

The Rose...

By C.J. La Belle



"I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where. I love you simply, without problems or pride. I love you in this way because I do not know any other way of loving but this: in which there is no I or you, so intimate that your hand upon my chest is my hand, so intimate that when I fall asleep your eyes close..."

~ Pablo Neruda





The rose bush from Catherine's balcony had travelled far. It had moved homes several times in the last few years, from the apartment, to the world Below, and back Above again, when Catherine and Vincent finally settled into their married life, balanced between their different worlds.

Their river-side mansion possessed a secluded roof garden, hidden from view. It could only be accessed by French doors leading out from their master bedroom. In the summer Vincent and Catherine often left the doors wide open to the night air, sometimes laying in each other's arms watching the stars rise and set.

It was also the perfect spot for a rose bush. Now, with the summer advancing and the days lengthening, the rose bush displayed its red and white roses in verdant splendour. It liked its new home, it would do well here. It was a shame the same could not be said for the garden's other, human, inhabitants...

"I don't believe it..." Catherine was on her knees, tending to her rose bush. She kept her head down, seeming to concentrate on the task at hand.

But the set of her shoulders, and the tense lines of her body, belied the

simple task she was performing. And her gloved hands remained still in the rich, dark earth of the pot the roses now lived in.

“What troubles you so, that you will not even look at me?” Vincent asked from behind her. “Tell me, please.”

“Very well...” Catherine glanced over her shoulder. The westering sun struck golden pinpoints of light in the wind-stirred glory of her husband’s mane. His hair looked so different away from the glow of candlelight, and it was a sight she never tired of seeing. Even when she was furious at him. As she was now...

“You’ve decided things without asking for my opinion. Jacob came to tell me earlier, before he left with my father and Kay. He was so excited he could barely contain himself. He sees it all as one great adventure.” Catherine sighed, wiping the back of one hand across her cheek. “He is my son too. I had the right to know what is being planned for him and discuss it. You and Father seem to forget that, in your ideas for his future.”

“But it is this way for all the children who live among us...” Vincent spread his hands helplessly. “As each grows they must learn to help where and how they can. It is the only way our world can survive.” His words were filled with honest confusion. “Jacob is no different in this. He has his role to play.”

“Yes, I understand that...” Catherine allowed throatily, rocking back on her heels, setting down her trowel. She glanced again over her

shoulder. Concern tore at her throat as she said, "It's just that he's so young, and the work is, or can be..." She shook her head.

"Dangerous?" Vincent supplied quietly, when she foundered into silence. "Oh, Catherine, all life is dangerous. You, of all people, must be aware of that. How can it be that our son is any safer up here, than Below?"

He looked away into the distance and the high stone wall that ringed the entire estate, built to keep out unwanted intruders. "Jacob must take his place among those who help us. It has always been so. My son cannot be seen as any different. I thought you would understand that. He is a part of my world."

"*Your* son?" Catherine flared, jumping to her feet and turning. "I think you forget sometimes, Vincent, that he's only four years old. Surely there is more time?" She set her bunched fists on her hips. "He still needs me. He could get badly hurt. And if I am not there..." She bit her lower lip.

"I ran my first errand for Father when I was barely three years of age," Vincent reasoned, taking a couple of steps closer, but halting when Catherine backed up, putting the rose bush between them. The fire in her green eyes meant she was not in a conciliatory mood. "I went with Devin. He made sure I came to no harm, and I soon learned the route by myself. I was six before I finally went alone. Jacob already knows the easy routes. He will not be walking them alone. And Mouse is always watching. As he does all the young ones."

“Mouse...” Catherine frowned, dismissing the tinker as not very reliable. “Very well, that makes everything all right then, does it? I suppose the girls will be next,” she snapped, thinking about their twin daughters, Mary and Cathleen. “Can you tell me they will always be safe?”

“It is the way it has always been, Catherine.” Vincent spread his hands. “I do not know what more you wish me to say. To console you that all will be fine. I could never allow any danger to come to our children. But we live with risks daily. They must learn resilience and self-reliance.”

“So your mind was already made up before you came to tell me.” Catherine stripped off her gloves, casting them aside on a convenient seat. “I see, very well. Thank you for informing me of my son’s future.”

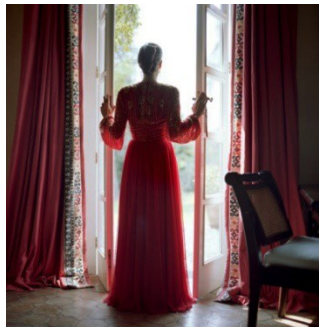
“That is not why I came here.” Vincent sighed. He reached towards her, but again his wife avoided him. “I wanted to talk with you.”

“Thank you, Vincent.” Catherine walked a long path around him, heading back towards the house. “You have made your point quite clear. I do not see there is anything more for us to say to each other.”

The sound of their bedroom doors slamming shut underscored the fact that somehow, somewhere, Vincent had blundered. He frowned over the uncomfortable idea they had just had their first, married fight. He had stated his case reasonably, and thought the matter had been settled. He had never known Catherine to be so brittle and easily

upset. This was new ground and he was deeply unsure of his footing.

“What must I do?” He cast a despairing look at the setting sun. But he gained no help there. The sun would go on shining without him, and he had to find a way back to Catherine’s understanding...*but how?*



Catherine brushed aside the curtains at the balcony doors to their bedroom and opened the doors to the night air. She walked slowly out into the darkness beyond. Strings of lights allowed her to see her way along the path.

Vincent was Below tonight. He had left a note saying he would not return until the morning. Their children were away for the weekend with their Above grandfather and Kay, so the house was abnormally quiet and still.

Catherine felt restless without her husband close by, and she could not compose herself to try and sleep. Despite her need to stretch out on the bed, she had remained dressed, contemplating the option of going Below to see him, but her feet did not take her that way. Outside on the garden balcony she paced the path slowly, trying to arrest the inner

turmoil of her conflicting emotions so she might find refuge in sleep. She had not meant to argue with Vincent over Jacob's future role in the secret world beneath their feet.

But the rush of her motherly instincts had overtaken her when the subject was broached. She had not expected her son to be involved in the dangerous work of running errands in the world Below, when he was still so young. It had taken her breath away that all had been seemingly arranged without consulting her. That was what had hurt the most. She knew Jacob could not wait to perform his first assignment. He had been breathlessly excited and unable to stand still.

"But I didn't mean to hurt Vincent's feelings..." She looked up to address the crescent moon sailing serenely overhead. Knowing there was no help to be gained there, she sighed gustily. The moon would go on smiling without her, and she need to find a way to make Vincent understand her concerns...*but how?*

Taking the path towards her rose bush, she frowned in the subtly-lit darkness. The moonlight showed there was some kind of note attached to the bush. Her steps quickened, and she stooped to remove it. She turned it towards the glow of the path lights. Her name had been written on the plain white envelope in flowing script and the writing was aching familiar.

"Oh, Vincent, I am so sorry..." Catherine pressed it to her lips for a moment, breathing in the faint scents of candlewax and smoke that permeated the parchment. Of course he had not left her alone. She

had been a fool to fight with him.

Opening the envelope Catherine extracted a folded note. With it came two pressed rose petals, one red and one white. The faint scents of sweet rose still clung to them.

Catherine knew they had come from her rose bush's first blooming. So long ago now, and Vincent had asked for them, keeping them faithfully. Had he somehow known that one day they might be needed?

She wanted to cry for the discord she had caused, without truly understanding what she was doing. This was her Vincent after all, and she loved him with every fibre of her being. If only he was here so she could tell him how sorry she was...

Tears blinding her vision, and falling onto the note as she unfolded it, she began to read what her husband had written there...

**'Before I loved you, love, nothing was my own. I
wavered through the streets, among objects. Nothing
mattered or had a name. The world was made of air,
which waited. I knew rooms full of ashes, tunnels
where the moon lived. Rough warehouses that growled
'get lost'. Questions that insisted in the sand.
Everything was empty, dead, mute, fallen abandoned,**

and decayed. Inconceivably alien, it all belonged to someone else - to no one. Till your beauty and your poverty filled the autumn plentiful with gifts.' **Pablo Neruda**

A sound from the other end of the garden drew her attention. She looked up. There was movement in the darkness beyond the lights, and the moonlight revealed a tall, powerful shape standing there motionless. The wind lifted and toyed with the voluminous cloak the figure wore, riffling the black wool.

“Vincent...?” Catherine queried breathlessly, not trusting her eyes to tell her the truth. She narrowed her eyes, trying to see. But her wounded heart already knew the answer.

“You didn’t think I would just ... stay away?” he asked, an outlined totem, in the dark. “I am a part of you, Catherine. As you are a part of me. Your pain is my pain...”

“Oh, Vincent...” Catherine’s hands clutched at the note, and her head dipped. “It’s your turn at sentry duty. I was even thinking of coming down to see you.”

Her husband took a step closer. “Then you would have found Cullen at the park entrance. We traded assignments.” He moved closer still. “I did not tell him why.”

Catherine kept her head down, knowing that he was drawing nearer, as yet unable to bridge the divide, between them. "It's dark in those tunnels," she began. "I was lost there, once. I tried to find my way down. I thought you needed me, and all I did was fall into Mouse's trap."

"I did need you. I will always need you." Vincent closed his deep eyes over the words. Yes, the tunnels were dark. And his wife had a childhood fear of that. And a passionate love for her children. The two sat at odds deep within her, he could sense their conflicting emotional response. Reason warring against pure instinct.

"Jacob has no fear of the dark," he reminded her, suspecting their son had inherited either some of his night vision or most of his fearlessness. "Nor much else. And he is more capable than you think, Catherine. Most children are that. More resourceful, cannier than adults give them credit for."

He watched her mull over his words. Good. This was good. They were finally talking, not fighting. Still, it worried him that she hadn't launched herself into his arms, as she might have done. He didn't like the distance, still existing between them. A chasm as wide and deep as the Abyss...

Slowly. Whatever this is, it must happen slowly. He forced himself to remain patient, rather than just to grab her and cover her beloved face with kisses and mumbled reassurances. He forced himself to listen.

Catherine lifted her shoulders helplessly. “I had my flashlight, but I kept wandering past different turns. When I knew I was lost, I was... a little afraid the battery would run out before I could be found,” she confessed.

It took him a moment. Was this the time she’d gotten turned around back when they were divided by Jason Walker? Or some other time? “That was years ago. You could find your way to our chamber all but blindfolded, now.”

“But, Vincent, ... he’s so small.” Tears tracked unheeded down her cheeks.

And in that moment, Vincent knew this was about something other than Catherine's childhood fear. And he also knew better than to tell her that Jacob, like Vincent, was actually tall for his age, and a good bit stronger.

Though Vincent's leonine features had not been passed on to any of his children, they were markedly his.

Both his daughters were already noticeably empathic. They communicated without words, or even gestures. Sight-line was all they needed to know what each other was thinking or feeling. All three carried hints of a soft, blonde line of hair down their spines.

Jacob was unafraid of a dark he could easily pierce. Mary was gifted with a lithe sense of balance that meant she rarely fell down, even at three. Cathleen begged for story time, and books, and was already

reading early primers. He loved them all, but he knew that right now, it was their eldest and only son who concerned Catherine.

“He is. He is small, Catherine.” Vincent decided to agree, rather than disagree. “But he is growing fast. And he will one day grow beyond us both. This world will hold many wonders for him, even as it is barred for me. One day he will claim it as he must. Until then, we will keep him safe.”

“Promise me, Vincent that he can’t go past the hub. Or anywhere near it, not without one of you.” She could sense her own capitulation, or at least its beginnings. “Mouse is not the best of guardians.”

Relief at it flooded through Vincent. “I will emphasize that point.” He stepped around the rose bush, reaching slowly to tug the note from her fingers. Relieved that she allowed it to happen. *Progress...*

“I remember the horror of being lost down there, Vincent,” Catherine whispered. “Suddenly you remember the whole world is over your head, with its weight. And that there are places in front of you, like the Abyss.”

Vincent brushed his wife’s lovely cheek with the back of his furred fingers, listening. “When you were lost... then found. Do you remember what we said? What you did next time you got turned around?”

Her eyes searched her memory. “I just ... banged on the pipes. I knew not to walk past where I couldn’t see them. I used the code you taught me.”

“Jacob knows the same code,” he confirmed. “He will be safe, Catherine. Please believe me. We will make sure of it.” The hand that had brushed down her cheek brushed back up again. His index finger lightly traced the scar before her left ear.

Her nervous fingers clutched at his biceps. “We can't afford to be wrong. It can get so ... dark down there, Vincent. Even you were caught, once.”

“And my wife came to rescue me, before she was even my wife. You came without hesitation or thought for your own safety. One day, Jacob will look up, and it will be the same for him, Catherine. The most beautiful woman he has ever seen will grace his life, and... stay. Forever.” His smile told her everything he was seeing and feeling.

But she wasn’t talking about a distant future, or the wonders that might await their son. She was talking about life’s dangers, and they were too close to her heart, for the moment. Many parts of his home knew the clutch of darkness. And it was those that worried her. The children didn’t always obey the rules...

Dark from paths that wound, and sometimes dark from people like Paracelsus, who had once inhabited them. And people and places that were never seen, only heard. Whispers in the darkness, faint laughter

and the drift of vital awareness that something lived down there, far below the inhabited tunnels and chambers. Vincent, better than anyone else, knew what it was to look into a black void, and see nothing.

The light from their bedroom spilled a golden glow out onto the rooftop terrace. Accent lights were scattered everywhere, down the winding paths, and near the balustraded edges. All of it was meant to prevent a stumble, a way to make the rooftop expanse a safe, navigable place even at night.

Crossing to the bedroom doors, Vincent knew what he must do now. He dropped the note on a nearby dresser, even as he tugged a folded, patchwork blanket off the chaise that sat just inside. The blanket had been had been a wedding gift from Mary, and the chaise was Catherine's favorite spot to curl up and read in, when it rained.

Reaching a hand further inside, he shut off the power to the bedroom, and then to the terrace, itself. Inside his mind he reached for the awareness that was Catherine, whispering words of comfort to her.

I know the dark. I am its friend...

But Catherine did not know it as a friend, and never imagined it could be so. She was an incredibly brave woman, and she had risked herself often, for him and their life together. But it was one thing to take a risk for yourself. And another to accept that your children would inevitably take those. And you had to allow them to fall.

She stayed where he'd left her, and though he could see her quite clearly, he knew she could not now say the same. Vincent approached her slowly, spreading her blanket out next to the huge rose bush, and letting her stand there, a moment, allowing her eyes to adjust to the newly darkened rooftop balcony. And to him, moving around her in near silence.

"You once told me there was no darkness when you were with me. Do you remember?" he asked, remaining out of her direct line of sight and the moonlight.

Catherine quickly realized just how dark the roof was, without either ambient or direct light. The river was a dark ribbon, past the privacy wall. On the other side of that, a distant skyline she couldn't actually see. Walls built to keep out spying eyes had kept in the dark, she realized. Absent the house lights, she felt suspended, in a dark space she only knew to be rectangular thanks to her familiarity with it. But she was not afraid. Never that, now.

"Winterfest," she answered quickly. "We were going into the Great Hall, and it was pitch black, inside the room."

"Your first one. And together we pushed the dark away," he said, and she knew from the sound of his voice that he had moved closer.

"Darkness is only the absence of light..."

"Will we do that, now?" she asked, sensing him near her shoulder, wondering if he was about to light a lantern for her, so she could see.

He would do that, he would not leave her alone here in the dark...
surely?

Her skin shivered when hands she trusted more than any other's traced the line from her elbow to her shoulder, and back again. He was standing behind her. She marveled that he could move so silently.

“No...” The soft voice was a low call to stay near him. “We're not going to push the dark away, this time... We are going to embrace it. And each other...”

She felt the sharp point of his nail barely touch her skin, as his beloved fingers continued both their downward and upward path. She felt them rise against her neck, then go back down, settling until his fingertips caressed the line of her shoulders. He moved his hands along her collar bones, out toward her arms, then back in.

Lifting her hair, his breath was a warm tickle against the soft flesh at the back of her neck. “Not everything that lives in the dark is there to hurt you, Catherine. It craves our attention as much as you do now.”

As he spoke, his mouth closed over the soft spot just below her hairline. Warm. So warm. Catherine felt sensation explode, where his mouth touched. Sensation which suffused the base of her skull as she felt his unusual tongue caress the soft skin his mouth now covered. She swayed back against him, instinctively. Never would she be proof against such exquisite torture. Vincent had learned all her weak points and vulnerabilities, with the skill of a consummate surgeon.

Letting some of her hair drop, he kept the rest aloft, and pulled her swaying body against his firmer form. Feet planted wide, he cradled her back against himself. Catherine expected to feel his arousal against her back, and was surprised when there was none. Yet.

“Vincent...” she breathed his name out on a night-wind sigh, and he flattened his palm against the skin over her womb, holding her. She was trying to marshal her thoughts, trying to resist the sensual onslaught her husband was sending her. This was a serious argument, between them. It couldn't be solved with a few stolen kisses on their rooftop terrace...

Could it?

His mouth was gentle and hot, against her skin, and she felt him drag his bottom lip down, over the ridge that signaled the beginning of her backbone.

“Mmm?” He was listening. And his mouth had just encountered the zipper at the back of her dress. Without asking permission (a thing he'd done often, in the beginning of their marriage), he trailed his fingers toward her zipper, meaning to tug down the tab that held the back of the long red dress together.

The metal sound of teeth separating from each other was a harsh whisper, in the dark, and it broke the reverie he wanted, for her. The dress fell apart, but his wife stepped away.

“Vincent... this doesn't fix what's wrong. My concerns are valid.”

He wasn't sure he agreed. As a matter of fact, he was fairly sure he didn't. He'd felt separated from her all afternoon, her anger at him giving way to despair, inside their bond. He hated the space that made, between them. Fear still held her in its grip, as surely as he had just done. It kept her apart from him, and he despised the sensation, on instinct. Her worry was a bitter taste, on his tongue.

“Perhaps it does fix it,” he said, stepping nearer, again. The back of her dress still open, he grasped her shoulders and turned her so she was facing outward.

“Catherine, what is before you?” he asked.

“The edge of the terrace,” she answered.

“And beyond that?”

“The wall,” she said, feeling his huge hand settle on her shoulder.

“And beyond that?” he persisted.

Her mind scrambled for a moment, as she felt his thumb stroking her bare skin, nudging the fabric aside, a little. “The... the river. The river is beyond the wall.”

“Can you see the river, now?” he asked, knowing full well she couldn't.

“No...” she admitted, on a long sigh, loving the back-and forth motion of his thumbs on her collar bones. She waited for her eyes to adjust to the deepening dark, but realized there was just not enough light to help her see. Still, she knew she was safe.

“But you know the river is there?” he asked, staying behind her.

“Ye-yes,” she said, feeling his other hand come up, and begin to worry down the fabric on the other side.

“Catherine...” he whispered her name on a long note, “What is behind you?”

He drew her against his chest again, so that she could feel the hard length of him, pressed against her from thighs to shoulders. He had held her like this before. She remembered grasping his wrist and kissing his bare flesh. He had not pulled away, merely drawn her closer still...

“You are,” she breathed the benediction as the red dress came open. She wore no bra, for it was built in.

“Are you so sure of that?” he asked, loving the bare expanse of her back.

“Yes.” His fingers gave her a squeeze. “My husband is behind me. The man that I love always...”

“And can you see your husband?” he asked, again, well aware that she couldn’t.

Her soft head shook, and the zipper came the rest of the way down, clean to her waist. “No. No, I cannot see my husband. But I know he’s there. I know he’s there because he is... touching me.” She sighed, feeling the warm breeze caress her skin as he bared it.

“And would your husband ever hurt you?” he asked, voice rough-hewn and throaty now.

The question, which was at one time a point of contention between them, for him at least, was now settled, utterly.

“No. No, my husband would never hurt me. He treasures me above all things.”

“Even though he is dangerous?” Vincent asked, prodding her as he took the dress down her arms.

Catherine’s breath caught at the question, but she simply nodded, knowing full well he could see the gesture.

“The tunnels are Jacob’s home, Catherine. They... will not hurt him. Even if he cannot see what is before him. They are shelter and they are safe. There are people there who love him and ways to call for help

if he goes astray.” He kissed the bared point of her shoulder. “You know these facts to be self-evident.”

“Yes...” Catherine shivered at the lawyer’s term he was now using against her own arguments. She had taught him too well.



“You had far less, for comfort, when your life turned upside down,” he said, referring not only to the night of her attack, but to the night he’d fled into the tunnels, thinking never to return. “You had only that darkness to cling to then.”

“I lost *you* in that dark, once,” she confessed, remembering with him. “Lost you to the cave, and your own dreadful uncertainties.”

“And we both found our son, there,” Vincent said, referring to Jacob's conception. “And neither of us were ever afraid of that cave, or anything that was in it, again.” He mouthed the skin above her collar bone as he beguiled, and she felt herself falling mindlessly beneath his spell.

“Believe in the dark,” he whispered. “For I am always there. I know the dark, and it knows me. I have lived there all my life...”

Trailing his hand down her arm, he helped her divest herself of the bodice of her gown. She stepped onto the blanket he'd provided, just as her dress slid off her hips and down to her ankles. The scrap of lace that was her underwear followed.

He let her hear the sounds of him becoming as naked as she was, knowing she could see some of his shape, but none of the particulars. A cloud obscured the crescent moon, as the wind picked up.

She crossed herself, self-consciously. And perhaps a bit self-protectively. She was standing right next to their rose bush, the original one, and not one they'd grown from its cuttings. Its wide open blooms nodded in the breeze, approving of this wordless ritual older than time itself.

Vincent reached to caress the nearest red bloom, meaning to gather it for her, but the blossom had already opened to beyond full, and the petals gave themselves to the wind, and spilled into his huge hands. The symbolism of such a surrender trembled through him on wings of fire.

Keeping a few of the claret-colored petals, he touched them to her feverish skin. They travelled across the waves of shimmering sensation he sensed she was feeling.

“What am I touching you with?” he whispered, tracing the line of her nose, her down across her mouth, chin, throat, and to the center of her chest.

“Rose petals,” she said, knowing. “You’re touching me with rose petals.”

His hand traced beneath her breasts as he painted her with the bounty from her garden. Slowly, sensually, he brushed the velvety blossom around her engorged nipple, until it begged for a firmer touch.

“Vincent...”

“Shhh. The dark is your friend, Catherine.” He traced the outline of her puckered flesh in an increasingly tight circle, until she gasped at the sensation when he ever-so-barely touched its raised center.

“Ah!” A sharp sound of delight, and his tongue reward her patience, taking her breast wholly in. He could taste the rose scent on her skin. It was intoxicating.

Drawing them both down to their knees on the soft quilt, he kept his hands upon her, one arm clasped against the small of her back, the other still holding rose petals against his fingertips as they slowly travelled down her lovely form, a reality he would have known in the blackest dark. And had...

Pregnancy had left her body subtly changed, and he adored every difference. Her hips were slightly rounder, making her still trim waist

seem even tinier. There was a gentle swell at her belly which no amount of time working out with Isaac Stubbs could ever erase. Her navel was a tiny well of secret pleasure, and he maintained the straight line down her body until he began to brush her satin curls, with the rose petals.

For Catherine, the sensation was exquisite. The familiar shape of his fingers, the strength of his arm, was against her, but the rose petals made the former feel as if his fingertips were encased in delicate velvet. He felt utterly familiar, let exotically foreign, to her skin.

She swayed backward, and reached up to clutch the column of his neck. She wanted to plot how two could play at this game, then lost all ability to think whatsoever, when the rose petals pressed against her engorged flesh.

Vincent moved the velvet 'glove' of his hand in a circular motion, and Catherine knew a startled second when she realized she was about to come. Hard. The barest push of nether muscles would bring her there. She clutched at her titan's shoulders, trying to warn him to stop, to stop so they could do this, together.

"St-op...please... I'm going to..."

"I know what you're going to do, wife." He neither applied more pressure nor took it away. Simply continued in exactly the same rhythm he'd established. Her legs began to shake.

“Do you think I don’t know my own wife?” It was a marauder’s whisper filled with lethal satisfaction. “Know how this makes you feel?”

He cupped her sex with his huge, warm palm, and kept his index and middle finger upon her. She screamed, raked his back with her nails, and clenched, in no particular order.

Her legs swayed and she staggered. She wanted to fall down to the makeshift bed, but he kept his hand at her back, kept her against him, while he cradled her, knowing to still his hand, lest the sensation actually feel uncomfortable, rather than blissful.

“Shhhh...shhhh. I have you. I will always have you, Catherine.”

She nodded against his left shoulder as her fist fluttered, ineffectually, against the right. Aftershocks. They were owning her, and she couldn't speak, not now. He felt the dampness captured in her curls, wetting her thighs. One of her hands covered his and she pushed, hard, keeping him against her.

“Let me... let me...” But she couldn’t finish the sentence even though both of them knew what she was asking for. Pressure. Warmth. Pleasure. Nature rewarded her servants, and Catherine had found her ability to climax more intensely, and more often, after she’d borne her children.

Vincent knew the second hard rush of sensation was about to take her by surprise almost as much as the first one had. Catherine tipped her pelvis forward, slightly, the angle of supplication, of request.

He massaged her gently, fully aware of what she was trying to do. Leaving the rose petal in her folds, he touched her with the other 'velvet,' between them, the engorged head of his penis.

Warm. No, not warm. Vibrant with heat. Vincent's body temperature always ran hotter than hers, and when he was keenly aroused, it was something she could feel both inside and out along his sex. It was like touching the heart of the sun, and yet so intimate it suspended her breath.

Vincent felt the velvet of the rose petal against his most sensitive flesh as he felt his wife's almost cataclysmic orgasm. Viscous and damp, she shuddered. Both arms dropped, too weak to hold herself against him.

She was limp, and dying, as he kept them together, finally allowing her to tumble down onto the soft blanket.

A hard breeze shook the rose bushes as Catherine shook beneath Vincent, and the blossom he'd already taken petals from gave up the rest of its bounty, spreading around them as she shuddered, and lifted her pelvis some more. It was a hard orgasm, the kind that left her seeing not just black, but starlight, and he knew it had been a long time since her climax was so sudden, so fierce that she literally left him behind not once, but twice.

He felt the rose petals drift across his back, and scatter onto the blanket, felt her relaxing, beneath him. Her legs parted in anticipation of his entrance, and he coated himself in her supple bounty.

In a moment's decision, he pulled back, and nudged her over, telling her with his hands that he wanted her to lay on her stomach. It was not a customary request, from him.

"I want to paint you with velvet," he whispered, as she complied, too replete to question his wish.

Two of the white roses had followed the red one to full blown glory, and he gathered the petals up and spread them across her back. Catherine felt the flutter of rose petals before she felt his warm, firm hands making lines down her spine.

He swung his leg over, enjoying the sight of their roses against her skin. He moved them this way and that, patternless, painting a design only he could discern. She moaned, and the muscles in her backside tensed, each time he drew his petal tipped fingers low.

"I am your husband, and I love you. I will care for you, and I will care for our children. Always..." he whispered it close to her ear and she felt the heavy weight of his erection brush her back.

She reached back and grasped his neck, keeping him to her. "Inside me," she whispered back, rising up on her knees, some. "I missed you all day, today."

Yes. Yes she had. And so had he. Fiercely.

Fighting, when they were together, felt far worse than simply being apart. And in their years together they'd had to endure "apart" almost any time she had to attend to work, Above.

But their argument was a different kind of "apartness." It stung, and left him feeling raw, inside. He had blundered without knowing it, and he swore a silent oath to never do that again. It hurt too much.

Sensing him, Catherine lifted her hips as he lowered his, feeling her soft undulation of invitation. He sought her warmth for comfort, as well as on reflex. Though they had been his way before, it was not necessarily a position either of them favored. But his need to be inside her was too great, and she was replete from before, and not inclined to turn. Guiding himself to her damp nether skin, he felt her reach between them, her beloved fingers caressing his sensitive skin just as he pressed near her familiar opening.

He slid home with the hot ease that fathering her children and helping her to two orgasms had afforded him. After years of marriage, she fit to him like a hand to a glove, and right now, that hand was both warm, and lax, from her pleasure.

He had no desire to withdraw from her heated flesh, once seated, nor any whim to raise her on all fours and dominate her. He knew what he did want, however.

Staying behind her, he guided her up to her knees again, keeping her back against his front, showing off her feminine body to the barely visible moon. Her breasts were gloriously white, to his night-accustomed eyes; pink tipped and swollen, they moved when she did. He gathered a palm full of the rose petals scattered on the blanket, and rubbed them all over her body.

The delicate blooms bent, scattered, then fell back to the blanket, while some remained trapped between her skin and his palm. The night breeze fluttered more laggard petals between them as he held her to him, touching everywhere he could reach.

She caught part of a white blossom in her hand and painted the bridge of his unique nose with it, tugging his head down for an awkward kiss. One he returned, ardently.

He crossed his arms in front of her, holding her close as he began to move subtly, inside her. He didn't want to retreat from her warmth, but the sensitive vein that ran the length of his phallus craved friction, and he could find it no other way to appease it.

Catherine, sensing his need, undulated her hips in a siren's call to abandonment, and Vincent looked down, taking in the picture they made, together.

He never tired of the sight of her lovely breast in his hand. Since the day she'd declared his hands "hers" and kissed his furred knuckles, it had been a truth he held close to his heart that he would touch her there, one day, no matter how sharp his nails, or how odd the contrast. The first night they'd made love, he'd nearly been unable to let go of her, there. She was perfect, and like her hips, the curve of her breasts had changed, subtly, after child-bearing.

He looked down now, to see his left hand cupping rose petals, and her right breast as his right hand pressed her stomach to him. Red and white blossoms drifted down her body where they spilled, or brushed upward along her sweet curve, caught between his fingers and her skin. A red velvet teardrop was trapped under his thumb, and he brushed it across the pink of her nipple. She raised her arm to clasp his neck, and the motion raised her breast. He wanted to suckle, and knew he couldn't, but the view was ... gorgeous.

"Too beautiful," he whispered holding her close against him as his slight movements inside her caused the round flesh to move, in his palm.

"No, you are," she disagreed, smiling. He moved harder, as the sensitive spot just beneath the head of his penis screamed for more friction.

"I'll keep them safe, Catherine. We all will." He nuzzled her scar. "Trust me?"

He felt a soft settling of a rose petal on his shoulder. It was the first time he realized she'd gathered just a couple of them into her hand before she'd reached up for his neck.

"With my... life." She stammered with the gentle force of his thrust.

"I know that. And ... with theirs." He didn't want to give up his possession of her breast so that he could own the curve of her hips, and direct them, a little more. It left them still too close together for a long stroke, but also left him blissfully encased, in her heat.

"I love you all so much, Vincent."

She did. He knew she did. Like everything else, it was a feeling he both knew and sensed inside her, once their bond had been restored.

He finally needed to hold her hips too much to resist, and left his prize of her breast to grasp them. His long fingers settled just below her waist, and he moved her so that he could drop his own hips and penetrate her just a little deeper. A satisfied growl accompanied his short, deep thrust.

"My hands are on you, in the dark." He knew he could see the odd picture of his alien hand settled against her bare skin far better than she could. "You are dotted with rose petals you cannot see, but I swear to you they are red and white." He drew back again, then returned, in the shallow, rocking motion their position dictated. "I know you know

that. But your eyes cannot see to know. Know it with your heart, Catherine. Trust.”

She looked down, and saw the shadowy picture they made, both in her mind’s eye and with as much eyesight as could pierce the night veil, between them.

He’d left the garden in utter darkness, and while there was enough moonlight for him to see, there wasn’t, for her. She could make out the contrasting shape of his hands against her, and feel the rose petal that miraculously still clung to her dampened breast. She shifted, internally, and began to push against his length, inside. She was rousing again, and they both knew it.

He wanted to drive, and knew this was the wrong position for it. He wouldn’t bend her forward so they were on all fours, the bestial connotation of it a thing he avoided, on instinct. But now the position that had seemed intriguing for its ability to see her rose covered breast while he was inside her was frustrating to him, and he knew he needed them to change.

Sensing his want, Catherine held his unique mouth in a kiss as she disengaged them, and nudged him to the blanket. His sensitive skin felt each petal beneath his back, as his wife gathered up a handful more.

“Close your eyes,” she told him, wanting him as sightless as she had been. He obeyed, and felt the indescribable touch of her hand as it rubbed rose petals through the silky hair on his chest. Scent exploded,

and he knew it would cling, thanks to the furred expanse of a torso that was ever firm from hard labor and long hours.

She laid two red petals over his closed eyes, just to be sure. It was the most ethereal blindfold he could imagine.

“You work so hard. I gave you grief, today,” she apologized.

I missed you. I hated being apart from you, he thought, speaking to her through their bond.

“I hated feeling separated from you,” she nearly echoed his internal sentence.

Already past aroused, he felt her swing her leg over his prone form, and anticipated that she would make them one, again.

She didn't.

Satisfied with her own completions, and wanting his pleasure more than she wanted more of her own, Catherine knew there was an apology to be made, and rose petals to make it with. She trailed her hand up the blanket until she found what she wanted, and moved unerringly toward his male nipple with a rose petal between her fingers, as he had done.

Unused to being sightless during lovemaking, Vincent tensed in anticipation, wanting to look down, wanting to see her, yet knowing it

was forbidden. When he felt the soft brushing of the rose against bare, rather than hair-covered skin, he arched and moaned, begging for more of her touch.

The masculine paps of his breasts weren't as sensitive as hers, but the touch of her tongue to bare skin had always been a sensation that drove him to moaning, and forced his abdominal muscles to tighten, in response.

To have velvet first, and her warm mouth after, was as erotic a dream as he'd ever dared not to have, and she suckled one breast as she traced the other with white velvet neither of them could see, but he couldn't help but feel.

She suckled and laved his male nipple until he couldn't help but nudge her head over to its twin. When she released his breast to the night air, the combination of warmth, wetness, and a soft breeze made him cry out, with pleasure.

More. More...

Sensual by nature, if not instinct, Vincent wanted them belly to belly, yet she held herself above him as she complied with his unspoken request to kiss the other side of his chest. Damp from being inside her, his phallus wept impatiently, as the same breeze that teased his left breast caressed his most sensitive skin.

“I can’t,” he choked out the words, wanting. He nearly removed the rose petals from his eyes, but felt her hand hold them still.

“Yes, you can. Trust, Vincent,” Catherine breathed the words near his ear, before she bent back down to adore the soft pap she knew to be deep tan in color, yet remained small, and all but unseen, even when he was shirtless.

“Touch me,” he begged. They both knew where he meant.

“I will. You know I will,” she purred, satisfied he would remain blind for her as long as she complied... or seemed to. She swung her leg back over so that she knelt beside him.

He felt the rose petals trapped between her fingertips and his softly pelted skin, as she traced her way down his long body in a meandering pattern which seemed to have no real destination, but dipped ever lower. He wanted to push her hand down, but sensed she didn’t.

“It’s terrible to feel helpless, isn’t it?” Catherine asked, getting a little of her own back, trying to make him understand what had driven their argument, this afternoon.

Blind, helpless, panting, wishing, he nearly screamed when she brushed close to his distended sex, only to gently lift over it and begin to trace lines on the inside of his thigh. She shifted, over him, still refusing to touch where he most wanted.

His blindness made her a phantom, in the dark. He knew her leg was against his, as her hand described a slow figure eight, inside his thigh. The silk of her hair was brushing his chest, as she'd lifted it and turned to look downward, even though he knew her eyes couldn't penetrate very far, in the dark. The wind picked up, and the smell of roses covered him even as he fought the urge to end this by simply grabbing and turning her.

Trust, her mind whispered to him.

His breath caught on a whimper when he finally felt her touch his engorged erection, but it wasn't the firm touch he craved. She was delicately laying rose petals along his sex, the dampness making them stick, (mostly) as the sensation made him jump.

"I love you. I would never hurt you." Catherine knew he was in torment, but that it was of the temporary kind.

When her hand finally covered him, the blessed pressure of it felt like a miracle, and he groaned his pleasure. Her other hand slipped lower still, and she brought her blossom laden hand against his scrotum, and massaged him there, gently.

Vincent felt conscious thought shatter. Her hands... divine. The feeling of the rose petals like her, inside, wet velvet, as she began to stroke his shaft, holding the soft gift of the rose petals against his most sensitive flesh. When she squeezed the tip and stroked down, he knew he was lost. And by "lost," he meant "completely."

Though her love play was always beyond generous, she'd never masturbated him to completion, before. When her ministrations had drawn him close, he'd always pulled back on the reins of the control which marked his days, and either turned her beneath him, or drew her astride.

But the urge to complete took him over too fast, too suddenly, and this felt like adolescence, the urges of a young body unfulfilled, the strength of his erection a thing that refused to be reasoned with, or tamed. There was a wild kind of joy in it, and this was too urgent, too sudden, and the command to release was there before he could call it back, or could hope to rein it in.

He arched immediately into her closed fist, climaxing hard, as she had, with her gorgeous, warm hands against him. His nether skin was encased in rose petals, her fingers, and the slick offering of her feminine ejaculate; now mixed with his.

It felt so good, so overwhelming, he knew he couldn't apologize for it, nor did she seem to require one, as she sensed the rhythm his spasming body now wanted, and gave it to him.

Testicles accustomed to nestling freely against him were now cradled, her fingers at his perineum, rocking in time to his bursts. What began as a man's cry of completion changed to a beast's growl of pure satisfaction as she stroked him every time he lifted his hips, asking,

bringing forth more seed, more pleasure, more shudders, from his long, helpless frame.

He thrashed some, and whimpered, feeling both seventeen, again and all of his thirty six years. His backside tensed as his hips lifted in a long-ago familiar dance. This felt like his teenager-hood, though the hands were not his. The climax was mind numbingly intense, full of both nascent and nostalgic sensations. He didn't want it to stop, and knew it had to. He'd never planned for it to happen, and couldn't help that it had. Eyes shut tight against the sensation, he didn't even notice the petals had fallen away from his eyes.

If there was comfort to be had, it was in that he knew she couldn't see him, in this vulnerable state. If there was comfort to be had, he was having it, now.

Catherine kept her hands on him, guiding him through it, helping him fall back to earth, gently.

He felt her move, felt her lithe form stretch out against his.

"It's hard to trust to fate, when you feel powerless," she said, laying herself alongside him, after he was done, drawing him over a little so that they were pressed together, stomach to stomach.

Rose petals were trapped between them, caught in his leavings and her warmth. She brushed a softly scented one down from his temple. They both knew the night was far from over, yet.

“I trust that you love me. All the rest is just... details,” he said, when he could speak again. Every part of him felt marvelous. And some parts in particular.

“Details you'll remember to discuss with me?” she asked, loving the feeling of being close to him, again.

“I will remember. He *is* my son, Catherine. I know he looks like you, and that he'll always be a part of your world. But please don't try to exclude him from mine. It is all I have, to give him.”

She closed her eyes and kept her hand across his spent sex, loving him.

“Is that what it felt like?” she asked, immediately sorry all over again.

“I know you didn't mean it.”

“I didn't. I swear I didn't. You know I'd never imply he was more mine than yours.” Vincent put his hand over hers, and moved her head so that it pillowed between his chest and shoulder.

“I know.” His voice was heavy, with his completion. “We're new, here.” He kissed her head, the usual spot he always favored. “I thought we had things all decided, just in that we'd become parents, together. Three times. It seems as if there is more to know.” He kept her warm hand against his sex, knowing the effect it would have, in a few minutes.

“Seems like,” she answered, years of marriage letting her know that he was both completely spent and slowly rousing.

“Where are they, right now?” she asked, loving that she could.

His right thumb moved in circles on her shoulder, as he painted the soft scene: “They are tired, from a happy day. Tucked near your father, on either side. I think Cathleen is in Kay’s lap. She likes the smell of Kay’s perfume. Your father’s voice is steady, and comforting. I think he’s telling them a bedtime story. Or reading them one.”

Catherine smiled. “Can you tell which one?”

Gently, he rolled, keeping his skin next to hers.

“I have no idea.” His abilities with the children did not extend that far. “The Velveteen Rabbit, perhaps...” His wife was a glory, in the sparse moonlight. “I have heard it is a very good story...” Errant rose petals were stuck to her skin. More were about to be in the long hours before dawn...

A red bloom on the rose bush fell silently apart. Seemingly in sympathy, its white twin began to give itself over to inevitable fate. For it was always meant to be this way. *Always...*

Two soft petals, one red, one white, drifted on the night wind, dancing and swirling together in perfect concert, before they finally settled. Each coming to rest against the lips of the slumbering pair, entwined so closely together they could almost have been one, on a patchwork blanket spread beneath the moon and stars...

~FIN~



“We fell in love, despite our differences, and once we did, something rare and beautiful was created. For me, love like that has only happened once, and that’s why every minute we spent together has been seared in my memory. I’ll never forget a single moment of it...”

~ **Nicholas Sparks**

