



“Will You Walk With Me...?”

By Judith Nolan

*“Is it the wind, over my shoulder?
Is it the wind that I hear gently whispering?
Are you alone, there in the valley?
No, not alone for you walk, you walk with me...”*

~ David Yazbek

“I have always loved coming here.” Catherine wrapped her hands tightly around Vincent’s upper arm, resting her head against his shoulder. “It’s so far from everything, from all our cares and worries. It has been such a magic place to me ever since I was a child spending my summers here with Dad. Now, to be here with you, to see it all in the sunshine, it’s everything we have been wishing for!”

“Yes...” Vincent leaned his cheek against her hair. “Everything...”

Before them the lake in Connecticut lay open and beautiful to the sun and blue sky. A light breeze ruffled the lake’s clear waters, lifting Vincent’s mane, causing the tawny strands to echo the wind’s rippling motion. They could have been alone in the universe and neither would have cared. This was their special world, a world all their own.

“It is a dream I had long thought impossible.” Vincent inhaled deeply, as he lifted one of Catherine’s hands to press her fingers against his lips. “But here we can suspend reality, perhaps even stop time itself.”

“And what would we do with that suspended time?” Catherine felt the deeply sensual contact of Vincent’s unique mouth against her flesh, as his moist tongue ran tentatively across the sensitive flesh of her palm, causing her to shiver with delight. How long had she wished he would touch her just like this? Would this be the one time he would choose not to pull back at the last possible moment to put the necessary distance between them, leaving her feeling bereft and so alone? It had always been like that. Vincent had always retreated in that final second before he lost his rigid self-control and all his good intentions.

Catherine rubbed her cheek against his arm. He deserved to be loved, without reservation. If only she could make him see that, that he deserved everything and more. And now...

“Now...now nothing stands between us and the ultimate fulfilment of our cherished dream.” Vincent answered her unspoken wish as he looked down at her. His seeking lips continued to torment her, nuzzling a gentle path along the warm skin of her inner wrist to where a pulse beat erratically. “It has been too long, Catherine, the final completion of our dream, of everything we have always wished for...”

“Well, nothing but our clothes and a quick walk back to the house stands in our way.” Catherine’s breathlessly shaky attempt at levity did nothing to alleviate the rising pressure of her blood singing deafeningly in her ears. Her heart was thundering like a subway train within the cage of her ribs, surely he could hear it? They had come so far, endured so much, for this moment, this place out of time. And this would truly be the first time, for both of them. Her whole body burned with long-suppressed need and rich anticipation. She had so much she wanted to teach him, show him, about her body and its clamouring expectations. Its blind wanting and needing. About mutual pleasure, giving and receiving.

“Oh Vincent, I do love you so.” She turned, melting into his welcoming embrace, readily accepting the first stroking touch of his mouth across hers, the full bottom lip and cleft upper where her seeking tongue seemed to find its own home and place. This was her Vincent, and she loved everything about him.

“I love you more than life itself.” he replied, and this time Vincent didn’t hesitate, caught up in the glory of the moment of fulfilment of their shared dream. Their mutual bond hummed with colours and sensations that ripped the breath from their lungs. Catherine staggered against him, gripping handfuls of his quilted grey vest, trying to steady legs that threatened to give way beneath her. In swift response Vincent’s seeking hands curved tightly around the rounded, twin globes of her trim backside, lifting and positioning her against the burgeoning thrust of his manhood at the heated angle of his jean-clad thighs. His black cloak floated outwards, high on the breeze, before closing about them like two great wings, moulding their entwined bodies seamlessly into one entity.

“Vincent, love me...” Catherine wove her fingers through his mane at his shoulders, responding to the sensation of his powerful body as he was cradling hers by wrapping her legs behind his back, marvelling at his seemingly boundless strength as he balanced her effortlessly within the shelter of his arms. Even as he began plundering her mouth she mused that perhaps they wouldn’t make it to the house after all...no matter, the grass beneath them was warmed by the sun and fragrantly thick, more than a cushion for their first venture into complete union where both their minds and bodies would blend at last.

“Catherine, you are truly mine...” Vincent groaned, bringing her closer still, his fingertips moving tantalisingly close to the apex of her thighs, where she throbbed and burned for his touch.

“Yes, I am yours...” Catherine pushed her lower body closer, wanting to embolden him to touch her even more intimately. “But I have always been yours, Vincent. You only have to ask.”

She deliberately slid one hand down his chest as she spoke, pushing between their bodies, reaching for the buckle of his belt, trying to unhitch it. Her questing fingers brushed across the front of his jeans, and Vincent's whole body bucked against hers. With deliberate intent she did it again, moulding and caressing, and he growled, deep in his throat. A delicious shiver of intent rippled along Catherine's spine. His questing fingers found their target, and her whole world became centred there.

This was how it was always meant to be, with the blood singing hotly in her ears, she thought she could hear distant bells. But it was no unearthly melody about love and promises made and kept, it was an increasingly strident clanging utterly at odds with the beauty and erotic fancy of this most pivotal moment in their relationship. She closed her eyes and groaned softly, trying to banish the sound as Vincent's mouth moved ever downwards towards the shadowed valley between the burgeoning fullness of her breasts. The buttons on her silk blouse were no match for one long-fingered hand that hooked into the opening at her throat and dispensed with them easily, tearing the delicate fabric aside. The lace and ribbon fabric of her bra also proved no effective barrier, soon following.

She didn't care, she barely even noticed. Warm summer sunshine stroked her naked skin. Throwing her head back, she arched her spine, offering Vincent further access to the creamy swell of her soft flesh, all caution, all barriers, down and trampled as if they never existed as her powerful lover bent his head, his seeking lips following the breeze's teasing path across her bare skin towards the aching, rose-coloured point of her left breast where she ached to be caressed.

But the ringing noise persisted, intruding more and more into the intensely erotic magic of the moment as Vincent growled her name, his deep voice filled with passion and need...

“For *pity’s* sake!” Catherine launched her body upright in her bed, batting the offending alarm clock to the floor in a fit of deep annoyance. It clanged its displeasure and fell silent. Dropping back onto her pillows, she groaned. *A dream, it had only been a wish filled dream.* Heaven help her, her whole body throbbed and shimmered from the unfulfilled anti-climax of it all.

“Get a grip, Chandler.” She ran distracted fingers up into the tumbled fall of her hair, raking dissatisfied fingernails against her scalp. Bitter disappointment stalked through her whole body on wings of latent fire. She inhaled, curling into a ball before turning onto her side and closing her eyes, willing the lake vision to return. But it was already far too late. Nothing but darkness lived behind her eyelids now. Vincent wasn’t there.

“Maybe it’s just as well.” She sighed and sat up, hugging the covers to her upraised legs, resting her chin on her knees. It had been a long-held dream of hers to show Vincent the lake house and her very special childhood place on its shore in the sunshine, just as he had shown her most of his childish haunts in the world Below. Of course she had never actually shared the dream with him, judging it would be too painful for both of them to even contemplate. Why wish for something you could never have?

“Oh, help, now what?” She could only pray that Vincent had not shared

in her vision. She huffed a mirthless laugh. That was unlikely. His ability to experience everything with her, good and bad, was the price they paid for depth of the connection they shared. Everything she was thinking and feeling...*everything*...he knew with her, through her. Catherine groaned. She wasn't even going to attempt an explanation. Though she doubted Vincent would ever broach the subject.

"Thanks for the help." She glanced derisively at the Regency romance novel she'd been reading before turning in. The more lurid passages must have followed her into her dreams. Jenny had thrust it into her hands over lunch the day before, excitedly declaring it a must-read from a brilliant new author and Catherine would just love it! The wildly erotic cover should have been a dead giveaway but Catherine, finding she had nothing else to read, had decided *why not? What could it hurt?*

"I should've known better. It's more to Edie's taste than mine. Stick to what you know. Dry depositions and boring legal-speak do not make you dream." Sighing, she reached to set the stranded alarm clock to rights. It was her own fault. Out of habit she had set the clock last night, forgetting today was Saturday. So now, not only was she wide awake at seven o'clock on her only day to sleep in, but she was also sensually frustrated and supremely embarrassed.

"Coffee..." she decided moodily, stretching her arms high above her head, ignoring the tautly peaked fullness of her breasts as they rose against the sheer fabric of her silk nightgown. She dropped her shoulders. "But a shower first."

She threw back the covers and set her feet on the floor with reluctance.

Padding into her bathroom she made ready to face the new day. She dared to hope Vincent had felt nothing and would be his usual self when he appeared on her balcony tonight, if he came at all. Perhaps, she dared to hope, he may have slept through the whole thing...

Coffee in hand, Catherine was crossing her living room towards her balcony doors for some fresh air when there was a sudden knocking on her front door. It startled her badly, causing hot coffee to go slopping over her hand. She swore under her breath, pressing her burnt fingers to her lips before hastily setting down the offending mug down on a nearby table. She approached the door reluctantly. Dressed in sloppy grey sweatpants and matching top, barefoot with damp hair swinging loosely around her shoulders, she was in no mood for company, but good manners insisted she at least see who was there.

“Who is it?” She pressed one eye to the peephole in her door.

“Guess.” A cheeky voice and even cheekier grin met her annoyed gaze.

“Come on, Cathy, open up. It can’t be that bad. Vincent said you were already awake. So I grabbed a cab and took a chance.”

“Devin...” Catherine fell back in disbelief. “How, I mean, when did you get back?”

“Door, Radcliffe, door,” Devin replied patiently, tapping his knuckles against the offending wood. “Come on, I’m sure I’ve seen it all before, as long as you’re decent, that is. Little brother would be right royally

annoyed if I broke in on you in the nude.” His chuckle deepened. “Let me in before the neighbours come asking and I have to lie to them about us.”

“All right, hang on.” Catherine sighed as she stepped back to release the bolts and unlock the door. She pulled it open. “Get in here, you idiot!”

“Great to see you too.” Devin’s dark eyes smiled down at her approvingly. “Sweatpants *and* wet hair...classy. You just in from the gym? Or am I interrupting something...?” His frowning gaze hunted around the room. “Got company? Anyone I might know?”

“Very funny, but that’s none of your business, anyway. But I am all alone and just got up from a failed lie-in.” Catherine turned away, her cheeks warming with embarrassment. “So when did you get back to New York?”

“Last night.” Devin looked strangely relieved as he entered the apartment, turning to close the door behind him. “Charles and I flew in from New Zealand. Hired a van, decided to drive over and see the folks. It’s been a while. I brought you a bribe, fresh croissants. Figured you wouldn’t have had time to eat yet.” He held out the large paper bag he was carrying. His nose lifted, scenting the air. “Coffee? Excellent! Best Columbian, if I’m not mistaken,” he mused hopefully. “I’m afraid Earl Grey just isn’t my cup of tea.” He glanced back at her with raised eyebrows. “If you get my meaning.” He chuckled at his own joke.

“Very well, sit down.” Catherine grimaced, as she took the bag, using it to indicate one of her chintz couches. “I’ll get us both a fresh cup. I have the feeling I’m going to need this.”

Devin's irreverent sense of humour had always been endearing. She felt a little lighter already. Maybe the day wouldn't be wasted after all. She opened the bag and inhaled the fragrant, buttery smell of fresh pastries.

"Just thinking..." Devin's raised voice followed her as she entered her small kitchen. "Those croissants would go really well with some of that strawberry preserve we had last time I was here, if you have any left, that is."

"I'll see what I can find," Catherine replied patiently, shaking her head. A good dose of Devin lifted her spirits immeasurably. *Maybe it was going to be all right after all...*

They carried their shared breakfast out onto the balcony, settling on the chairs at the tiny outdoor table with the easy companionship of old friends. Devin had kept up a steady stream of banter and anecdotes about the vineyard he and Charles owned on a small New Zealand island off the coast of that country's biggest city.

"You really need to see it one day," Devin encouraged, pulling a packet of photographs from the pocket of his leather jacket and spreading them out. "The whole place is just magic, a world away from here."

"Mmm, I can see that," Catherine murmured around a delicious mouthful of croissant and fruit preserve. She sorted slowly through the pictures of blue seawater bounded by verdant rocky coastlines. The many

snapshots also showed rows of ordered grapevines before a rambling, Tuscan-style house perched on a hill overlooking the vineyard. There were several shots of Charles, standing among the vines, wearing a broad grin and even larger black Phantom of the Opera t-shirt. “He must love it there.” She indicated the pictures of Devin’s companion and friend.

“Yeah.” Devin nodded. “It’s a private island, so he can be himself. We made sure we put up no trespassing signs everywhere. Visitors have to radio before they come ashore. It’s been good for him. See that shirt he’s wearing? He just loves the musical; says he can understand and empathize with Erik’s pain. He has such confidence in himself now. He even wants to use an old barn on the place to open a refuge where we would care for those children born disfigured like him for a time to allow their caregivers to take a break.” Devin shook his head. “I told him I’d think about it. I have to make sure he’s really ready to be seen.”

“It is very beautiful, Devin...” Catherine sighed, putting aside her half-eaten pastry before picking up her coffee. “Vincent would love it there too...” Her mouth turned down at the corners with unhappiness. Her early morning regrets returned to dampen her spirits. But she wasn’t about to share.

“Yeah...” Devin sighed. “My little brother deserves a break. Both of you do.” He glanced at her oddly, before sitting back to cradle his coffee between his palms. Suddenly he looked ill at ease. Like he wanted to ask her something, but didn’t quite know how to approach it. That wasn’t like Devin at all. He always spoke his mind, whatever the consequences.

“What...?” Catherine answered his look. She took a long swallow of coffee and waited.

Devin clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, his look of embarrassment deepening. “Well, look...” He shrugged and sighed, moving awkwardly in his chair. “Vincent and I sat up talking. Before we knew it, we’d talked the whole night through. You know, brothers just hanging out together, chewing the fat, catching up on all the juicy gossip. First thing this morning we decided to play a few games of chess with that new chess set Peter gave to him for his birthday...”

“Got the picture.” Catherine raised her eyebrows encouragingly. “”And so, what?”

“Well, all of a sudden Vincent went real quiet, you know how he can go so still you’d swear he wasn’t even there at all.” Devin gave a short laugh. “Mentally anyway. It’s like he goes away within himself, like he’s watching something only he could see. He sat like that for several minutes. But I could see whatever it was, it disturbed him deeply.” Devin rubbed a hand over his eyes. “Am I making any sense at all?”

“Some...” Catherine allowed cautiously, her breathing accelerating. “Go on, tell me the rest.”

Devin shrugged. “Then, after some time, he blinked and sorta half-jumped up, like he’d heard something startling. I was about to ask what was wrong, when he just fell back into his chair and put his hand over his eyes. I could have sworn he was trembling, like he’d just run a marathon or something. And if I didn’t know better I would also swear right then

that my little brother actually blushed, though it's hard to tell with all that hair hiding his face.”

“I don't see your point,” Catherine prevaricated. She saw it all too well. Vincent *had* witnessed her dream with her. They both had been startled by the alarm clock ringing. It made her squirm with embarrassment, while trying to maintain her carefully constructed expression of polite enquiry.

“Tell me I'm crazy.” Devin's outburst of disbelieving laughter tightened Catherine's already tense pose. “Ya gotta know my little brother hasn't blushed in years, not since we found out the truth about that human anatomy book Father always kept locked away in his desk. Then Vincent looked up, saw me watching him and went all squirrely on me. Wouldn't talk about it, said it was nothing. That he didn't want to worry me. He went on with the chess game as if nothing had happened. But he wasn't himself and he lost that game. He never loses these days, not to me.”

“If Vincent said it was nothing, then I don't see the problem.” Catherine tried to control the tell-tale flush of warmth seeping into her cheeks.

Devin shrugged as his dark eyes studied her look of frozen embarrassment. “It didn't look like nothing. I figured it had something to do with you two, and this intense emotional bond you share.” He tilted his head. “So I thought I would come and see you, see if you could shed any light on it.” He frowned as he glanced back at her apartment. “Not that it's any business of mine what you two do in your personal lives, but if I can I do anything to help...” He smiled deprecatingly. “I gotta be of some use. What else are big brothers for? Care to share?”

“No, it’s okay. It’s really nothing.” Catherine waved an airy hand, her attention suddenly becoming intent on shredding her half-eaten croissant into tiny pieces. Her heart quailed to think Vincent’s brother suspected she had been with someone else last night. “It was just a foolish wish and even more idiotic dream. Please forget it.” She glanced up. “But thank you for caring. More coffee?”

“I figured you’d say that.” Devin shrugged. “Just thought I’d ask. I’d do anything for my little brother, you know that, don’t you? Legal or otherwise.” He considered the bright flush of colour mantling her cheeks as she sat quietly in the early morning light. In his travels he had seen many beautiful women, and wonderfully exotic places. And he got to see things his little brother could only dream about, like the early morning, sunlit beauty of the woman Vincent loved so selflessly. Catherine was something truly special, and she deserved to be happy. They both did. It was a crying shame they weren’t already together, making babies, and each other, deliriously happy.

“It doesn’t have to be a dream, you know...” Devin continued gently, his dark gaze deeply serious. “If it was the sort of dream I think it was...the sort where you and Vincent get time to spend alone, together, like you really deserve.” He sat back to push one hand into the pocket of his jeans, drawing out a ring of keys, dangling them before Catherine’s startled gaze. “Without interruptions, work or duties to keep you apart.” He shook the keys pointedly. “I have the means, if you have the will and the trust in my considerable abilities to make it so. Help me out here, Cathy.”

“Please Devin, you can’t be serious!” Catherine stared open-mouthed at the keys. For a moment she allowed herself to dream. Could it truly be possible, the lake, her house, all of it? Only two hours away and yet it might as well have been on the other side of the world. It could never happen, it was much too dangerous, *and yet...*

“Don’t overthink it,” Devin urged quickly as he sat forward, seeing the unconscious weakening of her rigid stance. “Just go with it and know I would never do anything to hurt you or Vincent. I love you both too much to ever allow any harm to come to you. But you forget who helped your extremely stubborn beloved to be in the world. I taught him just about everything he knows. Besides, it’s early spring down in New Zealand. Charles and I can spare a few weeks, spend some time with the folks. We wanna take some time to re-connect with everyone. We won’t need the van for that.”

“A few weeks...” Catherine echoed blankly. “Oh no, I could only spare one day. Two at the most...”

“Ah, but you’re thinking about it. Good girl. That’s half the battle.” Devin’s relieved grin dared her to deny the truth. “So my devious plan is working.” He jangled the ring of keys enticingly. “Charles and I will guard the world Below and guard it well. Charles is family now, too. He’s even taken the name of Wells as his own. He swears he would never let anything happen to Father and the others. They would be safe with us.”

Catherine put a shaking hand to her throat. “And my father is away with Kay in the Bahamas right now, so he won’t miss me for a few days. He needed to rest and get some sun. They are talking two weeks. I was

supposed to go with them, but my work-load...” She looked up. “I’ll have to leave a message for him on my answering machine, or he’ll worry. But if he knows I’ve taken a few days off and gone up to the lake...” Her gaze narrowed. “Could we really do this?”

“I’ll drive the van around to the Fourteenth Street entrance as soon as it’s dark. That will be the safest way for Vincent to come Above. Once you’re both in the van, you can drive it wherever you plan on going. And don’t worry about Vincent, Charles likes to travel in comfort, so the back of the van has been well equipped and in style.”

“Connecticut...” Catherine said slowly. “We have a house on a lake up there, but it’s closed at this time of year. There’s only the old caretaker who lives in the village. No one else goes there now...” Catherine’s nervous fingers rotated her coffee cup slowly. “And I do have my own set of keys. It is what I dreamed about last night when I...when Vincent and I...” Her colour deepened and she lowered her head. Her hair swung forward, concealing her expression.

“And Joe...?” Devin prompted after several moments of contemplative silence. “What will you tell him?”

“I will manage somehow.” Catherine looked up. “I’m owed some time off. There’s nothing urgent he can’t get one of the interns to handle. So he can’t complain too loudly, I hope.” She flashed a smile. “A pity we can no longer call on the services of Jeff Radler.”

“A rogue.” Devin waved a dismissive hand. “An out and out scoundrel, couldn’t trust that man an inch.” He grinned. “Now Devin Wells, he’s your

go-to guy, he can turn his hand to anything. Together we can make it work, Cathy. You have my word on that.” He stretched his arm across the table to grasp one of her hands.

“I know.” Catherine pushed her plate of shredded croissant aside. “It’s not you I’m concerned about. He will never agree.”

“Vincent?” Devin nodded slowly. “He will take some convincing. This will be way out of his comfort zone, and Father’s. No doubt he will have something to say too. But you guys deserve the very best of everything and I’m sure I can square it with the old man. Vincent’s your department.”

“They both will take a lot of convincing...” Catherine returned his grasp before pushing back her chair and rising. “I guess there’s no time like the present. I need to change and phone Joe. He will tell me he can’t spare me, but I can swing it if I argue my case. He’ll just have to manage without me for a few days. Then shall we go Below?”

“That’s my girl.” Devin stood, coming around the table to hug her, planting a kiss in her hair. “Sometimes I wish I’d seen you first.” He laughed at her startled look before releasing her to gather the dishes. “Together, you know, we would’ve made one terrific lawyer.”

“But then we would have only been half a very good fraud,” Catherine quipped lightly, watching him for a few moments before hurrying to change. There were so many contradictory layers to Vincent’s big brother, she wondered if anyone would ever truly know him...

Devin put a detaining hand on Catherine's arm, halting her before the entrance to Vincent's chamber. "I'll go make the arrangements while you put your case. Then I'll talk to Father and sooth his concerns. Don't worry about the old man, I can handle him. I've had years of practice." He transferred his hand to the small of her back, giving her a gentle shove. "Go on now, make me proud. Don't let my little brother wriggle out of going." He grinned lopsidedly before disappearing into the shadows.

Catherine stared after him, not envying him his confrontation with his ultra-wary parent. But she wasn't about to give up now.

Biting her bottom lip, she stepped forward with trepidation into the chamber. Vincent looked up from the book he was reading. She smiled at him, fully aware he already knew of her approach and her emotional turmoil. She watched him for several moments without speaking, just absorbing the welcome sight of her love.

"Hello, Vincent." She finally moved slowly to his side. "What are you reading?"

"Dylan Thomas." Vincent held her gaze as he said the lines without reference to the book, *"And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns about the happy yard and singing as the farm was home, In the sun that is young once only, Time let me play and be Golden in the mercy of his means, And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the Calves Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked*

clear And Cold, And the Sabbath rang slowly In the pebbles of the holy streams...

Catherine stared at him mutely for several heartbeats after he stopped speaking, before she finally whispered, "That was so beautiful...please go on. Finish it for me. How does it end?"

"We are both know how it ends and I'm aware it's not bucolic poetry you came here for today." Vincent looked away. "I thought it was relevant to the moment." He looked back, his blue eyes were deeply shadowed in the flickering candlelight. "No doubt you will agree." His lips compressed. "You have been having dreams, Catherine. Dreams you chose not to share with me."

"I came here because of my dream..." Catherine moved closer, not touching him, but watching his reaction closely. "But I...I'm not sure what I can tell you about that. How to explain it all." Warmth flowed into her cheeks. "I was reading this silly book last night and I--"

"I know..." Vincent interrupted her regretfully. He sighed deeply. "It was only a dream, Catherine, nothing more. We cannot control our subconscious mind, our wishes and hopes." He dropped his eyes. "I too have dreamed thus," he confessed so softly she almost missed his words. Before she could react he grimaced and continued, "Dreams cannot hurt us, but they can expose what we strive to keep hidden. And, after all, it is a wish we both share. But it can be no more than that. The dangers are many and unavoidable, however we may wish it was not so."

“Are you so sure, Vincent?” She reached to place one hand on his arm where it rested on the table beside the open book. “Why can’t it be more than just a dream? If we both wish it to be more than we have now?”

“All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream...” Vincent sighed roughly. “Poe knew what he was talking about. All we truly have is the dream, Catherine. The reality is far too dangerous to ever contemplate. You know I am correct.”

“Okay...stop right there. I disagree.” Catherine grasped a nearby chair and dragged it close to him. She sat down, seizing one his hands within hers. “What we have is truly special, Vincent. It can survive anything. Everything! Won’t you at least think about it? Discuss the possibilities.”

“Why, Catherine? It serves no purpose, except to hurt you, and I cannot bear to see you in pain.”

“Because we don’t have to settle for just a dream.” She drew a steadying breath, marshalling her arguments, as she did when examining a witness in court. And she *was* a very good lawyer. She needed all her persuasive skills now.

“When I was young, we used to spend our summers at a lake up in Connecticut. It is so beautiful there! Down by the lake I had a secret place, a safe place that only I knew about. To me as a child it seemed wild and free. Sometimes I would go there all day, just to hide in the long grass and dream about the man I would one day meet and marry.”

She smiled, her gaze becoming unfocussed and dreamy. “It was deep

and green, the grass was taller than me, and many times I felt as if I were the only person alive on Earth. Tucked away deep in all that fragrant, summertime smell, I felt safe and cherished, as if nothing could ever hurt or harm me. It was a feeling I hated to let slip away as I grew older and my whole world changed forever.” Her breathing hitched.

“Yes...” Vincent nodded slowly. “I too have my safe places, my hidden places where I once dreamed as a child.” Slowly he shut the book of poetry, laying his free hand on the cover. “But then I grew up and that time is in the past.”

Catherine sighed at his unwillingness to discuss the subject.

“Sometimes, when I was older...” She glanced down at her hands still holding his so tightly. “After my mother died, I would go to my secret place and sit there for hours. Just sit there. And if I sat very still, sometimes a couple of deer would walk by, and not even notice me. I wished I could reach out and touch them. It seemed...so enchanted, so blessed. As if Mom was still near, watching over me, keeping me safe...”

She looked up at Vincent. “And it seemed so far from everything, the city, my life, my work. It was as if I existed in a different dimension. It was my only safe place...until you found me that night, Vincent. Now *you* watch over me.” She moved closer, perching on the edge of her chair in her eagerness to convey her message. “I believe we can do it. The lake *is* only two hours from here. I would love you to see it all...with me. We can make our own special world there. No one would disturb us. It would be so wonderful if you could finally see it for yourself.”

“You make it seem so easy. I *can* see it, through you. I wish—”

“Devin says we must try. We could be there tonight. He will arrange everything.”

“Devin?” Vincent frowned. “But we *are* already there. You have taken me with your words, shown me everything, as I have shown you all my secrets places. We can ask no more of fate, Catherine. Devin shouldn’t be putting such thoughts into your head. He has a way of making things appear easier than they are. It’s his special gift.”

“But he *is* right in this case. Why not?” Catherine tightened her grip on his hands. “I would dearly love to show it all to you, share it with you. I don’t feel I am asking for much at all. Just the chance for the two of us to be alone...together. It is a truly magical place.”

Vincent shook his head slowly, regretfully. “Catherine...” His breath rushed from him. “No, it cannot be. We both know that. I will speak with Devin—”

“*No!* No...” Catherine interrupted hotly. Threatened with the complete dismissal, however gentle, of all she and Devin had planned, her spine stiffened. “He meant well and I agree with him. Vincent, please. If you saw what I wish to show you, you would understand all that it means to me. Then the wonder of this place would be ours alone, always and forever.”

She shook his hand between hers. “Two days, that is all I am asking for. Two days and we will make memories that will last for a lifetime. Surely you can spare them?”

Vincent lifted their clasped hands to his lips, kissing her fingertips before resting his cheek against their linked fingers. “In a perfect world, I could truly wish for nothing more than to be with you and have you show me... everything. I too believe in magic places.”

“There you are, then.” Catherine leaned closer, pulling her hand from his grasp to lay her palm against his cheek, forcing him to look at her. “So, if there is a way, if Devin can make it so, would you agree to come with me to see everything?”

Vincent pulled away sharply, from her touch and her beguiling nearness. “Please don’t ask me to choose. It is impossible!”

“No it isn’t, Vincent.” Catherine forged ahead heedless of his objections. “All we really need is the means to escape the city unseen and arrive there safely. Devin’s van is perfect. He says he doesn’t need it. He would bring it around to the Fourteenth Street entrance. We could drive up at night. No one spends time at the lake at this time of year, so we would have it all to ourselves. He has promised that he and Charles will guard the tunnels while you are away. He’s already speaking with Father.”

“It seems my big brother has assembled his arguments well.” Vincent frowned as he pondered Catherine's daring plan. *Could it work?* His love seemed so sure of herself, of her ability to achieve a result that didn’t endanger either of them. But then Devin could make anyone believe the moon was made of blue cheese, if he put his mind to it.

“I’ve already checked the weekend’s weather forecast, and there’s no snow up there yet. So it won’t be too cold.” Catherine watched him closely. “If we can make it happen will you allow me to take you there?”

“You seem so sure.” Vincent’s chest tightened. The hopeful look in her eyes tore at him, and worse, it called to something he knew he wanted as much as she did. *But the risks...* “It is something I never even dared to hope could ever happen. How can it be?”

“Because we wish it to be.” Seeing his cautious disposition weakening she pressed her advantage. “To go there, to share that with you would mean so much, more than you could ever imagine. We are doing this for us. We are finally going to be alone...together.”

The words hung trembling between them like talismans, as if hearing them spoken would make it so. Catherine held her breath, watching and waiting.

“Very well, Catherine...” Vincent finally conceded on a sigh. “Then, for both our sakes, we must allow Devin to be our fairy godmother.” His broad shoulders slumping, he groaned as he shook his head. “I cannot believe I just said that. This is sheer madness...”

“Oh, Vincent, thank you!” Catherine’s radiant smile was his reward. She jumped to her feet and threw herself happily into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him soundly before he could react. “You will not regret this! With Devin as our fairy godmother, what could go wrong?”

“Oh, Catherine.” Vincent huffed a deeply sceptical laugh. “I have found that once Devin puts himself in charge of anything, you can only hang on tight and ride out the storm. When I was a child, I soon came to understand Dorothy’s predicament in The Wizard of Oz. I often felt caught up in the undeniable whirlwind that was my brother’s schemes and plans.”

“But he seemed so sure he could pull it off...” Catherine worried the point. “You know him better than I do. If you truly think--” Her brows drew together in consternation.

“Don’t worry.” Vincent leaned down to kiss away her frown. “The only thing we are likely to see and hear that is both beautiful and frightening at the same time is a thunder storm. Will you come ride the lightning with me, my love?”

“Try and stop me.” Catherine enclosed his face with her hands, smiling into his sapphire eyes. “And don’t forget, we’re riding this storm together...always.”

In the end it was ridiculously easy to escape to Connecticut. They waited only for the first hint of full darkness to descend, ensuring no one was around to see them depart. Devin had dealt exceedingly well with Father’s fears and concerns. But the old man refused to give his blessing to the trip, saying he would anxiously await their return. Vincent’s big brother and Charles were more upbeat and adamant nothing would happen while the two lovers were away. And as Devin

had promised, the van was waiting at the Fourteenth Street entrance, fully fuelled and ready.

“For this I will owe you everything.” Cloaked and hooded against the possibility of discovery, Vincent grasped his brother’s hand. “But you must contact us immediately, if anything happens. Catherine assures me the lake house has a phone. You have the number. You will promise me that?”

“Of course, little brother,” Devin replied easily. “But nothing will go wrong. So relax and enjoy yourself. This is supposed to be an adventure, with the woman you love. Remember that and you’ll be fine.” He grinned, punching Vincent lightly in the shoulder. “We’ve loaded all the supplies you will need. Everyone’s chipped in. Everybody wanted to be part of this adventure.”

“Just exactly who is ‘everyone’?” Catherine paused on her way to the driver’s door. “Who have you told about this? I thought this was supposed to be our secret.”

“Just those who needed to know. You would be missed otherwise, and we don’t want to cause a panic. Now come on, you can’t hang around here, just waiting to be seen. Your chariot awaits.” Devin ushered them towards the van with a flourish after checking that the coast was clear and they were unobserved. “You’re finally going to get away, do the whole couple’s thing, going out together or staying in, it’s up to you, I guess.” He winked broadly. “Make the most of it, guys.”

“Thanks, Devin. I think I have it from here.” Catherine gave him a

warning frown before going up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “We’ll talk more about it when we get back.” She circled the front of the van and climbed in behind the steering wheel.

“All part of the Wells family service!” Vincent’s brother quipped, grinning wickedly as he closed the side door on Vincent, after hugging his brother and wishing him well. He stood back. “Now get going before I change my mind.”

Needing no further encouragement, Catherine nodded before putting the van in motion and drawing smoothly away from the curb. Once they were on the street and moving, Vincent felt better. The van was completely enclosed, so the only view he had was of the back of Catherine’s head and the view through the windscreen of the passing cityscape of darkness and street lights. He looked around the van. Charles obviously liked to travel in comfort, for the back of the vehicle was well stocked with blankets and pillows. There was even a large, low-slung, over-stuffed old armchair that looked invitingly comfortable and a cardboard box stuffed with all sorts of snacks and drinks.

Vincent turned away to peer out and watch New York pass by, but he didn’t comment, sensing Catherine’s attention was on the trip ahead, and her eagerness to for them both to gain both the security and safety of the house at the lake. For now they were still within familiar territory. He knew the city even better than Catherine, having roamed its darkened streets for most of his life. Vincent could count on both hands the number of tunnel entrances he could safely reach from here. It quieted the demons of doubt that still lurked, whispering in the back of his mind. He was doing this for Catherine, because she wished it to be

so.

And then they began to accelerate, as the city fell away behind them and the darkening countryside beckoned. Slowly the city's sprawling reach began to dwindle, until only a few distant lights showed any signs of habitation. Vincent positioned himself carefully just behind the high back of the passenger seat, so he could see out and not be seen by any chance glance, not that there seemed to be many people about.

Time lengthened, running swiftly away beneath the van's wheels. He relaxed back against the rumbling side of the van, the rhythms of the vehicle keeping him in tune with all that was happening around him. He felt keyed-up and excited, and also full of trepidation. He was leaving behind all he knew and cared for. He shook his head.

All but the one who mattered most....*save one, one only, when Catherine had stood forlorn*...he knew he was mangling Wordsworth's beautiful poetry, but the sentiment fit perfectly. It was from the poem Catherine had read to him in his chamber, after she had saved him from that cage, from the certain and horrible death that had awaited him. She had looked up from finishing the poem and smiled at him, everything she was feeling and thinking there for him to see in her unwavering gaze.

She had never looked more beautiful than in that single moment, and his heart had done all sorts of crazy cartwheels and summersaults as he had locked eyes with her. It had been torture not to rise and go to her, to make her aware of all he was thinking and feeling in that moment. In that moment he would have agreed to do anything for her, go anywhere with her. All she had to do was reach out her hand and he would have been

lost to all caution. Long afterwards he became thankful she did not, because there was no guarantee they would have been left alone. And for what he had in mind right then, required complete privacy. But the moment was lost...

Catherine had fought for him. She had saved the best of him that night. He knew then that she loved him without question, and she had been prepared to die for him. It was that simple.

He knew that singular truth from the first moment they met, and that he too would die for her. He turned the thought over in his head. She had asked nothing more of him tonight, only that he accompany her on this journey of faith and rediscovery of her childhood home. He reflected on how much he had shown her within the security of the tunnels, but how little he truly knew of her world beyond the darkness and security of its hidden places. She asked that he allow her to show him something of her life before they met. Was he also prepared to live for her, *with her*, in whatever place she brought him to see? There would be none of the usual interruptions there, the comings and goings of tunnel life that often intruded, nor the imminent threat of the coming dawn to draw him away from her balcony and her side.

Alone...together, she had said back in his chamber. Vincent cocked his head, looking into the middle distance, contemplating all that those two simple words entailed. "Alone...together," he breathed.

"You're very quiet. Care to share what you're thinking right now?" Catherine slanted him a glance over her shoulder as they suddenly swung off the highway onto a lesser road that ran away into rolling hills

dotted with trees. Soon the full moon would rise even higher into the star-studded, black ink of the sky, making the turnings Catherine had so often taken only in daylight, more visible and certain. “It won’t be long now.” She smiled. “You are allowed to talk to the driver, you know.”

“I was thinking about how happy I am that you wish to share your childhood with me. I have shared so much with you already,” Vincent prevaricated, not quite ready to admit the whole truth.

Catherine’s slanted glance told him she didn’t believe him, but the bond between them hummed with happiness and anticipation of the days to come. Vincent didn’t wish to dampen her spirits by telling her how profound this whole experience was becoming for him, how much it marked out who they were to each other and what they were becoming. Devin had termed it ‘doing the couple’s thing’. Vincent’s mouth curved. Trust his irreverent brother to reduce something magical and breathtaking to the simplest of terms. And he couldn’t tell his love how daunting he found it to be away from all he knew and was familiar with. Here, he was going strictly on trust and trusting the one person he loved above all else.

The van slowed as it approached a large, padlocked gate. The headlights showed it closed off all access beyond the extensive wire fence that ran away into the darkness on either side. Suddenly they came to an abrupt stop behind a vehicle blocking their access to the gate. “Uh-oh, darn...” Catherine’s chagrined mutter jerked him upright. “I should have known...”

“What is it?” Vincent’s every sense went on high alert. He shrank back

into the shadows of the van's interior, scanning to see in which direction the threat may be coming from. He would fight to protect Catherine at all costs, but out here, in alien territory...

"It's all right, Vincent. I am sorry about this," Catherine cast the swift apology over her shoulder. "It's only old Mr. O'Leary. My father must have phoned my apartment and gotten my message that I was taking a few days off up here. He's obviously turned the poor caretaker out of his bed to make sure everything is up to snuff and it for purpose." She sighed as she opened the driver's door and prepared to alight. "Dad always likes to make sure things are properly taken care of where I'm concerned. He leaves nothing to chance. Stay there, I won't be long." She slipped into the darkness.

Vincent listened intently to the resultant conversation. An older man with a querulous voice was asking questions and receiving answers that appeared to mollify him. He seemed unsure why anyone would wish to visit the lake at this time of year, but he was prepared to make allowances for the mysterious and incomprehensible whimsies of his rich employer. Then came the sound of a rattling chain before Catherine returned behind the steering wheel to guide them beyond an opened gate which was swiftly closed behind them. A large metal sign declaring this to be '**Private Land**' and '**All Trespassers Would Be Dealt With Severely**' moved beyond Vincent's watchful gaze.

Again, Catherine alighted to thank the old man, who muttered something in reply as he securely double padlocked the gate, checking his work carefully, before returning to his own vehicle. Catherine remained standing beside their van waving goodbye until the car was out of sight.

Then she climbed back behind the wheel and they were on their way once more.

“Poor O’Leary likes his routines,” Catherine offered in explanation, as the van travelled easily down a broad, well-maintained gravel drive set between the towering black shapes of two uniform rows of massive old oak trees. “When my father closes the house at the end of every summer it’s almost like a sacred ritual. There’s even a small ceremony of handing over the gate keys, and a solemn promise to see each other again next summer. To have the gate re-opened for the family or visitors in the winter is completely against the poor old man’s beliefs. But he has done his job and restocked everything in record time.” She laughed softly. “My father is in for one heck of a tongue-lashing in the summertime.”

“To put you all to so much trouble...” Vincent shook his head.

“It isn’t any trouble.” Catherine glanced at him, before returning her attention to the road ahead. “It’s very much my pleasure. I have always wanted to show you this.” She smiled. “And besides, we’re already here...”

As she spoke she turned a corner, and a whole new vista was revealed. Gliding to a halt, she turned the key in the ignition, cutting the engine, and the absolute silence poured into the resulting vacuum. Catherine turned in her seat to smile at Vincent. “Welcome to Dunrowan, my love.” She climbed into the back, before opening the side door and they both looked out in silence.

“It is truly beautiful...” Vincent breathed, as he leaned forward carefully. What he saw was like something out of a fairy story and a dream, all wrapped up in the silvery moonlight reflecting in the mullioned windows.

“Come on, come and see!” his love begged him. Under the urging insistence of a tugging hand on his arm, he stepped from the security of the van into the unknown.

Like a chocolate box painting, the sprawling house owned its dominant place on a small hill surrounded by well-tended flower gardens and immaculately kept lawns. Everything was picture perfect. Whatever Vincent had been expecting, it was not this. The necessary ramshackle untidiness and cramped conditions of the tunnels had no reference here. Here, even the rocks and stones had their own appointed places. The tiny stream that tinkled and played among them, as it ran away into the middle distance before vanishing into the fern-smothered and tree-lined edge of the gardens, was contained and managed within its neatly manicured banks. There was nothing of the wildness and scale of the Great Falls here. Man had firmly stamped his will over nature, and she obviously knew her place.

Trying to absorb it all, Vincent turned full-circle, his cloak billowing out around him like a dark cloud on the chill, night wind. Folding her arms across her body against the bite of the wind, Catherine watched him speculatively, absorbing the incredible tableau of the man she loved so deeply standing among the ordered beauty of her childhood world. It did indeed seem like a dream, but if it was a dream, she was in no hurry to wake from it.

“We’re finally here,” she remarked, rather unnecessarily.

“Yes we are...” Vincent had been probing the shadows, all the hidden places, searching for any signs of life or danger, but he could sense nothing and no-one beyond the lonely call of a night-bird in the distance.

He turned back to smile at Catherine, as she moved to stand before him, becoming bathed in the unearthly light of the moon as she stepped out of his shadow. In a breath-taking echo of the first time she saw him fully, she lifted her hands to either side of his head, slowly pushing back the hood of his cloak, exposing the flaxen tumble of his mane to the moon’s silvering glow. He looked incredible and her knees went a little weak.

She wondered if he could guess what she was thinking right now, knowing full well he would catch the essence of her thoughts. Green eyes collided with sapphire blue as Vincent stood quiescent beneath her touch. Slowly she returned his smile, inhaling quickly as Vincent extended one fingertip to lightly run down the smooth curve of her cheek, halting at the corner of her parted lips.

Vincent held it there, sensing the swift rush and flow of her breathing feathering past his skin. He was about to go further, to move his finger across her mouth when he saw a shiver run through her in the same moment. It trembled along the strands of their shared connection. Despite Catherine’s jeans, yellow sweater and heavy leather jacket, she was feeling the cold wind biting through. Dressed as he was in several layers of serviceable tunnel clothing, the early fall’s bite didn’t penetrate to his skin, but Catherine wasn’t so used to the seasonal chill.

“You need to be inside, and warm.” Breaking the spell, he wrapped his arm around her, drawing her close against his side beneath the shelter of his cloak as they walked towards the house on the hill. “Come on, I want you to show me your house. Later, I’ll fetch our bags inside.”

“All right...” Catherine ducked her head, not willing to share that the shiver that ran through her was not entirely caused by the cold. It was caused by the anticipation of the days, and single night, ahead of them, and what those precious hours could mean, to both of them. If only her love would allow his guard down and let her into those most private places within him. But for now she permitted Vincent to take charge. It was, after all, what he did best.

*“You've gotta dance like there's nobody watching,
Love like you'll never be hurt,
Sing like there's nobody listening,
And live like it's heaven on earth...”*

~ **William W. Purkey**

The fire crackled cheerily in the grate. Ever the resourceful boy-scout, Vincent had the logs burning in no time. Cocooned in a blanket and

firmly settled on the enormous couch in front of the large stone hearth, Catherine watched Vincent move about the room. He had quietly refused her offer of her father's master bedroom, instead choosing the smaller guest room next to hers. Each bedroom was equipped with its own bathroom. There had been no further discussion on the subject, Vincent had simply moved into the other room and placed his large hold-all bag at the end of the bed. The boxes of tunnel supplies disappeared into the large farm kitchen at the back of the house.

Catherine chuckled as she looked over the back of the couch into Vincent's room. He certainly travelled lighter than she. Her three bags had been delivered to her room without comment, though she had seen his frown that was universal to all men. *Just exactly how many days were you planning on staying here?*

"Hungry?" She slanted a look up at him as he came to stand behind the couch. "I'm sure I can find the means to make us some dinner."

"No, Catherine..." When she would have thrown aside her blanket and risen, Vincent placed a firm hand on her shoulder, pushing her back again. "Father didn't allow for any slackers Below. He made sure all the boys learned to cook. I can prepare a meal." He shrugged. "William has always been a very able and talented teacher, if not known for his patience. When Devin finally crossed him one too many times, he insisted on calling him Mother behind his back. We prayed constantly William would never find out. But my little brother became the only chef among us. Of course he always excelled at everything he turned his mind to achieving."

“Well you know where the kitchen is.” Catherine settled back reluctantly beneath his warning gaze. “Shout if you need any help.”

It seemed only a matter of minutes before they were settled cross-legged on the rug before the fire, toasting thick slices of William’s crusty darkly-grained bread on long forks before slathering them with freshly-turned butter dug from a carved stone jar and a variety of smaller pots containing savoury spreads, all provided by the capable hands of the tunnel world’s versatile cook.

“This is heaven.” Catherine licked butter and mouth-watering savoury preserve from her fingers before reaching for another slice of home-made bread to toast. “How is it you all don’t get fat eating food like this?”

“William believes in feeding us to the best of his ability.” Vincent speared another slice of bread and held it out just above the greedily licking flames. “He is extremely proud of his store cupboards. They are packed full against the lean times that are always just around the corner. Or when we have too many new mouths to feed and the helpers are short of supplies themselves.”

“Oh...” Catherine’s fresh slice of laden toast hovered before her open mouth. She closed her lips without eating. The toast sank slowly towards her plate. “I’m sorry, Vincent. I didn’t think.” She waved her hand at the box of staples William had provided. “All of this, it was very thoughtful and wonderful, but so precious to your world.”

Vincent reached to clasp her hand, stilling her agitation. “William was extremely proud to be able to supply us for this trip,” he said gently. “He

would be deeply offended if we didn't consume his offerings."

"Are you sure?" Catherine's brows drew together in concern. "I mean—"

"*Extremely* disappointed," Vincent interrupted, emphasising the word. "Everyone chipped in to help. If you feel so strongly about it, you can repay them in other ways."

"Well, I know for a fact the cupboards in the kitchen will be bulging. O'Leary would have left nothing to chance." Catherine's slice of toast rose with her decision. "We can load all of it in the van for the journey home."

"Home..." Vincent mused, looking around at the large room with its paintings and expensive furnishings. Soft music playing in the background underscored the crackle and hiss of the pine log fire. Catherine had forsaken the use of electric lighting in favour of candles, giving the whole room a familiar and welcome ambience. It truly was another world, one Vincent was totally unaccustomed to, and yet...his eyes tracked back to Catherine. With her here beside him, perhaps anything could be truly possible, after all...

It was the faint glow of sunlight piercing the curtains that woke Vincent early the next morning. He and Catherine had played cards and talked well into the night. Each seemed reluctant to broach the subject of retiring to bed first. In the end, when he saw Catherine was struggling to keep her eyes open, Vincent had banished her to the comforts of her

own room while he cleared and tidied the big living room. When he dared to peek in on her, she was already fast asleep, curled up on her side like a child, her cheek resting on her upraised hand. He watched her sleep for several heartbeats, before closing the door quietly and retreating to his own room.

Now the early morning sunlight painted colours and patterns behind his closed lids he had never seen before. Brought fully awake by the sounds of activity beyond his closed bedroom door, Vincent rose quickly and padded into the adjoining bathroom before getting dressed and going in search of his love.

He had no idea what to expect, but he soon discovered Catherine had been very busy. Dressed in old, well-worn jeans, sturdy work boots and a man's thick woollen shirt, that fell well below her knees, and with her hair pulled back in a no-nonsense pony-tail, she looked about seventeen and eminently desirable. Vincent fought against the illicit temptation to reach for her fragrant softness. This newly precious state of complete aloneness was opening up new thoughts and needs within him. But he was uncertain of the direction they may take if allowed free rein.

Just as he was congratulating himself on his restraint she looked up and saw him. In the next instant she was in his embrace, throwing her arms around his neck. She wriggled against him, setting off all sorts of warning bells and cautioning voices in the back of his mind. But he couldn't resist pulling her closer still, burying his face in her hair and releasing a cleansing sigh.

"Hi, sleepy-head," Catherine murmured against his quilted vest. "I've

been up for hours. We have places we need to be.”

“I can see you have been working hard.” Vincent looked behind her to where a packed picnic basket sat with two large tartan blankets folded atop its wide cane lid.

Catherine released him with a regretful sigh. “We will need to get going before the sun rises too high.” She indicated the basket. “I have packed everything we will need for the day. We can go to my secret place and see it all. We will return to the house as the sun goes down. Less worry over being seen, if anyone happens to be around. Not much chance of that though.”

She was thinking solely of his safety, against the possibility someone may stumble on them accidentally. She was determinedly to secret them in her hidden sanctuary, where they could relax and be undisturbed by the outside world.

After pulling on her leather jacket, she came to lean against his chest again with the ease of long familiarity. “Have I told you lately how much I love you, Mr. Wells?”

“Not since last night...” Vincent whispered, drinking in all of her as she smiled up at him. He dropped a lingering kiss into her bangs, before smoothing them out of her eyes with a gentle finger.

“Thanks.” Catherine gazed at him solemnly. Then she went up on tiptoe to kiss his lowered cheek. Without the benefit of her high-heels, he towered over her, filling her vision to exclusion. It made her feel

cherished and very special to be so small beside his powerful frame and today she planned on making Vincent feel exactly the same. They did have all day...*and the coming night*. Her plans were laid, now all remained was to put them into action.

They left the house cautiously, Vincent carrying the picnic basket as Catherine went before him, carefully checking the immediate horizon for any sign of intruders. A softly floating mist blanketed the hollows of the land, hiding the contours of hill and tree trunks. Vincent turned his keen sight inwards and his acute senses could detect nothing that could threaten them. He pulled the hood of his cloak up over his head, concealing his face within.

Satisfied that they were alone, Catherine quickly returned to snag Vincent's free hand and draw him after her. They followed the tiny stream's path through the garden and into the trees, until it disgorged into a wide meadow full of waving fall-yellowed grass and several clumps of stubbornly rambling late blooming roses. Beyond the meadow, through the surrounding trees, Vincent caught sight of a body of dark, restless water. Finally he was about to see Catherine's cherished lake.

"Come on!" Catherine tugged at his hand, urging him across the meadow to the far side. They left the tree line and stood for a long time on a large outcropping of rock overlooking the sweeping vista of the lake. The distant shore was made invisible by the same drifting mist. The lake's restless darkness lapped at the shore, rustling through the pebbles and hissing in retreat before making a fresh assault. The early morning sun, rising behind them, tipped the restless waves with gold, glinting diamond sparks off the water through the mist.

“This side of the lake is ours. My father has put up signs everywhere to make sure people understand this side is private property. Over the other side there’s a campground that opens only in the summer. Occasionally people stray across to this side. I think sometimes my father wishes he could put up a fence right down the middle but it would spoil the view. This whole place used to belong to my mother’s parents.”

“It is beautiful,” Vincent remarked quietly. “Thank you for showing it to me. I will always remember it. And you were right, it is better seeing it for myself.”

“In the summer we would swim here all the time.” Catherine leaned against his shoulder. “A pity it will be too cold now.”

Vincent looked down at her. “It is never warm beneath the Great Falls and I swim there all the time.” He lifted his gaze to the restless dark water. “I’m game if you are.”

“I’ll think about it.” Catherine shuddered, pondering where this newly emboldened Vincent had suddenly sprung from. “I didn’t bring my suit with me. There may be an old one back at the house, but that water is freezing.”

“We don’t have much use for swim suits Below,” Vincent remarked with a shrug. “The children have always swum naked. We have selected areas marked off for our men and women to use. These are always signs posted. No-one gives it a second thought.”

“Okay...” Catherine turned to look up at him with renewed respect. His blue eyes teased her dismayed look mischievously. She smiled, trying to picture Father swimming naked at the bottom of the falls and failing. Then thoughts of a naked Vincent swimming powerfully against the strong currents of the falls filled her mind with sensual longing. If only she dared take him up on his offer, would he go swimming with her? She ducked her head, biting her inner lip against the temptation to ask. “I’ll let you know if I change my mind. Now I have something else I want to show you...”

She drew him back into the trees before turning to a place where the land dipped down into a grass-filled glen that ran along behind the rocky shoreline of the lake. It was deep enough to hide even Vincent’s massive frame, topping out well above his head in a ragged line of old weeping willow trees, their leaves slowly turning yellow in the chill of early fall. The waving grass that had once been deep and verdant, was fall-browned and drooping. Through the middle of the glen ran a narrow, well beaten path, obviously the deer trail Catherine had spoken of, leading down towards the lake edge. Leading him beyond the path, Catherine headed towards a massively ancient willow tree growing from the side of the cliff near the bottom of the glen. She parted the thickly drooping branches and disappeared from view.

Before Vincent could react, Catherine turned and her head reappeared. “Welcome to my secret world.” She smiled, beckoning to him, and Vincent didn’t hesitate to follow her lead.

Beyond the tree’s sheltering branches someone had taken great care to create a hidden realm with shelves and places to sit carved out of the

rocky, tree root bound wall that enclosed them on three sides. Hidden off to one side behind a screen of drooping grass stems there was a rather tattered arrangement of tarpaulins and oil cloth that had once formed a makeshift tent. Everything was painted in a soft yellow gloom that filtered the deepening sunshine into narrow bands of light, making it easier on Vincent's night-sensitive eyes as the pale fall sun rose higher into the sky outside.

"Soon their leaves will fall." Catherine fingered the willow's yellow foliage. "After my mom died, I tried to spend every day and night hiding down here. It meant I would never have to go back to the city. I prayed the winter wouldn't come and the leaves would stay." Catherine looked at the old tent regretfully. "But of course it did. And then there was my poor dad. After hours of searching, he finally found me hiding in this tent. Despite his coaxing, I refused to budge. He wore his own path from the house to the glen and back again, constantly checking on me throughout the night. So I had to give up my place here to be with him. He didn't deserve to be left so alone and lonely. That was the end of my childhood."

"He loves you dearly." Vincent slid his arms around her from behind, bringing her back against his chest and resting his chin on the top of her head. Gently he swayed her within his close embrace, allowing her the time and space to grieve over her memories without speaking. Catherine laid her hands over his at her waist and knew he understood everything without the need for words or explanation. Then, beneath their linked hands her stomach rumbled hollowly.

"Breakfast..." She laughed shakily, giving his hands a final squeeze

before he released her. They laid out the blankets and dined companionably on the thick ham sandwiches she had created and sipped rich, black coffee poured from the thermos.

“Best Columbian,” Vincent approved, inhaling the fragrance from his coffee cup. “It has been too long since I’ve tasted coffee this good.”

“Trust you Wells boys to know your coffee.” Catherine laughed, before deciding to share her Devin story with his brother. She then proceeded to tell him everything about the previous day, and the convincing it took to finally persuade her to approach Vincent with the idea Devin had assured her was workable.

“And your dream of that morning?” Vincent asked quietly, looking down into his cup. “What did you discuss of that?”

“Vincent...” Catherine went up onto her knees beside him. Placing her fingers beneath his chin, she forced him to look at her. “Only that I dreamed and you caught the reflection of it. And that has long been a dream of mine to bring you here, to my special place. But it was a dream I couldn’t share with you, for obvious reasons. The risks were too great, or so I thought.”

“And yet now, here we are...” Vincent mused softly, his blue eyes studying the heightened colour in her cheeks.

“Yes, here we are...” Catherine acknowledged slowly, her eyes drifting down to the unique curve of his mouth. There was the tiniest smudge of mustard in the corner of his bottom lip, and she reached to smooth it

away. In the same moment Vincent's tongue moved automatically across his lips, flicking warmly over her fingertip. The electric contact rippled through their bond, setting off a chain reaction neither could deny.

"Whatever happens on this trip, we are nothing without each other, and everything together," Catherine whispered brokenly, drawing steadily closer to him, watching and waiting for his reaction, ready to instantly withdraw. "Everything..."

"Whatever happens, whatever comes..." Vincent took her hand to draw it around his waist, bringing her bodily in between his spread knees and firmly against him from breast to hip. "Know that I love you now, and always. You truly are my soul..."

"Always..." Shedding her jacket, Catherine rose above him in the filtered sunlight, going up onto her knees even as she raised her hands to thread her fingers through the depths of his mane, capturing his head and tilting his face up to hers with her thumbs under his chin. In that pose she brought her mouth down to his, finding and caressing the fullness of his sensitive bottom lip with her tongue, finding her remembered place within the unique cleft of his upper lip.

He allowed the intimacy, giving voice to his rising needs with a soft rumbling deep in his throat. The sound rippled through Catherine's chest where her body pressed closer against Vincent's powerful ribcage as his broad hands spanned her trim waist, his fingers making caressing movements up and down her arching spine. Catherine didn't even try to stifle the soft reply of her own voice echoing within Vincent's.

Long after this suspended moment, Catherine would often look back and smile, thinking of that mutually soft, almost purring sound, as the first true voice of their bond. It was an acknowledgment of all they shared together, of all they could become together, if only Vincent would let down his barriers and allow her to share with him the full richness of her dream. How much her body craved to finally know his, in every sense!

And now it seemed she was about to get her wish. Intimately tuned to her every emotion, her unspoken longing communicated itself to Vincent. With his eyes never leaving hers, his caressing fingers slid lower, beyond the neat curve of her backside and down the length of her thighs, finally grabbing handfuls of her serviceable shirt. He drew it slowly upwards and Catherine lifted her arms above her head so the garment came off in one fluid movement. Immediately, cold air rippled across her flesh, making her skin dimple and shudder, the finest hairs rising in response to both the coolness and the intoxicating stimuli of what her love had just done.

Instantly, Vincent realised however enticing the creaminess of her exposed skin and lacy confines of her bra were, they proved no barrier against the cold air. Without a word, or taking his eyes from the beauty he had just revealed in his boldness, he reached behind them to snatch up the second picnic blanket, enclosing them both in its ample woollen warmth.

“My beautiful Orlando...” Catherine murmured smilingly, her fingers walking a slow path down the front of his vest towards his belt buckle. “But I think one of us is decidedly over-dressed. We need to fix that.”

“Catherine...” Vincent inhaled sharply and then stiffened, and Catherine’s heart sank in response. She could feel him withdrawing from her. Once more he was pulling back from fully committing to their love. She had been so patient, so careful in her preparations, not pushing too hard, making allowances, waiting for him to commit, and now they were back where they started. She knew she could not force the desired intimacy, if he wasn’t ready. But the taste of this fresh defeat was bittersweet in her mouth.

“Please, Vincent, I--” Against her better judgement she began to plead, just as he placed his fingers across her lips warningly. “There’s someone out there. I can sense them,” he told her in a low voice. “They are down by the lake, and coming this way.”

Damn, damn, damn! Catherine wanted to scream. Instead she scrambled for her shirt and pulled it on before ramming her arms into the sleeves of her jacket. “Stay here and don’t move,” she ordered briskly. “I’ll be right back. This won’t take long, not if I have anything to do with it.”

“You must be careful.” Vincent put out a restraining hand. “I cannot protect you out there. They may be hunters.”

“Please don’t worry.” Catherine gripped his outstretched arm. “This is my land and they are trespassing. You’re the one in danger here, not me. Please don’t come out, whatever happens. I’ll be fine.”

“Take care.” Vincent frowned after her. He had never seen his Catherine

in so fine a snit. Her roiling anger flashed through their bond like sheet lightning.

With the uncharted intimacy of their previous mood well and truly shattered, he began to gather their things together, repacking the basket. But the memory of her kneeling before him, hooded in the blanket, waiting and willing to be loved, sang its own tune in his blood. His whole body hummed with the abrupt disconnect of the interruption. What could have been right now, if their privacy had not been invaded from without? He shook his head slowly. His entire body still craved hers, wanting her naked and pressed against him, making its will and sensual needs blindly known.

And now Catherine was out there protecting him. He knew he could trust her to see off any unwanted intrusion into their private world, but he felt powerless and helpless to be there for her in the revealing sunlight. The dangers they feared were still there, after all. They were simply in a different form and he had no idea how to fight them without exposing himself for all to see.

He settled uneasily on his haunches, waiting and listening for what seemed like an age before Catherine's soft call alerted him to her return. Not that he needed it, her chagrin and indignation gave colour and depth to their bond, making it vibrate within him. He had seen her angry before, but not quite this upset and annoyed over unforeseen events over which they had no control.

"Out of season tourists," she complained, shaking her head ruefully as she stepped back into the shelter of the over-hanging branches. "They

had been canoeing on the lake and decided to explore our side. It seems they couldn't read the No Trespassing signs. I've showed them the way back to their camp on the far side, and managed to convey the idea that this side of the lake is private property. *Ist verboten...*" Her shoulders began to shake. "I was so angry, I think I scared them more than a little."

"Perhaps it is for the best." Vincent joined in her softly relieved laughter. "We are far too exposed here. At least your house has locks on the doors and windows. I will feel safer once we are inside."

"We must wait here until it gets dark. We have food and there's more coffee. I brought a pack of cards and some books. You could read to me." Catherine eyed him speculatively, her hopes that all had not been lost rising once more beneath the sensual look in his eyes. A look that plainly said he wanted to take up exactly where they had left off. "Then we will make full use of all those locks and bolts."

To Vincent it seemed as if he had stepped into a dream. Catherine had chosen a book of Tennyson poems. She lay tucked against his side in the long grass beneath the picnic blanket, drifting in and out of sleep as he read to her. The fall sunshine cloaked them in subtle fire, muted by the overhanging branches. Then they sat facing each other as they ate the sandwiches and drank the last of the coffee.

After they had packed up, Vincent reached for the book again, intending to finish the *Lady of Shalott*, but Catherine took it from his hands. "No,"

she said, pushing the book into the packed picnic basket. “I have something I want to show you.” Standing, she reached for his hand, pulling him to his feet. “It’ll be dark soon. We still have time.”

“More memories?” Vincent queried softly, as he paused behind her, waiting while she checked to see if the coast was clear. He arranged the hood of his cloak carefully over his hair, concealing his face deep within its protection.

“Yes...” Catherine smiled at him over her shoulder, as they stepped out into the first soft darkness of early evening. “Come on, we need to hurry, or it will happen without us.”

She led him down to the lake shore once more. The mist had long dissipated, exposing the far shore of hills and wooded hollows. Moving in front of him, Catherine reached back to draw Vincent’s arms around her waist. “Watch...” Leaning back against him, she pointed with her chin to where the sun was lowering in the sky, falling inexorably towards the hills on the other side of the lake.

Resting his chin on the top of her head, Vincent breathed in her fragrance as the sun dropped steadily lower, finally coming to rest briefly on the far shoreline before dropping behind, gilding a broad path of final, flaming defiance across the lake’s darkened waters before surrendering to the inevitable and disappearing from sight, allowing full darkness to flow into the void, claiming the view. Somewhere a night bird called, long and forlorn. It was the only sound beyond the lapping of the waves and their shared breathing.

“Thank you, Catherine.” Vincent drew a long breath and released it slowly. “For this, for everything.”

Catherine turned within the shelter of his embrace. “Thank you,” she replied. “I just knew you had to see this.”

“It was beautiful. I will remember it always...”

Catherine took his hand. “Let’s get back to the house.” Dipping her head, she peeked up at him through her lashes. “We have some unfinished business, you and I. And we only have tonight. We must make it something to remember as well.”

The trip back to the house was quickly accomplished, neither wishing to linger in the deepening cold. Once inside Vincent soon had the fire blazing. Catherine did a double check of the doors and windows, ensuring all was secure against intrusion.

Rising from tending the fire, Vincent watched her as she bustled about the dining room before going back and forth to the kitchen. A crashing of pots and a few choice words declared his love was cooking a meal, or making her best attempt. Vincent shook his head, wisely deciding to leave her to it. He doubted his culinary input would be welcome or encouraged. So he walked the room, studying the paintings, marvelling that they must be worth a small fortune, and understanding how far apart their worlds truly were. Earlier she had called him her Orlando, a reference to the loving couple in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. All he had to offer his beloved Rosalind was himself.

He breathed deeply, hoping it would be enough after all they had been through. His body hummed with anticipation of the night ahead, and his expected part in it. He no longer felt afraid. Only humble and accepting of what the evening would bring.

“That’s all done.” Eventually Catherine reappeared, looking flushed and triumphant. “I hope you’ll like my spicy chicken. It’s all I know how to cook.” Purposeful and determined she came to stand before him, taking both his hands in hers. “Dinner in half an hour...I hope.” She laughed up at him. “Okay, race you to see who can be first to get showered and changed and back here in record time.”

“You’re on!” Vincent was gone in a flash, leaving Catherine to make a belated start towards her own room.

She was soon back, but not before her love, who was now dressed in black leather trousers and thigh boots, topped by the same ruffled white shirt he had worn on their first Halloween date in the world Above. A low-riding belt completed the look. With his hair freshly washed and swinging damp around his shoulders, he certainly looked good enough to eat.

“Very nice.” Catherine licked her lips.

“What do you think?” Going up on her toes she turned a small pirouette before him, showing off her draped evening gown of mulberry velvet. When he didn’t reply, she glanced back at him over her shoulder. The look in his eyes as he stared at her made her blood begin to sing and her heart-rate pick up.

“There are no words...” he finally managed. “Or I do not yet know them.”

“That’s what I was going for.” Catherine smiled happily. She sank back onto her heels. “Dinner, I think.”

They dined in companionable silence, soft music playing once more in the background. Once again, Catherine had abandoned the electric lighting in favour of candles in a wide range of holders which, coupled with the fire, gave the whole room an intimate glow. When she pushed her chair back at the end of the meal, reaching to take Vincent’s hand, he rose with her and together they settled once more on the large rug before the crackling fire.

“It has been magic, hasn’t it?” Catherine reflected wistfully. “Tomorrow evening we must travel back to the city and resume our real lives.”

“But we will always have this memory,” Vincent countered, taking her hand and turning it over to trail one fingertip across her open palm. “Tell me, Catherine. Tell me about your dream.”

“My dream...” Catherine’s fingers close reflexively around his. “Better still, my love, let me show you...” She leaned closer and Vincent didn’t make any attempt to pull away. He watched her with half-closed eyes, smoky now with desire. This was his Catherine, whatever she did or needed from him, she could never hurt him. He knew what and how much she had sacrificed for him.

In the background the music changed to a plaintive song of love and yearning. It spoke of the only person in the world who was right, and that they were right here, right now. This was the only time that mattered,

and this yearning between them may never pass this way again...

“Vincent, this is real. Everything tonight is real...” Catherine breathed, threading her fingers through his mane, glorying in it. “You only have to believe how easy you are to love, and leave the rest to me.”

“I am yours...” He looked deep into her eyes, drowning in the love they showed, his acceptance of what simply had to be.

“My dream was created by reading a rather risqué romance novel.” Catherine smiled as she leaned closer, brushing aside his mane to press lingering kisses against the base of his throat, feeling the raggedness of his breathing beneath her seeking mouth. “And a longing for you to see this place. For us to be alone here...together...”

“It felt like a good dream...” Vincent dropped his head back, closing his eyes to allow the sensations her touch was invoking in him to pound through his senses, echoing throughout their bond. He groaned deep in his throat, that same sound Catherine had come to associate with their bond, its wordless voice echoing through her.

She raised a hand to his cheek, forcing him to look down at her. “I love you, Vincent. I will always love you, no matter what happens or whatever may come.”

“Yes...” Vincent breathed, fighting a rapidly losing battle with himself. He wanted to gaze once more on her soft loveliness, as he had done so briefly this morning. And this time there would be no interruptions to distract him from that pleasure.

“And then I fell asleep over the book...” Catherine rose to kneel before him. She loosened and discarded his belt, before returning to slide her hands beneath the hem of his shirt, moving up to mould the solid muscles of his back, pushing the shirt higher with her arms. Vincent shuddered in her loving hold as she moved forward between his spread knees, letting her hands slide down his body again to roam his thighs. She turned her lips against the side of his neck as she caressed the taut muscles beneath her hands, moving steadily upwards, and Vincent’s soft growling deepened. “And that’s when the dream began...”

“I was thinking of you and suddenly this incredible vision filled my mind...” Vincent brought his hands up in an attempt to gain some control over this erotic teasing, but he found he didn’t have the strength as Catherine moved against him, probing his flesh with her tongue as her seeking hands encountered the heat of his arousal. “Everything was green and lush, and we were standing in the sunshine...”

Intending to put an end to the erotic teasing, he lifted her easily from the floor and turned her over so her back was to the thickness of the rug beneath them. The fire’s glow reflected in the witch-fire that danced in her eyes, watching him take charge and silently approving. He leaned over her, tracing the line of her jaw with a rasping fingertip, evoking shivers as it travelled down into the shadowed valley between her breasts.

“And then we started making love...” Catherine whispered urgently, arching her back against his hand, encouraging further exploration. Vincent was not proof against such inducement. She was his love, his

soul. The light to his abiding darkness, and as such, impossible to deny...

The warm velvet of her dress was no barrier as he slipped it from her shoulders, revealing her nakedness beneath. This time she wore no bra and the creamy swell of her breasts tightened and lifted beneath his gaze. Catherine lifted up to caress his mouth with her lips, teasing another warning growl from him. She caught his bottom lip playfully between her teeth, nipping and releasing, smoothing the imagined hurt with the tip of her tongue. His palm enclosed her breast, his thumb instinctively knowing just how to smooth the swollen tip and back again, glorying in the shudder his touch invoked in her. She was so easy to love and he had no will to resist...

“And then I heard bells, and everything suddenly went dark...” Catherine manage to murmur. “It was my own fault...” Her breath suddenly hissed inwards.

The gentle rake of his claws against her skin jammed the breath in Vincent’s throat. He looked down into her eyes as she lay there, open and loving. Her warmth surrounded him, making him bold beyond anything he had ever dreamed possible, until this precious moment of suspended time.

“I forgot I had set the alarm clock.” Catherine breathed raggedly, as she sat up, allowing her dress to slip to her waist. Her ivory skin glowed in the firelight. “I tried to recapture the dream, but—”

“It had already slipped beyond your reach...” Vincent sighed. “I could not breathe for several seconds. I felt as if my heart would burst. The vision had been so powerful.”

“And now we are here. *This* time it’s real...” She lifted her arms to him and Vincent no longer had the will to deny her. She was his, for now and all eternity.

He lowered his mouth to hers, taking her lips in a deep, drugging kiss that sent his senses reeling into uncharted lands. He probed deeper, tasting the moist sweetness within and Catherine welcomed his invasion. Her tongue licked softly across his teeth, touching gently on the long canines, wrapping around one in playful toying.

Her hands tugged impatiently at his shirt, but it wasn’t easy to remove. Without hesitation Vincent reared up to strip it off, tossing it aside. Suddenly breathless, Catherine took her time gazing at what he finally revealed.

Fingers wide-spread, she ran the flat of her hand up over the fine golden hairs clothing his chest, feeling the flexing of his muscles beneath her questing fingers. Gazing down she found that the hard flatness of his abdomen was only lightly covered and at his waist the hair disappeared entirely. The golden thickness on his chest was echoed on his forearms, but his upper arms had only a soft covering of golden down and Catherine could see the powerful muscles outlined clearly beneath his taut skin as he hovered above her, silently accepting her detailed inspection as her right. The firelight shimmered and glowed behind him, outlining him in gold.

“Vincent,” she whispered finally, her hands settling on the hard outline of his hips, fingers probing beneath the waistband of his pants. “You truly are beautiful.”

“It is you who have made me that way.” He sighed over her reaction. “You know there are no mirrors in my chamber, Catherine.”

“Then look into my eyes,” Catherine whispered raggedly, fingers pushing deeper towards their ultimate goal. “There you will see the truth, Vincent. I see only the man I love.”

She felt the shuddering tremor that ran through him as she spoke her benediction. He didn’t reply as he captured her hands, drawing her up from the hearth rug. Insistent hands at her waist pushed down her gown. Catherine raised her hips, allowing him to strip her dress away. Her only remaining clothing was a pair of silk panties and the soft shadows of her body. Vincent’s breathing stopped in his throat.

“I love you...” Catherine smiled at the sensations rocketing back and forth along their heightened connection.

Vincent seemed deeply affected by the beauty of her body, and his desire to touch her intimately was a tangible thing in the heated air between them. She retraced her path along the line of his ribs, moving lower to caress the taut skin of his hips. Moving down, she trailed kisses across his lower chest and flat stomach. Vincent caught her then, lifting her in his arms to pin her beneath him, as he tested the warm moistness

of her skin with his tongue. His hands sought the intimate curves of her body with growing boldness.

“Vincent...” Catherine writhed beneath his tormenting touch, knowing that he was punishing her for her teasing and she gloried in the feel of him. Vincent threaded his fingers through her hair, planting kisses on the skin of her neck and shoulders before moving down to the ripe thrust of her breast.

Caught up in the moment, Catherine began to tug urgently at the closure of his pants, needing to feel him, needing to know all of him and Vincent moved to comply. He reared back to strip off his boots and the last of his clothing, before turning back to Catherine who was watching him with such love and acceptance in her eyes that he wanted to weep.

Catherine lifted her hips mutely, watching his every move, and Vincent tugged off the tiny scrap of silk that clothed her feminine beauty. The sigh that escaped him then, came from the very depths of his being.

“Catherine...” he breathed, moving into her as her hands slipped below the level of his hips to gently enclose the hot, satiny strength of him. His body surged powerfully against her palm, overtaking his control.

A primeval growl was torn from the depths of his soul. He felt as if his heart would stop, the incredible sensation of his Catherine, touching him so intimately after all they had been to each other, was beyond description. In that moment, he was finally set free to explore to fully explore, and understand this incredible bond between them.

Catherine smiled a secret woman's smile older than time. He was finally, irrevocably, hers. He was no longer denying the truth of their love.

Vincent's claws dug deeply into the rug beneath them as she continued to explore him, moulding and teasing, knowing once more the sheer power of his beautiful body. And he was beautiful, however much he tried to deny it.

Vincent groaned now, his head thrown back, the pulse in his throat a living thing as it kept pace with his thundering heartbeat. Sensation crowded into sensation, reflecting from one to the other until their minds were drowning in the headiness of it all.

His questing hand found its way to the softness of Catherine's inner thigh. With unsteady fingers, his touch travelled upwards to finally touch against the heat of her, against the moistness that welcomed his questing exploration. His claws whispered their own unique music along her skin as he moved to explore the very heart of her, to bring Catherine to trembling submission as she arched her back to press up against his hand.

"Always..." Her moan was an aching invocation, as he found the molten silkiness within, his heart almost stopping as he caressed her. Catherine sighed longingly, "Please, Vincent..."

"I'm here." He closed his eyes, revelling in the sensations crashing through his consciousness.

She surrounded him, filling his soul with the beauty of her love. He would die now, if she ever left him, he could not survive without her. He turned his mouth against her skin, moulding her body to his, bringing her warmth against him...all of him.

Catherine had won her battle. Vincent had allowed her into his innermost feelings, his darkest places where he had always lived alone and lonely. She moved against him now, pushing him forward into the light that was their love...

Catherine raised her hips to encounter the scorching heat of his lower body. Vincent sucked air deep into his starving lungs as he watched her, letting the erotic feel of her move through him. "Vincent, please..." Catherine voiced their mutual agony. Her legs closed around his waist, holding him intimately. "Don't stop now..."

Vincent looked down into her eyes, swimming with unshed tears. They were dark and unfocussed with passion and desire. "All that I am, Catherine...always," he whispered against her mouth as he moved into her, burying his aching length deep within the heated satin glory that was his beautiful Catherine...

Her hips rose to meet him, moving with him as his body took over from his conscious mind and he was driven onwards by a need so far beyond his control he had no power to stop it taking control. They blended together, rising into the light, becoming one being in their mutual desire to understand this union that bound them together.

This was a pleasure for which he had not been prepared. His rhythms increased as Catherine drew him on with her voice and hands, breathy cries of encouragement that drove him beyond the limits of all control, taking him into a world where only pure sensation existed.

Ultimately, his release was an explosion that knocked the breath from his lungs. He grabbed handfuls of the rug to steady himself, his arms losing all strength. He sensed without seeing, that Catherine was travelling before him, her muffled cries blending with his as Vincent arched forward one final time, deep within her, their connection a free flowing thing of dancing light, and colours beyond description.

“I will always love you!” was the cry torn from him then, as the world turned and fell away beneath him and he floated free of all earthly chains, Catherine cradled safely in his strong arms...

“I never truly understood your dream, until now...” Vincent whispered against Catherine’s mouth an eternity later as they floated back down into the candlelit quiet of the room. “It seemed so real. As if we were truly living it...”

Catherine took his face between her hands and smiled into his bemused eyes. “It can be like that every time...for us,” she murmured, planting a lingering kiss on the frenetic pulse that beat in his throat. “You only need to believe in what we can be together.”

“The poets certainly left out quite a bit...or maybe I need to find some new reading material. Do you still have that book?” He smiled, closing his eyes, allowing the sensation of her intoxicating touch to drift through

him. She filled to overflowing, every one of the dark, lonely places within him.

Catherine gasped as his feelings were reflected back to her. She moved her lips across his moist skin, travelling down onto his chest as her hands began to play over the corded muscles of his back.

“You are truly remarkable...” Vincent breathed. The tempo of their bond quickened as fresh desire flared and he had no will to resist this time as he reached for her, needing to lose himself once more in the beauty and sheer wonder of their love...

“We need to make full use of this one night.” Catherine chuckled much later, as she leaned back in the warmth of Vincent’s embrace. They lay together watching the fire’s flaming heart. She raised a hand to place it against his cheek, studying the uniqueness of his face. “Our dream will endure, Vincent...for all eternity...and beyond. You only have to believe in magic.”

“Always,” Vincent agreed softly, his heart echoing her love as he took her lips in a kiss that promised her everything, everything her heart could ever desire...

They spent the next day keeping to the house. Vincent read to Catherine from her father’s extensive library, and they took comfort in cooking a meal together in companionable silence, knowing neither of them would

ever be the same again. And when, in the long shadows of the afternoon, Catherine came to him asking for his love once more, Vincent had no thought to deny her. It would have been impossible anyway. Not when his love was busy kissing away any possibility of objection.

After kissing him thoroughly, Catherine took his hand and led him into her childhood room. Lying together in her bed they made more memories against the time ahead of them when they must return to their own lives. And they fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms. Night fell all too soon.

Reluctantly leaving the house in the early evening, they discovered the first snow of winter had finally arrived. Everything was coated in white that sparkled in the moonlight. Catherine took Vincent's hand. "It has been a magic time, hasn't it?"

"Better than magic." Vincent kissed her hair. "Better than anything I have ever known."

"Maybe we will do this again next year." Catherine hugged his arm as they approached the van. "How about we talk about it on the way back?"

They accomplished the trip back to the tunnels in record time. When they finally entered Father's chamber they found a welcoming committee eagerly awaiting their return. There were many questions to be asked and answered. Mouse was determined to understand the workings of the internal combustion engine, while William demanded to know if they enjoyed his food. Charles greeted warmly them as old friends. Father sat on the side-lines watching the commotion, but not commenting. It had

been a rather fraught two days, but it had all turned out for the best. *This time*, the demons of doubt in the back of his mind tormented him, but he didn't speak of his fears. They would be for another time.

It wasn't until much later that Devin managed to draw the returned pair of lovers aside. "Okay, so tell me, how did the couple's thing go?" Devin's dark eyebrows winged up in enquiry. "Did you work it all out?"

Vincent took Catherine's hand. "I think you could say we worked it out. We have been talking of going back again next year. Perhaps making it an annual event as we wish to do with Halloween."

"Excellent," Devin approved, watching them closely. He shrugged. "So I guess a big thank you is in order?"

Catherine smiled at him. "Thank you, our very own, very special, fairy godmother. Without you, none of this could have happened."

"What did you just call me?" Devin's mouth hung open for several stunned seconds. Then he swallowed convulsively. Behind him Father covered his mouth with his hand, his shoulders beginning to shake with mirth.

"You'd better get used to it, big brother." Vincent clasped him on the shoulder. "The title really suits you. Better than any other role you have ever played."

"Aw, come on now..." Devin threw up his hands in disgust as the whole chamber burst into companionable laughter, and he was finally forced to

join in the joke against himself.

THE END