

Darkest Before Dawn

Judith Nolan



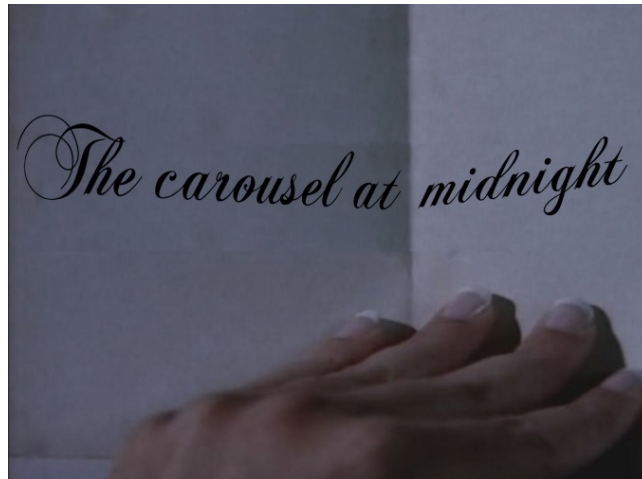
*“Those who dream by day are cognizant of many things which
escape those who dream only by night.”*

~ Edgar Allan Poe



Chapter One

The Invitation



The envelope with her name written across it had been pushed under her apartment door. Not seeing it over her heavily-burdened arms, Catherine kicked it with the toe of her shoe. Lifting on the sudden rush of air from the hallway, the flash of pale blue paper caught her eye, just before it disappeared beneath the nearest dinky, chintz couch.

“Dammit!” Catherine expressed her fulsome disgust succinctly.

After the long, harrowing week she’d endured...

Fuming, she kicked the door closed with the heel of her left shoe.

“Give me a break...” She threw her bag and coat one-handed onto the couch, followed by the stack of court files she’d been struggling to hold in one arm. She turned to engage the security locks, before sagging back against the door.

Her back ached and her head hurt. Despite that, the work she had been forced to bring home could not be ignored.

Joe wanted her final breakdown of the Holdridge testimony first thing Monday morning. *Or my head on a platter...* Catherine grimaced. Given her boss's present mood, she knew he wasn't fussy.

Overly long hours and yet another frustrating continuance had taken their heavy toll on his sense of fair play. Those in higher places, who wanted to see the D.A.'s office win the case, were becoming restless and annoyed. And Joe was suffering for it. And the office coffee machine had broken down *again*.

So the weekend ahead was not going to be the relaxing break Catherine desperately needed. Seeing Vincent any time soon, was also out of the question. Her body craved his touch and the comforting strength of his embrace. She blew a resigned breath upwards, briefly lifting her hair from her forehead.

“All right, where did you go?” Sinking to her knees before the couch, she pushed it aside with a thrust of her forearm, searching fingers clutching for the envelope.

Retrieving the note, she immediately recognised Vincent’s flowing handwriting. Her heart leapt with anticipation, before plunging with disappointment. She sensed it was an invitation to discuss their plans for the upcoming Halloween night.

The one evening Vincent could escape the world Below and walk the earth as himself once more. *They had been so looking forward to spending precious time together making plans...*

Their hopes of going out together on Halloween night itself was in serious jeopardy of not happening at all. The pressures of her work was going to see to that.

“Oh, Vincent...” She sat back on her heels, treasured memories flooding in.

The last two years had been magical adventures. Carriage rides in the park, ice cream from vendors who never looked twice. The many sights and sounds of a city seriously intent on having fun.

Stolen kisses shared in the darkness of the pre-dawn...and the murmured promise of more to come.

The first night, they had walked for miles together, before coming to rest on the park bench beside the river, beneath the 59th Street Bridge. Hand in hand, together they'd waited to greet the dawn.

They had been about to share their first kiss when they'd been disturbed by a startled jogger declaring, "*What the...!* Geeze! You gave me a real scare. Hey man, Halloween was yesterday!"

Defeated, Vincent had stood and walked away. But as soon as the jogger had moved on, he quickly circled back. Drawing Catherine to her feet, he had held her close, his intentions very clear. He wished to finish what had been so rudely interrupted.

There, beside the river, in front of the park bench, they had shared their first kiss, in the dawning light. And they knew they would do it all again next year...

"And now, what?" Catherine looked down at the note in her hand. She passed a weary hand over her eyes.

Halloween was on Tuesday night, and it loomed ominously as virtually impossible. Time, tides and frustrating courtroom dramas waited for no man...*or woman*. That was a given.

In that moment she truly missed her life as a dedicated student of 'fashion law'. Her friends never believed she had been serious enough to become a lawyer. And working impossible hours for the D.A.'s office hadn't even on her radar.

Opening the envelope, she quickly extracted the folded note held within. A single, hand-written line greeted her worried frown.

The carousel at midnight

"Oh, Vincent...I am so sorry, but I cannot meet you tonight."
Catherine's worried eyes turned to the stack of files on the couch. Their burdensome presence mocked her crumbling resolve with wry derision. "I just can't..." Her mouth compressed with sadness.

"I truly wish things could be different tonight, my love..." Weariness piled in on her, and an incipient headache, which she'd managed to hold at bay all day, began to pound at the base of her skull.

If only... Rising to her knees, she pressed the note close over her heart. She blinked back the tears scalding her eyes. *“Life is what happens while you are making other plans...”* she quoted John Lennon softly, on a deep sigh.

She needed a shower, and some food, before facing the inevitable workload. Studiously ignoring the stack of files that had wrecked Vincent’s plans for the night, Catherine stood to kick off her shoes before padding towards her bedroom on tired feet. Her shoulders slumped, consternation weighting heavily on her conscience.

She would slip down to her sub-basement soon, and tap out a message expressing her regrets...



Chapter Two

The Lady Regrets...



Vincent allowed Catherine's sense of regret to flow through him, along the unbreakable bond they shared. She could not meet him tonight as he had planned. He felt her pain and knew their meeting was impossible. The depth of her disappointment stabbed at him.

'Vincent...heavy work-load...cannot get meeting...Halloween off, sorry...make another time...Catherine...' Her somewhat jumbled message on the pipes had said.

"Oh, Catherine, it truly does not matter..." he whispered.

But it does...the one night when I can walk Above, and not be judged as different and alarming to even the closest scrutiny. And with a beautiful woman on my arm, I would be the envy of many men. I've never felt so alive, and so in love with Catherine...

But now it seemed as if it was not to be. Not this year...

The lady regrets...

Catherine's message sent him further underground, to wander the bridge in the Whispering Gallery. He wanted to be alone with his burden of disappointment. He knew he was being selfish to ask Catherine to go with him on that special night, when she was so busy with her work. He wanted to pace, walk off his deepening sense of wanting what he could not have.

His thirsty soul felt restless, yearning to throw off the confines of the tunnels and rush Above into the fresh air and taste the glorious freedom of the evening. The last two Halloweens had been magical lands full that the promise of the best was yet to be. Kisses shared and promises made in the first light of dawn. *Forbidden fruits, once tasted...*

Leaning forward to peer over the edge of the bridge, Vincent released his sense of consternation on a long sigh. There would be other nights, other plans. *It is just that...*

“Vincent...going to see Catherine?” a troubled voice queried from the tunnel entrance at his back. “Need to be gone. Almost dark Up Top.”

Vincent turned to his friend. “I am sorry, Mouse.” He shrugged an apology. “It seems our plans for tonight are not to be. It has made her unhappy.”

“Go Up Top, then. See her.” Mouse advanced. “Make her back into happy. Catherine always glad to see *you*. Nothing to do down here, tonight.”

Vincent’s cloak swirled about his booted ankles as he paced a short circle. “An excellent idea, my friend. But Catherine has work she must complete. Her burden is heavy and I cannot help.”

“Says who?” Mouse’s mobile expression settled into a dire frown. “Vincent likes Catherine a lot, right?” His hands waved agitatedly. “She can’t come here. You go there. You’ve done it before. Help Catherine. You good at that. Needs you. Message sounded sad.”

“Mouse logic.” Vincent sighed. “You make it sound so easy. But I am not sure I would be welcome...”

“Only one way to find out.” Mouse brightened. “What can happen? Catherine say ‘*go away*’ maybe. Then you will know. Come back sooner. Mouse walk with you some of the way. Have some new ideas I need you to ask Father about...”



Chapter Three

The Arrival



Vincent’s heavy boots settled onto the familiar tiles of Catherine’s balcony. Lamplight from within streamed out through the gauzy curtains, marking the grid pattern cast by her French doors. He was

earlier than usual. The moon had not risen yet and red streaks lit the sky, promising rain in the night.

Inside the apartment, a love song was being played. Vincent walked forward soundlessly. Through the glass pane, he could see Catherine seated cross-legged in the middle of the carpet in her living room. Surrounded by a sea of strewn paperwork, she was swaying gently with the music, and humming the lyrics as she worked.

'The road is long, there are mountains in our way. But we climb a step every day. Love lift us up where we belong. Where the eagles cry, on a mountain high. Love lift us up where we belong. Far from the world below. Up where the clear winds blow...'

Seeing her so absorbed and busy with her work, Vincent hesitated to tap on the glass. He didn't wish to distract her attention. His hand half-rose, even as he changed his mind. But in that instant of indecision, Catherine glanced up and saw him. The joy in her tired face humbled him.

"Vincent!" She leapt to her feet and rushed to the doors.

In one seamless motion, she pushed them open before she flew into his arms. They closed tight around her, and Vincent's discontent evaporated. The song continued, sifting through his soul with its words and meaning.

'Some hang on to used to be. Live their lives looking behind. All we have is here and now. All our lives, out there to find...'

"You came..." Catherine turned her face against the strength of his shoulder, her arms rising to encircle his neck. "I am so glad to see you...I was worried you wouldn't get my message."

"I do not wish to disturb you," Vincent apologised on a heavy sigh. "I know your work is important to you. And yet..." His hand splayed out against the back of her head, keeping her with him for as long as possible.

"It's all right, Vincent." Catherine finally pulled back to look up at him. "Joe's under a great deal of pressure about this particular case. I must do what I can to help him. But it meant the end of our plans for tonight. And I didn't want that either. But you are here, now. It is so good to see you."

Behind them the song went on. *'Time goes by, no time to cry. Life's you and I. Alive today...'*

“Yes. There will be other Halloweens. I know that,” Vincent managed the lie with a straight face. *Only another 368 days before my one night of freedom comes around again...*

“One night...” Catherine slipped from his embrace to walk the tiles. “One night out of the year for us to truly be together. Is that too much to ask?” Her voice trembled with distress.

Vincent lifted his shoulders. “Once I would have said even that one night was impossible...”

“But now you know it’s not.” Catherine came back to stand beside him. She placed one hand on his forearm, looking up into his solemn face. “To be able to walk with you on that one night means the world to me. You know that, Vincent. If it wasn’t for this trial dragging on with endless continuances and affidavits...” She tightened her grip. “It is all so unfair!”

“I want to be with you, Catherine.” Vincent stepped away to pace a short measure and then returned. He stood looking at the

scattered paperwork within the apartment. “This burden of work, it cannot wait for one night?”

“Sadly, no. Not if I wish to still be employed on Monday. And if Joe wants more, then I will be working late nights until he’s satisfied.”

Catherine came to stand beside him. “He needs it, like yesterday. I’m comparing depositions with the testimonies given. They must agree or we are back to square one on the whole case. Every ‘T’ must be crossed and ‘I’ dotted. Holdridge’s lawyers are highly-paid snakes in expensive suits. They know every mean back street and dingy alleyway around the law and use them.”

“I do understand.” Vincent parted the drifting, gauzy curtain to look closer. “Is there any way I may be able to help you?” he asked hesitatingly. “I mean...find things for you.” His eyes smiled shyly at her. “Become your secretary, for tonight.”

“Why...I...” Catherine frowned. “I really don’t see why not...” The idea made her heartbeat stumble. *Why not, indeed?* “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Devin likes to think he’s the lawyer in the family.” Vincent shrugged, dropping the curtain back into place. “But I think I could find my way around a deposition. If you can direct me what I need to look for.” Hope brightened his features. “Then we could still have a little of the night together before I must go. And Halloween could work, after all.”

“If only it were that easy...” Catherine worried the point. Her brow furrowed in thought.

She has not said no... “You are the most important person in all of this.” Vincent’s thumb rose to smooth across the dark smudges beneath her eyes. “You must get some sleep. If all we do on Halloween is sit on the bench by the river and watch the dawn, I will be content. We will be together...alone.”

The sweetness of that very first kiss they had shared, drifted through his soul. And last year there had been more than one kiss, hidden beneath the moon. He longed to be able do it all again this year...

“I’m afraid it will take hours before we’re done. You wouldn’t be bored with all this?” Catherine tucked a length of her hair behind

one ear where a pencil had been thrust. “Dry legal prose is not poetry.”

Vincent shrugged. “These are the testimonies of people who believe what they have seen is real. They have their own music, their own way of speaking the truth about what they know and saw. You have to find the way to understand what they are trying to tell you. The whole truth is among those words somewhere. It always is. In its own way it *is* poetry.”

Catherine stared at him as if she had never truly seen him before. Vincent’s boots began to shift on the tiles when the silence between them lengthened towards the uncomfortable. He had no idea what he had said to make her so silent.

Finally Catherine remarked, “Sometimes, even after three years of knowing you, Vincent, you still have the power to surprise me. You truly believe we can do this? That we can still have the 31st?”

“Thank you for being surprised...” Vincent’s brow creased in puzzlement. “I was simply trying to understand the work.” He shrugged. “I have spent my life observing people and what motivates them.” He spread his hands. “If it becomes a means to an

end, and gives us Halloween together, I am willing to move heaven and earth, to make it so.”

“Do you...would you like me to gather it all up and bring it out here?” Catherine’s worried gaze assessed the small limits of the outdoor table.

“There’s barely enough space for two.” Vincent wasn’t looking at the table. He looked up at the sky. “And it will rain soon.”

He knew there wasn’t any real need for them to work outside in the cold air, when the inside of the apartment looked so warm and inviting. An electric fire lit the room with its warm glow, seeming to beckon him in. *What could it hurt for one night?*

The bold thought, once it had taken root, would not be dismissed. It leant purpose to his first footfall, and then the second...towards the open doors to the ‘inside.’

Since he had left the tunnels, he felt he was walking into something new. He had no idea what, just that there was a different feel to his internal radar tonight. Something spoke, called out from somewhere deep within, that it would be all right. *I can do this...*

“Are you all right, Vincent?” Catherine watched him move slowly towards the doors.

She naturally assumed he would stop on the threshold, as he had every other night. He’d always considered the space within to be hers, and as such, inviolate. Even though everything Below was open for her to venture, anywhere she chose that was safe.

She studied his broad back and thick fall of tawny hair, blowing gently in the night air, and she shivered. She wrapped her arms across her body to conserve warmth. Perhaps Vincent was simply indicating he would carry the papers to the table for her, if she gathered them up from the floor.

Assuming this to be true, she hurried around his slower moving presence and stepped through the curtains into the room beyond. It *was* cold on the balcony, but if she grabbed a thick coat from her wardrobe, she could make it work.

Around them flowed the lyrics of the next song playing on her stereo. *‘Wise men say, only fools rush in. But I can't help falling in*

love with you. Shall I stay? Would it be a sin, if I can't help falling in love with you?'

“Elvis, the king,” Vincent commented absently, even as the toes of his boots over-stepped the very edge of the sill, the barrier between being ‘inside’ and ‘outside.’ It was his long-time, self-imposed stopping point, where he stood and watched the world within.

He halted there, balancing on the heels of his boots.

Standing now in the room before him, Catherine reached out one hand invitingly, palm uppermost. “Come inside, Vincent. If you want to, that is.” She watched his expression closely before hurrying on to say, “Or we can go outside. It doesn’t matter to me. I just need to grab a coat...”

The treasured memory of the first kiss they had shared beside the river warmed her blood. The touch of his unique mouth, and the gentle brush of his tongue across her lips...her body ached to do it all again, and more...

'Darling so it goes, some things are meant to be. Take my hand, take my whole life too. For I can't help falling in love with you...'

Vincent considered her hand, the smallness and the beauty of it. Her neat fingernails and soft, warm skin of her palm where the threads of her life, love and fate were clearly drawn. Did she know Narcissa had once explained palmistry to him, and his keen eyesight could clearly read what was written there?

What he had seen in her palm made him wonder and speculate, but he could not bring himself to broach the subject. He dared not look anew at his own, wondering if they had somehow been changed since he had last traced those same lines. Narcissa had gone into considerable detail about what she'd found there. None of it had been encouraging.

In that time, the lines had spoken of his eternal aloneness. A thing he had accepted until that one fateful night, three years ago. There was still so much to learn...about both of them.

"Vincent...?"

Her questioning tone brought his eyes back to hers. She looked so lovely standing there, hand outstretched, waiting for him to accept or decline. Making no judgements either way. The heel of his right boot lifted of its own accord, inclining his body forward.

'Like a river flowing surely to the sea, darling so it goes, some things are meant to be...Take my hand, take my whole life too. For I can't help falling in love with you...'

"It is all right, you know..." Catherine was still offering him the lifeline of refusal. "I don't mind, honestly. We can sit down at the end of the balcony as we have before." She half-turned away. "My coat's in the bedroom. It won't take a moment to fetch it. Wait here."

"It *is* cold outside tonight, Catherine. Too cold to work effectively out there," Vincent replied slowly, his admission detaining her.

"And it promises to rain later..."

Behind him, the deepening twilight warred with the streaks of lamp-light cast across the balcony. Soon, the moon would rise and the night would begin in earnest. A fitful wind flicked the gauzy

curtains around his lower legs. It seemed determined to push him forward.

His great heart lifted, hammering against the cage of his ribs. His boots made no effort to resist his will as he bent his right knee and stepped down into the room next to her.

“I am glad I came to see you tonight.” He reached to grasp the hand she had so steadily held out to him.

He was inside *at last*...he waited for any sense of entrapment to touch him, but it didn't. The room seemed to reach out and embrace him. Catherine's subtly feminine scent filled his nostrils, making him inhale deeply. This space was hers, all of it spoke of her good taste and love of beautiful things. *She once said I am beautiful...*

“I am so happy you are here with me.” Catherine turned her hand within his, to keep him beside her. “It is chilly out there tonight. I have a fire going in here,” she added, unnecessarily. “We can be warm.”

Before he could change his mind, she hurried to snap the doors shut, latching them closed against the descending night. She returned to hover in front of him. Her hastily-veiled look of surprise to see him standing there, finally inside her apartment, was swiftly followed by one of anticipation. It was as if a whole new world had just opened up before her eyes and she was unsure quite what to do about it. She'd obviously assumed he'd wish to remain on the balcony, as always.

Now, his delightfully massive presence dominated the inside of her apartment. His being in her home, which had been furnished around her feminine needs and tastes, threw what had been normal into complete chaos. Her bedroom was now only a few steps away from where they were standing...

Catherine knew that Vincent's chamber was full of wondrously eclectic things, gathered from all aspects of his travels both Above and Below. His bed, soft and wonderfully comfortable as it was, was a mismatched collection of various materials and hand-made gifts on a solid wood frame Cullen had repurposed for him from the remains of an old Victorian oak four-poster.

The most expensive thing in his life was the well-worn, antique French Aubusson carpet on the floor of his chamber. He'd once told her Mouse had found it in a dumpster, and managed to transport its considerable weight all the way home, because he knew his good friend would like to have it.

In complete contrast, Catherine and Jenny had agonized for weeks, if not months, over colour swatches, chairs, rugs, paintings and bed linen. Searching always for that right look, or feel. The sense of elegantly expensive order was paramount above all things. The rightness of every piece once placed, almost needing a committee to approve changing its position within the whole scheme.

The dinky, chintz couches, once so carefully chosen, now seemed impossibly small, and incapable of accommodating the largeness of Vincent's frame. If he ever chose to sit on a couch, or any of her fragile, reproduction dining chairs...laughter shivered inside her, seeking an outlet.

What would Jenny think? She smothered a chuckle at the errant thought.

"Catherine...?"

The questioning whisper of her name snapped her back to reality. Vincent remained where he was, barely 'inside', looking at everything within her apartment with thoughtful and considering eyes. As if he was seeing it for the first time.

"What is it?" she asked almost absently, nibbling at her bottom lip.

"It is all right, Catherine. I won't break anything." His frowning eyes slid sideways towards the couches and their appearance of sweet fragility. He ignored her spindly chairs. "I am house broken."

Despite his words, he'd already decided the middle of the floor was safest. Within his own chamber he moved with the ease of long familiarity around robust things that knew and understood his weight and size. *But here...*

"It is warm in here." His gaze slid back to hers. "Thank you for inviting me inside."

"You are most welcome." Catherine smiled shyly.

Vincent studied her fresh, unadorned loveliness. Her hair had been piled into a no-nonsense bun on top of her head, and she was dressed in old grey sweats pants and loose, striped blouse, in keeping with the work she had to do. Her feet looked comfortable in thick, white socks.

Catherine's hair framed her beautiful face with softly escaping tendrils, lanced through with another serviceable pencil. Her cheeks flushed warmly, and mantled with deeper colour, the longer he stared at her.

"I do believe the French call this an *impasse*," he remarked softly. He swept a hand at the detritus of paperwork on the floor. "Show me what you wish me to do. I am a quick study. I can help."

"Of course...sorry, I got a little distracted," Catherine jumped, as if her good manners had suddenly bitten through her confusion at seeing him there. "I have coffee or tea, if you wish refreshment before we start. I think there's also a bottle of wine..."

Now that the words were out, she discovered she had no idea if Vincent drank alcohol. She had never thought to ask, before now. She had never seen him drink anything beyond water and Father's

endless cups of tea. He'd always passed on William's offer of a mug of strong apple cider at every Winterfest.

"First we must make some sense of all this." Vincent hands settled comfortably on her slim shoulders, and he turned her towards the litter of paperwork. "Then we will talk about food."

Giving her a gentle push in the small of her back, he urged her forward. Catherine did as she was bid. But even as she settled cross-legged into her original position, her thoughtful gaze was not on the paperwork.

Instead, she marvelled as Vincent came towards her, shedding his voluminous cloak in one fluid movement, tossing it aside she has often seen him do, to land where it would. Below, it usually ended up over the arm of his massive chair in his chamber. This time, it shrouded one of the tiny couches in a pool of darkness, and spilled across the pastel carpet.

Catherine could not help savouring the moment. He had clearly made the decision to stay inside, and not outside as had been his wont. He had arrived to help her, because he'd sensed her

frustration and sorrow. He was there to try and salvage the holiday that was rapidly becoming more important to them than any other.

It seemed like a dream, to have him here, with music playing and the small electric fire adding a glow and warmth to her apartment.

The beguiling romance of the whole situation did not escape her notice. *It had only taken three years, after all...*

Beneath the cover of reassembling scattered paperwork, she pinched herself lightly.

Nope, this isn't a dream...wow! I mean, double wow and yes please to more of the same in the near future! Perhaps a kiss shared in the dawn light...

“Let’s make a place for you. You might as well get comfortable. There’s a ton of stuff, here. We could be here all night.” She smiled shyly, as Vincent settled close to her, his bulk filling her vision to the exclusion of all else. Broad thighs and bent knees, all encased themselves in well-worn denim above heavily furred leather boots. It was all real and he was here with her...*inside*.

She wanted to reach out and hug him. Forget the paperwork in favour of more intimate adventures...

“Show me what I can do to help you, Catherine.” Vincent scanned the stacks of files with curious eyes. “Tell me what you need from me.”

“All right.” Gathering a shuddering breath of purpose, Catherine reassembled her scattered thoughts.

She began to outline what she needed from him, and they were soon working steadily through the piles of testimony and evidential files. Their mutual pace and speed increased as Vincent’s agile and logical mind soon caught up with her legal definitions and began to out-pace her need for explanations.

Catherine’s hand travelled swiftly back and forth across the yellow legal pad as Vincent dictated. They compared notes, two heads hovering close together, at times.

Pages filled, and the used pads were stacked neatly together to one side. The hands of her mantle clock crept towards the midnight

hour, but its soft chimes of twelve went unremarked as one pile of paperwork lessened and the other grew.

It wasn't until the clock chimed twice that Catherine finally laid aside her pen. Stretching her arms above her head, she arched her aching spine on a groan of relief.

"I don't believe it. We have finished everything in record time." She felt tired beyond belief, and her empty stomach growled its discontent. But it had all been worth it, for the greater cause.

"Will it serve its purpose?" Vincent indicated the stack of legal pads. "Does it allow us to take the rest of the night off?"

"I really think so." Catherine sighed, lowering her arms. "It will make Joe happy, which is more important." She smiled at him. "We did good work tonight." Her eyes went to the clock. "Make that this morning. Where has the time gone?"

"I am pleased I could help." Vincent rose to his feet. He stretched his long limbs mightily, before leaning down to take one of her hands and draw her up after him.

They stood together in the centre of her lounge, entwined fingers their only physical link. Deeply romantic lyrics drifted around the room, heightening their mood of closeness.

'Yesterday is dead and gone, and tomorrow's out of sight. And it's sad to be alone, help me make it through the night. I don't wanna be alone, help me make it through the night...'

“We don’t need to meet at the carousel now...” Catherine leaned closer, their mingled breath warming the tiny distance remaining between them. “And tomorrow is...I mean, today is Saturday,” she confided so softly, Vincent barely heard the words. “Freedom...”

He sensed her rising excitement. Like a small child released from school for an unforeseen holiday. She felt as if she were confronted by a whole new universe of possibilities...

He felt torn, studying the dark smudges beneath her eyes with renewed concern. He knew he should insist she retire to bed and rest. He was aware exactly what he should say and how he should act.

He needed to say goodnight, then turn, gather his cloak and walk out into the night. Catherine would not reproach him. It would be as it had always been. The *status quo* would be reasserted.

But the sensation of unfettered freedom rising within his love also whispered to him. The idea of playing truant from all responsibility possessed a wickedly illicit taste.

Together, they owned the night and all its secrets...and he could still leave in the deepest darkness, just before the dawn...

“There’s an all-night place. I could order pizza for two,” Catherine queried, her eyes remained locked on his, her smile widening in invitation. “It’s not *that* late...or early...” Her slender shoulders lifted. “I can always sleep in, tomorrow.”

Outside on the balcony, the rain began to patter and splatter across the tiles, gathering pace and sound. The cocoon of warmth within the apartment could not be denied. They were alone, together...

“I would...like that. Very much.” Vincent gently tucked a stray tendril of hair behind her ear. “And I believe you mentioned a bottle of wine, some time ago...”

His hands settled on her waist and he drew her against him. Sensing her desire, he bent his head to kiss her lingeringly. Beneath his, her soft mouth tasted like warm honey. He ran the tip of his tongue across the seam of her lips, and they opened for him, inviting him inside.

After some time, Catherine finally drew back. She rested her forehead against his. "I'll see if I can find the wine. In a little while..."

She snuggled deeper into him, relishing his closeness and masculine presence. Their lips meet again and the next kiss was sweeter than any wine. Together they moved slowly in time with the music.

Behind them, the stereo went briefly silent before a new song began.

'There's a place for us, somewhere a place for us. Peace and quiet...'

~FIN~

"It is always darkest just before the day dawneth."

~ **Thomas Fuller**



*Welcome to my world, won't you come on in?
Miracles, I guess, still happen now and then.
Step into my heart, leave your cares behind.
Welcome to my world, built with you in mind.
Knock and the door will open, seek and you will find.
Ask and you'll be given, the key to this world of mine.
I'll be waiting here, with my arms unfurled.
Waiting just for you.
Welcome to my world...*

~ **Jim Reeves**



Music References

Up Where We Belong ~ Joe Cocker & Jennifer Warnes

Can't Help Falling in Love ~ Elvis Presley

Help Me Make It Through The Night ~ Kris Kristofferson

There's a Place For Us ~ Stephen Sondheim

