of the pressing comment, of the confusion engendered by her answer, if she wanted it. Vincent felt that he was dangerously close to spoiling the evening, and was trying to right their ship, keep the lightness of the night afloat, and the necessary distance between them that had always been there, unspoken and unacknowledged.

Vincent frowned, sensing the deepening of her confusion. No matter how many times he held her close, or allowed her to fall asleep leaning

against his shoulder, he never felt he had truly reached her. Make her believe in what he saw. All he could offer was to go on doggedly reading her poetry in the hope of reaching her innermost self and making her see what he saw. He meant what he had said to his father. Her beauty that shone from both from without and within... *always*...and Catherine herself was completely unaware of it on any deeper level, beyond what the mirror showed to her every day.

To his surprise Catherine ignored his arm. "I love you. You and Elliot aren't rivals because you can't be. You're the only man I can even think about now. No one else can compare to what I have with you. All of it."

"Ah, Catherine..." Vincent felt the words wash over him. *But I'm not a man, Catherine. Or at least, not all of me is. And you're the white queen, remote and unattainable.* Her beautiful declaration warmed him, however, and it sparked an honest reply.

"You are the first thing I think about when I open my eyes in the morning. And last I think of, upon closing them," Vincent told her as Catherine's shoulder was bumped by a rather portly pirate. The man stumbled back, apologising incoherently, before hurrying on, wine fumes floating back from him.

"But that isn't enough?" Catherine asked. "Not any more..."

Vincent's eyes followed the pirate, unable to hold his love's gaze. "I don't know what it is. I know it's all I have, Catherine. That I would fight Elliot, fight anyone to hold it. But that...that it's like the dawn that's going to chase me Below again, in a few hours. It's inevitable, and it's beautiful,

but it isn't something I can be a part of, the way other men can be. The light will always be for them as the dark is for me. I accept that fate, however unwillingly."

He looked back to her fair face and his gaze held hers. "Father once asked me if the precious gift of our love is good enough to last us both for a lifetime." His shoulders lifted and fell. "I couldn't answer him, not then. And now..." His shoulders moved again. "It's all right that I can't share some things with you and I understand. What we have now is worth everything to me."

Catherine's confusion deepened. *He did?* She wasn't sure if she did. "Understand what?"

"That there are things other men can share with you. Things you can share with them. Which I can't. Father also made that very plain to me some nights ago. He said this is your world, and I have no place in it. He only wants what is best for us...and yet..."

"I see..." Catherine's brows knitted together. "Are we still talking about the dawn, here?"

"Yes. And...no." Vincent shifted his stance, uneasily aware the course of this odd conversation had somehow veered off onto dangerous ground. Silently he offered his arm again, crooked and ready to receive her clasp, signalling her usual acceptance of the inevitable separation to come. She always had before...

"Since it is a clear night..." To his surprise Catherine refused to take his

outstretched arm and grabbed his hand, instead. “We’re going to watch the dawn arrive,” she declared, attempting to move him onwards. “It’s already Sunday, so I am not doing anything today, beyond lying in bed and reading a week’s worth of newspapers. And so, as of now, nor are you.”

She tugged him, trying to move him forward. The effect was one of dragging at an object that refused to move easily. “If you’re worried, we can send a message to Father...” Her eyes pleaded for his understanding. “Sax will still be playing his instrument up the street somewhere, working the stragglers. If we hurry, we can find him before dawn.”

More urgent tugging at his sleeved mantle seemed to activate Vincent’s curiosity. “Are we going to the area near the bridge, again?” He began lengthening his stride. “I enjoyed that night. It was so peaceful there.” His gaze slanted to hers. “Before we were interrupted, that is...”

“There will be no interruptions this time.” Sliding her arm though his, Catherine hugged him with both hands wrapped tight around his upper arm. “We’re going to my apartment.” The whole idea made her shiver, but she wasn’t cold.

“We are?” Vincent allowed himself to be shepherded by his determined love down the street to where they found the old man still playing his sax.

He took their message with a sidelong glance at them, but he forbade to comment, promising to make sure the note was delivered immediately.

As he replaced the mouthpiece between his lips, his rheumy, dark eyes flicked sideways, indicating they were blocking the paying customers coming from the reception. They made for good pickings.

“Thank you,” Vincent acknowledged simply as they stepped out of the way. It all seemed so easy to accomplish.

“Come on...” Taking his arm again, Catherine urged Vincent onwards until they arrived at the entrance to Catherine’s apartment building.

There he set his feet and refused to go further, saying softly, “It is better that I take the roof path to your balcony. We have given Elliot enough to think about this evening and he will come looking for you soon enough. Also that boy may still be around.”

“That man...” Catherine fumed, but quickly acquiesced to his request. She shrugged her shoulders regretfully. “You are right, of course. I will see you up there. Don’t be long...”

Taking the steps up to the front door of her building, she paused, turning for one final glimpse of Vincent but he had already vanished, set on whatever path it was that took him to her roof. Biting her lower lip in agitation she hurried to her front door. Inside she turned, securely locking and rechecking all security, and the dead bolt, before casting her reticule onto the nearest chintz sofa and kicking off her shoes.

She hurried towards the French doors, unlocking and flinging them wide to the early morning air, and the broad shadow that lurked in the darkest corner. Vincent came forward to catch her in his arms and she ran

barefoot into his embrace and the massive wings of his cloak closed around her once more. This was where she belonged, this is where she truly knew herself and it felt so good to lean on his solid strength once more.

“Catherine...” Vincent murmured against her ear, his arms tightening further.

Before she could reply he swung her up and off her feet, turning slowly, before setting her down again, breathlessly happy and blood racing. She leaned back to smile up at him, his eyes dark and mysterious in the darkness, but she could feel the love shining out of them through their intimate connection.

The new intensity of his mood gave her the courage to speak the words she had been holding back for the last few weeks. “There are things you need to know about me, Vincent, and some of them are not good.” She put her head down, burying her face in his chest. “I wish it could be otherwise.”

“I’m here...” Vincent sighed, gathering her closer still. His love was nervous. More nervous than he was, and that was just a tad ironic, considering.

“Are there things I should know? Are you sure you wish to tell me, Catherine?” He could sense the feelings shifting through her. The ones he’d been sensing for months, the ones he’d told Jacob about. She was afraid of this. Afraid it would not lead where she prayed it would. Afraid the act called ‘love making’ would not be part of ‘love’ for them, but part

of something else. Something... lonelier. Something that was already known and expected. And understood.

Catherine drew back to look up at him. "I wanted to share the dawn with you. I want to watch your face, see how blue your eyes are when sunlight warms them, and the day is beginning. I want...so much more..." She looked down at her beautiful gown as she said it. She knew she wanted that dream she had dreamed when she was young and so innocent of life and love. Before her mother had died and she became painfully aware of how her world worked...

"And you worry that I might not want the same things as you, Catherine," Vincent asked softly.

Her generous lips curved wryly. "We aren't playing to my long suit here, Vincent. I was once...very stupid and thoughtless, for a long time. I let this be something else, sometimes. And I can't take that back, can't fix it so that I'm--" Her voice faltered.

Vincent's heartbeat gathered pace. *Less used. Catherine was about to say 'less used' and I have to stop her.*

"A heart does not always go where a hand guides it," he interrupted her, drawing her closer again. "But some hearts go where hands have never been," he whispered, barely touching the hair at her temple with a pointed nail. "Trying to find out who you are while giving yourself away... It's an impossible thing, Catherine. A thing all of us face, all of us struggle with. I help raise girls into young women, and let them go Above, into your world. Do you think none have come back, in tears?"

There are lessons we all must learn.”

“And I have...” Catherine raised her eyes to his, then lowered them again, tears threatening. “They never tell you you’re going to leave a piece of yourself behind every time you fall for someone. That you’ll feel like less than you ever thought possible. You’re supposed to feel...” she moved one shoulder before continuing, “I don’t know...liberated, I guess.”

“Nothing costs more than that kind of freedom,” Vincent said, thoroughly understanding, simply because he did. “We must ask for what we want, not just accept what we have, simply because it is so.”

Catherine went still, her eyes suddenly wide and dark with trepidation. “Then I will ask you to come inside...please.” As she spoke she slid her hands down to enclose his, tugging at him gently. “Just for a little while. It’s cold out here, and we could be warm inside. We can wait and watch for the dawn.”

“Catherine...I...” Vincent watched her for a long time, so long she felt as if her heart would beat out of her chest, so long did he divide his glance between her and the shadowed limits of her ‘inside’ world. His lips parted as if he was about to speak, and then to her stunned relief he inclined his head slowly, in the barest of acknowledgement of her request. Pulse quickening even further, Catherine tugged more firmly at his hands, urging him on by walking slowly backwards, until first her bare feet and then his booted ones crossed his self-imposed line and they stepped down into the living room.

But he moved no further and she didn't try to force him. The immovable stone had returned. But she was encouraged when he folded his arms beneath his cloak, looking around with deep interest.

"Thank you, Vincent." Catherine stared up at him, nodding slowly. She released one of his hands, maintaining her grip on the other, no doubt in the fear he may retreat if she let him go, turning to survey the room trying to decide what they should do next. She reached out to flick on a nearby lamp, shedding muted light into the room.

Still clutching Vincent's hand, her eyes roamed their surroundings seeking inspiration while they waited for the dawn to arrive. *They could play cards or listen to some music...* She already knew his tastes. Then her eyes darted across to the bookcase...*or read the book of sonnets Vincent gave her after the first time she had been foolish enough to fall for Elliot's considerable charms.*

Sensing her inner turmoil, Vincent moved closer, looking down at her with compassion. "And I would not wish one change for you. Only that you understood it better, so that you could make peace with it. Only that your heart felt... how much is waiting for you. If you would only allow it in."

"I'm almost afraid to want it," she whispered, knowing in her heart she was. "I don't deserve it...or you." She slid both her hands back within his. "I have never felt this way before."

Vincent lifted one slender hand to his lips. "Be more afraid of what the fear has cost you." He brushed a kiss across the back of her delicate

fingers. *She's trembling.*

“More afraid of the toll the loneliness takes. But don't be afraid of a yesterday you can barely remember, or a scattering of nights you wish you could forget. Don't give those times the power to steal your joy, Catherine. You are worth so much more than those memories. I wish you could see what I see within you. The light that shines so brightly it hurts my eyes to look at you sometimes. We can only make the best of always...”

“You make it sound so easy.” Catherine blinked, and realized she had allowed her joy to be stolen. While she hadn't become 'jaded', exactly, she had become heartsick, from time to time. Love had not come for her. Not the lasting kind.

And now it was here and she was sure she didn't deserve it. She'd lived a life of privilege, with no consequence for her bad decisions but what they did to her, inside. It could never be there with Elliot, he was not astute enough to see what she really needed. The men she had dated and known concentrated on their own needs at the expense of hers.

She realized how heavy a toll “Fashion Law” Cathy had paid for her breezy lifestyle. How much “having done worse than Tom Gunther” had cost her, and for how long. She hadn't become as hard-hearted as many of the people she knew. But her heart had taken a beating, from each failure. And there had been more than a couple of those. How much it had cost her father in both time and money to rescue her from the folly of her own making. She was sometimes surprised he still loved her.

She'd posed nude in an art class as an act of defiance, and held onto Stephen Bass for too long as an act of desperation. A fear of being alone and unloved once more. Had felt fire that burned both hot and out, not understanding why that was. Dated people she had 'no chemistry' with and not understood why that was, either. But loneliness beckoned from just beyond the fringes of her vision. Having nothing to do on a Friday night was almost a cardinal sin in her world, so she had often 'made do', rather spend the night alone with her father.

"I did not say it would be easy." Vincent released her and stepped back. For a heart-stopping moment Catherine thought he was going to leave her, but instead he began tugging the cushions off the back of the nearest couch, settling them onto the carpet in front of the open doors so they could watch the dawn arrive. He pushed the filmy balcony curtains wide to the night air.



"How long do we have?" she asked, hurrying to help.

"Forever, if you wish for it to be so," he replied. "But until dawn, a couple

of hours yet. It's either very late...or early." He smiled.

Catherine dimpled him a matching smile as she pulled a fluffy throw off the back of the couch and spread it on the floor, in front of the cushions. "How many times have you seen the dawn, Vincent?" she asked, bending over to straighten the corners.

"More than a few, but mostly from the entrance to the drainage tunnel, and none for very long," he replied, looking searchingly into the night. "The evening we went walking was the first time I'd seen it rise over the water. It was incredible." His eyes tracked back to hers. "I wanted to kiss you that morning, with the sunshine on your face and love in your eyes." He shook his great head with regret.

"I know, Vincent. And so did I wish for that, beyond anything." Catherine moved close, taking one of hands between hers. "Will you read to me while we wait?" she asked. "I think there is a certain book of sonnets begging to be read tonight."

"If that is your wish." Vincent settled the cushions against the back of the couch as Catherine returned with the book, turning off the table lamp as she came.

She moved on to light some candles, drawing in the intimacy of the moment. The room was cast into shimmering darkness as the skyline twinkled, before them beyond the balcony wall. Whether she was intentionally doing so or not, she was making a very intimate space. Looking up she held out the book towards him wordlessly.

“Shakespeare knew everything...” Vincent took it and read the note he had left with the book that long ago night. The night he had been prepared to allow Catherine to love another. He moved to settle down onto the blanket, allowing her once more to make her own decisions.

“For thy sweet love remembered...” Catherine quoted the sonnet Vincent had marked with the pressed rose, as she moved closer. She studied the long length of his legs thrust out before him. It was not a view of him she had seen before. He usually towered over her. Now his bent head was level with her abdomen, and she longed to move close enough to hug him against her lower body. Feel his arms enfolding her at thigh level...

She jumped, startled by the erotic image. “Would you like some wine?” she asked, as if she were just now remembering her manners.

I want only you. Vincent kept the words in check, but only barely. He had sensed the intoxicating trend of her thoughts, but he would make no move to persuade Catherine the night could end so very differently if she so wished it. He watched her. “I want what it pleases you to have.” She must find the courage to come to him, ask him for what she desired.

“Yes...” Catherine sighed. “Perhaps we better not. I had champagne earlier. I might fall asleep on you again. I’ve made some famously bad decisions on more than one glass of wine.” She raised helpless shoulders. Again that ghost of loneliness raised its head.

Suddenly the sound of her telephone ringing was loud in the room. Catherine started badly, but she made no move to reach for it. She knew

who is was and she was not going to answer. She would leave Elliot to talk to her answering service. But when her own voice cut smoothly in, asking for the caller to please leave a message and she would return their call as soon as possible, there was nothing but a long silence before the sharp click of disconnection.

“That will not happen again.” Catherine crossed the room quickly and removed the receiver from its cradle, placing it on the table. “Now, where were we?”

“Enjoying the Bard...” Vincent kept his eyes down, focused on the slim book in his clawed hands. He was unaccustomed to the noise of a ringing telephone, and he disliked the strident sound that had tried to shatter their mood. He also knew who had been on the other end of the line, but he didn’t comment.

He settled for turning the pages slowly, savouring the beauty of the written word. Elliot’s attempt to reach her had unsettled Catherine. Vincent could sense she was growing nervous again, being near him now. He could feel her uncertainty reaching out to him. With Elliot she knew the rules, how the game was played and what was ultimately expected of her.

This was something so very different. He prayed he would make her see that...given enough time.

Finally Vincent looked up when the silence became almost painful.

“Catherine, nothing has to happen tonight that you don’t want. If all we do is allow me to see a painted sky and speak the Bard’s words as time

ticks past, I promise you I will not find the evening lacking.”

“I am not afraid.” She came to kneel beside him, gathering her feet up under the large skirt of her gown, the silk of her cape still lightly dusting her shoulders. “The first thing I ever remember about you is the sound of you reading to me,” she gave the non-answer for an answer. “I could have listened to you forever...Please, go on...”

“Very well...” Vincent began to read the sonnet he had marked with the dried rose, his voice low and haunting in the dimly-lit room.

Catherine closed her eyes and was instantly transported back to another room and another time. Again she could smell earth and dampness, candle wax and kerosene. Stone walls hemmed her in whenever she reached to touch anything familiar beyond the prison of her facial bandages, and she could hear the crackling of a fire somewhere close at hand.

Underscoring all was the fact that there was no background noise of cars, or televisions, no radio chatter...no awful shrill of an interfering telephone...and she had been aware with every fibre of her being that *he* was there too...somewhere close at hand, hidden as always within the shadows...*Always...*

Vincent concluded quietly “...*like to the lark at break of day arising from sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate; For thy sweet love remembe’d such wealth brings, that then I scorn to change my state with kings...*”

“So beautiful...” Catherine breathed as she opened her eyes and looked at him. “You bookmarked that sonnet the night I knew I could never be with Elliot. The night you welcomed me back, and didn’t demand I apologise, for the mistakes I could have made with him. Because of him. You are remarkable.”

Vincent lifted one powerful shoulder. “There was no apology to be made. The poem was about how I felt. I wanted you to know. That I was yours, no matter your choices. That I would always be yours. I have no choice in that.”

“Because you already knew how I felt? All of it?”

“You were feeling things deeply that night, Catherine. You often do.”

“I felt like I needed to ask your forgiveness,” she confessed, a shiver passing through her flesh. “I was foolish...”

Again those words spoke inside her mind, making her gasp. *‘Without you I am nothing, and if you abandon me I will never love another... Please do not leave me here, alone and cold in the dark, without your love...’*

“*Alone, in the dark...*” Vincent whispered, looking up as vital awareness rippling through their bond, making him more aware of her than ever before. “But you are the light, Catherine. It is I who was alone, trapped in the dark places.”

He shook his head slowly. “You feel you have to ask my forgiveness. For

what? Being sure you wanted a life with a man who could give you everything and not count the cost? What would you have said? 'Forgive me for being a beautiful woman with the world before her?' I would have understood, you know. Painfully so, but I would have known everything. That is our gift and our burden. Wherever you go, wherever you are, I am with you, always. You live with me, in me..."

Her love endured much just to be with her. Catherine swallowed against the strong of tears. "There was more to it than that. I hurt you deeply."

He didn't deny it. "And then you returned to me. And we were never the same, after. I have felt your aloneness too, Catherine."

"I know..." Catherine moved uncomfortably. "Elliot was like a holdover from my old life. He was the easy way out. The way I could take and not have to... not have to deal with the feelings I knew were coming. Feelings for you. Feeling even now I can't define or explain. I wish I could."

"Would that make them easier or more pleasant to contemplate?"

Vincent looked out into the lightening dawn sky. "In Father's study, there's an old chess set. It's been there ever since I can remember. He's been gifted others over the years, but the one near his desk is the one he almost always plays with. The one he teaches the children on. He taught me and Devin with it. My brother detested the deep game taking hours or days. He liked to show off by moving the pieces like quicksilver and winning every time, against all the odds."

"Go on," she encouraged, eager for more.

Vincent drew a long breath, expelling it slowly. “Of all the pieces, the queen is the one the years have worn most smooth. She’s beautiful, and strong. The strongest piece on the board, the one most apt to move, to conquer all before her.”

Catherine frowned. “But isn’t it the king you need to capture to win the game?”

“Yes. But everyone knows that if the queen is taken, the king will likely fall. It’s only a matter of time. He is lost without his consort. She is everything to him, his alpha and omega, his beginning and his ultimate end. He stands or falls with her, for her.”

Catherine blinked at his sudden vehemence while nodding her limited understanding of the game, even as she remembered the chess set in Jacob’s room. She had witnessed some epic battles and enjoyed the experience.

Vincent put the book aside. “In chess, white makes the first move. The white queen has had my hands on her more than any other piece on the board. Her neck is smooth ivory. Like yours.”

“Like mine?” Catherine lifted an involuntary hand to her neck. Her eyes glimmered in the soft candlelight.

“Always...” Vincent watched her through hooded eyes. “Do you have any idea how...unattainable you are to me? How like that ivory queen? Remote, beautiful and serene. How at odds that makes us?”

“I’m not a queen. And I’m certainly not made of ivory. And I have made some terrible mistakes in my life...you truly don’t know how bad some of those were, Vincent. I need to tell you—”

“No, you do not...” Vincent reached to press a silencing finger over her lips. *“Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom. If this be error and upon me proved, I never writ, nor no man ever loved...”*, he quoted another sonnet as he went up on his knees before her, turning her around so he could gently tug on the bow holding her cape together. It slithered off her shoulders, pooling at her knees. “Love alters not, Catherine. And it never will. Believe that, if nothing else, tonight.”

“You seem so certain...” Catherine shivered at the erotic contact.

“Are you certain?” Vincent whispered in reply, brushing the luminous skin of her bare shoulder with his warm mouth. Just a touch. A barely-there touch. His warm breath made her skin shiver.

“N-no, I’m not at all certain.” She sighed it and he could feel her immediate response. The warning of her arousal arced between them.

“No?” he asked, dropping a soft kiss on the point of her shoulder, then another near her neck. He could feel her pulse jump. He could feel his own do the same. His softly furred fingertips traces the line his mouth travelled.

“I’m not certain of anything right now,” she said, feeling his hands settle

at the top of her arms and lift, a little, carefully to be sure his claws didn't mark her skin.

"Shall I tell you what I am certain of?" he asked it close to her ear, before he pressed his unusual mouth to just below her jawline.

"What?" Catherine breathed, eyes closing in ecstasy.

"That you are made of something far more rare than ivory. Something far lovelier, and infinitely more precious." He settled his mouth at the curve of her neck and felt desire explode down her spine, to settle in her midsection. She held her hands up, in surrender's pose, and tilted her head back, allowing him greater access. "And I can barely believe that you could ever love me..."

He didn't have to open his eyes to know there were twin tracks of tears on her cheeks. He'd felt them fall from inside his mind as he caressed her gorgeous throat. Words echoed to him, through her, spoken in her soft tones... *'Without you I am nothing, and if you abandon me I will never love another... Please do not leave me here, alone and cold in the dark, without your love...'* They made his heart weep with sorrow that his love could have been so hurt, so lost as to not see her own value. Know her own inner strength.

He had given that back to her, no one else, no man of this Above world. He alone had done that. He had mended her broken spirit and made her whole again. The thought flooded his soul with light. He could be everything to her, that the others could not...or ever be. It was an intoxicating revelation.

“Please...don’t stop. Not yet...” He wasn’t sure if Catherine thought it or said it, he only knew it was what she felt, as he sent his tongue out to taste her skin for the first time. It was what he heard from her, one way or the other. Her soft neck moved against his touch.

As he moved closer still he could see the setting moon painting her tears silver. He back arched as she gasped and kept her hands up, the fingers loosely curled.

“Please...” This time he knew she’d said it.

“Queens don’t have to say ‘please,’ Catherine,” he murmured it as she felt his hands slide to the long zipper that held the back of her dress closed.

“This one does.” She didn’t open her eyes as she heard the rasp of the zipper as it slid down, felt the fabric parting, down her back. She did hear his indrawn breath, knew he was seeing the long length of her back, and the creamy band of her strapless bra. It had been a necessity for an off-the-shoulder gown.

“You have no idea how lovely you are, do you?” He caressed the line of her shoulder again, then she felt him turn his hands over so that the back of his fingers rested just above her shoulder blades. Slowly, he trailed them down over her skin. Skin that suddenly felt like it was too warm, too sensitive.

She lowered her arms and let the loose dress come down, knowing it

would pool at her waist. His touch stuttered over the elastic of her bra, then resumed the slow course down her back. He stopped when the fabric would let him go no further, then traced his way back up. Down... up. It was a slow motion caress and she could feel his eyes on her.

He repeated the motion and then held her shoulders with his furred, clawed hands as he planted a kiss on the nape of her neck. She shivered, and bit back a whimper of delight.

“You’re trembling.” He planted his palms flat, feeling the warmth and the tremors that flowed through her.

“I know.” She was. It was a thing she couldn’t stop, and a thing she couldn’t control. And a thing that had never happened before. His hands strayed to the band of her bra. *Is this how it always should have been?* she asked silently.

‘Yes...’ Vincent replied, his beautiful voice honeyed and low inside her mind. ‘*Always...*’

“Will you undress for me? At least as much as I am? I won’t turn around,” Catherine asked, before his fingers could undo the hook and eye clasps.

“Of course,” he answered, liking the enveloping darkness, liking that her back was to him. It wouldn’t always be. But it was good, for now.

She heard the rustling of his clothing, heard the brocade vest drop as he shrugged clear of it and the linen shirt being pulled over his head. Then

the understanding that he was half naked behind her was a temptation all its own.

She scooted her legs under and went up on her knees, as he returned to her, so he could embrace her from behind. His nude torso pressed against her back.

God... Muscle. And heat. Hair and a broad chest like a wall, behind her. The dress fell farther down and his arms came around her, embracing. He rubbed his front against her back, glorying in the sensation of being skin to skin. She could feel the warm tension in him, hear the low murmur of approval that was nearly a growl, as he clasped her to him.

“How can such beauty be mine?” She heard the catch in his voice at the question, a small stutter in the otherwise somnolent baritone of sound.

“I ask myself that same thing about you,” she said, clasping her arms over his. She kissed his flexing bicep. “I don’t think I’ve ever known the answer. I only know that this is what I have dreamed of...for so long now.”

Vincent enveloped her and his hands were everywhere. Her neck, her shoulders, her fabric clad breasts, her waist. He pushed the stiff fabric down as far as it would go, seeing the shimmering lace of her underwear and the creamy skin of her stocking clad thighs. *What is this?*

Stockings. Topped with a satin ribbon and held up by a wide band of lace. He let his fingers trail over them. They felt like a rich call to sin.

Palms full of skin, he trailed up her thighs, over her silk clad hips to the line of her bra, knowing this time she wouldn't delay him. She was unbelievably smooth and her skin sheened like a luminous pearl, lit from within.

He tugged on the elastic, and it gave way, leaving a pink line on her skin where the bra had held fast. His seeking tongue laved the mark on instinct, still holding the halves of her bra in his hands.

She sighed her pleasure, long and low, as his mouth made to repair the abrasion to her back. Then his sensitive lips found something else. A mark no kiss could ever remove. A scar.

An indentation below her right scapula. A thin line of scar tissue... and it had been meant for him. Vincent lifted his head to study the mark, and Catherine sensed he'd found the scar left by Mitch Denton's bullet. Her love's voice was rough. "You were hurt because of me. Because of someone I knew." She felt his ardour shift, and change into something more protective. "I am so sorry for that."

"No..." She shook her head and reached for the combs that held her hair up. "I was hurt because I was trying to save people who needed saving. And then I was saved because you were there. You are always there."

She felt him kiss the mark again, felt his mouth warm the skin, his tongue taste the scar.

"And I had a dream of you I wouldn't trade for anything. Ever. We were walking down fifth avenue in the sunshine," she retold it.

He lifted his head from the kiss. “And I bought you ice cream,” he remembered it. She’d been woozy from the drugs, and he’d stood in her hospital room, a sentinel against any further hurt coming to her. She’d told him the dream. He was surprised she remembered it.

“And no one looked twice.” She did remember. “Oh, Vincent, how I long for that to be so...”

“And this...?” He gently let the bra down, knowing that he would see the uninterrupted line of her back for the first time. Perfect. He wanted to kiss each knot of her spine, wanted to lay her down on the blanket and trace the line of her silky under-things where they hid her treasures from his pilgrim’s eyes. The nip of her waist was almost impossibly small, the curve of her hips a feminine violin of loveliness. She was so tiny before him, pushing her way clear of the ostentatious gown, and kicked it away as she toed her way clear of her slippers, and shoved them aside within the pile. She crossed herself, with her arms, shyly.

Vincent’s great heart took another devastating hit of pain. Someone had made his love feel inadequate, there. Some fool. Some bumbling idiot with a crass comment or a stray criticism. She would have been judged as too small, or too fine, too brittle seeming. Not enough of a prized possession, with her small breasts and slim legs, to make some other man’s stupid ego proud to have her on his arm.

Vincent wasn’t sure how he could be so certain. But he was. He could even feel her shimmer of trepidation, in their bond. And he knew she was none of these things she had been accused of. She was strong, like

the finest silk thread, or that marble queen with her serene gaze and indestructible body.

But someone had measured her, and found her wanting. More than once, he'd guess. And she carried the scar of that, still. Just like the scar on her back. *No, not like that one.* That one she had no care for. This one, she did and it had hurt her immeasurably.

"My queen is a beautiful fantasy, made real. Made warm. Made for me," he said, not sure how to take this hurt away, only knowing he had to try. He knelt at her back, again, and let her both feel and hear it as he undid his belt and let it drop open. He undressed no further, but let her feel the warmth of him, and the willingness of him. An erection he wasn't bothering to conceal pressed itself into her back, and he swept his arms around her torso, pulling her against him, revelling in the sensation. He closed his eyes, bowed over her, and let all that she was seep into his soul.

She undulated her back against him, the suggestion as old as Eve. *Soon. Soon, lover.* "Will you let me touch you?" she asked, not sure if she was supposed to stay in this position, facing away from him.

"I think I'll die if you don't," he rumbled, giving the nape of her neck a parting kiss before he moved around her.

Cheeks, nose, forehead... he planted soft, undemanding kisses on her as she kept her eyes closed. His hair brushed her collar bone. He held her crossed arms steady as he softly kissed his way across her closed eyes. Her arms would come down when she willed it, and not a moment

before. But now she was caught, and her desire to touch him required she drop her arms so she could use her hands. It wasn't a hard choice for Catherine to make.

Her left palm settled at the centre of his solar plexus as the right one slid longingly up the side of his neck. She felt his pounding heart under his palm as she brought his head down for a kiss.

His massive chest crushed hers to it as the kiss went from one of exploration to dark fire. The unique cleft of his upper lip caressing her mouth sent shivers racing through her from head to toe.

"You are truly beautiful..." she managed to say, feeling the wealth of muscle beneath her palms. His hair was a softer silk than the rumpled cape that now lay bunched somewhere near her feet. His erection was warm steel as he cupped her backside with one palm, to keep her close.

"I am only ever what you'll let me be. Especially here," he said, caressing her backside through the silk, and knowing every word was true. "To unwish the past is to remake yourself into someone neither of us would recognize, Catherine. It has made you who you are, here and now. If it would spare you pain, I would have it so. Yet..." His blue eyes looked wistful, and his bare chest, for all its glory, made him look vulnerable.

"And yet that wouldn't be fair, would it?" Catherine asked.

"Denying who you are, or were, makes no more sense than me denying who I am," Vincent said frankly. "I am what you see now."

“Yes...” Catherine moved closer to him, letting him know she would change nothing of what he was. “And you are mine...”

“Elliot did what he did because he wanted to say what you would be to each other. Wanted to say it with no other voice present.”

“And I hear too many voices, sometimes,” Catherine confessed. “People telling me what they expect. What I’m supposed to want. It’s gotten me in terrible trouble with myself, sometimes, Vincent. And again, I’m so sorry for that.”

He held her in a loose embrace, absorbing her regrets, letting her know with his strong, steady presence that he would always be what she needed, for as long as he could. She rubbed her nose against the wealth of hair on his chest, loving the sensation.

“You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that,” she confessed, smiling. It was a simple smile, and a girlish one. Both out of place here, and exactly right. Something inside her was reaching back for the Catherine she had been. The Catherine she’d been before bad decisions had swallowed her light, and left her stumbling to find her way.

“We have to be more than just what I allow. We have to be,” she said with conviction, and he hid a soft smile against her neck. *We will be. Reach for us, Catherine. You know I’ll always be there for you. Always love you. Until the end of time and beyond...*

“Do we?” he whispered the question as he brushed her ear. The simple question brought her ardour clamouring back. He felt her shift her

weight, in her stocking clad feet. There was a fire building inside her, and he felt the heat.

“Ye-yes,” she whispered, trying to catch her breath. She held his neck to steady herself. “We have to be what we both say.” She planted a line of kisses across his chest.

He blessed her for her lovely benediction. “Then I say I hold you high as heaven, my beautiful, beautiful Catherine. My love. My only love. For always.” His husky voice rasped over the last word.

“And I swear I will only love you. Forever. For always,” Catherine breathed, making a bargain, between them. “Beyond the end of time...”

“Then it’s the Beginning of Always.” He placed a gentle finger under her chin to raise her beloved face for a kiss. “And I am beyond blessed.”

She finished undressing him, delighting in unbuckling the soft leather of his boots, and drawing them down his legs. When she slid her fingers along his bare calf to remove his socks he tensed with want, and when she eased his dark trousers down and stopped to plant a kiss on his bare knee he groaned, arching his hips on instinct.

He was bare, and beautiful, covered with the long, soft down of body hair that marked him as forever different from other men. He was every shade of gold, from the tones in his skin to the lighter ones in his hair to the darker ones that covered his muscular body. She trailed kisses across torso until he caught his bottom lip with his upper teeth, his fangs

gleaming in the greying dark as he tried to keep the growl in his throat from coming forth.

“Shhhhhhh...” She petted him. “I won’t tease. Not this time.” She stroked her sweet palms down his thighs and he sighed, knowing their joining was close. She’d forgotten to be self-conscious about her delicate breasts now, and he loved the view.

He longed to say something, anything, but the words got jammed in his throat and he could only growl, softly but with intent. The rumbling found a small echo in the room.

“I know, my love, I know...” When Catherine laid down beside him and trailed her stocking-clad foot up his leg, he needed no further urging.

Vincent leaned over to slip her underwear off her soft-skinned body and felt her subtle compliance as she pressed their bodies together then shifted so that she was laying on her back, her arms still keeping them close. She was making this first move easy for him, this dance she knew well. But this time it was so different in both rhythm and pace.

Her fingers were gorgeously subtle curves of want, dancing from the breadth of his shoulders and down to press into the small of his back. The slender length of her legs rose to curl around him, pinning and trapping his hardness against her lower abdomen. Her hips shifted once more, her knees widening to accept him into a world he had never known before. The hooded beauty of her green eyes looked into his and she smiled, his name a whisper and a benediction on her parted lips.

Vincent responded in the only way he could. Loving her to completion was the priceless gift he could give her now. Between sharpening breaths of rising anticipation there came the moment when Catherine rose against him and made them one. A subtle, easy thrust of his hips against her and it was done, so easily he wasn't sure it was accomplished, until the star-shot explosion behind his eyelids assured him it was. All the colours and reflections of their bond was there, impossible to deny.

Catherine was warm velvet and the deep secrets of womanhood, while he was tension and build. Easy. Smooth. His queen was locked in stillness, for a moment, and then his queen became a dream of soft words and gentle petting of any place she was able to reach easily. She called his name, long and low, and it burned a path right through him.

His love's utter satisfaction was a gorgeous thing, blinding in its beauty and simplicity, it held him speechless for a moment. Then he wondered if the flash of light inside his mind was his reaction or hers, within the bond, letting itself be known. She felt like she was falling. She felt like she was flying. Her heart-rate lifted and raced off before her.

I feel as if I'm soaring to a place where everything shimmers and floats...

Fly then, my love...I am with you, always...

The memory of the book of sonnets left on her balcony came unbidden, but not unwelcome. It had been Vincent's gift and benediction. Catherine loved that book. And him...

Vincent reached down to draw one stocking clad leg up higher, loving the sensation it gave him when her angle shifted. He knew he was close to ending this, and he knew he never wanted it to end. Or, if it did, only to begin again...

“Please...end it now...” It was a hoarse whisper torn from the depths of his soul as the sky began to lighten, over his shoulder. He knew what he was asking for. They both did.

Catherine’s soft purr of sound was a tiny match for his own more intense growl as she drew the other leg up to match its twin, and twined both around his back, letting him feel the softness of her silk clad foot against his tense backside.

Her eyes were matching lambent witch-fires of intent, reflecting she was truly being well-loved. She pulled herself up so she could say the words into his ear. “Kings don’t say ‘please,’ Vincent.” Then she tightened her grip. *Everywhere!* Flexing everything internal and around his waist she brought a subtle pressure to bear on him such as he had never know.

The sentence exploded in his brain, the power of it, and the freedom inside it. If he thought her royalty, she thought no less of him. They were equals here. Beautifully matched mates. Like the sun chasing the moon. Like the queen protecting the king. As if the being who wasn’t sure how much of him was a man loving the amazing woman who was sure he was man enough for this, man enough for her. For always...

A warrior’s scream filled the room as the greying sky turned lighter, as the beautiful woman held onto her matchless mate through his tremors.

His climax felt endless, and they both gloried in it, his labouring body revelling in hers, pressing deep, then deeper, as each fresh spasm shook him. His testes stayed tight, and tense, emptying into her in quaking tremors that had his weight levered up on his arms, his head down near her ear, panting hard, moaning pleasure into the soft skin of her neck and he tasted salt.

She is perspiring, he thought. Then he realised the truth. No, those splashes of moisture were tears. *His*. Ones he hadn't been aware he'd shed, until some portion of sanity returned. He drew a long, shuddering breath, releasing it gustily.

The arch of his great back bowed him over her, and he lingered inside her, aware he was making her hot from the furnace that was his hair-covered body. His head was pressed to the throw, one hand cradling her head, the other, his own as he tried to find the will to move off of her. He moved his hips back, subtly, aware that his release meant he couldn't stay inside her much longer, anyway.

"No..." She tightened her legs around him, just wanting to hold him for as long as she could. Those internal muscles flexed again, subtly warning him against any withdrawal.

"Too heavy..." He had no idea where he'd found the capacity for speech. "I am too much for you..."

"Not by half," she lied, laughing softly before urging him to press more of his weight down on her. He did, and she purred her approval into his softly tufted ear, loving him.

His entire body felt like tone-less muscle, lax and weak. He knew he'd crush her if he gave her his full weight, but needed to take the pressure off his forearms. He compromise by gently rolling to one side, taking her with him.

She drew her leg up higher on him, resting it on his hip as the lip of bright sunlight came dancing its way inside her balcony door. The terrace where they so often stood at night was now taking on morning colours.

The light and colours Vincent had previously seen behind his eyelids shot through the orange and blue sky, points of dazzling light reflecting off the windows of nearby buildings piercing his night-accustomed eyes. He had to duck his head to become used to the brightness. The rays painted such vivid colours behind his lids, he had rarely seen before.

"Are you all right?" Catherine rose beside him, concerned at his soft groan.

"I am..." Vincent shifted his body, trying not to crush her when he couldn't quite see where she was within the brightness of the dawning light. He made a sound of regret when his body slipped out of hers. They both did. But it was time to move.

"Where are you going?" Catherine reacted with alarm.

"Not far at all." Vincent rose to his knees, crouching as he turned his back to the light, so he could see her better. "Catherine, my love, if you

say I have to wait a hundred years to have that again, I'll only ask you when I have to start counting from." His mouth curved. "Now, or five minutes ago from now," he continued, stroking her slightly damp bangs back from her forehead with his fingertip. Her eyes were luminously green and filled with tears. But he knew they were not the tears of regret that she had so often shed before in the aftermath of loving.

It was still some minutes before Catherine finally found her voice. She gloried in the feel of his tender touch exploring her face. "I think the Beginning of Always deserves better than that," she said, loving the look of sated desire in his blue eyes. "How about we let dawn creep in the room, and decide before the sun clears the skyline?"

"I think I can wait that long..." Vincent tore his gaze away from her beloved face to look over his shoulder, checking the progress of the sunlight streaming into the room, half-shuttering his eyes against the glare. He was aware of Catherine sitting up beside him, he could sense her gaze moving over the curve of his chest and the resting strength of his crouched thighs. And what lay nestled between, quiescent for now and once more enclosed in its surrounding of soft golden fur. That which had given them both pleasure, and he could sense her interest was more desirous than it was clinical.

He remained completely inert, allowing her to look her fill. They were both suspended in a space he had so often desired, but never thought could ever be. He was not ashamed of his nakedness. *Could this precious gift be enough to last them both for a lifetime?* There was truly only one way to find out...

He watched her watching him. He would make no apologies for his body, it was his and the only one he would ever possess. But he knew she was not judging him, far from it. The bond between them hummed with intent and expectation. She almost appeared to be measuring his stamina. A soft laugh rumbled deep with his chest, a small smile curving his mouth as he remained crouched and waiting.

Little did Catherine know that with his great strength and endurance Vincent could outlast the most vigorous of men, and often had, in any serious crisis Below. This was a different kind of crisis, but required the same rapt, and undivided attention. She would not be disappointed if she chose to further their mutual exploration.

Catherine studied the picture Vincent made, crouched there in the dawning light, like some great, mythical warrior from another time long, long ago. Waiting expectantly for a call only he could hear. And he was all hers, now and forever. The thought made her shiver with anticipation. They had made that pact, but she still wasn't used to it. This would last them both for a lifetime, she would make sure of that, if nothing else.

She watched the hair on his legs turning golden, tipped with lambent fire. And the dawning awareness of that most vital part of his body, which reacted instantly to her gaze caressing it lovingly and with intent. Vincent's returning erection rose, tight and hard against his lower body, and he did nothing to hide it. Not from her, never again.

Again, so soon... a voice inside Catherine whispered enticingly. She saw his reaction, and smiled. *Yes!*

Vincent moved and came back down to her, stretching out beside her like some great, glorious creature, barely tamed and here only because she willed it to be. He smiled at her knowingly, fangs bared and gleaming in the daylight, the hardness of him pressing against her inner thigh.

“Then I would say that is only a few minutes from now,” he said, laying his questing hand lightly on her hip as the man in Rodin statue had done for his love. Asking, not demanding. Requesting, not taking. A free exchange of mutual delight. “And my white queen holds my desire as a precious thing. You are so beautiful...”

He took her open palm, and kissed it lovingly, then leaned in to brush the damp stockings down her legs, rolling them off her toes as if he had done it a thousand times before. He only knew he now wanted her as bare as he was. Clothed only in sunshine and their love.

“I hold all of you as precious, Vincent,” she said earnestly. Dawn warmth was starting to kiss her toes. Her gaze drifted and she sighed. “All of you...”

“No more precious than I hold you. Always...I swear,” he answered, understanding the lambent pleasure of a slow burning passion rising in both of them. He was both utterly sated and wanting to start again, and marvelling at the sensation. It enamoured him further to know she felt the same.

“It was you who made me beautiful...Do you truly know how much I love you?” she asked, cupping his golden cheek. He was her lover, now. She

could ask that question and know the answer would be honest. He would never be less than that, again.

“I do...” he said, pressing his hand over the top hers. Of course he did. The singing of the bond between them told him. As did everything about her, right now. “And I promise you I will always treat that like the incredible gift it is. That I will treasure it as no man ever could.” He kissed her palm again, then spared one for her forehead. “Or ever will...”

“Oh, Vincent...”

“I want to go to your bedroom as the sun rises more.” He shared his most immediate wish with her. One that would not wait another moment to be heard, to be shared. “Lay on my back with you close against me and watch the light paint you with golden fire, while we love each other.”

“Are you sure?” Catherine asked softly. “I mean, I want that too. You have no idea for how long I have desired that.” She dimpled fetchingly, as a sudden thought assailed her. “You do know the weather forecasters promised us rain last night and this morning? I am so glad they were wrong...again.”

Vincent tilted his head at her. “If it had rained, then I would have lit all the candles in the room instead. Made our own sunlight to bathe you with. You are my queen.”

Morning light was starting to brighten the room. The picture he painted brought tears to her eyes. Tears mixed with knowledge. This very different man, who was something more than a man, truly loved her. He

would always love her. Through the good times, and the bad. His always made her feel beautiful and brave, strong and smart, and incredibly sexy. And he would love her with his dying breath.

“As long as what the king gets to have the queen gets to have, too.” She made him the promise, smiling through her tears. “And a shower will do nicely, for both of us later...much later...”

“Then come with me, my love and we shall see where this new journey takes us once more...” He gathered her in her silken cloak and scooped her up in his strong arms.

His legs were delightfully unsteady as he made his way through the louvered doors to her bedroom, kneeling on the edge of the bed to lay his love on the covers like a gift waiting to be unwrapped once more. He didn't need her breathless urging to ease his weight down beside her and welcome Catherine into his arms once more. And at the Beginning of Always, they each got their wish once again as dawning light filled the room with magic...



Sitting in his limo, in the lightening dawn, Elliot frowned at the frontage of Catherine's building. He knew she was in there, he had called her before leaving the museum, and made an impersonal contact with her answer phone. He had not left a message. When he rang again the busy signal mocked his frustration. He had given up on the third attempt knowing she was dismissing him.

His mouth turned down with distaste. The museum party had been a raging success and he'd made a huge splash with the press, got the undivided attention of the city fathers. But still he felt hollow and incomplete inside. He sighed, knowing it had always been that way, even when he was a young and untried youth. Finding someone to love had not been easy...

In the beginning he hadn't needed, or wanted, anyone to share the triumph with him. He grew accustomed to being alone by simple necessity. Now he was alone again, but not from choice. And the one he wanted was unattainable, for the foreseeable future. He had seen Catherine, and he knew his life would never be the same again...

Shafts of sunlight had already begun to paint the colours of the day by the time he'd arrived at her building. Elliot had sent his chauffeur to make discreet enquires and he was assured Ms. Chandler was at home, but no, she was not receiving any visitors. She had made that abundantly plain to the night guard. There were to be no exceptions, however powerful and ready with a significant cash persuasion.

Elliot's man had ascertained Catherine had returned alone and there was no sign of the powerfully built, French-costumed gentleman of the previous night at the museum. The man who had walked away with her right under Elliot's disbelieving eyes.

His hands itched to tear that fantastical cat-mask from the guy's face and uncover the real man, before he wrapped his fingers around his throat and squeezed the life from him. Probably not an easy task, given the size of the guy, but the street fighter within Elliot longed for some course of action, anything rather than this inert inaction. Frustration seethed through him.

"I know he's in there..." Elliot's eyes narrowed, as he studied Catherine's floor. "I can feel...and she wants him there with her." He wouldn't use the boy again, he had assured her of that and he would keep his word. "But there must be another way." He had to know...

“Did you say something, sir?” The chauffeur’s gaze met his in the rear vision mirror, his bored expression giving way to faint hope.

“Nothing of importance.” Elliot sighed heavily, casting one last lingering glance at the building before rolling up the window. “Very well, you can take me home. There is nothing more to be seen here...for now.” He remembered the whiskey bottle in his penthouse that was only half-full. He could do it some serious damage before returning to his office.

He hadn’t finished speaking before the car was put into motion and they drew smoothly away from the curb. Elliot’s hand clenched in his lap. There would be a next time. Catherine had said there would never be, but Elliot didn’t give up that easily. He was not cut from the cloth of a coward or someone who admitted defeat. One day she would need him again, and he would be there for her. He had so much to offer her, if only she would allow him to show her. What could the other guy possibly have, that he didn’t?

“Vincent...” Elliot breathed. The name rolled off his tongue and the taste was bitter. “I know you’re in there. Where and how you got in, I don’t know. But we will meet again, I can assure you of that. The game is not over yet. And next time I will win, see if I don’t...”

~THE END~

“Wherever you go, wherever you are, you stand for us, for our dream. You carry our light...That too is your destiny...”

Wherever the journey takes you, may you go with love...

~ C.J. La Belle